



GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES IN INDONESIAN CINEMA

Constructing *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* identities on screen

Ben Murtagh

ROUTLEDGE

Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema

Indonesia has a long and rich tradition of homosexual and transgender cultures, and the past forty years in particular have seen an increased visibility of sexual minorities in the country, which has been reflected through film and popular culture. This book examines how representations of gay, lesbian and transgender individuals and communities have developed in Indonesian cinema during this period. The book first explores Indonesian engagement with *waria* (male-to-female transgender) identities and the emerging representation of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians during Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98), before going on to the reimagining of these positions following the fall of the New Order, a period which saw the rebirth of the film industry with a new generation of directors, producers and actors. Using original interview research and focus groups with *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria*-identified Indonesians, alongside the films themselves and a wealth of archival sources, the book contrasts the ways in which transgendered lives are actually lived with their representations on screen.

Ben Murtagh is Senior Lecturer in Indonesian and Malay at SOAS, University of London, and Managing Editor of the journal *Indonesia and the Malay World*.

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**In memory of my grandparents Barbara and Arthur McDowell,
and Catherine and John Murtagh**

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Note on Indonesian spelling

This book uses the 1972 Indonesian spelling system as standard. Where appropriate I note the various spellings of a number of words (e.g. *sex/seks*) as they appear in cited source material. I have also tried to maintain the spelling of personal names as favoured by the named individual (wherever known).

Indonesian sources are cited in English translation throughout this book. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine.

1 Introduction

I began to think about representations of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* (male to female transvestite) Indonesians in film when working on my doctoral thesis.¹ As I struggled in London with my study of traditional Malay literature, the 2003 release of Nia Dinata's *Arisan!*, a film which apparently included Indonesia's first cinematic *gay* kiss, became an international news story. Following the lead of those brief reports, and as a diversion from my thesis, I began to look into the history of constructions of homosexuality in Indonesian cinema. This task was facilitated by a privileged access to what I discovered to be a remarkable collection of Indonesian films held by SOAS library. That project culminates in the publication of this book.

As a British gay male researcher who identifies with the perhaps somewhat old-fashioned label of Indonesianist, my reasons for being interested in alternative sexualities in that archipelagic nation are probably obvious. Since I first visited Indonesia in 1990 I have been intrigued by the lives of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians and the stories that they have to tell. However, more often in my travels I came across stories and narratives about *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians, told by people who often wished to warn me of the immorality of homosexuality. I do not think these people ever imagined that I might be *gay*, and I often did not feel secure enough to inform them otherwise. This position of silence ensured that I was frequently the audience to an often prejudiced and ignorant perspective which I might not have heard otherwise. The more I came to know *gay* and *waria* Indonesians, the more I realized how poorly those stories reflected the diversity of lived experiences of Indonesia's sexual minorities. Stories about *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians come in various forms and are told in a range of media. They are listened to by passengers in taxis, and groups of friends in coffee shops. They are read by housewives and their husbands in women's magazines, and by all manner of individuals in short stories published in newspapers. Young people in bookstores furtively dip into recently published queer anthologies. Stories are also watched on cinema, television and computer screens. The aim of this book is to explore one specific collection of those stories: those that have been told through the medium of what may loosely be described as mainstream Indonesian cinema.

Cinema in Indonesia has a history which stretches back to the beginning of the twentieth century when the first moving pictures arrived in the country. Until the

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Japanese occupation, filmmaking in the Dutch East Indies, as it was then known, was mainly in the hands of the Dutch and ethnic Chinese.² With independence following the Japanese defeat, Indonesians began making films, and annual local production rose to 58 films by 1955 (Sen 1994: 19), though the number of foreign imports, mainly from the United States and India, always far outweighed national production. Filmmaking during the Sukarno period (1945–66) was notable for its nationalist concerns, and, reflecting political developments post-1956, for the increasing influence of leftist cultural organizations. Following the dramatic events of the night of 30 September 1965, which led to the fall of Sukarno and the establishment of the New Order regime of President Suharto (1966–98), almost all of the films made by directors associated with LEKRA, the Institute of People's Culture, were lost or destroyed, and filmmakers and technicians were detained without trial. As Sen remarks, 'any analysis of New Order cinema needs to take into account the traditions of filmic practice it inherited and those which it lost in the decimation of the leftist cultural movement' (1994: 37). However, I am not aware of any films from this period which would be pertinent to the subject of this book.³

Given the upheaval and chaos of 1965–6, the New Order period saw a transformation in the institutions of cinema and these have been explored in depth by Krishna Sen in her 1994 book *Indonesian Cinema: framing the New Order*. By 1971 local production of films rose to 52, and peaked at 124 films in 1977. The 1980s saw production of at least 50 films per year with another peak of 101 films in 1989 (Heider 1991: 19). In the 1990s production began to decline in numbers and quality as many involved in the industry moved over to television as a result of substantial changes in the media industries. The economic crisis of 1997–8 brought filmmaking to a state of near collapse. The range of films made during the New Order is wide, though strict censorship clearly impacted not just on the final products but also on who was allowed to produce films. A glance through Kristanto's catalogue of Indonesian film (2007) shows that in addition to the more serious and artistic works by filmmakers such as Eros Djarot, Garin Nugroho, Teguh Karya and Ami Prijono, large numbers of more popular films were being produced in genres such as comedy, mystical/martial arts, teenage movies, melodramas and increasingly by the end of the New Order period, soft-core erotic films. Sen cites figures which show that in 1984 the largest audience segment was in the 15–24 age range, and during the 1980s annual film audiences were around 130 million, having peaked in 1980 at 144 million (1994: 71). Jakarta's share of the total audience was around 20–25 per cent in the 1970s and around 16 per cent in the late 1980s. It seems that national films were watched by 30–40 per cent of viewers overall in the 1980s (Sen 1994: 71). It is during this period that *waria*, *lesbi* and *gay* characters first appeared in Indonesian cinema. Excluding the minor comedic *waria* and cross-dressing characters that routinely appear in many slapstick comedies, at least 30 films made during this period include characters that might be readily recognized as of non-normative gender or sexuality by Indonesian audiences. I analyse films from the 1970s to 1990s from a range of genres including teenage films, comedies and melodrama.

Since the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, Indonesian film production has undergone something of a rebirth. By 2007 annual production had risen to 78 films, four of which gained audiences of over one million (Widjaya 2008: 136–9). Critics have noted the tremendous transformation, not just in filmmaking techniques and aesthetics (Khoo and Barker 2010: 3), but also in the new involvement of women in the industry as directors, producers and other technical roles (Hughes-Freeland 2011; Sen 2005; Sulistyani 2009). So too the new era of democracy has encouraged some filmmakers to specifically confront topics which would not have been possible under the New Order, including political issues, the position of the Chinese in Indonesian society and youth disillusionment. There has also been a pronounced body of films which have engaged with issues of *gay* and *lesbi* sexuality, and to a lesser extent *waria*/transsexual subjectivities. Between 1998 and 2009 at least 35 films have portrayed non-normative sexualities and genders in one way or another.

It would be impossible to write about Indonesian cinema without referring to censorship, and while there is not space to discuss fully the various regulations that have operated during the period with which this research is concerned, it is crucial to note that at the time of the New Order, the censorship body was most concerned with any image or message judged to threaten the stability and security of the state. Censors were also concerned with issues of sex and to a lesser extent violence, and several of the films discussed in this book were censored.⁴ Sen has argued that almost every film produced in New Order Indonesia 'has a narrative structure that moves from order through disorder to a restoration of order' (1994: 159). This, she argues, results from the 'particular history of this medium and the characteristics attributed to it by the New Order establishment' (1994: 161). This narrative structure is very much evident in the New Order films discussed in this research. Cultural and political changes since 1998 mean that this structure is arguably somewhat looser in recent cinema, as are some censorship criteria. Nonetheless, displays of sex and intimacy continue to attract the concerns of censors, albeit erratically. These are issues which shall be returned to as the book progresses.

For those who are unfamiliar with Indonesia and its cinema, the number of films referencing *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* subjectivities may prove surprising given its large Muslim population. However, it should be stressed at this point that there are no laws against same-sex acts between consenting adults in Indonesia, and while it is simplistic to characterize states and cultures as tolerant or otherwise, Indonesia is not a generally homophobic society. It is however, a country in which heterosexism is pervasive (Boellstorff 2007: 169), and the heteronormativity of the Indonesian government is overt (Davies 2010: 3). Incidents of violence and intimidation against *waria*, particularly those involved in sex work certainly occur, though doubtless many go unreported (e.g. Atmojo 1986: 11–13). Recent years have also seen a small number of events in which *gay* men as well as *waria* have been targeted and threatened (Boellstorff 2004b; Liang 2010; Oetomo 2001), in particular but not exclusively by the group known as Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front). FPI threats and violence have been directed against events such as a regional meeting of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

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Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) in Surabaya and a 2010 workshop on transgender issues held in Depok, West Java (Liang 2010). The Q!Film Festival, established in 2002 and now held annually in Jakarta and a number of other cities has also been subject to intimidation and threats, most notably in 2010. In 2012 organizers decided to limit access to screening details by requiring those interested in the event to register online (Iwan 2012).⁵ Distressing as these events are, it should be recognized that the majority of community activities pass without problem. As Jamison Liang (2010) observed, ‘Islamist parties are chiefly concerned with countering events that aim to advance LGBT rights through education and awareness; they may be less interested in harassing a lone gay man, lesbian or waria on the street.’ It is difficult to explain exactly why certain events have been targeted, and to say if the events of 2010 mark a real trend. One question to ask is whether this violence is in any way a response to an increased visibility of sexual minorities in Indonesia, which is in turn reflected and further strengthened through popular media including cinema.

This project has proved to be somewhat larger than I envisaged when I first embarked on it. I did not wish to write something which took on the style of an encyclopedia or catalogue and for that reason I have chosen to focus on a select body of films which I feel to be of specific interest, perhaps as a result of the controversy they courted or because they illustrate a particular issue. Also, despite considerable efforts, I have not been able to access copies of all pertinent films, in particular some films from the 1970s and 1980s which, according to Kristanto’s 2007 *Katalog Film Indonesia*, contain storylines of relevance. Copies of those films may still exist somewhere, and it is to be hoped that they will receive the academic attention they deserve at some point in the future. Doubtless there are other films that I am not aware of. The earliest film discussed dates from 1973, and the latest film from 2009. More films of interest to this project have already been released since then and certainly others are in production or still in the minds of screenwriters and directors.

In this book I only discuss full-length fiction films that have been released in commercial cinemas. I exclude films made for television, short films or documentaries. Neither have I discussed what Gotot Prakosa has labelled side-stream films (2005: 3), which are those screened in film clubs, universities and film festivals. As Katinka van Heeren has stressed these side-stream films are a feature of both New Order and post-Suharto Indonesia. With the exponential rise in access to digital technologies, coupled with a relaxing of censorship laws, recent years have seen an explosion in side-stream films or what others have called *film independen* (van Heeren 2009b: 72–8). The distinction between mainstream and side-stream or independent film is somewhat fluid, and as John Lent has argued if one takes it to mean independence from mainstream studios, all Indonesian cinematic productions of recent years might now be described as independent (2012: 15). However, for my purpose here, it is useful to distinguish between those films which have passed through the state system of censorship and been screened in commercial cinemas and those Indonesian films which have only been shown in festivals and other non-commercial venues.⁶

Before introducing some of the key issues related to the representation of non-normative sexualities and genders in Indonesian media and specifically cinema, and the theoretical approaches which underpin this research, it will be useful to first contextualize the study by briefly surveying some of the key ethnographic work on *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians.

Genders and sexualities in Indonesia

In this book I define *waria* as male to female transvestites who are male bodied but generally describe themselves as having a female soul. As such, in their attraction to men, *waria* are expressing an attraction to the other rather than the same. A number of other terms for *waria* are used in Indonesian films, and these are noted in my discussions of specific movies. When talking about the subject position generally I use this current term which is preferred by *waria* themselves. Evidence for the existence of *waria* seems to date as far back as the early nineteenth century (Boellstorff 2004a: 163–4). *Waria* occupy diverse professions and come from a variety of religious, social and ethnic backgrounds. Nonetheless, they are perhaps most visible as a result of their tendency to work in hairdressing salons, and also by the fact that a number of *waria* engage in sex work. As Boellstorff states, ‘virtually everyone in Indonesia knows what “*banci*” or “*bencong*” (derogatory terms for *waria*) mean’ (2005: 57).

The term *waria* is a melding of two words: *WAnita* (woman) and *pRIa* (male). This was introduced in a 1978 decree by the Indonesian Minister of Religion, Alamsyah, apparently in response to concerns that the name of a prophet was associated with the previously used term *wadam* (Boellstorff 2007: 224). *Wadam*, explained variously as a joining of the words *WAnita* and *aDam*, or of the words *haWA* (Eve) and *aDAM*, had been introduced by the Jakarta Governor Ali Sadikin in the 1960s in order to endow the city’s transgender citizens with a certain degree of recognition and protection from the state (Atmojo 1986: 18). Prior to that a variety of terms had been used by and to describe *waria*, most obviously *banci* which continues to be used to this day, along with its slang variant of *bencong*. Because *banci* is often used pejoratively, *waria* themselves will generally prefer to be described as *waria*, though among themselves *banci* and *bencong* may still be used. It should also be noted that *banci* tends to have a wider meaning than *waria*. Dédé Oetomo lists an incredibly diverse set of examples of usage ranging from calling male fashion models *banci*-like, to parents calling their male children *banci* if they play with dolls (1996: 261). I have heard the term *banci* used pejoratively for *gay* men as well as *waria* and the term *banci* is frequently used in film credits for both minor *waria* characters as well as effeminate men. A number of other local terms exist which are used by and for *waria* (Boellstorff 2004a: 162; Davies 2010: 10–11), though these have not been used in any of the films discussed here.

Much of the ethnographic work on *waria* has engaged with the concept of third gender (Andaya 2000; Davies 2010). From personal experience in Indonesia I agree with Boellstorff that *waria* are better understood as a male femininity rather

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than a third gender, thus operating within the orbit of male gendering (2004: 161). While *waria* may dress in female attire, it is important to note that this rarely equates to wishing to pass as a woman, rather the intention is to look like a *waria*. As Sharyn Graham Davies notes with regard to male-to-female transgender individuals (*calabai*) in South Sulawesi, while they may feminize their physical body through surgery, silicone injection or taking hormones, they also ‘disrupt the binaries of female-feminine women and male-masculine men and affirm their own gendered identities’ (2007: 69). This is a crucial point, and one which is very much reflected in the films under discussion. There is rarely any suggestion of *waria* passing as women in Indonesian films; it is always clear that *waria* are exactly that, and many of the stories revolve around a highlighting of masculine behavioural characteristics and indeed the male body which lies underneath the surface of female attire. Incorporated into several of the films is the commonly held notion that a masculine side will be readily drawn upon should a *waria* need to defend herself (Davies 2007: 26). Oetomo has made a similar point by highlighting the coarse, masculine behaviour and feminine dress of some *waria*, at least in Java, which he suggests might be understood in terms of resistance to hegemonic regimes of gender (1996: 266). This book does not intend to add to debates on which gender *waria* belong to. What I am interested in is how they are constructed in film, and, drawing on arguments elicited by Marjorie Garber (1993), Judith Butler (2006) and Judith Halberstam (1998), whether *waria* are shown to destabilize or reinforce male/female gender binaries.

While only a comparatively small number of Indonesians undergo sexual reassignment surgery, several who have done so have attracted a certain degree of media attention. The most well known post-operative transsexual in Indonesia today is the TV personality and talk-show host Dorce Gamalama. Dorce was formerly a vocal member of the *waria* community but since undergoing sex-reassignment surgery in 1988 defines herself as a woman, albeit ‘not an ordinary one’ (Gamalama 2005).⁷ Despite her female subjectivity and successful sex-change operation many *waria* still see her as *waria*. This notion of post-operative transsexuals still being seen as *waria*, irrespective of any legal recategorization, is commonly held in Indonesia (Boellstorff 2007: 95) and this resistance to the notion that men can become women is evident in the construction of both the transsexual characters discussed in this book. In trying to unpack popular understandings of male to female transsexuals I will draw in particular on the idea of in-betweenness described by Kate Bornstein, which has been flagged up in Judith Butler’s suggestion that transsexuals must be approached ‘through the active verbs that attest to the constant transformation which “is” the new identity or, indeed, the “in-betweenness” that puts the being of gendered identity into question’ (2006: xii).

Indonesia is also home to a number of ‘sacred’ or ‘traditional’ homosexualities, the most well known of which are the *bissu* of South Sulawesi and the *warok* of the Ponorogo region of East Java. Davies defines *bissu* as androgynous shamans who symbolically embody male and female elements. They are almost always male bodied (Davies 2010: 11–12; 177–8). *Warok* are also normally male bodied

and identified with magical powers, bravery and artistry. Given that these powers depend on refraining from sex with women, *warok* will often take on younger men known as *gemblak* as their domestic partners and undoubtedly some *warok* will have sex with their *gemblak* (Wilson 1999; Petkovic and Oetomo 1999).⁸ To my knowledge there is no mainstream film which portrays a *bissu*.⁹ There are however, a small number of films from the New Order period which depict *warok*. These movies belong to the mystical/martial arts genre, which, set in a distant Javanese past, tends to invoke *warok* simply as the possessors of special powers rather than as bearers of any homosexual desire. The only film in which I have seen *warok* associated, albeit fleetingly, with obviously transgender *gemblak*, is the 1982 film *Warok Singo Kobra* (dir. Nawi Ismail). Thus, to date there has been no cinematic attempt to draw on notions of an indigenous or traditional non-normative sexual heritage to assert a sense of present-day legitimacy.

Clearly, there is a close link between the English language category *gay* and the Indonesian category *gay*. Following Boellstorff, I choose to italicize *gay*, not with the purpose of exoticization, but to accentuate its own history, and to defamiliarize the concept (2005: 8). The Indonesian word *lesbi* also has obvious roots in the English language, but in order to stress its particular dynamics the Indonesian term *lesbi* is always italicized. Unlike the undisputed use of the term *gay*, there is discussion over the use of the term *lesbi*. Some scholars argue that it is only used pejoratively (Davies 2010:10) or contend that *lesbian* is used more commonly (Maimunah 2008a: 5). This is not my experience, and while both *lesbi* and *lesbian* are used in the films discussed in the book, I follow Blackwood in choosing to use the term *lesbi* as a reminder of the differences between Indonesian *lesbi* and European–American lesbians (2010: 25). Furthermore, the complex and nuanced identities that are covered by the umbrella term of *lesbi* are generally absent from the films under discussion. There is no place as yet in Indonesian mainstream fiction films for female-born individuals who ‘rework the category woman and do not necessarily wish to be considered men’ as highlighted by Davies for *calalai* in South Sulawesi (2010:10), or the similar *tomboi* subjectivity in Padang, West Sumatra, described by Blackwood (2010: 2). There is, however, an accentuation of perceived masculine characteristics, particularly in the construction of *lesbi* characters in post-1998 cinema, and this will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

The *gay* subject position is generally recognized to have emerged in Indonesia in the 1970s. Previously, there were men who had sex with men, though little is known of their stories and there is little reason to believe many would have understood themselves in terms of something akin to a sexual identity.¹⁰ Some Western men in the archipelago in the early twentieth century may have identified as homosexual and had sex or relationships with local men. However, as Tom Boellstorff argues, there is no recognized link between those Westerners and the emergence of the *gay* subject position in the 1970s (2005: 52). Given the subject matter of many of the films discussed here, the most pertinent findings from Boellstorff’s ethnographic writing on *gay* subjectivity in Indonesia relate to attitudes to heterosexual marriage and to the notion of coming out, or being open. Highlighting significant differences between Western and Indonesian approaches

to these two key notions, Boellstorff has demonstrated that the Indonesian state's privileging of marriage as an essential aspect of full citizenship has led many Indonesian men who identify as *gay* to aspire nonetheless to heterosexual marriage and fatherhood (2005: 109–11). Davies has noted similar imperatives and pressures with regard to transgender females in South Sulawesi. One of her interlocutors recognized, for example, that it was only through heterosexual marriage that she would become a legitimate mother (2010: 123).

Boellstorff also argues that rather than the confessional approach to coming out that is championed in the modern West, *gay* Indonesians tend to see themselves as being open (*terbuka*) in certain spaces – for example, in cruising spaces and in the homes of friends – and closed (*tertutup*) in others, such as the workplace or the family home (2005: 170–5). Evelyn Blackwood has described an equally nuanced negotiation of different spaces by *tomboi* in West Sumatra where they move between multiple subject positions as they negotiate different cultural spaces (2010: 151–77). Boellstorff also makes the point that the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions are found across the social classes, and given that most Indonesians are not wealthy, it follows that most *gay* men and *lesbi* are not wealthy either. This might seem an obvious point, but as will become apparent from the discussion of the films, the vast majority of *gay* male characters in Indonesian films are from the wealthiest strata of society. Interestingly, this elitism is not quite so marked in constructions of the *lesbi* identity.

It is important to draw attention to one difference between popular perceptions of Indonesian female and male homosexualities. There is no female equivalent to the *waria* transvestite subject position in the eyes of the general Indonesian population (Boellstorff 2005: 163), although among Indonesian *lesbi* the category of *tomboi* (female to male transgender) is well established. Many of Evelyn Blackwood's *lesbi* interlocutors in West Sumatra identified with gender-marked terms such as *tomboi* and girlfriend (2010: 2). Similar dynamics have been highlighted by Saskia Wieringa with respect to older female-bodied individuals in Jakarta who understand themselves as possessing a male soul (1999; 2007) and by Davies for the category of *calalai*, female-bodied individuals who see themselves as neither men nor women, in South Sulawesi (2010: 119–37). However, Blackwood notes that increasing exposure to global circuits of queer knowledge, particularly among activists and middle-class *lesbi* who often have higher levels of formal education, has led to new *lesbi* subjectivities which are both a response to international discourse regarding lesbian identity, but also offer 'resistance to the categories of tomboi and femme' (2010: 195). The tensions between different *lesbi* subjectivities in Indonesia, and specifically the different ways in which *lesbi* have responded to the notion of transgender, is fascinating for what it tells us about the intersection between local and transnational circuits of queer knowledge. However, as will become clear in the chapters devoted to the construction of *lesbi* identities in film, there is little space for these nuanced understandings in Indonesian cinema. Female masculinity is occasionally linked to female same-sex desire, but it is generally associated with a pre-adult and therefore transient stage in a woman's development rather than as a fixed and permanent subjectivity.

In practice the categories outlined above can be somewhat slippery and the relationship of sexuality to gender and how one helps constitute the other is complex. While some theorists have argued that they can be analysed separately, many working in queer studies, led by Judith Butler, have argued against the notion that they can be readily separated. As Davies affirms, ‘gender and sexuality tend to be tightly interwoven in the cultural imaginings’ in Indonesia (2010: 27). Analysis of the construction of *gay* and *lesbi* characters in Indonesian cinema will highlight a strong perception that non-normative gender performance is very much part of those subject positions. Recently however, and in response to certain entrenched stereotypes, some filmmakers have specifically sought to produce more ‘positive’ images, which seems to imply an erasure of any indication of non-normative gendered behaviour. A key feature of this approach has been the ‘normalization’ of *gay* identities. This often seems to involve the denial or minimizing of the notion that differences in sexual identity might also imply gender difference. Intriguingly, this does not seem to be the case with cinematic constructions of the *lesbi* subject position. This is probably because there is much less obvious concern with how *lesbi* Indonesians are being constructed on screen, and is possibly a reflection of *lesbi* voices being even less vocal in the Indonesian media than *gay* voices.

The term ‘queer’ is not commonly used in Indonesia, though it has been adopted by some working in the NGO sector. Dédé Oetomo, a prominent activist, argues that queer has the potential to become useful in the Indonesian context because it is seen as more neutral and indirect (cited in Maimunah 2010: 117). It is also referenced in the title of the Q! Film Festival, the annual festival which was founded by John Badalu and others in 2002 and is now the largest film festival (in terms of numbers of films shown) dedicated to films portraying non-normative sexualities and genders in Asia. Badalu is quoted as saying he chose the letter Q instead of *gay* or *lesbian* because the festival’s founders wanted to avoid making it appear too provocative (Fui 2012: 771). Thus the reference to Q was chosen because of its obscurity and perceived neutrality, as opposed to any political connotation.

While recognizing the potential slippage in meaning as queer has been adopted by some Indonesians, as well as the broad range of meanings queer has acquired in the West, I prefer not to use it simply as a convenient umbrella term for *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* identities. Whereas those latter terms are very much about fixing and delineating identities and subjectivities, I understand queer to imply a troubling of categories and the perceived boundaries between sexual desire, gender and sex. As such, queer not only resists normative codes of gender and sexual expression, but also ‘the restrictive potential of gay and lesbian sexuality’ (Aaron 2004: 5). Queer is useful for its disruptive potential (Edelman 2004: 17) and for recognizing the importance and validity of difference rather than similarity.

I refrain generally from using the word queer to describe the cinematic characters discussed in this research. I have not yet encountered a single instance of the word queer in mainstream Indonesian film. Furthermore, the cinematic construction of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* characters in the movies under discussion is generally essentialized. Therefore the films are better described as being about *gay*, *lesbi* and

waria Indonesians, than as *gay*, *lesbi*, *waria* or even queer film. None of the films takes a position which might be related to the New Queer Cinema which emerged in the West in the 1990s, which Michael Aaron has described as ‘no longer burdened by the approval-seeking sackcloth of positive imagery’ (2004: 3). As B. Ruby Rich said of one film, *Swoon* (dir. Tom Kalin, 1992), ‘it takes on the whole enterprise of “positive images”, definitively rejecting any such project and turning the thing on its head’ (2004: 21). In direct contrast to New Queer Cinema, several recent Indonesian films have been celebrated precisely for their positive intent and inclusive ideology. I do not seek to criticize these Indonesian films for not meeting my understanding of queer, or for not being queer enough. This is not my task as an outsider or as a researcher. But neither would it be productive to label the films under discussion with a term which conveys a meaning quite opposite to their apparent intent. This is a point hinted at by John Badalu in his discussion of a number of Indonesian films which are concerned with *gay* issues. Even given the loose significance of queer as it is used by some Indonesians, Badalu says ‘none of these films are really queer or full-blown queer’ (Fui 2012: 83).¹¹ Where I do find queer useful in connection to Indonesian film is as a viewing strategy. By this I mean recognizing the validity of readings of film against the grain and of disturbing and disrupting their assumed meanings. As such, there will be occasions in this book when I argue for queer ways of looking and highlight queer moments. This is a point I shall return to further below.

In responding to early interventions into discussions of what Dennis Altman termed ‘global queering’ (1997; 2001a; 2001b), queer scholars such as Jeffrey Weeks have argued against ‘a single universal global gay or lesbian identity’ (2007: 219) by drawing attention to local differences which challenge the presumption of an evolutionary model headed by the Western gay. The importance of the local in mediating global circuits of queer knowledge has been highlighted by a number of anthropologists working on Indonesia. Blackwood has noted ‘the uneven circulation and reception of queer knowledge’ and the variety of ways in which different groups of *lesbi* in Indonesia have incorporated transnational queer discourse into their own subjectivities (2010: 179). Boellstorff has stressed that at some level many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians do see themselves as sharing a sense of shared identity with gay and lesbian Westerners, though the extent ‘to which they feel they have knowledge about these [*gay* and *lesbi*] analogues varies’ (2005: 206–7). Blackwood makes a similar point, arguing that *lesbi* ‘use their own culturally available models to interpret global queer discourses and arrive at meanings that make sense to them, creating their own particular version of *dunia lesbi* [the *lesbi* world]’ (2010: 190). Given that most Indonesians are not wealthy and have not travelled abroad, it is useful to remember Fran Martin’s comment that, while not denying the importance of transnational aspects of culture, ‘connections to non-local scenes are for most people only ever experienced from within particular and limited local contexts’ (2003: 30). Even with the possibilities brought by the Internet, many Indonesians lack sufficient proficiency in English to make anything but the most superficial access to non-Indonesian sources of web-based information and cyber communities. As Peter Jackson has

written in his discussion of the recent proliferation of homosexual identities and cultural globalization, ‘transnational queer cultural patterns are emerging ... but new forms of cultural difference exist alongside international commonalities and emphasize that local forms of queer modernity have emerged from the agency of the members of each society’ (2009: 359).

This book is about how filmmakers, scriptwriters and directors construct *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* identities and in turn how audiences construct their own understandings of those images. But just as Blackwood has shown that Jakarta *lesbi* with higher levels of formal education are more exposed to queer knowledge from overseas than *lesbi* from elsewhere in the archipelago, it seems that the Jakarta elite involved in filmmaking are mediating their understanding of what it is to be *gay* or *lesbi* through queer, gay or lesbian cultural products from overseas. Some filmmakers have clearly taken the approach that *gay* is a new, foreign and unwelcome identity in Indonesia, as suggested in one of the earliest representations of a relationship between two men in Indonesian cinema which included an older man of mixed Indonesian–Australian parentage. In the post-1998 period, several filmmakers and actors have described how they reached their understanding of what it is to be *gay* by watching American, European and Latin American films and television series. One of the questions I am keen to explore is how this accessing of transnational queer knowledge and images has affected the construction of the imagined *gay* subjectivity. I purposefully stress *gay* rather than *lesbi*, because this reaching out to global images is most evident in the cinematic construction of the *gay* man. A further and more difficult question is to what extent these transnational constructions of gay subjectivity, albeit mediated through locally produced films, impact on Indonesian viewers’ understandings of their own subjectivities.

Non-normative sexualities in the Indonesian media

Boellstorff (2007: 213) outlines nine preliminary theses with regard to some broad patterns regarding non-normative sexualities in Southeast Asia, one of which emphasizes the role of the mass media:

Mass media play a pivotal but contingent role in non-normative sexualities and genders. It appears that print media, television, and movies have been crucial to the formation of gay and lesbian subject positions ... This seems more consequential than either the historically rare consumption of Western gay and lesbian media or publications produced by Southeast Asians themselves.

That *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions appear in the mass media is informative even if they are shown or discussed in a negative or stereotypical light. The emergence of such representations can be seen primarily to indicate the recognition and discussion of these subject positions in society more generally; the public discourse may not necessarily be positive, but it does at least exist. For example, in the case of

Thailand, Jackson (1999: 361) has written at some length of the importance of Thai reporting of the murder of Darrell Berrigan in the 1960s as an ‘originating moment in Thai gay history’ which resulted in the Thai and English-language press documenting ‘for the first time the existence of a subculture of Thai homosexual men’.

Excellent surveys of the emergence of popular discourse related to homosexuality in the Indonesian print media have been provided by Boellstorff (2005) and Blackwood (2010). As these anthropologists note, Indonesian press and media interest in homosexual subject positions, both in Indonesia and to a lesser extent overseas, seems to have begun in the 1970s. The type of media representations included letters to agony aunts, exposés on *gay* life in Indonesia and news items on advances in gay rights internationally. Boellstorff cites one story from 1981 which was highlighted by his interlocutors as really marking the entry of *gay* and *lesbi* into the mass media (2005: 62). This story of an unofficial ‘marriage’ between two women in Jakarta, Jossie and Bonnie, was reported in *Tempo* and later took the front cover of *Liberty* magazine (Boellstorff 2005: 62–4).¹² Around the same time, *Tempo* carried the story of another female couple, Aty and Nona, who ran away so that they could stay together, only for Aty, the older of the two, to be arrested on charges of kidnapping (Blackwood 2010: 50; Boellstorff 2005: 65). Boellstorff also cites a *Liberty* article from this period that recorded the joint suicide of two women, Suratmi and Isnaini, so that they could stay together rather than be separated by their families (2005: 65).

The emergence of *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions in the mass media does not equate with their normalization. Indeed, the fact that there seem to have been more stories in the print media concerning *lesbi* than *gay* men is ascribed by Boellstorff to greater policing of female sexuality in national discourse (2005: 66). As Blackwood notes in her summary of research on media representations of *lesbi*, the dominant tendency was to treat homosexuality as a crime, and to equate *lesbi* with criminality, including murder and deviance (2010: 53). Indeed it is intriguing to consider that *lesbi* characters appeared in Indonesian films earlier, and in greater numbers, than *gay* men. Based on the synopses in Kristanto’s catalogue (2007), those early *lesbi* characters inevitably came off badly and the films affirm dominant concerns regarding the expression of uncontrollable female sexuality.¹³ Since the fall of the New Order however, *lesbi* characters have been outnumbered by *gay* men. This change may well be explained by recent trends to construct homosexuality in a far more progressive light. Filmmakers have seemingly felt more able to do this with *gay* men than with *lesbi* women.

A second and unintended consequence of the increased media awareness of alternate sexualities which is difficult to demonstrate conclusively, but which has a great deal of credibility, particularly among gay communities, is what might be called the ‘that’s me’ factor. As the British academic Richard Dyer has written, ‘Because, as gays, we grew up isolated not only from our heterosexual peers but also from each other, we turned to the mass media for information and ideas about ourselves’ (1977: 1).¹⁴ In Indonesia, while there does not seem to be a strong affinity between *gay* men and the cinema such as has been described by Dyer for Britain, the argument for a link between the media, and the need

to find ‘information and ideas about ourselves’ is nonetheless solid (Boellstorff 2003: 33–5; 2005: 59–78; Budiman 1979). The phenomenon of coming to recognize one’s own *gay* identity through films and magazines has been described by Oetomo (2003: xxvii–xxxvii) regarding his own adolescence. The majority of Boellstorff’s sample of *gay* Indonesians said they had first learned of the term *gay* from Indonesian mass media (2005: 69). Blackwood (2010: 52–3) similarly notes that many of her *lesbi* respondents in West Sumatra ‘recalled finding out about *lesbi* from the magazines they read or found lying about the house’. Blackwood (2010) has also made the case for the important role of films and videos in learning about, and coming to identify with, same-sex friendships and relationships between women. Several of Blackwood’s case studies include mention of the knowledge gained from video and film. Certainly, some of these movies were foreign, as is the case with the ‘blue films’ featuring scenes of women making love to women, purchased by Noni, a *lesbi*, when she was in Jakarta (Blackwood 2010: 148). Blackwood also cites the case of Upik and her *tomboi* partner Jon who reported that they had gained knowledge about lesbians through watching films and videos which included scenes of women kissing (2010: 139).

Importantly, Blackwood’s study corroborates several points which were clear from my conversations with *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians. First, in addition to the print media, and increasingly the Internet, television programmes and films are important sources of local information about the existence of alternative sexual identities, both in Indonesia and overseas. Second, in addition to ‘coming across’ information about *gay* and *lesbi* identities, many Indonesians are specifically seeking out films and programmes which they have heard about or which are recommended to them because the content includes representations of non-normative genders and sexual identities.

Television programmes such as *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk* are often listed as favourites, especially among younger *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. In the big cities of Jakarta and Surabaya it is relatively easy to access TV series such as these on DVD and VCD format. Foreign and Indonesian films with *gay*/*lesbian*/transgender themes are also commonly mentioned by *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. In addition to watching films with some *gay*/*lesbian*/transgender content at regular cinema screenings,¹⁵ those more confident in their gendered/sexual identities also have the chance to watch a diverse range of films at the annual Q! Film Festival which shows mainly foreign but also some local films (contemporary and retrospective).¹⁶ Probably the most popular location to watch films, however, is at home with friends on television or on the computer screen. These films will commonly be in VCD or DVD format or downloaded over the Internet. In addition to this being the easiest means of viewing films which are no longer on general release, this also represents a far cheaper option for many Indonesians for whom a trip to the cinema is a significant financial expense. Furthermore, as one of my *waria* respondents stated when asked if she often went to the cinema, ‘I never go to the cinema, it’s not possible to go there as a *waria*’, serving as a reminder that there is not equal access to the public sites of consumption for which the films are primarily produced, and this is not just for economic reasons.

A final point, hinted at in Blackwood's case study of Upik and her partner Jon, is that films do not necessarily have to take homosexuality as the main theme – though this would of course be preferable – to be of interest or a source of information. At a minimum, they simply need to contain certain scenes representing lesbian (or gay) identities or behaviours. Developing this point, and thinking about the variety of ways which research has shown gay and lesbian audiences in the West responding to films which contain gay or lesbian storylines, one aim of this research is to explore how Indonesians with non-normative gender and sexual identities might respond to Indonesian films which purport to represent their lived subjectivities.

Little of the extant academic literature on Indonesian cinema has been concerned with the construction of *gay*, *lesbi* or *waria* identities. This lack is particularly evident regarding cinema of the New Order period. What has been written, either within the context of analysis of New Order cinema more generally, or as background to discussions of more recent films, tends to say the same thing: *waria* are objectified as figures of comedy, and *gay* men and *lesbi* receive very little attention at all, but when they do, the images are inevitably negative and depressing. For example, in her groundbreaking book on New Order cinema, Krishna Sen, who takes a specific interest in representations of women in Indonesian film, makes no mention of the emerging *gay* or *lesbi* subject position. She devotes only one paragraph to alternative genders, stating that those she calls *banci* 'are rarely anything other than figures of fun, and appear mainly in the films for the lower end of the market' (1994: 138).¹⁷ Sen does, however, make some interesting comments on notions of sexual fluidity in her article (1991) on the *Si Boy* series as will be discussed in [Chapter 3](#). More recently scholars and journalists have tended to repeat the idea that homosexualities in the New Order period are treated as a subject of comedy, or pathologized (Anwar 2005; Ellis 2005; Maimunah 2010: 117–18; 2011: 117; Tjokro 2012). My analysis will show that the picture is far more nuanced. Thus one of the key aims in this book is not only to correct misconceptions regarding the construction of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* subject positions in New Order film, but also to encourage scholars, film professionals and students to actually go and watch those films rather than simply repeat often misinformed opinion.

With the large body of films portraying *gay* and *lesbi* identities produced in the post-1998 period, a number of scholars have turned their attention to these works, though rarely with any attempt to contextualize the situation as it was prior to 1998. There are numerous short articles and reviews published online, mainly by Indonesian journalists and critics, and I will draw on these where appropriate. The most substantial academic contributions have been made by Maimunah who has published a number of articles (2008b; 2010; 2011) based on her Masters dissertation (2008a). Maimunah's work makes very useful observations and comments on a number of films including *Detik Terakhir*, *Arisan!*, *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* and *Tentang Dia* which are all also discussed in this book. My main point of departure from Maimunah's findings is with regard to what she describes and welcomes as the normalization of *gay* characters. In particular, I

find it difficult to interpret the normalizing of *gay* subjectivity into heteronormative society as indicative of any notion of queerness, albeit with the distinct definition of Indonesian queer which she tries to develop. Laura Coppens has also published a useful article on ‘queering Indonesian films’, and while she argues that one cannot talk of Indonesian queer cinema, seemingly on the basis that most films with queer content are filmed by heterosexual directors (2009: 184), she does maintain that a number of queer characters may be found in Indonesian cinema from the New Order and post-New Order periods, and that the first film to handle homosexuality positively was Nia Dinata’s *Arisan!*. Coppens makes many incisive observations on the films she discusses. However, I am a little troubled by her use of queer, as at times it seems to work simply as a shorthand for *lesbi*, *gay* and *waria*. While I do not dispute that some *lesbi*, *gay* and *waria* characters from Indonesian film might also be seen as queer, I prefer to use this label for subjectivities which disrupt and disturb dominant norms and institutions. Marshall Clark’s work on masculinities in Indonesian cultural products includes an analysis of male homosexuality in *Kuldesak* (2004; 2010), a film I discuss in [Chapter 5](#). Barbara Hatley (2009), Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2011), Ekky Imanjaya (2009a) and Intan Paramaditha (2011) have also touched on the representation of homosexuality in recent Indonesian cinema.

Queer responses

In addition to watching all of the films discussed in this book many times over, I have drawn on contemporaneous and retrospective press reports and reviews of the films. These have been a productive starting point in gauging how these often contentious films were received in the media. I am conscious, however, that these press reports do not tell the whole story, nor do they give an indication of how less film-literate individuals have responded to particular films. Furthermore, the voices of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians are rarely heard in those published sources. This became particularly apparent when I was speaking to friends about *Coklat Stroberi* (dir. Ardy Octaviand), a 2007 film with a *gay* storyline. The reported responses to *Coklat Stroberi* from that year’s Q! Film Festival were quite critical (Murtagh 2008; 2010), whereas many of those *gay* Indonesians I spoke to had enjoyed the film immensely. In order to better understand the range of possible responses to the films, I watched them all together with *gay* Indonesian friends who did not identify as particularly film-literate.¹⁸ In addition, I organized a number of screenings with *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* focus groups. Some of the findings from these sessions will be used to inform the discussions of the films.

My research does not dispute that the various apparatus that come together in the production of film might conform to and reinforce a dominant ideology. Neither does it disagree that mainstream films will often be made with an ideal viewer in mind, one who is male and heterosexual. However, as has been raised by a number of scholars working on issues of race, gender and sexuality, there remains the potential for ‘negotiation’ between the text and the audience. Some researchers have focused on the possibilities for queer or resistant readings of

films which do not obviously contain non-heteronormative themes. For example Alexander Doty's *Flaming Classics* (2000) is devoted to queer readings of mainstream Hollywood movies such as *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). In a related vein, Henry Jenkins' (2003) work on gay fandom and *Star Trek: the next generation* has examined how gay fans of that American science-fiction television series, frustrated by the lack of overtly gay characters in the show, have developed queer readings of certain crew members, and also lobbied the makers of the series to introduce gay storylines into the series.

Other studies have focused on how gay and lesbian audiences have reacted to films which include gay men or lesbians. One film which has attracted a notable amount of attention from scholars, including the potential for multiple readings of its central narrative, is the American film *Personal Best* (dir. Robert Towne, 1982). As Andrea Weiss discusses in her study of the history of representation of lesbians in Hollywood and European cinema, cinematic depictions of love between women were dominated by the inevitable resolution in which one lesbian is cured and the other is killed (1992: 54). However, Elizabeth Ellsworth's study of feminist responses to that film showed that feminist lesbian audiences had a tendency to ignore 'large sections of narrative material focusing on heterosexual romance' and instead to elevate the secondary lesbian character to the role of protagonist (1990: 193). Thus the subject positions of the spectators determined their creative readings of the film. Nicholas de Villiers argues in his discussion of 'queer ways of looking' that it is useful to think about the variety of ways of looking available, both within the diegesis, and also by the spectator. Thus the question is not "'who" gets represented?' but "'how" we look *at* them or *with* them' (2007). Such viewing strategies offer the possibilities of embracing negative stereotypes and even interpreting homosexual villains as challenging gay-assimilationist views about the place of gay people in society (Saunders 1998: 19).

One of the best-known studies of representations of homosexuality in cinema, Vito Russo's 1987 book *The Celluloid Closet*, has been the focus of several critical essays of late (e.g. Adnum 2011; Bronski 2008). Among other criticisms is the point that Russo often does little more than rail against the stereotypes which anyone who watches Western film will be familiar with, critiquing films on the basis of their positive or negative images. As Bronski argues, the main problem is that Russo's analysis leaves little room for ambiguity or even interpretation (2008). Negative stereotypes are as unpopular in Indonesia as they are in the West. However, while often hurtful and certainly intended to disempower and exclude, they are nonetheless interesting for what they tell us about popular understandings of non-normative genders and sexualities. As Richard Dyer argued in his 1977 essay on stereotyping 'thinking about images of gayness needs to go beyond simply dismissing stereotypes as wrong or distorted' (1977: 27). In response to the supposedly negative images of the New Order period, several filmmakers have attempted to create more 'positive' representations, notably of *gay* men. This has been welcomed by a number of critics and one imagines fans. Nonetheless as Judith Halberstam observes, cinema consisting of only positive

images can also thrive on stereotypes and often at the expense of certain other types – she highlights the butch dyke – who are erased and made invisible (1998: 184–5). Furthermore, she notes with regard to Hollywood cinema, the ‘desire for positive images places the onus of queering cinema squarely on the production rather than the reception of the image’ (1998: 179). Instead she argues for ‘a queer cinema which recycles as much as it produces’ (1998: 185). Here she is calling on audiences to look again at ‘negative’ images and to appropriate those films for themselves, to find their own queer ways of looking at films.

To date there has been little research on how Indonesian cinema audiences actually experiment with the form and meaning of the films they watch (Murtagh 2011a). My interest in this question has been sparked by Krishna Sen’s comments pertaining to New Order cinema. Sen’s arguments regarding an ‘ordered cinema’ (1994: 59) are well known and she has exposed the political/social ideological basis of various film genres such as *film remaja* (youth films) (Sen 1986) or ‘films in which women are presented to be seen and so that the film is seen’ (1994: 134). The case has been made that the institutions of Indonesian cinema in the New Order period led to ‘every film being made in relation to the hypothetical practices of a hypostasized audience’ (Sen 1994: 75). Among a variety of other characteristics, and perhaps most significantly for our purposes, that imagined audience is heterosexual and male, and the ideology is heteronormative and heteropositive.

Nonetheless, Sen (1994: 109–14) has also raised the possibility of popular resistance to dominant culture, citing the example of the mass audience’s reaction to the 1974 film *Si Mamad* (dir. Sjumandjaya). Furthermore, in her analysis of *Perawan Desa* (dir. Frank Rorimpandey, 1978), Sen draws on Annette Kuhn’s scholarship to argue that the known censorship of a film may ‘trigger off readings of a film text, which go against the conscious purpose of censorship’ (1994: 118). Thus, she is arguing for the possibility of creative and negotiated viewing strategies being conducted by Indonesian audiences:

Censorship does not only restrict, it also creates the conditions for film-makers and audiences to experiment with form and meaning to get around the spirit of the censors, without seeming to contravene their words.

(Sen 1994: 71)

In order to further explore the possibilities of negotiated viewing strategies, in November and December 2008 I organized a number of focus group sessions in Surabaya on a variety of Indonesian films with *gay*, *lesbi* or *waria* themes. There were three distinct groups based on the identities of *gay*, *lesbi* or *waria*, and each group, consisting of between six and eight participants, met weekly over a period of five weeks. Each session comprised a film screening followed by discussion.¹⁹ The focus groups were all conducted on the premises of Gaya Nusantara – a Surabaya-based NGO that aims to represent the whole LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) constituency through its work on education, public awareness and advocacy and health. Some of the participants worked as paid

or volunteer health advisers; others came to the NGO for sexual health advice. Several of the *lesbi* participants had previously attended workshops on gender and sexuality organized by Gaya Nusantara, and two had also been involved in organizing Q! Film Festival in Surabaya. One *gay* man simply attended a weekly badminton club organized by the NGO. While not all participants were ‘open’ or ‘out’ in every aspect of their lives, the fact that they were connected in some way with the NGO demonstrates at least a certain degree of openness.

While most of the *lesbi* group had university education, the majority of the *gay* group had only completed high school, though one was a university lecturer. The *waria* group had the lowest levels of formal education, most of them only having completed elementary education to around the age of twelve. Few of the *gay* or *waria* participants regularly watched Indonesian movies; if they did, then they were more likely to watch films at home with friends on VCD or as computer downloads than in the cinema. Perhaps reflective of the higher level of formal education, the *lesbi* group were more frequent watchers of both Indonesian and foreign films. However, none of the participants had an informed knowledge of the history of *gay/lesbi/waria* representations in Indonesian cinema. Even those *lesbi* participants who had helped to organize the Q! Film Festival had little knowledge of any but the most recent Indonesian films.²⁰ Thus, the participants met my criteria of audiences who were not fluent in film language and convention. It was to be expected that this lack of ‘competence’ as spectators (Nelmes 2003: 112) would impact on responses. On the other hand, many were knowledgeable in ideas of sexual health, gender and sexuality as a result of their involvement with the NGO and participation in workshops and courses on gender and sexuality. The results from these focus groups are analysed at length in Murtagh (2011a) but I also draw on those discussions in the treatment of the films in the remainder of this book.

Organization of chapters

The first half of the book (Chapters 2 to 4) looks at films produced during the New Order period (1970s to 1990s), while the second half is concerned with films released after 1998 and these later chapters all focus on the same period, 1998–2009. Despite this structure there is not a simple linear trajectory evident in the films. The political and cultural changes which accompanied the fall of the Suharto regime might lead one to suppose that 1998 represents a significant rupture in Indonesian cultural production. In some respects this is true. However as Boellstorff (2007: 42) and Hughes-Freeland (2011: 439) advise, we should be cautious in rushing to proclaim immediate socio-cultural change. My research shows that while often decried for its negative images, several films from the New Order period offer nuanced understandings of non-normative genders and sexualities and even offer some of the queerest moments in all Indonesian film. The post-1998 period has been hailed for its positive images and imaginings of new possibilities, but many of the former ambivalences remain and the notion of positive cinematic images of *gay* men in recent cinema needs to be further

interrogated. Thus I eschew any notion of a grand narrative from oppression to liberation, from negativity to positivity or any other such trajectory.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the construction of the transvestite or *waria* subject position in films from the 1970s. It is commonly asserted that cinematic depictions of *waria* tend to be incidental, stereotypical and comedic. The films discussed in this chapter – *Raja Copet*, *Betty Bencong Selebor* and *Akulah Vivian* – fall into comedic as well as melodramatic genres but are united by a concerted directorial attempt to engage more fully with *waria* subjectivity. Drawing on academic studies of transgenderism in popular Western culture, I engage with the concepts of dewigging and the progress narrative as tools to unpack the specifically Indonesian understandings of the transgender subject position. Each of the films in question attempts to explain the motivations, self-perceived subjectivities and hardships faced by *waria* in Indonesian metropolitan society and my analysis seeks to demonstrate the various strategies employed to construct *waria* as deserving of respect and acceptance by the broader Indonesian population. The discussion of *waria* is made all the more complex by the consideration of *Akulah Vivian*, a film based on the true story of an Indonesian male-to-female transsexual. A comparison of the construction of *waria* and transsexual identities reveals the complex and contradictory ways in which films from this period have affirmed and resisted dominant notions of gender binaries.

Chapter 3 deals with the emergence of the *gay* subject position in Indonesian cinema of the 1980s. It engages with the question posed by a film critic in 1988 as to whether the number of *gay* characters featuring in films of that year's Indonesian Film Festival provided evidence of a breakthrough on the position of *gay* men in Indonesian society. In addition to examining a selection of films from earlier in the decade the chapter focuses on those films from 1988, in particular Wahyu Sihombing's film, *Istana Kecantikan*. While recognizing that ambiguities and ambivalences in the construction of the *gay* Indonesian man persisted, the discussion of these later films highlights a real desire by filmmakers to break free from stereotypical constructions of the morally corrupt and dangerous homosexual. Consideration of responses contemporaneous to the film's release, supplemented by evidence from focus group discussions, shows that a viewing of *Istana Kecantikan* may still prove rewarding to today's audiences.

Chapter 4 turns primarily to Indonesian cinema of the early 1990s. The focus of the discussion is on *Gadis Metropolis*, which earned a reputation for its exploitation of the female body, but which is also notable for its *lesbi*, and to a lesser extent, *gay* storylines. Around the time of its release, the film's producer argued that in making *Gadis Metropolis* he sought to 'explain the lives of *lesbi*' in Indonesia. While engaging with academic studies on Western representations of female homosexuality, in particular that of the murderous, deviant lesbian, it will be argued that the emergence of the *lesbi* in local cinema should be understood as an extension of dominant Indonesian images of the sexually licentious woman who is constructed as a threat to the moral (heterosexual) order. While recognizing that the intended message of *Gadis Metropolis* and similar films was a depressing reaffirmation of popular media notions of homosexuality, I will also

explore the possibilities of communal identification for those who employ queer ways of looking.

In [Chapter 5](#) the focus turns to a collection of post-1998 films which have been praised for their positive images of *gay* men. I first look at the seminal movie *Kuldesak*, filmed in the final years of the Suharto regime and screened a few months after his fall. This film contained Indonesia's first *gay* kiss, albeit one blurred by the censors. I then move on to discuss three films – *Arisan!*, *Janji Joni* and *Kala* – each of which have been noted for their 'positive' treatment of *gay* storylines or for presenting characters who 'just happen to be *gay*'. While noting the warm reception these films have received from many critics and academics, I will approach the films through the lens of what Lisa Duggan has termed 'the new homonormativity' (2003: 50). The chapter also discusses the extent to which, in their desire to create positive and acceptable images of *gay* Indonesians for Indonesian cinema audiences, filmmakers are simultaneously disavowing a body of citizens who, drawing on Jon Binnie and others, may be described as the 'queer unwanted'.

[Chapter 6](#) considers the construction of *lesbi* in post-New Order cinema. It is striking that *lesbi* have featured far less than *gay* characters in films of recent years. Tropes characteristic of the New Order period, such as the love triangle involving a heterosexual man and the inevitable death of one of the *lesbi* characters by the end of the film, persist in a number of these films. Several of the female pairings in recent Indonesian cinema feature young women who are on the very cusp of adulthood and who might be read as *lesbi*. In my discussion of these characters I will draw on Judith Halberstam's (1998) observations on the tolerance and repression of the tomboy in Western culture. The final film discussed in this chapter, Nia Dinata's *Berbagi Suami* (2006) marks a true break from any previous construction of the Indonesian *lesbi* on screen. Not only does it allow a relationship to survive until the final credits, it also imagines women as the conduit for creating new possibilities for Indonesian family structures.

[Chapter 7](#) returns to the construction of the *gay* male in Indonesian cinema. Following on from the discussion of [Chapter 5](#), it explores the tremendous diversity of film genres in which *gay* characters have occurred in recent years. Several of the films express ambivalences towards homosexuality but the range of situations in which *gay* characters feature is testimony to the visibility of the *gay* subject position and the place that it holds in popular media discourse. Returning to the theme of circuits of queer knowledge, a common thread linking several of the films analysed in this chapter is the ways in which imaginings of the world beyond Indonesia are localized in an Indonesian cinematic context. In addition to exploring the queer possibilities of looking at films such as *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* and *Coklat Stroberi*, my discussion of responses to the latter film will show that despite certain misgivings expressed by critics, these more popular films have proved meaningful to the lived experiences of young *gay* men.

With few exceptions the films discussed in this book will prove difficult to access for those not conversant in Indonesian. While comedy and erotic films from the New Order period are often available on VCD (usually pirate versions)

I was only able to access other New Order films through the assistance of staff at Sinematek, the Indonesian Film Archive. Very few films from the New Order period are subtitled. Most of the post-1998 films discussed in this book have been released in Indonesia on DVD (generally with English subtitles) and on VCD. Many of the comedy films from the New Order period and most of the post-New Order films are accessible on YouTube, though often without subtitles. Given their relative obscurity and the obstacles involved in accessing these films, I have devoted a considerable amount of space to retelling plots. The book is also illustrated with a number of stills, film posters and DVD covers. There are not as many images as I would have liked, due to difficulties in securing permissions. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that the available images will help transport the reader to the world of the films even if they have not yet watched them first hand.

Notes

- 1 Following Boellstorff (2005: 8), I recognize the Indonesian terms *lesbi* and *gay* to be distinct from the English 'lesbian' and 'gay'. The Indonesian term *normal*, which is also used by *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, refers to dominant understandings of modern sexuality (Boellstorff 2005: 8) and should similarly be seen as distinct from the English term 'normal'. *Waria* is an accepted term for Indonesian male to female transvestites. *Waria*, who will often see themselves as men with women's souls (Boellstorff 2005), dress as women and therefore in their attraction to men are expressing a desire for the other rather than the same.
- 2 For a survey of cinema in Indonesia up to 1945 see Biran (2009); Said (1991); Sen (1994: 13–19).
- 3 For a survey of cinema of the period see Said (1991); Sen (1994: 27–49).
- 4 A useful summary and discussion of censorship regulations under the New Order are contained in Sen (1994) and Sasono *et al.* (2011). For the period post-1998 see Kusuma and Haryanto (2007); Lindsay (2009); Sasono *et al.* (2011).
- 5 For an overview of the history of the Q! Film Festival, see Fui (2012); Maimunah (2008b).
- 6 Some films hailed as independent have been screened by the now dominant Cinema 21 network. The most relevant example is the 1998 film *Kuldesak* which will be discussed in [Chapter 5](#). Despite its perhaps contentious position within the scope of this study, its important place in the history of representation of male homosexuality in Indonesian cinema and its impact on future filmmaking generally are both reasons for its inclusion in this research.
- 7 In her biography, *Aku Perempuan* ('I am a Woman'), Dorce Gamalama is careful to differentiate herself from former *waria* colleagues, not just in terms of her pride that she never prostituted herself, but also because she wanted to be a 'real woman' (*perempuan yang benar*) (Gamalama 2005: 30).
- 8 There is now a significant body of research published on the *bissu* including Andaya (2000); Davies (2007, 2010); Pelras (1996).
- 9 The *bissu* have been the subject of two recent documentaries: *The Last Bissu: sacred transvestites of South Sulawesi, Indonesia* (dir. Rhoda Grauer, 2005); and *Taboo: the third sex* (dir. Morris Abraham, 2009).
- 10 Useful here is the autobiographical writing of a certain Soetjipto (b.1910), whose account of his youth and early adult years included stories of relationships and sex with men, both local and Dutch (Anderson 2006, 2007; Boellstorff 2005: 48–51; Budiman 1979).

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- 11 Badalu here refers to *Istana Kecantikan, Kuldesak, Arisan!* and *Berbagi Suami*, which are discussed in Chapters 3, 5 and 6 of this book.
- 12 *Tempo* is a high profile Indonesian weekly news magazine. *Liberty* is a weekly magazine based in Surabaya.
- 13 I have not been able to access these early films but they are briefly mentioned in Chapter 3.
- 14 This is not the case with *waria*. As Boellstorff states: ‘I have never heard *warias* cite mass media as the means by which they first saw themselves as *warias*; they learn of the *waria* subject positions from their social environs’ (2005: 69–70).
- 15 Besides mainstream Indonesian releases, numerous foreign films with a *gay* theme have been screened with at least a limited run in Indonesian cinemas. In addition to more recent films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005), news articles as far back as the 1980s report on the novelty of films with a *gay* or lesbian storyline. For example, in an article in *Pikiran Rakyat*, Eddy Iskandar (1987) discussed the Indonesian release of *The Berlin Affair* (dir. Liliana Cavani, 1985) and its lesbian storyline.
- 16 One of the reasons that *gay* and lesbian film festivals are so appealing is that a space is created where the non-heteronormative dominates. Nonetheless, several Indonesians I have spoken to, who are less open about their *gay* identity but who have watched films with a *gay* theme at the cinema or purchased DVDs/VCDs to watch at home, informed me that they would never attend the Q! Film Festival for fear of being seen by friends or work colleagues who did not know about their sexuality. On the other hand, as John Badalu has suggested in his dialogue with Chris Chong, that festival has become something of a meeting place for certain members of what Chris Chong labels the ‘queer community’ (Fui 2012: 79).
- 17 Sen notes the existence of the film *Mereka Memang Ada* (‘They Indeed Exist’, dir. Mardali Syarif, 1982), a more serious treatment of the lives of *waria*, though like me she was unable to track down a copy of that film. The screenplay is held in the Sinematek archive.
- 18 It would have been interesting to also watch the films with *waria* and *lesbi* Indonesians. Unfortunately, my network of contacts and friends means that I know far more *gay* men than *waria* or *lesbi*.
- 19 Full details of the rationale and organization of the focus groups, together with a detailed discussion of responses to one film, *Istana Kecantikan*, are contained in Murtagh (2011a).
- 20 This is perhaps reflective of the difficulty in obtaining or seeing anything but the most recent Indonesian releases.

2 *Wadam, waria* and the story of a man who became a woman

Non-normative genders in the 1970s

Critics and commentators writing about the period of New Order cinema will often state that the most common depictions of homosexuality in Indonesian films tend to invoke *waria* as incidental figures of fun – with *gay* and *waria* subjectivities often merged into one confused category.¹ It would be misleading to continue with the assertion that *waria* function purely as objects of derogatory humour in Indonesian cinema. In addition to the plethora of stereotypical representations there is also a notable body of films produced during that period which engage more fully with the *waria* subject position, some of them comedies, others better described as dramas. This chapter will focus on two particular films from the 1970s, a comedy *Betty Bencong Selebor* ('Betty the Scatty *Bencong*', dir. Benyamin S, 1979) and a drama *Akulah Vivian: laki-laki jadi perempuan* ('I am Vivian: the man who became a woman', dir. Endraatmadja, 1978).² These films have been selected because they can both be argued to reflect and perhaps also to have attempted to shape contemporary discourse on issues related to transgenderism and transsexualism.

Betty Bencong Selebor attracted the fifth largest audience in Jakarta in 1979 (Kristanto 2007: 170) and given its ludic style inevitably plays on existing cinematic stereotypes of *waria*. At the same time however, it engages with the problems perceived to be faced by *waria* in contemporary society. The film was produced just a few years after Jakarta's Governor Ali Sadikin (1966–77) had demonstrated his support for this marginalized group of citizens by giving *waria* a 'go-go stand at the annual Jakarta Fair' and a 'charm contest at Taman Ismail Marzuki' (Abeyasekere 1987: 231; Atmojo 1986: 18) and facilitating the founding of the Himpunan Wadam Djakarta (HIWAD Jakarta Wadam Association).³ He reportedly explained his support by saying 'I saw that this group was regarded as if they did not have a right to exist. They were ostracized by society ... I then became conscious that they too are citizens of this city ... We must see them as humans, as citizens of this city, as citizens of this country' (Atmojo 1986: 18). In a lighthearted way, the film actually engages with issues and problems perceived to exist for *waria* at the time, many of which still exist thirty years later.

The second film for discussion in this chapter, *Akulah Vivian*, was released a year before *Betty Bencong Selebor* and had a much smaller cinema run. But it is of key interest because it brought to the silver screen a fictionalized account of a

news story which had provoked considerable public interest a few years earlier; it tells the story of Vivian Rubianti, the first post-operative transsexual to have her change of sex recognized by Indonesian law.

Using the example of these two films, this chapter will explore how Indonesian filmmakers, working in two different genres, engaged with popular understandings of gender transgression, and the place of those gender minorities within Indonesian society. Furthermore, taking note of the occasionally didactic approach evident in the films' narratives, the discussion will highlight what were considered to be the main issues affecting *waria* and transsexuals and how, using different approaches, filmmakers attempted to engage with and mould contemporary understandings of *waria*. Finally, with an eye to wider debates about the extent to which transgenderism and transsexualism subvert binary notions of gender, this chapter will pay close attention to the ambivalent attitudes towards the gender identities of the heroines of the two movies.

As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), one of the key debates regarding the *waria* subject position is whether it should be considered a third gender or, as Boellstorff has argued, a male femininity which operates within the 'orbit of male gendering' (2004a: 161). Linked to this debate is the extent to which the *waria* subject position reproduces or resists particular hegemonic gendered ideologies. What I am interested in discussing here is the way in which cinematic representations of *waria* feed into these debates and in particular the ways in which screen portrayals of *waria* resist or reproduce the binary gendered system which was so integral to the New Order regime. Developing from this discussion of perceptions of the *waria* subject position is its perceived relationship with the concept of transsexuality and gender reassignment surgery. In seeking to surgically align one's body with one's gender, is the individual understood to be reinforcing existing notions of gender or, drawing on Judith Butler, putting the very reality of gender into crisis (2006: xxiv)?

It is useful to draw briefly on some of the theoretical arguments which have been developed with regard to representations of transgender identities in Western film. Certainly this is not to essentialize the category nor to claim that there is something universal and timeless about transgender identities or their cinematic construction. However, as will become clear, some of the key narrative conventions regarding transgender representations from Western film are also key tropes in Indonesian film. Of particular salience is the 'progressive narrative', described by Marjorie Garber (1993: 69) as one in which the protagonist 'is compelled by social and economic forces to disguise himself or herself in order to get a job, escape repression, or gain artistic or political "freedom"'. There is generally no erotic pleasure involved in such a course of action and it is the problem of thwarted heterosexual desire which generally leads the protagonist to 'unmask'. This disguise is only temporary or carnivalesque, and there is the expectation that the cross-dresser will resume life as he or she was before, albeit with some lesson learnt. As Phillips notes, the comedic and dramatic potential in such a narrative derives from the fact that it is generally the other characters in the diegesis who are deceived rather than the audience (2006: 53). However, as Garber points out, such

narratives are unconvincing and problematic because ‘they rewrite the story of the transvestic subject as a cultural symptom’, ignoring the ‘unconscious eroticism of such self-transformation’. Even worse, in denying the figure of the transvestite, ‘the consequent reinscription of “male” and “female” ... reaffirms the patriarchal binary’ (Garber 1993: 70). This idea of a character being compelled to cross-dress for some reason or another is also a feature of several Indonesian films,⁴ though taking *Betty Bencong Selebor* as an example, it will be observed that in the Indonesian milieu, the transformation is not always temporary.

A second key idea highlighted by Garber and further applied by John Phillips in his 2006 study of transgenderism in Western film is the concept of ‘unveiling’ or ‘dewigging’. Garber points to the wig as being the very sign of female impersonation, with the removal of the wig serving to reveal the ‘true’ gender of the individual, often with the result of comforting the audience that the binary divisions of gender between male and female remain intact. Phillips’ analysis of transgender representations in Western comedy films highlights the prevalence of such an unveiling which is structurally key to the denouement in which ‘the world is set to rights’ (2006: 54). Dewigging is also a typical motif in Indonesian cinema. Indeed in almost every film discussed here, the wig or at least the hairpiece (*kondé*) commonly used by Indonesian women, is removed at some point from or by one of the cross-dressed characters. In Indonesian cinema the unveiling does not simply stop with the wig however, and for a variety of reasons which will be explored below, in both comedies and dramas stripping the transgender characters at least partially of their female attire is a common trope. However the function appears to be very different from that described by Garber and Phillips, for rarely does the dewigging result in a denouement or restoration of patriarchal order. We must then ask ourselves why it is that this dewigging is so central to Indonesian mainstream cinematic representations of the transgender subject position?

In order to contextualize the discussion of the two main films, it will be useful to first look at a comedy film from the 1970s which encapsulates many of the key cinematic stereotypes of *waria*. There are certainly other films which might have been chosen, but *Raja Copet* (‘King of the Pickpockets’, dir. Syamsul Fuad, 1977) is a particularly useful example, because of the short speech made by a *waria* when she relates an understanding of her own subjectivity, and because of the inclusion of so many stereotypes and conventions in a further scene.⁵

Stereotypes in comedy films

Waria appear in a number of films⁶ made by or starring Benyamin S., the extraordinarily prolific Betawi comedian and singer whose career in popular films began in 1970 and continued until just before his death in 1995. As has been argued by David Hanan and Basoeki Koesasi, Benyamin’s comedy films of the 1970s are notable for their ‘Betawi⁷ anti-hero ... presented as a Betawi outsider seeking reciprocity in a changing and increasingly aloof modernizing Jakarta society’ (2011: 74). One such film, *Raja Copet*, with its 1970s Jakarta setting of a city

undergoing rapid economic transformation, is a satire on the world of big business and its effect on petty criminals. As Hanan and Koesasi remark 'the satire cuts both ways: the petty thieves have started to behave like businessmen, and, equally, businessmen are no better than petty thieves' (2011: 62).

The film tells the story of Big Boss Copet,⁸ played by Benjamin, who forms a company consisting of fellow thieves. At a board meeting Big Boss Copet explains to the other pickpockets that there is an ethical code that all members of the profession must follow. As well as an explanation from the representative of the department for women, as to why pregnant women and true virgins should not be pickpocketed, the *wadam* representative is invited to explain the ethical code regarding transvestites.

Wearing an orange and white striped dress with a pearl necklace and matching earrings, and taller and somewhat larger than most of the others gathered around the table, she first of all begins a comical and lengthy explanation of the fact she is actually a man, 'a true man, complete (*betul-betul lelaki, komplet*), the same as all the others present, except for the two women'. This self-definition is remarkably similar, we might note, to the explanation given by one of Boellstorff's interlocutors, 'I am an *asli* [authentic] man.' Another said, 'I was born a man, and when I die I will be buried as a man, because that's what I am' (2004a: 167).

The *wadam* then proceeds to explain that *wadam* should not be targeted 'because *wadam* are essentially men, they will chase anyone who tries to rob them and pelt them with stones, and the *wadam* will be more headstrong (*nekad*), brave (*berani*), wild (*beringas*) and possessed by the devil (*kesetanan*) than true men'. This characterization of *wadam/waria* is one which I have often heard repeated by Indonesians, including *gay* men. Boellstorff notes a similar description, commenting that *waria* subjectivity is 'not so much marked by the wholesale adoption of feminine forms as by the mixing of men's and women's styles' (2004a: 169). Not only are they reputed to be stronger than men, but they are also known for their obscene speech and gestures. One of Boellstorff's informants was also overheard explaining 'If you get them [*waria*] mad, their maleness comes out (*keluar*) and they'll beat up the person who's threatening them' (2004a: 169). The *wadam* in *Raja Copet* makes no mention of female gender or having a female soul. There is no suggestion though that the *wadam* is merely cross-dressing for the purposes of her profession as a thief.

A further aspect of the performance of the *waria* identity on screen which is common to many Indonesian films, at least those in which *waria* play a ludic role, is the voice and intonation of the characters. The use of a somewhat more nasal voice with slightly higher pitch than most male characters is a specific aspect of the performance of *waria* characters, certainly from the 1970s. So too is the inclusion of vocabulary from *waria* slang or language known as *bahasa binan*.⁹ The use of such language is limited by both the knowledge of those producing the films and the intended, presumed heterosexual, audience. As Dédé Oetomo has argued, public familiarity with this language has increased over the years (2003: 62), and it is thus perhaps no surprise that such use of *bahasa binan*, or *bahasa gay* as it is perhaps better known today, is more common in recent films, a theme

returned to on various occasions in this book. Nevertheless, even in those films that make little specific use of *bahasa binan*, and of which *Raja Copet* is a good example, *waria* are often marked as lexically different through resort to the stereotype of a sharp tongue and a colourful and inventive range of insults for those who cross their paths.

At the end of the meeting of pickpockets, Big Boss Copet tells one of his men to go out and observe the other pickpockets in action. Several comical situations ensue in which the thieves make an assortment of bungled attempts to rob Jakarta folk, some of which involve the *wadam* character. The most interesting scene begins with the *wadam* busking in a Jakarta street while paying close attention to a wealthy-looking woman in a jewellery shop. Incidentally, street busking or *ngamen* is another of the professions often associated with Jakarta *waria* (Thajib 2010: 407). While strumming a makeshift guitar and shaking her tambourine, the *wadam* pickpocket makes various attempts to pluck a gold clip from the woman's hair. The woman becomes increasingly suspicious and leaves the shop, at which point the *wadam*, frustrated by her lack of success, pulls out a pair of scissors and tries to hack off the woman's hairpiece. The distraught woman starts to call for help, attracting the attention of laughing bystanders. The camera focuses on the *wadam*'s feet as she kicks off her shoes and flees from the scene with several onlookers in pursuit. At this point the two men sent to observe the *wadam*'s skills remark with frustration that a *wadam* should only work at night – no doubt referring to the reputation for *wadam* to engage in sex work.

The *wadam* is eventually caught and a comical fight ensues. It is in this scene that the dewigging occurs, fully revealing and accentuating her corporeal masculinity, and calling to mind the earlier warning that one should not pick a fight with *wadam*. After one of the men grabs at her hairpiece, she lobbs the tambourine at them. Then with her string of pearls entwined in the cord from her guitar she hurls the makeshift guitar around her head so as to keep her attackers at bay. They manage to disrobe her of her pearl necklace, *kain* (traditional batik sarong worn by women) and *kebaya* (traditional blouse), leaving the *wadam* dressed in shorts, corset and bra. Accusing her attackers of being impolite, she quickly pats her hair into place before taking on a fighting pose, raising her forearms and flexing her biceps, as the camera pans in for a medium close-up of the broad-shouldered *wadam* still in her bra. 'If you are really men, take on the *bencong*', she says, grimacing and striking a ridiculous pose before removing the padding from her bra and hurling it at the men. Finally the bra itself becomes the tool of attack as she pulls it off and hurls it around her like a single-handed hammer thrower. Then while she taps at her naked chest and calls the men cowards for not taking her on, her attackers beat a hasty retreat.

The partial undressing of transgender characters, at least in comedies, is a fairly standard trope in Indonesian cinema. There are, however, significant differences from the unveiling or dewigging described by Phillips. First, there is no element of surprise: both the audience and the other characters within the diegesis are quite well aware of the transgender identity of the character in question – the opening 'boardroom scene' specifically elaborated the nature of her *wadam*



Figure 2.1 Film poster for *Raja Copet*. The wadam pickpocket is on the far right (Sinematek)

subjectivity through the discussion of the ethical code for pickpockets. Neither does the dewigging result in the end of her journey as a transgender; the same character appears in later scenes. Indeed there has never been any attempt by the *wadam* to 'pass' as a female to begin with; almost the first thing she says or does on screen is declare, or perhaps clarify, she is a man. We are in no doubt that this is a gendered behaviour that falls within the 'male orbit'. Indeed it may be countered that this dewigging actually serves to emphasize her male physicality, perhaps reminiscent of Esther Newton's observation that American drag queens would frequently drop their voices or remove items of female clothing or their wig to highlight the fact that 'the appearance is an illusion' (1972: 101). Furthermore, in the case of the cross-dressing pickpocket, it is only by removing some of the physical restrictions imposed by the performance of female gender that she is able to put up the necessary fight against the cowardly men. Reminding us of the earlier warning that one should never steal from *wadam* because they are braver than real men and will win, in this act of dewigging not only does she reveal her male body but so too she affirms her *wadamness*. For she remains a *bencong* to the end, as is clear in the words she uses to label herself and also in the voice she uses to utter them, as the real men run for their lives.

While undoubtedly the *wadam* pickpocket is a figure of amusement in *Raja Copet*, drawing on and reaffirming many of the commonly held stereotypes related to male-to-female transgender individuals, it should be stressed that she is simply one among several humorous characters in the film. We may interpret the dewigging or stripping of the character as symbolic of her humiliation, an attempt to somehow destabilize the *waria* subject position, particularly given the emphasis and importance placed on attire and appearance in the lives of many transgender Indonesians. However, we should remember that the *wadam* is victorious in these scenes, and it is the (presumably) heterosexual men who run for their lives. Indeed the very use of her clothes as a weapon of defence may perhaps be seen as symbolic of the strength she gains from her *wadam* style of dress. Furthermore, the other aspects of the *wadam*'s transgender performance, her distinctive voice, styled hair, specific use of language, and male physicality all remain intact, and there is never any doubt that what we are viewing is a *wadam*, a unique identity, though to return to Boellstorff's argument, one which functions within the orbit of masculinity.

Nonetheless, this character exists for no other reason than entertainment. The complete lack of psychological development of the character – and to be fair this is a feature of most of the other characters in the film – means that while interesting for engaging with so many stereotypes in such a structured manner and for opening our discussion of transgender representations in Indonesian cinema, there is little about the character of any complexity. Thus we will now turn to another comedy, one which develops something of a life history, and consequently a more complex characterization of the *wadam* heroine. While still engaging with many of the stereotypes and conventions seen in *Raja Copet*, it also addresses many contemporary issues regarding the place and position of *waria* in Jakarta society.

Betty: an extraordinary cross-dressing maid

Of all the comedy films featuring transgender characters produced during the New Order period, *Betty Bencong Selebor* gives greatest focus to a *waria* or *wadam*.¹⁰ This essentially comedic film, which typically of many of Benyamin S's cinematic works champions 'marginalized people living by their wits' (Hanan and Koesasi 2011: 76), also satirizes the commercialization of the recording industry. The film is essentially the story of Betty (Benyamin S), who begins dressing as a woman to improve her chances of getting a job, though we never actually witness Betty prior to her becoming a *waria*. As such it may seem that this film would fall into the category of 'progression' narratives. The difference is that Betty's cross-dressing results in a feeling of '*wadamness*' and therefore the transformation is a one-way journey.

The use of *bencong* in the film's title is an early high profile example of recognition of *bahasa binan*. While *bencong* is the term most commonly used in the film to describe Betty, and often for abuse or at least exclamation, it is interesting also to note the dual use of the words *wadam* and *waria* within the film. Notably, when Betty speaks of her own sense of self she uses the term *wadam*, while in a scene involving a group of *waria*, presumably sex workers, at Taman Lawang,¹¹ they use the word *waria* to describe themselves.

The film begins with Betty's arrival at the house of a wealthy couple where she is to start work as a maid. The lady of the house offers her a job based on her housekeeping skills – she describes herself as a true all-rounder – but also for the fact that she is unlikely to be a temptation to Bokir, her womanizing husband. Bokir (played by the comedian of the same name) is clearly not happy that the new servant is a *waria* rather than a woman, though intriguingly he still cannot resist commenting on her swaying backside as she walks away from him after their first encounter. The male servant, Nasir (played by the comedian of the same name), is also initially suspicious of Betty, though eventually they become firm friends. The narrative is not particularly complex, focusing mainly on a variety of comic incidents involving Betty and Nasir, and the thwarted attempts by Bokir, a record producer, to woo one of his singers Elvi (played by one of the top singers of the time, Elvi Sukaesih). The film ends with Bokir thinking he is marrying Elvi. However Bokir's wife knows about her husband's philandering, and together with Elvi they plot for her place on the marriage dais to be taken by Betty. Thus the film's climax results in the complete humiliation of Bokir in front of the assembled guests, when Betty lifts her veil to reveal the mistaken object of his affection in front of the assembled guests.¹²

Of particular interest regarding the construction of the transgender identity, is the notion that Betty chooses to start cross-dressing for economic reasons. This decision is explained in a conversation between Betty and Nasir midway through the film, when, due to a misunderstanding, they have been banished from their place of employment. As they sit outside wondering what to do next, the camera zooms in on some nearby construction workers and Nasir suggest they should try seeking work on the building site. Betty rejects the suggestion saying she does not

want her hands to become rough again. When Nasir jokes that while her hands are soft (*halus*) her body is like that of a hod carrier, Betty responds that her body may be rough but her feelings are ‘smooth, sensitive and ladylike’ (*‘halus, sensitif, keputrian’*). Thus prompted, Nasir then puts the question which the audience was also doubtless asking, ‘Why are you the way you are?’ followed by the reprimand that it is ‘not good to behave like a woman’. Betty explains that ‘at first it was because I was broken hearted. Whenever I tried to get work as a man I was always rejected. Then I tried being like this, and it worked fine, and who knows why, it just carried on, and my soul became that of a *dames-wadam*’.¹³ Crucially here, Betty is not attempting to become a woman. Rather, in dressing in women’s clothes she came to understand herself to be a *wadam*. Nasir’s attentive response and ultimate acceptance of Betty’s reply signals the final step in their ever-closer friendship. There is, however, absolutely no hint of desire between the two who are better understood as partners in comedy. With his understanding of Betty’s subjectivity now complete, Nasir makes the most appropriate choice possible for their future professional endeavour – echoing the stereotype already seen in *Raja Copet*, he suggests they should take up busking.

With her male body and female soul, Betty’s explanation of her transgenderism is one which tallies with the accounts given by numerous Indonesian *waria*. Her reason for becoming a *wadam*, however, is more unusual when compared with the ethnographic data, both for the relatively late age at which Betty took to



Figure 2.2 Film poster for *Betty Bencong Selebor* showing Betty (left) and Nasir (Sinematek)

being a *wadam*, and also for the idea that it was the act of cross-dressing which preceded and caused her sense of having the soul of a *wadam* rather than the other way round. Not only does the film's structure diverge from Garber's progression narrative in that Betty's transformation is one way, so too it diverges by the fact that the film's ludic moments do not centre on confusion regarding Betty's 'real' gender – most of the characters realize immediately that Betty is a *wadam*. Rather, it is the very fact of being a *wadam*, and a scatty and extraordinary one at that, which lies at the heart of the film's comedy and drama.

The two main female characters – Mrs Bokir who first gives Betty a job, and Elvi who sings with Betty at a concert and then later takes her on as a maid when she has been sacked from her first job – are both instantly sympathetic to Betty. Indeed from a momentary glimpse of Elvi's other maid, we can see that she too is a *waria*. For the male characters, Betty's subjectivity is more troubling. When Betty first meets Nasir she walks in on him naked after he has just taken a bath, ignoring the sign on the door stating 'no entry to people of the other gender'. Initially suspicious, he challenges Betty, 'which gender are you, man or woman?', to which she replies with comic effect, 'mix double' (English in original). Nasir clearly feels threatened by his new colleague. Her incongruous physicality and gender performance are so mismatched to his traditional notion of binary gender roles that he is left pondering whether she can actually cook and clean, the 'female' tasks for which he understands her to be responsible. So troubled is he, that he attempts a very Indonesian version of a dewigging, by trying to pluck off her *kondé* with a long bamboo pole, a comic scene in which the hairpiece eventually lands on Bokir's face causing him to think he is being attacked by some sort of creature and to pass out in shock. It is surely no coincidence that in trying to humiliate Betty, or maybe as Nasir sees it, in trying to reveal her true identity, he intends to remove what is clearly a sign of her exterior *wadam* identity. This attack on her external appearance, this attempt at revelation of the 'truth' of her physical sex, clearly results from a desire for normative correspondence between sexed bodies and gender. Nonetheless, Nasir's outlook is not as rigid as it first seems, and any misgivings over Betty's presence in the household are swept away when Betty covers up for Nasir's misbehaviour, proving that friendship and loyalty are more important than grander notions of gender conformity.

The one character who is constantly troubled by Betty's ambiguous gender identity is Bokir, the master of the house. Bokir is the butt of many of the jokes and comedy scenes, and the film culminates with his complete humiliation as a two-timing husband. Betty is brought into the household by Bokir's wife with the hope of curtailing his straying hands at least within her own household – surely even her husband would not be attracted to such a parody of femininity as Betty! On first catching sight of Betty he is clearly displeased by their latest servant. The close-up on his face as he does a double take and specifically remarks on her disappointing looks, leaves us in no doubt that this is not the sort of woman to whom Bokir is attracted. Indeed he scolds his wife for employing 'a maid of that model' (*pembantu model begini*) saying she would be better suited to work as a *becak* driver or gravedigger. Yet, as she walks away from him he cannot help but suck

his teeth in pleasure or perhaps erotic anticipation, mesmerized by Betty's swaying backside. Bokir's ambivalent attitude towards Betty is further highlighted in two other comic incidents, when he takes her for a real woman. First, he comes home to see Betty wearing a dress lent to her by his wife. Somewhat drunk, and confusing her with his wife, he embraces her from behind and tries to kiss her. Betty, as a character seemingly without erotic desire, and certainly not for Bokir, manages to fight him off. In the second instance, which is the final scene of the film, Bokir thinks that he is about to take Elvi as his second wife. As he sits down on the wedding dais next to his wife-to-be, he suddenly catches sight of Elvi and his current wife across the room. Lifting up the veil of his bride he is shocked to discover that it is Betty sitting next to him. Certainly, in this literal unveiling of the person beside him, the truth revealed is actually that of his bride's transgender *wadam* identity. Rather than using this denouement to reaffirm any conception of a binary gender system, what is revealed here is a *wadam* temporarily performing true femininity; once exposed she is able to return to her true *wadam* subjectivity.

It is important to stress that Betty's performance of femininity, while perhaps confusing for Bokir, is clearly marked as different from the femininity performed by female-bodied characters. While this is not drag in the Butlerian sense of a temporary performance of femininity – once adopted, Betty's *wadam* subjectivity is permanent – the parodic nature of her performance of femininity is a constant trope throughout the film. In the long opening shot focusing on Betty's high heeled shoes and calves as she walks towards the house of her future employer, we already know that that there is something unusual and not quite right about what we are seeing. Not only are the shoes completely inappropriate for the terrain – her route takes her across wasteland as well as along more conventional paths – the wearer of the shoes cannot walk properly in them. At one point her ankle twists as she totters along, on another occasion she takes her shoes off (reminding us of the fleeing *wadam* in *Raja Copet*), and finally, just before reaching her destination, one of her heels snaps off completely. Undoubtedly comic, this is a parody of feminine style. A further scene which marks Betty as other to the idealized feminine occurs when Mrs Bokir advises Betty to change her hairstyle to a more fashionable blow-dry, in the style of Elizabeth Taylor, rather than the old-fashioned hairpiece favoured by the *wadam*. Just as when Mrs Bokir offers to lend Betty some make-up and Betty manages to apply lipstick to her cheek rather than her lips, the scene carries the sense of a true woman teaching Betty how to perform her role more convincingly. However, there is no question that the role Betty is being taught to perform is that of a real woman – for a real woman is the last thing that Mrs Bokir wants in the house. Rather, the new hairstyle and make-up will enable Betty to perform a more up-to-date parody of female gender and fashionable performance of her *wadam* subjectivity.

The second main scene of undressing, hinting at Bokir's discomfort with Betty's gender transgressions, occurs when Bokir and his wife are bringing Betty back from the police station (see below). The scene is already highly comical as they are in a two-seater sports car and Betty is forced to sit behind Bokir and his wife, on top of the luggage space. An overhead shot of the car as it drives

through the traffic juxtaposes Betty's attempts to maintain her feminine poise with clear physical signals of masculinity. Despite occupying a space in the car more suited for luggage, she fans herself and adjusts her hair to maintain her respect and composure. But another camera angle reveals that under her dress she has positioned her legs wide apart in a most unladylike manner. Furthermore, when the car breaks down it is Betty who is ordered to get out and push. Despite her protestations of weakness, supported by Bokir's wife, Betty is soon pushing the car uphill. Once the attempt to push-start the car fails, Betty adjusts her make-up while Bokir looks at the engine. Sent off to find a damp cloth, she finds a pond where she removes her bra allowing her fake breasts to fall into the pool and soaks her bra in the water. The damp bra does the job, and when ordered to push the car again, her long skirt somehow gets pulled off leaving Betty dressed in only a blouse and red football shorts. Even with this unveiling, Betty still manages to maintain her 'mixed double' identity, keeping her blouse and necklace on to contrast with her shorts.

Betty's trials do not end there, as she is teased and then set upon by a group of youths. Though eventually overcome she does first manage to knee the leader of the gang in the crotch – an act which leads to the possible interpretation of symbolic castration, and is certainly reminiscent of the warning from *Raja Copet* that *waria* are not to be messed with (other such incidents occur, as when Betty throws an unfortunate *becak* driver into a lake). It is thanks to a friendly but short-sighted *kyai* (Islamic expert or teacher) that Betty is eventually saved, and while reprimanding the boys for neglecting their religious duties, he helps Betty to cover herself and preserve her dignity. In a final act of knowing humour, when offered a lift back home Betty insists on sitting in the back seat, for to sit next to the *kyai* would not be *muhrim* (referring to the Islamic concept which prohibits women from being in close proximity to men other than close family members).

While there is no doubt that Betty is the star of the movie, there are occasions when we seem to be laughing at her rather than with her. Nonetheless on each of those occasions, Betty has the final say, winning the last laugh and triumphing in the face of adversity. However, as is typical of Benyamin's films, there is a still deeper and more explicit depth to the social commentary. Issues of abuse and harassment towards *waria* are highlighted, though always with a touch of humour, and we are left in no doubt of the difficulties and prejudice that *waria* meet as they go about their lives in Jakarta. The first example of such prejudice occurs when Betty volunteers to sing with Elvi Sukaesih at an outdoor concert. As she sets foot on the stage, members of the audience start hurling abuse at the would-be singer, calling her a *kuntulanak bencong*.¹⁴ Elvi and the host of the show rebuke the audience for their prejudice, stating that artists must be respected. Cheered by the support, Betty gives a magnificent performance and the crowd is won over.

The second and more serious incident happens when Betty is caught up in a raid on *waria* at Taman Lawang. I use the term *waria* for this group of characters as this is the term they use to define themselves in the film. The night-time scene commences with a group of *waria* taking part in a self-defence class, in order to

protect themselves against disrespectful behaviour by gangsters. Then suddenly the police arrive sending the *waria* running in all directions. As fits the genre, there are comedic scenes of *waria* tripping and falling as they try to flee from their pursuers, and the fact that it is the forces of order rather than bandits from whom they need protection cannot be lost on the audience. Meanwhile, returning from the performance where Betty had successfully converted a hostile crowd into fans, she and Nasir are caught up in the confusion and Betty runs for her life. The atmosphere changes dramatically as she is forced to jump into a river to try to evade the police. Her desperate attempt to escape capture is unsuccessful however, as when she swims to the riverbank she is apprehended. We do not see what happens to the other *waria*. In the police station Betty stresses her difference from the other *waria*. 'I am no regular *bencong*', she says, 'I'm an upmarket *bencong*'. The language used is amusing as ever, and perhaps the comment is smartly critiquing an Indonesian society that privileges the wealthy and their possessions/employees.

When the next morning Bokir and his wife come to the police station, bringing with them Betty's identity card, a number of jokes allow the police to be absolved of their harassment of a citizen. First, the policeman argues that the identity card does not belong to Betty, for it bears the name of a certain Ma'un (a male name). 'Officially I am Ma'un,' she says flirtatiously waving her hand fan, 'but I changed my name to Betty Senhorita Syumanjaya.' 'But look,' she says, 'the person is the same, it is just the hair that is different.' Charmed by Betty's demure wit, the police commandant even corrects himself as he addresses Betty, quickly using the female term of address, *saudari*, in place of the male form, *saudara*. However, he warns Betty to take care, for if she is arrested again she knows what the consequences will be. Given that she has not committed a crime it is difficult to know what 'care' the policeman feels she should be taking. While the film's language is clearly exposing the everyday harassment of its minority citizens, the police are nonetheless allowed to save face with the final reminder – 'and always carry your identity card in future'.

I suspect that the *waria* in the film play themselves and are not played by actors. If that is the case, the scene takes on added poignancy and significance for it depicts scenes of harassment which many *waria* certainly faced at the time – and continue to face. Indeed in Kemala Atmojo's journalistic exposé on the life of Jakarta *waria* from the 1980s, he describes events which have a tragic similarity with the raid on the *waria* in *Betty Bencong Selebor*. In October 1979 Kemala's informants recalled one of their colleagues, a *waria* by the name of Siska, jumped into a river to avoid capture in a raid. She drowned. She was apparently the third *waria* working the parks and streets of Jakarta to die in such a way (Atmojo 1986: 11–13).

Having watched the film on numerous occasions, I must admit to being somewhat ambivalent about it. On the one hand, the real focus of satire and criticism in this film is Bokir, with his wandering eye for women and his exploitation of those who work for him in the music business. Indeed, it is thanks to Betty that Bokir's attempts to enter into a polygamous marriage, much to the anger of his

wife, are thwarted. So too there is a serious treatment of the abuse and discrimination to which *waria* are perceived to be subjected. The subject position of *waria* is recognized as being permanent – this is no temporary gender transgression which ultimately serves to reiterate the hegemony of binary gender positions. While we are in no doubt that the film’s understanding of the *waria* identity is, as Boellstorff has argued on the basis of his ethnographic research, ‘operating within the orbit of masculinity’, it is nonetheless a distinct identity which serves to destabilize and trouble dominant Indonesian notions of gender. Perhaps most importantly, the film is very funny but one cannot escape from the fact that this is also a parody of Indonesian *waria*. What is more, while acknowledging the fluidity of gender identities, the film denies Betty a sexuality or sense of erotic desire.

Given this ambivalence, I was intrigued to see how the *waria* focus group would react to the film. They laughed throughout the film. Without exception they found the film to be hilarious – but as one of the respondents remarked, ‘It is funny because Benyamin [the actor playing Betty] is funny, because of his movements and actions.’ Most importantly, they laughed at Betty’s attempts to maintain her femininity in the face of her various predicaments. They laughed at the language, which, as several respondents remarked, showed clear observation of the inventive use of language and slang associated with *waria*. As one of the group said, ‘This film is not for us, it is about us.’ As the group watched the film they laughed along with Betty. But they were in no doubt that other audiences, while also finding the film funny, would be laughing at Betty, and therefore at them.

Vivian: the man who became a woman

The 1978 film *Akulah Vivian* is based on the true story of Vivian Rubianti, an Indonesian citizen who following sex reassignment surgery in Singapore in 1973 successfully applied to the Court of West and South Jakarta to legally change both her name and gender. Vivian plays herself in the film and so audiences are faced with the fascinating situation of a post-operative transsexual playing her pre-operative self. In addition to a discussion of the film itself, this section will also draw on press stories from the time of Vivian’s court appearance and reviews of the film from its release in April 1978. Furthermore, reference will be made to an unpublished film screenplay with the title ‘Ratu Wadam’ (‘Queen of the Wadam’). This screenplay clearly forms the basis for *Akulah Vivian*, with several scenes recorded exactly as written or with only slight modifications, though certain parts of the narrative diverge considerably. A comparative analysis of the final film and earlier screenplay provides further evidence for my arguments regarding the intended message of the filmmakers, and what these changes seem to reveal about Vivian’s own subjectivity.

While Vivian’s story is almost inevitably referred to in any Indonesian journalistic article about citizens who undergo sex reassignment surgery, those reports are often rather brief, hence it will be useful to piece together what is known about her before going on to discuss the film. Reports vary as to whether Vivian was

born in 1944 or 1947, though it seems the later date is probably correct. She was originally named Khan Kok Hian, later changing her name to Iwan Robbyanto Iskandar¹⁵ (*Tempo* 1973a). Vivian underwent a sex change operation in Singapore on 8 January 1973, and sought legal recognition for her change of name and sex in October of the same year.

Prior to her surgery Vivian ran a successful beauty salon, 'Robby Remaja', from her home on Jalan Melawai VI in the Kebayoran Baru district of Jakarta. While described as a simple salon 'without air conditioning', Vivian's clients reportedly included wives of high ranking politicians such as Nani Sadikin, wife of Jakarta Governor Ali Sadikin and Mrs Ali Wardhana, wife of the then Finance Minister¹⁶ (*Tempo* 1973a). After the surgery, Vivian closed the salon and worked as a sales girl at Viva Kosmetik before marrying Felix Rumayar at a Catholic church in Petamburan in November 1975, a marriage which was also registered in the civil registry office (Isnaedi 2010). The marriage apparently failed and soon after Vivian moved to Australia.¹⁷ One of the reasons put forward by Vivian for taking her case to the courts was the need for travel documents, 'Why did I ask for legislation through the courts?' she is reported to have said, 'It wasn't for popularity, but only for the need of my travel documents' (*Tempo* 1973a). That same report goes on to state that she did not wish to be in the situation of one of the two Indonesians who had already undergone sex changes [in Indonesia], who until that time was unable to travel overseas because her status had not been legalized (*Tempo* 1973a).¹⁸

Turning to the film itself, after a very brief scene which is discussed in more depth below, the film proper begins with a series of photographs of Vivian. These form the backdrop to the opening credits accompanied by the song composed by Barce van Houten, *Apa salah dan dosaku?* ('How have I erred and sinned?'). The photographs enhance the concept of the film as based on a true story, a sense of realism which is further strengthened when recalling that many viewers would already be familiar with Vivian's story before coming to the cinema. The repeated use of the song throughout the film, the lyrics of which ask what the singer has done wrong that life should be so full of endless suffering, establishes a tone of intolerable and undeserved unhappiness.

The film's narrative begins when a younger woman, Eva, goes in search of someone called Fian. The surprise is that Fian, also known to her friends and colleagues as Vivian, is a woman. Eva explains to Vivian that she is engaged to Vivian's father, Pak Arif, Vivian's birth mother having died several years ago, and as such she wishes to get to know her future husband's son. Eva was apparently unaware that her future son-in-law lived her life as a woman, and Vivian's explanation, 'That's right, I used to be his [Pak Arif's] son', is suggestive both of Vivian's estrangement from her father and the fact that she no longer sees herself as his son, but as his daughter.

Eva is supportive of Vivian, quickly becoming her confidante and getting to know Vivian's boyfriend Alex (Kris Biantoro). The tension in the movie hangs on two key points. First, Alex does not know that Vivian is male bodied. Second, Vivian's father is appalled by his offspring, describing her as '*abnormal*'. Eva

encourages Vivian to be truthful to Alex about her situation, and summarizes Vivian's predicament with the observation, 'Dating normally progresses to engagement and then to marriage. But until now, both government and religion only recognize marriage between heterosexuals (*orang-orang normal*).' Things come to a head in a key scene when Alex invites Vivian and Eva to watch that year's *Ratu Wadam* beauty contest. While reluctant to attend, no doubt fearing that Alex might become aware of her identity, and also reticent to associate with or be associated with *waria* generally, Vivian goes along out of a sense of obligation to her boyfriend. In stark contrast to Vivian's obvious discomfort, Alex and Eva enjoy themselves immensely, even dancing together once the beauty contest is over. At the end of the night Eva plans to drive Vivian and Alex to their respective homes. However, because Alex is by this time completely drunk, she takes him back to her place, where she puts him to bed alone. On discovering this, and fearing that Alex is attracted to Eva, Vivian contemplates suicide. However with Eva's words about legal recognition ringing in her ears, she takes destiny into her own hands.

She goes to see her doctor and it becomes clear that she has been undergoing long-term assessment for a sex change operation. On hearing the news that she has been approved for surgery by the medical team, she sets off the next day to undergo her operation in Singapore. Meanwhile, Eva tells Alex about Vivian's transsexual status. He is momentarily surprised but his love wins out and he visits a psychiatrist to find out what can be done to help. Then they discover that Vivian has already gone to Singapore so Alex follows. Eva also convinces Vivian's father of his parental obligations and responsibilities and they too go to Singapore where all are united around the hospital bed. On returning to Jakarta, a courtroom scene shows the judge announcing the decision to recognize Vivian's petition to legally change her name and sex. The film comes to a close with a double wedding in which Vivian and Alex are joined by Vivian's father and Eva. As Alex carries Vivian into the bedroom, the door closes and the film's end is signalled with the appearance of a large question mark on the screen.

While the press reports of Vivian's legal case refer to her as a former *wadam*, it is clear from the way that Vivian is reported to talk about herself that she never identified with this subject position. Indeed one of the reasons that she wanted to undergo the operation was because she disliked the *wadam* label and understood her subjectivity as falling firmly within the gender binaries of man and woman. Thus when we look at the structure of the film it is particularly interesting to note how Vivian's character is purposefully differentiated from other *waria*. Nonetheless, there is evidently a desire to show *waria* sympathetically – though this is far less marked than in the earlier script for 'Ratu Wadam'. Thus it is useful to look at the representation of *waria* within the film, and note how Vivian's character is constructed differently, in terms of both appearance and behaviour.

Before the opening credits of *Akulah Vivian*, there is a night-time scene of a man and woman driving in a car which has no narrative connection with the rest of the film. Perhaps just before the man realizes it, the audience becomes aware that the female character is a *waria* – as well as obvious visual clues, the character's



Figure 2.3 Film poster for *Akulah Vivian*. The tagline translates as ‘when man changes to become woman, and woman becomes man ... it is a sign that doomsday is nigh!’ The text on the right translates as ‘Don’t miss: scene of a sex change operation undertaken in Singapore, which has never been shown before on film’ (Sinematek)

voice shares the nasal quality of the comedies discussed above, and her speech is also marked with vocabulary from *bahasa binan*. While it is not clear if she is a sex worker there are no doubts as to the man's intentions. However, on realizing she is not quite what he thought, he pretends the car has a flat tyre and asks his passenger to get out and take a look. No sooner is she out of the car he drives off, leaving her cursing him at the side of the highway, her handbag still in the car. At first sight it seems this scene has little to do with the rest of the film, and neither of the characters appears again. However, it is quite sufficient to explain Vivian's desire not to be associated with *waria*. Society does not accept them, and as soon as the reality of the transgressive identity is known they will automatically be rejected.

We encounter *waria* in two further scenes in the film; in both instances they become the object of the gaze both of a diegetic audience and also of the film's audience. In the first of these scenes Eva and her future husband attend a cabaret evening. They are seated in the front row and the camera switches between a medium close-up of the couple discussing the performance and a view of the stage, from behind Eva and Pak Arif, as if we, the cinematic audience are also present. The particular act that we witness is a striptease, and as the act progresses it becomes clear that this artist is male-to-female transgender. The striptease is performed by a member of the popular Bambang Brothers dance troupe, presumably Bambang Wisnu, also known as Myrna.¹⁹ The audience is encouraged to make a direct comparison with Vivian as the previous scene had ended with her twirling around in delight, only to fade into the image of the stripper spinning round in a similar way.

As they watch the performance, Eva's conversation with her future husband focuses on her sympathy for those who are forced to take their clothes off every night, and his contrary opinion. 'It's their profession,' he retorts. 'They can sleep in the daytime while we are at work.' He later reflects how grateful he is that Vivian is not working as a stripper, as it would make him even more confused and nauseated than he already is. Despite her reservations, Eva takes obvious pleasure in watching the show, smiling and laughing as she watches the dancer slowly remove her clothes. The contrast with Vivian's father could not be more pronounced for he looks increasingly aghast and confused at what he is seeing (or perhaps not seeing). This perplexed look seems to reveal a sense of being tricked, an unease at the blurring of gender boundaries, no doubt with Vivian always in his mind. The disruption of gender norms is further accentuated in a demonstration of wonderfully ironic self-awareness by the dancer. By now only dressed in her bra and panties, she takes a ping-pong ball which had been used to pad out her bra, and throws it into the air before it drops back in the bra. With this act she challenges the audience to reconsider which gender they desire, to question which gender the dancer is (does). This play on gender is undoubtedly both thrilling and yet disturbing for the diegetic audience, and the show culminates in the ultimate act of self-aware d wigging: momentarily turning her back on the audience, she pulls off her blonde wig and, spinning round to meet the gaze of those watching, she kicks her leg up high and sideways, almost as if she is performing a defensive martial arts manoeuvre, grimacing back at the audience in an act of defiance.

This striptease scene might be understood to function rather like the opening scene, highlighting the sorry plight of *waria* in society. However, in using a professional act in this scene, in presenting yet another layer of reality masquerading as fiction, the result is far more ambiguous. On the one hand the scene supports the narrative's premise that any behaviour or identity outside of what is understood to be normal is to be pitied, if not condoned. In the strident return of the gaze offered by the transgender stripper, in her knowing and deliberately provocative dewigging, the artist is demonstrating that she neither needs nor deserves pity. Instead the comfortable gendered expectations of the audience (both internal and external to the diegesis) have been resolutely disrupted and challenged.²⁰

The second significant scene to feature *waria* is the beauty contest attended by Vivian, Alex and Eva. According to the film's opening credits these are real life Jakarta *waria*²¹ and the scene seems to be styled on competitions of this type which were indeed held in Jakarta in the 1970s.²² One of the key differences with the earlier script revolves around this competition. In the script Eddy (Alex in the film), already knowing his girlfriend is a *waria*, encourages Antonia (Vivian in the film) to take part in the competition which she wins, becoming Queen of the *Wadam*. This change to the storyline further highlights Vivian's desire to differentiate herself from other *waria*. In the earlier script Eddy's reasoning for encouraging Antonia to participate was to highlight the rights and existence of *waria*: 'In my opinion, you have to be brave to progress. You should be as one, show you indeed exist. Demand your proper place in society – struggle for your rights and freedom to live. One such way is through activities like this' (Wiyono 1977: 44). Despite the transformations to the narrative, the inclusion of such a competition in the film, not as parody but as something serious, further strengthens its progressive credentials. While on the one hand the scene encapsulates Vivian's despair, it is at the same time a celebration of gender diversity, and of public tolerance of such difference, and reflects Ali Sadikin's belief that *waria* too were citizens of the city.

In common with several films discussed in this book, current medical opinion is invoked, no doubt to inform the postulated audience as well as for reasons of plot. Furthermore, the inclusion of this expert knowledge enhances the legitimacy of the approach to gender and sexual minorities taken by the films. In *Akulah Vivian* three such scenes occur: first, between Alex and a psychiatrist when Alex is trying to find out how he can help Vivian; second, between Vivian and her consultant, when he tells her that she may go ahead with the operation; third, a team of medical professionals look at a number of diagrams of genitalia, no doubt to stress fully to the audience the sort of bodily transformation that a patient undergoes during such a procedure.

The most interesting of these scenes in *Akulah Vivian* occurs when Alex discovers Vivian's secret and visits a psychiatrist to see how he can help her.²³ The psychiatrist first explains that there are three types of *wadam* or *banci*:

The first is the transsexual (*transexualisme*) group, that is, those who have the body of men but the souls of women. The second is the transvestite group

(*transvestisme*), who are those who have the bodies of men but get sexual pleasure by performing the activities of women or those who have feminine characteristics. The third group is known as *wadam kaleng*, or *banci kaleng*. That is men who wear women's clothes for profit or who merely have an adventurous spirit.

Alex then asks about the sex lives of these three groups and the doctor explains:

With the transsexual group, their souls are female but their genitals do not allow them to act accordingly, therefore they do it in a variety of ways which are refined (*halus*) and intimate, but remember that sodomy is rough (*kasar*) and they don't want to do that. The second group can be homosexual, can be heterosexual, that is bisexual. They can use it [their genitalia] in all ways. The third group, because their sex does not follow a set pattern, it is difficult to say.

Finally Alex asks if it can be cured, at which point the doctor lights his pipe before commenting:

The first group, practically they can't. Because they have the bodies of men but have female souls. The way to cure them must be by changing their souls to become male. This is very difficult. Or change their bodies to become female by means of an operation. This is different from transvestites; they are as they are because of environmental factors. A change to their environment can cure them.

This is followed by an explanation that with recent technological advances the operation is not in itself difficult, rather the problem is that sometimes those who undergo the operation come to regret it, and it cannot be undone. For this reason it is necessary to undergo a long period of observation prior to the operation to ensure that it is the right move, and the team of experts would include psychologists, psychiatrists, plastic surgeons, gynaecologists and urologists. Stressing that it is because of this that the 'problem of *wadam*' is complex and specific, the doctor warns of the need to be aware that the situation of *wadam* is full of sadness and difficulty. Clearly keen to do all he can to help Vivian, Alex is urged by the doctor to show his love to Vivian so that she feels fortunate rather than regrets undergoing the operation.

The purpose of this scene with the doctor is clearly twofold. Within the logic of the narrative it is necessary to explain to Alex how he must react to the news that his girlfriend is not only a *wadam*, to use the doctor's words, but that she has already embarked for Singapore to undergo a sex change operation. But most striking within the medicalized explanation of the existence of *waria* is the fact that in all counts it is something that needs to be cured, even if the path to a cure is fraught with difficulties. The implication seems to be that *waria* will always be restless and sad, something which may be compounded by (but not result from)

the views of an unaccepting society. Note should also be taken here that the term *wadam* is used here as a catch-all term for both transsexualism and transgenderism, as well as the fetishistic act of transvestism.

The doctor's explanation mirrors the approach taken by Eva since her first meeting with Vivian. While certainly sympathetic, many of her actions are motivated by a desire to help Vivian become *normal*. Her reminder to Vivian that religion and state only recognize marriage between heterosexuals seems to be at the heart of Eva's concern. She wants her future husband to accept his daughter – and this reminder about religion and state can also be extended to her understanding of the make-up of the idealized family. Indeed it is Eva who encourages Alex to go to the psychiatrist to understand how he can help Vivian. Taken together with the doctor's advice, which fails to leave any space open to the possibility that the *waria* identity might not actually need a cure, the film affirms rigid notions of gender identities and follows the normative ideas that only with correspondence between sexed and gendered body can an individual be happy. As long as individuals performing female gender inhabit female bodies the state will be content, and the presumption seems to be, so too will the rest of society. Intriguingly, despite the fact that Eva raises the problem of both state and religion, the notion of religious legitimacy is dropped from any later discussion in the film, though perhaps the marriage celebrations function to act as religious approval in the way that the court scene demonstrated the state's approval.

An argument may be made that *Akulah Vivian*, with its championing of the post-operative transsexual who undergoes this surgical procedure because of the demands of state and religion, is anything but subversive. As we watch the final scene in which father and daughter celebrate their double marriage, we cannot help but be reminded of Boellstorff's argument for the importance of heterosexual marriage as a means of finding a true sense of citizenship during the New Order period. Indeed Alex's final and completely conventional act, of taking Vivian in his arms and carrying her into the bedroom, only accentuates the hierarchies of normative gender. However, in the very closing image of the film all of our certainties are destabilized and our responses called into question. For just as all had seemed well, the sudden appearance of a question mark on the screen is clearly inviting the audience to dispute something.

The possible doubts called to mind, or perhaps anticipated by the sudden appearance of that symbol on the screen are numerous. Will the marriage last? Will they manage to have sex? How will they have sex? Will society accept them as a married couple? Whatever the specifics of the question, they all seem to lead the viewer in a similar direction. Despite the medical intervention, the state's approval and apparent religious legitimization, there is still something not quite right, something troubling, about this couple. And the question arises because there is still something not quite *normal* about Vivian. Indeed the very subtitle of the film, 'the man who became a woman', invokes Kate Bornstein's argument (1994) which has been highlighted by Butler regarding the transitional and transformational nature of being a transsexual (2006: xi). In including the fact of Vivian's past as a man as essential to her current identity, the film's title

accentuates the very notion of an identity based on a process of becoming. She will perpetually be defined by what she used to be as much as what she is becoming, she will forever be in a moment of in-betweenness, a moment which the closing question mark specifically interrogates.

The film had a mixed reception on its release in April 1978. One film review was positive, noting the interesting though sad part of the story, arguing that it would certainly attract attention (ASA 1978). Other reports criticized a weakness in the plot, primarily because it was considered implausible that Alex would not have realized that Vivian was not a real woman (Ilham 1978), and the film's failure to engage fully with the internal conflict which comes with being a *wadam* (Sindu 1978; Simon 1978). The inclusion of *wadam* in the film was also considered to be unremarkable by one reviewer (Ilham 1978), though another report noted the graceful performance of the striptease artist and the inclusion of a number of beautiful *wadam* which added to the film's atmosphere (Simon 1978). Finally, we have the first of several reports to be noted in this book which record the difficulties of heterosexual male actors playing roles which may compromise their perceived masculinity. One article in *Pos Film* noted that a kissing scene between Vivian and Alex had to be recorded ten times because Kris Biantoro 'shook' every time he had to kiss his opposite number (MN 1978).

In addition to the point about the difficulties of Kris Biantoro in kissing the post-operative transsexual Vivian Rubianti, sending the strongest message possible that Vivian was not quite considered a real woman by her co-star, there seems to be something of an underlying hostility to the case of Vivian in the reviews. In particular the problem seems to be that the film did not engage enough with the problems of Vivian as a *wadam*. As noted in [Chapter 1](#), many Indonesians, including *waria*, do not differentiate between transsexuals and *waria*. Thus despite the lengths that Vivian went to, in real life and in the film, to get her new status recognized, it seems that it was not quite enough to gain full recognition, at least from Indonesian film critics. Rather than the celebration of Vivian as a woman, her marriage and her courtroom success, it seems the critics would much rather have received a deliberation on the angst and turmoil that they presume she should have gone through as a *waria*.

Conclusion

There is a deliberate attempt to construct both Betty and Vivian as characters worthy of the audience's sympathy, and to differentiate them from other *waria*. With their more complex characterization, and their attempts to integrate within 'normal' society, there is a concerted effort to contrast them with more simplified and essentialized representations. In seeking to find work as a maid within a decent and middle class milieu, Betty is purposefully contrasted with those *waria* who we are led to presume are sex workers. Likewise Vivian, whose choices within the film are determined by her desire to live in accordance with law and religion, is specifically contrasted with those *waria* who are sex workers and striptease artists or who celebrate their *wadamness* by participating in beauty contests. While very

distinct characters, and appearing in quite different film genres, both Betty and Vivian encapsulate the notion of the marginalized yet deserving. It is attempting to live by the rules of society, to live normal lives – to find an honest job, to live according to gender norms – which marks them as extraordinary and atypical and in contrast with the other *waria* who are still clearly positioned as outsiders.

If measured against the less acceptable *waria*, our two heroines are remarkably devoid of expressions of sexual behaviour or desire. While those marginalized *waria* are notable for the exhibition of their bodies and for engagement in sex work, quite the opposite is evident of Vivian and Betty. In *Akulah Vivian* we have no doubt that there has been something different about the heroine since childhood, as demonstrated through the use of the flashback sequences – it is something natural, rather than caused by environmental factors, a point which is reaffirmed by the legitimizing opinion of the psychiatrist. Thus the formation or moment of recognition of Vivian's deviant subject position is constructed as one which preceded any notion of erotic desire. This 'lack' is all the more notable given that the plot centres on her wish to change her sex so that she can marry Alex. She is clearly motivated by her desire to be with Alex, but it is a desire for marriage – and, we may intimate, desire to become a fully recognized citizen of New Order Indonesia – that is not erotically manifested. Turning to Betty, in making a decision to cross-dress for economic reasons, we have something which at first sight appears close to Garber's progression narrative. However, despite the comedic genre, the transformation is only one way and Betty is also constructed to be remarkably devoid of erotic desire. While early on Betty does make one joke, a play on words linking a large phallic-shaped manioc root (*singkong*) and man (*lekong*), and she is occasionally flirtatious, she is otherwise the unwanted object of desire rather than its source. Thus gender transgression is permissible only in the guise of characters devoid of sexuality. This lack of sexuality becomes all the more apparent when we consider the earlier script for Vivian, and the original synopsis for Betty. For both Betty and Antonia (Vivian) were constructed as characters who frequented places of disrepute at night, thereby marking them as remarkably similar to the more fixed and stereotypical characterizations of the other *waria* we see in the two films.

Turning to the performativity of the various gendered subject positions, it is notable that Vivian's performance of the feminine convinces everyone within the diegesis. This is no surprise given that her character is specifically constructed to legitimize her legal claim to change of name and sex. So too the actress playing Vivian is of course a post-operative transsexual. She is playing herself, someone who considers herself a woman. Despite the generalized overarching terminology used in the film, it is in this respect that it is clear that Vivian is marked as a transsexual rather than a *waria* in the sense of a male-bodied individual with a female soul. In the case of Betty and the pickpocket *wadam* in *Raja Copet* there is a recognition and acceptance of the performativity of *wadamness*. This performance manifests itself not just in dress, but also in voice, language and behaviour, all of which, perhaps unsurprisingly given the comedy genre, function as parodies of femininity. The contrast with the *waria* characters in *Akulah*

Vivian is noteworthy. Rather than a superficial performance of femininity which is not quite right – where masculinity is always just under the surface – the contestants in the beauty contest are celebrated for their beauty, poise and elegance. Likewise the striptease artist's illusion of femininity is sufficiently convincing that Vivian's father is visibly troubled by her gender transgression when the act of dewigging begins.

Acts of dewigging in the films emphasize male physicality. On the one hand there are similarities with the resolution observed by Garber in her analysis of Western acts of dewigging by transvestites. In each situation – the *wadam* pickpocket, Betty and the transgender striptease artist – it is the corporeal masculinity of the individuals which is revealed/unveiled. However, these unveilings occur at key moments when each of the characters are fighting off the physical attacks of heterosexual males – actual physical attacks in the case of Betty and the pickpocket, symbolic in the case of the striptease artist. What is more, these dewiggings do not result in a denouement, a point at which the characters return to their 'true' male gendered selves. For in each case the characters retain key elements of their transgender performativity – the clothes may be lost but the language, the voice and the defiance remain. In all these instances there is little doubt that the cinematic representations of these *waria* characters fall within the orbit of male gender. There is no notion here of a third gender. At the same time there is nothing to suggest that the performance of this subject position is merely temporary.

We can argue then that despite the specific demands of the two different genres – comedy film still employs stereotypical representations of *waria* identities – the *waria* subject position is specifically constructed as one which is permanent and in the right circumstances acceptable within Indonesian society's norms. Thus both *Betty Bencong Selebor* and *Akulah Vivian* might be seen as an attempt to counter a regime of truth which represented all *waria* as sex workers and somehow undeserving of society's understanding and recognition.

In Vivian's character something of an ambiguity is evident regarding how she should be understood, and the narrative introduces several scenes to explain her subjectivity to the Indonesian public. While certainly linked to *waria*, both by the scenes including conventional *waria* and the psychiatrist's explanations, it is made clear that she is different. This difference is also evident in the fact that she is never dewigged, indeed her use of a swimming costume further accentuates her female embodiment. It might be argued therefore that her character is constructed with the complete intention of affirming gender norms. It is only in the final moment of the film, with the appearance of that question mark, and the invitation to the audience to think about sex, that the construction suddenly seems far more ambivalent. It is then that we recall again the film's title, and realize that Vivian will always be a man who became a woman, and will always be in state of in-betweenness.

The 1970s were notable for the number of films which depicted *waria*, most probably reflecting existing public knowledge of the *waria* subject position in Indonesian society and a developing discourse about transsexuality. The films

discussed in this chapter, while perhaps atypical, should be seen as efforts to engage with dominant regimes of truths, using the power of the cinema to construct more complex characterizations. As such these cinematic constructions were one component in a range of media which fed into new conceptions of the subject position as evidenced by the increasing number of *waria*-focused news stories in the Indonesian media generally in the 1970s – complementing the political attention from Jakarta’s mayor Ali Sadikin, and the knowledge and practice of medical advances which led to increasing options for surgical intervention. Indonesian filmmakers have continued to depict transgender Indonesians in their movies, some of which will be mentioned in later chapters of this book, but in later decades it is alternative sexualities which have captured the attention of filmmakers. This no doubt reflects the emergence of those subject positions in Indonesian discourse from the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards. Thus in the next chapter it is to the 1980s and *gay* male homosexuality that we will turn our attention.

Notes

- 1 As discussed in [Chapter 1](#) there are a variety of terms which have been used for the transgender or transvestite subject position in Indonesia. In this chapter I use *waria* unless referring to the usage in a particular film. The 1970s saw the replacement of the preferred term *wadam* with *waria* and this momentary fluidity is evident in the films analysed in this chapter. In addition to these ‘preferred’ terms, we should also note the use of the words *banci* and *bencong*.
- 2 The translation of a film’s title, its director and year of release is given on first mention of a film in the main text. These details are also included in the Filmography. For some older films I have followed details in Kristanto’s catalogue which often details the year a film passed the censors rather than its actual release.
- 3 Later to become Himpunan Waria Jakarta.
- 4 For example, in *Dorce Ketemu Jodoh* (‘Dorce Meets her Match’, dir. Mardali Syarief, 1990), the character played by Dorce cross-dresses as a man in order to get a job as a car mechanic. In an interesting play on this plot device, the lead female character played by Luna Maya in *Jakarta Undercover* (dir. Lance, 2007) pretends to be a *waria* to gain work as a dancer in a nightclub.
- 5 The *wadam* character here is played by the popular comedian Sukardjo, also known as Karjo AC-DC, who always performed in female attire. The term ACDC, a slang term used in the West to denote bisexuality, was also fairly well known in Indonesia in the 1970s and 1980s and occurs in a number of journalistic reports.
- 6 For example, *Benyamin Koboï Ngungsi* (‘Benyamin Refugee Cowboy’, dir. Nawi Ismail, 1975), a satire which part parodies the American Western genre and includes a *waria* riding into a ranch on a leather hobby horse (*kuda lumping*). See Hanan and Koesasi for a full discussion of this film (2011: 63–9). In the 1973 film *Benyamin Brengsek* (‘Benyamin Messes Up’, dir. Nawi Ismail), Benyamin plays a young man who travels to Jakarta to try his luck. He tries out a number of ‘professions’ such as zoo attendant, *becak* driver and parking attendant before finding success. Kristanto’s catalogue records that one of the occupations he takes on is that of ‘*banci*’ (2007: 101). However in the only version that I have been able to see (on YouTube), the singular mention of *banci* is when Benyamin runs away from the police midway through cutting someone’s hair at the roadside. Speaking to his friend afterwards he says ‘it’s not pleasant being a *banci*’, seemingly using the word *banci* to imply hairdresser.

Given the popularity for such work among the *waria* community in Indonesia, such terminology is perhaps understandable, though there is certainly nothing effeminate in his performance of the role.

- 7 The Betawi are the original inhabitants of Batavia, present-day Jakarta.
- 8 *Copet* means 'pickpocket'.
- 9 I use the term *bahasa binan* to reflect its usage by *wadam/waria* characters in these films. *Binan* is actually a *bahasa binan* word meaning *banci*, formed by inserting the infix *in* between the consonant and vowel of every syllable, and then shortening the result so that it becomes just two syllables long (Oetomo 2003: 64). Thus *banci* becomes *binancini* which is shortened to *binan*. Boellstorff makes the important point that the way of speaking, which he refers to as *bahasa gay* does not act as a secret language but rather it 'reveals and sustains the interlocutor's inclusion' in the *gay* world (2004c: 191). For more on this language or way of speaking see Oetomo (2003: 61–71) and Boellstorff (2004c).
- 10 In the opening credits the film is entitled simply *Betty*, but elsewhere it is always known as *Betty Bencong Selebor*. Sinematek holds an earlier draft of a script on which the film is clearly based. On its cover the title is 'Bencong Indehoy' ('The Immoral Bencong') while on the first page of the script the given title is 'Bencong Slebor' ('The Scatty Bencong'). The inconsistent spelling of *selebor/slebor* reflects its usage.
- 11 To this day Taman Lawang in Central Jakarta is an area well known for being frequented by *waria* sex workers.
- 12 Kristanto's synopsis (2007: 170), probably based on similar synopses held by Sinematek, is repeated on a number of Internet sites but shares very little in common with the actual film. It reads: 'Because of difficulties in finding work, our hero becomes a *waria* or *bencong* called Betty. Then she applies to an employer (Bokir) for work. Betty is taken on as a maid because Bokir likes her terrible behaviour, although his wife is disapproving. At a birthday party for Bokir, he and his wife squabble, because Betty invites Bokir to dance intimately. That incident can be understood because the husband is drunk. To earn additional income, Betty often joins in hanging around with other *bencong*. One time she is unfortunate to be caught in a raid. Betty admits her wrongdoing to the police. Unfortunately, the employer's business also went bankrupt.' In one of the synopses held at Sinematek a further detail is that the business went bankrupt because of Betty.
- 13 *Dames*, from the Dutch noun modifier, meaning 'lady's'.
- 14 A *kuntilanak* is a supernatural being with the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth and who appears, mainly to unfortunate men, in the guise of a beautiful woman.
- 15 Some sources spell the name Iwan Rubianto Iskandar.
- 16 Clients also included President Suharto's eldest daughter, Tutut, and his daughter-in-law, Elsyie Sigit (*Tempo* 1973a).
- 17 Despite the notoriety of the case, little seems to be known about what happened to Vivian in the subsequent years.
- 18 The situation of the other post-operative transsexual was reported as unknown.
- 19 The Bambang Brothers are listed in the film's credits as guest stars (*bintang tamu*). Information on the group is somewhat limited but according to Kemala Atmojo, one of the brothers, Bambang Wisnu, also known as Myrna, was previously a member of a short-lived group called the 'Wadam All Stars' and in 1977 went on to be a founding member of the 'Fantastic Dolls' (1986: 18–19). A 1973 *Tempo* article discussing sex change operations mentions the Bambang Brothers and quotes Bambang Wisnu as saying he did not want an operation, despite having the money, mainly because the feeling of pleasure in sex disappears. Bambang describes himself as not wanting to be labelled a *banci*, presumably because of its pejorative connotations. He says, 'Because I am also a man I can function like a guy. The only difference is it's without full love. The preference to love men is stronger in me' (*Tempo* 1973b; see also

- Atmojo 1986: 18–19). Bambang Wisnu (Myrna) became chair of the Jakarta *waria* association in 1979 (Atmojo 1986: 19; personal communication Dédé Oetomo 29 August 2012). Her brother Bambang Prio went on to heterosexually marry (personal communication Dédé Oetomo 7 September 2012).
- 20 It is remarkable to note the apparent similarities between the striptease in *Akulah Vivian* and Esther Newton's (1972) observations and analysis of American female impersonators from the late 1960s. In particular she noted a common technique used by female impersonators to reveal that the female appearance was an illusion – to show one 'breast', to take off the wig, or for those doing a full striptease, to reveal the flat chest (1972: 101).
 - 21 The credits list Laila, Susy, Angel, Ichi, Windy, Lina, Poppy, Linda, Lenny and Merry.
 - 22 The script for 'Ratu Wadam' includes a special note that the director should consult with Kris Biantoro (the actor who plays Alex), to ensure that the recreation of the competition is as realistic as possible (Wiyono 1977: 51). Kris Biantoro worked as an MC at the Jakarta Tropicana nightclub from 1970 to 1977 (Biantoro 2006: 152–64). An increasingly high profile host and quiz master, he was the MC of the first Miss Indonesia competition in 1971 (Biantoro 2006: 172–3), though I have not been able to find confirmation that he ever compered a *waria* beauty contest.
 - 23 In the script for 'Ratu Wadam', there is a scene with a psychiatrist, but instead of the dialogue there is a note stating that the scene will be perfected later after getting the necessary scientific knowledge from Doctor Arman Adikusumo of the RSTM (Rumah Sakit Tjipto Mangunkusumo) (Wiyono 1977: 17).

3 The first Indonesian *gay* movie

Gay men in the cinema of the 1980s

In 1988, Eddy Iskandar, an Indonesian journalist reporting on that year's Indonesian Film Festival, wrote a long article in the newspaper *Pikiran Rakyat* noting the presence of *gay* characters, or at least characters who appeared to be *gay*, in three different films: *Terang Bulan di Tengah Hari* ('Moonlight at Midday', dir. Chaerul Umam, 1988), *Istana Kecantikan* (*Palace of Beauty*, dir. Wahyu Sihombing, 1988) and *Catatan Si Boy* (*Boy's Diary*, dir. Nasri Cheppy, 1987). He concluded the piece by questioning whether the inclusion of the *gay* world (*dunia gay*) in those three films was evidence not just that they (*gay* men or men who appeared to be *gay*) exist, but that they no longer have a sense of shame in incorporating themselves into wider society.¹

The production of these three films towards the end of the 1980s is undoubtedly a reflection of an increasing media awareness of the *gay* subject position in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were not the first films to contain *gay* characters (or characters who might be understood to be *gay*), but they are notable for attracting media attention and public discussion. Emon, the character of interest from *Catatan Si Boy*, which generated four sequels and a number of spin-offs, has recently been described as Indonesia's best-loved *banci* (Iwan 2008). *Istana Kecantikan* attracted considerable attention for its narrative focus on a *gay* man and continues to be the best remembered, or at least most referred to, '*gay* film' from the New Order period. While there are clear ambivalences in the construction of *Istana Kecantikan's* *gay* protagonist and more recent critics have tended to view its portrayal of male homosexuality negatively, contemporary responses to the film were far more welcoming.

Characters who might be identified as *gay* (as opposed to *waria*) began to appear in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Indonesian cinema, and before going on to look at those films from the late 1980s in more depth, it will be useful to consider these early cinematic constructions of male homosexuality. Many of these earlier representations tend to make use of visual signifiers and stereotypes rather than use the word *gay* or its equivalent. From these images, however, it is possible to develop a sense of dominant attitudes regarding homosexuality, which it seems *Istana Kecantikan* and perhaps *Catatan Si Boy* set out to counter, albeit with limited success.

Homosexuality as a sign of social and religious breakdown

Probably the earliest film to focus on a sexual relationship between men was *Remaja di Lampu Merah* ('Youth at the Stop Light', dir. Syamsul Fuad, 1979).² The film is particularly interesting for its specific use of Islamic teachings to condemn homosexual behaviour, a fact all the more significant given that a consideration of Islamic or religious teachings with respect to alternate sexualities tends to be remarkably absent from most other films discussed in this book. It is also distinguished by its use of a foreign or rather mixed-race (Australian–Indonesian) older man as the corrupting homosexual. While other films in this book lend themselves to the discussion of influence of transnational flows of queer knowledge, this 1979 film is the only one which explicitly constructs the *gay* man as a foreigner. The controversial nature of the film, and certainly the novelty of the theme, is captured in a pre-release report on the film in *Pos Film* which proclaimed 'El Manik plays *homo* with Rano Karno' (Rotan 1979). The celebrity of the two main actors is conveyed in the cheeky first line of the article which reported, 'El Manik who has recently been awarded Best Supporting Actor has been caught red-handed having sex with the popular teenage actor Rano Karno.' Referring, of course, to a scene from the film, the article also included a still showing the two in bed together.

The film tells the story of high school student Andri (Rano Karno), who along with many of his friends spends too much time attending discos to the detriment of his schoolwork. His relationships with his father and stepmother are increasingly strained, and the film is clearly intended as a warning of the dangers of broken homes and the lack of strong guiding adult figures. To add to the problems, and perhaps as a consequence of the lack of familial involvement, Andri is bullied at school by some of his classmates who call him a *bencong*. During this time he is given moral support and advice by Yatie, a sympathetic housewife. Things come to a head when Andri is thrown out of the family home by his father after (correctly) accusing his stepmother of infidelity. In a moment of stress and heightened despair, he loses control of his motorbike, plunging into the sea. He wakes up in the house of Stephen, an older man of mixed Australian–Indonesian parentage. A strong relationship soon develops between the two. The bond is evidently sexual as well as emotional. Then, while Stephen is on a trip back to Australia, Andri walks past a prayer house and happens to overhear a sermon condemning homosexual acts. Andri returns to his friends, and his relationship with his female school friend, Ita, is clearly now based on much more healthy and suitable pursuits such as playing in the park rather than attending discos. On returning from Australia, Stephen, disappointed that Andri has disappeared from his house, tracks him down and forcefully takes Andri back to his house. Andri finds the strength to repel Stephen and manages to escape. After a chase through the Jakarta streets the two are apprehended after Stephen accuses Andri of theft. In the police station all becomes clear however, and when Andri's father appears, father and son are reunited. Stephen's fate is left unresolved.³

The boys who bully Andri call him a *bencong*. The word covers a range of meanings from sissy to *waria*, but as Oetomo has pointed out is also used to reprimand children who do not behave in accordance with gender norms (1996: 261). We cannot ignore the fact that the boy who is taunted for being a *bencong* falls into a homosexual relationship. So is there something about this character's construction which is not quite *normal*? He is a shy figure in comparison with his more lively school friends, but there is nothing about him which is conspicuously effeminate or camp. The 'problem' simply seems to be that he is not spirited in confronting those who taunt him. In the screenplay's list of characters Andri is described as a 'quiet boy who because of his family background is easily led astray'. It is this unpluckiness and introspection which is used within the diegesis to signal a lack of manliness resulting in the taunts of his school-mates. In response he is constantly urged by his friends, and also the mother-like figure of Yatie, to be 'more masculine' (*lebih jantan*), and to 'show his teeth'. This problematic want of manliness and lack of direction, such that he ends up under the influence of Stephen, are all explained by his wrong upbringing and the tragedy of the broken home.

When complaining to Yatie, his older female confidante, that he can never learn to love when he is surrounded by hate, she cautions him not to go down the path of misogyny because of his father's wife. This warning comes just before his rescue by Stephen, directing the audience to infer that Andri's willing response to Stephen's advances is a direct consequence of the stepmother's behaviour. But ultimately the blame lies with his father and his desertion of Andri's birth mother. As Andri says to his father at the end of the film, 'This is all because of you. Why did you leave my mother? And why did you marry that woman?' The result of all of this, captured in his final words to Stephen, are not simply that his morals have been damaged, but more importantly that Stephen had 'done away with his youth'.

Remaja di Lampu Merah is one of a large number of films from the late 1970s and early 1980s that came to be known as *film remaja* (teenage films). Krishna Sen has argued of *film remaja* that they are less about teenagers than about 'the older generation with whom the young people must necessarily become one'. As such it is a genre which 'chips away at the [*remaja*] identity until the homogeneity of the whole society is re-established' (1986: 41). While *Remaja di Lampu Merah* is possibly unique for its engagement with male homosexuality, the film is nonetheless typical of the genre in following the pattern described by Sen. It is the very fact that the film is about homogeneity being re-established, and viewing Andri as a not yet fully formed adult, which means that all is not lost for this particular teenager. There is still time for him to realize the error of his ways and to become a fine upstanding Indonesian adult citizen. Guided by the will of Allah he is able to return to the right path, accusing those who have wronged him and facing up to those who have neglected him. His father also realizes his own culpability and we can be sure that he too will reform his behaviour. Finally reunited, we can assume that Andri has returned to the orbit of the best role model of all, his own father. In so doing, his normative masculinity and sexuality and his eventual entry into the adult world are certain.

While *Remaja di Lampu Merah* has come to be known for its early representation of a male homosexual or *gay* man (e.g. Maimunah 2011: 117; Widjaya 2007: 28), the word *gay* is completely absent from the film. In the screenplay, Stephen is described as ‘rather eccentric’ and ‘sexually deviant’. Importantly, it is behaviours as much as identities which are criticized in this film. This is the case with Andri who is never labelled as a result of his relationship with Stephen, by the police, his father or friends. Andri’s friends seem to ignore the obvious implications of his relationship with Stephen, and his father is unable to find the words to verbalize what he fears may have happened to his son. At the police station, after Andri blames his father for everything that has occurred, and for the fact that he fell into the hands of Stephen who destroyed his morals, something unsayable seems to slowly dawn on his father, ‘So ... you, and him...’. The words to complete his realization elude him. Perhaps he is unable to finish the sentence because it is so abhorrent to him, its very utterance would somehow fix something to the identity of his son. Or maybe it is because he simply does not yet have the words to explain what he comes to understand. His only response is to move to hit Stephen, though he is restrained from doing so. However we understand that lacuna, leaving the unsayable unsaid eases the re-establishment of the bond between Andri and his father, and our acceptance of Andri back into the normative world of Indonesian youth. As the film ends with everyone looking happily at the screen, Andri is able to proclaim confidently, ‘Tomorrow I will go to school again.’ Andri is not constructed as a homosexual, even one who has been saved. Rather, he is a youth who has been led astray by an inappropriate role model, but who has discovered his way back onto the right path thanks to his willingness to follow Allah’s guidance.

The key turning point in *Remaja di Lampu Merah*, when Andri finds the strength to face up to his unhappiness and decides that his relationship with Stephen is inappropriate, comes when he overhears a sermon delivered by an Islamic preacher. At a moment when he is more alone than ever, thrown out by his family and temporarily deserted by Stephen, the preacher’s words provide a guiding light. However, if we look at the words which the preacher uses, Andri does not need to see these as a criticism of him as an individual, but rather it is his behaviour which is condemned:

So to our respected congregation, in connection with my *subuh* [early-morning] teachings, related to the earlier moral problem in which God has already decreed that an individual who gives full rein to his sexual lust for another man, this is a deed that has gone beyond the limits. So it is clear that *homo* acts are acts which are in violation of God’s law. Those *homo* (acts) are forbidden by religion and proscribed by its laws, which is why we as members of the Islamic community are obliged to keep away from that God forsaken behaviour, as is recorded in the holy book Al-Qu’ran.

Importantly, the concern here from the perspective of religious teachings and interpretation is with deeds (*perbuatan homo*) rather than identity. Drawing on Foucault's description of a development from times in the West where it was homosexual behaviours rather than any notion of homosexual identities which were problematized, the logic within this film reflects a time when contemporary notions of the *gay* subject position were only beginning to emerge in Indonesia. As Blackwood has argued, this was a time when the New Order state still deployed gender to control sexuality, with concepts of 'proper manhood ... advanced through state programs as well as the statements and pronouncements of Islamic clerics' (2007: 295). There is little doubt that Andri will fulfil the expectations of the audience and the New Order state by going on to be a normative, reproductive, heterosexually married citizen. Of course, it is left to the individual viewer to imagine whether Andri will enjoy any further moments of sexual intimacy with other men.⁴

Through the character of Stephen the film deliberately and concertedly links homosexual behaviour with the Western world. While played by the Indonesian actor El Manik, one of the first things that Stephen says in the film is that he is Australian. Furthermore, the actor deliberately speaks Indonesian with a strange accent to mark him as different. His trip back to Australia only strengthens the sense of otherness, a notion compounded by the fact that he claims to have no family and appears to live apart from any sense of community. His eccentric lifestyle is accentuated by his preferred pastime of painting, while his full beard, open colourful shirt and aviator-style sunglasses also set him apart from typical representations of Indonesian men.⁵ Thus, this early portrayal of homosexuality and homosexual behaviour is in the guise of a foreign, predatory character pursuing Indonesian youth. As will become clear as this book develops, *gay* identities have been linked with the West in various ways in Indonesian cinema: through the influence of storylines inspiring actors how to play *gay*, as a location which *gay* characters visit, and as an imagined place of heightened liberality and freedom. However, this film is perhaps unique for its association of homosexuality, and a particularly insidious and corrupting representation of same-sex erotic desire at that, with foreign, outside influences.

Contemporary press reports mainly pointed to the film's novel treatment of the problem of homosexuality within the teen movie genre (*Harian Terbit* 1980a; 1980c). One article published in *Harian Terbit* (1980b) reported the positive reception the film had received from teenagers, noting that it did not intentionally exploit sexual themes, but rather the audience was 'invited to look into the problem of *homo sex* which can occur among teenagers if their parents are neglectful in directing their children towards positive activities'. Illustrated with an image of the scene in which the faithful listen to the sermon condemning homosexual acts, the article also picks on the proselytizing mission of the film in showing the important guiding role of religion for young people (1980b). Another article from *Harian Terbit* welcomed the engagement with the new theme or problem of *homosex* framed within an educational approach, in which the same-sex relationship is something from which Andri needed to be saved (1980c). This educational

function is stressed in a further article which states that the censors praised it for being different from other *film remaja* (*Harian Terbit* 1980a). Thus the apparently educational value of the film's treatment of homosexuality was key in its acceptance by the censors and the press.

This perspective on the film continued into the 1990s as is evident from a 1991 review on the occasion of its screening on the TPI television channel (Indonesian Educational Television). The report noted the groundbreaking theme for the time, with the headline 'Youth in the 1970s were already *hombreng*', *hombreng* being a slang term used until today for *gay* men. Described as brave and unique for its engagement with the taboo sexual theme, the pioneering nature of the film is contextualized by pointing out that it was made eight years before *Istana Kecantikan*. Intriguingly, it interprets Andri as 'enjoying' the same-sex relationship, a perspective not proposed in any of the reports from the previous decade, arguing that the moral ending is indicative of the director's hesitation in depicting youth homosexuality. The article also argues that the decision by the new television channel to screen the film highlights the fact that the dangers of homosexuality and the problems caused by broken homes were still perceived to be relevant at the beginning of the 1990s (*Berita Buana* 1991).

A useful comparison can be made between *Remaja di Lampu Merah* and Chaerul Umam's 1982 film *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* (*The Narrow Bridge*), which tells of a young Islamic teacher, Ibrahim, sent to work in a West Sumatran village riven by corruption and immorality. The film draws on the story of the Prophet Yusuf to explore the challenges and rewards of staying true to one's faith in Allah despite temptation, false accusation and feelings of despair. *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*, like *Remaja di Lampu Merah*, invokes male homosexuality as a signifier of immorality and values that have gone awry, though while the latter looks at homosexuality as a manifestation of specific problems within a family unit, in the former it signifies the collapse of morality in society generally. *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* also includes brief images of same-sex erotic behaviour between women, and these scenes will be specifically discussed in [Chapter 4](#).

A number of short scenes leave the audience fully aware of a male–male relationship between Pak Harun, the most wealthy and powerful man in the village, and a younger rather simple man, Ukan. Despite being married, it is clear that Pak Harun, the epitome of corruption and immorality in the village, has little interest in his wife, and would much rather spend his leisure time fooling around with his younger companion. With its strongly rural setting, it is perhaps no surprise that the sexualized behaviour between the two men is not verbalized. Nonetheless, various scenes leave us in no doubt of the intimacy between the two: Ukan drapes his arm around Harun's shoulder as they ride into town in a horse-drawn cart and Harun slaps the younger man's backside as Ukan nestles his head in Harun's lap. Most tellingly of all, at a meeting of the male village elders in the village mosque, Ukan lies with his head cradled in Harun's lap while having his temples massaged and playing with his tambourine. This clear disregard for the proceedings of the meeting is made all the worse for the fact that it takes place in the mosque. Having



Figure 3.1 Film poster for *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*. Pak Harun is in the centre wearing a scarf (Sinematek)



Figure 3.2 Film poster for *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*. Pak Harun is in the frame bottom right (Sinematek)

already declared that he has no time to consider such matters as the repair of the mosque, the inappropriate behaviour with Ukan signifies Harun's immorality and disregard for religion; moreover, the tolerance of such behaviour by the rest of the villagers symbolizes the moral void at the heart of the community. As a travelling *fakir* said at the beginning of the film, the people in the village are 'like a drifting kite'. With no teacher of any worth to guide them they are instead victims of the wayward and overly powerful Pak Harun, a situation remarkably similar to that of Andri who as we have seen is described as easily led astray.

The contrast between the settings of these two films could not be more extreme. *Remaja di Lampu Merah*, with its focus on middle class Jakarta youth, is a world away from the highland Minangkabau setting of *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*. In the former film, homosexual behaviour is shown to be a foreign import, while in the latter even the Indonesian city seems another universe, let alone the pernicious West. Even on this point we should note that Pak Harun, clearly wealthier than anyone else in the village, is also the only person, together with Ukan, to travel beyond what seems like a misruled state in miniature. But most importantly, the link between the two is the lack of a guiding teacher or father figure and the consequent forgetting of Islamic beliefs and laws.

1988: the emergence of a gay identity?

In 1988, Eddy Iskandar highlighted the nominations for the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival which included three films with notable *gay* or *bencong* characters. Not only did he call attention to the recognition which those films were giving to what he called the *gay* world, but he even asked, in response to director Wahyu Sihombing's stated intention of bringing the *gay* world to the attention of the Indonesian film-going public, whether it was not already so well represented as to somewhat diminish this intention. It will be useful to look at each of these three films, or at least the '*gay*' characters from each of those films, to gain a measure of how well entrenched such images of the *gay* world really had become.

Turning first to *Catatan Si Boy*, at first glance it may seem incongruous to include this film and its well-known character Emon in a chapter discussing the emergence of the *gay* subject position in Indonesian cinema. Emon (Didi Petet) is not identified as *gay* in the film and his character seems to have as much to do with gender transgression as it does with any notion of a modern *gay* identity. Indeed Didi Petet has repeatedly stated that his cinematic creation Emon was neither *gay* nor *banci* but merely 'spoilt' (*manja*) (e.g. *Tempo* 1989: 46). However, the fact that the character of Emon was included as confirmation of a new visibility of the *gay* world in Iskandar's 1988 newspaper article is, if nothing else, evidence that the previously better known subject positions of *waria* and *wadam* were being incorporated by some commentators into the emerging category of *gay*.

The *Si Boy* series was something of a cinematic phenomenon in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Running to five films in all, the series focused on the lead character Boy, a super-rich, bright and morally upright high school student and his friends from the Jakarta elite, one of whom is Emon. Initially a weekly radio programme of the same name on the popular Prambors radio station, the film became the second most popular film up to that time in Indonesian history (Sen 1991). The character of Emon, significant enough from the beginning, grew with each film, and he was clearly a big hit with Indonesian audiences.⁶ Indeed the character's popularity was such that it led to two separate spin-offs, *Bayar tapi Nyicil* ('Pay but in Instalments', dir. Arizal, 1988) and *Catatan Si Emon* ('Emon's Diary', dir. Nasri Cheppy, 1991), though in the latter of these two films Ade Faisal played Emon.

The films in the *Si Boy* series generally lack any serious storyline and the narratives are focused on Boy's different love interests and the various scrapes he and his friends get into. With their elite youth setting they provided a perfect vehicle for product placement of all sorts of consumer goods aimed at young adults and as Sen notes, the promise of a series of films was undoubtedly attractive from the advertisers' point of view. It is therefore perhaps all the more surprising that out of these clearly commercial films stepped such an ambiguous character in terms of his gender/sexuality. While Didi Petet might have argued that Emon was merely spoilt, it is clear from contemporary published responses and subsequent reports and articles that others were putting a different reading onto him. Sen noted the series for its inclusion of male homosexuality – focusing particularly

on a storyline in *Catatan Si Boy III* ('Boy's Diary III', dir. Nasri Cheppy, 1990) – and describes Emon's character as 'very effeminate' (1991). In a recent journalistic article looking back at the Emon phenomenon, Rizal Iwan (2008) labels him 'everyone's favourite sissy' noting that 'Emon was the only character without any sexual urges' and citing Didi Petet's argument that Indonesian audiences would not have accepted Emon if he had developed a crush on Boy. Rizal does argue that the relevance of Emon lies in the fact that, like lots of 'gay boys and girls', he was 'forced by power to conform and acquiesce' and to deny his sexuality. Thus in addition to pointing to a hypocrisy in Indonesian society which revels in its camp and sissy icons while preferring to deny an accompanying transgressive sexuality, Rizal, like a number of commentators and no doubt audience members, also recognized an underlying 'gayness'.

An essential aspect of being *gay* is the existence of erotic desire and this is, as in *Betty Bencong Selebor* and numerous other comedy films, striking for its absence. This lack is particularly apparent for a series of films which so clearly hinges on the heterosexual love interests of its other stars and the exploitation of images of both male and female bodies (other than Emon's). We should also note that in both *Bayar tapi Nyicil* and *Catatan Si Emon* the plots centre on Emon and various potential female love interests. Indeed, it is in these spin-offs that the true dilemma regarding Emon is exposed. In the *Catatan Si Boy* series this outrageously camp but non-sexual character functions not merely as comic relief but also to emphasize Boy's normative, and therefore sexual, masculinity (Iwan 2008). However, in those cinematic spin-offs in which he is promoted to the position of protagonist, this avoidance of erotic desire, and by implication the omission of a love interest for the central character, becomes impossible. The only option is to give him a (hetero) sexuality, albeit a rather unsuccessful and implausible one.⁷

Despite Didi Petet's protestations that Emon's manner was merely the superficial behaviour of a childish comedy sidekick, there is clearly more to it than that. Emon's use of *bahasa binan* or *bahasa gay*, his style of walking and his limp wrist are exaggerated in the extreme and certainly unique. His behaviour at the swimming pool (*Catatan Si Boy*), when he covers his chest with one arm to protect his modesty, is not simply the behaviour of a spoilt upper class boy. It is the studied, stereotypical mannerism of someone whose gender performance is in stark contrast to the other male characters on screen.⁸ Whether this means he is transgender, *gay* or some other queer identity is for his audience to interpret. But certainly as Sen and Iwan have already remarked, even his own diegetic friends note that there is something different about him to the extent that in the third instalment of the series they try to pair him up with a *lesbi* friend 'because they are both just a bit off'. Quite what Emon's friends thought this match might achieve is again open to the audience's imagination, and certainly it is difficult to image the two as a couple for any other reason than their lack of conformity to normative gender roles. So whether we see Emon as the latest variation in a line of transgender characters or as an effeminate *gay* man (even if he does not quite realize it himself), it is the cinematic denial of his sexuality which makes it

difficult to support Eddy Iskandar's invocation of *Catatan Si Boy* as evidence that gay men had entered into general society without shame.

The second film mentioned by Eddy Iskandar, and for which Cok Simbara was nominated for a Citra at the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival, was *Terang Bulan di Tengah Hari*. The film received a fair degree of critical attention on its release, though it is unfortunately marred by a number of overly long catwalk scenes which were effectively product placement opportunities for various designers. The film tells the story of Sora (Zoraya Perucha) and her unemployed husband, Sony. Sony's friend Hadi (Cok Simbara) is a modelling agent and encourages Sora to enter the world of fashion, and she soon becomes a top model. Much to Hadi's dismay, she gives up her modelling career when Sony gains work, though she is forced to return to the catwalk when as a result of Hadi's machinations she splits up with her husband, losing her home and custody of her child. Things go wrong when she becomes the victim of a drugs trafficking gang, and it turns out that Hadi was the only witness to the planting of drugs in her case. With the help and perseverance of a young lawyer she manages to clear her name. We find out at the end of the film that Hadi has died in a mysterious car accident – presumably at the hands of the international crime gang.

Our interest is in Hadi, although he performs a supporting role to the main action and progression of the narrative. The character appears in a number of scenes and is clearly portrayed as a somewhat camp or effeminate man, such characteristics mainly being signified through his cross-legged manner of sitting, upright body posture, animated body movements and limp-wristed comportment, all of which stand out against the other notable male characters. He is much neater than most of the other men in the film, and perhaps as one would expect for a modelling agent, his sartorial style is flamboyant. The only verbalization of his perceived subject position is when he is referred to on two occasions as '*si bencong*' – as discussed earlier this is a term with a variety of possible meanings, but in this case it is probably best translated as 'the queer' or 'the poof', an expression which is also repeated in some newspaper reports on the film (GT/P-4 1988). The contemporary media reports of Cok Simbara's role in the film tend to pick up on the marginal identity of the character, though generally describing it in terms of gendered performance – his 'feminine behaviour' (e.g. Sukoyo 1988), rather than as an articulation of sexuality. Iskandar (1988) differentiates Hadi both in terms of style and appearance from Didi Petet's Emon, arguing that Emon's *banci* performance is familiar from Indonesian daily life, while Cok Simbara's Hadi is played in the 'style of an upper class *gay*'. In an interview reported in *Berita Buana* (BBEM/NP 1988) the actor himself stresses the difficulties in playing the role, 'so out of character with my own identity'. Indeed such was his embarrassment at watching himself in the role of '*si bencong*', the actor is 'reported to have closed his eyes on seeing the film', also noting the 'psychological stress' (*tekanan batin*) in playing the role, which required three weeks of preparation, 'mainly observing the modelling world'. This report also stresses the heterosexuality of the actor by referring to his married status, as well as describing him with appropriately masculine adjectives such as 'handsome' (*ganteng*) and 'of suitable bearing' (*tampan*).

Cok Simbara's character has no love interest and unlike the case of Emon this is not a notable lack, but is in keeping with his supporting role within the narrative. Nonetheless, on two occasions within the film we become aware of an erotic desire which develops the character beyond a merely stereotypical effeminacy. These instances both occur in scenes when models are being readied for the catwalk. In each case the camera fixes in medium close-up shot on his gaze as he watches the models dress. We might presume that this look is aimed at his models, but on second watching it becomes possible that he is actually fixating on the camp and ostentatiously attired male assistants who are helping the models to dress. A parallel may be drawn with the pimp character in Ami Prijono's 1977 film *Jakarta Jakarta*, a masterly exploration of the emerging tensions between various elements of Jakarta society as the city underwent a period of rapid growth and development. That character, who has been variously described as *waria*, *banci* and *gay*, is certainly ambiguous. As well as dressing in a stereotypically showy way – a red silk shirt on one occasion, a blue silk shirt in a later scene – his performance is also revealing for the several markers more obviously suggestive of a transgender identity: his occasionally nasal voice, wit at punning, wearing of a string of (fake) pearls and a side-saddle mode of riding pillion on a motorbike. However, while that character exclaims his desire for the very masculine lead of the film (played by El Manik), Hadi's gaze in *Terang Bulan di Tengah Hari* fixes on effeminate men, breaking the suggestion of transgender desire for the other, but rather suggestive of a homosexual desire for the same.

As the film develops, Hadi becomes an increasingly unsympathetic character, principally because of his plotting to bring Sora back into the world of modelling for his own financial gain and at the expense of her marriage. There is also the ambiguous question of his involvement in the activities of the criminal gang. He seems to be happy to see Sora's downfall and annoyed by the presence of Sora's child which limits her commitment to modelling. There is also one somewhat bizarre scene in which he is caught in a cupboard with a female model. While seemingly out of character this should probably be interpreted as another indication of his unsavoury character and his tendency to exploit his models. Finally, we cannot help but notice that there is no happy ending for Hadi. While he is not the only bad character in the film – there are others far worse – his death in the mysterious accident is just one of a number of untimely ends to which *gay* or *lesbi* characters are subjected in the history of Indonesian cinema.

The range of labels applied by contemporary reports to Emon and Hadi indicates a significant fluidity in the usage of the existing categories. This is probably indicative of still developing notions of the meaning of the relatively new word *gay* and a tendency from some critics to include alternative expressions of sexuality within those categories traditionally used to indicate gender transgression, particularly when used pejoratively. While Eddy Iskandar's understanding of the term *gay* was inclusive enough to also incorporate Vivian and the *waria* of the 1982 film *Mereka Memang Ada* ('They Indeed Exist', dir. Mardali Syarief), quite the reverse is true of other critics who defined Hadi and Emon with words generally indicative of gender rather than sexual transgression. However, in turning to

the third of those films apparently signifying a shift in attitudes towards the *gay* world, there is no doubt as to the subjectivity of the character who specifically identifies himself as *gay*. This is also the first Indonesian film to intentionally seek to engage with the modern *gay* Indonesian identity, not just in some fleeting or superficial way, but by foregrounding the dilemmas and difficulties which were imagined to be faced by middle class *gay* Jakartans in the late 1980s.

Istana Kecantikan

Of all the films with a *gay* or *lesbi* theme produced during the New Order, *Istana Kecantikan* is best remembered and most frequently referred to in discussions of the history of the representation of alternative sexualities in Indonesian cinema (e.g. Anwar 2005; Ellis 2005; Fui 2012; Maimunah 2011; Widjaya 2007). While in 1988 the Indonesian journalist and novelist Eddy Iskandar saw the release of *Istana Kecantikan* as evidence of a shift in Indonesian attitudes towards homosexuality, later Indonesian commentators have remembered the film as an example of negative portrayals which somehow typified the New Order period generally. This changing attitude to the film is probably indicative of ever more tolerant views, at least among those writing on film, and the wider circulation of knowledge regarding the range of possible constructions of alternate sexual identities in Western, Asian and Latin American cinemas. However, the ambivalence which is highlighted by an analysis of the history of responses and critiques of the film is also testimony to the fact that *Istana Kecantikan* is a complex film which lends itself to a variety of readings. It is this somewhat contradictory construction of the *gay* character in the film with which I will be primarily concerned in the remaining part of this chapter. Analysis of *Istana Kecantikan* will also draw on Asrul Sani's original script, which underwent significant changes during filming and censorship. It will also be useful to draw on a number of journalistic reports and interviews in order to understand the evolving responses to the film.

Istana Kecantikan can be briefly summarized as the story of Nico, a self-identified *gay* man under pressure from his family to marry, who decides to wed Siska, a woman pregnant from an affair with a married colleague. Despite the marriage and the birth of the child, rumours circulate at Nico's work place regarding his homosexuality. He resigns and opens a beauty salon. One stormy night Siska finds Nico in bed with Toni, one of the male hairdressers. Arguments and a struggle ensue but the couple pledge to go on with their marriage. The marriage continues for a number of years, until Nico discovers Siska in bed with Toni, his previous lover.⁹ Nico chases his wife with a knife but accidentally stabs Toni, who dies in his arms. The film closes with Nico behind bars.

Anyone reading this brief outline of *Istana Kecantikan* would come to the conclusion that its representation of the *gay* subject position is far from positive. It seems to conform to many of the stereotypical cinematic depictions of homosexuality including the lonely young man, a desperate sense of impending tragedy, an unspeakable love that can only be resolved by death and the implied link between homosexuality and criminality. Nonetheless, a detailed analysis of the



Figure 3.3 Film poster for *Istana Kecantikan*. Nico and Toni are in the still centre bottom. All other stills are of Nico and Siska (Sinematek)

film reveals a far more nuanced directorial approach, and while the incarceration of Nico can hardly be seen as a positive end to the narrative, many other aspects of the film cast the central character and his sexuality in a far more thoughtful light. In addition to these questions of how pessimistic or otherwise the film's depiction of homosexuality is deemed to be, it provides fascinating visual evidence of some of the debates, concerns and sympathies towards the *gay* subject position which were manifesting in late 1980s Indonesia.

The first half of the film follows Nico as he moves between three distinct worlds: the secretive *gay* world; the domestic, as signified by his relationship with parents and sister, and the world of work in which these two other spheres collide. The film's opening scene is located firmly in the *gay* world, leaving the audience in no doubt as to the central place which the theme of homosexuality will occupy in the film. In a scene which was not only revolutionary for its time but which continues to stand out against the majority of mainstream images produced since the fall of the New Order, we are introduced to Nico as he accompanies a friend to a 'wedding' party exclusively for *gay* men.¹⁰ While shadowy images of men dancing together provide visual clues that this is not a *normal* party, the audience is left in no doubt as to what they are seeing when the somewhat naive Nico asks his friend of a certain individual, 'is he *gay*?' (*dia gay?*). The more knowing friend replies, 'there is no one at the party who is not *gay*' (*di sini tidak ada yang bukan*

gay). Thus in these opening minutes, with what is probably Indonesian cinema's first use of the word *gay*, the lead character is established as a *gay* man, albeit somewhat insecure in his identity and still finding his place in the *gay* world.

A comparison of this scene with the original script shows that a great deal has been either deleted before or during production, or censored by the authorities. In addition to removing images of men holding hands and kissing, the actual 'wedding ceremony' between Ben and Teo, complete with recitation of a love poem, exchange of kisses and cutting of cake, was dropped. Rizal Iwan has argued that this loss of the wedding scene discredits the *gay* community, by reinforcing the notion that they are only interested in one night stands as opposed to long-term commitment (Suyono *et al.* 2003). While the actor Mathias Muchus maintains that the meaning or narrative flow was not lost as a result of censorship (private interview, 7 April 2006), the exact significance of the 'event' would surely have been lost on most audiences and the notion of *gay* commitment is all but excised from the film.¹¹

In addition to establishing Nico's *gay* identity, this opening scene introduces two of the movie's central themes. First, Nico's friend describes his dislike for a certain individual due to his being a hypocrite (*munafik*). Boellstorff (2005: 214–15) has noted the frequency with which his *gay* interlocutors raise the concept of hypocrisy, generally in relation to notions of authenticity. He points out the common use of this concept when reflecting on relationships, desire, heterosexual marriage and movement between the *gay* and *normal* worlds. The inclusion of this theme in the film might be judged to be based on knowledge of Indonesia's *gay* world. On this occasion, the idea of hypocrisy surrounds a particular man's failure to use his real name. The concept of hypocrisy returns again as a subject of discussion when Nico considers his options with a friend midway through the film. His friend tells him that he has the choice of admitting his homosexuality to his parents, or getting married and thus surrendering to hypocrisy. We may judge that it is this failure to be true to his authentic self which leads to his eventual downfall. The second key idea which resonates throughout the film and is strengthened with the cutting of the display of commitment between Ben and Teo, is the inevitable loneliness and sadness of *gay* men. This is illustrated when an older man is pushed to the floor as he attempts to put his arm around a younger man. Later that night, this older man gives Nico a lift home and pours out his frustration that 'in the *gay* world there is no place for those who are old and ugly'. Nico is clearly disturbed by his new friend's outpourings and tries to comfort him. He does not however dispute his older companion's pessimism and a sense of foreboding for the rest of the film is established. In invoking this future of loneliness as a consequence of not complying with the New Order's expectations of reproductive heterosexual marriage, we can understand Nico's eventual decision to marry, in the face of parental pressure to which he eventually succumbs.

In the following scene, as Nico leaves the *gay* world and re-enters the *normal* world, we are introduced to his family and the essential problem around which the narrative will revolve. Not only is his family oblivious to the fact that Nico is *gay*, but there is also immense pressure for him to meet the expectations placed on any

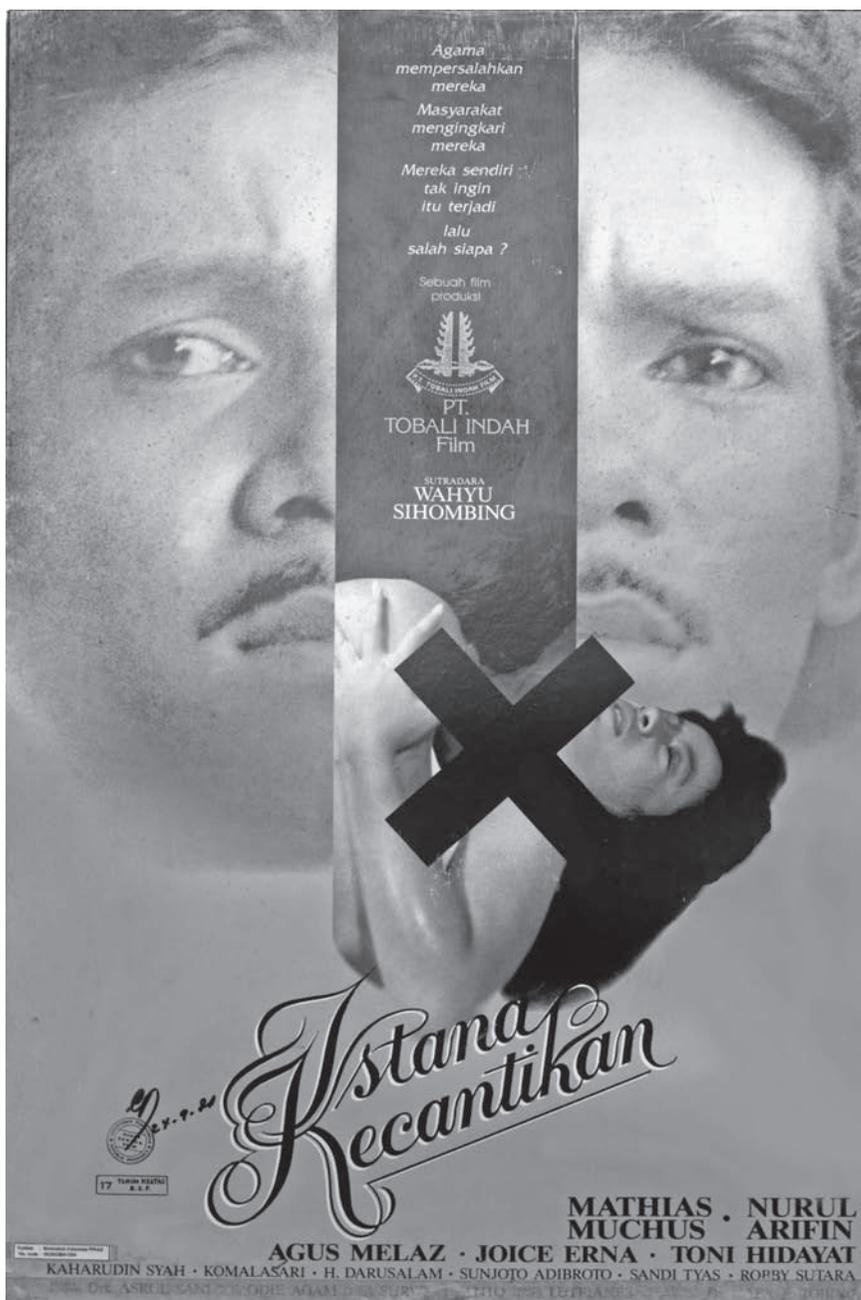


Figure 3.4 Film poster for *Istana Kecantikan*. The tagline translates ‘Religion blames them. Society rejects them. They themselves do not want it to happen. So whose fault is it?’ (Sinematek)

Indonesian son: to be heterosexually married and to produce a grandchild. Nico's mother is concerned that he is staying out until the early hours and her husband delights in her apparent innocence and his son's imagined virility: 'Where else could he be but out wooing the ladies.' There is no hint here that his father's confidence in his son's heterosexuality contrasts with a mother's doubt – the couple is blissfully confident in their heteronormative certainties. The juxtaposition with the previous scene perfectly establishes Nico's turmoil as he moves between two apparently incompatible worlds.

The next key scene takes us to the third aspect of Nico's life, that of work. It is here that Nico's essentially likeable and sympathetic nature is established. He is shown to be on good terms with many of his colleagues. He chats with the lift attendant who thanks Nico for the present he gave to his child. His female colleagues seem to be quite enchanted by him; one secretary presents Nico with a flower she has grown especially for him. Perhaps we should notice that he is overly thrilled by the beauty of the flower rather than the beauty of the secretary, but as a whole the scene constructs the image of a kind and diligent employee who is liked and respected by his colleagues. As one staff member suggests, he is clearly destined for a high position. Or at least he should be. As the scene closes, the fragility of his position is emphasized with the introduction of his sister Tuti into the narrative. She phones him at work to find out when he will be getting married, stressing the expectation of his parents, and the long pensive close-up on Nico highlights the impossible situation in which he finds himself.

When Tuti confronts her brother again, this time at home, Nico is forced to be truthful to his sister in explaining why he is in no hurry to marry. He declares, 'I cannot marry a woman. I am *gay*'. Tuti is at first horrified, and her immediate reaction is to refute her brother's words, 'That is a lie, it's not possible, it can't be.' However after this initial shock, Tuti is compassionate and certainly does not reject her brother. While she tries to persuade Nico that his homosexuality is all in his head, her brother makes a strong and emotional declaration of his subjectivity. Prompted by her question of how long he has been *gay*, he states, 'Since I was born. I don't like women. I've already been to a psychiatrist, I am not sick. I am different. I didn't want to be born like this.' In a tradition established in *Akulah Vivian* this scene undoubtedly serves the didactic purpose of informing the audience, using Tuti's doubts and questions to strengthen the film's ideological contention that Nico's subjectivity is neither a psychological disorder¹² nor, as implied in the statement that he did not want to be born *gay*, is it something caused by environmental factors. These ideas are further strengthened and legitimized in a unique scene between Nico and his psychiatrist.

While Nico's mother seems unaware of her son's *gay* identity, we are later invited to question whether her relationship with her son is not actually based on denial. For while Nico and Tuti are having an emotionally charged discussion in his bedroom, with Nico shouting out to his sister that he is *gay*, his mother is on the other side of the door in the hallway. She is clearly concerned at the raised voices, to the extent that she asks through the closed door what is going on, but she is perhaps too easily put at ease. Can it really be that the mother has no idea

of her son's sexuality, or that she did not hear Nico finally speak the truth to his sister? She should perhaps be seen as a woman more concerned with perceived family and societal obligations and duties than the realities of what is going on around her. Rather than face confrontation she would prefer to see her son married and siring the grandchildren that this arrangement should inevitably produce.

While there is no doubt that Nico's relations and performance at work are apparently good, the receipt of an anonymous letter by his boss makes his position untenable. Called into the office by his employer, the picture of the then president Suharto stares down from the wall, and it is on the grounds of propriety that Nico's boss confronts his employee. He tries hard to explain that it is not a personal issue, but rather that business requires a certain behaviour and morality. Although the boss tells Nico that it is not necessary to resign, he nonetheless makes the decision to leave his job, and to establish his own business instead, a beauty salon that he names 'The Palace of Beauty'.

In this official setting, under the watchful gaze of the president, it seems that the voice of the Indonesian nation is speaking, refusing any longer to allow a blind eye to be turned at Nico's sexuality. Interestingly, while I was watching this film in focus groups and with a number of individual Indonesians, no one referred to the portrait of Suharto. Perhaps we should simply see the inclusion of the presidential portrait as an essential component in establishing the authenticity of the *mise-en-scène* of New Order public space. However, the inclusion of Suharto's image surely also opens up the possibility of a veiled critique on the intrusiveness of the state into the private lives of its individuals.

Given the professional predicament in which he finds himself, it is no surprise that on leaving his employer Nico chooses to open his own business, thus detaching himself from the heteronormativity of the middle class office. Of all the possible business opportunities, he chooses the one most plainly associated in the Indonesian mind with *waria* and *gay* men. Indeed as Boellstorff has commented, salons are 'an important venue by which knowledge of the *gay* world crosses, however fitfully, into Indonesian popular culture' (Boellstorff 2005: 137). Thus in developing Nico's story the film is certainly doing nothing here to challenge stereotypes. Or perhaps we should see this as recognition of the limited choices available to Nico, as the most obvious professional space which allows *gay* men to temporarily free themselves from the heteronormative judgements of society.

While the audience has been aware of Nico's sexuality almost from the beginning of the film, it is his wife's discovery of Nico in bed with Toni, one of the male hairdressers, which provides one of the most dramatic moments within the film. While the disjointed soundtrack affords clear evidence that the scene was censored, it remains one of the most audacious scenes, albeit far from erotic, in the history of Indonesian cinematic representations of *gay* men. When after several months of marriage, during which time she fails to arouse Nico sexually, Siska later finds Nico in bed with Toni, her first reaction is one of revulsion and shock. She calls the male lover a 'pig' and screams at Nico that she is 'disgusted' (*jijik*). In a scene loaded with typical Indonesian cinematic motifs, rain and thunder hint at the ensuing disaster. As The Palace of Beauty's sign comes crashing

down Nico chases the crazed woman around the salon. Siska grabs a knife as if she is going to kill someone. But then she collapses and Nico puts her to bed. Describing himself as ‘vile’ (*busuk*) and ‘*homo*’ he admits his deception. The two then hug and make up, saying that they will stay together and Nico declares that he will be a good father.

Thus like Tuti, after a period of initial shock Siska is reconciled to the truth, which she then chooses to ignore in pursuit of an ideal marriage which she surely knows is doomed to failure. The encounter clearly has an effect on Nico – soon after he makes his visit to the psychiatrist where current thinking and research on homosexuality are explained for the audience’s benefit. The medical expert clarifies that Nico likes his own gender more than the opposite gender and that there is no scientific explanation offered for this. Neither is there any medicine to cure the problem, and the tendency will always arise. The psychiatrist then pronounces to the clearly devastated Nico that according to various studies, Nico is of the type who can be categorized ‘one hundred percent homosexual’.¹³

The film’s depiction of the central conflict of familial pressure to marry against Nico’s desire to live his life free from hypocrisy is an interesting one, particularly when we consider much of the ethnographic data on Indonesian gay men’s attitudes to marriage during the late New Order period. Tom Boellstorff has argued that it is through marriage and having children that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians show their proper citizenship of the modern Indonesian nation. While recognizing that there is a minority of *gay* men who choose not to marry,



Figure 3.5 Production still from *Istana Kecantikan*. Nico and Siska in bed (Sinematek)

for most *gay* men the failure to love heterosexually and thus to enter into heterosexual marriage is seen as a failure of self and citizenship (2005: 107). The construction of Nico is somewhat at odds with this pattern and it might be argued that the problem on which the film turns is more of a heterosexual fantasy of what it is to be *gay* in Indonesia than a reflection of an attempt to engage with the experiences of the majority of *gay* Indonesians. Nico is represented as dreading marriage. It is only his inability to tell the truth to his parents, and perhaps also the fear of being alone in old age, that force him to reconsider. Once married he is unable to reciprocate the amorous desires of his wife. Despite Tuti's prediction, the ready availability of a willing female partner does not alter or 'normalize' Nico's sexuality. There is no echoing of Boellstorff's observation that *gay* Indonesian men commonly father children (2005: 109–25). Instead, *Istana Kecantikan* portrays its *gay* lead as unable to perform such a masculine and *normal* role. Thus, rather than demonstrating any sense of development of a heightened sense of citizenship, the only positive outcomes for Nico in marrying are the opportunity to free himself from parental pressure and the close personal bond he develops with the child.

While we may note a disjuncture between the ethnographic data and a basis for the choices and decisions which Nico makes in the film, there is no doubt that the cinematic narrative is one intended to invoke audiences' sympathies. The film can be read as a powerful critique of family life and of the heteronormative demands placed on Indonesian citizens. We may choose to read Nico as a weak character, for being unable to resist the demands of his parents and for his hypocrisy in agreeing to enter into a doomed marriage. However, we might also see Nico's parents and his sister as ultimately responsible for the disaster which befalls Nico. It is their unwillingness or inability to prioritize the real needs of their son and brother respectively over the idealized and ultimately empty ideals of the New Order family which pre-empt the catastrophic chain of events leading to Toni's death and Nico's incarceration.

The remainder of the film shows the decline in the relationship between Nico and Siska, as they both realize that the lie they are trying to live is impossible. Then, presumably because of the hollowness of the marriage, Siska attempts suicide, only to be prevented from doing so by Nico. As a consequence, Nico allows his wife to resume relations with her previous lover Sumitro.¹⁴ From that point it seems that there is no holding Siska back, as she then embarks on an affair with Toni, Nico's former lover. Finally, she tells Nico that she wishes to separate and he is content. A heated argument after he finds Siska and Toni in bed together pushes him over the edge, and in what is almost a reverse of the earlier scene he grabs a knife and chases his wife throughout the house. However, on this occasion Nico does not calm down or collapse in exhaustion as his wife did before, but accidentally stabs the man who has been both his and his wife's lover. Clearly distraught, Nico holds his former lover's head as he dies in his lap.

It is the memory of this ending which dominates the film and its subsequent critical history. The audience remembers that the *gay* man ends up in jail, and film history remembers *Istana Kecantikan* as one more film which pathologizes

gay men. However, it is not his homosexuality but rather the accidental killing of his former lover that brings about his imprisonment. Furthermore the actual spark that causes him to lose control is Siska's threat to take away the child. Toni urges her to be calm, but Siska's frustrations boil over, and the violent chase ensues. Nico's sense of despair is only added to by Toni's declaration that he is a real man, hence his relationship with Siska and rejection of Nico. Thus it is not the idea of his wife having an affair that provokes the desperate chase round the house – he has already agreed to a separation – it is the double threat of losing his child and his (former) lover that is more than he can bear. Thus as he shouts at his wife, 'You are taking away everything that I have', the horror of the older *gay* man's loneliness established in the film's opening returns to haunt Nico's thoughts.

It may be that we should interpret Nico's emotional outburst as some sort of weakness or even pathologization linked to his homosexuality. In mirroring the earlier behaviour of his wife, he is also mimicking the performance of the feminine. Perhaps we should understand that this weakness, this inability to control his emotions, is linked to his homosexuality – the mental stress of the situation pushes Nico into a position where he commits murder. Or from another perspective, to be *gay* is to be unstable, crazy and dangerous. Despite Nico being constructed throughout the film as a sympathetic character, it seems the director considered that he had no choice but to finally incarcerate him. Was it felt that the *gay* character had to be shown as dangerous and crazy, regardless of the fact that there had been little hint of this in the movie generally? There would after all have been the perfect opportunity to voice such an idea in the appointment with the psychiatrist. Perhaps we should see the film as flawed by its ending, with no forewarning of Nico's final murderous behaviour. More likely is that the film's deficiencies result from the regime of censorship which would never have allowed the survival of a *gay* lead character. Indeed, when it was originally shown, the film was followed by a written warning of the dangers of homosexuality, as demanded by the state censorship board (Suyono *et al.* 2003).¹⁵

While 'The Palace of Beauty' is certainly not a positive portrayal of *gay* life in Indonesia, it is more nuanced than has been suggested. The fact that a film dealing exclusively and centrally with this topic was even made, should be seen as a reflection of the emerging public discourse regarding *gay* culture in Indonesia in the 1980s. Nico does not end up in prison because of his homosexuality but rather because he accidentally killed someone. While there is a hint that Nico is somewhat unbalanced in that final scene, this is not a film that overtly casts homosexuality as wrong and wicked. Nico is shown as a kind and loving father, a diligent employee, and a respectful and dutiful son and brother. Attitudes towards him are rarely hostile, with the only real aggression in the form of the anonymous letter sent to his boss. The initial shock of his wife and sister soon reverts to love, though neither are able to truly understand Nico's subjectivity and his emotional needs. Even in that climactic final scene, his wife's anger seems to be more about her lack of sexual fulfilment than any disdain for or revulsion at Nico. Most importantly, the scientific opinions offered by the psychiatrist do not

go against Nico's own understanding and explanation of his sexuality. In some respects marriage is a source of happiness for Nico, principally because it brings acceptance from his family and the opportunity for fatherhood. Nonetheless, the position of hypocrisy which Nico is forced into results in a relationship which is false or inauthentic and therefore doomed to failure.

It is worth recalling that in Asrul Sani's original screenplay, the character of Nico actually makes an impassioned speech at the end of the film in a voice-over while a guard walks away from his locked cell. In that speech, Nico accuses the whole of Indonesian society, including the sentencing judge, of having forced him into the predicament he finds himself:

I am not a killer, Your Honour. I am a father who loves his son, his parents, and everyone around him. That killing happened because the whole of my life has been a deceit. Not because I wished to be deceitful, but because everyone forced me to behave like that, the whole of society, including you, Your Honour.

(Sani n.d.: 69)

It is no surprise that it did not make it to the final version of the film – such criticism of the state would not have been allowed. But certainly these words further emphasize the intent of the scriptwriter and filmmakers, even though in losing the scene the overt nature of the critique is somewhat lost.

I have argued elsewhere (Murtagh 2011a) that when considering strategies used by Indonesian audiences to negotiate meanings of films we must make allowance for knowledge of New Order codes of censorship. With respect to *Istana Kecantikan*, we should be open to the possibility that contemporary audiences ignored the tragic ending of the film to focus instead on Nico as a sympathetic character dragooned into a terrible predicament. As Krishna Sen has argued of the impact of censorship on the ending of Indonesian films:

... how a story ends is very important to Indonesian films, because of the way censorship operates. Time and again the Board of Censorship has dictated the final sequences of films to ensure 'morally correct' (read politically convenient) interpretations. The rules and conventions about endings operate as both constraint and contingency. A film can contain (in the sense of both carrying and limiting) contentious images and ideas, as long as it achieves the 'correct' conclusion. And audiences, aware of such conventions, can read the film without or against its narrative closure.

(1991)

Certainly, my research with *gay* and *waria* focus groups highlighted the possibility that sexual/gender minority audiences may well be inclined to focus on those aspects of the film which are not simply more positive, but also more meaningful to their lived experiences (Murtagh 2011a).

Responses to *Istana Kecantikan*

Istana Kecantikan was nominated for Best Film in the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival, and the actor Mathias Muchus won the Citra for Best Leading Man for his portrayal of the film's gay protagonist Nico. Although the film attracted a fair degree of attention in the Indonesian media at the time, it was somewhat eclipsed by Eros Djarot's 1988 film based on the life of the Acehnese heroine *Tjoet Nja' Dhien*. Many of the media reports focused on the skills of the already well-known actor, Mathias Muchus, in his convincing portrayal of a *gay* man (e.g. Darsono 1988), and the fact that a *gay* storyline was so prominent in an Indonesian film. Particularly relevant, given my analysis of Nico as a sympathetic character, is a report carried in *Merdeka Minggu* (Julia 1988) which was of the opinion that while Mathias Muchus' acting was not particularly strong, he might well win the best acting award as a result of the festival jury's sympathy for Nico's fate. The article went on to suggest that audiences would feel that an 'injustice' was done both to Nico and also to the *gay* community who 'often lose out' due to 'pressure from society'. Interestingly, the censors are praised in that report for permitting an 'open-ending' which allowed debate, rather than its normal request for an ending which championed that which is right (*benar*) (Julia 1988). Presumably, what is meant here is that the censors did not demand that Nico be imprisoned specifically because of his homosexuality. In common with so many of the other articles of the time, and markedly different from those reports on *Istana Kecantikan* which have been published since the rebirth of Indonesian cinema post-1998, the fact that Nico ended up in prison is not singled out as a reason for regret.

Istana Kecantikan was screened in the National Film Campaign (Kampanye Film Nasional) on 27 October 1988 at the Pusat Perfilman H. Usmar Ismail, Jakarta, as an entry in the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival. Following the screening a discussion was held with the audience, where university students and members of the public asked questions of the director Wahyu Sihombing and the lead actors Mathias Muchus, who played Nico, and Nurul Arifin who played Siska. Contemporary accounts of that discussion report a packed event with a variety of responses to the film (e.g. Martha 1988; Z.A 1988). Perhaps most intriguing are reports of protests from one man who identified himself as having 'formerly been *gay*' (*seorang bekas gay*) but who was now 'healed' (*sudah sembuh*), and questioned why the '*gay* community' (*kaum gay*) had been 'cornered' (*dipojokkan*) through the making of the film (Martha 1988). The director's response was that he had made the film out of sympathy with *gay* life, reportedly saying 'I wanted to reveal it [*gay* life], not to make things difficult for them' (Et/Bon 1988). While one member of the audience had been so touched that he/she reported having been brought to tears by the film, another participant in the discussion stated that he/she felt it was wrong that the film had intentionally sought to bring the *gay* world to the attention of society at large (Martha 1988). This last concern regarding the potentially damaging result of bringing knowledge of the *gay* world to a wider audience was also raised by Herling T (1988) in a report in *Harian Jayakarta*. While recognizing the performance of Mathias Muchus as being in with a chance

of a prize ‘as long as the political problem of supporting the legitimization of the life of *gay* people is put to one side’, the writer contended that Nurul Arifin did not deserve a prize, given her vulgar performance, and likewise that the director Wahyu Sihombing should be denied an award for allowing the vulgarity. The report also expressed concerns regarding the controversial theme of the film, and the possibility that bestowing honours on it would have the effect of legitimizing homosexuality, despite the fact that a ‘life style like that’ was still considered proscribed in Indonesia.

Critical responses to this film have changed significantly in recent years. With the release of *Arisan!* (*The Gathering*, dir. Nia Dinata) in 2003 (see [Chapter 5](#)), a number of critics briefly summarized their understanding of the history of the representation of homosexuality in Indonesian cinema as a preamble to their invariably enthusiastic reviews of the new film. The general argument was that previously non-normative sexualities had always been treated negatively (e.g. Djuhari 2004; Asmarani 2004), and *Istana Kecantikan* was often mentioned as the main culprit, principally because the *gay* protagonist ends up in prison. The co-screenwriter of *Arisan!*, Joko Anwar, perhaps wanting to stress the importance and groundbreaking nature of his latest film venture *Janji Joni* (*Joni's Promise*, 2005) (also discussed in [Chapter 5](#)), noted the pessimistic portrayals of homosexuality in *Istana Kecantikan*, arguing that it showed *gay* life as one of suffering and craziness (Anwar 2005). Another prominent Indonesian, in an off-the-cuff remark, recently described its ‘horrible ending’ as a warning on the dangers of homosexuality, and claimed it was a very negative film. This perception has also been absorbed into some academic writing as demonstrated by Justin Ellis’s article (2005) on the *gay* scene in Jakarta in which *Istana Kecantikan* is associated with a cycle of ‘pathological *gay*’ characters in Indonesian cinema. Nonetheless, when I watched this film with focus groups in 2008 the vast majority of *gay* and *waria* participants found the film meaningful to their lives. Remembering Sen’s point about the possibility that audiences might ‘experiment with form and meaning to get around the spirit of the censors’ (1994: 71), I found that the *gay* and *waria* participants paid little attention to the ending of the film, an obvious moment in the film where filmmakers had to anticipate or respond to the censors’ demands. The negotiation of the film’s conclusion resulted in a more affirming and self-validatory viewing. This contrasted with the more film literate *lesbi* group who were not only less likely to resist the film’s ending but focused on the predicament of Nico’s wife Siska as a woman who had no choice but to enter into a loveless marriage, an issue in the film universally neglected by critics both contemporary and retrospective (Murtagh 2011a: 409).

Conclusion

The discussion of these films from the 1980s shows a range of divergent voices in the cinematic uses and imaginings of male homosexuality in Indonesia. In *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* and *Remaja di Lampu Merah* male homosexuality is used variously to signify moral decline, a threat to the idealized family, a foreign

permissive behaviour which threatens Indonesian religious and moral values, and a threat to Indonesian youth. While in neither of these films is same-sex male desire actually verbalized into a *gay* identity or something equivalent, in the case of Stephen, the Australian–Indonesian older man in *Remaja di Lampu Merah*, there is little doubt that he is constructed as possessing a subjectivity which is clearly open to such interpretation.

There is little scope for reading these representations of homosexuality – or at least homosexual acts – from the early 1980s as anything but negative. However, the very fact that homosexuality was being used as such a signifier in mainstream cinema is a clear indication of the emergence of homosexuality alongside the already well-known *waria* subject position into Indonesian public discourse. That one of these films sees homosexuality as a threat originating from outside is not particularly surprising given that much of the media attention that male homosexuality was beginning to attract in this period was also focused on gay news stories from abroad, including reports of gay storylines in foreign films. So too, it is perhaps unsurprising that as the country grappled with ambivalent attitudes to the impact of modernity on its youth, homosexuality was imagined to threaten the younger generation in particular. Certainly, the disparate age difference between the couples in both films, together with the unequal power relationships, constructs the partnerships as based on exploitation and victimhood which may well stray into suggestions of inappropriate adult–child relations. At least in the case of *Remaja di Lampu Merah* however, there is no suggestion that Andri is too young to pursue a non-sexual romance with a female. As such we should read the fears regarding his homosexual behaviour as related to perceived threats to his masculinity, and his future as an adult male citizen. While it is appropriate for males of his age to engage in relationships and romances with females, to do so with males can only be imagined to occur in the situation of exploitation.

Against the backdrop of these earlier films, the production of *Istana Kecantikan* in particular, but also *Catatan Si Boy* and *Terang Bulan di Tengah Hari* represents a marked shift in popular cinematic portrayals of male homosexuality. As noted, the construction and public reception of the characters of interest in these films is complex and open to various interpretations. However, this evidence of multiple readings should probably be seen as indicative of shifts in public discourse generally and a developing willingness and desire (by some) to engage with marginalized sexualities in film, even if such representations have received retrospective criticism.

Of all the characters discussed in the first half of this book, Emon is perhaps the most enduring. The character is still remembered by many Indonesians and, more importantly, with affection. The actor Didi Petet remains a popular figure in Indonesian television and film and one who will be forever linked with that character. Nonetheless, in terms of its serious engagement with predicament of *gay* men in Indonesian society it is *Istana Kecantikan* which stands out and continues to serve as a reference point for present-day commentators on the Indonesian film industry. The complexity of the film presents possibilities for various readings, though more recently critics have tended to highlight a perceived darkness

in the construction of the central character Nico. In addition to my argument that the film should be seen as more nuanced than that, particularly given the codes of censorship within which the filmmakers were working, we should bear in mind the contemporary responses to the film. On the one hand, some commentators expressed concern that engagement with homosexuality in Indonesian cinema might legitimize what they argued was taboo and unacceptable to most Indonesians. Many, however, welcomed the film's brave attempt to deal with a difficult subject. Most intriguing of all, and perhaps easy to forget or dismiss a generation after its release, is the discussion that the film provoked at the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival itself. Records of the debate show that the film encouraged *gay* men (or men who 'used to be *gay*') to speak openly about their lives and those of other *gay* men in a public, and it seems friendly, space. We can only guess at the number of other unrecorded conversations among *gay* men and about *gay* men provoked by a viewing of the film.

The release of *Istana Kecantikan*, together with the creation of the characters of Hadi and Emon in *Terang Bulan di Tengah Hari* and *Catatan Si Boy*, also led to the posing of questions such as the one with which this chapter opened. In retrospect it was too early to be suggesting that a time had come when Indonesian *gay* men were no longer ashamed or unafraid to speak about their lives in public. But the very fact that such a question was being asked is indicative of a huge shift, at least among certain sections of the metropolitan population, in terms of a willingness to engage with and accept the existence of alternative subjectivities, not just based on gender, but also determined by sexuality.

The next chapter, which moves into the 1990s, will principally focus on the *lesbi* subject position at a time when production values and markets for Indonesian cinema were entering into something of a decline. While the *lesbi* subject position tended to dominate over representations of *gay* identities in the early part of that decade, perhaps as a result of the perceived erotic potential of female same-sex behaviour, *gay* characters did not disappear altogether. As the *lesbi* position was subjected to cinematic scrutiny as part of a more general concern about the threats posed to female sexuality by modernity, it is interesting to note that *gay* male identities show signs of further normalization within the Indonesian cinematic tradition.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this chapter first appeared in Murtagh (2006; 2011a)
- 2 According to Kristanto's catalogue the 1977 film *Tinggal Bersama* ('Living Together', dir. Bay Isbahi) included a minor character who was '*homoseks*', though unfortunately I have not been able to see this film. Kristanto's synopsis of the film is as follows:
Roy Handoko, who works in advertising, meets with his former girlfriend, Kiki a secretary. That meeting gives rise to an agreement to marry in secret, because Roy still wants to live a free life and he promises not to have children straightaway. Kiki agrees because it would disturb her work. Their marriage is shaken somewhat when the director at Kiki's workplace proposes to her as a result of pressure from his

mother. He is forced to do this, because he is a homosexual. As a result of carelessness Kiki falls pregnant. Roy pressures her to have an abortion, but Kiki is resolute in not wanting to do this, until in the end Roy admits that the child is his. (Kristanto 2007: 168).

- 3 According to one report the film is based on the 'true story' of Andry S, which had previously been published in the women's magazine *Gadis* under the title 'Dilangit Masih Ada Bintang' (*Harian Terbit* 1980a).
- 4 As Blackwood notes, men were policed far less heavily than women, allowing for men to engage in extra-marital (hetero)sexual liaisons (2007: 296). It seems that this turning a blind eye probably also extended to liaisons between men, certainly before marriage, though with the shift to specific concerns related to non-normative sexuality there is arguably now less willingness to tolerate such behaviour.
- 5 El Manik, the actor who plays Stephen, is a popular Indonesian actor, from Bohorok, North Sumatra. His light skin and somewhat hirsute body contrast with the notably darker and smooth-skinned Rano Karno (Andri).
- 6 Didi Petet did not appear in the fourth instalment in the series, though was back again for the final one.
- 7 Even in *Bayar tapi Nyicil* however, Emon's identity is called into question within the diegesis. On one occasion, Emon's male competitors for the attention of the female lead call him a *bencong*, to which he answers that he is '200% male', inviting them to look first down the front and then the back of his swimming shorts as proof.
- 8 He does the same in a swimming pool scene in *Bayar tapi Nyicil*.
- 9 In a number of contemporary articles from 1988, the fact that Toni sleeps with both Nico and Siska is explained by the fact that he is 'bisex' or 'ACDC'.
- 10 This is not a celebration of a legally or religiously recognized wedding, but rather a mutually agreed partnering which seems to follow in the style of an event held in 1980 in Jakarta between two women, Bonnie and Jossie. That ceremony which was much reported at the time is cited by various *gay* men as the moment when they first remember the *gay* subject position entering into public discourse (Boellstorff 2005: 62–4).
- 11 The original script (Sani n.d.) was clearly extensively reworked and simplified before filming. Many of the changes result in a tighter and somewhat simpler script. While the final film is constructed as one long flashback which begins with a police car and an ambulance driving through Jakarta (presumably carrying Nico and Toni, respectively), the meaning of this flashback is somewhat lost until the end of the film. In the original script frequent recourse is made to Nico's account of events, thus embellishing the unfolding narrative through Nico's retrospective reflection on the circumstances which led to his incarceration.
- 12 Since January 1982 homosexuality is no longer considered a psychological disorder (Boellstorff 2005: 235, n.3).
- 13 This tendency to define the percentage to which one is *gay* has been conspicuous among many *gay* Indonesians I have spoken to during the course of my research.
- 14 This bedroom scene is another that appears to have been censored, as indicated by the disjointed soundtrack.
- 15 This 'warning' is not included in the VCD version on which my analysis is based.

4 *Lesbi* in the metropolis

Stories of sex and salvation in Indonesian cinema of the 1990s

The first half of the 1990s in Indonesian cinema is generally described as a period of decline. The film industry was confronted on one side by the growing power of the large cineplexes and increasing domination by foreign, particularly American, movies and on the other side by rising domestic ownership of televisions accompanied by the emergence of private television channels. The response by many involved in the domestic film industry was to resort to the production of films which have been noted for their lowbrow qualities (van Heeren 2009a: 20–1). While slapstick style comedies remained popular, many of the films produced during this era are notable for their relatively erotic content.¹

This period of Indonesian cinematic history remains largely unstudied, perhaps because of its perceived lowbrow nature. Nonetheless, the early 1990s saw the production of some of the most notable cinematic representations of lesbianism of the New Order period. One of these films, *Gadis Metropolis* ('Metropolitan Girls', dir. Slamet Riyadi, 1993),² will form the focus of this chapter, though the discussion of this film will be contextualized by discussing a number of other films with *lesbi* characters from the New Order period. In turning my attention to *Gadis Metropolis*, I wish to explore how an examination of both Western and Indonesian traditions of representing lesbians on the silver screen adds to our understanding of the portrayals of *lesbi* in that film. In considering my response to the film I also intend to draw on the works of Western academics who have proposed that apparently negative depictions of female homosexuality might simultaneously be empowering to some lesbian viewers. Furthermore, analysis of this film will be complemented by a discussion of contemporaneous press responses to the movie, in terms of the film's depiction of homosexuality and with regard to the place the film came to occupy in common perceptions of Indonesian cinema's tendency towards eroticism in the early 1990s.

Foretastes of female same-sex erotic desire in Indonesian cinema

Same-sex erotic behaviour between women is to be found in a number of New Order films which preceded *Gadis Metropolis*. Unfortunately, I have been unable to track down copies of a number of pertinent films, and we are therefore somewhat

reliant on scripts, synopses and posters to piece together the complete history. Earlier films of note include *Tiada Maaf Bagimu* ('There's No Forgiveness for You', dir. M Sharieffudin, 1971),³ *Jang Djatuh di Kaki Lelaki* ('Those Who Fall at Men's Feet', dir. Nico Pelamonia, 1971)⁴ and *Perawan-perawan* ('Virgins', dir. Ida Farida, 1981).⁵ Certainly it is notable that two of these films were made in the early 1970s, somewhat earlier than is normally recognized for the emergence of *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions in the Indonesian media, and they would undoubtedly merit academic attention, should copies become available. They apparently share several similarities with the films discussed in this chapter, in that non-normative identities are variously linked to wrong upbringing, trauma and downfall as a result of the violent or inappropriate behaviour of men.

A brief but telling glimpse of same-sex erotic behaviour between women is to be found in Chaerul Umam's 1982 film *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* (*The Narrow Bridge*). In that film, Suleha, the wife of the corrupt and immoral Pak Harun, the wealthiest man in the village, is shown to turn her sexual attentions elsewhere as a result of her husband's interest in a younger and somewhat simple man. When the hero Ibrahim rejects her advances, one short scene is structured to reinforce firmly the sense of her degraded sexual morality. Not only does she lust after the devout and decent Ibrahim, she also secretly enjoys sexual relations with her maid.

First, Suleha is shown complaining of a headache and calling her maid to massage her temples before the film cuts to images of her husband jesting around with his young companion outside the house, pulling him towards his lap and patting his buttocks. The film then cuts back to a close-up of Suleha grasping her maid's hands and drawing them down towards her breasts. Suleha closes her eyes and seems to lose consciousness in sexual bliss as she caresses her maid's hands and moistens her lips before the camera cuts to her maid's face; closing her eyes and looking to the side, she too is seemingly absorbed in her own erotic pleasure.

The scenes showing both Pak Harun and Suleha engaging in such wayward sexual behaviour clearly accentuate the moral void at the heart of Pak Harun's household. However, there is also an important difference in their particular motivations, which is indicative of differing Indonesian constructions of male and female sexuality more generally. While Pak Harun chose to reject his wife and follow instead his homosexual desire, Suleha only turned to homosexuality in the face of rejection by two different men. In another sequence towards the end of the film, images of Suleha pleasuring herself are juxtaposed with a close-up of Ibrahim and scenes of her husband japing around with his younger companion, again highlighting the central position of men in constructing women's erotic motivations. As will become clear below, this notion of women 'becoming' *lesbi*, and succumbing to non-normative sexual passion as a result of rejection, and even mistreatment, by men has clear resonances with representations of female desire in *Gadis Metropolis*.

A very different perspective on erotic attraction between women is offered – albeit elusively – in the third film of the *Si Boy* series, *Catatan Si Boy III* ('Boy's Diary III', dir. Nasri Cheppy, 1990). In one scene, the tomboyish Sheila makes



Figure 4.1 Production still from *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*. Suleha and Pak Harun (Sinematek)

a pass at Vera, Boy's girlfriend. Sheila's advances, as the two sit side by side on the beach with only a can of Pepsi between them, is brief and rebuffed by Vera. Nonetheless, the film does not reject Sheila (nor her sexuality) outright. As Krishna Sen (1991) has pointed out, at the end of the film Vera and Boy plan to set up their camp male friend Emon with Sheila 'because they are both just a bit off'. Sen makes the important argument that the 'unending' nature of the *Si Boy* series enabled the directors to avoid full closure at the conclusion of each movie, thereby evading the censors' demands for a morally correct ending. Thus, she argues, homosexuality was shown not as an aberration, but rather as just another aspect of sexuality (Sen 1991).⁶ This ambivalent attitude towards female homosexuality stands in contrast to *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*. *Catatan Si Boy III* does not judge female homosexuality to be overtly wrong, even if Sheila's flirting is repelled. Rather, there is a brief hint of tolerance from the main characters in the film, although both Emon and Sheila, notable for their male effeminacy and female masculinity respectively, seem to be marked as different as much for their gender identities as for their alternative sexualities.

These two films contain attitudes and ideas regarding female homosexuality which resonate throughout later portrayals of lesbianism in Indonesian cinema. On the one hand, there was an inability to imagine female same-sex eroticism as anything other than a threat to the state and to the moral order of society. On the other hand, there was the beginning of a wish to engage with these conceptions of

sexuality which had entered into public discourse only relatively recently, while nonetheless exhibiting an ambivalence towards notions of female desire outside of the male orbit of authority and control. It was the 1993 film, *Gadis Metropolis*, which really brought the *lesbi* subject position to the fore and which, at the same time, exposed those conflicting attitudes towards the *lesbi* subject position, and it is to those metropolitan girls that we will now turn.

***Gadis Metropolis*: a synopsis**

Gadis Metropolis is the story of three young women, Lisa (Sally Marcelina), Fanny (Inneke Koesharawati) and Sandra (Febby R. Lawrence), all from upper middle-class Jakarta backgrounds. Each of the young women faces a number of problems, and the three friends comfort and advise each other as the film progresses. Lisa's story is the most prominent.

The opening credits are interspersed with scenes of three women dressing themselves for a night out. The upbeat music becomes part of the diegesis as they meet to walk up some steps and into a nightclub. The setting of the discotheque offers numerous opportunities to show women in revealing costumes, and as such is something of a staple of this genre. For instance, in this opening sequence of *Gadis Metropolis*, the camera focuses on two of the friends on the dance floor. An overhead shot fixes down on their breasts as they dance opposite each other – suggestive of an intimacy between the women that goes beyond mere friendship. The voyeuristic camera pans slowly down the women's dancing bodies from head to foot, focusing particularly on their thighs and calves.⁷

As the three friends survey the dance floor before them, Lisa recognizes a man and goes over to him. Her two friends look momentarily confused, apparently not knowing who he is, but they soon start dancing and having a good time. There is a sudden cut to Lisa being hit hard across the face by her boyfriend, Jacky, outside the disco. He is angry that Lisa has been dancing with another man, saying 'After all I've given you, you want to leave me just like that.' Lisa spits in his face, saying 'You have no right to control my life', before running down some steps where a group of men catch her. Jacky calls to the men 'Take care of everything, brothers.' As the camera cuts back to the disco, we see Jacky invite Lisa's friend Sandra to dance, which she does gladly. The next morning Sandra wakes up in bed with Jacky. Fanny telephones to tell Sandra that Lisa has suffered an 'accident', and as we find out from several flashbacks, Lisa has been raped and violently abused by Jacky's henchmen. Vital themes such as male notions of the sense of ownership of the female body and resistance to such ideas by young metropolitan women are clearly established in this opening scene. The frequently violent and almost inevitably futile consequences of such resistance, themes common throughout New Order cinema and particularly these erotic films of the 1990s, is clearly encapsulated in Jacky's aggressive response.

The story then turns to Fanny, an aspiring singer. She is persuaded by a record producer to sleep with him in order to get a contract for her first album. It is clear from the bedroom scene that she gains no pleasure from the experience. Then

she agrees to marry the keyboard player, Maxi (Alex Kembar), despite knowing he is *gay*. Meanwhile, Sandra, an aspiring model, is shown to be sleeping with a number of men, all of whom are buying her expensive gifts. This storyline allows us to view Sandra dancing for a modelling shoot dressed in a variety of high-cut swimming costumes and bikinis, flanked by two men in swimming trunks. The subversive eye cannot but note that when Sandra is called away from the shoot to answer a telephone call, the two male dancers carry on dancing with each other. In another scene, she dances and seduces her older lover, Teguh, as he films her on a newly bought camcorder.

We then turn back to Lisa, who has her credit card declined in a fancy boutique. She has already caught the eye of another female shopper, and this woman, Aunt Mirna (Baby Zelvia), steps in to complete the purchase for her. While initially Lisa appears ambivalent towards Mirna's advances, over the course of several scenes she becomes ever more entranced by the older woman. In one scene Lisa models on a bed wearing a satin negligee while Mirna reproduces her image in oils.⁸ While in earlier scenes Lisa pushed Mirna away when she put her hand on Lisa's thigh, by the middle of the film, she holds her hand in place, allowing Mirna to go down on her knees and lower her head towards Lisa's lap, before the camera cuts away to Fanny coming in the room and catching the two by surprise.

Despite Lisa's developing relationship with Mirna, Jacky makes repeated efforts to get her back and starts to follow Lisa. When Mirna and Lisa go to Mirna's house, we discover that she is married to a crazed and violent man who brings numerous women to the family home. He tries to rape Lisa, but Jacky sees what is going on and comes to her rescue. While Mirna can only try to pull her husband off, Jacky fights him and saves the day. Later he clarifies that he never meant for his henchmen to rape and abuse her; rather, he merely intended them to beat up the man she had been dancing with. Lisa accepts this explanation and goes back to Jacky.

In a key conversation between the three women, Fanny warns Lisa off same-sex relationships, saying 'Same-sex love sometimes has a stronger bind. They're not like men who can just exchange one love for another in the span of a night.' While Lisa agrees, she is left to wonder if there are still good men in the world, and whether it is realistic to dream of starting a family. Sandra also sees the error of her ways, saying she is going to give up her life of clubbing, and look for something more meaningful instead. Sandra's remaining partner reveals that he knows she has been sleeping with other men and she is left humiliated and alone. Mirna is then thrown out by her husband and starts to stalk Lisa.

The film comes to a climax when Mirna, disguised as a male plumber, attempts to kill Lisa in her own home, though luckily Fanny saves her. It seems that Fanny's engagement party marks the happy resolution of the movie. Sandra has a new and decent partner, Ricky; Lisa is happy with Jacky; and Fanny is seemingly happy with her marriage to the *gay* keyboardist Maxi. However, the happiness is not to last. As Jacky leaves the party, Mirna tries to run him over. A car chase ensues, and Mirna manages to stab Jacky. Mirna staggers off laughing and almost dancing in delight as Lisa weeps, raising her bloody hands to her face in grief. It is the *gay*

character Maxi who catches and secures Mirna. As the credits begin to roll, the final cut is to Mirna behind bars in prison uniform, first laughing hysterically, but then gripping her head in anguish.

Gadis Metropolis was produced by Ferry Angriawan of Virgo Putra Film and the screenplay is credited to Zara Zettira ZR. The director was Slamet Riyadi. The idea for the film apparently came from Zara Zettira, and was initially taken up reluctantly by the production company because of its treatment of homosexuality.⁹ A comparison of the initial script held at Sinematek and the final film shows that it was always envisaged as a movie full of disco scenes and sexy images. However a number of key differences to the narrative, particularly in the second half, are revealing. First, in the initial script Fanny becomes pregnant from the record producer, giving further impetus to marry Maxi. Second, the role of Aunt Mirna was initially quite small. Those scenes in which she attacks Lisa and kills Jacky, together with the story of her abusive and drunken husband, are all missing from the original script. Third, there is no attempt in that earlier script to redeem Jacky by explaining the rape of Lisa as a misunderstanding. Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, it was initially proposed that Aunt Mirna would kill Lisa in a car chase. Then, after Lisa's funeral, the two remaining metropolitan girls visit a nightclub. When Jacky appears and invites Fanny to dance, she says that rumours of her marriage to Maxi are only gossip and joins him gladly. Thus, the initial script ends with the young woman who became *lesbi* murdered, and the two remaining girls ignoring the dangers of the Jakarta night to return to the world of the disco where the film started.

The differences outlined above are more than mere divergences in plot. The changes reflect a need to respond to the expectations of censors. The initial screenplay provided no punishment of crimes committed and no return to the moral order, structural characteristics which Krishna Sen has shown to be key to Indonesian cinema of the New Order period (Sen 1994: 157–61). While Lisa the victim is killed and therefore removed from the diegesis, Mirna, the agent of violence, remains unpunished and at large. There is no attempt to excuse the rape of Lisa as a mistake and Jacky is neither punished nor reformed. As Sen remarks of cinematic production under the Suharto regime, 'Directors and producers working during the New Order period knew that any crime that was central to a film's narrative had to be resolved and its agents had to be punished' (Sen 2010: 208–9). Similarly, we can understand the changes made to the storylines involving Sandra and Fanny as indicative of a need to show the young women realizing the errors of their ways, and being brought back into the moral order. The result of all these modifications is that the character of Mirna is further stressed and developed to accentuate her deviant, murderous and predatory behaviour.

The murderous lesbian: a global cinematic phenomenon?

Anyone who watches *Gadis Metropolis* with knowledge of Western cinema, in particular cinematic representations of lesbians, will be struck by a number of apparent similarities. Critics have noted the relative invisibility of lesbians in

Western mainstream cinema, with the exception of two genres: pornography (aimed at the heterosexual male) and horror (Daniel 1997: 11). Indeed, a notable body of writing exists which looks precisely at Hollywood's creation of deadly, deranged, predatory lesbians spawning a number of epithets such as 'lethal women' (Daniel 1997), the 'deadly doll' (Holmlund 1994), 'lesbians who bite' (Hanson 1999), 'fatal women' (Hart 1994), the 'deadly woman' (Tasker 1994) and the 'lesbian vampire' (Weiss 1992). Commenting mainly on American film production, Kelly Kessler notes that there was a boom in movies depicting lesbians in the 1990s, and that while those films directed by women often presented images of lesbian love, male directors were more likely to continue the tradition of focusing on lesbians as 'deviant threats to the social order' (2001: 18). Indeed, one of the 'classic' movies of this type, *Basic Instinct* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1992),¹⁰ in which all four central characters are linked to both lesbianism and murder, was released the year before *Gadis Metropolis*.

The tradition of the predatory lesbian in European cinema goes back to the 1920s. Andrea Weiss describes Countess Geschwitz in the German film *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*, dir. G.W Pabst, 1929) as the first in a long line of these predators, drawing on Smith-Rosenberg's description of the character as 'the aggressive seducer of other women, the ruthless, perverted competitor of the male suitor' (Weiss 1992: 22). Thus, the basic triangular pattern in which the younger, more innocent woman is fought over by a heterosexual male and an older lesbian was established. By the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting ideas from popular psychiatry of the time as well as the demands of the American Motion Picture Code, Weiss notes a general formula in Hollywood depictions of lesbianism where one (the predator) would be killed and the other cured (1992: 51–7). To explain why so many of these predatory lesbians end up as murderers, the common argument is that by rejecting not just heteronormativity, but also patriarchy, they are a group who position themselves outside the law. To exemplify their lawlessness these sexually deviant women are depicted as committing the ultimate deviant act – murder.

As Lisa Daniel observes, the horror genre has proved ideal for presenting lesbians as 'unpredictable, malevolent and deadly' and the ultimate portrayal of this is in the lesbian vampire subgenre (Weiss 1992; Daniel 1997). In these movies, we commonly see the female vampire and the mortal heterosexual male compete for possession of the younger, 'innocent' female (Daniel 1997: 12). These films, which became particularly common in the 1970s when the relaxation of censorship laws began allowing for the representation of more sexually explicit scenes were, Daniel argues, both titillating and cathartic for the male heterosexual viewer. There was the opportunity to view the overt female sexuality of the vampire, safe in the knowledge that she would be destroyed (or destroy herself) by the end of the movie. Feminist responses to such films (vampire or otherwise) have generally been negative, on the grounds that aggressive depictions of lesbians empower the heterosexual viewer while marginalizing the lesbian viewer. The use of these stereotypes also trivializes, marginalizes and exoticizes lesbians according to some feminists. Nonetheless, other scholars have argued that

films of this type may simultaneously meet the fantasies of heterosexual men while proving empowering to lesbians (Weiss 1992: 106). We might also draw on Michael Saunders in understanding such characters as embodying anti-assimilationism and queer defiance (1998: 19). Kessler has made a particularly interesting argument for one film, *Bound* (dirs Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1996), which she argues utilizes ‘stereotypes which provide a space for communal identification for lesbians and an ideological framework for the heterosexual viewer’ (2001: 35). As such, she contends, the film can be read as ‘family fun for everyone’ (2001: 19), a point which will be picked up on again in the conclusion to this chapter.

There is much about the Western cinematic lesbian murderer which lends itself to a reading of *Gadis Metropolis*. However, while Aunt Mirna can be identified as a predatory older woman competing with a heterosexual male for the possession of a younger female, she is not a vampire. Nonetheless, there is one scene in which she is most definitely vampire-like. The scene begins with Jacky (now living with Lisa) answering the telephone to be called away to a meeting. As he speaks on the phone a bell tolls. From where this tolling comes is not clear, but its five chimes are not indicative of the time. As the echo of the bell merges into one of the eerie tunes used repeatedly in the film to hint at danger, it is clear that there is trouble ahead; someone is spying on him from behind a partially opened door. As Jacky lightly kisses Lisa goodbye, he tells her there is a plumber in the house to clear a blocked tap, but to be careful, for he seems a bit ‘scary’ (*nyeremin*). As the haunting music plays and Lisa has her back turned, the bedroom door opens and we see first an oversized glistening wrench, then the full body of the plumber, tool in hand. As Jacky had warned, there is something not quite right about this handyman.

As he lifts the wrench into an upright position, we see that this is no ordinary plumber, but Mirna in drag. Throwing the wrench towards Lisa, she first pulls off her baseball cap, and her hair tumbles down. Then with a loud ripping sound she tears off her fake moustache while Lisa looks on in terror. She grabs Lisa and wrestles her to the convenient bed – Mirna is on top of course. The two rise up momentarily while Mirna warns ‘Lisa, if I can’t have you, then no one can.’ Mirna then slaps Lisa hard across the face and she falls back onto the bed. As Mirna stands above Lisa, she takes a few deep breaths, her chest rising and falling as she does so, while Lisa lies panting in fear on the bed. Then, raising her arms above her head she leaps, almost flying, on top of Lisa, her black jacket reminiscent of Dracula’s cloak. After a brief struggle, Mirna once more stands before Lisa, saying ‘Lisa, you’ve ruined my life and now you want to experience happiness on the back of my suffering. I won’t let that happen. No way. I won’t let it be. We’ll be destroyed together.’ This time she holds a dagger before her, though in the battle that ensues Lisa manages to force it away from her. In close-up we see Mirna’s almost-still face, repeating Lisa’s name longingly and hypnotically. The camera’s gaze fixes on her glistening purple lips as she holds the woman beneath her. Then slowly she sinks her head down and out of shot towards Lisa. What exactly she was intending to do we will never know, for a quick kick by Lisa, followed by the somewhat comical arrival of Fanny, has Mirna suddenly dazed and lying on the floor rubbing her head!

Certainly, there is more to Mirna than we realized, and as she lies on the floor, she too seems confused by what has just happened. With the eerie music, the tolling bell, the black leather jacket, and Mirna's momentary ability to fly, one cannot help but be reminded of a vampire. When Mirna looks down on her prey, disabled of her two phallic tools, with only her purple lips as a weapon, it is surely blood from Lisa's neck that she wants. On this occasion she is stopped short, but at the end of the film she finally gets the blood she needs. As Jacky lies (almost) dead on the floor, Mirna emerges from the shadows of the night to plunge her weapon into his neck. As she pulls the bloody dagger from his wound, and puts her hand to his neck to check that he is truly dead, it is once again her purple lips that become the focus of the gaze as she throws her head back and laughs in delight.

Care must be taken in drawing too many comparisons with Western traditions. First and foremost, Mirna is not actually a vampire or any other type of supernatural being, though in the above scenes she does seem to be suffering some sort of psychic disorder. Second, the image of the predatory and overtly sexual female is not unique to Western cinema. If we turn now to Indonesian cinema and literature, we will find that representations of the dangerous and deranged woman, though not the dangerous *lesbi*, were already an established aspect of the cultural output of the New Order period.

Popular representations of women in Indonesian cinema

The New Order period has been highlighted by various scholars for its state ideology regarding women. In particular, the moral precepts of *Panca Dharma Wanita*, which set out the five main duties of Indonesian wives (to support their husbands, provide offspring, care for and rear the children, be good housekeepers, and be the guardians of the community), were central to public notions of women's roles under the patriarchal New Order. Saskia Wieringa writes that during the New Order period, the discourse of *kodrat wanita*, the ideology which constructed women's social roles as biologically preordained, called for women to 'be meek, passive, obedient to the male members of the family, sexually shy and modest, self-sacrificing and nurturing. To this end, their main vocation was wifehood and motherhood' (2003: 75). While women were certainly not forbidden from participating in the public sphere, and indeed most Indonesian women had to work to help support the family, this ideology nonetheless privileged men. As Julia Suryakusuma (1996) has observed, female dependency on men was cast as the ideal. As Boellstorff (2012) has recently noted in a review of her work, Julia was arguing that 'the militaristic New Order state was predicated not just on ideologies of masculinity and femininity, but ideologies of heterosexuality.' The key implication of this was that homosexual Indonesians under the New Order were seen as outside 'national belonging'. Thus it is perhaps almost inevitable that the triangular pattern developed in Western cinema – with one lesbian killed and the other brought back to heterosexuality – would fit so well into Indonesian notions of the place of female sexuality in the New Order state.

In her analysis of images of women in popular Indonesian print media, Suzanne Brenner argued that discussions on women's role and place in Indonesian society were bound up with the question of what it was to be modern and 'whether or not Indonesians are on the right path toward the right kind of modernity' (1999: 17). Crucially, Brenner argues that women's choices became a major preoccupation of the New Order state, as all of the 'tensions and anxieties that accompanied political repression, rapid and uneven modernization, and economic inequality and instability were displaced onto the figures of women and the family' (1999: 36). Karl Heider has identified a similar dilemma with regard to Indonesian cinema, highlighting a dominant concern of 'how to modernize and yet retain Indonesian identity; how to avoid the perils of excessive conservatism on the one hand and destructive Western-ness on the other' (1991: 86). The very title of the film at the centre of this chapter's analysis, *Gadis Metropolis*, highlights young women and the capital city, thus clearly encapsulating this preoccupation.

While much of the discourse about women in Indonesia revolves around the conduct of wives and mothers, the role of daughters is also implied, and it is this that we see being specifically treated in the characters of the three metropolitan girls. Daughters using their bodies to win record contracts (Fanny), expensive presents (Sandra) and clothes (Lisa); daughters sleeping with various male (and female) partners; daughters deceiving their parents; and of course daughters being sexually active before marriage. Brenner draws our attention to 'the uncertainty of modernity' and 'the image of modernity gone awry', which was seen in 'the picture of uncontrollable women – wantonly sexual; reversing the "proper" order of things by dominating males instead of being dominated by them; shirking their "natural" roles as wives and mothers' (1999: 37). This image is almost fully encapsulated in *Gadis Metropolis*. The one aspect in which the construction of the metropolitan girls does not match this description is the question of dominating males. However it is arguably in the same-sex behaviour of Lisa and Mirna, not dominating men but rejecting them completely, that this aspect of modernity gone 'awry' is also fulfilled.

While the range of options available to women were of course numerous as they negotiated the demands of modernity and tradition, media images of women leaned towards a dichotomized system of representations, variously described as models and maniacs (Tiwon 1996), or as victims and viragos (Hughes-Freeland 2011). Sen draws our attention to one film in particular which has clear resonances with *Gadis Metropolis*, and which falls into the theme of 'salvaging the feminine essence of a female'. *Guruku Cantik Sekali* ('My Teacher is Very Pretty', dir. Ida Farida, 1979) is the story of Dina, a female schoolteacher who fiercely defends the idea of gender equality and for some reason hates men. We discover in a flashback that this hatred results from the sexual advances of her former boyfriend. Eventually she 'recovers' and is able to respond to the loving attention of her colleague Danu, with the previous aversion to men depicted as a 'psychic disorder' resulting from past trauma (Sen 1994: 141). As Sen says of another film of this type, men are the social agents of both the corruption of natural femininity and its natural restoration (1994: 140). Thus in keeping with the requirements of an

ordered cinema – i.e. one in which order is restored by the conclusion of the film – the woman who has strayed can be rescued and brought back to normality.

However, in other films the corruption of women cannot be reversed, particularly as Sen argues, ‘when a woman’s sexuality is aroused outside of monogamy’ (1994: 144). The haunting or stalking of past tormentors by a female ghost, witch or other such abject being has a long tradition in Indonesian horror cinema, and it provides one means of dealing with the woman who has been violated in some way or another by a man. Just as in the previous example, the right man is needed to eradicate the evil spirit, though in this case it is normally in the person of an Islamic figure (van Heeren 2009a: 97–9; Sen 2010: 205). Sen also points to the prostitution movie as another genre of films in which women abused by men end up ‘unforgivably stained’, often dying in the arms of their only true love. Clearly, such films also carry the possibility of exhibiting plenty of female flesh for the delight of the audience (Sen 1994: 144–7). It is at this point that it is useful to recall Sen’s oft-repeated observation that even in those films where women dominate the screen, it is often more about presenting them ‘to be seen so that the film is seen (sold)’ (1994: 134).

While the representation of *lesbi* as seen in *Gadis Metropolis* marks something new in Indonesian cinema, it is clear from the above discussion that there are a number of parallels with existing popular discourse about women. The two images of *lesbi* that are presented in this film – that of the predatory, murderous *lesbi* who ends up in jail, and the abused *lesbi* whose life is re-ordered and given meaning when she is taken in hand by an upstanding male member of society – can both be understood within the binary of victim and virago or of model and maniac.

The trajectory of Lisa’s character shares many similarities with those Indonesian cinematic women who have gone before her. Traumatized by rape she steps temporarily outside her heterosexuality. But it is also the very experience of that trauma and her temporary homosexuality that lead her to the epiphanic moment when she wants to pull back from the disorder, pondering ‘Are there still good men who will marry us? Can we still dream of having a family?’ However, the resolution is not quite as we would expect. Despite her decision to return to monogamous heterosexuality, it is not to be. Her partner is killed and Lisa’s fate is unknown. She does not die in the arms of her lover like the tragic heroines of those earlier prostitution films, but rather the position is reversed. As her male lover dies, it is she who is left alone. Her future remains unresolved, but it seems that the idealized marriage and family for which she yearns are an impossibility.

Mirna’s seemingly permanent aversion to men is explained as resulting from the humiliation of her husband’s womanizing, drunken and violent behaviour. Furthermore, she was already in the ‘valley of sin’ when he first took her in, as he reminds her in one confrontation. In the case of the character of Aunt Mirna, there is no firmer rejection of the ideals of *Panca Dharma Wanita*. The *lesbi* killer (of men) challenges the male order in two vital respects: she is beyond the sexual control of men, and in committing the act of murder she is also outside of their social control. With Sen’s comment on psychic disorder in mind, there is

no possibility of bringing Mirna back to normality; the only option is incarceration. The view of homosexual attraction as obsessive and dangerous, verbalized when Fanny says that same-sex love has a stronger bind than heterosexual love, is something which seems to endure in Indonesian society generally. It is exemplified by the statement of an Indonesian criminologist commenting on the 2008 case of a *gay* Indonesian serial killer. The problem with *gay* men, he pontificated, was that '*gays* won't let go of the men they love ... if he can't have the guy, then no one can' (*Jakarta Post* 2008).

The trope of the woman who succeeds in taking her revenge on men can be found in various forms in Indonesian cinema, particularly from the late 1980s and early 1990s when the concerns of censors were beginning to focus more on television. Felicia Hughes-Freeland cites the example of the film *Ranjang yang Ternoda* ('The Spotted Bed', dir. Norman Benny, 1994) which shows a betrayed woman who avenges herself on her wealthy lover by beating him at his own business game and finally destroying him. As Hughes-Freeland argues, not only was female sexuality more overt but also 'the film's narrative shows a change in representation: how a victim becomes a virago and then triumphs' (2011: 421). Whether Aunt Mirna can be said to be successful in her revenge is clearly open to interpretation; she is successful in killing her rival Jacky, but she does not win back Lisa and ends up in jail.

A slightly earlier film which saw a woman creating far greater havoc than Aunt Mirna was *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan* (*Lady Terminator*, dir. Tjut Djalil, 1988). Following protests, this remarkable film was withdrawn by the censors to be eventually released in shortened form in 1994 (Kristanto 2007: 314; van Heeren 2009a: 118). The film, which has become something of a cult classic in the West following its release on the Mondo Macabro label,¹¹ tells the story of the Queen of the Southern Ocean who lures men into her realm for a night of passion. Those unable to satisfy her have their genitalia cut off by a dagger/snake which emerges from her vagina. When one man manages to seize the dagger from her while he is still intact she swears to take revenge on his great-granddaughter. A hundred years later, an American anthropologist dives into the ocean in a bid to discover the truth behind the legend. She becomes possessed, and in a clear parody of the American film *Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), she wreaks mayhem on Jakarta as she tries to track down and destroy the great-granddaughter, killing numerous men in a particularly emasculating way. Finally, after a car chase, she is destroyed by the great-granddaughter's boyfriend. One cannot but notice the parallels between this film and *Gadis Metropolis*; it is clear that the character of the strong, crazed and violent woman, with particular aversion to men, was far from unique to Aunt Mirna in the closing years of the New Order period.

While the attention of this chapter is primarily concerned with representations of the *lesbi* subject position, it is useful to note that *Gadis Metropolis* also contains a subplot focusing on a *gay* male character. In taking a comparative approach to the film's representations of male and female homosexualities, further concerns surrounding the expression of female (homo)sexuality become

apparent, allowing for a useful contrast with the films discussed in [Chapter 3](#), particularly *Istana Kecantikan*.

Male homosexuality in *Gadis Metropolis*

It will be remembered from the synopsis of the film that there is a subplot involving Maxi, the *gay* keyboardist. In that storyline we also meet Maxi's friend Tony who introduces record producer Michael to Fanny and Maxi. From Tony's dress (a black, low-cut vest top, yellow jacket and a blue headband) and mannerisms he is clearly marked as camp and effeminate. When Fanny explains that she is distracted because her friend has been raped, Tony makes an exaggerated response with elaborate hand gestures, moving behind the seated Maxi to embrace him from behind: 'What? Raped? Scary, being raped. I want that, Maxi. We're into rape and being raped, too.' Maxi, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, brushes his friend off and shows concern for Fanny. The remark does not impress Fanny, as is clear from the following dialogue in which she and Maxi discuss Michael:

- Fanny: Max, I think this guy isn't right.
 Maxi: Let it go. Trust Tony. He's the best when it comes to this sort of business.
 Fanny: Why do you trust Tony so much? I'm a woman. My intuition is stronger than that fag's (*banci*).
 Maxi: Be careful when you speak, Fan.
 Fanny: But he really is a fag (*banci*). I don't understand. Why are you defending him so much?
 Maxi: Well, that's you, Fan. We're all good friends. It would be bad if Tony heard what you said.

At this point in the film, it is still not clear that Maxi is *gay*, and the above dialogue might be understood to serve to hint to the viewer that there is more to Maxi and his friendship with Tony than first meets the eye. But, it is also important that it is Fanny's pejorative use of the word *banci* that is admonished in this scene – one of the indicators of a more general attitude of tolerance which the film seemingly tries to promote.

A little while later, Fanny seems to have overcome her homophobia when she meets Lisa and Mirna at a nightclub. She affectionately jokes to Lisa, 'I didn't know you liked girls as well. If that's the case, you should be with me.' Thus while Lisa's friends are undoubtedly troubled by the predatory character of Mirna, they also demonstrate, or learn to show, an acceptance of alternate sexualities as the film progresses. What is more, despite having introduced Fanny to the manipulative Michael, Tony is simultaneously concerned for her well-being, affirming the sympathetic qualities of his character. As he drops her off at Michael's hotel, aware that Fanny will be forced to have sex with Michael in order to clinch the record deal, he urges her to reconsider, regardless of the potential consequences for the band. Tony reappears at the engagement party near the end of the film, no

doubt providing a brief moment of humour, but also supporting his friends despite perhaps knowing that his relationship with Maxi will be altered forever.

In contrast to the camp and exaggerated character of Tony, there are at first no obvious visual signifiers used to convey Maxi's homosexuality. It is in a bedroom scene with Fanny that we learn of his somewhat tragic situation. Maxi is unable to respond to her sexual advances, forcing him to explain why he is unable to satisfy her – though again, the explanation appears more for the audience's benefit. While a decent man is able to 'cure' Lisa of her *lesbi*-ism, the nature of Maxi's same-sex desire is constructed quite differently in this film.¹² It is not something that can be cured by the affection and sexual advances of a beautiful woman. Rather, it is something he must hide if he is to advance his career:

- Maxi: You must be disappointed, Fan.
 Fanny: I'm not disappointed. Because I love you.
 Maxi: I care about you, Fan, but ...
 Fanny: You should be honest with me.
 Maxi: Be honest? You think people can easily accept the presence of a *gay* man? I have goals, Fan.
 Fanny: I have goals, too.
 Maxi: Yes, but if they know I'm a *gay* man, I'll never achieve those goals and dreams.
 Fanny: Then why do you think I slept with Michael? All of that was about reaching goals, yours and mine. A large part of those goals is to marry you, Max.
 Maxi: Then let's get married. If you'll accept me the way I am and don't mind a marriage of convenience.

At the end of this conversation, Fanny's facial expression is one of uncertainty, as if it suddenly hits home that she is to be in a sexless, if not loveless, marriage. Nonetheless, when the marriage is next mentioned she is happy again, and certainly seems to be content at her engagement party. This aspect of the storyline is confusing and can be read in a number of ways. On the one hand, the marriage to the deviant *gay* man might be interpreted as just one further act Fanny is prepared to undergo in order to succeed in the music business. However, given the behaviour of many of the heterosexual men that the metropolitan girls encounter – rape, abuse, violence and manipulation – Fanny's attraction to Maxi becomes more understandable. His very lack of sexual desire (for women) promises her physical safety as well as career success, while at the same time offering the sense of security and 'national belonging' offered by heterosexual marriage.¹³

Maxi's predicament is reminiscent of that of Nico in the 1988 film *Istana Kecantikan*. In the latter it will be recalled that Nico marries the pregnant mistress of a work colleague in order to satisfy parental pressure to marry and produce a grandchild. Like Nico, Maxi is shown to be unable to meet his female partner's sexual advances. *Gadis Metropolis*, like *Istana Kecantikan*, seems to be picking up on the fact that failure to love and to enter into heterosexual marriage is

seen as a failure of self and citizenship (Boellstorff 2005: 107). However, just as we saw in [Chapter 3](#) regarding Nico in *Istana Kecantikan*, the concern of *Gadis Metropolis* is that Maxi cannot function sexually with women. Maxi's desire to marry is not portrayed as resulting from a need for acceptance for 'national belonging', but rather to hide his homosexuality so that his musical career is not hindered. What we have here, as in *Istana Kecantikan*, is reflective of a heterosexual fantasy – albeit a sympathetic one – of what it is to be *gay* in Indonesia.

This attempt to depict Maxi as 'decent' is further reflected in the final scene where Mirna runs amok. While Lisa cries over Jacky's bloody body, it is Maxi who restrains Mirna, keeping hold of the frenzied woman until, presumably, the police finally arrive. As he grapples to hold her, he takes a momentary sideways glance at Mirna. His look seems to be one of shock and disbelief at what she has done. Yet for an instant, the expression also seems to be of recognition. In the final scene of *Istana Kecantikan*, it is the *gay* man who ends up behind bars, having accidentally killed his former lover. In *Gadis Metropolis* things have moved, on and it is the *gay* male character who behaves as a good citizen and restrains the homosexual murderer. However, given that this was no accidental killing but rather a crazed and pre-meditated attack, there seems to be far less opportunity to sympathize with Mirna the *lesbi*. These differences in attitude to *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions are a further indication of what Boellstorff has described as the greater policing of female sexuality (2005: 66), demonstrated through a clearly less tolerant approach towards female than male homosexuality.

Explaining the lives of *lesbi* or an Indonesian *film porno*?

Reviews of *Gadis Metropolis* published in March 1993 all pick up on the *lesbi* relationship in the film, with several of them including an image of the two women in bed together. While most of the reports see the film as having some sort of didactic purpose in warning of the dangers that await young women in the city, particularly those seeking fame and glamour (Kartini 1993; Elisa T 1993; Martha 1993), none of the articles specifically condemns the portrayal of the same-sex scenes between Mirna and Lisa. Elisa T (1993) notes that because the screenwriter is a woman, those scenes depicting the *lesbi* relationship are not at all vulgar. Martha's report (1993) in *Berita Buana* describes the growing relationship between the two women at some length, including snippets of dialogue to explain their same-sex desire. The film received quite strong criticism from Untung SP (1993). As well as stating that it lacked depth and the plot made little sense, he argued that the scriptwriter Zara Zettira ZR's understanding of homosexuality, and even of 'free sex' (*pergaulan bebas*), was shallow indeed.

Opinions were split over the images of young people included in the film. For example, *Pos Kota Minggu's* review (1993) saw the film as a courageous attempt to attract a younger audience given the stiff competition from foreign imports, and commended it for drawing on reality to tell the stories of celebrities and the children of rich businessmen (*anak konglomerat*). However, the women's magazine *Kartini* takes the cynical viewpoint that the director clearly wanted to serve

up 'hot images' of the young actors, specifically citing the scenes featuring Aunt Mirna and Lisa. Another report points to the presence of breasts and thighs in almost every scene as the film's main attraction – cinematically this was said to be nothing new or special – though not to the extent that it becomes a *film porno* (M/FB 1993). This same report includes a quote from film producer Ferry Angriawan saying that the main point about the film is that it flows, the breasts and thighs being only a 'sweetener'.

The writer of the screenplay, Zara Zettira ZR, is cited in one review of the film as suggesting that there are various types of lifestyle lived by young women in Jakarta, and she thought it important to bring the lives of those seeking glamour to the big screen so that this side of life would be better known (Elisa T 1993). This approach is reaffirmed by the film's producer in an article published in *Majalah Film* in early January 1994. Questioned as to why he continued to make films in such a tough climate, he replied that he was responding to demand by the people. Referring specifically to *Gadis Metropolis* he argued that in making the film he was breaking new ground in Indonesian cinematic history and pushing the boundaries of what Indonesian society was able or prepared to accept:

The above-mentioned film [*Gadis Metropolis*; BM] explains the lives of *lesbi*. Lives such as this have existed for some years, but for various reasons, themes such as these can only now be brought to the silver screen. If we had produced this film five years ago, it was still not yet certain that the government would have allowed it. Neither was there any certainty that the people would accept it.

(*Majalah Film* 1994)

These comments should be seen in the context of an interview and a climate where the producer was being attacked from various quarters of the community for the content of his films. It might be that the producer set out to give Indonesian *lesbi* a voice, as is suggested in the above quote. However, a more cynical critic may be tempted to suggest that this was merely a ploy to bring gravitas to a film which was symptomatic of a decline in production values and the resort to increasingly erotic and violent content.

Judging by the popularity or notoriety of the theme in Indonesian newspaper and magazine reports from the early 1990s, the proliferation of 'erotic' content in Indonesian films was an ongoing source of preoccupation. These articles seem to have come in waves; but by the 1990s, with the demise of what was perceived to be more serious cinema, critical voices were becoming ever more strident. In reports from the mid 1990s a number of films are repeatedly referred to as being the origins of the current problem. Among the main culprits named is *Gadis Metropolis*. Thus while on its release most reviewers credited the film with bringing a previously hidden side of young metropolitan life to the attention of the public, with only minor criticism of the 'hot scenes', a year later *Gadis Metropolis* was denounced for its exploitative and even pornographic content.

Even by the end of 1993 opinions were beginning to change, with a review of that year's films noting that the big successes were comedies or films with 'sexy themes' (*bertema seks*), listing *Gadis Metropolis* as an example (Wijaya 1993). In early January 1994, Zaenuddin argued in the newspaper *Merdeka* that Indonesian film was not dead but that it had moved to television. He noted that the only Indonesian films that tended to be watched in Indonesian cinemas were those which 'exploited sex and violence'. The journalist pointed to the low-class audience who desired to watch films such as *Gadis Metropolis*, and comedy films heavily laden with scenes of 'young women in bikinis' (*cewek-cewek berbikini*) (Zaenuddin 1994). A piece in *Pos Film* (23 January 1994) stated that Bandung filmgoers had been 'intoxicated' by films of a more 'sexual flavour' and that this followed on from the earlier success of such films as *Gadis Metropolis*. In these reports we see not just familiar warnings of the perceived dangers of films of this ilk, but a particular concern that the national film industry was targeting only a 'lower class' audience – an interesting debate which highlights a perceived inability of lower class Indonesians to respond appropriately to anything without an overtly didactic message. Purnawady's report in *Pikiran Rakyat* in February 1994 takes another perspective on the crisis in film production, suggesting that one of the ways for the Indonesian film industry to survive at all was for producers to recognize the success of such films as *Gadis Metropolis*. It points out that producers were no longer embarrassed to make such films given their profitability, even though these films 'lacked any intent of information or education'. The article is typical of a general air of resignation that the future for national cinema seemed to be in the domain of those cinemas frequented by lower class audiences.

Despite commentators' concerns about the nature of *Gadis Metropolis*, it was a hit with Indonesian audiences, drawing the fifth highest audience numbers in Jakarta in 1993 (Kristanto 2007: 370). While I do not have figures to indicate the financial success of the film, the fact that *Gadis Metropolis* was followed by a sequel the following year, *Gadis Metropolis 2* ('Metropolitan Girls 2', dir. Bobby Sandy, 1994), is surely indicative of box office success, despite and perhaps because of the controversy it generated. Indeed, the titles of two more films which were released soon afterwards – *Pergaulan Metropolis* ('Metropolitan Relationships', dir. Acok Rachman, 1994) and its sequel *Pergaulan Metropolis 2* ('Metropolitan Relationships 2', dir. Acok Rachman, 1995) – are further testimony to the financial rewards the original film must have produced. The similarity between the later films does not rest merely in the derivative nomenclature. The topic of *lesbi*-ism or at least individuals purporting to be *lesbi* also continued into *Gadis Metropolis 2* and *Pergaulan Metropolis*, though the theme was dropped for *Pergaulan Metropolis 2*.¹⁴ Zara Zettira also wrote the script for *Gadis Metropolis 2*, and Inneke Koesharawati starred in all four films, undoubtedly adding to the sense of continuity. Zara Zettira also wrote the screenplay for the 1995 film *Roda-roda Asmara di Sirkuit Sentul* ('Wheels of Love at Sentul Racing Track', dir. Norman Benny), which includes a brief *lesbi* scene between the actresses Febby Lawrence and Inneke Koesharawati. The latter film also drew on the theme of one woman seducing another, only for the latter to realize the error of her ways with a return to her former male love interest.

While lacking the complexity of the original, many of the key notions of the *lesbi* subject position as constructed in *Gadis Metropolis* resonate through these subsequent films of what became something of a subgenre within the larger erotic output of the 1990s. Unfortunately, I have so far been unable to view *Gadis Metropolis 2* and so what follows is the summary from Kristanto's catalogue (2007: 384).¹⁵

A story of the adultery and infidelity of three metropolitan girls: Fanny (Inneke Koesharawati), Sandra (Febby R. Lawrence) and Lisa (Windy Chindyana). These three girls are all friends. Fanny who is married to Maxi (Hudi Prayogo), the *gay* component, wants to be a famous singer. To achieve this, she is forced to serve her promoter, eventually becoming pregnant. Fortunately, Maxi is happy to accept the pregnancy. She then becomes angry with the promoter over the financing of her show. She fights with the promoter and miscarries. After recovering, she is heartbroken when she finds out that Maxi is able to have an affair with a woman. Then, as if forgetting her own problems, she helps to straighten out a fight between Sandra and Lisa. Sandra is sleeping with Pak Teguh (Piet Pagau) for money, which she uses to support her boyfriend, a kind of gigolo. Sandra then finds out that this boyfriend has been unfaithful with Lisa. Sandra responds by seducing Sam, Lisa's boyfriend. Then, there is Bu Heru alias Aunt Mirna, a *lesbi*, who is piqued at seeing Lisa's behaviour and wants revenge. This continues until the end of the film when she fights with Lisa who is helped by Fanny, eventually dying in a car crash.

At least from this synopsis it seems that the sequel is indeed a continuation of the storyline from the original film, though it is not clear how Aunt Mirna was ever released from prison. However, plot inconsistencies seem to be par for the course with these films, and it is likely that the idea for the sequel was developed only after the success of the original. Nonetheless, the continuing jealousy of Aunt Mirna, and indeed the seeming realization that even incarceration was insufficient for such a wayward, threatening character, means that it is probably of no surprise that the character was resurrected only to be destroyed in a car crash. We should also note that in this synopsis, there is something of a repetition of the plot from *Istana Kecantikan* whereby Fanny, married to *gay* Maxi, becomes pregnant as a result of an extra-marital relationship, a pregnancy that Maxi is pleased to accept. It is difficult to judge whether the fact that Maxi is able to find pleasure with women after all – after his traumatic admission that he is *gay* in the original film – is introduced to recognize the existence of ever more complex sexual identities, or perhaps more likely indicative of something ambivalent, that *gay* men too can be saved by the appropriate women.

The notion that women turn to lesbianism because they have suffered in some way at the hands of men continues in *Pergaulan Metropolis*. This film tells the story of Inneke (Inneke Koesharawati), the owner of an advertising agency who becomes a *lesbi* because she is weary of men, a view which is also shared by Desi

in *Roda-roda Asmara Di Sirkuit Sentul* who views all men as hypocrites. Inneke forms a relationship with her secretary Lisa, who is trying to blackmail her boss. In order to do this, Lisa is in league with Toni, her boyfriend. Meanwhile Budi, an insurance salesman, falls for Inneke, but then sleeps with Lisa the secretary. Toni blackmails Inneke into sleeping with him, and this is discovered by Lisa who tries to kill him, but she herself ends up being stabbed by Toni who tries to blame Inneke for the crime. Finally, Budi helps Inneke out of all the difficulties which include saving her from homosexuality.

Just as in *Gadis Metropolis* and innumerable other films which have ever purported to engage with lesbian sexualities, *Pergaulan Metropolis* uses the concept of the love triangle to structure the first part of the film; a slightly older woman, Inneke, competes with a man, Toni, for the attention of a younger woman, Lisa. The difference, however, is that Lisa is dating Inneke only as part of a plot to blackmail her. There is also the added complication, albeit a useful addition to the storyline in terms of boosting the film's atmosphere of sexual licentiousness, that Lisa also sleeps with Budi – the most memorable encounter being during the elevator ride down from her workplace to the ground floor. Then, midway through the film, when the first triangle is broken with the stabbing of Lisa, a second triangle is established in which the two men, Budi and Toni, compete for Inneke's attention. This triangle, however, is a little less conventional than the usual competitive love story. At the heart of the struggle is a competition which will determine Inneke's future sexuality. Perhaps typically of Indonesian constructions of the *lesbi* subject position in New Order cinema, actual erotic desire for women seems to play little part in determining *lesbi* women's sexuality. Rather it is the behaviour of men which is the prevailing factor.

While at the beginning of the film, Inneke's sexuality seems fairly fixed – she has a girlfriend, and she enjoys watching the female models on the promotional shoots organized by her advertising company – on revisiting the character it seems that she was always constructed as a heterosexual waiting to be rescued from *lesbi*-ism. Most obviously, when realizing Lisa has betrayed her, she visits a bar and, seemingly forgetting her mistrust of men, willingly leaves the venue with a man she has never met before. Unfortunately for her, he tries to rape her together with an accomplice, but the audience is surely left wondering why on earth she went off with the man in the first place given her dislike of the opposite sex. Maybe it is all to spite Lisa; more likely is the notion that once a little drunk, her repressed heterosexuality is able to break through. On this occasion, she is saved by Budi who just happens to be passing. Astonishingly, she is so grateful to him that having explained that all men are 'bastards', she then offers to sleep with him as a measure of her appreciation. This is his chance to show his superior qualities: having already expressed his belief in her right to behave as she wishes (being a *lesbi*), and that he has no intention of trying to convince her otherwise, he also turns down her offer, proving once and for all that he is a decent and honourable man. Another scene, albeit rather ridiculous in premise, sees Budi take the place of Inneke's female masseuse. As she commands the masseuse (now Budi) to move her hands up to her towel-covered buttocks, the scene only serves

to reiterate that what women need, and what they really want, is to be better provided for by men.

The struggle for Inneke's sexuality comes to a head in the final scene. On the one hand, there is her *lesbi* subjectivity arising from her deep hatred of men, as highlighted through her attitude to Toni. On the other hand, there is the possibility of heterosexual salvation as offered by the good and decent Budi. The scene is reminiscent of one in *Gadis Metropolis* where Lisa is about to be raped by Aunt Mirna's husband, potentially securing her hatred of men and hence her *lesbi* sexuality forever. In that scene Mirna is unable to come to Lisa's assistance, and it is thanks to the strength and power of former lover Jacky that she is saved. In *Pergaulan Metropolis*, Inneke manages to tie Toni up and then straddle him as he lies helpless on the floor. As payback for the pleasures he has taken in raping women, she begins to torture him slowly, methodically cutting his torso with a dagger, coldly informing him that he now knows what it feels like to be raped. Just as she is about to plunge the blade into his chest, Budi arrives on the scene and pleads with Inneke to stop. In that instant, Toni frees himself and takes Inneke by the throat, leaving Budi to save the situation – indeed this has been Budi's mission almost from the very beginning of the movie, when on catching Inneke and Lisa in an embrace he says to himself, but also to the camera 'I have to find out what this is about and why they have become *lesbi*'. Indeed, in being positioned to speak directly to the camera, we can almost interpret his mission as one which should be taken on by all right-minded (and presumably male) members of the audience – to use their strength and seductive skills to save Indonesia's women from homosexuality and at the same time to assert fully their masculinity in the right and proper way.

The scene ends with a drawn-out battle between the two men. The final result will determine Lisa's sexuality for always: either a man-hating *lesbi* or a loving and grateful heterosexual brought back into the normative fold by the realization that only through the protective strength of right-thinking men can she survive. Of course, heterosexuality wins out in the end as Budi overcomes Toni, leaving him impotent and destroyed. Thus, unlike Aunt Mirna, Inneke is saved from murdering the boyfriend of her former lover and prevented from committing the ultimate act of criminality – as such, she can be brought back safely to the ordered world of heterosexuality where she rightfully belongs, represented by Budi's strong and protective embrace.

While there is always something ambivalent in Inneke's dislike of men, Lisa's sexual identity is even more confusing and open to various interpretations. At the outset, we presume that her affection for Inneke is genuine. Scenes of the two leaving a modelling shoot, driving in a car and exchanging an embrace in Inneke's office, all convince the viewer, and presumably Inneke, that Lisa is true in her desire for her boss. When she is first caught by Inneke in bed with Budi she looks regretful, but is that for fear of losing Inneke or the money? The next time they meet and embrace, the sudden onset of dramatic music is introduced presumably to convince us of Lisa's evil intent. However, scenes such as these, which reveal contradictory motivations and responses, open up spaces for negotiated

or oppositional readings. Just as scholars working on Western films have highlighted a tendency for lesbian and feminist audiences to re-imagine and give extra strength to aspects of the plot which accord with their own sexual preferences, it seems that relationships such as that between Inneke and Lisa offer enormous potential for alternative queer readings. Surely for some audiences of this film, the relationship between Inneke and Lisa seems to be at least as convincing for its passion and mutual attraction as that of Lisa and Toni, or even Inneke and Budi. While recognizing the eventual conclusion of the film, grounded as it is in New Order conventions regarding the construction of women, it is this other possibility which offers the potential for undoubtedly unintended viewing pleasure to the film's queer audiences.

Conclusion

On its release in 1993, most critics discussed *Gadis Metropolis* in terms of casting light on the lives of a certain section of young women in the capital city – photo models, celebrities, artists and the daughters of elite businessmen. The final message was seen as one warning of the dangers this particular variant of modern living posed to such young women if appropriate care was not taken. Certainly, the dangers presented in the film were many: rape, exploitation and violence to name the most obvious. While men lay at the root of all these dangers, the solution offered by the film is for the women to reform their own behaviour. Following New Order patterns of cinema, there is something of a restoration of the moral order at the end of the film. By renouncing their immoral ways, two of the three metropolitan girls appear to find a secure future. However, no such security awaits the girl who, at least momentarily, rejected men completely. Yes, she is eventually saved from homosexuality and partially brought back from disorder, but there is no happy ending for her; her hero dies in her arms, stabbed by her former female lover.

That *Gadis Metropolis* could be explained by its producer Ferry Angriawan as representative of the lives of *lesbi* is clearly troubling. It is probably better understood as reflecting and perpetuating popular Indonesian understandings of homosexuals generally, and *lesbi* specifically, as deviant criminals suffering from mental illness. The only option for these women, if it is not too late, is to allow themselves to be saved from their homosexuality by submitting to the right man. The success of *Gadis Metropolis*, however, meant that this image of *lesbi* was to be perpetuated in other films of the 1990s such as *Pergaulan Metropolis* and *Roda-roda Asmara di Sirkuit Sentul*. Indeed, as we will see later in this book, these are ideas which recur in Indonesian cinema into the post-1998 period.

The other part of Ferry Angriawan's comment, that the film would not have been accepted five years previously, carries more validity. However, the truth in the statement lies not so much in a change of moral attitudes to homosexuality, but rather in the loosening of control by the censors regarding issues of sexual content. The use of rape, sexual exploitation and violence as a device to display the female body, under the guise of exposing the moral dangers posed to women

by certain visions of modernity, was not unique to these erotic movies from the 1990s of which the *lesbi* films formed a distinct subgenre. As Sen has observed, the prostitution movies which were so popular in the 1970s used the female body to sell the film, while at the same time condemning the body. The films discussed in this chapter should be understood as a pushing of the boundaries of the same tradition. Starring some of the most popular female actors of the day, combined with its blatant engagement with male heterosexual fantasies of lesbianism, *Gadis Metropolis* attracted relatively impressive audience figures and notoriety. This, in turn, spawned a number of films capitalizing clearly on its success, which meant not only an imitation of 'hot images' but also the promise of further scenes of same-sex erotic behaviour between women.

Although the debates about the eroticization of Indonesian cinema in the 1990s cite *Gadis Metropolis* frequently as a chief culprit or influence, analysis of subsequent discussions in the popular media has shown that the *lesbi* content of that film was rarely referred to by journalists and critics after its initial release. Rather, it was the general imagining of women, and seemingly the dangers of such images for the (presumably male) lower classes, that were of primary concern. Most importantly, concerns that the cinematic engagement with the *lesbi* subject position might lead Indonesian women to explore homosexuality for themselves, or that such films legitimated female homosexuality in any way, were never expressed. This stands in marked contrast to fears articulated by sections of the press at the time of the release of *Istana Kecantikan*, in the late 1980s, that representing male homosexuality on screen may set a dangerous example to viewers and be seen as legitimizing same-sex relationships (Herling T 1988). This points to a fundamental difference in the imagining of male and female homosexualities, and perhaps male and female sexualities generally. Whereas male homosexuality is seen to stem from active – albeit deviant – desire, female homosexuality is imagined only to result from men's absence or as a temporary reaction to the negative behaviour of men. As such, *lesbi* sexuality is constructed as a passive consequence of last resort. As soon as an appropriate man comes onto the scene, the problem of *lesbi* disorder is resolved.

Nonetheless, the imagining of female homosexuality in these films is a little more ambiguous and contradictory than the straightforward plot structure – of one *lesbi* killed or incarcerated and the other 'cured' – would suggest. While in contrast with the construction of the *gay* subject position there is no similar representation of the *lesbi* subject position as permanent, there are moments when the ideas and actions of the *lesbi* characters within the diegesis seem to contradict the overall moral message of the film. In these incidents, same-sex behaviour between women is certainly tolerated or at least treated in a light-hearted manner. When Fanny apologizes for barging in on Aunt Mirna and Lisa, she does not censure her friend. Budi does not express any revulsion at Inneke and Lisa's relationship – it is simply beyond his comprehension. Despite the fact that she is supposedly only in the relationship for reasons of blackmail, there is nothing to suggest that Lisa disapproves of female same-sex sexuality. In *Roda-roda Asmara di Sirkuit Sentul* Novi does not reject Desi completely and the two remain friends. Just as in

Catatan Si Boy III, there is a recognition that sexual identities can be complex and that those who stray from the norm are not condemned, at least not by the other women within the diegesis.

It is these ambiguities which open up possibilities for alternative responses to the dominant messages contained within these films. Given particularly the potential for an Indonesian audience knowledgeable of the restrictions imposed by censorship, there exists the prospect that some audiences will resist the 'curing' of the *lesbi* characters and instead foreground aspects of the films that give space to *lesbi* desire. As discussed earlier, there are times in *Pergaulan Metropolis* when Inneke and Lisa seem to have a genuine relationship, and certainly Lisa seems to derive more satisfaction from the attention of Inneke than she does from any man. She seems truly regretful when Inneke discovers the deception, and it is not out of the question that some members of the audience may imagine that this is the most rewarding relationship of any shown in the film. So, too, while Novi has second thoughts about her feelings for Desi, a scene in which they dance together in the privacy of Desi's bedroom is the most erotic in the film, and certainly seems to engage Novi far more than her eventual heterosexual relationship with the racing champion.

Most complex of all when considering the possibilities for alternative responses to these films is the character of Aunt Mirna in *Gadis Metropolis*. Mirna's transcendence of New Order ideology and the norms of New Order cinema seems to be transitory. Her same-sex relationship is foiled when Lisa is 'saved' from *lesbi*-ism, and the final scene depicts her as a maniacal killer incarcerated by the Indonesian state. Nonetheless, Aunt Mirna is not actually killed off in this movie, thus defying the resolution that Weiss (1992) noted was so typical for Hollywood's lesbian couples. Rather, it is Tony, Lisa's heterosexual saviour, who is killed. In Mirna's last desperate act, the happy heterosexual ending is denied. And while we may perhaps view the film's final close-up shot of Mirna, in which she is shown to look first despondent before throwing her head back in hysterical laughter, as evidence of the madness and sickness of this dangerous, deviant woman, it might also be viewed as a final act of defiance in the face of a patriarchal system that has treated her so cruelly. Drawing on arguments made by Weiss (1992) and Kessler (2001), while female homosexuality in *Gadis Metropolis* is principally situated within the ideological framework of the heterosexual viewer, the film may simultaneously offer, at least for some *lesbi* and *gay* viewers, momentary spaces for communal identification.

Questions of global and local characteristics are difficult to unpack in *Gadis Metropolis* and the films that came in its wake. The rise of erotic cinema in the era in question was in part a response to the availability of foreign soft-core videos. Indonesian filmmakers parodied, copied and drew inspiration from Western, Bollywood and Hong Kong films. So too the trope of the murderous lesbian was an established Western cinematic tradition which had been re-energized in the guise of *Basic Instinct* immediately before *Gadis Metropolis* was made. Nonetheless, it was the fact that these ideas lent themselves to Indonesian film of the time, with its established patterns for the representation of wayward women, that meant that

the ‘deadly doll’ could be incorporated into local cinema. While some audience members may look queerly at the characters of Mirna, Inneke and Desi as symbols of defiance, and while the more positive dialogues regarding homosexuality and difference may have been gratefully received by some, the dominant message was a depressing reaffirmation of popular media notions of homosexuality, and of societal concerns regarding women’s sexuality generally.

Notes

- 1 Parts of the chapter first appeared in Murtagh (2011b).
- 2 The film is occasionally referred to erroneously as *Gadis Metropolitan*. We should also note the tendency to translate the title as *Metropolitan Girl*. Given that there are three main female characters, a more appropriate translation is *Metropolitan Girls*.
- 3 This film apparently contains the first *lesbi* scene in Indonesian cinema. Part of the film’s poster showing two women embracing is reproduced in Pranajaya (2010). Kristanto’s plot summary (2007: 89), which notes that ‘the plot and characterization of this film is confusing’, reads: ‘Aunt Nana (Tuty S.), who has two children, is not sure of her husband’s whereabouts, but she has a free life. As the owner of a nightclub, a warehouse and trade links with Hong Kong she lives luxuriously. Nana is an older ‘wild’ woman. If she does not have a man, then her pretty secretary (Noortje Supandi) serves as the source of her release. Dino Hehanusa (Farouk Afero) is the man who succeeds in stealing her heart and also her fortune, with the result that Nana falls into poverty. At the end of the story the court is confused as to who is Hehanusa’s killer. Was it Nana or her son (Gatot Teguh Arifianto), who had gone previously gone away to work as ship’s crew due to conflict with his mother. An old beggar (Bissu) saw the son fire the bullet.’
- 4 According to Kristanto, *Jang Djatuh di Kaki Lelaki* tells ‘the story of several people suffering from sexual deviance, though in a far more polite way than in later films’. This includes Sinta, who has suffered a trauma at the hands of her stepfather and stepbrother. She marries Parmin to cover up her pregnancy, but falls into a *lesbi* relationship with Sumiyati, a woman who is *lesbi* because all her siblings are sisters, and because her relationships with men have been so tightly monitored by her parents. The film ends with Sinta dying in a car crash when her relationship with another woman comes to an end (Kristanto 2007: 83). The poster for the movie includes an image of two women cheek to cheek (Pranajaya 2010: 12–13).
- 5 *Perawan-perawan* is apparently about a number of young women at boarding school, one of whom, Dhani, ‘contracts the *lesbi* disease (*penyakit*)’ as her father wanted a son rather than a daughter (Kristanto 2007: 221). Note Sen’s discussion of Ida Farida’s first film, *Guruku Cantik Sekali*, mentioned below, which also explores the issue of a woman being turned away from her natural femininity due to the actions of men. According to Kristanto, all the girls’ problems including, one presumes, Dhani’s *lesbi*-ism, are resolved by the end of the film (2007: 221).
- 6 In a copy of the film provided for me on DVD by staff at Sinematek, the scene in which Sheila slips her hand into Vera’s has been censored. All we are left with is Sheila’s sideways glance at the object of her affection. Usefully for me, however, a trailer for the film contemporary to the film’s initial release was also kindly included on that DVD, and in that 3min 45sec montage of the most enticing scenes, Sheila is clearly shown entwining her hand with Vera’s.
- 7 Undoubtedly these nightclub scenes, notable for their general lack of dialogue, are a cheap and easy way of padding the film to the required length of around 90 minutes.

- 8 This scene is remarkably similar to one from *Remaja di Lampu Merah* (see [Chapter 3](#)), in which the older *gay* character Stephen paints a portrait of his young lover Andri.
- 9 Zara Zettira ZR (b. 5 August 1969) was only in her early twenties when she wrote her first film script for *Gadis Metropolis*. She had spent much of her life overseas since the age of twelve. The story was her own idea and she part-funded the making of the film (personal correspondence by email, 22 July 2011).
- 10 On *Basic Instinct* see Hart (1994: 124–34); Holmlund (1994).
- 11 On Indonesia's cult films, including *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan*, and what has been labelled exploitation cinema, see Imanjaya (2009b).
- 12 According to Kristanto's synopsis of the film's sequel *Gadis Metropolis 2*, Maxi does manage to father a child (2007: 381–2).
- 13 In the initial screenplay, this storyline makes a little more sense because Fanny falls pregnant as a result of sleeping with her producer.
- 14 *Pergaulan Metropolis 2* had the same director and screenwriter as *Pergaulan Metropolis*, and maintains two of the central characters, Budi and Inneke. However, the *lesbi* storyline is dropped.
- 15 Sinematek does not have a copy. VCDs purportedly containing the movie are easily found in Glodok Market and elsewhere in Jakarta, but they are of the original *Gadis Metropolis*. Even when the producer Ferry Angriawan kindly sent me a VCD of the film, I was disappointed to find that it was not the sequel.

5 Modern gay men and fear of the queer unwanted

Positive images from the Reform Era

The Southeast Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s, which contributed largely to the fall of the Suharto regime, had a serious impact on local film production. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), the quality and number of films being produced in the early 1990s was in decline. With the economic disaster that hit the country in 1997, the film industry collapsed. Nonetheless, within a few short years things were looking more cheerful as domestic film production began to grow once more, albeit in the hands of a new generation of producers, directors and actors. The recovery of the film industry was coupled with a new era of comparative media freedom, though the Indonesian board of censors continues to be an irritant for many in the film industry. Neither were all sections of the Indonesian public in step with the liberalization. Lengthy debates over new pornography laws,¹ and the sporadic opposition of certain Islamic groups in recent years to the Q! Film Festival are indications that reforms have opened up space for other sections of the population to become more vocal on moral issues in the media. Jennifer Lindsay has noted that one of the characteristics of the post-1998 period is that ‘Islam has come to the fore to monopolize the moral high ground and has emerged as the political force driving the calls for changes in legislation’ (2009: 180). Nonetheless, the fall of the regime meant that directors and producers were able to engage with themes and ideas which had been difficult or impossible to deal with during the New Order period.

This chapter looks at four films which I consider key in the construction of *gay* identities in the decade since 1998. The first of the four films, *Kuldesak* (‘Cul-de-sac’, dirs Nan Triveni Achmas, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani and Riri Riza, 1998), is one of those that, like *Istana Kecantikan*, is invariably mentioned in reviews and summaries discussing the history of *gay* representations in Indonesian cinema. Primarily remembered for the blurring of its *gay* kiss by the censors and for a storyline showing a couple breaking up as a result of homophobic violence, it tends to be seen retrospectively as a somewhat pessimistic portrayal of *gay* lives. The other three films – *Arisan!* (*The Gathering*, dir. Nia Dinata, 2003), *Janji Joni* (*Joni’s Promise*, dir. Joko Anwar, 2005) and *Kala* (*Dead Time*,² dir. Joko Anwar, 2007) – have all been noted for their far more ‘positive’ representations of *gay* men and for challenging stereotypical images. This thematic strand highlights individual directorial decisions to bring positive *gay* images to the big

screen, and for this reason the films have been warmly welcomed by many critics and commentators. Indeed, Maimunah has argued that these latter films, together with *Jakarta Undercover* (dir. Lance, 2007),³ are evidence of a mainstreaming of 'queer sexuality' (2010: 128–9).

One of the tasks of this chapter is to discuss what exactly it is about the construction of the *gay* subject position in these films that has been so welcome. It will also take a more questioning approach to this desire for positive images. Drawing on Richard Dyer's comments on stereotypes and Judith Halberstam's observations on the demand for positive images of lesbians in 1980s Western cinema, it will be useful to question whether there has simultaneously been an erasure or marginalization of certain images which do not accord with the imagination of the 'good' *gay* man. In this respect I will also draw on notions of the 'queer unwanted' as highlighted by Jon Binnie and others, and Lisa Duggan's concept of the 'new homonormativity'.

Kuldesak

The earliest film to be associated with the period of *reformasi* was made without the required approval of the authorities during the final years of the New Order between 1996 and 1998. *Kuldesak* has received considerable academic attention (van Heeren 2002; Clark 2010; Paramaditha 2008, 2011; Setiyawan 2009), linked as it is with a new generation of directors, specific and deliberate engagement with American cinema, new cinematic and narrative techniques and deliberate flouting of regulations, not to mention the challenge it posed to the New Order regime's authoritarianism. Coinciding with events that culminated in the fall of the New Order, it is generally seen to have captured something of the spirit of a new urban generation. As Dahlia Setiyawan has argued, the legacy of *Kuldesak* in post-New Order Indonesian cinema continues to be felt in terms of both new freedoms of expression and content (2009: 110). *Kuldesak* also earns its place in Indonesian cinematic history thanks to its engagement with the *gay* subject position. It also serves as a reminder of the ongoing and somewhat erratic attention of the state authorities; Indonesia's first big-screen *gay* kiss was blurred by the censors.

Kuldesak is made up of four unique storylines, each with its own director. A sense of unity is maintained by a small number of incidents in which characters from one storyline appear, albeit fleetingly in another, and more obviously by the common setting of the Jakarta cityscape. The sense of interconnectedness is developed further by a consistent engagement with the theme of youth alienation and an unashamed embrace of American film, music and popular culture.

Two of the four stories are of relevance to this discussion. Nan Achnas' contribution concerns Dina, a cinema cashier, and her obsession with a TV character Max Mollo. Dina becomes friends with a young *gay* couple, Budi and Yanto, who move in across the corridor from her. One evening when they are returning home, they are verbally abused and have stones thrown at them by a group of men for being *banci*. Yanto is unable to cope with the violence and returns to his village. A

strong platonic relationship subsequently develops between Budi and Dina. The other relevant story is directed by Mira Lesmana. It tells the story of Aksan and Din. Aksan's ambition is to make a film, but he will not ask his father, the owner of a laser disc rental shop, for financial help. On the suggestion of his friend Din, the two decide to rob the store to fund their cinematic project. Meanwhile, another group of friends – two women, Sophi and Maya, and their male friend, Ceki – decide to rob the same store for a copy of *Pulp Fiction*. On breaking in, they happen upon Aksan and Din, and a somewhat comical and exaggerated display of ineptitude and stupidity results in the shooting of Aksan.⁴

Many of the media and academic responses to the film have picked up on the story of Budi and Yanto, the *gay* couple, and in particular the fact that their kiss was censored (blurred) when screened in Indonesia.⁵ Several of the reports written retrospectively have seen the portrayal of homosexuality in *Kuldesak* as depressing, on the basis that the couple are ostracized by their community (e.g. Ellis 2005), and also, somewhat inexplicably, for continuing what is seen as the pathologizing of homosexuality (Ellis 2005; Coppens 2009).⁶ Despite the considerable attention the film has received, it is only Marshall Clark (2010) who has given serious academic treatment to the construction of homosexuality in the film. Building on Clark's reading, I will suggest that the female character Maya also offers ample opportunity for a queer response to the film. While recognizing that the film depicts Jakarta as an oppressive place to be *gay*, though not necessarily that being *gay* is depressing, the film simultaneously offers a vision of Jakarta's youth which is far more sexually fluid than the majority of media and academic commentators have so far recognized.

The story of Budi and Yanto, who move in to lodgings across the hall from the TV personality-obsessed Dina, is simple and tragic. The characters are poorly augmented and the dialogue is limited, yet from the intermittent glimpses of their lives the audience is left free to develop a much fuller imagination of the lives of these two men, Budi in particular. We first see the two as they move in to their room, and later introduce themselves to Dina and invite her to eat with them. Budi and Dina talk fleetingly about their childhoods, and, perhaps typically of the construction of *gay* men's identities in Indonesian cinema, Budi's relationship with his father seems to have been an abusive one. Like the majority of the characters in *Kuldesak*, Budi and Yanto are clearly alone in the city, alienated from their families either geographically or emotionally.

While it is the censored kiss that is best remembered, there are actually several depictions of intimacy between the two men. Importantly, and in contrast with the majority of scenes of same-sex intimacy or tenderness discussed in this book, several of these displays occur in public spaces. In this respect, we might see the construction of their subjectivity as standing in contrast to the concept held by many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians of open spaces of the *dunia gay* (*gay world*), and those spaces of the *normal* world where it was neither desirable nor necessary to be open (Boellstorff 2005). These are two men who want to live and perform their non-normative lives in public, who want to be accepted by the society in which they reside without compromise. The infamous kiss takes place at night on a city

bus, a medium-distance shot capturing Budi stroking Yanto's hair, before Yanto leans in to kiss Budi. The camera then fades into the passing white lines of the road, leaving the audience to imagine what it wishes, but giving the impression that this is a common and repeated sign of affection between the two lovers.

Clark has argued that other than this kiss, displays of sexuality between the two seem somewhat 'chaste or kept off-screen' (2010: 85). Given the problems of censorship there are clearly limits to what can be shown. I would argue that taken collectively, the on-screen displays of intimacy construct one of the most convincing portraits of two men in love that I have seen so far in an Indonesian film. In particular the later sequences – the two sitting on a wall, their legs swinging together; Budi with his arm around Yanto as they walk home at night; Budi caressing Yanto's head as he sleeps – all signal a touching degree of familiarity and intimacy between the young couple. A few sparse lines of dialogue also seem to catch the subjectivities of the couple: the comment from Budi that Max Mollo is not even that good looking; Budi's account of how he and Yanto met at a party with an exchange of looks being sufficient to affirm their mutual attraction; and Budi's assertion of his hatred of hypocrisy (*munafik*), a common trait among *gay* men.⁷

Despite this intimacy, however, the relationship collapses when Yanto leaves Budi to go back to his village after they are attacked. When the three friends are first cursed and then have rocks thrown at them, they do resist actively by throwing rocks back. Nonetheless, in an interesting reversal of general patterns of movement among *gay* men, Yanto decides to return to the village, presumably to his family and a society in which he feels safer. Clark has argued that the resulting 'invisibilization' of the *gay* element signifies an endorsement of the traditional view of deviant homosexuality versus dominant heterosexuality (2010: 85). I would proffer another reading, that of despair at the violence and intolerance within the Jakarta society in which the pair are living. Hence, in thinking about the commonly repeated argument of the pessimistic representation of homosexuality in *Kuldesak*, I would contend that the pessimism is towards Indonesian society and its oppressive intolerance of difference, rather than regarding the *gay* subject position itself. This pessimism is only confirmed by the state's tolerance of violent scenes against its *gay* citizens, in contrast to its censorship of the young men's public expression of love and desire.

In his discussion of the *Pulp Fiction*-inspired storyline of the robbery of the laser disc store, Clark has described the two women Sophi and Maya as 'vampish' (2010: 78). Indeed there is a remarkable sexual energy between Maya and her female friend and partner in crime, Sophi, at least on Maya's part. When we first meet the two women it is late at night, and together with their male friend Ceki they are already a little drunk. As the two women sit in their car sharing a drink and a cigarette, Maya, short-haired and dressed in a tight but round-necked black top, repeatedly tries to touch Sophi, who is more traditionally feminine in appearance with her long hair and red v-necked blouse. On each occasion Sophi brushes her off, albeit somewhat coquettishly. Calling her 'baby' and toying with Sophi's hair, Maya's flirtation eventually wins out. She and Ceki convince Sophi to join

them in searching for more excitement, and the plan to rob the laser disc store is hatched. In the next scene when the three friends come upon Aksan and Din during their attempted robbery, Maya asks the two men if there is ‘something going on between them’. Din’s immediate response is to assert that he is a real man, but what is interesting to me is Maya’s openness to this queer possibility. In questioning their sexuality, Maya may be attempting to disempower the young men, but a simultaneous reading may be that of a queer eye suspecting that she has stumbled upon a queer guy. A few moments later she confirms her female desire when she taunts the now restrained Aksan. Sitting on Aksan’s lap and looking at Sophi she says ‘you like her, don’t you? So do I, but she doesn’t want me.’ When she then kisses the now-physically restrained Aksan whom she has been taunting as ‘handsome boy’, her purpose is surely as much to attract a jealous response from Sophi as it is to affirm their subversion of traditional male–female power relations.

Returning to Dahlia Setiyawan’s affirmation of the lasting influence of *Kuldesak*, we should highlight here the film’s impact on cinematic constructions of alternative genders and sexualities. In addition to its imagination of a ‘collage of “deviant masculinities”’ (Clark 2010: 77), *Kuldesak* also provides a number of characters, male and female, who open up possibilities for queer readings. With particular regard to the plight of the *gay* couple, the combination of on-screen and off-screen intolerance seems only to have further heightened the desire among Reform Era filmmakers to engage with the *gay* subject position, and to provide what are often referred to as positive images of those marginalized for their sexuality or gender.

***Arisan!* – positive images as a sign of modernity**

Key in this effort to represent marginalized groups, among them *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, has been the director and producer Nia Dinata and her production company Kalyana Shira Films.⁸ It was Nia Dinata’s second film as director, *Arisan!*, which grabbed headlines, both in Indonesia and internationally, for its ‘positive’ *gay* storyline replete with Indonesian mainstream film’s first uncensored *gay* kiss. The film’s impact on encouraging film directors and producers to engage with alternate sexualities will become clear in later chapters of this book. So, too, many Indonesians took delight and pride in a film industry that was willing to test the limits of censorship through its references to drug taking, heterosexual oral sex, and homosexuality. *Arisan!* won numerous awards locally, including *Citra* awards for Best Film and Best Director at the relaunched Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) and the MTV Indonesia Movie Awards.⁹ The film won some acclaim overseas, and is one of the rare Indonesian films made since 1998 to have an international distributor.¹⁰ There is no doubting the film’s impact in Indonesia, and a number of academics have welcomed the film for its new and refreshing approach to *gay* subjectivities in Indonesia (e.g. Maimunah 2010, 2011; Paramaditha 2011). Nonetheless, this chapter intends to take a somewhat more questioning approach to *Arisan!*’s very particular construction of *gay* male sexuality which, it will be argued, is as much influenced by Western neoliberal

notions of domesticated and depoliticized privacy, as it is by the lived lives of gay men in Indonesia today.

Film scholar Chris Berry (2005) has argued that *Arisan!* might be considered part of the 'Wedding Banquet effect'. This is a reference to Ang Lee's 1993 Taiwanese–American movie in which a gay Taiwanese man who lives in Manhattan with his American partner marries a mainland Chinese woman to placate his parents, and Berry argues that 'queer is equated to Western-derived and elite global capitalist culture' (2005: 306). Like a number of Asian films that preceded it, Berry asserts that in *Arisan!*, 'having a gay man around seems to be like having the right clothes, the right car, and so on – another sign of the successful attainment of modernity' (2005: 306). Nia Dinata is reported to have countered this point, maintaining that the association between the *gay* identity and middle or upper class lifestyles is a reflection of social reality (Maimunah 2010: 120). Alleging that it is easier for socially and economically independent *gay* men to survive in Indonesia, the film's producer seems to equate *gay* 'survival' with an ability to follow a model of being which shares remarkable similarities with certain increasingly vocal Westerns constructions of gay subjectivity.

In considering the model of *gay* subjectivity put forward in the film, I draw on Duggan's concept of the 'new homonormativity' (2003), developed in her critique of American neoliberalism, but also used in a number of disciplinary interventions, especially in the geography of sexualities. In particular, a number of queer geographers (e.g. Bell and Binnie 2004; Binnie 2004; Casey 2007) have drawn on Duggan's work to frame the notion of the 'queer unwanted'. This notion is useful for my discussion of *Arisan!* and two subsequent Indonesian films directed by Joko Anwar,¹¹ which have been noted for their positive representation of male homosexuality – *Janji Joni*, also a Kalyana Shira Films production, and *Kala*.

Duggan defines the 'new homonormativity' as a politics that 'does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them, while promoting the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2003: 50). The championing of gay marriage, adoption rights and the right to join the military by those asserting the similarity of – and lack of threat posed by – some lesbians and gay men to normal heterosexual citizens, inevitably leads to a marginalization of those who are oppressed by a binary sex and gender system as well as those who challenge serial monogamy. Duggan's argument is particular to a certain historico-political moment in the United States. However, given that the basis of this new homonormativity lies in consumer rights rather than citizen rights the influence of the politics of homonormativity can be felt well beyond the borders of the US, with varying degrees of slippage and reinterpretation. In terms of mainstream cultural production, especially that of television and film, this new homonormativity is most apparent in the desexualization of gays and lesbians in an effort to make them more 'acceptable' to the perceived 'majority', by placing emphasis on the domestic, depoliticized private sphere, and the economic contribution which gays and lesbians make to society by virtue of their consumption. I

will argue that the influence of this homonormative politics is particularly apparent in certain cinematic constructions of homosexuality in Indonesian films made by the new wave of producers and directors. *Arisan!* provides a useful case study to examine how such ideas have permeated into recent Indonesian cinema.

Set among the hyper-reality of the Jakarta elite, *Arisan!* sets out to critique the hypocrisy and materialism of certain members of the elite class in a comical and self-referential style. The term *arisan* refers to a monthly social event in which a number of wealthy female friends come together to network and gossip.¹² The film focuses on three friends, Meimei, Andien and Sakti. For my purpose here it is Sakti's storyline which is most relevant. This strand is also the one which grabbed most of the headlines in the Indonesian and international press. Sakti, a successful thirty-something architect, is the only child of a wealthy Batak widow. He is seeing a psychiatrist to overcome his homosexuality and is also under pressure from his mother to get married. When he meets Nino, a film director, a relationship quickly blossoms, though with a number of hurdles along the way. In particular they are restrained by Sakti's fear of his mother finding out about his sexuality and a conflict arises when Sakti's best friend Meimei, who knows nothing of his sexuality, falls for Nino. Finally, his family and close friends come to learn about and accept his sexuality, though he is rejected by several of the women who attend the *arisan*. The second of the friends, Andien, is a socialite whose life goes off the rails when her husband confesses to having slept with another woman. She then has a number of brief flings, the most serious of which is with a drug-addicted art collector. Things for her come to a head when she is detained at a police station, after the discovery of her boyfriend's cocaine in the car she is driving. With the help of her friends she gets out of this scrape and returns to her husband. Meimei's story centres on the discovery of her infertility and collapse of her marriage to her childhood sweetheart. She overcomes these changes with the support of Sakti and Nino, though she feels tremendously let down when, upon developing an attraction for Nino, she discovers that he is dating her best friend Sakti. Most of the problems are resolved by the end of the film, with the three characters facing up to and accepting each other for what they truly are with the motto 'be yourself'.

The elite setting of *Arisan!* has attracted the attention of a number of scholars and critics. Berry notes that the entire film takes place 'in what could be Beverly Hills' (2005: 306). In her report on the film for Associated Press, Leila Djuhari comments that the 'upmarket' setting of the film means that it 'could almost be in any cosmopolitan city in the world' (2004). This is not to deny that the film might bear some resemblance to the lives led by a certain coterie of Jakarta's citizens. Intan Paramaditha maintains that the eclectic quality of the architecture and urban space of Jakarta as represented in *Arisan!* might usefully be interpreted as 'a rejection of any essential notion of Indonesian-ness', a quality also apparent in the cosmopolitan and urban nature of the film's characters (2011: 508–9). On this basis, she argues, the characters reflect an identity which 'mediates between local and global culture' (2011: 508).

An interesting question arises when we consider that these new, and supposedly more positive, constructions of *gay* Indonesian subjectivity are based around

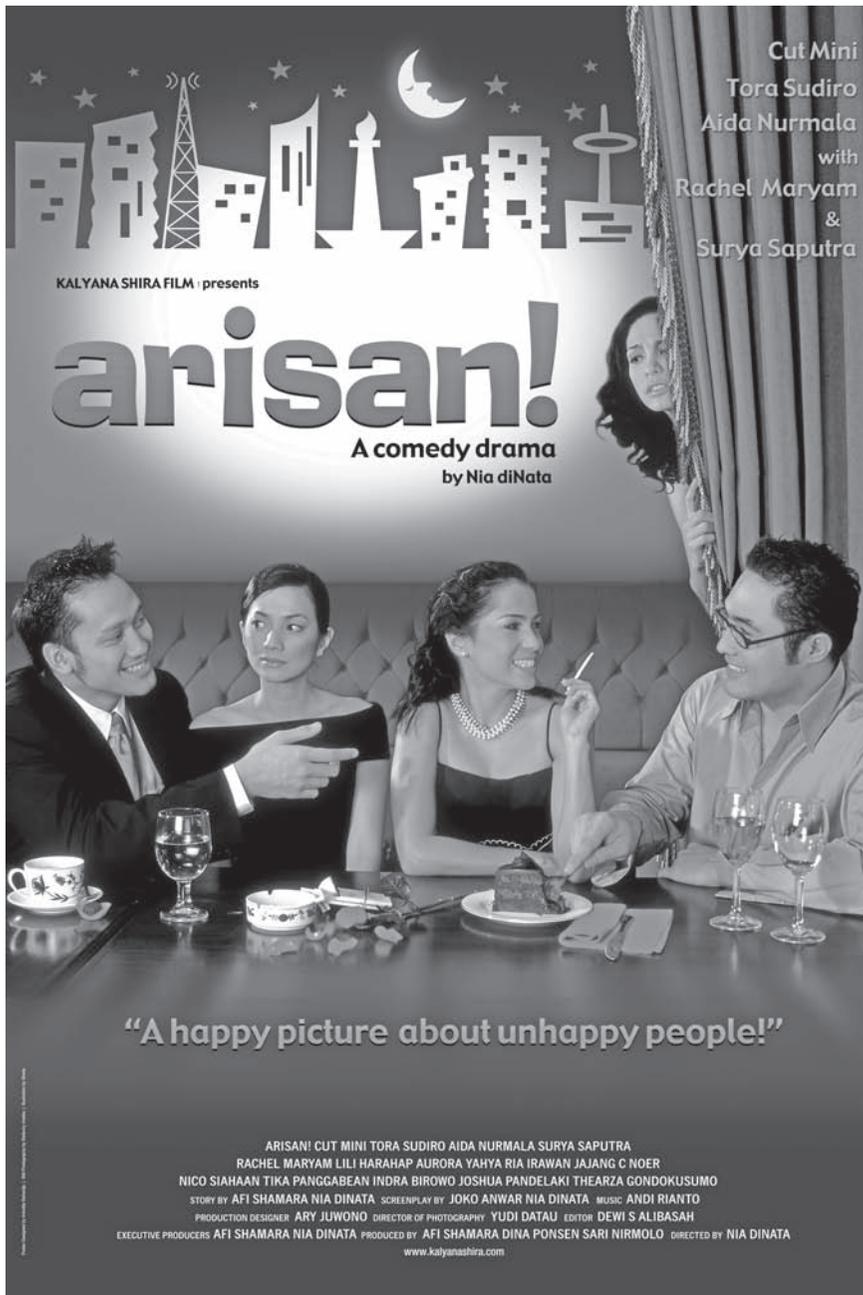


Figure 5.1 Film poster for *Arisan!*. Sakti (left) and Nino (right). Reproduced with permission of Kalyana Shira Films

wealth, opulence and a freedom to consume which is unlikely to be achieved by the vast majority of Indonesia's citizens. This point becomes all the stronger when we reflect how at the end of the film the three friends may well liberate themselves from the hypocrisy and banality of other members of the Jakarta elite by learning to 'be themselves'. But the film does nothing at all to imagine a world in which the rights and privileges enjoyed by that elite might be extended to the majority of Indonesia's citizens.

In thinking about the wealth and advantage of *Arisan!*'s elite characters, it is useful to draw on debates about the 'consumer citizen', the globalized inhabitants of world cities. John Urry's definition of such citizenship as 'not only about the right to buy across the globe the products, services and icons of other cultures', but also 'the ability to locate them within one's own culture' (2000: 70), is clearly exemplified in the world depicted in *Arisan!*. This is most obviously demonstrated by the characters' occupation of global travel networks – Sakti travels to London, Meimei's husband Ical to Singapore. This consumer citizenship is also evident in their use of the English language and consumption of 'Western' foods.¹³ Sakti first meets Nino in a cafe in which American paraphernalia hangs on the wall and he drinks from a mug bearing the American flag. Payments to the *arisan* are made with US\$100 bills. When Sakti's cousin Lita searches his bedroom for evidence of his *gay* subjectivity, it is not a copy of one of the various Indonesian *gay* publications that she finds, but rather an issue of the British magazine *Gay Times*.¹⁴

In their discussion of the consumer citizen, Bell and Binnie have highlighted questions about those excluded from these places and practices of consumption (2004: 1810). In this respect, it is appropriate to reflect upon those who are excluded or made invisible from *Arisan!*'s construction and representations of the city. Non-elite Jakarta folk are all but eliminated from the cinematic imagination of the capital, other than to consolidate a sense of geographical setting in the opening credits, to be driven past in cars with blacked-out windows, or fought through as in one scene set in a police station. Similarly, I would suggest non-elite *gay* Indonesian audiences are excluded due to an inability to respond to the constructions of *gay* identities offered in the film. As such, when the film was mentioned in the focus groups which I conducted with *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria*-identified Indonesians, the general consensus was that the lives depicted in that film had very little to do with them, and on this basis they generally found the earlier film *Istana Kecantikan* more thought-provoking and meaningful (Murtagh 2011a). Thus for some *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians, the elite background of the characters and their lack of engagement with the issues that affect so many citizens of Indonesia's cities, meant that the film was perceived to have as little relevance to their lives as was felt by my London-based undergraduate students.

The characters of Nino and Sakti are unlike any other *gay* men that had been seen up to that point in Indonesian film. Nino is confident in his sexuality with a high level of formal education and a good career. He is apparently financially independent. We know little about his family background but to all intents and purposes he is established as an out *gay* man. Sakti is more troubled by his sexuality – he is seeing a psychiatrist to overcome his same-sex attraction – but when



Figure 5.2 Production still from *Arisan!*. Nino (left) and Sakti. Reproduced with permission of Kalyana Shira Films

propositioned by Nino, he soon falls into a relationship with him and eventually his sexuality becomes known to his friends and immediate family. Most importantly both characters survive the film without being imprisoned, murdered, chased out of the city or rescued from deviant sexuality. Indeed, they end the film more confident in their *gay* identities than when it began. Thus Nino and Sakti achieve what none of the *gay* men in Indonesian cinema had managed before them. They are accepted by their family and friends, their careers remain intact, and there is no religious or moral censure of their identity. So too their kiss was allowed to be screened by the censors. Their modernity and hyper-Indonesianness, and as such the modernity of the class to which they belong and which accepts them, is confirmed.

Perhaps because Nino's character is less well developed than Sakti's, we know little about him other than through his dialogue. We only know he is *gay* because he says so, and perhaps because of a few other nuanced qualities which might not typically be flagged as masculine such as his interest in hibiscus, a passion he shares with Sakti's mother and a key topic around which they are able to bond. He is so confident in his sexuality that he declares he has already written films that engage with the issue,¹⁵ and he laughingly refers to the 'OGT' (*obvious gay traits*) that he observes in Sakti's behaviour. In his mannerisms and appearance, however, there is little about Nino to mark him as anything other than a modern, confident and wealthy young man. To draw on Richard Dyer's essay on stereotyping, he is marked more as a social type than a stereotype (1993: 14). As such, in challenging traditional Indonesian media representations of the effeminate *gay* man, he is undoubtedly constructed to be sympathetic and appealing for all the right reasons (Groves 2010; Maimunah 2010).

It is rather in Sakti that qualities not typically associated with masculinity in Indonesia are discernible. Even as a completely closeted man he is shown to be

more expert at applying mascara than his friend Meimei – though why this should be, as an only child who seems to have no propensity for using makeup himself, is somewhat unresolved in the film. So too it is suggested that he is a little too concerned with his own physical appearance as exemplified by his liking for body scrubs. Perhaps even more important in his representation, he becomes increasingly feminine or feminized as his character gains confidence in expressing his sexuality. This is most evident in the final scene, when in the company of his two female friends, his voice takes on a higher pitch, his wrist becomes a little limp and his hand gestures more exaggerated. Suddenly, in the last few seconds of the film his performance becomes somewhat clichéd, undoubtedly serving to represent his liberation from the heteronormative oppression of the world in which he has been living, but also perhaps returning to a well-established Indonesian notion that the *gay* subject position must inevitably be associated with effeminacy.

Given that the film seems to set out purposefully to resist the use of stereotypes as signifiers of Nino and Sakti's *gay* identities, it is through dialogue that we learn much about them. While all of the characters in the film speak Indonesian most of the time, several of the characters also include English language words and phrases in their conversations, as is not uncommon among some urban Indonesians. It is particularly interesting to note the tendency to use English when discussing sexuality in the film. When Nino proclaims his sexuality to Sakti he does so in English, 'I'm gay.' He then also seeks confirmation from Sakti regarding his sexuality, again in English, 'But ... you are not gay?' in a conversation which is otherwise almost totally conducted in Indonesian. We might interpret Nino, who expresses himself generally in Indonesian, as defining his sexuality in a non-Indonesian, perhaps global sense. This contrasts with Sakti who, once his sexuality is known by his family and friends, proclaims his sexuality in his native Indonesian tongue (though never in *bahasa gay*).

So too in the final scene, when the three friends confront the rest of the *arisan* women, and Sakti comes out as *gay* (in Indonesian), one of the group, who subsequently faints in shock, says repeatedly in English, 'He's not gay!' Clearly, this use of English serves to make the identity sound more foreign, more Western. That the woman is still using English as she collapses in shock may well be a sly dig at the self-conscious socialite, but it seems also to convey the idea that what is unsayable in Indonesian becomes sayable in this foreign, or at least global language. This foreignness of the term *gay*, in the eyes of the scriptwriters, is further accentuated by looking at the published screenplay. In that publication the word *gay* is always italicized to indicate that it is a foreign (non-Indonesian) word, even when only in combination with Indonesian words. Furthermore, in the quotes attributed to Tora Sudiro and Surya Saputra, they always use the word *homoseksual* rather than *gay* to describe the characters they play (Dinata 2004: 23, 51).

Intentionally or not, *Arisan!* revisits a number of key scenes from earlier Indonesian movies engaging with *gay* identities, most notably *Istana Kecantikan*. The inclusion of a scene with a psychiatrist, in this case played by the veteran actor Jajang C. Noer, reminds us of scenes from *Akulah Vivian* and *Istana Kecantikan*,

and in many respects serves a similar purpose. As well as using the scene to highlight the stress that Sakti feels he is under as the only son of a Batak family who is expected to produce children, the medical view, in this case voiced by one of Indonesia's most well-respected actresses, serves to inform the audience of latest medical opinion and of the film's ideology. As ever the psychiatrist is well ahead of the patient, saying 'These days being *gay* is no longer considered abnormal.' Updating the encounter for a more consumer-savvy age, Sakti demands a cure to his homosexuality, 'Yes, I remember everything you've said. But I'm paying you to make me *normal*.' However, the audience is left in no doubt that it is Sakti's understanding of his own self that needs support, rather than any outmoded concept of treating his homosexuality.

The discovery of Sakti's homosexuality by his family also mirrors several scenes in *Istana Kecantikan*. Just as it seems the conversation between Nico and his sister must surely be overheard by their mother in *Istana Kecantikan*, though it seems she chooses not to act on her knowledge, so too Sakti's mother overhears the conversation between her son and Nino. In this instance, however, the mother's response, understated yet resolute, is essential in signifying her acceptance of Sakti's sexuality and of Nino as his partner. We also see something of a parallel between Nico's sister and Sakti's cousin Lita. Nico's sister is first shocked at his confession of his homosexuality, and then convinces him of the importance of marrying to appease the wishes of their parents; Lita is completely accepting



Figure 5.3 Production still from *Arisan!*. Nino (right) and Sakti. Reproduced with permission of Kalyana Shira Films

of Sakti and indeed does what she can to encourage him to be brave in facing up to what she says is no big deal – her close friend at university in Medan, North Sumatra, was *gay*. It is notable here that other than Nino and the psychiatrist, it is Lita – the comical character from a small town in Sumatra – who is perhaps the most accepting and progressive of all the characters in the film, and who represents an interesting injection of honesty and tolerance in contrast with what turns out to be a remarkably intolerant group of elite metropolitan women. In many respects then, this film serves as a fascinating reworking of the story of Nico from *Istana Kecantikan*. Whereas the earlier film was clearly grounded in what was judged the principle tragic dilemma facing *gay* Indonesian men in the late 1980s, the later film is a powerful idealized imagining. It is clearly filtered through the lens of Western rights discourse and LGBT film and television, as well as through the strictures of Indonesian censorship and local cultural sensibilities of what it might be to be *gay* in Indonesia in the early twenty-first century.

Maimunah (2010: 118) has suggested that the film be seen as an illustration of ‘how *gay* men can be accepted in the *normal* world if [their] coming out is handled in a gradual and non-confrontational way’ rather than a realistic representation of Indonesian *gay* culture. Elsewhere, she has described the representation of gay men as ‘real men’ who ‘seem no different from their heterosexual counterparts’ as a ‘breakthrough’ in Indonesian film history (2011: 117). This argument, no doubt unintentionally, evokes Duggan’s concern with the neoliberal brand of identity politics which, among other things promotes gay ‘normality’ (2003: 44). Remembering Dinata’s argument that in pitching the *gay* storyline among Jakarta’s elite the film reflected social reality, and combining this with the movie’s clearly well-intentioned ethos of showing how relationships between men can be both positive and unthreatening to family and other social values, we are again reminded of what Duggan labels ‘a trickle-down version of equality’ in which gay positive sentiments are imagined to drip down from boardrooms to shops, farms and factories (2003: 54).¹⁶

Besides Nino and Sakti, we only meet one other character in *Arisan!* who is marked as being of a gender or sexuality outside the heteronormative. Yung Yung (Sapto S.) is a slightly older male photographer who accompanies the *arisan* women to the monthly meeting when it is held at Sakti’s house. Camp, effeminate, limp-wristed, apparently confident in his subjectivity and with a fawning attitude towards the wealthy women whom he is there to photograph, the contrast with Sakti could not be clearer. While Nino and Sakti walk calmly around the garden, speaking to friends and acquaintances, Yung Yung bustles about, cutting inexplicably backwards and forwards across the camera, flicking his hand-held fan. This difference is not just evident in manner but also in appearance, as Yung Yung, much smaller in stature than both Nino and Sakti, uses a style of dress and hair which contrasts with the gym-fit and more normatively masculine style and comportment of Sakti and Nino. His snide and derisive comments about others at the gathering, in the style of the main *arisan* group, also marks him as of the type from whom Sakti, Meimei and Andien eventually manage to break free in their quest to ‘be themselves’.

Yung Yung is clearly presented as a threat to Sakti, and it is interesting to examine exactly why this is so. It might be simply understood that the effeminate camp photographer is unwelcome because Sakti is loath to be associated with other men of a non-normative gender or sexuality, as if his presence may somehow make Sakti's sexuality more explicit. However, Sakti's spurning of Yung Yung also seems to be about the rejection of a certain type of subjectivity, in which homosexuality and gender transgression are inextricably linked and where differences are celebrated rather than regretted. The encounter between the two comes to a head when Sakti is about to leave for the airport to travel to London. Yung Yung arrives and begins to flirt with Sakti who is already seated in his car. Sakti repeatedly tries to close the vehicle door and therefore shut out the photographer, but Yung Yung insists on trying to keep the door open. The gulf between the two in this encounter is further highlighted by language differences. While Sakti continues to use a mixture of Indonesian and English as he has done throughout the film, Yung Yung's language is replete with words and syntax from *bahasa gay*. Not only does this mark him as confident in his alternative gender and sexuality, but in using this particular way of speaking, a specifically local notion of the subject position is stressed. Sakti is clearly unsettled by Yung Yung's presence, and as he finally succeeds in shutting the car door, he stresses his cosmopolitan and global identity by speaking in English, 'Sorry, but I'm in a relationship,' to distance himself spatially, emotionally, culturally and now linguistically from his camp pursuer. Furthermore, in making reference to a relationship, the resort to the idea of monogamy as indicative of being morally *normal* serves only to stress the gulf between the two men in Sakti's eyes.

This is not just a case of Sakti being made to feel uncomfortable by a rather flamboyant photographer. Rather, it is an attempt to shut out the queer world from the homonormative bubble in which Sakti and Nino seem to be trying to live. Just as the main characters of *Arisan!* negotiate the geographical space of Jakarta by travelling around in cars with blacked-out windows from one luxurious venue to another, keeping the rest of the unpleasant reality of the city at bay, in closing the door on Yung Yung as he heads off to catch a plane to London, Sakti is also seemingly trying to keep the 'queer unwanted' at a distance.

***Arisan!* – uncensored kisses and playing gay**

Turning now to the narratives about the film, almost twenty years after Mathias Muchus was stressing his heterosexuality following the role of *gay* Nico in *Istana Kecantikan*, similar interviews and reassurances were being given by the latest actors to play *gay*. For example, in the book that accompanied *Arisan!* (Dinata 2004), Tora Sudiro who played Sakti, described it as the most difficult role he had ever had to play, not just in terms of the athletic body he had to develop, but the psychological difficulties in playing a homosexual.¹⁷ Only with the support of the crew and director did he have the self-belief to kiss Surya Saputra (Dinata 2004: 23). Surya Saputra is also quoted as saying that he never imagined he could kiss another man and in summing up his role as Nino, the actor stressed that in real

life he is straight (Dinata 2004: 51). Saputra also emphasized the research necessary to understand the *gay* lifestyle, including visiting a Jakarta café frequented by *gay* men and at the request of Joko Anwar, watching the TV series *Queer as Folk* (Saputra 2005).¹⁸ While at first, it may seem odd to try to learn about being *gay* by watching a media representation, and even more so for someone wanting to represent an Indonesian *gay* man to be directed to watch a Western construction of queer identities, it is, on reflection, less surprising given the global imagining of the *gay* subject position taken by the makers of the film.

While very few Indonesian films become international news stories, reports about *Arisan!* circulated widely in early 2004. Rachel Harvey's story for the BBC had the headline 'Indonesia embraces first gay screen kiss', and focused on the generally positive local response to the film, the strong critical reception and the lack of oppositional voices from conservatives (Harvey 2004). A Reuters article by Tomi Soetjipto (2004) appeared in online news sources from the *Los Angeles Times* to *China Daily* under a variety of headings, and also focused on the *gay* kiss, but gave more space to negative audience reactions – 'I heard about the *gay* thing, but I wasn't prepared for the kiss. It's kind of sickening, don't you think?' – as well as the taboo-breaking nature of the film (e.g. Soetjipto 2004). Lela Djuhari's article on the film for Associated Press also stressed the *gay* kiss, but used this as a vehicle to discuss the situation of homosexuality in the country more generally (Djuhari 2004).

The film gained most attention for its inclusion of a *gay* kiss – or actually, two kisses. It is worth noting here the comments from the head of the board of censors, the late Titie Said, who sought to explain why this kiss had been allowed while even heterosexual kisses in other films had been cut. According to an article by Jason Tedjasukmana on censorship in Indonesian films, Said is accredited with recognizing '12 categories of kisses', with pecks on the cheek and on the forehead being permissible, while kisses on the lips were prohibited if they might 'arouse one's passion'. The allowance of the kiss in *Arisan!* was justified by Said because it was shot from a distance and therefore did not arouse the requisite passions (Tedjasukmana 2007). While the kiss was screened from a distance thus passing the censors, as John Groves has argued, the fact that the camera panned away as the two kissed actually allows for a variety of imaginings from the audience (Groves 2010).¹⁹ For the second kiss, more overtly sexual and certainly longer in duration than the first, a technique of switching between three camera angles seems to have assuaged the censors' fears that passions may be aroused. Furthermore, in this scene the gaze, and therefore sympathies of the audience, switches as we witness the embrace from Meimei's perspective, and the frame is constructed to invoke her shock that neither Nino nor her best friend Sakti are the people she thought she knew. The sense of loss and betrayal that this realization represents for Meimei is signified by the change of camera angle to fix on the birthday cake she was carrying as it drops between her legs, referencing her infertility.²⁰

It is worth noting that there is not actually a single heterosexual kiss on the lips in *Arisan!*, though there are a number of pecks on the cheek, and as such the focus on the *gay* kiss needs a little more unpacking. We should note that kissing on the

lips is a far from common convention in Indonesian cinema even for heterosexuals:²¹ indeed one film – *Buruan Cium Gue* ('Kiss Me Quick', dir. Findo Purwono HW, 2004) – had to be withdrawn from cinemas because of a scandal which arose over its title.²² It is little surprise, therefore, that there had been no *gay* kisses screened previously. Nonetheless, this championing of *Arisan!* for its inclusion of *gay* kisses might be taken to suggest that there had never been any prior scenes of physical intimacy between men in Indonesian cinema. For example, there is nothing in *Arisan!* to compare with the scene in which Nico and Toni writhed topless in bed together in *Istana Kecantikan*, or even with the suggestion of sex between Andri and Stephen in *Remaja di Lampu Merah*. Despite their two kisses, Nino and Sakti never seem particularly passionate; we don't even catch a glimpse of one of the men topless, and even when Sakti returns from a trip to London, Nino simply greets him at home with a peck on the cheek before the couple settle down to eat a Chinese takeaway. Nonetheless, whereas those previous scenes of intimacy had been used to signify immorality, danger, or at the very least, impending disaster, in *Arisan!* we can be content to imagine that Nino and Sakti will continue to enjoy such private and therefore unthreatening moments of domestic intimacy long after the film ends. As such, Nino and Sakti go down in Indonesian cinematic history for being allowed not only to kiss on screen but also to survive as a happy, if not particularly sexual, couple.

***Janji Joni* – modern gay men and the queer unwanted**

Soon after the success of *Arisan!*, Joko Anwar, who had co-written the screenplay of the film with Nia Dinata, directed his first film *Janji Joni*, which was also produced by Dinata's Kalyana Shira Films. Importantly, Joko Anwar is one of the few Indonesians in the film industry to be publicly 'out', and his specific interest in representation of the *gay* subject position is evident in a number of films that he has been involved in. He is credited with saying he feels very close to the *dunia gay* and that he cannot imagine making a film that did not reference that world (Anwar 2005).

With its numerous allusions to Indonesian and Western film-making traditions, *Janji Joni* also contains a particularly interesting reference back to *Arisan!*. On many levels there is a good case for suggesting that *Janji Joni* is one of the true queer films of the *reformasi* era. The film is essentially a romance-comedy-adventure film in which Joni (Nicholas Saputra), a film delivery boy, overcomes a number of obstacles as he tries to deliver a roll of film on time to win a date with a beautiful girl, Angelique (Mariana Renata), whom he meets in the cinema. On the basis of this brief summary it appears to follow a fairly conventional structure – a lower class boy meets an upper class girl and then has to endure an assortment of difficulties to convince her that he is worthy of her love, which of course he manages to do by the end of the film. However, two aspects of *Janji Joni*, both at the very beginning of the film, construct a view of the world which is far more diverse and fluid in terms of gender and sexuality than the conventional film structure might at first suggest.

An opening montage explores the way in which Jakarta folk think about, explore and transform their lives in response to films they have seen (all of which are Western films). For example, one woman is shown saying to herself 'I really love the film *The Last Samurai*, Tom Cruise is so cool' before the camera pans to a man standing nearby who thinks to himself 'I really love *The Last Samurai*, Tom Cruise is really sexy.' Then the narrator recounts how film has transformed the lives of some of his friends – a punk who became a policeman after watching *Police Academy*; a nerd incapable of developing personal relationships who was able to make imaginary friends after watching *A Beautiful Mind*; and a hard rock guitarist who after watching *Bring It On* became a cheerleader. The transformation of these individuals is illustrated through a succession of Polaroid shots. The last of the three friends, a formerly long-haired musician, becomes a skirt and bra-top wearing cheerleader whose guitar is replaced sequentially by pom-poms, a large lollypop and a lapdog. This transformation is also compelling for its depictions occurring in adulthood, thereby recognizing an alternate notion of masculinity that deliberately plays against the more common imaginings of childhood effeminacy. However, it is a construction of gender that destabilizes rigid notions of conformity and that posits instead that in all of us there is potentially something a little queer.

This opening sequence is something quite remarkable for Indonesian cinema. In addition to being one of the few Indonesian films to engage truly with film itself as an important cultural product, it also recognizes an urban Indonesian society that is, at least beneath the surface, more fluid and complex in terms of desire and sexuality than is generally recognized or admitted in the Indonesian mass media. The fact that male screen icons may be objects of lust for men as well as women is perhaps not something new for Western screen audiences, but in Indonesian cinema it is truly noteworthy. This notion was introduced in a playfully subversive discussion in the final scenes of *Arisan!* when the three friends imagine who would play them if a film were made of their lives. Sakti jokes that Nicholas Saputra might play his character. This too, though not quite as overt, might also be interpreted as a fantasy of an Indonesian film star (incidentally the lead in *Janji Joni*) as an object of Indonesian *gay* desire. Certainly as Sakti imagines his life being played by Nicholas Saputra, so too the audience is surely invited to imagine that same actor in the *gay* role complete with *gay* kiss.²³

Having established the primacy of films in many people's lives, the story then moves on to a scene in a cinema, where the hero Joni overhears a conversation between two men in the washroom. It soon becomes clear that the two men are a *gay* couple, and given that one of them is played by Tora Sudiro, who was Sakti in *Arisan!*, it is impossible not to associate this couple with Nino and Sakti from that film.²⁴ The couple discuss the essence of true love and, drawing on Jennifer Aniston's character in *The Object of My Affection* (dir. Nicholas Hytner, 1998), Tora Sudiro's character argues against settling for compromise, maintaining that the heart will tell you when you have met your soulmate.²⁵ The other *gay* man (Winky Wiryawan) then asks his friend if he has already met his soulmate, at which point he affectionately pulls his companion towards him and, putting his

arm round his shoulder, affirms that of course he sees this friend as his soulmate. On overhearing this discussion Joni too is inspired to reject compromise and to follow his heart. He suddenly finds the courage to pursue the upper class girl he has just bumped into in the cinema lobby. Thus Joni's quest for true love is based on the example of the *gay* couple he overhears in the cinema washroom. This 'gay inspiration' is further apparent for the film's audience, with their intertextual knowledge of the relationship they had already seen develop in *Arisan!*. In this second respect *Janji Joni*'s credentials as a queer film in which *gay* romantic love can become the model for heterosexual romantic love seem clear.

In thinking about this proposition for a *gay* model, it is noticeable that all the cinematic examples invoked in the opening stages of *Janji Joni* are from Western film. While Indonesian traditions are referenced later on in the narrative, all of the inspirations for *gay* love, the objects of *gay* erotic desire and the understandings of the *gay* subject position come from Hollywood. This construction of the model of the modern *gay* relationship, seemingly free of the anxieties evident in *Istana Kecantikan* and *Kuldesak*, and with its apparently upper-class setting and inspiration based more on global circuits of queer knowledge rather than anything intrinsically Indonesian, becomes even more obvious when we consider one brief but telling moment towards the end of *Janji Joni*. In that scene, Joni finally has the film roll back in his hands, and simply needs to get back to the cinema as fast as possible. He stops a passing taxi whose driver says three words to him, 'Selamat sore, Mas' ('Good afternoon, Sir').²⁶ The words, of course, are all one would expect of a friendly taxi driver. So why does Joni decline the lift and opt for trying to hitch a lift in the back of an ambulance instead? The sudden change of mind can only be explained by the manner of the taxi driver and while some Indonesians have explained this development in the plot as based on Joni's fear that the taxi ride would result in more mishaps, it seems to me that the explanation is simply based on the fact that the cabbie is a little bit camp. Certainly this was also the view of the DVD's subtitle translator who phrases it as 'Good afternoon, Handsome!'. Heteronormativity seems to be the model here, and homonormativity the result. This is a hierarchy of worthiness which is based on models of gender conformity, in which *gay* couples who perform their gender according to acceptable masculine codes, and who understand their relationships in terms of notions of heterosexual monogamy, are tolerated and potentially inspirational, but at the expense of delegitimizing other models of masculinity – as exemplified by the over-friendly cab driver.

The queer unwanted in this film, however, is not simply snubbed because he is camp, or a little bit *banci*. We should also note here the class difference, for while we can presume that the opening *gay* couple played by Tora Sudiro and Winky Wiryawan are from Jakarta's elite – based on the intertextual reference to *Arisan!* and the fact that, like Joni's intended, they are part of the audience in the upmarket cinema, not employees of the institution – the cab driver is clearly from a less privileged social background. While the homonormative model of perfect monogamous love invoked at the opening of the film provides the inspiration for Joni to pursue his own true love, this other apparently less palatable variant

of queerness strikes fear and confusion into Joni's heart. He would rather risk failing in his promise than getting into a car with a camp driver. In constructing the homonormatively *gay* couple as part of the acceptable side of cosmopolitan Indonesian society, the lower-class cab driver is othered as part of the not-quite modern, troublingly effeminate, queer unwanted.

This seeming ambivalence in Joko Anwar's work towards queer identities, and his focus on a homonormative model suggestive of influence from Western neoliberal imaginings of the modern acceptable *gay* man, takes on another dimension in his second feature, *Kala*. This film, often described as neo-noir in style, draws on a variety of Indonesian and Western genres and is the story of a state in an escalating condition of turmoil. After a number of murders, Eros, who is created in the mould of a typical *film noir* detective, sets out to unravel the mystery. One very short scene in the film shows Eros sitting smoking on the side of a bed in a dingy motel. His companion, still lying down at first and therefore obscured from view, is revealed to be another man. There is nothing else in the film to hint at Eros' sexuality, and several commentators have fixed on the inclusion of this detective figure as a true sign of something new when it comes to constructions of *gay* identities in Indonesian cinema. This idea is contained in the description of Eros as a character 'who happens to be *gay*' (Emond 2010).²⁷

This concept has been welcomed by many. Eros is generally described as a *gay* male character free from stereotypical representations, who lives his life like any other character on the screen, and whose sexuality is simply one aspect of his identity. In several key respects, the construction of Eros and his unnamed partner contrasts significantly with the *gay* men in *Arisan!* and *Janji Joni*. In the short exchange of words, there is no discussion of sexuality, no sense of representing them as a happy couple. Rather, perhaps fitting the style of *Kala*, there is a strong focus on letting the image tell the story. From the night-time setting to the sultry music accompanying the scene, there is a focus here on the sex we can presume the two men came to the motel for. Seeing Eros (and his sexual partner) stripped down to boxer shorts, this is a far more overtly sexual couple than Sakti and Nino. While his partner points to the cigarette Eros is smoking as a sign that he wants to leave, there is also no clearer cinematic indication that sex has just taken place.

Thus the revelation midway through the film that our detective hero has sex with men may be seen as a huge step in challenging audiences' heterosexual suppositions that everyone is the same as them (heterosexual) unless specifically marked as other in some way. Joko Anwar's film confronts abruptly the audience's heterosexual assumptions and simultaneously contests the detective archetype from the noir genre. Not only is the detective hero a man who has sex with men, but also as the plot reaches its increasingly fantastical conclusion, we find that this man is also the individual chosen to bring peace and harmony to this troubled nation.

Nonetheless one cannot help but be reminded of Dyer's point about the various functions of character typing (1977: 31). In stripping Eros of any qualities which might mark him as *gay*, other than the fact that he is shown to have slept with one man on one occasion, is there not the danger of denying the existence of *gay*

subjectivities, gay histories and specificities in the experience of living life as a *gay* man in a society which, if not homophobic, is heteropositive? Certainly there are *gay* men in Indonesia who are judged to be sufficiently masculine to pass as heterosexual, or at least without attracting derogatory comments. But there are also many *gay* men who cannot or do not want to perform their masculinity in accordance with heteronormative expectations. After all, if *gay* men are no different from *normal* men except for the object of their erotic desire, why are they subject to discrimination and disadvantage in Indonesian society? And does the fact that they experience disadvantage and discrimination not mean that there is more to the difference than mere sexual behaviour?

Considering Joko Anwar's declaration of a desire to include the *gay* world in his films (2005) it is notable that the only place that Eros seems able to perform his sexual identity is in the confines of a seedy motel far from the city centre. While numerous commentators have described Eros as a *gay* man, it seems that there are reasons to challenge the use of this subject position. One wonders whether Eros would understand himself as a *gay* man, and whether it may be perhaps more suitable to describe him with the behavioural term of a man who has sex with men (MSM).

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on four films which, in their respective ways, are perceived to have played an important role in the history of constructions of the *gay* subject position in Indonesian cinema. Both *Kuldesak* and *Arisan!* attracted attention from media commentators for their inclusion of *gay* kisses, and the censorship, or lack thereof, of those expressions of intimacy. *Arisan!* showed a happy and successful *gay* man and his partner accepted by his family and some of his friends. *Janji Joni* used a *gay* couple's idealism as the model for heterosexual love, and its opening montage features a variety of random Jakarta citizens who have come to understand their sexuality or gender in new diverse ways as a result of watching films. The recognition that men also dream about Tom Cruise challenges audiences' perceptions that individuals they see on screen are heterosexual unless marked otherwise. In *Kala*, Joko Anwar extends this notion by disclosing midway through the film that the hero Eros is having sex with another man, leading most commentators to understand him as a man who just happens to be *gay*.

Undoubtedly, *Arisan!*, *Janji Joni* and *Kala* mark a specific effort to engage with the *gay* subject position in a more positive light. In view of popularly accepted narratives regarding the understanding of constructions of homosexuality in the New Order, they can be seen to act as something of a response to those films from an earlier era. This is particularly notable in the case of *Arisan!*, which seems to re-imagine various aspects of *Istana Kecantikan* through a newer, more cosmopolitan and global lens. However, none of these films go as far as *Kuldesak* in imaging a *gay* couple demonstrating their intimacy – indeed simply behaving as a couple – as part of the visible Jakarta cityscape. Neither do those films surpass *Kuldesak*'s imagination of a *gay* identity as something which exists

beyond the elite metropolitan class. In their retreat to their innermost thoughts or the domestic, private space of the apartment, motel room, or even the washroom of a cinema, it is difficult to see how one could interpret this, as Maimunah (2010) has argued, as a case of *gay* characters and *gay* meeting places being presented as incidental to Jakarta's metropolitan environment. Remembering the concept of negotiating different cultural spaces as elaborated by both Boellstorff (2005) and Blackwood (2010), it is perhaps unsurprising that these films are so focused on the private. But nor is there any indication that the characters in these films inhabit those spaces in the city which might be designated part of the *gay* world. Indeed, it might be argued that this lack is further evidence of making invisible the queer unwanted, in this project of creating positive homonormative images for the heteronormative majority.²⁸

As discussed in the Introduction, various scholars have pointed to the problem of simply criticizing negative representations and praising positive ones. Following this line of thought, positive representations of homosexuality are just as likely to be removed from reality as negative ones, and as Halberstam holds, a cinema in which there are only positive representations of queer subjects would not be very interesting (1998: 184). More engaging here is to consider what kind of characters are being seen as 'positive' and what sort of impact this may have on popular discourse regarding *gay* men (as the focus of attention in this chapter), and, more broadly, on all manner of sexual and gender identities which exist in Indonesia but are made invisible or unwanted, perhaps even shameful, in this recent cinema. Halberstam notes that in Western cinema the most common stereotypes linked to queer subjectivities are those of the queen and the butch dyke. But while recognizing the violence that may be done in repeating these stereotypes, this is not to argue that these stereotypes do not ever 'represent a "true" type': butch dykes and queens do exist, and they should not be expunged from the screen simply because such use of stereotypes in the past has been judged to 'prop up a dominant system of gender and sexuality' (Halberstam 1998: 180). As Halberstam argues, these stereotypes can also 'exceed the limits of representation imposed by the law of the stereotype and disrupt the dominant system of representation that depends on negative queer images' (1998: 180). In the case of Indonesia, the common and much-complained about stereotypes, the *waria* and the camp man, could be coerced to disrupt the dominant system of representation far more effectively than purely constructing *gay* men in the same image as heterosexual men. In disavowing types of *gay* men who have been the target of stereotypes in the past, a new set of essentialized notions of homosexuality, seemingly akin to Duggan's homonormativity, has been created. We might also note here a comment by John Badalu regarding the types of people deemed appropriate at Q! Film Festival parties: 'There are a lot of male prostitutes who would come if we opened it to the public, so we have to be selective with guests' (Fui 2012: 79). It is not just in Indonesian film, but also in events which are purportedly celebrating queer life, that certain types of people are unwanted.

It is ironic that *Kuldesak* is noted for its pessimistic portrayal of the lives of *gay* men when it serves only to highlight an intolerance of *gay* men and their desires on the part of both urban society and the Indonesian state. In contrast, films such as *Arisan!* and *Janji Joni*, in making a case for tolerance and acceptance of the healthy, professional, clean-living, monogamous elite *gay* men, simultaneously ‘other’ the more marginalized, less normative, sexual and gender identities. There are, of course, significant differences between the new homonormativity being proposed by neoliberals in the United States and the images being constructed by the Indonesian elite in these films. But in the focus on consumerism, personal wealth, monogamy and acceptance by the heterosexual world, there are, nonetheless, remarkable similarities. When Sakti slams the door on Yung Yung, and when Joni declines to get into the cab, both films are asserting that to be *gay*, wealthy and monogamous deserves acceptance, whereas sexual or gender identities which go beyond or threaten this normativity do not. It is this aping of heteronormative ideals which fractures Indonesia’s queer communities by degrees of worthiness and acceptability. As such they bring to screen the notion of the queer unwanted. In arguing this point, I am aware that the discussions I pick up on are not well known in Indonesia. Demands for *gay* marriage are not even on the radar. Furthermore, it should be recognized that these ‘positive’ images are being produced at a time when sections of Indonesian society are increasingly vocal in their opposition to the expression of same-sex desire in the irrational fear of corrupting the youth, and in their claims that such subjectivities are un-Indonesian, immoral or sinful. Obviously, it is not my task as a non-Indonesian academic to criticize filmmakers for the images they are constructing. What I am interested in doing is questioning the impact that such images have on popular notions of homosexuality and particularly on those *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians who do not wish to, or are unable to, fit in with the images constructed in these films. My research with focus groups found that the majority of participants read more value into *Istana Kecantikan* than they did into *Arisan!*, a film which was generally dismissed as irrelevant to their social position or to their lived experiences as *gay* or *waria* Indonesians (Murtagh 2011a). Given the censorship regulations that still affect films made in Indonesia, and perhaps even more perturbingly, the power of Islamic groups to demand the withdrawal of films from circulation and posters from display, there are clearly limits as to what images and ideas directors and producers are willing or able to put into their films. Nonetheless, as will be discussed in the next two chapters, other cinematic constructions of *lesbi*, *waria* and *gay* Indonesians, which are perhaps less acclaimed, have presented more diverse, less normalizing images, although marked ambivalences on notions of difference and transgression certainly remain.

Notes

- 1 For discussions on the protracted debates over the pornography laws, see Bellows (2011); Lindsay (2009).
- 2 *Kala* has also played internationally with the title *The Secret*.
- 3 Joko Anwar, the director of *Janji Joni* and *Kala*, wrote the screenplay for *Jakarta Undercover*. It centres on a heterosexual woman who impersonates a *waria* so as to gain employment in a *waria* show at a nightclub. Her son sees a group of men rape and kill a *waria* prostitute, and the film then progresses into a thriller as the murderers hunt down the mother and her son. While certainly embracing the notion of a hedonistic and liberal nightlife, it is debatable if a film with a heterosexual woman impersonating a *waria* as its lead, and a group of men who violate a *waria* resulting in her death, is somehow showing *gay* spaces to be incidental to Jakarta's landscape or evidence of the mainstreaming of queer sexuality.
- 4 Unusually for a film screened post-1998, *Kuldesak* was never released on VCD or DVD and is unfortunately difficult to access. For analysis of other aspects of the film and detailed synopses of all four storylines, see Clark (2010) and Setiyawan (2009).
- 5 The uncensored version was shown at a number of overseas film festivals.
- 6 At least this seems to be implied by Coppens who states that *Arisan!* broke the cycle of the pathological gay character in the same paragraph that she footnotes *Kuldesak*.
- 7 Boellstorff discusses the meaning of hypocrisy in relation to notions of authenticity for *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. He notes the common reference to the concept of hypocrisy by *gay* men when reflecting on relationships, desire and movement between the *gay* and *normal* worlds (2005: 214–15).
- 8 In addition to representations of both male and female homosexuality and working in a variety of genres, notable subjects treated in films produced by Kalyana Shira have been the Chinese in Indonesia, polygamy, those living with disability, and women's access to sexual and reproductive health services.
- 9 The festival had been dormant between 1993 and 2003 because of the decline in film production, financing and standards. In 2004, *Arisan!* won Citra for Best Film, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress and Best Editing (Kristanto 2007: 411).
- 10 The film is distributed internationally by Water Bearer Films, a company pledging to bring 'quality gay-themed films to the home viewing market' (www.waterbearerfilms.com).
- 11 Joko Anwar also co-scripted *Arisan!*.
- 12 The *arisan* is a highly popular form of social gathering in Indonesia, often described as a type of Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA). Each member pays in a pre-established amount of money which is traditionally used for micro-financing or as a form of rotating savings. *Arisan* are held by all social classes and in a range of social settings. While for poorer Indonesians this gathering provides otherwise inaccessible credit, for more elite Indonesians, while the investment may be much higher, the purpose may be purely social or networking.
- 13 Certainly there are moments when the film mocks the behaviour of the elite but the derision is always far from totalizing.
- 14 *Gay Times* is a monthly British magazine published since 1984. In March 2007 it was rebranded as *GT*. The copy used in the film is a genuine version of the May 1999 issue. That issue was published with two different covers, one featuring an image of Ben Silverstone (the version used in *Arisan!*), the other featuring Brad Gorton, co-star of the British coming out-film *Get Real* (dir. Simon Shore, 1999).
- 15 The character refers to one screenplay called 'Andri dan Haryo Terus Berdansa' ('Andri and Haryo Keep on Dancing') which he says is held up at the censors. This is a direct reference to a screenplay of the same name written by *Arisan!*'s

- co-screenwriter Joko Anwar. According to an interview in 2005, he knew that no Indonesian producer would be brave enough to take on the project, so he published the script on the Internet (Anwar 2005). The script can be found on various sites including: <http://forumm.wgaul.com/showthread.php?s=c42c5d8b6ac86ede4410d8f0f080e76b&t=61110> (accessed 27 February 2012).
- 16 Duggan here is referring to an American writer for the Independent Gay Forum (IGF), Bruce Bawer, who proposed that major corporations were doing more to bring about gay equality than any other establishment institutions or radical gay rights movement (2003: 53–4).
 - 17 This is not unique to Indonesia. On Hollywood's engagement with gay themes at the time of the release of *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005), the gay novelist and critic Phillip Hensher (2005) noted, 'There are half a dozen other big name actors playing gay roles this season, and it's evidently now a safe career move. It's worth noting, however, that none of these actors themselves is gay, and indeed most of them have been at some pains to distance themselves from any such suggestion.'
 - 18 It is not clear whether he watched the American version or the original British series, first screened in 1999. The British series was set around Manchester's gay village and focused on the lives of three gay men – Stuart who was extremely sexually active, Vince who was far less sexually confident, and Nathan, a 15-year-old school-boy who slept with Stuart after his first encounter on the gay scene.
 - 19 As John Groves has maintained, if the shot had not panned away, there would have been only two options available to the director: 'either the kiss would have had to have been cut at some point which might have looked like censorship (either state censorship, or self-censorship on Dinata's part). Or if the kiss hadn't been cut, they would have had to have continued the action which might have led to more than a kiss and inevitable state censorship' (2010).
 - 20 See Hughes-Freeland (2011: 425–6) for a fuller discussion of this scene.
 - 21 Heider notes that kissing in Indonesian films became common only in the late 1980s (1991: 67). Sen makes the point that during the New Order, there was an unwillingness of censors to allow 'private acts of intimacy into the public domain of the film screen'. Like Heider, she also notes that censors were more tolerant of displays of intimacy in European and American films (1994: 155). Indonesian films from which heterosexual kisses have been cut in recent years include *Gie* (dir. Riri Riza, 2005) and *3 Hari untuk Selamanya* (*3 Days to Forever*, dir. Riri Riza, 2007). The film *Janji Joni* (discussed below) was also subjected to the cutting of two heterosexual kisses between actors Ria Irawan and Syandi Tumiwa, and between Wulan Guritno and Ananda Mikola, breaking a one-shot scene (Anwar 2005).
 - 22 In 2004 the film was passed by the censors but then withdrawn from screens after pressure from Aa Gym and Din Samsudin of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) who claimed that it 'encouraged adultery' (Kusuma and Haryanto 2007: 105–6, 130). The film's narrative focuses on a schoolgirl who tries to get a kiss from her conservative boyfriend. The film was re-released with some revisions under a new name – *Satu Kecupan* ('One Smooch') (Kristanto 2007: 415).
 - 23 Incidentally, Nicholas Saputra is the star of *Gie*, which has received a number of academic readings which stress the homoerotic relationship between the student activist Gie and his friend Han (e.g. Maimunah 2008a; Rahman 2005).
 - 24 It was apparently intended for the other character to be played by Surya Saputra, who had played Nino, but he reputedly turned down the role so as not to be stereotyped.
 - 25 *The Object of My Affection* is a romantic comedy in which Jennifer Aniston's character Nina, pregnant by a boyfriend whom she knows is not the right man for her, falls in love with her gay flatmate, George, who is apparently perfect in almost every other respect. George then starts dating another man which is difficult for Nina to cope

with. Eventually, Nina finds a suitable heterosexual partner, and George and Nina end the film as good friends.

- 26 *Mas* is a commonly used term of address in Java for contemporary males, which may be translated as ‘elder brother’.
- 27 Eros is played by Ario Bayu, who had already played a *gay* role in *Pesan dari Surga* (‘Message from Heaven’, dir. Sekar Ayu Asmara, 2006)(see [Chapter 7](#)). The New Zealand-raised actor gives one of the most positive comments so far from an Indonesian actor on the task of playing *gay*. He describes his approach; ‘I had sort of a clue on how to see things from the homosexual side, I don’t know if it’s PC to say that. My take on it is that if I could love another human being, in this case a woman, then why couldn’t I also understand what it’s like to love a man?’ (Emond 2010).
- 28 In arguing this, I should acknowledge the opening scenes of *Jakarta Undercover* (see note 3), set in a nightspot which has been interpreted by many as a *gay* club – though with equal numbers of male and female revellers and certainly not with any men dancing together.

6 Old concerns in a new era?

Images of *lesbi* in the new millennium

One of the remarkable characteristics of post-New Order cinema is the specific engagement with non-normative sexualities. However, the number of films which have focused specifically on romantic love between *gay* men, or which have included *gay* men and sexually ambiguous male-bodied characters in minor roles, far outweighs that of films featuring *lesbi* characters. As far as I am aware, there have not yet been any female-to-male transgender or transsexual characters in Indonesian fiction films.¹ Furthermore, while certain filmmakers have publicly expressed a desire to challenge the cinematic representation of *gay* men in New Order film, a similar concern has not been articulated with regard to former cinematic constructions of the *lesbi* subject position. Nonetheless, as will become apparent in this chapter, there are marked differences with images of *lesbi* from the New Order period. In particular, there has been no film to date in which intimacy between women is overtly constructed to appeal to heterosexual male erotic fantasy. On the other hand, the notion of the *lesbi* as a potential threat to patriarchal order persists, and the trope of the violent murderous *lesbi* also continues to some extent. The broken home and physical and sexual abuse are also ongoing tropes in explaining the apparently perplexing question of why some Indonesian women are not attracted to Indonesian men. Also, in marked contrast with recent imaginings of the *gay* subject position, it continues to be rare that *lesbi* couples will survive intact to the end of a film.

This chapter will focus on four films which have specifically sought to engage with the *lesbi* subject position, or at least which feature erotic desire between women which has been interpreted by certain commentators as *lesbi*. Three of these films, *The Butterfly* (dir. Nayato Fio Nuala, 2007),² *Tentang Dia* ('About Her', dir. Rudi Soedjarwo, 2005) and *Detik Terakhir* (*Final Second*, dir. Nanang Istiabudi, 2005), are concerned with the lives of teenage girls on the verge of adulthood. They also share the concept of a love triangle involving two young women and one man, demonstrating the difficulty that (male) filmmakers have in imagining the *lesbi* subject position without the simultaneous participation of male heterosexuals. The first two films in particular also lend themselves to discussion of non-normative gender performance, and I will draw on Halberstam's work on tomboyism and female masculinity (1998) in considering the construction and final transformation of the lead characters in those films. The final film

for discussion, Nia Dinata's *Berbagi Suami* (*Love for Share* 2006), contrasts with all those imaginings of *lesbi* which had gone before, primarily because a female couple is allowed to survive until the end of the film. In addition to proposing a new cinematic imagining of women who desire each other, it also offers new possibilities for thinking about the Indonesian family.

In addition to those films mentioned above, *lesbi*, or references to *lesbi*, occur in a number of other films, providing useful illustrations of how that identity is constructed more generally in media discourse. For example, in Monty Tiwa's 2008 comedy *XL (Extra Large)*³ about a man who engages the help of a traditional healer to increase the size of his manhood, one male character jokes with a friend that it is no wonder so many women become *lesbi* if he is typical of their experience of men. Such jokes are a direct continuation of one of the principle themes that emerged in the discussion of the cinematic construction of *lesbi* during the New Order period. Women become *lesbi* for lack of men, or because men do not perform the right kind of masculinity in this era which Clark has described as one wherein the Indonesian man is undergoing a 'period of fluidity', as archetypal notions of the Indonesian man are being contested by images of non-traditional or alternative masculinities (2010: 86).

Another example, in which the term *lesbian* is used pejoratively by a female character, specifically invoking the notion of policing of female gender and sexuality, occurs in Upi Avianto's first film *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* ('30 Days to Find Love' 2004).⁴ The premise for the film's narrative is established in an opening scene in which three female friends are accused of being *lesbian* by an apparently much more desirable woman, Barbara (Luna Maya). The blow to the young women's self-assurance is compounded by Barbara's observation that she never sees them hanging out with men. The charge of *lesbian* is made three times in succession, but rather than challenge Barbara's apparently obsessive surveillance activities, the three friends attempt instead to counter her accusation. For instance, one of the group cites her ownership of the TV series *Meteor Garden* on VCD, and her love of the Taiwanese boy band F4, as evidence of her femininity, of being a 'pure woman' (*perempuan sejati*).⁵ Finally, the more tomboyish and feisty of the three swings a punch at Barbara, knocking her to the floor. However, the friends are unsettled to such an extent that they resolve urgently to prove their femininity, and to compete to find heterosexual love within thirty days. The twist in the film is that none of the many candidates they date proves suitable, each of them being carefully crafted caricatures of a range of undesirable masculine traits (e.g. self-obsessed, unhygienic, sex maniac, *gay*). In the end, the friends resolve that being with each other is more fun than dating, though there is no comeuppance in the film for Barbara, nor any suggestion that an accusation of being *lesbian* should not instill a sense of shame or failure. The comedic style of the film, which some other women filmmakers have described as more akin to 'chick lit' (Hughes-Freeland 2011: 426), relies on the knowing use of a number of masculine stereotypes, and perhaps we should see the questioning of the girls' sexuality as a similar resort to caricature. Nonetheless, for a director who has gone on to engage particularly with *gay* and transgender subject positions (see

Chapter 7), and who has publicly expressed her desire to educate Indonesian cinemagoers about non-normative (male) sexualities (*KapanLagi* 2007), it is all the more revealing that the term *lesbian* should be invoked to engender such feelings of inadequacy.

While *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* uses the *lesbi* subject position as a signifier of exclusion and deviancy in an almost off-handed and perhaps even unthinking way, *lesbi* seem to be incorporated into the 2006 film *I Love You, Om* ('I Love You, Uncle', dir. Widy Wijaya) for no other purpose than sensationalism. A most peculiar film about the emotional relationship that develops between an eleven-year-old girl and a thirty-five-year-old man, the film has been labelled as verging on paedophilic by some commentators. Certainly, it is highly unsettling in its sexualization of the young girl, and in the manner in which the relationship is shown to progress. As Ferry Siregar (2007a) has argued, it seems that the team behind the film sought to push boundaries by producing an 'unusual' story, but regretfully they did so with a complete lack of sensitivity. And if the storyline of a love affair between a pre-pubescent child and man in his late thirties is not enough to court controversy, a minor subplot of abuse, rape and lethal *lesbi* is added into the mix. With nothing in the film to lend itself to a resistant, or queer, reading of the *lesbi* storyline, *I Love You, Om* exploits existing cinematic notions of *lesbi* unashamedly as deviant, dangerous and definitely to be avoided.

I Love You, Om tells the story of Dion, a young girl from an extremely wealthy background. She is neglected by her mother who works too hard running the family businesses after the death of her husband. The relationship between mother and daughter becomes increasingly difficult. A bond develops between Dion and the laundryman Om (Uncle) Gaza. This nature of the friendship becomes ever more confused in the minds of both Dion and the older man. Gaza's partner Nayla has recently left him, and it is here that the *lesbi* subplot surfaces – Nayla is now living with another woman.

The main *lesbi* character Nayla (Karenina) is marked as deceitful and emotionally volatile from the beginning. Her duplicity is established in a succession of scenes where she begs Gaza to take her back, and expresses her love for her female partner Laras (Marcha Caroline). In a scene with Gaza, her mood changes from pleading to rage when he refuses to take her back and she claims that he is in her debt due to the financial support she has given him. The core scene between the two women is characterized by violence almost ending in death. When Nayla confesses to Laras that she is pregnant, her enraged partner accuses her of being in the relationship simply for her money; Laras takes away Nayla's credit cards and orders her out of the house. Nayla goes to leave, but takes her car keys with her, the car being presumably a present from Laras. A fight ensues in which Laras verbally abuses Nayla while hitting and kicking her repeatedly. As so often happens in Indonesian films however, it is not Nayla who comes off worse. In the struggle, Laras falls over the banister to plunge down several floors before landing on a conveniently positioned sofa. For a moment it seems she is dead – at least this is what Nayla thinks – but the almost indestructible Laras recovers to scream for the return of her car as Nayla flees.

The next scene of gratuitous violence occurs when Nayla visits the photographer who has apparently raped her and whom she accuses of having got her pregnant. He denies responsibility, claiming that because she likes women he could not possibly be responsible. When he refuses to accept his part in the pregnancy, she picks up his camera and surreptitiously smashes it hard across his face leaving him prostrate and bleeding. As he tries to crawl away from her we hear only the final impact – another swipe with the camera or maybe a kick – but the camera’s gaze returns for us to see her kicking him callously a couple of times to check he is really dead before walking away from his lifeless body.

Beyond its superficial veneer of concern for children and the relationships they form with adults, *I Love You, Om* conflates a raft of images already associated with the *lesbi* subject position in Indonesian cinema since the era of the New Order. The suggestion of women turning to homosexuality for material gain is reminiscent of Lisa in *Gadis Metropolis*, the credit card of the wealthier woman being the signifier that links the two situations overtly. In their resort to extreme physical violence both Laras and Nayla are reminders of the threat to patriarchal order that their non-normative sexuality poses. In Laras’ jealousy and resultant violent rage on hearing that Nayla is pregnant, we are also reminded of the warning from *Gadis Metropolis* that love between women is unlike heterosexual love, and that it somehow ensnares the parties into ties that cannot be unbound. Furthermore, the inclusion of rape into Nayla’s character background perpetuates the New Order construction of the *lesbi* subject position as a passive reaction of last resort which comes about as a result of the actions, or rather the inappropriate actions, of men rather than as a positive and deliberate expression of desire by women.

In one respect there is a significant difference between *I Love You, Om* and those *lesbi* films from the early 1990s. In the latter, men tried to win their women back from homosexuality by demonstrating their superior qualities of loyalty, honesty, decency and bravery, but in the former, Gaza’s response is quite the opposite. It seems that Gaza was so traumatized by Nayla’s betrayal, and emasculated at being replaced by a woman, that he can find solace in friendship only with a pre-pubescent girl, and when he brings that relationship to an end he channels his emotions into his affection for a pet fish. However, it is here that the film exceeds any attempt at re-imagining the possibilities for alternative masculinities described by Clark (2010). In the face of Gaza’s failure as a man in not preventing his wife from straying into lesbianism and murder, and in his inability to behave appropriately with the pre-pubescent Dion, there is no choice but to kill him off in a car accident towards the end of the film.

This brief survey of the variety of constructions of *lesbi* subject positions in the early years of the twenty-first century has highlighted a number of continuities with the New Order era, in terms of a closer policing of female sexuality, the ongoing pathologization of women who desire women, the violent *lesbi*, and the idea that a woman’s decision to ‘become’ *lesbi* can normally be explained by the behaviour of men. What is perhaps less apparent in this opening discussion is that the solution to female homosexuality lies in the hands of men. As we turn now

to the films which will form the main focus of this chapter, many of these ideas continue to resonate.

Love triangles, tomboys and female masculinity

The Butterfly tells the story of three university friends – two young women, Tia (Poppy Sovia) and Desi (Debby Kristy) and a young man, Fano (Andhika Pratama) – as they embark on a life-changing road trip across Java to celebrate Desi's twentieth birthday. The progression of their journey into the highlands around Bandung is interwoven with flashbacks, and the main interest of the film centres on the love felt between Tia and Desi and on a developing relationship between Fano and Tia. All of this occurs against the backdrop of Desi's ill health – indeed the trip comes to an end when she dies.

Taking place as it does to celebrate Desi's twentieth birthday, the film is clearly positioned as a coming-of-age movie. However, when Desi remarks that in the future they may not all be together again, this is not simply a young woman's realization that their bonds will be tested by new priorities as they enter adulthood and move on from their student lives. As we find out, this is also a recognition that she is soon to die of some unnamed illness. It is against this backdrop that Desi finally manages to verbalize her love for Tia, and on the point of death she asks Tia's permission to kiss her, to which Tia consents. With the security of impending death Desi is finally able to express fully her erotic desire for Tia. Likewise Tia is able to reciprocate in the knowledge that the relationship will go no further. We might take issue with the label of *film lesbi* which some students, bloggers and messengers on electronic discussion boards have applied to the movie, but it is certainly a fairly powerful exploration of the confusing emotions and sexual desires that the three friends share for each other at a pivotal moment in their lives.

With hindsight it is clear that the relationship between Tia and Desi is based on more than friendship. But it is only at the very end of the film, with Desi's declaration of love for Tia – first using the word '*sayang*' which might be taken to mean care as well as love, then restating her love using the far less ambiguous '*cinta*' – that some audiences will become fully aware of the intimacy between the two, or at least the desire felt by Desi. Even then a number of blog sites bear witness to the fact that for many Indonesian viewers the relationship between the two girls is simply one of intense friendship. This unsuspecting response to the relationship might perhaps be explained by naivety or even denial of the possibility for erotic desire between females, for the images of the two women quite clearly invite a sexual reading from the outset, certainly to anyone open to queer readings.

As the three friends set out on their road trip, the bond between the two girls is immediately and continuously differentiated from their relationship with Fano. As they are about to leave, Desi discovers condoms in Fano's bag; while he turns the issue into a joke, without denying his desire to have sex with one or both of them, and says 'just in case', the girls make their feelings clear by using the condoms as balloons as they drive through the countryside in their convertible automobile. Not only do their actions put Fano in his place as far as his sexual intentions are

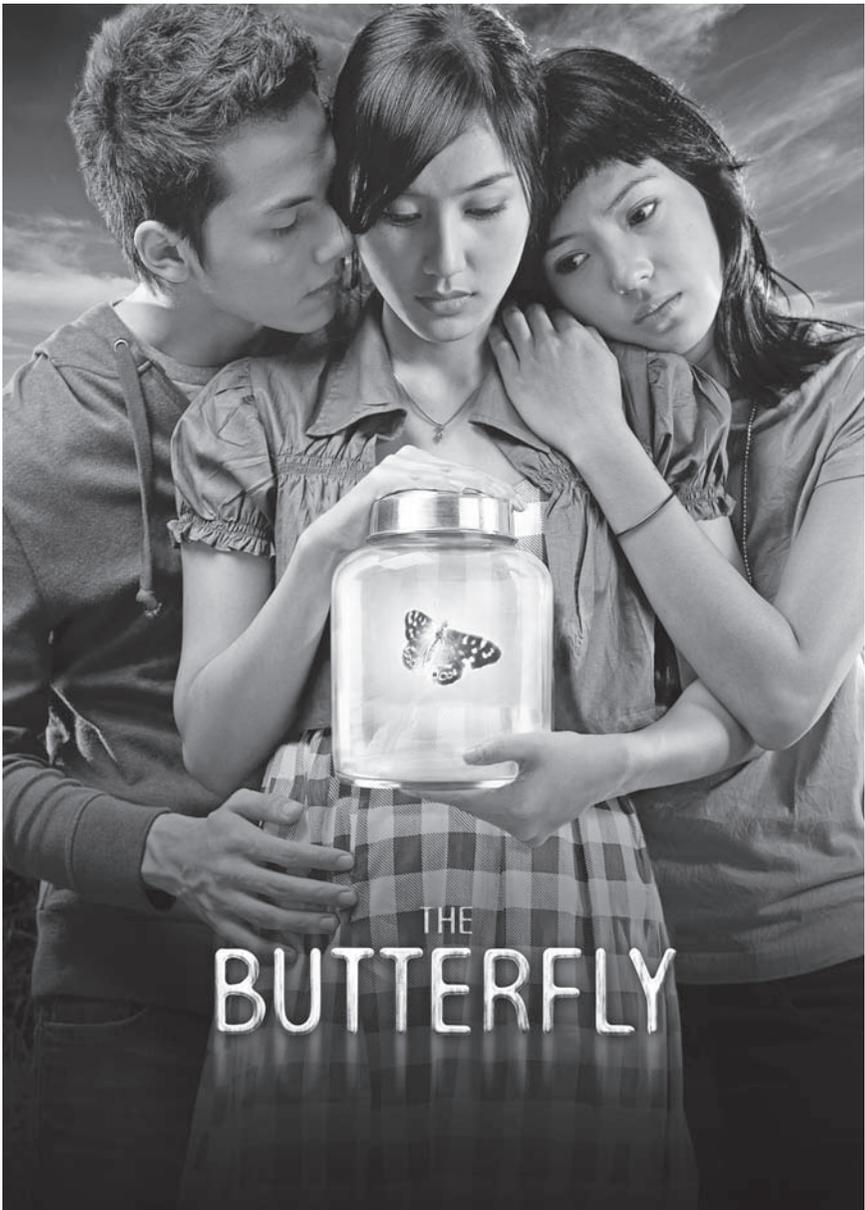


Figure 6.1 Promotional image for *The Butterfly*. Fano, Desi (centre) and Tia. Reproduced with permission of Maxima Pictures



Figure 6.2 Production still from *The Butterfly*. Desi (left) and Tia. Reproduced with permission of Maxima Pictures

concerned, but it also hints at an intimacy and shared understanding between Tia and Desi which Fano will never be part of. The discussion about sleeping arrangements as the three travel around is another moment when it becomes clear that the girls have no intention of letting Fano come between them. As they jump around in the large double bed, Fano is confined to the single bed, despite his protests that the larger bed would fit all three of them. From that moment on, there are numerous night-time scenes showing the two girls in various positions of embrace – though almost always asleep. We also see Tia biting Desi’s finger in one scene of the two embracing, and in another sequence the two wash each other as they share a bath.

These scenes certainly invite a queer reading, at least with regard to Desi’s feelings for Tia, though the film’s direction is at all times careful not to eroticize the relationship, or at least not in accordance with what we might expect of films playing to male heterosexual fantasy. This directorial approach comes through most clearly in the scene where Tia and Desi finally kiss. Desi is covered in blood and clearly very ill, and the three friends hug each other, Fano positioned in between the two women. Desi finally has the courage to confirm Tia’s suspicions that she is hiding something from her. However, the secret is not that she is about to die; rather, it is that she loves her. Initial shock is diminished by Desi’s sudden relapse and as the three hold each other, she asks if she can kiss Tia. With all three friends crying, Fano looks away while Desi slowly moves closer to Tia. As they are about to kiss the camera cuts away to a flashback sequence of the

key moments in their friendship. Then, returning to the two women a moment after their lips separate, the scene's tender reality and emotion are encapsulated in the trail of saliva that hangs between their mouths. While eliding the *gay* kiss – the camera's gaze following Fano's lead in looking away rather than treating the scene as an opportunity for male voyeurism – the sequence nonetheless conveys a sense of intimacy rarely seen in Indonesian films. It is not to last, however, for like in so many Indonesian films that have gone before it, and in common with two of the other three films which form the focus of discussion in this chapter, one of the women must die. This leaves the way open for Tia to get together with Fano; indeed this heterosexual couple had already shared a kiss and were only delaying the relationship's progress because they knew it would be hurtful to Desi. Thus the death of one of the two young women on the eve of adulthood frees the other to embrace, or to be embraced by, the normative path of Indonesian womanhood.

In thinking about the gender performativity of the two girls and their burgeoning sexuality, it is useful to note Halberstam's comments on tomboyism (1998), observations which are based on the situation in the Western world, but which nonetheless seem to be applicable to the cinematic depiction of female masculinity in recent Indonesian cinema. Halberstam, who defines tomboyism as an extended childhood period of female masculinity, argues that – in contrast to the lack of tolerance for cross-identification in boys – tomboys are perceived to be tolerated precisely because their behaviour is associated with a desire for the greater freedom and mobilities afforded to boys. However, she argues that as soon as puberty strikes, girls are constrained by lessons of restraint, repression and punishment when the full pressure of gender conformity is unleashed (1998: 5–6). When watching *The Butterfly* and also *Tentang Dia*, which will be discussed below, I am struck by how, with some modifications, this model seems to fit the depiction of female masculinity in Indonesian films, and how this gender performance is literally snuffed out once the identity becomes complicated by sexual desire. As Halberstam notes with regard to popular Western cinema, 'the image of the tomboy can only be tolerated within a narrative of blossoming womanhood; within such a narrative, tomboyism represents a resistance to adulthood itself rather than adult femininity' (1998: 7). This argument has parallels with Sen's observation, discussed in [Chapter 4](#), that a small body of New Order films was specifically concerned with tomboyism or the rejection of men, and in these films, men are at the heart of both the corruption of natural femininity and its restoration (1994: 140). Likewise, in that chapter I drew on Sen to argue that the New Order *lesbi* subject position was often constructed as having come about as a consequence of men's misdeeds (generally rape), but that men also offered salvation from that deviant sexuality, and thus the restoration to proper femininity.

In *The Butterfly*, it is the presence of the decent and already sexually mature male, in the guise of Fano, which provides the means for Tia to progress to heterosexual adulthood and normative femininity. The contrast between the construction of male and female characters is quite pronounced throughout the film, and a few examples will illustrate this point. Desi's desire for Tia is very much

characterized by the need for someone to care for her, a surrogate for her parents who are both too busy having affairs to care truly about their daughter and who are only maintaining the pretence of a functioning family until Desi dies. Just as both Desi and Tia treat the condoms as a child's toy rather than sexual paraphernalia, so too Desi's confused expressions of love and care for Tia, and the fact that such desire culminates in a single kiss, highlight an almost pre-sexual, pre-adult innocence. Fano, on the other hand, is far from innocent – he has sex on his mind, as evidenced by his optimistic packing of a good quantity of condoms. So too, when Tia tells Fano that she has caught her widowed mother in bed with a toy-boy, Fano counsels her on the need to recognize that her mother has adult, sexual needs. Thus with her pre-adult friend Desi dead, and her mother involved with a younger man, Tia is finally ready to be guided by her heterosexual male friend to sexual and emotional maturity.

A similar pattern, in which one tomboyish character progresses to normative adult femininity while her best friend – who might also be interpreted as a love interest – dies, can be found in Rudi Soedjarwo's 2005 film *Tentang Dia*. In this film the relationship between the two main female characters is constructed in a deliberately ambiguous manner and has certainly been interpreted by some critics as offering a potentially *lesbi* or at least homoerotic reading. However, as Maimunah notes, most critics focused on the theme of suffering caused by the loss on a loved one (2008a). In addition to considering the debates on *lesbi* or homoerotic readings versus close female friendship, I suggest that an added level of understanding may be gained by exploring the narrative as one based on the progression from pre-sexual tomboy to heterosexual adult.

Tentang Dia is the story of Gadis (Sigi Wimala), a student who has been profoundly depressed and alone since her boyfriend left her for her best friend whom he got pregnant. One young man at college, Randu (Fauzi Baadila), is attracted to her, trying to encourage her to get over her upset, though she rarely reciprocates his attention. One day Gadis runs into a young woman, Rudi (Adinia Wirasta), in her car. A friendship soon develops between the two young women, initially at least because of Gadis' efforts. In comparison with Gadis' wealthy background, Rudi has had a very different life experience. She had to run away from home at a young age because of her violent father; indeed, as we later find out, her younger sister died as a consequence of this physical abuse. Rudi has been taken in by the kindly Pak Dibyo and works as a waitress in his restaurant. She lives for the present, having worked to overcome her fears and sense of loss, and encourages Gadis to do the same. Randu becomes suspicious that Gadis is having a relationship with another man (Rudi is generally a male's name), and after he confronts Gadis about her friendship with Rudi she too is forced to reflect on the nature of the relationship that has developed. She asks Rudi to clarify the basis of the relationship and Rudi becomes upset at Gadis' suggestion that she is '*lesbi*'. The two argue, and although Rudi defends Gadis when she is attacked by three girls from college who are jealous of her relationship with Randu, the two do not have time to make up. When Rudi tries to retrieve a photo of herself and Gadis, which she has dropped in the road, she is hit by a car and dies instantly. Pak Dibyo

gives Rudi's diary to Gadis and she interprets the writing as indicating that Rudi did indeed only see their friendship as based on sisterhood. Gadis and Randu are finally brought together as a couple.

In many respects *Tentang Dia* is yet one more film which fits into that pattern of a love triangle between two women and one man. The film's resolution comes when one of the young women is killed, leaving the remaining woman free to be brought back to heterosexuality by the good and decent man. The complication in this interpretation is that Gadis and Rudi both seem to deny their romantic interest in each other. Nonetheless, Gadis certainly suspects that Rudi is sexually attracted to her, and the two women's behaviour when together presents audiences with the opportunity to imagine that their mutual interest extends beyond mere friendship. Numerous scenes show a physical intimacy between the two women which may be interpreted as sexual, and this is highlighted by Gadis' singular interest in Rudi, a woman so different from the women who surround her at college. The classic cinematic montage of snaps taken in a photo booth together shows Gadis pulling Rudi towards her and putting her arm around her. Elsewhere, Rudi invites Gadis to dance, and despite her initial reluctance, the two gain great pleasure from their shared moment together.

As Maimunah (2008a) has argued, the *lesbi* reading of the relationship is also supported by the film's poster which foregrounds the two women, Rudi with her arm around Gadis, leaving Randu to stand alone far in the distance. What is more, the ambiguous tagline used on the poster, '*Harapan itu datang saat dia kehilangan*' ('Hope appeared at a moment of loss'), also allows for a queer reading besides those based on friendship and heterosexual romance. If we understand it to be Gadis' loss, the hope can be interpreted as coming in the form of Rudi to compensate for the loss of her boyfriend, or in the form of Randu who helps her through the loss of Rudi. If it is Rudi's loss – she has lost her family, and in particular her sister – then the hope comes only in the form of Gadis. All these interpretations are possible, but the poster's focus gives weight to a relationship which clearly contradicts, and allows for audiences to resist, the film's actual ending (Maimunah 2008a).

In addition to the *lesbi* issue actually being raised by Gadis, the characterization of the two women also seems to encourage a reading of same-sex erotic attraction by engaging with many of the stereotypes associated with the *lesbi* subject position. Rudi is clearly signified within the film as being tomboyish as other critics and scholars have noted. While these traits represent the self-defence mechanism of a young woman who has had to learn to protect herself on the mean streets of Jakarta she is clearly designed to be read as a tomboy – the questioning of her sexuality by Gadis is presumably intended to resonate with the postulated audience's own questions. In addition to having adopted a name more commonly given to men she is confident in walking the streets alone, she laughs at the idea that she should go to a hospital after being knocked over by Gadis, she throws a powerful right hook at a woman who attacks Gadis, she refuses to look away demurely when they attract the attention of an older man in a café and she has absolutely no fear of heights. So too, the fact that she witnessed the physical abuse

and killing of her sister by a man, presumably her father, represents a recycling of the frequent cinematic trope of the female whose normative performance of gender and sexual identity is disrupted by trauma at the hands of men.

However, I am less convinced by the description of Gadis as Rudi's stereotypical femme counterpart. The strongest argument in favour of Gadis as a femme actually lies in her name *gadis*, meaning girl, and this stands in contrast to Rudi, a name more commonly associated with males. We also know that Gadis has previously had a boyfriend – though he did of course leave her for her best friend. We might also wonder why the girl's pregnancy should be deemed humiliating for Gadis. Pregnancy outside marriage in Indonesian films is fairly disastrous for the female character involved, and a signifier of immorality and impropriety. But perhaps in this case the taunting of Gadis with news of the pregnancy suggests that there was something (hetero)sexually incomplete about her and her relationship with the former boyfriend. But most of all it is Sigi Wimala's acting as Gadis, or perhaps her poor acting,⁶ which leaves me completely dissuaded by her performance of anything approaching normative femininity. Her mannerism is extraordinarily stiff, evoking (perhaps unintentionally) an air of masculinity – a fact which is compounded by her relatively short hair in contrast to the 'cool' college girls who taunt her and even the tomboyish Rudi, who all wear their hair long. Furthermore, the opening scene of Gadis exercising on a treadmill at the gym in running pants and a sleeveless sweat top, while probably intended to establish her as a young woman without friends and going nowhere in life, is a somewhat uncommon method in Indonesian cinema for establishing a character's femininity.

Rather than suggest that the two female characters are constructed to hint at a butch–femme dynamic, I read Gadis to also represent a female who falls outside the acceptable bounds of gender performativity. Gadis is rejected in the film specifically by the other young women at college who are constructed as more normatively feminine, a pattern we have seen already in other films discussed in this chapter. In *30 Hari Mencari Cinta*, the three girls are accused of being 'lesbian' by Barbara because they do not have boyfriends and always hang out together. To indicate Barbara's desirability she is surrounded by a coterie of tall, athletic, handsome men. Even at the film's conclusion, the girls find that they actually prefer hanging out with each other to dating men. In *The Butterfly*, Fano points to the fact that the two women have no other friends at college – other female students avoid them and no male student is interested in dating them. In *Tentang Dia*, Gadis is victimized by a group of three girls, one of whom is also attracted to Randu. 'Why does Randu like Gadis?', the girls discuss. 'She's not popular, she's not pretty and she's not smart.' Furthermore, they are contemptuous of her because she has been dumped by her former boyfriend. In each case we can argue that the young women in question are shown to contravene the narrowly defined limits of proper femininity, and thus comes an inevitable questioning of sexuality – as much by some of the other diegetic characters as by some audiences.

In thinking about the process through which certain women deliberately exclude and isolate other women in these Indonesian films, it is useful to draw

on Halberstam's intervention into debates on urinary segregation. Commenting on gender policing in washrooms, Halberstam notes that in contrast to the men's washroom where, she argues, it is only transgender individuals who are policed, in the women's washroom it is 'all gender ambiguous females who are scrutinized' (1998: 26). It is not the more obvious policing of female sexuality by men which is at issue in these Indonesian films. Indeed none of the women has done anything 'wrong' according to normative male concerns regarding sexuality – none of the women in these films seems to be sexually active at all. Rather, it is the policing of gender by other women which directs us to recognize that there is something not quite right about the gender performance of these women.

By the time we reach the final scene of *Tentang Dia*, the male character, Randu, has replaced the female character, Rudi, who is ambiguous in both gender and sexuality, at Gadis' side on top of the tall building which she had frequented previously with Rudi. Gadis is no longer fearful of heights nor afraid to embrace the present. She is able to move beyond her inability to respond to Randu's amorous advances, and out of her pre-sexual identity which marked her friendships with her former boyfriend and with Rudi. She is now able to reciprocate the attraction expressed by Randu as the two stand looking out over all the city has to offer them – a heterosexual coupling accentuated by the soundtrack which instead of the familiar solitary female voice now becomes a joyous duet of male and female voices.

Once more we are left with a heterosexual ending to a film which devoted most of its narrative to a relationship between two people of the same sex. The deliberate ambiguity in the film, compounded by the promotional poster, means that multiple levels of understanding can be used in support of a variety of readings. Putting aside the heterosexual ending, a strategy at which queer audiences must be quite adept when watching Indonesian films, there remains the confusion between female masculinity and *lesbi* subjectivity. Given that the former is often taken to indicate the latter, this may be taken as an unnecessary distinction. However, it seems that the presumption of this conflation is in need of further analysis, because gender rather than sexual transgression is the stronger trope in these recent Indonesian films. Nonetheless, it is when female masculinity becomes potentially blended with lesbianism rather than pre-sexual tomboyism that it is seen as being particularly problematic, and the need for heterosexual salvation or death swings into action.

***Detik Terakhir* – lesbi love, drug rehabilitation and sexual violence**

Another triangular story, though in this case involving a relationship between two women clearly defined as *lesbi*, occurs in the 2005 film *Detik Terakhir*. Loosely based on a short novel by Alberthiene Endah,⁷ the film tells the story of Regi (Cornelia Agatha) through a long flashback. Now in a drug rehabilitation centre, she recounts to a journalist how, as a daughter from a wealthy Jakarta family, she came to be a drug addict, and lost the two most important people in her life.

Detik Terakhir is a rather harrowing film with numerous scenes of physical and emotional violence. Several sequences take place in a drug rehabilitation centre where the two heroines are subjected to physical and mental torment by both the centre workers and their fellow inmates. There are deliberately provocative scenes of sexual violence and drug-taking. Thus while the film contains many of the elements typical of a certain type of Indonesian movie – privileged youth, nightclub scenes and strong soundtrack – there is little in the film that glamorizes the metropolitan lifestyle, or that projects a voyeuristic gaze onto the bodies of the two women. Rather, the film takes a very clear anti-drugs approach from the beginning; indeed it ends with an English language caption reading ‘This film is dedicated to all the people of the World, who have wasted their life after World’s biggest enemy of the society, drugs’ (sic). It is into this mixture of institutionalized violence, sexual abuse and drug taking that the theme of same-sex love, support and erotic attraction between women is introduced.

As Regi tells her life story to the journalist, we learn that she comes from a staple of Indonesian cinema – a wealthy Jakarta family in which the father beats the mother, and both parents have extramarital affairs. Such a violent and dysfunctional home life means that Regi is a deeply depressed young woman, who, after pressure from friends, enters into a world of drug-taking and finally discovers what it is to not feel sad. Also, while she hangs out with several male friends, she feels no sexual attraction towards them – perhaps because of the violent and abusive example set by her father – rather she slowly discovers that it is women who interest her. At the bar in which her dealer, Rajib, works, she meets Vela. Vela had previously worked with Rajib, but once she became addicted to drugs, the work became untenable. Vela’s previous romantic involvement with Rajib came to an end when he left her alone in a club probably knowing that she would be raped by the main dealer for whom they all worked. Following this ordeal, Vela is so traumatized that she too prefers the company of women.

A relationship develops between Regi and Vela, along with the use of drugs. Eventually Vela overdoses and after she is taken to hospital the two women are put in different rehabilitation centres by their respective families – Regi at a relatively progressive centre, while Vela is subjected to a regime based on violence and humiliation. Regi manages to escape and with Rajib’s help they free Vela too. However, back in the real world they try to raise money to leave Jakarta by going back to the world of drug dealing, and Regi and Rajib are soon caught in a police raid. Rajib saves Regi’s life when he shoots a mafia boss who was about to kill her, but the two are then imprisoned for the killing. When Regi is released from prison she discovers that Vela is once more addicted to drugs, and feeding her addiction by sleeping with the dealer who had once raped her. What is more, she has become infected with AIDS.⁸ Vela dies soon afterwards – it is not clear whether from an overdose or an AIDS-related illness – and Regi is left in a state of despair having lost her two best friends as Rajib is still in prison. One night she is beaten up and left to die outside a club, but her father finds her and takes her to a rehabilitation centre. The film ends with Regi determined to live life to the final second.

Detik Terakhir has attracted a fair amount of attention from critics, academics and students, a reflection not just of the contentious issues with which the film engages, but also perhaps the controversy it generated at the time of its release in September 2005. Like the film *Virgin* (dir. Hanny Saputra) which had been released the previous year, *Detik Terakhir* attracted the ire of the FPI apparently because of its engagement with the *lesbi* subject position. Reports on the eve of the film's release make specific mention of sex scenes involving *lesbi* kisses, masturbation and sex in a bathroom (e.g. Kartikawati 2005). Such interviews and reports seem to have deliberately exaggerated the sexual content of the film, presumably for commercial reasons. As will be discussed below, the kisses, while their shock value in Indonesia is not to be understated, are relatively tame; the sex in the bathroom is seen from behind a curtain; and the scene of Cornelia Agatha masturbating was presumably cut before its release. The fact that the film was released during the fasting month of Ramadan also compounded the FPI's displeasure. Apparently stirred up by press reports of the film prior to its release, threats were made to burn down cinemas which screened the movie. However, the producer Shanker RS organized a private screening for FPI representatives who then withdrew their threats, apparently pacified by the strongly anti-drugs message (CinemAsia 2006). With all the controversy, and presumably because Indonesian audiences enjoyed the film, it had a relatively long run of two months in cinemas. *Detik Terakhir* was also nominated for several Citra in the 2005 Indonesian Film Festival,⁹ and Cornelia Agatha won an award for Best Actress in the 2007 Indonesian Movie Awards.

While several commentators welcomed the film for its anti-drugs message, Mahendra (2007), although criticizing the film for its proposition that perpetual parental feuds lead children to drug addiction and *lesbi*-ism, noted that it took a non-judgmental attitude to the *lesbi* subject position and praised the courage of the film's producers in engaging with *lesbi* sexuality. He also expressed the hope that its example in riding out the controversy would open a space for other filmmakers to engage similarly with the *lesbi* experience. From a contrasting perspective, a blogger called Queer Indonesia criticized the film for its depiction of the *lesbi* subject position as one of unending suffering and a consequence of being brought up in a family marred by domestic violence. He argued that *lesbi* subjectivity was constructed in the film as a flight from heterosexual patriarchy which results in the punishment of one of the characters by her infection with AIDS (Queer Indonesia 2006). Maimunah has argued that the *lesbi* storyline in *Detik Terakhir* reproduces Hollywood's eroticization of *lesbi* for the male gaze, though simultaneously arguing that the depiction of the *lesbi* relationship serves as an unsuccessful challenge to Indonesian hetero-patriarchal society. She also welcomes the representation of the *lesbi* couple in *Detik Terakhir* for being *normal*, i.e. gender-conforming and challenging butch-femme stereotypes (Maimunah 2008a: 55–64), echoing her positive response to the *gay* male couple in *Arisan!* on the basis of appearing *normal*.

The theme of trauma, as a result of being brought up in a broken home and also of suffering sexual and physical abuse, is crucial to the film's construction of

the characters' coming to their *lesbi* subjectivity. This is a common theme in the construction of *lesbi* in Indonesian cinema, a point also noted by Tracy Wright Webster (2008) and it is a continuation of a notion which emerged in the New Order period. Despite this, Regi's description of her realization of her own *lesbi* subjectivity brings an added depth to her character and stands in contrast with the constructions of *gay* male subjectivity discussed in this book. Whereas there is rarely any discussion of why or how men come to be *gay*, it seems to always be a matter of concern regarding same-sex female erotic desire. When recounting her attraction for Vela, Regi says:

I always rejected love because the love that came to me, there was never any chemistry. But Vela, she was so different. Even the first time I saw her, from my eyes down to my heart, I felt an extraordinary chemistry. That is when I first realized who I really was.

This notion of gradual realization is interestingly developed through the depiction of an earlier encounter with another woman, Helena. On that occasion, while clearly attracted to Helena, Regi withdrew from a kiss, because there was 'something wrong about it'. The meaning here is ambiguous, in that it is not clear if she means there was something wrong with Helena, or whether it was because she was still ambivalent about her desire for women generally. We can take it probably as a mixture of the two, and it is this focus on the fact that Regi truly saw Vela as unique, as something akin to a soul mate, that strengthens the story of burgeoning sexual awareness. Even when she finds out that Vela is using drugs again and suffering from AIDS (as the film describes it), Regi remains true to her love for Vela.

The idea that Regi's *lesbi* subjectivity is somehow innate or natural is further developed through a number of flashback scenes, in which she is shown gazing at her female maid's body and later dancing with her maid. Despite this deliberate attempt to construct *lesbi* subjectivity as developing gradually and as something natural, Queer Indonesia (2006) has argued that the use of flashbacks to scenes of domestic violence, seems to direct audiences to interpret her *lesbi* identity as a flight or retreat from heterosexual normativity. Just as with Desi in *The Butterfly*, there is the suggestion that the broken home is a prime cause of pushing daughters towards a non-normative sexual identity, a situation compounded in Regi's case by witnessing the abuse Vela suffers. We might also see parallels here with the situation of Aunt Mirna in *Gadis Metropolis* who suffers at the hands of a womanizing and abusive husband, and Pak Harun's wife in *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* who seeks out the possibilities of sex with her maid when abandoned sexually by her husband. Vela's turn to *lesbi*-ism also has parallels with *Gadis Metropolis*, in this case with Lisa, in that they both become involved with other women after having been raped. Incidentally, in both cases the rapes are understood to occur with at least the tacit agreement of their boyfriends. It is also notable that despite her *lesbi* subjectivity, Vela is shown to be unable to free herself from the

world of men, and when she begins using drugs again, she goes back to her former rapist in order to feed her drug addiction.

HIV/AIDS in Indonesian cinema

It is perhaps surprising that it has taken until near the end of this book for the issue of HIV/AIDS to surface. Furthermore, not a single film discussed in this book links HIV with *gay* men, or *waria*. Indeed, given the desire for ‘positive’ images of *gay* men that has been expressed by various filmmakers, commentators and critics, it is perhaps inevitable that no film exploring the impact of HIV/AIDS on *gay* men or *waria* has emerged so far. In this sense, HIV-positive *gay* men and *waria* represent one more constituency of Indonesian mainstream cinema’s queer unwanted.

Rather, it is with *lesbi*, one of the categories least affected by the virus, that the condition becomes a subject of cinematic discussion. Queer Indonesia (2006) has suggested that there is something predictable and pathologizing in the linking of AIDS with homosexuality in *Detik Terakhir*, but as the relative dearth of films linking HIV/AIDS with non-normative genders or sexualities highlights, this is far from being a stereotype of Indonesian cinema. It is not overtly stated in the film that Vela was at risk of exposure to the virus because of her sexual orientation and whether she became exposed to HIV as a result of her intravenous drug use or through sexual activity (homo- or heterosexual) is not clear. The cause of her death is equally opaque, though it has generally been interpreted that her death results from AIDS (Aartsen 2011: 31; Maimunah 2008a: 56). Taking into account the film’s professed anti-drugs message, it is unsurprising that AIDS should find its way into the film, given that official Indonesian anti-drugs warnings are strongly linked to the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS; this epidemic in Indonesia is driven primarily by the sharing of contaminated injecting equipment, although this cause is now believed to be peaking (Mustikawati *et al.* 2009: 391).¹⁰

Besides *Detik Terakhir*, the consequences of HIV/AIDS have been explored in a number of Indonesian films in recent years, though generally filmmakers have engaged with its impact on women. These women are invariably shown to have been exposed to the virus through sex with drug-using men. In *Pesan dari Surga* (discussed at more length in [Chapter 7](#)), Veruska, a strongly Catholic woman, becomes infected by her drug-user boyfriend, and in the omnibus film *Perempuan Punya Cerita* (*Chants of Lotus*, dirs Fatimah T. Rony, Upi Avianto, Nia Dinata, Lasja Fauzia Susatyo, 2007), the fourth and final story focuses on a woman who comes to learn that she is HIV-positive following her husband’s death from an overdose, and we can presume that it was he who infected her.¹¹ As such, it might be argued that these films have shown a tendency to construct the notion of ‘innocent’ or ‘undeserving’ victims of the virus, those who have become exposed through no fault of their own. While we are not quite sure how she became exposed to the virus, drug-addicted Vela in *Detik Terakhir* does not quite fit into this pattern of ‘undeserving’ victim – although, given her repeated rape by the evil drugs boss and enticement into the world of drugs by Rajib, there are clear resonances with this trope.

While ‘core groups’ or groups most at risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS in Indonesia have high levels of knowledge regarding HIV risks, the treatment of the condition in Indonesian films seems to reveal degrees of understanding which are, at times, simplistic and uninformed, and perhaps also tainted by stigma and discrimination towards those typically thought responsible for the spread of HIV in Indonesia. For example, in *Pesan dari Surga*, upon finding out that she has been tested as HIV-positive, Veruska’s friends are extremely supportive, encouraging her by saying that there is treatment available and that it need not be a death sentence. The doctor, on the other hand, who is treating her because she is pregnant (outside of wedlock), is shown to be extraordinarily harsh and judgmental, blaming her for becoming exposed to the virus and offering little hope for the future. Like three of her fellow band members, she dies shortly afterwards in a car crash. We do not know what happens to her boyfriend – the last we see of him is his being told that he is HIV-positive by a friend of the dead woman, as he recovers from an overdose alone in hospital.

Given that *Perempuan Punya Cerita* was produced by Nia Dinata, it is perhaps unsurprising that a far more sympathetic and informed approach is taken by that film to the impact of HIV/AIDS on women in Indonesia. Its fourth story, written by Melissa Karim and directed by Lasja Fauzia Susatyo, focuses on the immense difficulties and prejudices faced by women diagnosed HIV-positive, and also engages with issues of access to public health provision. The narrative is notable for its lack of sensationalism and its attempt at serious discussion of the difficulties faced by women who are infected by their husbands. The story also has a pessimistic ending, though the pessimism is towards Indonesian society rather than as a result of perpetuating notions of stigma; the mother – by this point destitute – feels she has no choice but to surrender her daughter to the care of her parents-in-law, leaving her alone in the city but hopefully about to seek help from an NGO she has heard about.

In *Detik Terakhir*, Vela dies soon after telling Regi that she has AIDS (the HIV virus itself is never mentioned in the film), but why she dies is not made explicit. It may have been from an overdose, though there is no foaming at the mouth which is the usual signifier used for such deaths in Indonesian films. Rather, the bleeding from the nose which Vela experiences is much more typical of a death from a terrible disease – similar symptoms are displayed by Desi in *The Butterfly*. Despite these ambiguities over the exact cause, Vela’s demise soon after informing her partner that she has AIDS provides the melodramatic ending necessary to appease the censors and the FPI. It also provides another example of the apparent impossibility of *lesbi* happiness in Indonesian cinema.

***Berbagi Suami* – imagining new possibilities**

The last film to be discussed here is one of the most talked about in recent years. Nia Dinata’s 2006 film *Berbagi Suami* (*Love for Share*) is in effect a triptych of stories, each of which takes as its central theme polygamy and its impact on

Indonesian women. Since the end of the New Order, during which period taking additional wives was officially disapproved of, polygamy has re-emerged as an issue in Indonesian society.¹² Several celebrities and religious officials have endorsed the practice, much to the disappointment and consternation of many women's groups, and the film should be seen as a response to this changing discourse, with Nia Dinata citing polygamy within her own extended family as inspiration for the cinematic treatment of the issue (Hatley 2009: 49–50). The first story concerns Salma, a successful gynaecologist who discovers that her politician husband has secretly married a further three women. The third story focuses on Ming, a young waitress who becomes her boss's second wife. Given the theme of this book, however, it is the second story which is of interest.

Set mainly in the claustrophobic environment of a simple dwelling in a city kampung, the second story is that of Siti, a young woman from the Javanese countryside, who is brought to Jakarta by Pak Lik. There, she is to live alongside Sri and Dwi, his two existing wives, and their numerous children. While initially under the impression that she is coming to Jakarta to train as a beautician, she soon finds out that she is intended as Pak Lik's third wife; with few other options she acquiesces and takes her part in the crowded household, assisting with child-rearing and helping the pregnant older wives. When Pak Lik returns from work driving a film crew in post-tsunami Aceh, he brings a fourth wife back with him. Meanwhile, a relationship has been slowly developing between Siti and Dwi, and once Siti has taken the initiative to sort out family planning for the first wife Sri, Siti and Dwi have the courage to leave the household together, taking Dwi's two children with them.

Berbagi Suami provoked considerable discussion on its release, inviting praise from many quarters for its acting, scripts and production values. Many critics and bloggers commended its innovative engagement with the contentious topic of polygamy. Inevitably, most academic writing on *Berbagi Suami* has focused on this last issue. Novi Kurnia reads the film as an examination of the complex problems which all polygamous families face, issues which will only be resolved when men and women come together 'to eliminate the practice' (2009). Felicia Hughes-Freeland suggests that the satirical humour actually equates to a far more critical position towards polygamy, and argues that the emphasis on the mother–child relationships in the first two stories almost turns the position of husbands into an irrelevance (2011: 431). Barbara Hatley, in her comparative analysis of representations of polygamy in *Ayat-ayat Cinta* ('Verses of Love', dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2008)¹³ and *Berbagi Suami*, argues that Nia Dinata's film celebrates 'the strength, initiative and sheer survival capacity of [Indonesian] women' (Hatley 2009: 56). Situating her discussion within polemics on the role of popular culture between liberal secular groups and conservative Muslims, Hatley considers the divergent responses to the film of Jakarta audiences and those from more rural areas, particularly men. In particular, she suggests that devout Muslims may have been particularly taken aback by the *lesbi* theme (2009: 60).¹⁴



Figure 6.3 Production still from *Berbagi Suami*. Dwi (left) and Siti. Reproduced with permission of Kalyana Shira Films

As well as potentially shocking devout Muslims simply with their presence, the construction of Siti and Dwi's *lesbi* sexuality marks a significant event in Indonesian cinematic history for other, more interesting, reasons. Not only do Siti and Dwi both survive to the end of the film, but their subjectivities derive from a burgeoning awareness of mutual desire, rather than from previous trauma at the hands of men in the form of rape or other violent abuse. In arguing this point, I am not discounting the possible interpretation of Pak Lik's attempt at intercourse with Siti as attempted rape – her response to Pak Lik's demands is clearly one of displeasure and she was saved from her 'marital obligation' only when a co-wife went into labour. However, we can be sure that her attraction towards Dwi (and perhaps women generally) does not result from her experience of heterosexual sex – it already existed, even if it had not been previously understood. Siti's horror and Dwi's ambivalence towards sex with Pak Lik are made all the clearer by the visual contrast with Sri who certainly derives sexual pleasure from marital intercourse with the husband. In this sense, there is some truth in Eric Sasono's argument that the relationship should be seen as a flight from heterosexuality, and a rejection of phallocentrism, in that the film suggests the option of a new family structure free of men (2006a). But it is perhaps preferable to understand their motivation as a gradual realization of better possibilities, based on the mutual sense of trust, love, desire and dependability felt between the two women. As Queer Indonesia has pointed out (2006), their pact is not born from a hatred of

men or a desire to show that they can survive without men; rather, it is about finding a strategy and a space to live together in accordance with their own desires.

The decision to leave the household headed by Pak Lik is facilitated by the fact that in all his arrogance and self-importance, he is shown to be completely irresponsible. He leaves the family short of money and it is Sri, the first wife, who actually owns the house. He has no interest in family planning, and the women are too afraid to discuss either contraception or the fact that he has brought a sexually transmitted disease into the household (note again here the issue of sexual health and its impact on women as a theme). He views his large number of children as an indication of his sexual prowess, and it is completely beyond his imagining that two of his wives would rather have sex with each other than with him. This last point is highlighted ironically when he warns Siti to be careful at the Beauty School because there will be lots of *bencong* studying there. Little does he realize that he should in fact be more concerned about the desires held by his second wife.

The rejection of patriarchy is the consequence of, rather than the reason for, the bonding between the two women. While both Siti and Dwi seem to have entered into the marriage with Pak Lik unaware of any alternative, it is their growing consciousness of mutual desire which enables them to take control of their own destinies. This growing sense of empowerment manifests itself in a number of ways before they finally pluck up the courage to leave. First, Dwi encourages Siti to join her and Pak Lik in the bedroom reserved for sexual activity. While Pak Lik presumably imagines this as simply double pleasure, it is actually a subversive way for the two women to enjoy moments of intimacy in each other's company. Second, the women save money slowly and secretly from the allowance they are given by Pak Lik, taking vital steps towards their financial independence. Third, Siti's initiative in taking the first wife Sri to the gynaecologist, so that she can finally take control of her sexual health and bring an end to the ongoing cycle of pregnancies, ensures that Sri can assert control over her own reproductive choices, and that Siti and Dwi can leave the household without guilt at leaving a pregnant Sri alone.

The images used to represent the growing intimacy between the two women also mark a unique place in Indonesian cinematic history. The directorial gaze of the female director (all the other films discussed in this chapter have been directed by men), coupled with the technique of using a female narrator, ensures that the perspective is always a woman's. The depictions of intimacy between Dwi and Siti evoke a sense of stolen moments of privacy in the claustrophobic environment in which they live, yet at the same time exhibiting tenderness and desire through the simplest of touches or looks. When the different wives have sex with Pak Lik, this is heard by the non-participating wives from the across the thin partition wall; or during Siti's first encounter with Pak Lik, the camera fixes on her look of discomfort, an effect augmented and desexualized by Siti's matter-of-fact voice-over.

As various critics have noted, the three stories of *Berbagi Suami* recognize a variety of non-normative families and, as such, it works as a powerful counterweight to the slew of films which cite the broken home as the source of a whole range of problems among Indonesia's young generation including delinquency,

drug addiction or sexual immorality. Most importantly, the central place of men is queried in each of the three segments, with Salma and her son stronger after her husband dies in the first story, and Ming realizing that she would be better off alone than depending on men in the third. However, it is in the second story that men are written out of the equation completely. As Laura Coppens argues, while Dwi and Siti are shown to make a confident decision to free themselves from polygamy, they do this very much within the context of reconceptualizing family and motherhood, principles which are key to Indonesian state-propagated notions of womanhood (Coppens 2009: 189). On the very first occasion that Dwi suggests to Siti that they leave the house and set up home together, she is holding a child's doll. As she gently taps Siti, coaxing her to respond positively to the proposal, we cannot help but note that in the figure of the doll, Dwi is speaking in her role of mother, and with the doll acting as the bond between them, they have taken on the appearance of a new, if alternative, model of family, but one in which children continue to hold a central place.

In its representation of same-sex erotic desire, *Berbagi Suami* makes an interesting contrast with Nia Dinata's earlier film *Arisan!*. Not only are the class settings from opposite ends of the social scale, but also in focusing purely on the relationship as it develops between the two women – rather than treating it as something to be accepted or rejected by friends and family – a far more developed



Figure 6.4 Production still from *Berbagi Suami*. Siti (left) and Dwi. Reproduced with permission of Kalyana Shira Films

sense of intimacy is achieved than is the case with Sakti and Nino, the *gay* couple in *Arisan!*. Importantly, this is not a desire which is given specific labels in the manner of Nino's declaration 'I'm gay.' Like almost all the relationships between women discussed in this chapter, it is left to others, sometimes fellow players within the diegesis but more usually the audience, to ascribe an adjective to their intimacy and a subject position based on notions of sexuality. There is no mention of the word *lesbi* in that crowded kampung house of *Berbagi Suami*; indeed there is perhaps no notion of its existence. It is in the women's physical actions and expressions of mutual desire that the sense of intimacy is manifested, an attraction which previously had not likely registered as even a possibility, at least in the case of the more sexually naive Siti. In situating the story of Dwi and Siti in this distinctly Javanese and lower-class setting, there is, as Coppens has noted, a sense of representing the sexual intimacy between the two women as distinctly local (2009: 189–90). While the relationship between *Arisan!*'s Sakti and Nino, both on-screen and in its off-screen explanation by the actors and filmmakers, was mediated by knowledge and practices which clearly linked into global circuits of queer knowledge, the on-screen bond between Siti and Dwi appears rather disconnected from such transnational notions of sexual identities.

Conclusion

Cinematic fictional representations of *lesbi* in the first decade of the post-New Order era are characterized by the persistence of the many fears and notions evident in those erotic films of the 1990s discussed in [Chapter 4](#). Dysfunctional homes, rape, the dangers of the city and emotional volatility are all tropes which have persisted in the films mentioned here. More than a decade after the director of *Gadis Metropolis* was proclaiming that he had been able to explore the lives of *lesbi* on-screen, it is remarkable that the majority of *lesbi* couples still do not make it to the end of the film. The preferred option, or perhaps the only resolution which seems possible for most filmmakers, is to kill off one of the *lesbi* characters.

One intriguing contrast with the early 1990s is that many of these recent films show a lesser degree of tolerance towards *lesbi* women, in particular from other women. This may be partly explicable by differences in genre – in the erotic films of the 1990s, *lesbi* characters were invariably treated with tolerance by female heterosexual peers whereas in the films discussed in this chapter, many being aimed at the youth market, there is a notable policing and exclusion of the heroines by fellow female students for what is judged non-normative gender performance. Indeed, the common factor in most of these films is the return of the heroines to normative heterosexual femininity. Both Tia from *The Butterfly* and Gadis from *Tentang Dia* end up in heterosexual relationships. Even *I Love You, Om* culminates in Nayla crying at Gaza's bedside, perhaps finally realizing that she loved him all along. The girls from *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* may not secure the boyfriends they set out to find – but that was their choice, and not for lack of candidates, and the characters close the film more secure in their femininity and

female friendships than when it commenced. As audience members, we have little sympathy for those minor characters who attack verbally and physically their marginalized female contemporaries. But while those characters are never the agents of change – that role is always reserved for men – their normative ideology always prevails.

It is in only in *Detik Terakhir* and *Berbagi Suami* that a challenge is made to these conventions. *Detik Terakhir* is a complex film both in terms of its message and its reception history. The mixing of the *lesbi* love story with one of drug-dealing and addiction means that on the one hand, alternative sexualities are linked with physical and sexual abuse and moral and emotional weakness. On the other hand, the reaction of the Islamic groups who were appeased by the strong anti-drugs message highlights the difficult environment that those working in the arts find themselves in.

Given the vital role played by Nia Dinata and her production company Kalyana Shira Films in bringing new perspectives on the construction of male homosexualities (discussed in [Chapter 5](#)), it is no surprise that it is another of her films which represents the greatest shift from New Order patterns in imagining erotic desire between women. While this chapter's male-directed films are notable for a continuation of many constructions of the *lesbi* subject position well established in the New Order period, Nia Dinata's film is remarkable for its contestation of normative understandings of family structure and women's relationship possibilities. As Hughes-Freeland has argued, women's fiction films of the Reform Era's first decade have shown a more complex and nuanced understanding to representations of both men and women, and also 'have the potential to create change in how women (and men) think about themselves and how they behave' (2011: 441).

While the *reformasi* period has been noted as an era in which women were finally able to participate – indeed, in many cases, set the agenda – in the Indonesian film industry, the *lesbi* subject position has received remarkably less attention than *gay* male subjectivities. The reasons for this are not clear to me, but it seem insufficient to point simply to the fact that *lesbi* are less visible than *gay* men in Indonesian society generally. After all, one of the characteristics of sections of the film industry in recent years, under the aegis of both women and men, has been to challenge established notions regarding all manner of issues affecting groups who might be described as minorities or marginalized. Without proposing definitive answers, we should perhaps look to the more rigorous policing of female gender and sexuality, by both men and women, coupled with ongoing concerns over the uncertainty of modernity. In particular, fears of the undesirable consequences of globalization for Indonesia's women, already a key factor of media images of women in the late New Order period (Brenner 1999), have clearly persisted beyond the collapse of the Suharto regime. This contrast will become all the more apparent as we move to the final chapter of this book, which considers the contrasting proliferation of *gay* characters in recent Indonesian cinema.

Notes

- 1 There are, of course, the instances of females impersonating men discussed in [Chapter 4](#).
- 2 Nayato Fio Nuala is currently Indonesia's most productive film director. He also works under the following names: Koya Pagayo, Ian Jacobs, Pingkan Utari and Ciska Doppert.
- 3 English language in the original title.
- 4 See Hughes-Freeland (2011: 426–7) for a more general discussion of this film.
- 5 *Meteor Garden* is a Taiwanese television series dating from 2001–2 that was extremely popular in Indonesia and across East and Southeast Asia. Four of the actors from the show went on to form the boy band F4, again a big success across the Asia-Pacific region. See also Rachmah Ida's article on responses of Indonesian women audiences to the show (2008).
- 6 The acting is remarkably wooden and her voice a monotone throughout the film. Nonetheless, she won an award as Best Female Newcomer for the role in the 2007 Indonesian Movie Awards.
- 7 The novel was originally published, in 2004, with the title *Jangan Beri Aku Narkoba* ('Don't Give Me Drugs'), but following the success of the film, was republished in 2006 with the title *Detik Terakhir*.
- 8 This is what she says in the film – she does not mention becoming infected with the HIV virus. She shows no sign of any AIDS-related illnesses – and indeed, this would be very unlikely given that she had presumably contracted the virus within the previous nine months when Regi was in prison.
- 9 Nominations for Cornelia Agatha as Best Actress, Mike Muliadro as Best Supporting Male, Sausan Machri as Best Supporting Female, as well as for Cinematography, Sound and Artistic Direction.
- 10 Projections based on 2006 figures estimate that in 2009 there were 314,500 people in Indonesia aged 15–49 who were living with HIV. The cumulative number of reported AIDS cases in December 2009 was 19,973, of whom 3846 had died, and 25 per cent of reported cases were women (National AIDS Commission 2009: 1–2). The main mode of HIV transmission driving the epidemic is the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes among injecting drug users (52.6%), followed by unsafe heterosexual intercourse (37.2%), homosexual intercourse (4.5%) and perinatal transmission (1.4%) (<http://www.aidsdatahub.org/en/country-profiles/indonesia>).
- 11 The exception to this pattern is John de Rantau's *Mencari Madonna* (*Looking for Madonna*, 2005), a film set in Tanah Papua (the Indonesian part of the island of New Guinea), which focuses on a young man who, together with his girlfriend, discovers that he is infected with HIV. Figures from 2006 put HIV prevalence among the population of Tanah Papua at 2.4 per cent (Irmanigrum *et al.* 2007: i) Unlike the rest of Indonesia, the situation in Papua is described as a generalized epidemic. As a proportion of the population, incidence rates for the province of Papua are around 15 times the national average, and in Papua Barat province about 2.5 times the national average. Prevalence among ethnic Papuans is almost double that of non-ethnic Papuans (Irmanigrum *et al.* 2007: i). This difference has been ascribed to 'a reflection of differences in the level of knowledge about prevention and risk behaviour' (Irmanigrum *et al.* 2007: 57).
- 12 For an overview of polygamy in Indonesia in its historical context, see Blackburn (2004: 111–37). See also Nurmila (2009) for a critical examination of debates around polygamy, and the lived experiences of women in polygamous marriages in contemporary Indonesia.

- 13 *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, which is generally seen as sparking a recent trend in *film religi*, or films engaging specifically with Islamic themes, takes a far more romanticized and sympathetic approach to the question of polygamy, though even in this film the practice is shown to be far from unproblematic for the parties involved.
- 14 See also Coppens (2009); Imanjaya (2009a); Sasono (2006a).

7 A proliferation of storylines

Alternative masculinities in mainstream cinema

This chapter looks at a selection of more popular films which might be deemed a response to and reflection of the increased visibility of alternative sexualities in the Indonesian media, and specifically the enthusiastic response that films such as *Arisan!* received. These representations have not been universally welcomed as ‘positive’, nor do they wholly reject the constructions of homosexuality perceived to have existed during the New Order period. Regardless of the type of *gay* man that is being constructed, it is quite clear that the increasing visibility of *gay* men in the Indonesian media which really began in the mid 1990s (Boellstorff 2005: 75) is replicated in cinema. As such, these films have in turn played a considerable role in further exposing Indonesian audiences to the *gay* subject position. For those viewers who are open to and use queer ways of looking, this proliferation of films can only lead to further discussions and consideration of the position of *gay* men in Indonesian cultural outputs and of popular discourse concerning non-normative sexualities in Indonesian society.

As discussed in [Chapter 6](#) there have been a number of *lesbi* characters in Indonesian cinema in recent years. *Waria* and to a much lesser extent transsexuals also continue to feature in a variety of films, though generally as minor characters. Somewhat more frequent are male-bodied effeminate characters that are regularly described in the credits with the pejorative term *banci*. These invariably comic characters who are generally afforded little agency to express their own subjectivities will be understood by some as representing some sort of non-normative gender performance, while others might also interpret the characters as *gay*. The inevitable results are marginalization and hegemonic othering. However, all of these groups take a back seat to the increasing prominence given to characters who are clearly marked as *gay* men and of all the non-normative sexual and gender categories discussed in this book it is the *gay* man who dominates in post-1998 cinema. This chapter will focus on two of those films which have foregrounded *gay* characters, *Pesan dari Surga* (‘Message from Heaven’, dir. Sekar Ayu Asmara, 2006) and *Coklat Stroberi* (‘Chocolate Strawberry’, dir. Ardy Octaviand, 2007), and one film, *Realita Cinta dan Rock ‘n’ Roll* (‘The Reality of Love and Rock ‘n’ Roll’, dir. Upi, 2006)¹ which in addition to featuring a prominent transsexual character invites a queer reading of the friendship between the two male teenagers.

While it will be useful to contextualize the production of these films through a brief discussion of some other notable movies, I will not discuss the considerable number of films which have continued to revisit and recycle the same stereotypes used to indicate *gay* men, *waria* or characters whose sexual identity is ambiguous. Instead it will be more rewarding to consider a selection of films which have introduced *gay* or *waria* characters, not simply as a figure of humour, derision and marginalization, but as a means of introducing different character types into a film, and perhaps also to try to construct a more pluralized vision of sexual subjectivities, masculine gender and Indonesian society generally. Inevitably, resort will often be made to stereotype, but referencing Dyer (1977; 1993) and Halberstam (1998), it is apparent that these stereotypes are not necessarily used to reaffirm a power inequality but rather to disrupt and query dominant notions of normative masculinity.

An interesting, though somewhat confusing portrayal of a young *gay* man is to be found in the film *30 Hari Mencari Cinta*, which narrates the quest of three female friends to find heterosexual love within thirty days. The teenagers date a number of men who represent a comical take on the types of young men (and masculinities) perceived to exist in urban Indonesia. One of the more serious relationships formed is between Olin and Erik (the first film role played by Vino G. Bastian).² While never explicitly stated, the character is marked as *gay*, and interpreted as such in various reviews and commentaries (e.g. Hughes-Freeland 2011). A number of signs are given to indicate Erik's non-normative sexuality. These include an obsession with the Taiwanese boy band F4³ (cited as evidence of femininity and therefore female heterosexuality by one of the girls), a twice-weekly habit of having his hair styled, being acquainted with two men at a salon who are clearly marked as effeminate through their manner and language (a notable use of *eke* as the first person pronoun, typical of *bahasa binan* or *bahasa gay*), expertise in matters of make-up and manicure, asking his girlfriend to push his car when it will not start and a reluctance to kiss Olin.

While Erik's character is constructed through resort to familiar and often amusing stereotypes, this is true of almost every male character in the film. Nonetheless, an examination of his characterization invokes several of the ambivalences regarding the *gay* subject position already discussed with respect to other films. While the plot revolves around Olin's naivety and her failure to interpret the plentiful signs which surely leave the audience in no doubt that there is something queer about Erik, his motivations for wanting to date Olin are rather unconvincing. Why would an extremely handsome *gay* man wish to go along with a heterosexual relationship which evidently causes him discomfort? After all – perpetuating the motif of the *gay* man physically unable to perform with women – the very idea of kissing Olin seems to fill Erik with horror and anxiety.

The romance between Erik and Olin actually won the audience vote for Most Favorite Romantic Moment in the 2004 MTV Indonesia Movie Awards. While the couple was far from plausible and obviously doomed to failure, the storyline does point to a more general characteristic of constructions of the *gay* subject position in recent Indonesian films. Erik is actually one of the few *gay* characters

in any Indonesian film who seems to have other *gay* friends, suggesting that off-screen he also inhabits the *dunia gay*. However, when Olin and Erik meet these friends in a salon – where else? – we cannot help but notice that whereas Erik is an object of desire for the heterosexual Olin, her reaction to his two effeminate friends is a mixture of bemusement and distaste. Yes, Olin is naive, but her troubled reaction simultaneously evokes the notion of the queer unwanted. Erik too is embarrassed by the meeting with his two effeminate acquaintances, and calling to mind Sakti's response to Yung Yung in *Arisan!*, he seems to be concerned that in associating with these more overtly queer characters he is exposing himself as *gay*. Thus in trying to understand why the screenwriter thinks this *gay* man would want to date a woman, the reaction to the unwanted effeminate *gay* men seems to provide some clues. There is a presumption in the narrative that *gay* men would really rather be straight and inhabiting the *normal* world. It has clearly become fashionable to incorporate *gay* men into cinematic storylines concerned with the difficulties of heterosexual women, and their inclusion may be seen as indicative of the diversity of post-New Order Indonesian cinema. Erik is one more example of the desexualized homosexual, of the *gay* man who is imagined to want to function only in heterosexual society, albeit with his foibles and particularities which mark him as acceptably and safely different.

An interesting example of alternative masculinities constructed to challenge dominant norms is to be found in the 2007 comedy *Maaf Aku Menghamili Isteri Anda* ('Sorry, I Got Your Wife Pregnant', dir. Monty Tiwa).⁴ The film revolves around a young man Dibyo (Ringgo) who is trying with little success to be an actor. He meets, sleeps with and impregnates Mira, who unbeknown to him is separated but not divorced from one of the biggest *preman* (gangsters) in Jakarta. He soon finds himself embroiled in the gang rivalries of Mira's husband. One particular scene is of relevance here for its disruption of audience preconceptions and existing stereotypes of effeminate men.

The scene involves Dibyo, by this time promoted temporarily to the position of gang leader, staging a fight with another gang in the hope of scaring off their Timorese rivals by convincing them that he is an expert fighter. Dibyo takes on the entire gang single-handed, leaving the lot of them on the floor and the Timorese onlookers running for their lives. The defeated gang members pick themselves up and their previously tough-talking leader reveals himself to be quite the opposite – his speech is camp and his movements effeminate – as are his companions. It transpires that this gang is actually a troop of actors. As a comedy film that knowingly structures itself around stereotypes, it is unsurprising to see the inclusion of this group of effeminate men. But on this occasion the resort to stereotype is not meant to exclude or strengthen a system of marginalization of those who resist normative masculinity. Furthermore, while the common trope of the strength, courage and almost uncontrollable masculinity associated with *wadam/waria* is again evident, on this occasion the subjectivities of the individuals involved are far less obvious – are these effeminate men, *gay* men or *waria* in disguise? Different audiences will reach their own understandings, though once more we

are reminded of the centrality of Boellstorff's observation of a gendering which falls into the male orbit.

Intriguingly, and offering further evidence that this scene is not merely repeating tired stereotypes, one of Dibyo's friends seems to be remarkably taken, at least momentarily, by one of the actors. As the actors line up to be paid for their work, the friend appears to be visibly stirred by the flirtatious manner of one of the group. The multiple queer ways of looking involved in that quick exchange suggest far more fluid subjectivities than might have been supposed, and simultaneously open a space for audiences to rethink their assumptions regarding the sexualities and erotic desires of the film's characters.

The association of non-normative genders/sexualities with the world of acting is also an interesting one. There is the link with the concept of performance, hinting at the fluid nature of gender identity and the sense of a space in which the troubling of dominant notions of gender identity is at least tolerated. But, so too, there is the association of these subjectivities with the acting profession. The idea of the artistic professions opening up space to *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians is an oft repeated and celebrated feature of the Indonesian entertainment industry, as it is of numerous such industries around the world. For example, in talking about his role in *Arisan!* Surya Saputra is accredited with recognizing the 'colour' that 'homosexuals' bring to the world, and the fact that many of them work in artistic professions (Dinata 2004: 51). However, as mentioned earlier, most prominent actors and actresses are still at pains specifically to stress their heterosexuality, and this 'colour' which *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians are judged to bring to the world, is far more present, or at least acknowledged, in those supporting professions than it is among actors themselves.

Finally, there is an unusual scene in Hanny Saputra's 2004 movie *Virgin*.⁵ The film tells the story of three schoolgirls: Biyan, who wants to be a writer and is proud of her virginity; Stella who is trying to break into acting but gets duped into performing in a soft-core porn film; and Kettie who prostitutes herself to older men to purchase consumer goods. The film is an extraordinary development of the *film remaja* which found new popularity in the wake of *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* ('What's Up With Love', dir. Rudi Soedjarwo, 2002). While concluding with the message that to lose one's (female) virginity is no different than prostitution, for the most part *Virgin* revels in images of teenage misadventure.

In addition to a neat and highly demonstrative camp character who takes the predictable role of Kettie's pimp, there is one bizarre scene in the film where Biyan's idol, the actor Merix, holds a party where his girlfriend Luna puts him up for auction saying that the highest bidder, 'girl or guy', can sleep with him. This announcement is met with shrieks of excitement from several young women, but a number of the young men are also audibly carried away with the idea. Male voices dominate in encouraging Merix to take his shirt off. As Merix dances topless on stage, the auction begins and Luna finds herself bidding against a male in his early twenties. Increasingly desperate at the prospect of being outbid, a fight breaks out between Luna and the young man. Such is the fast pace and increasing

absurdity of the film's narrative that the scene of the man bidding publicly for the right to have sex with Merix passes almost unnoticed. There is little in the male bidder's appearance or manner to mark him apart from the rest of the crowd.⁶ Biyan saves the day by ensuring that Merix evades the clutches of the *gay* victor. It is nonetheless intriguing that the handsome Merix, the love interest of the film's heroine, was prepared to be sold to another man, especially in a cinematic tradition which is so ready to show women entering into prostitution but almost never shows men doing the same, unless of course they are *waria*. In the next scene, Merix reveals that he has never actually slept with a woman (or we can presume, a man), principally because of embarrassment about his small penis. While this information is used as evidence of his own virginity and therefore his suitability as Biyan's boyfriend, it is intriguing that the small size of his member is invoked here, given a commonly held belief that *waria* have small or shrivelled genitals (Oetomo 1996: 261). Given this popular misunderstanding about *waria*, it is not perhaps too much of a leap to understand why Merix's character was constructed as willing to be penetrated by another man due to his own self-perceived genital inadequacy.

Thus in *Virgin*, we can note the incorporation of the notion of sex between young, wealthy, metropolitan men into the cinematic discourse of damaged Jakarta youth. We might interpret this as a continuation of the theme established in the New Order youth film *Remaja di Lampu Merah*. Crucially however, this is not about young Indonesian men being led into immoral foreign ways by older Westerners. Nor is it about simple young men being won over by power and money as in *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh*. Rather it is about young men having the money to buy sex with other men whom they desire. The film's message as a whole is of the shame, danger and disgrace that will meet young women who give up their virginity, but there is no such suggestion that young men should be judged by the same moral values. Even if we do choose to extend those judgments to the behaviour of young males, sex between men is simply marked in the film as one more variant from a range of possibilities open to unmarried young people – bad maybe, but according to the logic of the film, no worse than heterosexual sex.

This brief discussion of three very different films illustrates the extent to which *gay* characters have become something of a mainstay of popular Indonesian films during the opening decade of the post-1998 period. While none of these films exhibits such a deliberate or overt desire to challenge popular media constructions of *gay* male subjectivities as those movies discussed in [Chapter 4](#), they nonetheless point to a broader willingness to engage with and subvert existing stereotypes regarding notions of normative masculinity and sexuality. This disruption of stereotypes is not always successful and each of these films may invite accusations of ambivalence towards the non-normative gender and sexual subjects they represent. But they also invite the consideration of queer ways of looking, both within the diegesis and from audiences, strategies which have often gone unnoticed or unremarked upon in most recent work on Indonesian film. These are themes which will be explored in the three films that are analysed in this chapter.

***Pesan dari Surga* – a story of eternal gay love**

Pesan dari Surga tells the story of five good friends who perform together in a highly successful rock band. Each of the five faces a personal drama in their life involving divided affections and betrayal. Canting is jealous of her husband, convinced that he still loves the mother of his child; Verusca, a committed Christian, becomes pregnant by her boyfriend, but finds out he is an intravenous drug user and has infected her with HIV. Arya loves two different women. Brazil dates large numbers of men but is caught out when she dates identical twins and cannot tell them apart. Finally Kuta (Lukman Sardi) is having an affair with a married man Mario (Ario Bayu, who also played Eros in *Kala*). The climax of the film comes when four of the band members are killed in a car crash. They each send a message from heaven to their loved ones via Canting, the only survivor.

Despite its absurd plot and overstressed sense of foreboding, the *gay* character of Kuta represents a distinct break from the norm in terms of cinematic constructions of the *gay* subject position. As well as being the drummer in the band, Kuta is a tattoo artist, and has an interesting style of dress which conflates a grunge/punk style with femininity. Kuta's lover is outwardly far more conventional in terms of appearance and lifestyle – he is married and his wife is pregnant. Tension arises between the two because Kuta begins to demand a greater level of commitment than his married partner feels able to give. Thus, *Pesan dari Surga* engages with the sometimes complex reality of the *gay* lives of many Indonesians by introducing the character of the *gay* man who is heterosexually married – somewhat akin to the dilemma of Nico in *Istana Kecantikan*.

Kuta's marginalized position is accentuated by his looks which are a curious mixture of what might be traditionally recognized as masculine and feminine features. He is the most punkish of all the band members. He has an intricate tramline pattern shaved into his dyed hair and his black sleeveless t-shirts emphasize his lithe but muscular body. In contrast, his trousers are distinctly feminine and so loose-fitting that on occasion they appear more like a long skirt. Kuta is also more emotionally expressive than his partner Mario. When he breaks down crying on the floor and Mario stands above him trying to console him, the relationship is staged in accordance with the typical dynamics of male emotional reserve and feminine expression. On another occasion Mario criticizes Kuta for being too '*emosi*', a word linked to the external expression of emotion, and there are times when Kuta's displays seem to verge on hysteria and self-harm. For example, he smashes a phone in anger, drips hot wax on his wrists, threatens to shoot himself in the head and burns himself with a cigarette, each time because Mario is unable to make a total commitment to him. Perhaps we should take this as a construction of the *gay* identity marked by mental instability and with a tendency to self-harm. However, his behaviour is not so different from a number of cinematic women who have found themselves threatened by their male lover's affairs. Even in this film, Kuta's response to Mario's lack of commitment is remarkably similar to that of Mario's wife who comes searching dagger in hand for evidence that he is having an affair with another woman. While his emotional behaviour is equated

with the feminine we should not fall into the trap of understanding this as a sign of weakness and certainly not the pathological. Indeed, we might argue that Kuta is actually a very strong figure, loyal and determined in his love for Mario, and simply unable to bear his position of occasional lover rather than permanent partner.

We should also recognize that while the relationship appears to be yet another *gay* partnership which is not allowed to survive to the end of the film, this is in fact not the case, for the message which Kuta sends to Mario from heaven is that he will wait for Mario in their future lives. This is a reference to their common belief in reincarnation, and that their love will last to eternity. Some might quibble with the premise of the film's narrative, but if we accept the film's logic, *Pesan dari Surga* does make a case for same-sex love as an alternative but equally valid model on a par with heterosexual love. Indeed, while other band members sent messages of reconciliation and forgiveness, it is only the communication between Mario and Kuta which invokes such a strong sense of unsurpassable permanence.

The representation of the *gay* relationship is also enhanced by a number of cinematic techniques which while accentuating the same-sex nature of Kuta's relationship for dramatic effect, always stress the loving and romantic nature of the couple. The opening scenes which move between the various stories of the five band members establish that Kuta is in a relationship. The ambiguity of gender-neutral words such as *sayang* (love, darling) and the gender neutrality of the third person pronoun *dia* (he/she) do not however challenge the audience's heteronormative presumption that the partner must be a woman. It is only when Kuta comes home one day and senses that his lover is waiting in bed for him that we find out that the object of his affection is another man. As Kuta walks into the room, calling his lover with the word *sayang*, we see someone lying in bed with their back to the camera. When he turns to face Kuta, smiling contentedly, the tone of the accompanying music changes from suspense to euphoric love. So while the film plays on the mysterious identity of Kuta's lover, the undoubtedly celebratory effect of the shift in musical tone to coincide with the revelation that his lover is male-bodied stands in striking contrast to the shock value used in several other films. The normality of the men's relationship is further enhanced through a later scene in which the couple talk of their hopes and dreams while sharing what is presumably a post-sex cigarette. While Mario lies shirtless under the white covers of the bed, Kuta sits shirtless on the bed. The relaxed intimacy is stressed not only by a conversation about their commonly held belief in reincarnation, but by the affectionate yet routine way in which Kuta holds his cigarette to Mario's lips. The bedroom scene ends dramatically when Mario's wife bursts in on them knife in hand, but for a moment the audience is treated to a demonstration of touching honesty rarely seen in any Indonesian film.

***Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* – a story of families, a transsexual father and thwarted teenage desire**

Upi's 2006 film *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* is essentially about the relationships between children and their parents, but with the added twist that one of the



Figure 7.1 Production still from *Pesan dari Surga*. 'Kuta played by Lukman Sardi'.
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Figure 7.2 Production still from *Pesan dari Surga*. 'Mario played by Ario Bayu'.
Reproduced with permission of Film Multivision Plus

characters discovers midway through the film that his long-absent father now identifies as female. In addition to discussing this *waria*/transsexual storyline – it is not quite clear in the film whether the character is supposed to be transgender or transsexual – I will also raise the possibilities for a queer reading of the relationship between the two teenage boys in the film, particularly if the movie is watched intertextually with knowledge of the Mexican film *Y Tu Mamá También* (*And Your Mother Too*, dir Alfonso Cuarón, 2001).⁷

The plot of *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* revolves around the stories of three teenagers – Ipang, Nugi and Sandra. Ipang is a rebellious teenager, more interested in his rock band than school. His relationship with his parents breaks down when he discovers that he is adopted. Nugi lives with his mother and finds it difficult to cope with the fact that she is dating another man; things become even more complicated when he is reunited with his long-absent father only to discover that he now identifies as a woman (Mariana). Sandra is very much alone since her father has committed suicide and her mother is an alcoholic, though her storyline becomes somewhat lost as the film develops. The two boys both develop feelings for Sandra, and their friendship hits a moment of crisis when Nugi feels that Ipang has betrayed their friendship by kissing Sandra. All is resolved by the end of the film with Ipang, Nugi and Sandra reconciled once more and the two boys accepting and being accepted by their parents on a new basis of honesty.

The representation of the transgender/transsexual character is fascinating for its repetition of several tropes already well-established in Indonesian cinema while it simultaneously seeks to challenge those conventions. As Laura Coppens has noted, reactions to the movie from queer Indonesian audiences were generally positive (2009: 195) though it is interesting that one of her respondents raised the issue of Mariana's subjectivity, noting it was not clear whether she was supposed to be a transgender, transsexual or a cross-dresser, an ambiguity which is reflected in the range of published reactions to the film. Coppens, for example, defines Mariana as a *waria* (2009: 191), whereas Maimunah understands the character to be transsexual (2008a). Sasono (2006b) also notes that Mariana's identity is far from clear, though points out that if she were considered to be transsexual this would be the first 'positive' representation of a transsexual in Indonesian cinema.⁸ This ambiguity is perhaps a reflection of a more general confusion over differences between transgender and transsexual subjectivities in Indonesia. However, my interpretation is that the character should be understood as a post-operative transsexual and that presumably this gender reassignment took place during the long period of time spent by the character in the United States.

The film has been noted by Coppens (2009: 192) for its middle class setting – though the incredible opulent lifestyle of Mariana is suggestive of the elite rather than the middle class – and as such, one which specifically seeks to challenge typical representations of *waria* which mark them as working class and as sex workers. Just as in those films from the 1970s discussed in [Chapter 1](#), in which the appeal and accessibility of Betty and Vivian were very much based on their apparent atypicality as transgender/transsexual subjectivities, Mariana is also marked as extraordinary and sympathetic and contrasted with the majority of *waria* who

are positioned as part of the queer unwanted. And as in *Akulah Vivian* this difference is established in an opening scene in which the audience is confronted with traditional images of *waria* sex workers before progressing to more audience-friendly images of the transsexual who does everything possible to be accepted by normative, heterosexual society. Like Vivian, Mariana also has a boyfriend, though we see him only briefly, and he is introduced mainly for dramatic effect. Not only is the presence of her partner Onky momentarily troubling to her son, but so too the element of surprise and tension around which the brief scene is structured challenges the notion of Mariana's gender transformation and brings once more to mind Kate Bornstein's comments on in-betweenness (1994).

In comparison with the distinct femininity of Vivian Rubianti, Mariana's character invokes a deliberate mixture of the feminine and masculine and in this respect Mariana's character is much more akin to usual depictions of *waria*. Her clothing, appearance and comportment are generally feminine, and her somewhat slow and studied movements are suggestive of the movements of the 'newly transgendered person' as described by Bornstein (1994: 87) or maybe of the actor's studied performance of a female-to-male transsexual. However, there are specific devices used within the film which deliberately or otherwise invoke the concept of 'in-betweenness' and the belief that masculine traits cannot be completely hidden/expunged by the transsexual subject. Certainly, these are designed to serve as moments of comedy, but they also stress the understanding of Mariana's subject position not as a woman but as a woman who used to be a man.

The casting of Barry Prima to play Mariana is a particularly interesting aspect of the character's construction and likely played a key role in attracting positive responses from Indonesian audiences. Barry Prima was one of the biggest stars of 1980s Indonesian cinema, well known for his leading roles in a number of martial arts films. In casting this hyper-masculine star in the role of a transsexual, the director is deliberately and playfully forcing the audience to rethink concepts of gender, masculinity and femininity. There are numerous moments in the film when a knowing, delightful playfulness at the melding of masculine star status with the stylized femininity of the character shines through on the character's face.

This intertextual play on Prima's star status is at its most effective in a climactic brawl scene in which Mariana applies her former expertise as a male taekwondo instructor and Prima's skills as a star of Indonesian martial arts movies to thwart a thief, thus earning adoration from her son, the diegetic crowd watching the action and presumably the cinema audiences as well. In a sequence which pits the glamorous Mariana against a petty crook, full use is made of martial art film conventions as she dodges her assailant's kick, and flies through the air to disable the thief. Only moments before passers-by had stared at Mariana as she went about her business and the transformation from shame to heroine, while not particularly complex, is engaging for its employment of the concept of *prestasi*. This word, discussed at some length by Boellstorff (2007: 67) in relation to *gay* and *waria* senses of national belonging, means 'perform' or 'achieve', and involves a variety of different acts which draw acceptance and recognition from the wider community. This act of crime fighting wins Mariana the recognition of broader society,

and as a consequence Nugi and Ipang also feel much more comfortable in her company. Importantly, the act which instigates this transformation in attitude is intrinsically linked to Mariana's previous male life as a taekwondo instructor and Barry Prima's reputation as masculine Indonesian action hero. While the conventional martial arts moves are comically interspersed with more obviously female actions – slapping the thief's face and pinching his nose – it is in recognition of the overtly masculine acts that her son and society come to accept her.

Although she subsequently exaggerates her performance of femininity by demonstrating concern about her broken nails, and explicitly maintaining her feminine decorum as she walks away with the two boys, Mariana is clearly thrilled at her newfound acceptance. Thus, in this scene, in which masculinity is revealed to be a key element of her subjectivity, we are inevitably reminded of the numerous films featuring brave and fierce *waria*, and note the contrast with Vivian, the only other transsexual discussed in this book. In overtly locating transsexual Mariana within the orbit of masculinity, the character is closer to Betty the scatty *bencong*, the transgender character who despite her best efforts cannot help but reveal her male embodiment. Remembering too the compulsion to dewig or unveil transgender characters discussed in [Chapter 1](#), Mariana also dewigs herself at a key moment when discussing with her former wife the difficulties she is facing. This cinematic trope undoubtedly serves to remind the audience of Mariana's perceived in-betweenness, an ambiguity which is only heightened by the confusion as to whether she is transgender or transsexual.

Turning now to the relationship between the two boys, Nugi and Ipang, I will argue that the friendship is repeatedly defined by homoeroticism, sexual tension and barely concealed desire, though this has either been ignored or dismissed by most other commentators.⁹ My reading is informed by the relationship which develops between Tenoch and Julio in *Y Tu Mamá También*. The Mexican film is basically a road movie, the journey being undertaken by two young men and an older woman (a cousin by marriage) they have recently met at a wedding. Mutual attractions develop between the characters and in the final scene the two friends begin to make love to the woman, though after a time the woman drops out of the scene and the intimacy continues between the two boys. The Mexican film's influence on *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* can be seen on many levels, including poster design, costume and the storyline involving Nugi, Ipang and their older female friend Sandra. Several scenes are also obviously inspired by the Mexican movie.

From the outset, the relationship between Ipang and Nugi is defined by sexual banter. In the opening scene the two boys drive round town late at night and after commenting on some female sex workers, they then arrive at what is probably Taman Lawang. There they engage in some idle chat with one of the *waria*, though always from the protective safety of their car. The scene highlights the conventional attitude of the two boys towards *waria*, as objects of simultaneous ridicule and fascination. Ipang jokes that the '*banci*' are more Nugi's crowd, playfully suggesting that his first sexual experience was with a *waria* prostitute, something which Nugi laughs at but does not deny. Then, when Nugi slows the

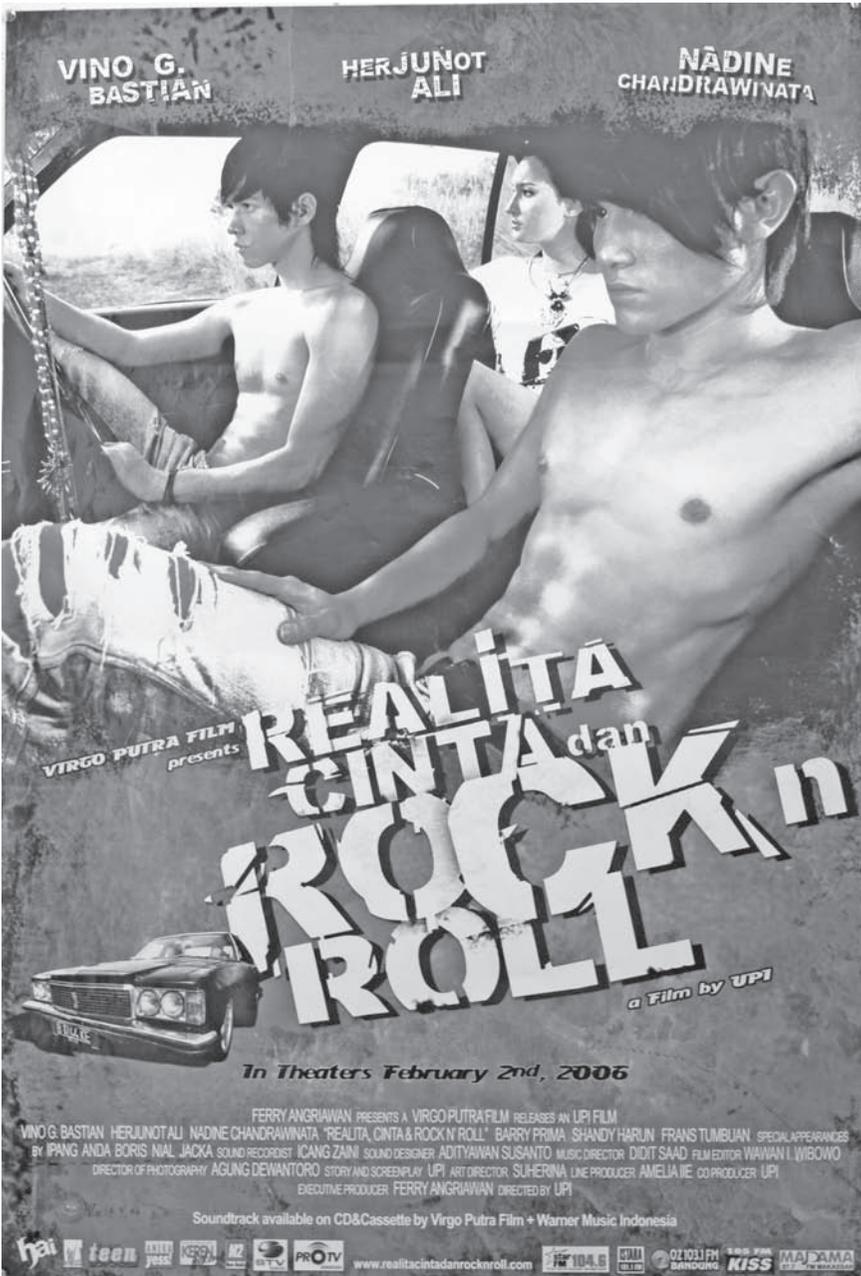


Figure 7.3 Film poster for *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll*. Reproduced with permission of Virgo Putra Film

car down so that a *waria* can flirt with Ipang through the open window, Ipang becomes more and more uneasy at the sexually charged conversation while Nugi seems to revel in both the suggestiveness of the comments and his friend's disquiet. When Nugi is later confronted by the fact that his own father is actually a transsexual, this opening scene serves as a reference to the challenges that he faces in coming to terms with his father's identity, but it also anticipates later questions regarding the sexualities of the two friends.

Nothing overtly sexual is ever shown to happen between Ipang and Nugi and this has led Maimunah to differentiate the Mexican film from *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* by remarking on the strict demarcation between homosociality and homoeroticism that is maintained in the Indonesian movie (2008a: 108). This conclusion is based in particular on a scene when Ipang and Nugi prepare to sleep when staying at Mariana's house. They both lie on a double bed fully clothed and then take off their t-shirts. They look at each other and suddenly become aware of their semi-nakedness. After a moment of reflection Nugi suggests it would be better if they put their shirts back on. Ipang then returns to lying on his back, while Nugi turns away from him to lie on his side. Maimunah has argued that this act of putting their shirts back on clearly delineates that this is not a homoerotic relationship. However, one cannot help but ask why the two boys felt it necessary to verbalize their need to put the shirts back on. What did they think (fear/hope) might happen if they did not? Were they concerned that the audience, or perhaps the censors, might jump to conclusions? Did the anxiety arise from fear of mutual misinterpretation? From the example of the Mexican film we know what would likely happen and for those audience members deploying a queer way of looking, the off-screen possibilities seem to be deliberately invoked in this scene.

A second scene which draws directly on the Mexican movie situates the three friends in a bar. Sandra and Nugi dance and, encouraged by his friend, Ipang joins them. The boys momentarily dance face to face with only Sandra between them. Perhaps realizing that if they are not careful they will be fulfilling the roles already written for them in *Y Tu Mamá También*, they resort to joking abuse of each other and the immediate possibilities are disrupted when Nugi disappears to buy more drinks. When he returns the moment has passed and the three simply offer a toast to each other. A queer gaze will also note the final scene in which the two boys reconcile in the hotel room where Ipang has been staying. The friendship soon returns to its familiar name-calling and a pillow fight ensues on the conveniently positioned bed, with Ipang jumping on top of Nugi before a quick cut to the next scene.

These scenes are preceded by numerous incidents of sexual suggestiveness. Ipang particularly is never threatened by any suggestion of his homosexuality. When the two walk down the street only in their boxer shorts, making jokes about the size of each other's manhood and whether one would become sexually excited if in the presence of the other while naked, they are called '*homo*' by a group of men. Turning round to face their accusers, Ipang takes off his sunglasses saying 'Do you like what I have?' He revels in the exhibition of his body and also the attention he attracts from both men and women. Indeed, they have only come to

be in their state of near-undress after Nugi has turned down Sandra's request to see them kiss each other, deciding instead that they should both strip down to their underwear. While such scenes are clearly designed to develop an air of sexiness and an exhibition of the male body for commercial purposes, so too the constant references to the sexuality of the two friends reinforce the undoubted sexual tension which exists between them. While they occasionally verbalize a denial of their attraction to each other, though never to the extent of resorting to homophobic comment, their actions frequently suggest otherwise, and seem constructed to imply such.

In its closing dedication to the filmmakers' parents and through an engagement with the common Indonesian tropes of the problems of the adopted child and the 'broken' home, *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* is one in a long line of films which explore inter-generational relationships within families. In introducing the figure of the transsexual parent, the director challenges hegemonic notions of family in this fun and provocative assertion of the possibilities of non-normative family structures. It is intriguing to unpack what exactly the director and producer, Upi, is trying to achieve in this movie regarding the relationship between the two boys. Even the remarkably sexy film poster, which features the glistening shirtless bodies of Ipang and Nugi in the front seats of a car – Sandra only appears in the background – leads the audience to focus on the burgeoning relationship between Ipang and Nugi. It is this aspect of the storyline which so obviously draws on *Y Tu Mamá También*, and Upi's deliberate reference to the film with its story of growing male erotic desire is complicated by the fact that so much is hinted at only for it to be thwarted at the last second by humour or a cut to the next scene. In the end, the way is left open for audiences to imagine for themselves what happens off-screen, but there is no doubt that for queer audiences at least, Upi has done all that is possible to stimulate a queer reading of the boys' relationship.

Coklat Stroberi – Indonesia's Brokeback Mountain?

The last film for discussion in this book, the 2007 *Coklat Stroberi*, broke barriers in the history of Indonesian representations of *gay* subjectivities by incorporating a dominant *gay* storyline which was clearly aimed at the 17–25 age group. Falling into the genres of romantic comedy or *film remaja* (teenage movie), it maintained its feel-good factor to the end, allowing one of its *gay* characters not merely to survive, but actually to develop, and to find himself secure in a *gay* relationship as the final credits rolled. Thus *Coklat Stroberi* marks new territory, going beyond the central *gay* storylines of *Istana Kecantikan* or *Arisan!* in that it is aimed very much at the younger end of the mainstream cinema audience.¹⁰ A romantic comedy focusing on university students and an unashamedly commercial movie, it draws on several of the themes and marketing techniques that should ensure commercial success: overt use of product placement of branded goods; young and attractive male and female actors (Nino Fernandez, Marrio Merdhithia, Marsha Timothy and Nadia Saphira); a soundtrack by a number of popular bands and singers, as well as an appearance by the very popular group Ungu; and minor or

cameo roles for a number of stars (Fauzi Baadila, Luna Maya, Julia Perez and Vino G. Bastian).¹¹

Upi, the producer and screenwriter, has described *Coklat Stroberi* as a film engaging with teenage sexualities and their place in wider Indonesian society. She was clearly aiming to produce an inclusive film, though it may be argued that her approach, which for some critics suggested a superficial knowledge of *gay* life in Indonesia, led her into the trap of portraying a heterosexual perspective on *gay* Indonesia. The film tells the story of two female university students, Key and Citra, who share a house in a plush Jakarta suburb. Due to difficulties in paying their rent, their landlady forces two new male tenants on them, Nesta and Aldi. Despite being beautiful, Key and Citra are for some unexplained reason very unlucky in love and fear that they will end up as spinsters, and immediately fall for their handsome new housemates. Unbeknown to them the two young men are actually lovers, though various visual clues ensure that the audience is let in on the secret. While Nesta has a very masculine and straight-acting look, Aldi is feminine and moody. Nesta explains to Aldi – and to the audience – the theory of chocolate strawberry.¹² Basically, strawberry equates to feminine and *gay*, and so in order not to be found out it is important to act chocolate, i.e. to act masculine like a straight guy.¹³ As well as more innocent ways of showing that one is straight, such as doing weights, spending hours on the PlayStation, and not cooking, Nesta decides it would be a good ploy to start flirting with and eventually dating Key. Aldi becomes increasingly jealous as he sees his boyfriend of the past two years devoting far too much attention to Key. Meanwhile Citra starts flirting with Aldi, though he remains oblivious to her various manoeuvres.

Aldi decides he can lie no longer about his sexual identity and when his parents come to dinner, he discloses his sexuality to them. His father has an asthma attack, such is his shock and disgust, and his mother leaves with his father, urging Aldi to revert to how he used to be. Things further come to a head when Citra and Key walk in on the two men as they are kissing. But instead of admitting it was all a deception, Nesta states that he really is in love with Key. Nesta has turned truly chocolate (or straight). Key initially rejects Nesta for lying to her, but returns to him after having run through the Jakarta night to stop him before he leaves forever. So it seems we have the conclusion: Nesta discovers that he is actually straight thanks to the charms of the pretty Key; Citra is still alone due to her distrust of men; Aldi also is to spend his life alone as a sad but out *gay* man. However, in the final scene, as is demanded by romantic comedies, everyone is provided with a partner: Citra wins the attention of a cool rocker at a pop concert, and then Aldi appears hand in hand with Citra's boss, Dani. Incidentally, the punk-looking Dani is played by Fauzi Baadila, one of Indonesia's most in-demand young actors and someone generally associated with far more macho roles.

Thus all's well that ends well. On the four occasions that I watched the film in cinemas in Bandung and Surabaya everyone seemed to leave the cinema happy. Many *gay* Indonesians I spoke to liked the film tremendously and the response from many younger and perhaps less politicized *gay* men was primarily pleasure and a sense of self-validation at seeing a depiction of their lives represented

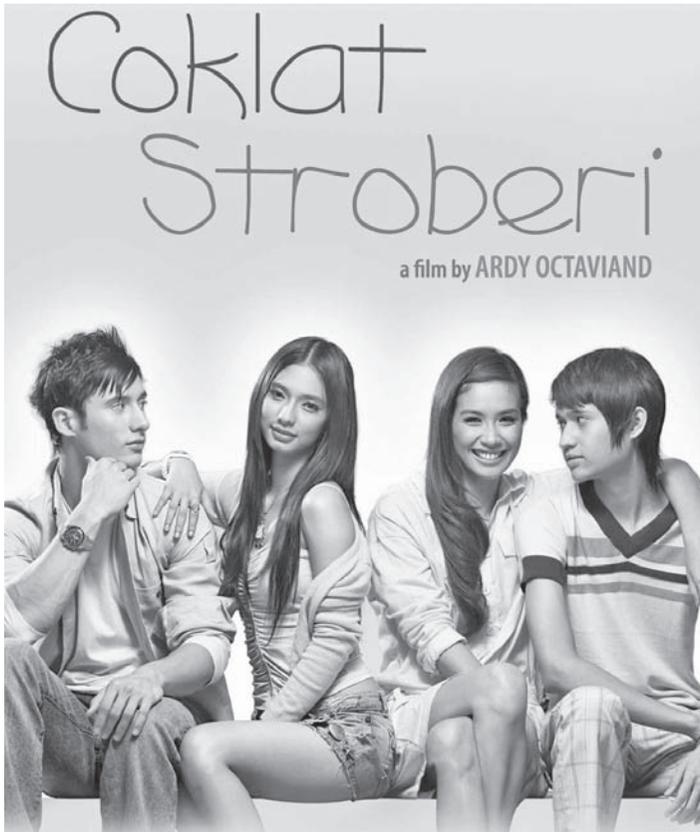


Figure 7.4 DVD cover for *Coklat Stroberi*. Nesta (left) looks at Aldi. Reproduced with permission of Investasi Film Indonesia

on the screen for the first time. Even for those who had seen *Arisan!*, *Coklat Stroberi* was still regarded as a first in that it depicted the lives of men of their own age, rather than the somewhat older characters in *Arisan!*.¹⁴ However, for more politicized viewers, and particularly for those audiences more literate in gay representations in Western films, the movie was somewhat problematic as a result of its perceived political incorrectness, with key aspects of the plot annoying a number of Indonesian web critics and *gay* activists (Siregar 2007b; Adjie 2007). The film's audience at the Jakarta Q! Film Festival in August 2007 is also reported to have been somewhat hostile (Adjie 2007).

Political incorrectness is not necessarily problematic. Yet Upi, the screenwriter and producer of the film, has stated that there is a didactic intent to this movie.¹⁵ The *KapanLagi* website reports Upi as stating that her movie is 'inspired by *Brokeback Mountain* [dir. Ang Lee, 2005], which also tells a story about the lives of two *gay* men'. It further states that Upi expressed the hope that the film might serve as an educational resource for young people and their parents, enabling

parents to be more open with their children and to ask their children, 'Are you chocolate, strawberry or chocolate-strawberry' (*KapanLagi* 2007). Nonetheless, the contrast with *Brokeback Mountain* could not be more pronounced. Whereas in the American movie the two cowboys stay true to their love for each other despite family and societal pressures which force them both into undesired marriages and a generally closeted existence, in the Indonesian movie, the first attractive female to come along leads Nesta to realize that his homosexual desire is simply a passing phase, and that really he is a hot-blooded heterosexual male, a role he swiftly adapts to. Thus Nesta's character might best be explained as that of confused young man who, while intimate with his closest friend since his school days, comes to understand his preferences as being heterosexual once he has the chance to explore his feelings intimately with a female. Clearly, and given the supposed educational purpose of the movie for parents as well as young people, for many *gay* activists the representation of homosexuality as something that can be 'cured' or 'solved' by the right woman is disappointing, particularly given that this is not simply one among many representations of youth *gay* sexuality in Indonesia. While the filmmakers are to be commended for pushing the boundaries and making the film at all, it is understandable that some have been left unsatisfied by what they perceive to be this regressive plot twist.

As a counter to this argument of turning the *gay* character straight, it might be argued that Nesta was never actually a *gay* character at all, rather someone who in his pairing with Aldi was a remarkably unsexual character, only awakened by his encounter with Key. This reading is dependent on understanding the film's narrative as centring around the universal teenage plot of boy meets girl, only to break up and then be reunited at the end of the film. A secondary plot then revolves around Aldi finding the strength of will to come to terms with his sexuality and come out as a *gay* man (Groves 2010).

A comparison of the visual representation of heterosexual with homosexual pairings in the film is illuminating and does much to illustrate this reading of Nesta as a pre-sexual young man becoming aware of his (hetero)sexuality and of Aldi slowly gaining the strength to perform his *gay* subjectivity. We frequently see Nesta, who has a strong and gym-fit physique, in long lingering scenes with Key in which he occupies sexually suggestive and domineering positions. In one erotically charged car-washing scene Nesta soaks himself and Key with water spurting from a hosepipe with a look of ecstatic, orgasmic abandon on his face. On several occasions Nesta is shown shirtless with glistening torso, though this is almost always in scenes where he runs into Key, for example, when he visits the bathroom late at night. However, with his lover Aldi he is invariably dressed more modestly, including when the two are in bed together. Only in one scene is Nesta shown naked above the waist with Aldi, and this is when Aldi confronts Nesta about why he is showing off his body to the girls.

Whereas intimate heterosexual scenes are allowed to develop and are dwelt on by the camera, any closeness or impending intimacy between the two men is generally disrupted for comedic or dramatic effect. For example, on one occasion when Aldi and Nesta are about to hug as they make up after a disagreement, they

are interrupted by the sudden arrival of their landlady and the scene transforms into one of comedy at Aldi's expense. This is typical of the film's approach generally. Aside from one scene where the two are asleep together (and fully clothed), the only other time that the camera is allowed to linger on the two men is when Nesta joins Aldi sitting on the doorstep and Nesta talks about the difficulties he has faced in coming to the realization that he is in love with Key. The camera pans out to a long-distance shot of Nesta sitting with his arm around Aldi's shoulder. However, by this point in the film's narrative, this is no longer a *gay* couple but rather two young men pledging their loyalty to each other as friends and nothing more.

This apparent prudery regarding the visual depictions of the male couple is not unique to *Coklat Stroberi*, and filmmakers are of course constrained by the censors, their audiences, and perhaps their own ambivalence towards displays of erotic desire between persons of the same sex. Nonetheless, the sexiest moment in the whole film is one which takes place between two men, Aldi and Dani. It is at this point that we can argue that Aldi has achieved the independence of will and strength fully to assert his *gay* sexuality, and he demonstrates this by bringing his partner along as he joins his friends at a concert in a bar.

As the two walk in, the camera first fixes on the joined hands of the two men before panning out to reveal that Aldi's new partner is Dani whom we have previously only met in passing as Citra's boss, and of whom only the subtlest clue has been given that he too is *gay*. As the two join Citra, Nesta and Key, the look of pure delight on Aldi's face is matched by one of near-disbelief from Nesta as Dani extends his hand in greeting. Nesta's sideways glance at Key and her reciprocated look are open to multiple readings: surprise that Aldi is with someone and they did not know about it, discomfort that he is with another man, shock at their display of public intimacy. The two seem to be genuinely troubled by the pairing. Key is forced to confront the fact that until a short period of time ago her boyfriend had been sleeping with someone who is now an out and proud (homo)sexual individual. The ambiguity of Nesta's gaze brings to mind Lee Edelman's argument that queerness can never define but rather disturbs an identity (2004: 17), revealing Nesta's shame at his sexual past as he seeks reassurance from Key while simultaneously exposing his fascination for the overt sexuality of his replacement. Finally, and perhaps remembering that this is a film about tolerance and understanding, the couple can only smile and look on as Fauzi Baadila performs one of the most convincing portrayals of *gay* desire to make it to the Indonesian big screen.

Dani kisses Aldi's neck and face, and his body seems literally to shudder in sexual expectation as he holds Aldi's head and slowly passes his hand past Aldi's chest and towards his groin just as the camera cuts away. There is no actual kiss, but in contrast to the somewhat innocent behaviour of Aldi and Nesta, this short final scene represents a shift to overt sexual desire. The atmosphere is certainly enhanced through the deliberately provocative casting of Fauzi Baadila in the role of Dani. The contrast with Aldi's more feminine performance also goes some way in challenging the homonormative tedium of many of the *gay* cinematic pairings of recent years.

A key moment in the film in terms of Aldi's development into a confident, independent and sexual individual occurs when he comes out to his parents at the dinner table. Aldi's father responds by going into a violent seizure. While for some tastes this scene might appear overly dramatic, when I watched the film in public screenings, as well as in focus groups with *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* participants, the Indonesian viewers' response, which at other times was generally vocal, was invariably a hushed and tensed silence. The repercussions for Aldi's relations with both parents is reinforced when he asks his mother if she can accept what he has just said. She does not tell him she cannot, but rather asks him to change his thinking and to retract the declaration of his sexuality and to return to 'normal' like before – *normal* being the word Indonesians tend to use for heterosexual. She then follows her husband out of the house, and as their car pulls away the pained, tearful image of his father as he looks out from the car leaves Aldi, standing alone on the doorstep, with tears running down his face. We see nothing else of Aldi's parents in the movie, and we can presume that he has to struggle on without them.

The idea of being out has arisen in a number of recent films other than *Coklat Stroberi*, at least in terms of being out to straight friends, and sometimes also to family members and it is interesting to note the contrast in this respect with the ethnographic data. Boellstorff found that unlike in the West, the notion of opening oneself to the *dunia gay*, 'does not imply that it is necessary or inevitable to open oneself in all aspects of one's life (such as one's family or workplace)' (2007: 199). This topic was crucial to both *Istana Kecantikan* and *Arisan!*. In the New Order film, it was unimaginable for Nico to tell his parents, his sister was only partially understanding, and he felt obliged to leave his workplace once his boss found out he was *gay*. By comparison, in *Arisan!* Nino was out from the beginning of the narrative and Sakti underwent an accidental, but accepted, coming out to his cousin, mother and friends. In *Pesan dari Surga*, Kuta's *gay* sexuality is known and unproblematically accepted by his friends, though we know nothing of his family.

It is pertinent to reflect whether this represents some sort of shift in Indonesian society generally, or whether these cinematic representations of coming/being out are arising for other reasons, familiarity of filmmakers with the situation in the West being one of the key possibilities. Being out or open to the *dunia gay*, the most likely scenario in reality, is seldom depicted in Indonesian movies. *Gay* characters are rarely shown to interact within a wider *gay* community – the notable exception being the 1988 film *Istana Kecantikan* and to a lesser extent Upi's *30 Hari Mencari Cinta*. This is interesting, for while many *gay* Indonesians will be open to other *gay* men and frequent *gay* spaces, the number who are open with their families seems to be very limited indeed. This finding is illustrated by the fact that at the focus group with *gay* men I organized to discuss *Coklat Stroberi*, only one of the seven participants was out to their family, even though all were 'open' in the LGBT community. When pressed on the point, they all agreed that family would be the last group to be told, and for most of them it was neither desirable nor necessary that their family should ever know about their sexuality.

Incidentally, a discussion with the *lesbi* group found a somewhat different attitude; while arguing that one's family would generally be the last to be told, a majority of the *lesbi* group had come out to at least some members of their family. It may be that things are changing, particularly in the Indonesian capital, and it is important to note that Boellstorff's principal research sites did not include Jakarta. My focus groups were also conducted outside of the capital. While it may be that there are more out Indonesians in Jakarta, this is not reflected in my experience of the city, neither is it echoed in the tiny number of Indonesians who are publicly out in the mass media.

The message on coming out in the movie is somewhat confused and was certainly a key point of discussion among my focus group participants. On the one hand, Aldi is shown to be a visibly more confident person after his coming out and is eventually able to pursue a relationship with a more fitting and suitable partner. On the other hand, the reaction of Aldi's father seems to send a strong message that coming out is highly inadvisable, particularly given the lack of familial reconciliation later on in the film. In this respect the implication of the movie seems to bear similarities with Nesta's views that coming out is inappropriate and will only cause disaster.

When Aldi explains to Nesta the reasons for his honesty to his parents, that he does not want to pretend any more and that he is tired of hiding their relationship, Nesta retorts by asking Aldi whether he thinks that they could 'go to the mall and to the university campus hand in hand'. Telling Aldi that he has been completely crazy, he asks 'Where do you think we are living?' (*lu pikir kita hidup di mana?*). Implicit in that question is Nesta's view that being openly *gay* in Indonesia – as opposed to some other unmentioned location – is impossible.¹⁶ Here, as nowhere else in the movie, a particular perception of the struggle faced by *gay* men in Indonesia is revealed. In Nesta's eyes the public declaration of homosexuality in Indonesia is impossible and thus implies it can only be something temporary and secretive, inevitably to be succeeded by a publicly acceptable and socially essential heterosexual pairing. This idea is so dominant in Nesta's explanation for his breaking up with Aldi that it is easy to sympathize with Aldi's accusation that Nesta is dating Key simply because he perceives only heterosexual relationships to have a future.

It was clear from my focus group discussion of the movie with the *gay* group that they understood the message to be clearly warning of the dangers of coming out to one's parents, a fear that they almost all shared. Thus whereas from a twenty-first-century Western perspective, a film purporting to engage positively with issues of sexuality might be scorned for its depiction of Aldi's coming out, for my *gay* Indonesian interlocutors the scene formed the dramatic climax of the movie, and was generally appreciated for what was judged to be its honest and realistic depiction of what would happen if a young man came out to his parents. When I suggested that some young men might be deterred from coming out to their parents as a result of watching the movie, this was seen as a positive outcome by those respondents, such was their view that coming out to one's parents is not only unnecessary, but also quite unwise.

The vast majority of *gay* Indonesians are not ‘global gays’ but a number of *gay* Indonesian film characters seem to be. The case of *Coklat Stroberi* highlights this variance between the ethnographic data and mass media representations of *gay* subjectivities in Indonesia. Not only are *gay* men generally being shown to be from the higher socio-economic classes, but there also seems to be a process of global queering of the representations, which is not in consonance with the reality of how *gay* Indonesians live their lives – recalling Berry’s reminder that in the case of East Asian cinema, what we get from the mainstream is often not the reality of gay men’s lives but rather how gay men are perceived (1997: 14). In the case of several recent Indonesian films, and in particular the case of *Coklat Stroberi*, the perception seems to be based on non-local models. Rather than draw on local sources as inspiration for plot lines and understandings of the *gay* subject position, it seems that filmmakers and writers are drawing on (mainly) Western sources to inform their understanding of *gay* subjectivities. In *Coklat Stroberi*, we see this clearly in the coming out storyline, where Aldi tells his parents before even coming out to his friends. Incidentally, the importance of gay cultures outside of Indonesia are even more evident in the adapted novel by Christian Simamora which is closely based on the film script, in which Aldi regrets that his parents will not support him when he attends his first *gay* pride march.¹⁷ Aldi himself is further shown to be informed by Western *gay* culture through his watching of an American *gay* movie *Adam and Steve* (dir. Craig Chester, 2005) and his liking of the singers George Michael and Will Young (Simamora 2007). There is nothing wrong with that: many *gay* Indonesian men listen to Western music and watch Western movies; but what seems to be missing from the construction of Aldi as an Indonesian *gay* man is any sense that he might participate in the *dunia gay*. He is not shown to have any other *gay* friends, or to hang out in *gay* spaces. Even in the Simamora novel, no attempt is made to show Aldi as entering into a wider *gay* community. Despite his apparent strong convictions, he seems to watch the *gay* world from afar rather than actually being part of it, and the *gay* world he watches is an international global one, not local or Indonesian.

Conclusion

The past ten years have seen an explosion in the number of films which have depicted or made reference to *gay* men. As [Chapters 4](#) and [6](#) have shown, *gay* men, or at least men clearly marked to be non-normative in their sexual identities, have cropped up in genres ranging from drama to comedy, teenage romance to neo-noir supernatural thriller. In addition to a number of films which have deliberately created storylines around *gay* characters, there has also been a notable increase in the number of minor characters who might be interpreted as *gay* and in the number of films which make reference to alternate sexualities, sometimes just in a phrase or a sentence in a conversation. Taking cinema as an example, non-normative male genders and sexualities occupy a firmer place within Indonesian popular media discourse than ever before.

Certain filmmakers have expressed and demonstrated a desire to construct more 'positive' images of *gay* men, and to play a role not just in countering what were seen as the negative images of the New Order, but in providing models for a more tolerant and representative Indonesia. This didactic intent is not particular to issues of gender and sexuality; didacticism has always been a notable feature of Indonesian cinema and Indonesian cultural production more generally. What is notable in this post-New Order period is that some filmmakers have specifically chosen to raise issues which run counter to dominant ideologies, or at least which argue for a more diverse and pluralized vision of contemporary Indonesian society.

Continuing with the pattern set out in [Chapter 5](#), this chapter has highlighted a number of more popular films in which *gay* individuals, indeed *gay* couples, are allowed to survive until the end of the film. In *Pesan dari Surga*, Kuta dies and Mario survives, but given their belief in reincarnation, and Kuta's ability to send messages from beyond the grave, we are in no doubt that the relationship will endure through countless lives. In *Coklat Stroberi*, Aldi is dropped by Nesta when Nesta realizes he is heterosexual, but by the end of the film Aldi has a far more exciting boyfriend in the character of Dani, and judging by Dani's gaze and wandering hand in that final scene, he also has a far more sexy and sexualized lover too. In *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll*, whatever the ambiguity over Mariana's identity, we are presented with a new model of an Indonesian family, not only one in which the traditional concern with broken homes is shown to be redundant, but one in which a parent can change gender and be positively accepted by both son and former wife. Mariana's male partner Onky does not reappear at the end of the film, but we can presume that she continues to date him and that he too will become accepted as part of that extended and thoroughly modern family. Such positive and optimistic films do not mean the end of the pathologization of *gay* characters, but they do present a concerted cinematic attempt to resist perceived negative stereotypes.

I argued in [Chapter 5](#) that the desire to create more positive images has resulted in an erasure of the diversity of queer identities evident in Indonesian society, or at least there has been a foregrounding of a particular modern *gay* identity. This has often been at the expense of disavowing what are perhaps seen as more traditional homosexualities. While effeminate Indonesians do continue to appear in the background or as figures of fun, it is a certain model of male *gay* subjectivity which tends to be given prominence. This is generally one which is clean living, affluent, monogamous (or at least desiring of monogamy) and desexualized. In several of the films discussed in this chapter, the narrowness of that vision is not quite so apparent as in those films highlighted from [Chapter 5](#), and filmmakers or actors have found ways of depicting moments of overt sexual desire and of opening up possibilities for queer ways of looking, even within films which might otherwise be noted for rendering the *gay* subject position as a lifestyle rather than as something intrinsically linked to sexual desire.

In discussing this emergence and prioritization of the affluent modern *gay* man, it is inevitable that debates regarding what has become known as global queering are invoked. The debate about representations on screen needs to be separated from arguments about what is happening in Indonesian cities and towns. Representations on screen are clearly not a reflection of the variety of lived lives of *gay* Indonesians across the archipelago. Yet many of the concepts and arguments from debates concerning global queering, transnational flows and circuits of queer knowledge are important to film-making as well as the subjectivities of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians. Just as we can rethink and refine ideas regarding the influence that the West and elsewhere has had on *gay* subjectivities in Indonesia, similarly, we need to think about the influences of Western discourse regarding gay, lesbian and queer subjectivities on those involved in the Indonesian media, specifically the film industry. Certain filmmakers and actors are drawing their knowledge of what it is to be *gay*, and to a lesser extent *lesbi*, from non-Indonesian films and this is in distinct contrast to *waria* or transsexual subject positions in Indonesian cinema, which remain far more localized.

Nonetheless, as has been pointed out by critics working in East and Southeast Asia, the local invariably acts as an essential filter on the reception of these global images. Even in the case of filmmakers who generally come from the wealthiest strata of society, the engagement with the global gay identity will inevitably be filtered through local cultural understandings. Some of these are institutional, and the perceived limits of acceptability, the demands of the censor, and the increasing strength of some Islamic groups are overriding factors when thinking about how the lives of *gay* Indonesians have been imagined on screen. Findings from ethnographic research on the lived lives of *gay*, *lesbi* and *waria* Indonesians are rarely reflected in the films discussed in this book. With some exceptions *gay* men are still imagined to be metropolitan, educated and rich. The notion of marriage as a preferred choice for some *gay* men hardly features, neither does the *dunia gay* or the *dunia lesbi* as a space inhabited by Indonesia's *gay* and *lesbi* citizens. So too, given common arguments about the primacy of the family or religious life in Indonesia, these aspects of the lives of *gay* Indonesian men might be expected to feature strongly. However, the fact is that religion is remarkably absent from most of the movies discussed in this book, and indeed this is probably a result of those filmmakers engaged in trying to make 'positive' films wanting to avoid attention from individuals and groups purporting to represent religious communities.

Finally, throughout this book I have tried to raise the possibilities of other, queer responses to those films which have so often been written off for their negativity, political incorrectness, or pathologization of *gay*, *lesbi* or *waria* Indonesians. As Halberstam has shown, one response in the West to such negative films has been for filmmakers to try to make more positive films, though as she points out this is often at the expense of erasing certain types – she highlights the butch dyke – as the scapegoat for homophobia. She instead calls for a recycling of queer images, which I take to mean a reviewing of existing images in order to find the queer possibilities which may well already exist in films long written off. On the basis of the finding of focus groups I organized with Indonesians, and from

my own perspective as a British gay man, I have tried to highlight the possibilities which a queer way of looking might offer. The readings offered in this book will provoke a variety of reactions including recognition and disagreement. I hope that for some it will also inspire a sense of liberation. However, my task will be done if some readers are encouraged to rethink the possibilities that a queer viewing of the films might offer.

Notes

- 1 This title is sometimes written with a comma after the word '*realita*' in which case the translation could be, 'Reality, Love and Rock 'n' Roll'.
- 2 Since this debut Vino G. Bastian has had a prolific film career, and in 2009 reputedly became Indonesia's highest paid male actor, a position previously held by Tora Sudiro who played Sakti in *Arisan!* (<http://indoshowbizinsiders.weebly.com/stars.html>). He also starred in *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* and *Pesan dari Surga* and played a small role in *Coklat Stroberi*, all of which are discussed below.
- 3 See Chapter 6, note 5.
- 4 This film generated controversy around the time of its release, principally for its knowing engagement with Batak stereotypes. It also attracted protests from certain organizations in Makassar because its provocative title suggested immorality. It was withdrawn from screening in Makassar to placate community groups such as *Warga Peduli Moral SulSel* (Citizens Concerned for South Sulawesi Morality) (Lindsay 2009: 182).
- 5 English language used in the original.
- 6 In the adapted novel which is based on the film, the character is referred to as '*Si Homo*' (the homo), but no additional detail regarding his manner or appearance is given to accentuate this fact (Bawantara 2005: 143).
- 7 Upi is reported to have stated that she was inspired by the works of Pedro Almodóvar (Maimunah 2008a: 102) though not apparently Cuarón's film. Both Eric Sasono (2006b) and Maimunah (2008a) have remarked on links with Almodóvar's *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* (*All About My Mother*, dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 1999) as well as *Y Tu Mamá También*.
- 8 In making this point it seems that Sasono is unaware of the film *Akulah Vivian*.
- 9 Eric Sasono's (2006b) interesting essay on the film does consider its (lack of) sexual content and notes the strong links with *Y Tu Mamá También*. While noting the importance of the female gaze in the eroticization of the male body, he does not consider the alternative meanings which may be constructed by queer ways of looking.
- 10 From my observations on watching four different screenings of the movie in Bandung and Surabaya, the audience tended to be a mix of genders in their late teens and early twenties, but a notable majority of young men in pairs or small groups attended the late night showings. According to the director, audience figures for the film were in excess of 500,000 (interview with Ardy Octaviand, 8 July 2008), which is slightly above average for an Indonesian movie, though it pales in comparison to the two extraordinary hits of 2008, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Laskar Pelangi* ('Rainbow Warriors', dir. Riri Riza) each of which attracted audiences of more than four million.
- 11 The marketing of the film included the launch of a *novel adaptasi* (adapted novel) by Christian Simamora (2007), and the release of a pop video to accompany Ungu's song *Di Sini Untukmu* ('Here for You') which was written specifically for the movie. The video is a mix of images of the band, who also feature in a cameo role in the movie, and key scenes from the film. These three products appeared on the market almost simultaneously, and were aimed at a similar target audience. In addition to

its own sales, the commercial purpose of each variant was to reinforce sales and awareness of the other two, though undoubtedly the commercial success of the cinematic version is paramount. Elsewhere I have analysed the transformation of *Coklat Stroberi* into the genres of novel and promotional pop video, finding that while the *gay* storyline was somewhat enhanced in the novel, it was notably diminished in the pop video to the advantage of the heterosexual romance between Nesta and Key (Murtagh 2010; 2011c).

- 12 Despite the apparent similarity with the title of the *gay* Cuban movie *Fresa y Chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1994) whose title refers to the observation that only *gay* men eat strawberry ice cream – straight men would choose chocolate – the production team only apparently became aware of the Oscar-nominated film when it was brought to their attention at a discussion at the 2007 Q! Film Festival (personal interview with Ardy Octaviand, 2008).
- 13 This meaning of chocolate and strawberry is not in common circulation in Indonesia.
- 14 The observation is based on informal conversations with a number of young *gay* men in June–July 2007 and on focus group discussions with *waria*, *gay* and *lesbi* groups in Surabaya in November and December 2008. In my experience, most young *gay* Indonesians, even those reasonably interested in films, had not seen and often not even heard of *Istana Kecantikan* (1988) or *Kuldesak* (1998).
- 15 Upi also directed *30 Hari Mencari Cinta* (discussed above and in [Chapter 6](#)) and *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n' Roll* (discussed earlier in this chapter).
- 16 Participants in the focus group discussions on this movie often suggested Thailand as the place in Nesta's mind, thus confirming the strength of the notion of Thailand as a *gay* paradise in Indonesian eyes (*cf.* Murtagh 2011a).
- 17 To date there has never been a *gay* pride march in Indonesia.

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