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THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN INDONESIAN FILMS: A CASE STUDY OF FILMS RELEASED POST-2000

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Abstract

This article focuses on the representation of gender and sexuality in modern Indonesian society by analyzing films released post 2000.

After Suharto's resignation in 1998, subjects related to gender and sexuality have received great attention in Indonesia, and criticisms of and debates, and discussions on these subjects continue even today.

The representation of gender and sexuality in films is an important topic, as it is related to the process of Islamization in Indonesian society, especially of the urban middle class. As Heryanto (2011) pointed out, non-religiously motivated agents and other factors (such as the post-authoritarian politics, the expansion of global capitalism in consumer goods and services, the developments in new media technology) have partaken in the broad processes of Islamization.

In this article, two films directed by the young female director Nia Dinata are analyzed as representative works that deviate from gender and sexuality norms. The 2003 film entitled "Arisan!" and its sequel "Arisan!2" in 2010 are analyzed as films that explore gender and sexuality issues through the depictions of the life style, homosexuality, friendships and family relationships of urban middle class.

Key words: representation, gender, sexuality, Indonesian films, Nia Dinata

1. Introduction

This article discusses representations of gender and sexuality in modern Indonesian society, focusing on two films. In a growing number of films created in the modern Indonesian film industry, while some representations of gender and sexuality are deeply rooted in traditional

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norms or religious values, there are simultaneously some that spur confusion in people's values. This is coupled with the impact from globalized information and advancements in scientific technology. More than a few social disputes have the potential to develop due to representations in films. Studying representations of gender and sexuality in modern films is an interesting topic that can help people learn the reality of a confusing sense of values regarding gender or sexuality in a globalizing modern society.

The research target, Indonesian society, has repeated a trial-and-error process in maintaining unification of their nation since their independence from colonial domination. Under the so-called "new order" (1966–1998), known as *orde baru*, a national policy of economic growth and development implemented by Suharto, who held sway over Indonesia for 32 years starting in 1966, a strenuous hardline for cultural control was in effect for a long time based on the centralized political regime. Cultural expression and media representation including gender and sexuality issues were controlled by the censorship system. After Suharto resigned in 1998, controls on expression were lessened during the changes of regime. Since then, the conventional gender and sexuality norms have deviated, and the number of activities to overturn previous norms has increased.

This article deals with the fierce clash between gender/sexuality representation in films and various regulating powers in modern Indonesian society. In addition to the censorship under the national powers, another factor deeply related to this regulating power is religion. Nearly 90% of the over 250 million Indonesians practice Islam. Indonesia is not only diverse in religion, but also has the largest Islamic population in the world; representations of gender and sexuality in Indonesia have always been the target of debates or disputes, while also having close ties to religion, especially Islam. The fierce clash between religious faithfulness and rightfulness, and gender/sexuality representations in media is one of the important factors to note when studying modern Indonesian society (cf. Fukuoka 2015). As mentioned later, a number of disputes in 2006 over the judgment regarding the adoption of the Anti-Pornography/Pornoaction Bill (Rancangan Undang-Undang Anti Pornografi dan Pornoaksi RUU APP) regulation had a great impact on film making. Furthermore, Clark (2008) points out that the dispute over this Bill caused the vitalization of activities by sexual minority human rights and feminist groups (Clark 2008: 40).

In modern Indonesian society, which is experiencing significant economic growth, Islamic awareness seems to be increasing, especially among the urban middle class. Aoyama points out that the characteristic of heightening Islamic awareness in Southeast Asia is, in general, a history of growth in awareness from a societal standpoint, while keeping the separation of religion and state. What has been observed through this are developments in tandem with the expansion of modern consumption activities, such as in Islamic fashion, *halal*-accredited businesses, and the establishment of Islamic banks (Aoyama 2014: 164–165). The anthropologist Heryanto points out that in Indonesia the affluent are moving toward Islamic lifestyles and fashion through consumption in their social lives, and this movement is considered a modern trend (Heryanto

2011: 19). As described thus far, the characteristic of the rise of Islamic awareness in modern Indonesian society is that it cannot be restricted to the level of religious practices or belief, and instead is taking initiative as an emerging modern trend in the lifestyle sphere due to notable relationships with primarily urban consumption.

Also, Heryanto points out that Islamization in modern Indonesia is a series of complex multidirectional processes, and involves multiple agents without religious motivations. Politics post-Suharto, global capitalism, the development of new media technologies, and others are also involved in this broader process of Islamization (Heryanto 2011: 26). As discussed above, this surge of Islamic awareness in modern Indonesian society can be deemed a dynamic movement that involves many other agents.

Many elements can be identified as standards for criticism against gender and sexuality representation in addition to religious faithfulness and rightfulness, such as Westernization and globalization of gender and sexuality norms, as well as the appropriateness of lifestyle directions based on these norms; discussion regarding the popularization of physical alterations due to scientific technologies and medical advancements and its reception; issues regarding disparities in media distribution; and attention towards traditional gender or sexuality norms¹.

As will be discussed later, in Indonesia after the Suharto government's dissolution, there were not only criticisms of those who participated in drag and of gay men, but also much violence against them (Boellstorff 2004: 470). What were behind these attacks were not simple critical opinions based on religious perspectives towards cross-dressers and homosexuals. A struggle over "masculinity" values is behind the desire to build a strong nation during the absence of a strong authority. Globalization of information broadens the two sides of diverse gender/sexuality norm acceptance and demand for stereotyped strong male figures. Anything that goes against this stereotype tends to receive criticism that incorporates traditional gender-based categorizations.

For example, Indonesia has traditionally had many men who participated in cross-dressing (cf. Boellstorff 2005). These men still work as make-up artists or hair stylists, and are usually assumed to possess special skills that can alter their own or others' outward appearances. This kind of traditional gender-based categorization often receives criticism in modern Indonesian society. What supports these critical opinions are religious perspectives, resistance against stereotyped strong male figures, and the idea that the traditional values regarding men who cross-dress are a symbol of backwardness. It has been pointed out that while the values regarding gender and sexuality are becoming more inclusive through the globalization of media and the increase of tourists from around the world, the global culture boosts national voices about what gender and sexuality are within the country. Another thing that Zwaan points out is that recent attacks against cross-dressing males or gay men are rooted in nationalized masculinity (Zwaan

¹ Please refer to Fukuoka (2015) for a discussion on traditional gender categories, Americanized and Europeanized gender categories, and physical alterations and transsexual surgery within these elements.

2012: 35). Here we can observe a situation that involves various agents when it comes to attention or criticism against subversive representations of gender and sexuality.

Considering the circumstances described above regarding societal changes, this study will examine films shot after the year 2000 that deviate existing images of gender and sexuality, and then discuss their characteristics before reviewing the background of their creation.

2. Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Indonesian Media

In the context of societal changes in Indonesia due to rapid industrialization and urbanization focused around development policies under the Suharto government, various case studies targeting women were conducted after the 1970s (Nakatani 2003: 15). A distinguishing feature of these studies is that they deal with many of the critical examinations of government-led women's policies and their impacts, as well as the impacts of development processes led by the national policy on women's labor in rural districts. Under the Suharto government, development and stabilization of the country were the primary directives, and the government consistently emphasized the role of women as good wives or mothers (Nakatani 2007: 24). The role imposed on women through Indonesian nation building including the Family Planning and Family Welfare Plan was as good mothers or wives who could establish healthy homes². This concept of motherhood has been called *ibuism*, which stemmed from *ibu*, meaning “mother.”

The aforementioned circumstances are often described as a domestic positioning of women in an androcentric society. However, here it meant that these circumstances also required men to be human resources that possessed a prerequisite “manliness” that could contribute to nation building. As mentioned earlier, though it has been pointed out that there have long been quite a few cross-dressing males and gay men in Indonesia (cf. Boellstorff 2005), public acceptance of such diverse gender representation has never been observed in society—at least, not during the Suharto regime. It can be said that though cross-dressing males and gay men existed at that time, revealing their identities to society was difficult³.

Such stereotyped figures of women and men have been depicted in domestic Indonesian films. It has been pointed out that the media industry during the Suharto regime showed a high tendency towards male leads in media productions, as well as depictions within media representation;

² Nakatani (2003) brings up Family Welfare Education (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga) and Darma Wanita, which consists of wives of public servants or female public servants, as nationwide organizations that have played an important role in determining that the most suitable place for women was at home during the Suharto era (Nakatani 2003: 20–21). She also points out that the Indonesian government has been enforcing the domestic position of women as well as their economic role in the same period (Nakatani 2003: 22–25).

³ In Indonesian dances and plays, there is a tradition of transgenderism, which includes a male actor in female roles. Also historically, cross-dressing men called *waria* or *banci* have existed. Please refer to Fukuoka (2015) for more on the relationship between these categories.

women were regarded as marginal members of these activities⁴. Sen points out that the desired characteristics of “femininity” in media were close to the idealized images of women as good mothers and wives that were seen in the domestic scope (Sen 1993: 119).

One facet of the background of this tendency that became even more noticeable was the strict censorship that the government put in place (Tatyzo 2011: 2). Since the establishment of the first film censorship agency, the Indonesian censorship agency has censored films while simultaneously changing their mother ministries and structures⁵. Since 1964, the censorship agency has been under the jurisdiction of the Information Ministry, and changed its name to the Board of Film Censorship (Badan Sensor Film: BSF) in 1965 (Lindsay 2011: 176). The BSF has been censoring film titles, scenarios, contents, and representations for a long time. After a certain point in the 1970s, film producers were obligated to obtain a license from the government prior to shooting films. During the Suharto regime (1966–1998), representations and activities of expression that would have threatened national unification were strictly regulated. Targets that were identified as threatening among the media were films that dealt with themes that revealed differences in religions, ethnic groups, races, and classes, or focused on political issues. Sex scenes or extreme violence were also taboo. As an extension of such censorship, an “ethical code” was imposed with the intention of sustaining moral and national order, as well as respect for religion. Films that did not follow this ethical code were prohibited or were forced to be partially altered (Aartsen 2011: 14).

Regarding representation of gender/sexuality in films, Sen points out that women tended to be shown living stereotypical lives where they depended on men (cf. Sen 1993), while Heider notes that there were many descriptive versions of women in films; for example, women were described as targets of oppression, which symbolized their strength (Heider 1991: 121). In either case, due to the censorship that restricted expressionism under the Suharto regime, it seems it was difficult to generate representations that could overturn traditional gender/sexuality norms that presupposed heterosexual love and marriage. Because Islam takes marriage between the sexes as the standard and considers it to be an important norm, this idea still has a powerful regulating force in Indonesia today (Davies 2010: 105–111).

After Suharto left office in 1998, film censorship became more moderate, and films on a variety of themes started to be shot during the 2000s and onward. As a whole, in addition to films dealing with negative facets of society such as corruption, political issues, drug dependency, violence, and ethnic issues, those focusing on the existence of sexual minorities and the topic of

⁴ Film producer Mira Lesmana says that “traditionally, film described women as objects, but I have been working to describe women as subjects” (at a workshop at the Focus on Asia Fukuoka International Film Festival in September 2015). Her beliefs have had a ripple effect not only on the themes and contents of films, but also the growth in the number of female directors and producers among filmmakers, as mentioned later.

⁵ According to Lindsay (2011), at that time, censorship agents were established in four cities: Batavia (now Jakarta), Surabaya, Semarang, and Medan. In 1925, they became the Film Censorship Commission in Batavia, and it transformed to become an autonomous agent under the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1940 (pp. 175–176).

gender/sexuality representation began to be seen (Aartsen 2011: 32). Heryanto points out that those diverse themes in films were responses to the increase of women in the film production workforce (Heryanto 2008: 73). The film “Kuldesak,” filmed in 1998 by four young male and female directors, Riri Riza, Nan Achnas, Mira Lesmana, and Rizal Mantovani, is regarded as a frontrunner of independent film productions called “*film independen*”, which constituted a new milestone for many successive filmmakers by challenging the censorship system and using innovative themes and representations (Workshop at the Focus of Asia Fukuoka International Film Festival in September 2015, Aartsen 2011: 21)⁶. This film was an independent production, without undergoing the usual procedures of filmmaking: namely, without joining the motion picture and TV production association or asking for prior production permission. In addition to the content of the film that confusingly depicted stranded youths in modern society, this method of independent production had an impact on many filmmakers. The film was a blockbuster, and it became the first flag-bearer for independent production communities and film festivals hosted around the country. Aartsen points out that when the film was made—right after the collapse of the Suharto regime and the beginning of the reformation period—was an important factor to its success (Aartsen 2011: 22). Each of the four directors has gone on to produce masterpieces, and they are striving to be important figures in the Indonesian film industry as well as to educate their successors. The production of this film was a great opportunity to challenge censorship, and also triggered film productions that required consistent self-belief. Furthermore, two of the four directors were female, and they have been influential to many of the female directors and producers who came after them.

Under the censorship system, all films are subjected to review by a censorship agency prior to premiering, and are required to clearly categorize themselves as “for adults,” “for youths,” and so on. On top of that, there have been reported examples of films during the post-Suharto era that were forced to change their title, script, and contents. Such changes were forced by regulatory powers (different from so-called censorship) and included critical opinions as well as resistance movements by Muslims or the public (Aartsen 2011)⁷. Loosening government censorship has had a side-effect where various groups’ and movements’ influences were boosted in the public. On the other hand, as stated before, different regulatory powers have come into power, and this is coupled with heated discussions over the establishment of the Pornography and Pornoaction Regulatory Bills in 2006.

The pornography regulation, which was controversial among the mass media after Suharto

⁶ Aartsen (2011) distinguished the genre *film independen* from independent cinema after reviewing his previous research. This research defines independent cinema as a term compared to Hollywood movies, and *film independen* as a term opposed to the regulation of film during the Suharto regime (p. 21).

⁷ Aartsen introduces the film “Kiss (Satu Kecupan),” released in 2004, as an example of a case where a film title was changed because of public opposition. The original title of the film was “Kiss me quickly (Buruan Cium Gue).” This film passed the censorship test, but this was revoked and the filmmakers were made to change the title because it turned into the target of objection (p. 17).

left, expanded its scope to broadcast media, video software such as VCDs, and live performances. In tandem with these regulations, Indonesian Muslim Clerical Organization (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*: MUI) established religious arbitration in 2001, and set the Pornography Regulatory Bills after 2002. Finally, in 2003, the newly set up committee started to convert regulations on pornography from discourse on national identity or national security/development to religious discourse (Lindsay 2011: 181–182)⁸.

Many artists, including filmmakers, opposed this bill, but various criticisms and movements, including demonstrations against films, were born from its supporters. In this social environment, filmmakers came under pressure to search for their own direction in film production while restricting their expression of certain themes and representation (Clark 2008: 42).

Nia Dinata, one director discussed in this article, has consistently challenged censorship through filmmaking; but she also points out that the censorship system is changing from one conducted by the government to one conducted by citizens. This movement, as discussed later, was visible in a protest in Jakarta regarding the hosting of the Queer Film Festival in 2010. Dinata not only incorporated scenes of said protest into her film in consideration of this current climate, but also attempted to play a part of her film at the Queer Film Festival. As previously mentioned, in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, the concepts of gender and sexuality have mostly been discussed in relation to religious piety and rightfulness. Cross-dressing and homosexuality have been targets of criticism for opposing what religion ordained as a natural lifestyle. Homosexuals have been criticized based on a deeply seated norm that families are to be built on marriages between heterosexuals. However, Muslim interpretations of gender and sexuality norms have branched out, and it is not always the case that cross-dressing and homosexuality are considered as sinful⁹. According to Boellstorff, there are two stances that people take regarding homosexuality: the first, that it is a serious sin, and the second, that it is not a sin, but would be forgivable by God even if it were. The reasoning behind the latter is that homosexuals were created by God, and that their desire was inherently given by God, which is something that cannot be denied (Boellstorff 2005: 183). Even though there is a gap between these interpretations, being a Muslim and a cross-dresser or homosexual in Indonesian society is an extremely challenging situation¹⁰.

⁸ The regulation against pornography later developed into disputes including those over the issuing of *Playboy* magazine in the Indonesian language, as well as a sensual performance by a female *dangdut* singer, Inul Daratista.

⁹ Ihsan (2011), who is an editor of an Islamic magazine in Indonesia, points out that the activities of homosexuals were usually regarded as against ordinary social norms, but that there are no specific remarks on homosexuals in the Islam Act, Fiqh (p. 103). Even in the Koran or *hadith*, which are important guideline texts for Islam, there is no explicit explanation of homosexuality. Though there is a general consensus that homosexual activities are banned, the penalty for them is under dispute. He points out that this issue should be addressed in the scope of each social context (p. 103)

¹⁰ An Indonesian magazine, *Tempo*, ran an article about an Islamic boarding house called *pesantren* for cross-dressers (*waria*), which was built in Yogyakarta on Java island, and was introduced as the only facility of its kind in the world (<http://www.tempo.co/read/news/2013/11/24/205532048/Pesantren-Waria-Yogyakarta-satu-satunya-di-dunia>).

Back in the post-colonial era, during the process of nation building, there were instances of sexual minorities being attacked while the entire country was directed to construct a sturdy nation. Boellstorff, pointing at a series of raids targeting homosexual males after 1999, calls such situations, where a string of methods including violence were employed, “political homophobia” (Boellstorff 2004: 470). It is said that cross-dressing and homosexuality existed in Indonesia in the past, but one of the reasons for the intensification of criticism and harassment in recent years could be that sexual minorities began publicizing their identities in society, spurred on by movements by sexual minorities in Europe and the U.S.

3. Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Films Post-2000

In today’s world, where information is globalizing, the influence of other countries’ (including Europe and the U.S.) media representations can clearly be observed in the changes in traditional values toward gender and sexuality. The opportunity to come into contact with expressions in overseas media is increasing as people’s consumption activities expand. Meanwhile, it is also true that self-recognition of many kinds of gender and sexuality have started to form, and that some of those equipped with media literacy through globalized information conduct their own self-recognition process using media, and subsequently come out to society. Boellstorff notes that it was in the 1970s that the word “gay” first appeared in Indonesian media through the translations of American magazines or short novels, and this had the effect of helping the Indonesian gay population start to become aware of themselves (Boellstorff 2003: 227). Self-recognition by the gay population of Indonesia may be one of the outcomes of the new permeated categories of gender and sexuality due to the media’s impact. This recognition of new categories has become widespread, and it is not limited to the parties in question, but also extends to movie audiences and many would-be social critics.

In such a social environment, films that agitate people’s values by presenting innovative disturbances of gender and sexuality concepts have come onto the scene. In the following section, some of these films are introduced and their contents, social evaluations, and disputes are explored.

“Virgin”

This film was shot by director Hanny Saputra in 2005. It depicts the life of high school girls who are engaged in patronage dating and prostitution in an urban society permeated by materialism. It is coupled with chastity ideology and family affairs that are still deeply seated in Indonesian society (Ueno 2006: 179–180). This film describes the daily lives of three high school students and the relationships surrounding them. One girl maintains her chastity, another accepts the act of selling herself in order to be an actress, and the other repeatedly engages in patronage dating because of her desire for material goods. The real world of the youths that

inhabit a metropolis, Jakarta, is well illustrated in this film. The themes focused on in this movie were taboos in the Suharto era, such as patronage dating, prostitution, and crime (Aartsen 2011: 16). As mentioned earlier, films that dealt with these kinds of themes after 2006 have faced criticism from religious groups and society, causing them to have to consider these criticisms before proceeding with filming. This film was shot as a series with three installments, with separate protagonists and staff for each film, showing the great effect it had on Indonesian society (including the criticism it attracted).

“Quickie Express”

An adult comedy directed by Dimas Djayadiningrat in 2007. This is a story about a company disguising itself as a pizza delivery company to navigate through protests by religious groups while actually dispatching young males to urban, bored upper-class women for various escort services. The main protagonists are three young men who realize great success in their escorting services, but a tangled relationship occurs that includes mafia feuds stemming from one man’s romance. This is a film loaded with dark sexual jokes. Furthermore, there is even a scene where the father of a main character’s girlfriend confesses his love and even pressures the main character for a relationship. It has become accepted as a film that depicts often subversive representations of gender and sexuality using a comedic touch. It has been pointed out that this film boosted the popularity of the genre known as “adult comedy” through its strong success thanks to the popular actors that starred in it.

(<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/12/27/cinema-comes-outdark-ages.html>)

Last accessed on Sept. 28, 2015).

“Berbagi Suami (Love for Share)”

This well-known socially aware film was directed by Nia Dinata and released in 2006. It focuses on three cases of polygamy (Tatyzo 2011: 31–35). The first case depicts an upper-class woman, who is a doctor and a wife, and her son agonizing over their husband/father choosing the path of polygamy. The second case is about a country woman who came to work in a city, got married to a man as his third wife, and then fell in love with the other wives. The third case describes a young Chinese woman dreaming of becoming an actress while living with a Chinese man as his second wife. Ultimately, she chooses to move on with her life and chase her dreams. Each case is illustrated differently in respect to social class, age, and ethnic roots.

As for this film’s subversive descriptions or representations of polygamy, Heryanto (2011) comments that “Berbagi Suami’s subversive message appears to have escaped both state officials and the many members of the society who are obsessed with the disciplining of citizens, particularly in matters pertaining to sexual activity and clothing.” While indicating his favor of “Berbagi Suami”, he points out that in comparison to another film that also dealt with polygamy, “Ayat-ayat cinta (The Verses of Love),” which was a big hit in 2008, the message of “Berbagi

Suami” was not easy to comprehend, and thus could not “stir the mass audience” (p. 74). However, this film is still remembered as a controversial work due to its subversive images.

Nia Dinata herself hosted discussions with audiences after screenings of this film. According to one interview, she conducted discussions with local sociologists and female activists when screening it during a provincial tour in Makassar, Bandung, and Jakarta (Rahman and Andan 2008; <http://filmindonesia.or.id/article/nia-dinata-penonton-indonesia-sekarang-sangatcerdas#.VgnzjMs9I5s>. May 13, 2008. Last accessed on June 13, 2014).

“Madam X”

This film premiered in 2010 and was shot by a young male director, Lucky Kuswandi. Among the issues of gender and sexuality, it especially focuses on “manliness.” With the conflict between the main gay protagonist and a homophobic male politician as the axis for the plot, the film depicts a current social scene showing attacks towards cross-dressers and homosexuals with a comedic touch (the setting of the film is supposed to be an imaginary country). The film contrasts male figures by showing a gay young man mastering a unique dance and starting to find his life’s purpose in fighting, alongside a husband who is a charismatic male politician with three wives who possess unusual powers (cf. Fukuoka 2012: 92–97). While the setting is presented as an imaginary country, the situation that cross-dressers and homosexuals face, such as being attacked and having issues with polygamy, reminds one of the current Indonesian society. Although it is a comedy, filming this kind of movie in 2010 must have required considerable conviction, and shows the director’s intentions to spark discussion.

As observed from the four cases above, a variety of contents and expressions regarding gender and sexuality have been portrayed in Indonesian films after 2000. Some of them have been called into question, and some have become subjects of criticism from society. However, the diversification of theme and representation is occurring even now.

4. A Study of Films Directed by Nia Dinata with Kalyana Shira Films

A director who is continuously and vigorously making attempts to portray subversive representations of gender and sexuality in a sea of diverse themes is Nia Dinata, a young woman who started in the advertising industry and won the best new director award at the Asia Pacific Film Festival in 2002. She is consistently conscious of problems regarding national restriction of filmic expressions in the past, present, and future, and seeks possibilities for representation in various themes (Tatyzo 2011: 15). In the Indonesian movie industry, where films containing sociological commentary started to pick up momentum in the late 1990s, Dinata is a director that skews towards social aware films and constantly challenges censorship. She made the following comment on the role of film and censorship in a report by the Ford foundation in 2009:

When I see films from far-away countries, places I'm not familiar with, I get a feel for their history or social reality. So I feel I have this mission and that is to tell the story of Indonesia, which is a very diverse and complex place, but also a place where freedom of expression is not experienced by all. Film can tell a more complete story than the headlines—newspapers don't have enough space for complex stories. That is why films are often perceived as threats to power. That is why the Indonesian film law that has been reformed recently, still has a strong censorship regulation in it¹¹.

I have fought to change this law because I believe in freedom of expression and I will continue to fight against censorship

(<http://www.fordfoundation.org/about-us/2009-annual-report/visionaries/niadinata>

Last accessed on June 6, 2014).

Also, in another interview about censorship for the Jakarta Post, she said:

In terms of censorship, I have been dealing with this since 2001 and there has been no change. The laws need to have a strong value in embracing freedom of expression. I went to the constitutional court in 2007, but censorship laws are still controlling. What we really want is a law that embraces freedom of expression, but even in the preamble of the new film law that came out in 2009—it's still controlling. (Trisha Sertori, Jakarta Post April 28, 2011. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/04/28/niadiata-embracing-freedom-expression>)

As we can see from the comments above, Dinata sees media as a vehicle to depict reality, and pays attention to its role as society's mirror for the public. She also emphasizes the importance of challenging censorship and pursuing freedom of expression. While producing social aware films on the one hand, she has also put forth efforts to educate her followers by opening her own studio, Kalyana Shira Films. She explains why this was necessary as follows:

Indonesia has been a very silent culture, especially when it comes to women and other minorities. But creative expression through film can change behavior. It can give voice to those who remain unheard in the cinema. This change inside the cinema is a big step toward larger change. That's why we're training young filmmakers. The next generation must be educated so they know how to use their rights in expressing their thoughts. We need more people to make stories of equality and justice.

(<http://www.fordfoundation.org/about-us/2009-annual-report/visionaries/niadinata>

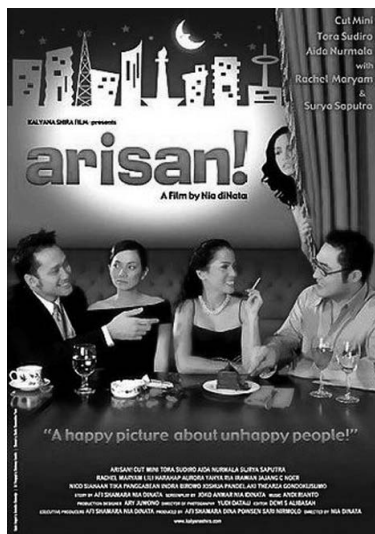
Last accessed on June 6, 2014).

¹¹ Lindsay (2011) reports that these regulations were shifting from the national governmental level to the local level, and that the tendency toward autonomy by local governments has become emphasized. Moreover, the author states that regulation might get stricter in certain areas, and that filmmakers feel uneasy about this situation (p. 176).

Backing up her opinions above, Dinata’s films often cover themes that have been ignored by society and present issues directly to the audience so that they can face them head-on. Some of her pieces confuse stereotypic gender and sexuality roles in an extreme fashion, which is likely a deliberate expression on her part. The film mentioned above, “Berbagi Suami (Love for Share),” is not just seen as an expression of her critical opinions through the depiction of women’s anguish while living in the reality of polygamy, but also an expression of her intention to challenge people’s common sense by showing love among wives. Her rather extreme technique that brings the contradictions of untouchable problems such as polygamy, ethnic issues, and sexual minorities has helped some of her films receive appraisal from overseas; however, some have been rated low in domestic evaluations, as mentioned earlier.

The next section will focus on Dinata’s films, “Arisan!,” and review its contents. “Arisan!” is a serial with two installments shot in 2003 and 2010, respectively. The first of these films, “Arisan!,” was released in 2003 and the sequel “Arisan!2” took a gay young man as its main character—a rare case in Indonesian films. The serial work of “Arisan!” was known as the first film in Indonesian film history to tackle the theme of gay individuals straight-on.

“Arisan!” and “Arisan!2”



The cover of Arisan! DVD



The cover of Arisan!2 DVD

“Arisan!” tells the story of the urban lives of adult men and women, and their friendships. This film depicts various issues faced by affluent metropolitan individuals in their early 30s living elegant city lives. It describes a lifetime of repression of a gay male hiding his homosexuality, and details the process of ultimately coming out to his family and friends (Tatyzo 2011: 29–31). Casting gay young men as protagonists, and showing a gay love story and two kissing scenes between them that lasted for a few seconds, triggered disputes in Indonesian society. The gay

young man in the film is introduced as a Batak man from Sumatra Island, a place that follows traditional conventions of patriarchy. The young man goes through anguish over his identity. However, he finally comes out to his mother and is accepted. The film portrays his coming out as something that is accepted by his family, implying that being accepted by family is, above all, the important first step in being accepted by society; a contrast to films in the U.S. or Europe, which usually depict the process of coming out as cutting family ties. Munir points out that this film depicts the U.S.- and European-oriented concept of self-recognition by gay males and ties it into the characteristics of Indonesian society (Munir 2011: 125).

Another interesting aspect of this film is its depiction of affluent young male and female city dwellers and the distress that those who have established themselves through interaction with others feel. In criticisms of this film, some in the media said that “At times, we even laugh at ourselves, because the film tells of real people with real problems”. (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2003/12/07/039arisan039-achingly-funny-slice-life.html> Last accessed on Sept. 28, 2015).

As explained above, what is shown in this film is not an imaginary construction, but a real world in which actual young urban dwellers live.

Arisan means an association based on mutual financing that can be observed in locations in Indonesia. The real function of *arisan* in societies is as a group of people that support temporary expenses for school fees or house repairs among families and neighbors, to enforce social solidarity. In this film, however, it is defined as a luxurious lunch party functioning as a means of social community between wealthy young urban men and women (Ueno 2006: 180). Nowadays, *Arisan* in megalopolises are often held among work associates gathering at restaurants, which is portrayed in this film. Issues between couples or infertility issues faced by the characters are described with humor, and difficulties with identity and human relationships are presented around *Arisan*, which has now been transformed into a gorgeous ceremonial meal in urban, well-off circles.

What one can see from the daily lifestyles of the people in this film is very different from what has been shown previously in traditional Indonesian films. It depicts financially independent upper-class individuals who live their lives while anguishing over sexual identity, infertility, or divorce. This film can be regarded as a work that displays well-educated, financially sound, consumption-crazy, modern-lifestyle-practicing urban people from a new angle, to reveal how they search for and anguish over their identities. The film is also recognized as an anomaly due to its head-on depiction of gay men and its focus on the relationships between those men and the friendships between the men and women surrounding them, whereas traditional film norms have been biased toward heterosexual love as the central theme. A comment was made regarding this film that “Much of the attention about the film has focused on a same-sex kiss, but more important is that this is the probably the first local movie to portray homosexuals in an unsensational, objective light”.

(<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2003/12/07/039arisan039-achingly-funny-slicelife.html> Last accessed on Sept. 28, 2015).

As pointed out by this comment, nobody has ever tried to describe gay men as commonly existing, independent people of integrity in the traditional Indonesian film industry. Because “Arisan!” won many awards at Indonesian film festivals in 2004, it is recognized as one of several notable popular films.

The second sequel, “Arisan! 2,” was filmed by the same director in 2010. The main protagonists of this film are played by the same actors as the first one. What are portrayed in this film are the lifestyles of those same characters in their 40s. One of the heroines has gotten divorced, left her luxurious lifestyle in Jakarta behind in order to face an illness, and settled down on Gili Island, which is located in the eastern part of Indonesia, surrounded by nature. It also involves the stories of a bereaved widow friend of hers, a young woman who makes up her mind to live as a single mother, as well as of separated gay men who have found new partners. They ultimately run into each other on Gili island. There, the heroine’s illness becomes known to her friends, and the gay young men mend their friendship. This continuation of the previous “Arisan!” illustrates various issues that urban individuals face in their 40s in a sophisticated manner. One comment on this film states, “This sequel is a blend of drama, comedy, and wisdom. We see the clash between the trendy, witty gatherings with the tormented private lives of the protagonists.”

(<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/12/04/still-witty-more-touching.html> Last accessed on Sept. 28, 2015).

What makes this film stand out is its depiction of the characters, which invites audience empathy towards the difficulties of human lives, as can be seen through the lives of the protagonists in the film who experienced change as they grew older.

There is a scene where the main characters encounter a protest over the hosting of the Queer Film Festival. This is based on a real event that eventually brought about disputes in Indonesia. This event, in which Indonesia, home to the world’s largest Muslim population, hosted the Q! Film Festival (Queer Film Festival, whose films are about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual topics) during September 2010, attracted the interest of many people. It also indicates the rise in national interest in themes of sexual minorities, including gay individuals. In the meantime, there were cases in certain locations where the film festival was forced to cancel due to a claim from the MUI. Based on these incidents, it can be seen that there was a strong backlash against people belonging to sexual minorities, and that these movements were led by Islamic groups as well as others in the country, which implies that a backlash is in effect.

(<http://www.voanews.com/Indonesian/news/MUI-Desak-Pemerintah-Tutup-Festival-Film-Gay> Friday Oct. 1, 2010. Excerpt from “A claim for gay film festival cancellation to government by Majeris ULAMA (MUI Desak Pemerintah Tutup Festival Film Gay.” Last accessed on Sept. 2, 2011).

In reality, “Arisan 2!” was screened at the Q Film Festival, but there were reports of protests around the theater. In consideration of these incidents and people’s comments about this film, director Nia Dinata stated that:

When I released “Arisan!” in 2003, people criticized the film through TV and radio; for “Arisan 2!” in 2010, though, people used the Internet as a threatening tool. Gay individuals in Jakarta are relatively accepted compared to other locations, but we are still moving against the times. Conservatism came back to life. Censorship has now come into people’s hands, and the government has let the people do that. This must be their strategy. Instead of resolving issues, the government urges people in certain communities to move towards canceling or boycotting film festivals. The current state of Indonesia is very unstable. (<http://latitudes.nu/director-nia-dinatas-arisan-sex-and-the-city-with-substance/Latitudes>. April 12, 2012 “Director Nia Dinata’s Arisan: Sex and the City with substance” Last accessed on June 8, 2014).

As can be seen from her remarks, the way people express their criticism against films within society has changed. This change shows that the platform of dispute that generates fluctuations in the concept of gender and sexuality is gradually widening from national media such as conventional newspapers or TV coverage to global media. Specific trends such as video and communication devices becoming miniaturized, personalized, multi-channeled, and cheaper helped to make individuals senders of information on behalf of the media. Now those who previously lacked the tools to express their own criticisms and opinions can send them through Facebook, Twitter, and their personal blogs. Dinata said the following about this:

Audiences in current-day Indonesia are well informed, and this audience is not limited only to those in metropolitan areas like Jakarta, but also those who live in other urban centers. They possess DVD players, and have access to pirated copies and are familiar with U.S. and European movies through bootlegs. They have detailed knowledge about films from the U.S., Europe, and Asia, and know how to judge the quality of production, performance, and story of films. If provided with something through TV dramas, these individuals can immediately post their thoughts onto their own blogs. Under these circumstances where audiences are getting more informed, the people on the production side must have a sense of responsibility to provide more informative products (Rahman and Andan 2008. <http://filmindonesia.or.id/article/nia-dinata-penonton-indonesia-sekarang-sangatcerdas#.VgnzjMs9I5s>. May 13, 2008. Last accessed on June 13, 2014).

In modern Indonesia, through widespread personal media devices and the development of many kinds of Internet communication, people’s spontaneous and varied thoughts regarding media representations can be conveyed. These thoughts sometimes promote media

representations, but at the same time, they may lead to criticism or attacks. In light of this trend, many film directors and producers often get involved with Internet communication systems. Nia Dinata has also created opportunities for discussion with people at movie premieres, and disseminates her ideas via Facebook and Twitter, as mentioned above. In other words, she represents her ideas as a filmmaker in many ways alongside presenting issues to society through her films.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented a discussion on the significance of subversive representations of gender and sexuality in films. Films, can project to the people a certain vision of a segment of social realities that are in question using visual information; this applies to both social and art films. Film is a type of media that can partially or uniformly present a population's cultural aspects (lifestyles, languages, religions, and customs) that can be seen in sceneries and manners of clothing, food, and housing in cities and farmlands.

On the other hand, if one regards films as a form of representation, there are many options as to how to depict themes. For controversial themes or serious social issues, one choice is to present the film in a straightforward way as a socially aware work with objections against society. Another option is to pursue more euphemistic expressions. One can pursue expression by utilizing techniques that enforce visual beauty in film, by focusing on the linguistic script or the narrative, by giving the film a serious ambience, by satirizing issues in a comedy, and more.

The film "Arisan!" tactfully weaves themes of identity, rifts between spouses, infertility, homosexuality, and rifts in friendships in the form of sophisticated urban lifestyles with humor. "Arisan! 2" deals with how to face and live through the difficult times of urban life for individuals in their 40s, with trials such as divorces, bereavement, illness, and so forth. There are scenes of young gay men in a relationship and of disputes over hosting the Queer Film Festival, which caused a real argument in Indonesian society. Using Gili Island's beautiful scenery as the backdrop and introducing the aforementioned problems that invite people's empathy at pivotal points of the storyline to make them known as larger issues are techniques utilized in this film.

The cultural studies researcher Yoshimi underlines the necessity for continuous questioning processes that will proliferate a certain level of dominant codes and perspectives where multilevel interactions of statements and actions within collective and political processes are mentioned in the research of media text creation, editing, and viewing, as well as processes that exclude and conceal separate competing codes or perspectives (Yoshimi 2008: 85). Symbolized as involving many other agents under the name of "the rise in Islamic awareness," the dominant code or perspective against expressions of gender and sexuality in the media in current Indonesian society must be considered as movements to restrict such expressions based on the belief in religious and social norms. In these movements, the presence of cross-dressers and gay

individuals, as well as the reality of homosexuality, has been excluded and concealed. “Arisan!” can be seen as a head-on attempt to portray a counter-image of gender and sexuality that has been excluded and concealed. “Arisan!” introduces gorgeous urban lifestyles as well as sophisticated behavior displayed by independent young men and women, while also depicting a young gay man who anguishes over his identity, a heroine who is forced to go through a divorce, and a mother who accepts her son as gay. In “Arisan! 2,” in addition to the luxurious urban lifestyle, the beauty of a distant island in Indonesia is introduced, as well as depictions of what gender and sexuality are and the activities of sexual minorities that can be observed in the hosting of the Queer Film Festival and during the protest movements. Against the backdrop of common experiences and idealistic scenes of a luxurious urban lifestyle that seems reasonably attainable, the film presents issues regarding gender and sexuality, and even the recognition of individuals’ identity as human beings without excluding or concealing one’s issues; this contributes to its uniqueness.

Nia Dinata has continued to create social aware films that portray the existence of minorities and challenge preexisting common sense and norms by casting them into the light at the forefront of society through media (specifically film). This article focused on gender and sexuality, but she produced another film entitled “Ca Bau Kan” in 2002 that shone a spotlight on the Chinese population in Indonesia (Tatyzo 2011: 23-27). The topic has continued to be avoided in Indonesian film production¹². She also made a film focused on the female labor force. A documentary filmed in 2011 showed women engaged in the traditional craft of *batik* cloth production. Many of Dinata’s socially aware films have created platforms for disputes between both yay- and naysayers regarding her original themes and subversive representations. Bringing up disputes in society and calling into question people’s common sense and values may be a function of socially aware films. The discussion of social aware films featured in this article covered not only the way that these films explicitly challenge social reality, but also the way they show a deconstruction of existing norms, which indicates that they have the potential to generate social disputes. Also, through the review of censorship trends in film representations and its contents, one may be able to uncover the possibility of creating fields of discussion through media representation regarding sustainable negotiation and the power of arguments.

In order to discuss these circumstances, analyzing criticism in news and newspapers and reviewing the intentions of creators and the works they generate will be helpful. Also, as mentioned above, criticism against films that are being generated on the Internet is different from the rest,

¹² The evaluation of the description of the Chinese population in Indonesia as shown in this film is covered in Heryanto’s (2008) article (pp. 78–84). The author recognizes this film as a breakthrough in Indonesian film history, in that the Chinese-Indonesians known as Peranakan are featured as a group that has put forth a great effort for the independence of the country, and shows that depictions of patterns of hostility between the Chinese population in Indonesia and native Indonesians have not stayed exactly the same between eras, while admitting that negative descriptions of the overseas Chinese population in contrast to the Indonesian Pribumi (native Indonesians) were classified as racism during the Suharto regime (pp. 78–84).

especially in recent Indonesia. This article could not cover disputes in blog postings, but perhaps future scholars will review the contents of day-to-day comments and criticisms in order to understand the details of disputes over values regarding gender and sexuality.

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