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Progress or Commodification: Representation of Queerness in Indonesian New-Wave Cinema

Ivonne Muliawati Harsono[1]*, Audie Ferrell Liem Fu Wang[2]

ABSTRACT

The fall of the New Order marked a transition period that saw the end of authoritarian interference and the invigoration of artistic freedom in filmmaking amid the moral-panic-induced opposition against promoting queerness in film. This study examines films incorporating queer characters released during the Indonesian New Wave period (post-Soeharto). The purpose of this research is to see if the representation of queerness in the selected films can be considered as evidence of progress or merely serve as gimmicks intended for inclusion or commodification purposes. The study uses 15 feature films, 1 omnibus, and 2 short films released between 2003 and 2021 with a runtime ranging from 8 to 127 minutes. The research expands on the three assessment criteria used in the Vito Russo Test, a test used as an early indicator for queer depiction in film. The films are analyzed using four variables: prominence, portrayal, journey, and outcome. The findings of this research indicate that 77% of the films meet the prominence criteria; 58% conform to non-stereotypical portrayal; 46% depict complex journeys, and 54% offer positive outcomes. It can be argued that the Indonesian New-Wave cinema is currently at the intersection between inclusion/commodification and progress in terms of queer representation in film.

Type of Paper: Review

1. Introduction

The development of queer representation in film media is inherently tied to the larger development of prevailing cultural attitudes towards sexual minorities in any given society. Supiarza et al, (2019) argued that film is one of the most effective means of ideological transmission, since it serves as a cultural medium through which the audience perceive, argue, and formulate opinions about social phenomena, including queer issues.

The representational strategies utilized by filmmakers when depicting queer identities therefore play an important part in shaping public discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ topics, since they not only reflect, but also hold latent power to challenge negative stereotypes and perception regarding queer groups and individuals. This characterization is especially important when discussing queer issues in Indonesia, where public expression of queer identities continues to be met with sustained hostility. A clear example of this happened in 2016 when extremist Islamist groups pushed queerphobic rhetoric into the forefront of public discourse, a flashpoint which led to an anti-LGBTQ+ content ban from the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia: KPI) and the disbandment of Q! Film Festival, then Asia's largest LGBTQ+ film festival by number of films shown and the first queer film festival organized in a Muslim-majority country.

The nature of queer representation in Indonesian media has always been strongly influenced by

the prevailing political attitudes towards queer identities. During the Soeharto era, strong government censorship often limited the depiction of *gay*, *lesbi*, and *waria* (gay, lesbian, and transvestite) identities to storylines that either highlight their questionable moral character, their suffering, or otherwise punish them with negative outcomes. In *Jang Djatuh di Kaki Lelaki* (1971), Sinta, a lesbian woman, dies in a car crash right after her lover Sumiyati abandons her for her husband. In a more direct example, Niko, a gay man, murders his lover Toni in *Istana Kecantikan* (1988). Even light-hearted comedies, such as Benjamin Sueb's *Betty Bencong Slebor* (1978) feature jokes that are heavily reliant on negative queer stereotypes. In one scene, the transvestite Betty is caught up in an anti-prostitution raid–a joke reliant on the audience's familiarity with Kemala Atmojo's journalistic work, which often follows *waria* (transvestite) subjects locked in a constant cat-and-mouse game with police forces out to get them on prostitution charges; often ending in their death.

The fall of the New Order opened the doors for more explicit queer representations that are more complex than simplistic caricatures, sympathetic tragedies, and/or outright condemnation, as direct government intervention over queer content in popular media ceased to exist (Pawito, 2011). The proliferation of these more complex depictions equally resulted in progress and regression in terms of public sentiment towards Indonesian queers. While films such as the much-discussed *Kuldesak* (1998) and *Arisan!* (2003) pushed boundaries in terms of positive, non-patronizing depictions of gay men and, they were also met with increased attacks on the queer community. As Oetomo (2001) argued, Indonesian society during the early years of *Reformasi* entered "a new phase of Indonesian homosexualities, one where homophobic attacks, previously unknown, are becoming a bitter reality."

The nature of queer representation in contemporary Indonesian cinema therefore lies between two extremes, with increased representation and visibility on one hand and increased hostility towards positive queer representation on the other. This fissure became more visible following the 2016 moral panic. The cancellation of Q! Film Festival and KPI's anti-LGBTQ+ ruling encouraged even more public challenges against LGBTQ+ films from religious organizations which adopted KPI's framing of queer values as being incompatible with public morality. For instance, the release of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* (2018) was met with online petitions objecting to the film's queer content; resulting in screening bans from at least seven regional governments and a scaled-back, delayed theatrical release nationally.

These challenges eventually pushed representations of queer characters out of the cinematic mainstream, with traditionally-distributed films largely readopting the regressive anti-queer attitudes that still prevail in contemporary society–as measurable through commodified negative depiction of, or the relegation of queer characters into the narrative background. Coexisting alongside this queerphobic mainstream is the less-visible arthouse largely aimed at foreign festival circuits, which very rarely even gets local distribution, and instead, finding its audience through non-traditional distribution methods, such as online streaming services.

This paper offers an analytical approach to quantify the attributes of on-screen queer representation in Indonesia's New-Wave cinema to help "navigate the treacherous terrain of representation" (Green, 2013, p. 30). Through the use of a framework adapted from Vito Russo's (1981) test model, 26 examples of queer film representation are measured against the metric of character prominence, portrayal, journey, and outcome.

2. Literature Review

Among the first who identified a flourishing of queer depictions in Indonesian cinema following the fall of the New Order was Maimunah, whose 2008 dissertation identified a flourishing of non-normative sexualities in contemporary Indonesian films between 2003-2006. This was

followed up by a larger reading of female same-sex homoerotic depictions in 2010, which identified several strategies employed by the filmmakers of *Tentang Dia* (2005) to negotiate new understandings of sexual diversity which breaks away from the dominant heteronormative norms.

However, the most extensive analyses by far came from Murtagh, who chronicled the construction of queer identities in Indonesian cinema from the 1970s to 2008 in his 2013 monograph, "Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema: Constructing Gay, Lesbi and Waria Identities on Screen". Murtagh followed up this research with several studies, including his 2022 paper which contextualized queer depictions with the increasingly queerphobic discourse of Indonesian society in the 2010s, including the cancellation of Q! Film Festival.

Outside the realm of textual readings, Coppens (2015) argued that queer film activism played an important part in the formation of a new Indonesian society, highlighting how queer depictions (such as in 2012's *Anak-Anak Srikandi*) working in tandem with queer-centric film events such as Q! Film Festival created safe spaces where heteronormativity can be safely challenged and subverted.

This paper builds on existing research to identify larger trends within the Indonesian film industry in regard to queer depiction. Whereas previous research applied different theoretical frameworks to understand the construction of queer identities, ranging from de Certeau (1984) to Boellstroff (2005 and 2007), this paper seeks to apply one analytical framework, the Vito Russo test, to a wider range of films across the entirety of the post-*Reformasi* Indonesian film industry to generate data that can be used to identify trends and fluctuations in the nature of queer depictions.

3. Research Methodology

This paper used a descriptive-qualitative approach to analyze the attributes of on-screen queer representation in Indonesian cinema. The subject of this research includes 26 instances of queer representation across 15 feature films, 1 omnibus (9 shorts), and 2 short films produced between 2003 and 2021. The films were selected on the basis of their production and release years in the Indonesian New Wave period, tracking from the post-*Reformasi* cinematic boom in 1998 to the moral panic of 2016 and the immediate pre-pandemic aftermath. The shortest of the films (*Setengah*) runs for 8 minutes while the longest (*Berbagi Suami*) runs for 127 minutes. The selection covers both conventionally distributed feature films as well as independent films only available in festivals and streaming services.

The authors went through a series of steps to reach the results of their research. First, the authors watched all 26 films, paying particular attention to the depiction of queer characters. Each instance of queer representation was then analyzed using a framework adapted from Vito Russo's (1981) test model, measuring the depiction of each character against the metric of prominence, portrayal, journey, and outcome. Finally, each depiction is then assigned a result based on the criteria of each metric. The description, significance, and outcomes of each variable are explained below.

3.1 Prominence

Measures the significance of the queer character to the story. This variable is similar to the Relevance variable in the Vito Russo Test. It is an important indicator of progress because it reflects whether the inclusion of the queer character is superficially treated (for the sake of inclusion or commodification) or if it is central to the story. This variable is divided into three outcomes:

a. Main

The queer character is an indispensable main character in the story

b. Supporting (essential)

The queer character is a supporting but essential character in the story. The removal of the character will affect the story considerably.

c. Supporting (dispensable)

The queer character is ornamental to the story. The removal of the character will have little to no impact to the story.

3.2 Portrayal

Measures the character traits and social roles assigned to the characters against the existing queer stereotypes. This variable is relevant to measure progress because it indicates whether the filmmaker is reinforcing existing stereotypes or walking away from them. This variable is divided into two outcomes:

a. Stereotypical

The queer character has stereotypical character traits (e.g flamboyant, feminine), social roles (e.g sex workers, fashion designers, dancers, English/Art teachers), and/or tropes (e.g cheating bisexual)

b. Non-stereotypical

The queer character has character traits and social roles that are not commonly associated with queer people. No trope is being reinforced.

3.3 Journey

Measures the filmmaker's approach in creating the queer character. This variable expands on Vito Russo's Complexity variable. It is an important variable to measure progress because more complex storylines and conflicts indicate that queer representation in film as visual media has gone beyond acceptance phase. This variable is divided into two outcomes:

a. Generic

The queer character is mainly dealing with sexual identity/orientation-centered conflict (e.g questioning, awakening, family acceptance, peer pressure). Additionally, the story offers simple or crowd-pleasing resolution for the queer character. In the extreme case, the queer character undergoes no conflict at all.

b. Complex

The queer character experiences conflicts outside his/her/their sexuality, such as interpersonal or occupational conflicts. Additionally, the story offers more complex resolution for the queer character that is not aimed at pleasing the audience.

3.4 Outcome

Measures the conclusion to the queer character in the story. This variable is significant to

measure progress because most of the existing queer films choose tragic or sad-ending routes, implying that queer relationships usually end with a heartbreak - and that heterosexuality remains the better choice. This variable is divided into two outcomes:

a. Positive

The queer character is given a happy/hopeful ending or a resolution to his/her/their conflict.

b. Negative

The queer character has a tragic/sad ending or unresolved conflict

4. Discussion

This research covers 26 films released during the New Wave period as seen below:

No	Year	Type	Original Title	English Title	Director
1	2003	Feature	Arisan!	The Gathering	Nia Dinata
2	2006	Feature	Berbagi Suami	Love for Share	Nia Dinata
3	2006	Feature	Realita Cinta & Rock 'n Roll	Reality, Love, and Rock 'n' Roll	Upi Avianto
4	2007	Feature	Coklat Stroberi	Chocolate Strawberry	Ardy Octaviand
5	2010	Feature	I Know What You Did on Facebook	I Know What You Did on Facebook	Awi Suryadi
6	2010	Feature	Madame X	Madame X	Lucky Kuswandi
7	2011	Feature	Lovely Man	Lovely Man	Teddy Soeriaatmadja
8	2011	Feature	Arisan! 2	The Gathering 2	Nia Dinata
9	2012	Feature	Dilema	Dilema	Robert Ronny, Adilla Dimitri, Rinaldy Puspoyo, Razka Robby Ertanto
10	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Kotak Cokelat	Jakarta Deep Down	Aline Jusria, Billy Christian, Lola Amaria, Kirana Larasati, Dinda Kanyadewi, Adriyanto Dewo, Sim F, Tika Pramesti, Alfrits John Robert, Fira Sofiana
11	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Untuk A	Jakarta Deep Down	
12	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Pembalut	Jakarta Deep Down	
13	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Menunggu Warna	Jakarta Deep Down	
14	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Kentang	Jakarta Deep Down	
15	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Terhubung	Jakarta Deep Down	
16	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Lumba-Lumba	Jakarta Deep Down	
17	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Malam Ini Aku Cantik	Jakarta Deep Down	
18	2012	Omnibus	Sanubari Jakarta - Setengah	Jakarta Deep Down	
19	2014	Feature	Selamat Pagi, Malam	In the Absence of the Sun	Lucky Kuswandi
20	2015	Feature	Negeri van Oranje	Negeri van Oranje	Endri Pelita
21	2016	Feature	Jakarta Undercover	Jakarta Undercover	Fajar Nugros
22	2017	Short	Pria	Man	Yudho Aditya
23	2018	Feature	Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku	Memories of My Body	Garin Nugroho
24	2019	Feature	Pretty Boys	Pretty Boys	Tompi
25	2021	Feature	Yuni	Yuni	Kamila Andini
26	2021	Short	Dear to Me	Dear to Me	Monica Vanesa Tedja

Table 1. Film List

The discussion in this paper will be divided into five parts, which are sexual identity and the four analysis variables namely Prominence, Portrayal, Journey, and Outcome.

4.1 Sexual Identity

The sexual identity classification used in this analysis is based on the LGBTQIA spectrum which consists of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual. From the 26 films, the queer character(s) in each film consist of: gay (9, or 35%), lesbian (5, or 19%), bisexual (1, or 4%), queer/questioning (2, or 7%), trans woman (8, or 31%), and trans man (1, or 4%). These numbers suggest that gays, lesbians, and trans women are well represented, while bisexuals, trans men, and queers are underrepresented. Furthermore, there is no intersex or asexual character.

It is no surprise that trans women come in big numbers since the existence of *waria* (similar to *kathoey* or ladyboy in Thailand) has long been considered as a part of Indonesian culture, especially in the arts. Comedy films, dance rituals, variety shows, and performances often feature *waria*. Outside of the arts, *waria,* also called *bencong* or *banci*, is often associated with street prostitutes. Trans man, on the other hand, is very underrepresented in Indonesia's queer cinema. A contributing factor to this lack of representation is that such individual is commonly referred to as tomboy, without any

attribution to social roles.

4.2 Prominence Variable

In terms of Prominence, this research concludes that 20 out of 26 films portray their queer characters as main characters (77%); 4 out of 26 as essential supporting characters (15%), and 2 out of 26 as dispensable supporting characters (8%). In a glance, these numbers imply that Indonesian queer films are doing well in terms of character prominence. However, it is worth noting that 11 out of the 20 come from the shorts and omnibus, in which the queer characters are central to the story given the runtime. This research also discovers that transgender characters are a popular choice for essential supporting characters. Finally, the two dispensable supporting characters come from the films *I Know What You Did on Facebook* and *Dilema*. In the former, the queer character is the male protagonist's brother whose storyline feels disjointed from the plot. Additionally, the character does not experience any pressure upon coming out. In fact, his dismissal from work results in successful romance. Likewise, the bisexual mother who works as a drug dealer in *Dilema* is portrayed in such a negative light, and her existence does not contribute anything to the story.

4.3 Portrayal Variable

In terms of Portrayal, this research indicates that 11 out of 26 films depict their queer characters in a stereotypical manner (42%), while the other 15 portray them in non-stereotypical fashion (58%). As many as 11 films replicate or reinforce queer stereotypes (e.g. flamboyant/effeminate gay men, trans-women prostitutes, cheating bisexuals), and/or offer a one-dimensional depiction. For example, the gay couple in *Coklat Stroberi* are textbook portrayals of 'bear' (hypermasculine gay) and 'twink' (hyperfeminine gay). Similarly, the lesbian couple in *Pembalut* are characterized as 'butch' (masculine lesbian) and 'femme' (feminine lesbian). This validates the suggestion that gay and lesbian couples are often presented in two extremes (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 39). Poole (2014) also reminded us that media representation of sexual identity is "dominantly constructed through a heteronormative lens" (p. 279). When gay and lesbian couples take on male and female roles, certain heteronormative order is maintained "to assure the dominance of males over females" which "perpetuates a long history of patriarchy" (Poole, 2014, p. 282).

Meanwhile, the trans women in *Malam Ini Aku Cantik, Lovely Man,* and *Jakarta Undercover* are sex workers and a stripper. The danger of these stereotyped portrayals is that it can have a "regressive effect advancement of acceptance towards queer individuals", as argued by Thomson (2021, p. 2). The anomaly in this group comes from the trans woman in *Madame X* who is depicted as a self-deprecating hairdresser that turns into a homophobe-bashing superhero. Although the occupation is stereotypical, the character traits are not.

On the other hand, 15 out of 26 films offer more multi-dimensional characters with better character depth and less stereotypical occupations, such as architect and film director in *Arisan!*, smart and self-supporting housewives in *Berbagi Suami*, a wealthy dance instructor with martial art skills in *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll,* a religious and obedient Moslem teenager in *Pria*, and a *lengger* dancer with a traumatic past in *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahmu*. Overall, the statistic is fairly balanced between stereotypical and non-stereotypical portrayals.

4.4 Journey Variable

In terms of Journey, it can be said that 14 out of 26 films depict a generic journey for their queer characters (54%), while 12 out of 26 offer a more complex one (46%). Generic journey in this research's framework is defined as having an identity-centered conflict (e.g. questioning, awakening, family acceptance, peer pressure), no conflict, or a crowd-pleasing resolution that undermines the character's struggles. Some examples can be seen in the unconditionally supportive family members and friends in *Realita Cinta dan Rock 'n Roll, Lovely Man, I Know What You Did on Facebook,* and *Negeri van Oranje*. Similarly, the potential for conflict between a trans woman and her formerly-school-bully partner in *Kotak Cokelat* is quickly dismissed with the writer opting for a crowd-pleasing

acceptance. Likewise, the lesbian couple in *Pembalut* are depicted as the cliché insecure butch and indecisive femme.

On the other hand, 12 out of 26 films showcase a complex journey in which the queer characters are treated as 'normal' people whose struggles are not confined within the sexual identity domain. The characters in this group have moved past acceptance and identity crisis stage. Complex journey also involves resolutions with grave consequences or open endings that do not always satisfy the mainstream audience. A good example from this group is the two wives who flee a polyamorous marriage in Nia Dinata's *Berbagi Suami*. In a film that mirrors Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*, the women are strong, confident, and secure despite their social status. *Menunggu Warna* also feels like a breath of fresh air as it depicts a mature relationship between two men whose sole conflict centers around the homophobic society they live in. The film's open ending, when they stop at the traffic light waiting for the light to turn green, also serves as a good metaphor for the reality of being queer in Indonesia.

4.5 Outcome Variable

Finally, in terms of Outcome, this research concludes that 14 out of 26 films reward their queer characters with positive outcomes (54%), while 12 out of 26 opt for negative ones (46%). A classic example of the stereotypical lesbian cinema can be seen in *Selamat Pagi, Malam* and *Pembalut* where one of the lesbians chooses to marry a man. Equally bad is the reinforcement of the cheating bisexual trope in *Dilema*, which echoes Green's (2013) opinion about how female bisexuals are "often equated with manipulation and deceit" (p. 32). Perhaps even more damning than the first two scenarios is the rape of the trans woman in *Lovely Man*. Nevertheless, 12 films give their queer characters a more hopeful ending, including *Arisan!, Coklat Stroberi,* and *Negeri van Oranje*, although some of them may seem illogical and crowd-pleasing.

5. Conclusion

Despite the indisputable progress in the number of queer representations in cinema during the New Wave era, it remains to be seen whether the quantitative evolution is in line with its qualitative nature. In other words, "being represented as a subculture is as important as how they are represented" (De Ridder, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2011, p. 200). Therefore, a certain queer method is needed to analyze queer representations in film. This research expands on the Vito Russo test by employing Prominence, Portrayal, Journey, and Outcome variables. The research outcomes suggest that Indonesia is yet to reach the politics of norms (De Ridder, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2011) where queer representation on screen is aimed at subversion or deconstruction, and sexual identity is perceived as fluid and performative. The end of Soeharto's regime opened the door for more inclusive works, but at the end of the day, Indonesia remains a religious country. Consequently, queer films target a more macro level which is aimed at empowerment and inclusion. Seeing that the current society is more receptive towards queer individuals, particularly generation Z and below, filmmakers are encouraged to incorporate queer characters in their works to appeal to this specific market. Regardless, not all works treat queerness as a commodity. A few like *Berbagi Suami, Madame X,* and *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* treat their queer characters with respect through prominence, non-stereotypical portrayal, complex journey, and positive outcome. We are yet to reach the levels of *Carol, Booksmart, Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, or *The Handmaiden*, but it is safe to say that we are heading there in a nonlinear – or straight – manner.

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