

Indonesia on the Silver Screen

Lisa Siregar | August 09, 2011



A new book, "Asian Hot Shots: Sinema Indonesia," serves as a reminder of the country's own rich cinematic tradition and how film can act as a barometer of political and social change. (JG Image)

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As Hollywood films once again begin to flood Indonesian cinemas after a five-month boycott, the local film industry is preparing to fall back under the shadow of imported blockbusters.

But a new book, "Asian Hot Shots: Sinema Indonesia," serves as a reminder of the country's own rich cinematic tradition and how film can act as a barometer of political and social change.

The book was first published by Bentang in Germany last year, following the 2009 Asian Hot Shots Film Festival in Berlin, which focused on Indonesian movies. In June this year, an Indonesian-language version of the book was launched at the Goethe Institute in Central Jakarta.

It presents a collection of nine scholarly papers, edited by the curator and director of the 2009 festival, Yvonne Michalik, from the Potsdam-Babelsberg University of Film and Television in Germany, and Laura Coppens, a social anthropologist at the University of Zurich in Switzerland.

The compiled studies range from topics such as polygamy to satire, feminism, queer identity and the portrayal of children in Indonesian film.

The resulting text is an in-depth, historical source on the development of Indonesia's film industry from colonial times to early independence, the New Order period and the social and political upheaval of the reform era.

It is the first book in a series of publications on film in Southeast Asia to be released by Asian Hot Shots.

In the book's introduction, Coppens explains that Indonesia was chosen as the first topic in the series because very little scholarly research had been carried out on the country's film industry, especially in comparison to other Asian countries like Japan, China, India, Hong Kong or South Korea. As one of the world's most populous countries, Coppens writes, Indonesia deserves a second look.

She gives an overview of the history of Indonesia's film industry as a starting point for the book. She writes that Indonesia began importing movies in the 1900s, while the country was still under Dutch occupation. Around 1910, the Dutch started to make documentary films about Indonesia to send abroad.

But it was not until the time of independence that Indonesian film finally began to take shape through the establishment of national film companies.

By the 1970s, notable directors such as Teguh Karya, Slamet Rahardjo, Ami Priyono and Chaerul Umam had begun to make their mark with quality films able to reach a broad audience.

Coppens writes that the development of Indonesia's film industry has also been shaped by the monopoly of the 21 Cineplex group, which once owned all the cinemas in the country and was the only group licensed to import films.

In recent times, the group's monopoly has been challenged by the BlitzMegaplex chain, owned by the former chief of the State Intelligence Agency (BIN), A.M. Hendropriyono.

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A development missed by Coppens, due to the time of publication, was that Hendropriyono recently teamed up with cinema pioneer Ilham Bintang and soap opera king Raam Punjabi to form a group called Sinar Surya Sinema to challenge the import monopoly of 21 Cineplex.

But this issue aside, the introduction is a comprehensive guide to the history of Indonesian film, rich with information that is often missing elsewhere. The following chapters cover a range of perspectives in Indonesian film.

In his chapter, David Hannan, a professor of film and media studies at Monash University in Melbourne, highlights the differences in the portrayal of politics by Indonesian filmmakers in the time of President Sukarno, President Suharto and the reform era.

One interesting discovery in Hannan's research is the use of "Bapak" ("Sir") as an honorific to refer to those in power, as seen in "Tamu Agung" ("Honorable Guest"), a film made by Usmar Ismail in 1955.

Hannan writes that the custom of calling the boss "Bapak" seems to have started in the time of Sukarno, and its usage has continued in Indonesian business circles until today.

Another Australian scholar, Barbara Hatley, professor of Indonesian studies at the University of Tasmania, presents a chapter on the portrayal of gender and sexuality in Indonesian film.

Hatley compares two films with clashing perspectives on polygamy: "Ayat-Ayat Cinta" ("Verses of Love") by Hanung Bramantyo, and "Berbagi Suami" ("Love for Share") by Nia Dinata.

Hatley writes that "Ayat-Ayat Cinta" is a film with wide appeal due to its strong Islamic themes, while "Berbagi Suami" easily wins the hearts of female viewers and activists by highlighting the perspectives of the women in the film.

Interestingly, Hatley argues that "Ayat-Ayat Cinta" portrays the contemporary identity of Indonesia, and the growing trend toward piety, while "Berbagi Suami" gives a voice to those who support pluralism and secularism.

She ends the chapter with an interview with filmmaker Nia, who speaks about how to tell a story "in a culture where people don't tell stories" — especially those that are taboo — and how she aims to present pluralism in her films.

Commenting on the book's release, Ening Nurjanah, director of the women-themed V Film Festival, said the trend was slowly changing in film from the stereotypical portrayal of women as meek and submissive characters to stronger and more independent ones.

Ening praised pioneers such as Maesa "Djenar" Ayu, whose debut film, "Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!" ("They Say I'm a Monkey!") broke new ground in portraying issues of female sexuality in film. "Djenar is an example of director who can portray a strong woman in her films," Ening said.

However, she added that much needed to be done to change the mind-set of audiences, who still feel challenged by the sight of an outspoken female lead on screen.

Another chapter that deals with sexuality is Coppens's take on queer themes in Indonesian films. She explores the issues raised by organizers of a queer film festival in Indonesia and how its values clashed with those of religious communities.

She cites films such as "Cokelat Stroberi" ("Chocolate Strawberry") and "Realitas, Cinta dan

Rock & Roll" ("Reality, Love and Rock & Roll") as popular examples of how homosexuality is depicted in Indonesian movies.



While the films openly address gay themes, barriers in society and politics influence how homosexuality is ultimately portrayed.

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Film critic Ekky Imanjaya agrees, noting that homosexual characters are still mainly presented as comic relief, and are not intended to be taken seriously by audiences. One notable exception, he said, is the 1988 film "Istana Kecantikan" ("Beauty Palace"), which portrayed its homosexual lead in a sympathetic light.

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Ekky said the key to breaking down social barriers regarding homosexuality through film was for filmmakers to present their case subtly, without alienating more conservative viewers.

The hope for Indonesian cinema, then, is that opinions will still have audiences to hear them.