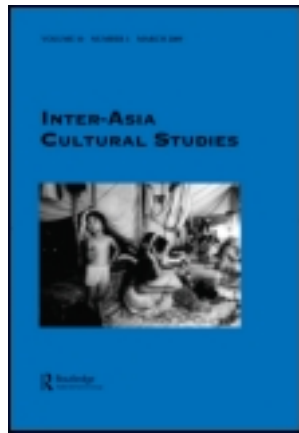


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### City and desire in Indonesian cinema

Intan Paramaditha <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Cinema Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, USA

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## City and desire in Indonesian cinema

Intan PARAMADITHA

**ABSTRACT** *This article examines the ways in which desire in/for the city is projected in contemporary Indonesian cinema in comparison with the authoritarian New Order period (1965–1998). Despite the government's visual investment to project the image of a unified, stable, and modern nation, filmmakers of the New Order period sought ways to capture 'national reality' that was incongruous to the official version of national ideals by portraying the urban space, particularly Jakarta, as a site of social/economic disjuncture and moral contradiction produced by Suharto's developmentalist paradigm. The post-New Order era is characterized by the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers whose cinematic imaginations were shaped by the promises of political reform, the global flows of images and capital, and the dissolving image of a coherent nation. Whereas the previous generation treated subjects who pursue their desire in the city with suspicion, contemporary Indonesian filmmakers embrace the city and the production of various forms of desire: sexual desire, desire for consumption, and desire to reclaim the space. This article further discusses 'coming out within the closet' as a spatial strategy that reveals the agency of new urban subjects on the one hand, and, on the other, the defining limits in which such agency could be fully articulated.*

**KEYWORDS:** Indonesia, film, urban space, desire, nation



**Figure 1.** *Eliana, Eliana*, 2002; image courtesy of Miles Films.

'I am a village boy, and cinema is just too urban.'  
(Arifin C. Noer [1941–1995], Indonesian film director<sup>1</sup>)

There was a sense of pervasive anxiety among film directors of New Order Indonesia (1965–1998) as they tried to grapple with film and modernity. Arifin C. Noer, who had been recognized as a prominent theater director when he decided to make films in the 1970s, was 'a

village boy' only in terms that he was born on the coastal region of Java and was exposed to rich traditional art forms in his hometown (*Suara Pembaruan* 1993); his works, nevertheless, reflected a vast range of references and influences, from shadow puppets to the plays of William Saroyan and Eugene Ionesco. Such a humble statement was probably made because Arifin did not enter the world of cinema earlier in his career, nor did he learn filmmaking through a formal, modern institution. With regards to film education, however, a modern film school was only established in 1976; so it was common for many filmmakers to familiarize themselves with the camera by observing others. Film and theater director Teguh Karya (n.d.) warned that one should be aware that film has a language of its own, and many Indonesians 'were still stuttered' in using the language. Unlike performance, film was constantly viewed as something that was 'brought to' rather than 'coming from' Indonesia, with all its excitement and unfamiliarity.<sup>2</sup>

When Arifin mentioned that film is 'too urban,' a parallel between film and modernity was established; as cultural forms, both were new and imported, demanding people to adapt, manage, and experiment. The multidimensionality of film as a modern medium conjured up a sense of wonder for Arifin (Noer 1988: 66): 'Film represents the complexity and the confusion of this age ... it is within a film that we see the struggle between ideas and capital, the cooperation between nature and machine. Fantastic!' Arifin's passion for the new and dynamic medium was shared by his peers. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the New Order filmmakers were preoccupied with the question of what film is and should be, and in the same period, they tried to make sense of the rapid transformation of the urban space, particularly Jakarta. The result was a series of representations of the city in which their conception of an ideal cinema and the desire to grasp modernity interweave. The gaps and contradictions in the city produced by Suharto's developmentalist project had urged filmmakers to capture the experiences of people caught between their own desire for the city, the illusion of modernity, and the wavering tradition. Under the gaze of many New Order filmmakers, Jakarta is portrayed as a Third World metropolis with all its problems of urbanization, poverty, and class conflict lurking beneath skyscrapers and highways. The city had ensnared them, although more often, in a bleak way.

Today, the city still fascinates the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers, whose emergence coincided with the end of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, the democratization of the film medium through digital technology, and the breaking down of a coherent image of the nation marked by decentralization and regional autonomy. Many films have engaged with voices from the marginal areas to counter the New Order dominant narratives, but Jakarta as the capital city remains central on screen. It is an intimate landscape shared by film-makers, producers, actors, and activists: a place where they grew up, learned filmmaking, work, desire, and consume. With an awareness that the city is a crucial part in the new film culture, post-1998 filmmakers translate the urban experience differently from the previous generation. The city now serves as a site in which urban, cosmopolitan subjectivities emerge, often outside the designated national framework, and articulate new desires in the post-authoritarian time.

### **The new order films and the city of gaps**

The city for the New Order government was a visual marker of national progress and modernity, neatly framed within the keyword '*pembangunan*' (development). The Suharto administration, as many scholars have also pointed out, was characterized by state-guided national developmentalism and pro-foreign investment policies, with power highly centralized in the hands of bureaucrat and military elites. The relationship between '*desa*' and '*kota*' (village and the city) was to be understood as a harmonious relationship between tradition and pro-capitalist development, an ideal situation where, as described by Abidin Kusno (2000: 72),

'cultural heritage ... exists side by side with "inevitable" modernization.' The national television TVRI, the only TV channel available to Indonesians before the booming of private television in the 1990s, was populated with programs that promote this ideal relationship to the national audience. Documentaries such as '*ABRI Masuk Desa*' (The Army Goes into the Village), displaying the army assisting people in the village to build infrastructures such as roads and bridges, situates the national center as the benevolent modernizer for the less developed citizens who aspire progress. Despite the government's transmigration policy aimed at reducing population in big cities such as Jakarta, the urban remained desirable, ironically because the state itself invested in glossy images of modernity and economic progress projected to both Indonesian people and the world. The developmentalist framework underlined the need to constantly make visible the physical transformation of Jakarta, or what Kusno in his other writing calls 'the city of influence.' Using the term 'nationalist urbanism,' he describes the authorities' effort to create 'a unifying image of Jakarta as the center that represents the nation for citizens living in the city (as well as elsewhere in the country)' (Kusno 2010: 25).

The heritage park Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (The Miniature Park of Beautiful Indonesia) exemplifies how the progressive image of a city in terms of its economic development is linked seamlessly with Indonesian diverse forms of cultural heritage. Initiated by First Lady Tien Suharto after her visit to Disneyland, Taman Mini replicates the map of the Indonesian archipelago on 100-hectare land in the suburb of East Jakarta, boasting traditional houses from the 27 provinces along with the advance of technology in the forms of railroads and airplanes. Covering the vast national territory from Aceh to Irian Jaya, the park was founded on the philosophy that sought for a 'balance' between physical/economic development and spirituality (The Miniature Park of Beautiful Indonesia n.d.). Such an ideal was emphasized through a series of films called *Indonesia Indah* (Beautiful Indonesia, 1984) screened regularly in the IMAX theater of Taman Mini. As many scholars have argued, the editing of the film endorses the idea of national cohesiveness, juxtaposing images of regional diversity through Javanese *wayang* or Balinese dance with the image of a modern nation represented by skyscrapers and flyovers in metropolitan Jakarta.<sup>3</sup>

The Taman Mini project demonstrates the importance of visual culture for the New Order regime in projecting the nation as multicultural, stable, and modern. The regime in fact invested in a wide range of visual apparatuses, including museums, monuments, television, and cinema; the latter was assigned a special place as both a subject of regulation, particularly censorship, and a medium for state propaganda. When Suharto came to power in 1966, he quickly restructured the cinema institution under a more centralized administration, the Department of Information. Whereas literature and theater were regarded as 'art' under the Department of Education and Culture, cinema was grouped together with radio and television as 'a medium of mass communication.' The Film Law no. 8/1992 stipulates that cinema functions to 'develop national culture as a key aspect to improve national security within the scheme of national development.' Within the paradigm of developmentalism, film serves as a fortress, similar to the military, that facilitates stability. Consequently, local films were censored more strictly than foreign films; in addition to the post-production censorship before a film could be screened in theaters, filmmakers had to submit their scripts to the Censorship Board (Badan Sensor Film [BSF]) before they could start shooting.<sup>4</sup>

Emphasizing the communicative and pedagogical function of cinema, the government funded many propaganda films that promote the notion of a stable nation through the State Film Corporation. Led by G. Dwipayana, a former military general, the State Film Corporation produced the big budget *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The September 30 Treason/PKI, 1982), a historical film on the 1965 coup, which demonizes communism and glorifies Suharto as a national hero. It also funded other films that support the national development projects. *Dr. Siti Pertiwi Kembali ke Desa* (Dr. Siti Pertiwi Returns to the Village, 1979), for instance, is

propaganda to prevent the massive flow of urbanization by highlighting the importance of returning to and developing the village. Another important program produced by the State Film Corporation was the children's TV series, *Si Unyil*, a puppet show based on European *guignol* (Rubin 1998: 237), which ran from 1981 to 1993, aimed mostly to educate children on the positive effects of government policies. Set in a village named Suka Maju, literally meaning 'Desiring to progress,' *Si Unyil* reflects that aspirations in the regions had to be situated within the goals of national development dictated by the national center (Kitley 2000; Spyer 2004).

Images of the ideal nation and national progress, however, were not uncontested. Although the censorship law stated that films were prohibited from touching the issues of SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, class), I argue that some prominent New Order filmmakers pose their critique towards the government in subtle ways. Filmmakers such as Syumanjaya, Arifin C. Noer, Teguh Karya, and Nya Abbas Acup were concerned with representing the reality of the nation that is far from glossy through the discourse of 'wajah Indonesia asli' (the real face of Indonesia). This was a term shared by critics and idealistic filmmakers in the 1970s to respond to the majority of Indonesian films that merely promote luxury and fail to reflect the reality of the nation. They criticized producers who perceived cinema as a commodity and used images of luxury, romance, sex, and violence to spice up their films. The nation within the discourse of 'the real face of Indonesia' was, hence, not an extension of the imagination of a cohesive ideal space endorsed by the state. In fact, New Order filmmakers often expressed views about the nation that were conflicting with those asserted by the state, as national reality for them also meant ruptures in the national progress. The city, with its high contrast between skyscrapers and slums, became a staple image of social and economic disjuncture in many 'national reality' films made by the New Order artists.

Idealistic filmmakers, who preferred to call themselves *seniman* (artists) so as to differentiate their position from the commercial producers, chose to represent national reality through images diverting from the portrayal of luxury offered by producers as well as the success of developmentalism asserted by the state. The critique towards developmentalism and the larger problem of neocolonialism drew many New Order films to the rubric of Third Cinema. Third Cinema was in itself a specific movement that could not be detached from its historical context: the emergence of Latin American filmmakers in the late 1960s that sought aesthetic forms to pose an anti-colonial political stance and resistance towards the dominance of Hollywood practice and ideology.<sup>5</sup> Teshome Gabriel (1982: 2), however, proposes a wider conceptualization of Third Cinema as 'cinema of the Third World which stands opposed to imperialism and class oppression in all their ramifications and manifestations.'

The New Order film artists did not directly link themselves to the international Third World aesthetic movements (except in rare cases where they praised Indian neorealism as a strong statement of anti-colonial national identity), nor were they 'radical enough' to turn away from the commercial producers and, in Ismael Xavier's (1997: 1) terms, as he describes Brazilian Cinema Novo, 'to turn the scarcity of means into a channel for aesthetic experimentation.' Yet Indonesian filmmakers' nationalism and their critique on the rise of capital among the few elites were the very product of the changing world order: the processes of decolonization and the global constructions of developmentalism and modernization that followed. In this case, I found it more useful not to measure New Order Indonesian cinema against the ideal Third Cinema but, as Robert Stam (2003: 31) has suggested, to analyze it as a part of 'a wide spectrum of alternative practices.' As Ella Shohat (2003: 55) further emphasizes, Third-Worldist film practices vary from place to place, ranging from 'epic costume drama to personal small-budget documentary.'

'The Third-Worldist film practice,' 'Indonesian way,' could be found in what Umar Kayam called 'mixture films,' where artists negotiated their idealism with the demands of

the producers (Kayam 1979). Images of social and economic discrepancies in the city were prevalent in, among others, Arifin C Noer's *Matahari-Matahari* (Sun, Sun, 1985), Ami Priyono's *Jakarta Jakarta* (1988), Syumanjaya's *Si Doel Anak Betawi* (Si Doel the Betawi Kid, 1972), or Wim Umboh's *Pengemis dan Tukang Becak* (The Beggar and the Rickshaw Driver, 1978). In some cases, filmmakers had to face the censor's scissors for images that provoked class tension, such as Arifin C Noer's *Matahari-matahari*, which went through a seven-month process of censorship because it was deemed as 'heightening social tension.' The film finally found its way to theaters but a scene when a mentally-disordered novelist criticizes people sitting in a Mercedes Benz was deleted (Luqman 1986).

The works of Nya Abbas Acup deserve special attention since they might appear as harmless comedy (sometimes involving slapstick) films appealing to the masses. Because his films were not considered 'serious enough,' he rarely faced problems with censorship (Batubara 1991). In *Inem Pelayan Sexy* (Inem the Sexy Maid, 1976), Nya Abbas criticizes the rise of the new Indonesian middle class in the city, following the New Order economic betterment, as subjects who maintain their modern status on the ground of feudal exploitation of the *babu* (maid). In his other film, *Drakula Mantu* (Dracula Weds His Son, 1974), a hybrid genre of horror and comedy, Nya Abbas problematizes the relationship between the city and the village in which people from the city, i.e. the government and the capital owner, try to claim the village as their property. The film captures the fate of the common people in the village trapped by the top-level political forces at play, between the national policy of land acquisition on the one hand and the foreign policy compliant to the Western capital on the other. In a comical way, these common people are portrayed as ghosts, the neither-here-nor-there entities, who have no place to live because their cemetery was acquired by the government. The only savior is Dracula from Europe, the symbol of civilization and imperial capitalism.

With the exception of Nya Abbas Acup's *Drakula Mantu*, realist aesthetics in general was preferred to visualize the excess of Suharto's modernization project: the gap between the rich and the poor and the moral degradation among the rich. In *Si Doel Anak Modern* (1976), Syumanjaya nostalgically laments the disruption of a harmonious village (*kampung*) community by modernity, embodied in the figure of a deceiving femme fatale, Kristin, who works as a model in Jakarta. Film critic Eric Sasono (2008) has argued that Kristin, whose life is associated with urban problems such as drugs and promiscuity, has lured the innocent male protagonist Doel; Doel's desires for the city and for the femme fatale gradually put his 'traditional' identity as a *kampung* boy in crisis. Syumanjaya's negative view of the city and modernity echoes that of the early cinema produced at the turn of the century such as Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), which associates all evils of the urban space with a dangerous female character called 'the woman from the city.' As Elizabeth Wilson (1991: 150) has argued, the woman in the city tends to be seen as either 'virtuous womanhood in danger ... who triumphs over temptation and tribulation' or the 'temptress,' 'the whore,' 'the fallen woman,' and 'the lesbian' – in short, the forbidden desire made possible in the city.

The gendering of the city in critiques on modernity can also be seen in Teguh Karya's *Ibunda* (1986), a family drama that questions national identity in modern Indonesia. Teguh's protagonist is Mrs Rachim, a Javanese mother who attempts to unite her four children, who have walked through diverging paths in Jakarta. The main plot revolves around Mrs Rachim and his oldest son Fikar, an actor who abandons his family to live with his much older girlfriend, Norma. Norma is a rich 38-year-old woman, who serves as Fikar's manager but has full control over his career and personal life. The conflict between the mother, Fikar, and Norma reveals the tension between the virtues of urban modernity, i.e. capitalism and professionalism, and the traditional filial duties to the family. Using Fikar as a star commodity for her own economic and sexual interest, Norma is a disruption to the cohesive family bonding. Her physicality represents the fake, glamorous urban

entertainment business – the commercial segment of the Indonesian film industry that Teguh Karya loathes – with her excessive make up and the dominant (hence unnatural) ways in which she flaunts her sexuality.

In contrast to Ibu Norma, Mrs Rachim as a mother figure represents traditional values forgotten in the fast-moving, capitalist world. She wears *kebaya* and ties her hair into a *sanggul* (Javanese hair bun), yet the film keeps reminding us that ‘tradition’ here does not mean regionalism. It poses a commentary on the feudal perspectives held by many middle-class Javanese, who value their tradition so highly that they perceive other ethnic groups as inferior. Mrs Rachim strongly criticizes her daughter and feudal son-in-law for their ethnocentrism when they disapprove of their youngest sister’s relationship with a man from Irian Jaya/West Papua, the ethnic other. Mrs Rachim’s strong character and her commitment to unite the family by accepting differences reveal Teguh Karya’s view of what the nation was supposed to be. Born as a Chinese-Indonesian, Teguh was obsessed with representing ethnic and racial prejudice as a problem of urbanization that the New Order tried to conceal beneath the image of harmony and stability.

In visualizing national reality through the city, New Order filmmakers shared their anxiety of the urban space as an alienating, capitalist-driven space, resulting in a harsh criticism on people who pursue their desire for and within the city. Desire, whether it is for an alluring femme fatale or for material wealth, is a subject of constant suspicion and scrutiny. Further, as Indonesian cinema of the New Order period was predominantly a male sphere, images of the city are often gendered, embodied in the figure of a domineering and sexually loose woman, to fit the male filmmakers’ imagination of the bleak national reality.



**Figure 2.** *Arisan!* (*The Gathering*, 2003); image courtesy of Kalyana Shira Films.

### Celebrating desire in the urban space

In the 1990s, the last decade of the Suharto regime, the number of Indonesian films declined drastically as a result of the combination between the New Order foreign policy and the monopoly practice in the film industry. Trying hard to accommodate the demand of MPAA (Motion Pictures Association of America) that intended to distribute Hollywood films directly to Indonesia, the Indonesian government appointed Suharto's crony under the Subentra/21 group as a sole distributor and allowed only Hollywood films to be screened in major movie theaters. Being pushed away to second-class, marginal theaters, Indonesian films lost a large proportion of their audience, causing many film personnel to migrate to television. It was during this unfavorable climate that a circle of graduates from the Jakarta Arts Institute (Institut Kesenian Jakarta/ IKJ) tried to find a way to produce films independently. The IKJ graduates – Mira Lesmana, Nan Achnas, and Riri Riza – worked with Rizal Mantovani, who in that period was a popular music video director, and decided to raise their own funding to make the film *Kuldesak* (Cul-de-sac, 1998).

The independent spirit of *Kuldesak* and the burgeoning of the digital technology eventually inspired the growth of indie filmmaking in various cities in Indonesia. Public screenings are held in cine-clubs, universities, galleries, and cultural centers. Film communities, large and small, are growing with various aims: making films, archiving, and organizing public screenings as well as film/video competitions. All of these activities are either funded by a collective of individuals or by an international funding network. Film activism is similar to other forms of cultural activism in Indonesia: they start small, grow, and sustain themselves without support from the state. Independent filmmakers who began their career in the late 1990s later set up small production houses such as Miles Films, Kalyana Shira, and Salto Films, screen their films in the mainstream theaters, and revive the film-going culture in Indonesia. By 2004, Miles Films had produced *Eliana, Eliana* (2002) and *Petualangan Sherina* (The Adventure of Sherina, 2000), well-acclaimed films directed by Riri Riza, and the teen-flick blockbuster *Ada Apa dengan Cinta* (What's Up With Love, 2003). Whereas in the late 1990s the IKJ graduates had to fund their films independently because the wealthy producers channeled their capital to television, in the mid-2000s these producers returned to cinema for the market that the independent filmmakers had created.

*Kuldesak* was a marker of the new generation's search for new themes and forms. A compilation of four shorts, *Kuldesak* was meant to be a medium for the young filmmakers to experiment without any restrictions, as explained by Mira Lesmana: 'We decided – let's make our story, whatever it is – horror, sex – it's up to you. We did not set up any rules.' Mira was surprised that after filmmakers experimented individually with storyline and film language, the four films revealed a similarity in theme: 'It's all urban, it's all about the lost generation. It's very Western influenced. Without us realizing it, gender issue comes out. Like sexuality or homosexuality. Violence comes out. Anxieties over everything. We thought this is – it's what we are. It's close to us.'<sup>6</sup>

By representing youth in the urban space, *Kuldesak's* filmmakers pose the young generation's version of reality; it captures an awareness of one's place as a part of the lost generation in the urban space, with issues closer to their everyday life. Its trajectory is different from the older generation's version of reality encapsulated within the discourse of 'the real Indonesia.' In fact, Mira recalls that when she and her peers decided to embark on the project with 'the spirit of rebellion,' they were very conscious that they did not want to follow the path of the older generation. 'Because we are of a different generation... We are very aware of the Western influence in ourselves and we decided to accept it rather than being resistant to it,' explained Mira. Despite the young filmmakers' admiration towards the old maestros, the 'social issues' films of Teguh Karya or Syumanjaya did not speak to them. 'We want to portray reality,' said Mira, and 'reality' in this sense was 'our reality.'



The question of 'the real Indonesia,' which from the beginning was founded on the problematic idea that an essential, fixed 'Indonesia' exists, now seems to be more outdated. *Kuldesak* filmmakers celebrate the urban pop culture through a music-video style and the appearance of pop stars: the rock band Slank, vocalist Achmad Dani, and rapper Iwa K. A segment by Riri Riza in the film portrays the life of a filmmaker wannabe who lacks a stable job, much like Mira's description of the actual lost generation who had no access to jobs in the film industry. The character is then famous for a statement that reflects his true desire: '*Gue cuma pengen bikin film*' (I just want to make movies). This might sound unabashedly self-absorbed, but it later became a mantra for independent filmmaking. More importantly, the generational stance was established when the filmmaker wannabe character claims that he does not want to make films like Teguh Karya and Syumanjaya but like Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez.

In post-New Order Indonesian cinema, the urban space is used as a backdrop to reflect on young people's subjectivity in relation to issues that directly affect them, issues that have been treated as 'private' and 'domestic' instead of 'public' and 'national.' This in turn shifts the ways in which the city is imagined. While the older generation of filmmakers criticized desires produced by the city, channeled through sex, drugs, fashion, and class passing, multiple desires are allowed and even celebrated in post-New Order urban films. These desires include sexual desire, desire for consumption, and desire to reclaim the urban space itself. In the following I will focus on the relation between young people, desire, and the urban space through three films: Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* (The Gathering, 2003), a social satire of young urban professionals and socialites in Jakarta, Cinzia Puspita Rini's *The Matchmaker* (2006), a short film about a beautiful woman who finds a potential lover for her gay friend in a bookstore, and Riri Riza's *Eliana, Eliana* (2002), a road movie that revolves around the problems between mother and daughter in a night-long taxi ride.

While the older generation's 'social issue' films tend to portray the act of consumption as excessive and apolitical, the post-New Order 'city films' do not shy away from characters who occupy the position of consumers in the urban space. In Nia Dinata's *Arisan!*, a rich woman, Andien, receives a Jaguar as a birthday present from her husband and recalls a cultural critic who says that Jaguar is not suitable for Indonesia in crisis. But after a brief moment of guilt, she drives the car and later uses it to hunt for young men when she learns that her husband has cheated on her. This, of course, is very different from the sarcastic view of people sitting in a Mercedes Benz in the deleted scene of Arifin C Noer's *Matahari-matahari*. Rather than condemning Andien's ignorance towards Indonesia's reality, the film *Arisan!* deploys the car as a symbol of her mobility in the city and resistance against her husband's patriarchal values. In much the same way, in *The Matchmaker*, going to a hip bookstore in the city means the ability to desire and to buy a certain lifestyle. Kay, the protagonist, spends most of her time sitting at the bookstore café with her Mac laptop and a cup of coffee, a leisure activity that, until today, remains the privilege of middle-class Indonesians. In both *Arisan!* and *The Matchmaker*, desire to consume is not presented as a forbidden desire that automatically entails the loss of identity; instead, it is naturalized as a part of everyday reality of the urban subject and is situated within the global context.

The desire to reclaim the space, to be a part of the city, often conflates with the desire for cosmopolitanism. The characters are not only a part of the local urban space but a real and imagined global community. Like the filmmakers, they are educated in the West, well-versed with global cinematic aesthetics (Wong Kar Wai), and their meetings often take place abroad. In *The Matchmaker*, Kay walks around the bookstores with a global consciousness; she speaks with an American accent, in parallel to the young MTV generation in Indonesia, and refuses a plastic bag to assert her position as a part of the global green community. In *Arisan!*, the gay architect Sakti meets his future boyfriend in a café populated with American emblems, from American flags to Marilyn Monroe posters. The films show that the

immediate experience of the characters within the local, urban space is intertwined with the global without situating the global vis-à-vis the wavering traditional values. The city in the eyes of young urban characters reflects Svetlana Boym's (2001: xviii) paradoxical term 'local internationalism,' which she defines as urban identity that mediates between local and global culture.

In *Eliana Eliana*, the urban aspiration manifests itself as the desire of a young woman from Padang, West Sumatra, to redefine the masculine privilege of 'merantau' (travel), a vernacular form of cosmopolitanism. In Padang culture, *merantau* means leaving one's hometown to seek for wealth and success in another place and is an important part of a man's life. Eliana escapes a marriage arranged by her Padangnese respectable family to be a working-class girl in Jakarta and live in a slum area with her best friend Heni. Eliana's character indicates that a woman is also capable of travel and is not afraid of downward social mobility to fulfill her desire. The opening scene of the film shows Eliana inside the taxi, taking off her *sunting*, a crown worn by a Padangnese woman at her wedding ceremony. Looking at the flashing cars from the taxi window, Eliana enters the city with uncertain feelings as well as desire for freedom.

### Coming out within the closet

The striking similarity in post-New Order films is that desires are articulated mostly within specific spaces of the city: the confined spaces. Indonesia's rather slow economic recovery after the monetary crisis in the late 1990s did not seem to obstruct the constructions of malls, apartments, and hip restaurants and cafés. The city streets are packed with traffic jams, pollution, and street vendors, making it uncomfortable to wander around the city without an air-conditioned car. While the outdoors of Jakarta reveals problems of urban planning, Jakarta people seek refuge in these confined spaces. Unlike the liminal nature of the outdoors, associated with crimes, poverty, and the blurred boundaries between the haves and the have-nots, the closed spaces of malls and restaurants are safe social spheres in which the middle-class urbanites interact. In post-New Order films, buildings thus become important sites in which characters experience the city.

The characters in *Arisan!* have a similar middle/upper-class cosmopolitan background to the filmmaker, Nia Dinata, who comes from an affluent family and has spent many years studying and working in the United States. Her protagonists are rarely seen in the outdoors; rather, they are enveloped in the closed spaces of houses, offices, cafés, restaurants, gyms, and bars. The opening scenes of *Arisan!* showcase the homes of the characters, designed with a minimalist style that signifies contemporariness. They introduce us to the characters and their individual problems: Sakti, a closeted gay architect; Meimei, a successful designer who is desperate to have a child; Andien, a rich housewife disillusioned by a perfect marriage. Minimalist designs are noticeable as we glimpse Sakti's Zen-style wooden floor or Meimei's all-white bathroom and simple living room accentuated only by lighting. Similarly, almost all scenes in *The Matchmaker* take place in the hip bookstore with minimalist designs marked by white, smooth surfaces, and geometric shapes.

Minimalist architecture and designs have been mushrooming in Jakarta since early 2000. Hip streets in Central and South Jakarta are filled with cafés and restaurants offering sleek buildings, neutral colors, and simple interiors. The appearance of minimalist architecture in the films is often accompanied by non-diegetic lounge music to signify newness, which differentiates the films from those of the previous era. The spectacles of minimalist buildings have been seen by some as lacking a clear conception; it simply follows the trend, as Indonesian architect Andra Matin states, 'It is like cosmetics because it only wants to imitate.'<sup>7</sup> If architecture in the New Order is loaded with history, minimalist design in contemporary Indonesia is often viewed as, in Frederic Jameson's (1991) term, a pastiche. It is an imitation without any political or historical reference, which does not say anything except an

engagement with the trendy and the now. Yet this 'pastiche' could be seen as a rejection of any essential notion of Indonesian-ness; its eclectic quality defines the identity of the characters who are urban, cosmopolitan and, more often, a combination of both.

In *Arisan!* and *The Matchmaker*, movements are very limited within buildings, but the closed spaces of the city are not treated as a source of claustrophobia. Rather, they are sites where problems are confronted; the space limitation is not to be transgressed but to be understood and stretched in order for the characters to articulate their subjectivity. The urban landmark of *Arisan!* is Paprika, an existing trendy restaurant in Jakarta, the place where socialites gather. A scene taking place in the restaurant poses a self-reflexive commentary about the upper-class and their tedious flaunting of wealth, shallow gossip, and hypocrisy. The older generation of Indonesian filmmakers has also engaged with satirical comedy criticizing the lifestyle of the rich, yet in Nia Dinata's films we find hopes in the urban space. Dinata's characters do not attempt to escape the city or its contradictions but find a way to confront their problems within the limitation of space. In the final scene, we once again see Paprika restaurant, but this time the image signifies a different meaning. It becomes a more inspiring place where Meimei decides to move on with her life after being cheated by her husband, Andien accepts her imperfect marriage, and Sakti comes out as a gay.

In *The Matchmaker*, Kay's comfortable urban space is out of sync with the bigger picture of the nation with its various problems ranging from corruption, poverty, to ethnic conflicts. However, the bookstore serves as a space where Kay defines her gender identity that does not necessarily fit into the widely accepted construction of femininity. Kay's entrance to the bookstore immediately draws attention since she becomes a spectacle of Eurasian, upper-class beauty in the public sphere. A man behind her admires her beauty, particularly her skin, because the film is sponsored by Lux beauty soap. His objectifying look makes Kay appear to be a potential victim of male gaze. When Kay meets a good-looking man named Darren, the plot (mis)leads us to think that she is ready for a heterosexual romance. It turns out that Kay tries to hook up Darren with her gay close friend. As a matchmaker of a homosexual partnership, Kay escapes the heteronormative construction, the same construction that defines beauty as a necessary part of successful heterosexual relationships. When Kay defines her own beauty as 'giving happiness to others,' she rejects the traditional (Javanese) conception of womanhood: 'masak, macak, manak' (cooking, grooming, breeding) that serves as a foundation of woman's identity in the New Order as wife/mother. Furthermore, the film's redefinition of gender and beauty is a negotiation with, although not a complete resistance to, Lux's capitalist ideology.

Compared with the other two films, *Eliana*, *Eliana* provides us with more images of outdoor spaces in Jakarta. Jakarta is visualized as dark, cramped, dangerous, and alienating. This is the fast-moving city, shown by the recurrent motif of a train passing, where debt collectors, depressed poets, bus drivers, and perpetrators flock in every corner to try their luck. We not only have a glimpse of modern glittering Jakarta under the bright city lights, but also the crooked view, or what the filmmaker Riri Riza calls 'the back door' of Jakarta.<sup>8</sup> When Bunda, Eliana's mother, travels from Padang to persuade Eliana to return home with her, the film portrays how women experience the urban space. Bunda finds her daughter at a humble rent house, occupied with her own problems. She avoids her landlord for not paying the rent for three months while looking for her best friend Heni. Bunda and Eliana end up wandering in a taxi cab for hours, trapped in a seemingly pointless journey in the crowded Jakarta.

For Eliana, Jakarta is an escape from the confinement of domesticity and tradition; on the contrary, for Bunda, Jakarta means entrapment, danger, and trauma. It was the city that devoured her husband, who went *merantau* to gain success years ago and never returned. Bunda loses her space immediately when she arrives at the Jakarta airport, overwhelmed by taxi drivers who swarm around her and convince her to take their taxi. She has to walk

in a very narrow alley to find Eliana's house. People appear from a different direction, forcing her to move carefully. When she has dinner in a cheap restaurant, she is always surrounded by sellers who persuade her to buy magazines and toys. Disturbed by the lack of space, Bunda says that these people will make more money if they go back to their village. Eliana, however, views Jakarta as the city of opportunity.

The conflict between mother and daughter, however, is solved within the confined, private space of the taxi, safe from dangerous male predators who tend to assault Eliana and her mother in the public space. It is in the taxi that Eliana and her mother understand each other. Eliana learns that her mother, despite her attachment to traditional values, is also a strong character. Her mother discovers that despite the danger and uncertainty in the city, she has to let her daughter choose her own path. Yet outside the taxi, the city streets are exclusively the male sphere.

In the film, Jakarta's mystery and danger are feminized through the image of Ratna, who works at the department store with Eliana during the day and transforms into a nightclub singer in the evening. When Eliana re-enters the taxi in weariness and confusion after a series of unsuccessful searches and endless fights with her mother, *dangdut* music is heard,<sup>9</sup> followed by the image of a nightclub crystal ball. Ratna appears with full make up and fake fur accessory, singing with her face in close up. She returns the spectator's gaze with her seductive eyes. The lyrics heighten the sexual aura: 'I am like a violin that creates heavenly sound/ Touch me and you know the kind of woman I am.' Eliana gets out the taxi, and the scene crosscuts to Ratna singing 'just like some red restless grapes longing for your mouth.' Bunda, who remains in the taxi, remarks that 'the city gets crazier at night.' The editing contrasts Ratna's sensuality with Bunda's stiffness, suggesting that the image of a promiscuous woman like Ratna contributes to Jakarta's madness. The juxtaposition between Bunda's frustration in 'the crazy city' and the figure of the temptress highlights the feminization of the city. The urban space is sensual and enigmatic; it is, as Ratna's song explains, 'the beautiful poison.'

The film further contrasts a different way of viewing the city between Eliana and her mother and The Red Hat Man, the son of a taxi driver who takes pictures of the city lights, streets, and ordinary people. While the taxi window separates the two women in their private world from the threatening street, the Red Hat Man freely explores the streets while keeping an anonymous identity. He reminds us of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* in the turn-of-the-century modern city; instead of being absorbed in the hustle bustle of the city, he is an observer with urban consciousness. Women in the modern city, on the contrary, are a part of the spectacle: the ones who are observed instead of observing.<sup>10</sup> Despite their agency, Eliana and her mother still need to confront the objectifying male gaze as a real problem in the city.

## Conclusion

The New Order filmmakers deployed the city to pose their critique of the nation that fails to reconcile the promises of modernity and development to the very reality of social discrepancies. Individual desires in the urban space, under their gaze, tend to lead to disillusion and disappointment. On the contrary, contemporary filmmakers portray characters who acknowledge their problems in the modern city but choose to keep their desires alive by redefining their relation to space. In the end, they are not victims but rather people with agency to negotiate in the city. Subjectivity is defined through 'coming out' – both in terms of admitting one's dream, sexual orientation (as in *Arisan!* or *The Matchmaker*), and of freeing oneself from certain social constructions. Yet 'coming out' here specifically means 'coming out within the closet,' a spatial strategy to reclaim only a part of the city, while the rest of the urban landscape remains threatening, unsafe, and unfamiliar.

The lack of outdoor spaces of the city in post-New Order Indonesian films shows ambivalent views of the new generation. On the one hand, it shows the importance of the local and the personal that have been ignored by the New Order regime, and the New Order filmmakers who would rather problematize what happens outside: the poverty and class conflicts that constitute larger national issues. On the other hand, it also shows an anxiety of the larger spaces of the city. 'Coming out' for gay characters in *Arisan!* and *The Matchmaker* is made possible within a closed space, a certain circle that accepts deviant sexual desire, while outside, the city as a heterosexual and homophobic space remains an unresolved question. Similarly, although a strong female character such as Eliana decides not to return to her hometown and continues to desire the city, her agency can only be defined in opposition to the prostitute figure. When the film ends, with Eliana separating from her mother and taking a taxi, we once again see her in the safe space in contrast to the bad women outside, who wander the city streets and cheap clubs at night. The urban subjects voice their desires by resorting to their own place within the city – the buildings and the safe transportation – while the wider public place remains fleeting and illegible.

## Notes

1. Cited in *Kartini* (1990).
2. Film was brought to the archipelago by Europeans and Chinese producers in the 1920s as a form of entertainment. Many New Order filmmakers and critics perceived that because film was historically introduced as a commodity, film producers in Indonesia tended to disregard film potential as art. See, for instance, Said (1991).
3. See, for instance, Roberts (2000: 177).
4. For a comprehensive discussion on censorship and institutionalization of cinema in the New Order period, see Sen (1994).
5. The third Cinema movement was manifested, as Robert Stam (2003: 31) writes, in films with low production values, such as Gabriel Rocha's 'sad, ugly films,' Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's 'militant guerilla documentaries,' and Julio G. Espinosa's 'imperfect cinema'.
6. Personal interview, 16 February 2010.
7. See an interview with Andra Matin in 'An Introductory Seminar to Minimalism and Contemporary Architecture: Minimalist and Minimalism' (2008).
8. Seno Gumira Ajidarma (2002: x–xi) in his introduction to the published scenario writes that the film portrays depressing Jakarta, its 'small alleys' and 'shops after closing,' without any attempt to offer dreams to its audience.
9. *Dangdut*, a combination of Arabic, Indian, and Malay dance music, is associated with the Indonesian working class.
10. See Janet Wolff's (1985) critique on the *flâneur* and her discussion of how women experience modernity differently.

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### Author's biography

Intan Paramaditha is an Indonesian fiction writer and a PhD candidate at the Department of Cinema Studies, New York University. Her writings on cinema appear in, among others, *Jump Cut*, *Asian Cinema*, *Criticine*, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, and *Dictionnaire des femmes créatrices* (forthcoming). She is currently writing her dissertation on film culture and sexual politics in post-Suharto Indonesia.

**Contact address:** Department of Cinema Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, 721 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, USA.