

Ben Murtagh

Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema: Constructing gay, lesbi and waria identities on Screen. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013, xiv + 199 pp.

[Media Culture and Social Change in Asia series.] ISBN 9780415536318. Price: EUR 90.00 (hardback).

In this delightfully engaging and critically insightful book, Ben Murtagh explores how lesbian, gay, and transgender subjectivities have been portrayed, and understood, in Indonesian cinema from 1971 until 2008. A useful list of these films is provided in the filmography section (pp. 186–188). In the decade following 1998 alone, at least 35 Indonesian films have been released in cinemas that include non-normative sexualities and genders in one way or another (p. 3), suggesting a certain degree of public recognition and tolerance of queer subjectivities. Murtagh is careful to point out that while these films have transgender, lesbian, and gay characters, they are not necessarily queer films (pp. 9–10), with the possible exception of *Janji Joni* (Joni's Promise) (p. 117). It is possible though, as Murtagh aptly demonstrates, to undertake a decidedly queer viewing of these films. This queer viewing, combined with an eloquent writing style and inclusion of focus group narratives, give a sense of depth to the film analysis by revealing how lesbian, gay, and transgender audiences receive and interpret the films. The result is a valuable contribution to understandings of gender and sexuality in Indonesia that will be a rewarding read for all those interested in Indonesia, film, and queer subjectivities.

The book is divided into seven chapters, some of which have been previously published. The introductory chapter gives an overview of non-normative sexualities and genders in Indonesia, with subsequent chapters examining selected films chronologically. Chapter 2 explores portrayals of *waria* (male transgender) in film in the 1970s, showing how waria disrupt gender through processes of 'dewigging', where the literal wig of waria is removed to assert maleness over performative femininity. The films selected reveal a kind of normalness about being waria, albeit with waria framed as asexual figures of fun.

Chapters 4 and 6 respectively focus on films from the 1990s and the new millennium that include lesbian characters. Prior to the fall of the New Order in 1998, lesbian characters outnumbered gay characters in mainstream films, in part a result of a generalised moral panic about women's supposed uncontrollable sexuality (p. 12). The films that feature lesbians, such as *Gadis Metropolitan* (Metropolitan Girls), reflect and perpetuate popular Indonesian understandings of lesbians, and homosexuals generally, as deviant criminals suffering from mental illness. The only options lesbians have in these films are to be literally saved from their homosexuality by submitting to the right man, or dying (p. 97).

Chapters 3 and 5 respectively explore films from the 1980s and post-1998 that include gay characters, with Chapter 7 examining alternative masculinities in mainstream cinema (although the last couple of pages include a nod to lesbian characters). While there is cross-analysis throughout the book, with waria characters for instance being discussed in numerous chapters, a concluding chapter might have been useful to draw the various threads together.

While I had read Murtagh's work in article form, reading the book gives a tangible sense of the pervasiveness of heteronormativity running through these films. Most of the films present male homosexuality as stemming from active—albeit deviant—same-sex desire; female homosexuality is imagined to result only from the absence of men, or as a temporary reaction to the damaging behaviour of men (p. 98). At the end of almost all the films, gay and lesbian characters convert/revert to heterosexuality, or suffer a tragic death. While one might be forgiven for concluding that such overtly negative portrayals of homosexuality are uncontested, and the few positive portrayals of homosexuality self-affirming, a real strength of Murtagh's book is the insight given to various readings of these films; in short, Murtagh reveals processes of queering affirmative and negative portrayals of homosexuality.

One instance where Murtagh queers a presumed negative portrayal of homosexuality is in the reading of the film *Istana Kecantikan* (Palace of Beauty), which has been widely reviewed as a film that demonises gay men. In the film, which was originally followed by a written warning of the dangers of homosexuality, as demanded by the state censorship board (p. 70), the gay protagonist ends up in prison. Yet, drawing on early work by Krishna Sen, Murtagh shows how the director acquiesced to censor demands, all the while producing a nuanced account of same-sex desire. With this understanding, it is possible to appreciate that even though the ending is a moment when the filmmaker had to anticipate and respond to demands of censors (p. 73), gay and waria focus group participants paid little attention to the film's end. Knowledge of codes of censorship thus gives audiences an ability to read against narrative closure and engage in negotiated viewing strategies. Murtagh's focus group participants took the ending in context, allowing a more affirming and self-validating viewing (p. 73). Moreover, off screen events, for instance panning away from an imminent kiss, enabled audiences to imagine queer scenes.

Murtagh also provides nuanced analysis of films largely considered affirmative of gay life. For instance, Nia DiNata's film *Arisan!* (The Gathering!), has been widely applauded for its positive portrayal of gay life. Yet Murtagh shows that this positive portrayal is not necessarily any more liberating than the portrayal of gay life in films such as *Istana Kecantikan*. Drawing on Lisa Duggan's work on homonormativity, Murtagh analyses the desexualisation of gay and

lesbian characters to make films such as *Arisan!* 'acceptable' to a heteronormative majority. By placing emphasis on the domestic, depoliticised private sphere, and on the economic contribution gays and lesbians make to society by virtue of consumption, Murtagh shows that some Indonesian films are replacing homophobia with a stereotyped modern queer self (p. 107). Inherent in this move is a hierarchy of worthiness based on models of gender conformity—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 and same-sex sexuality (p. 119). Furthermore, homonormative gay couples are contrasted with effeminate sexual characters (such as *waria*), making *waria* (and other 'queer unwanted' subjectivities) almost invisible.

Murtagh also explores how recent films present a largely heterosexual fantasy, often based on an illusion of the West, of what it is to be gay (p. 69). This portrayal contrasts with ethnographic research and commentary from the few publicly out gays and lesbians, revealing that there is not a general desire for gay men to come out (as depicted in the films). Rather, most individuals desire to participate in the 'gay world', a world which the films do not explore. In analysing films and revealing audience viewing strategies, Murtagh shows that films cannot simply be criticised as negative presentations or praised as positive ones, but rather that complexity characterises both production and viewing strategies. In revealing the richness and contestability of gender and sexuality in Indonesia Murtagh's book is a triumph.

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