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'THERE'S NO PLACE FOR US HERE' Imagining queer spaces in Indonesian cinema

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ABSTRACT

The sudden onset of sustained anti-LGBT discourse in Indonesia in 2016 gives pause to revisit a number of Indonesian movies from recent years, a cinema which has, since its re-emergence in the early 2000s, been noted for its positive engagement with non-normative genders and sexualities. Was there anything in those movies that forewarned the homophobic discourse that dominated politics and the media in the early months of 2016? When queer cinematic characters were faced with intolerance or a fear of unacceptance, how did those characters find a space for themselves in the cinematic imaging of the Indonesian city? Paying particular attention to Lucky Kuswandi's 2013 film *Selamat pagi, malam* (*In the absence of the sun*), alongside Joko Anwar's 2005 film *Janji Joni* (*Joni's promise*) and Ardy Octaviand's 2007 film *Coklat stroberi* (*Chocolate strawberry*), this article draws on Michel de Certeau's concept of tactics to discuss how queer characters find ways to embody their queer selves in the supposedly heterosexual spaces of the city.

KEYWORDS

city in cinema; homophobia in Indonesia; Indonesian cinema; queer cinema; queer cities

Introduction

In a scene towards the beginning of Nia Dinata's 2011 film *Arisan! 2 (The gathering 2)*, two elite women are caught up in a demonstration while being driven to the 'Rainbow Film Festival' in Jakarta. After a brief moment of trepidation, they get out of the car and push past demonstrators towards the safety of the cultural centre where a friend's movie is to be screened. A demonstrator shouts at them 'Those who come to this festival are evil', provoking one of the women to respond, 'You guys are absurd. We are here to watch world class movies, not porn!'¹ Inside the centre, Nino, the movie's director, calms staff concerned about the demonstration outside with a variation on some age-old words – 'the screening must go on'. As his friends rush upstairs to take their places for the start of the movie, Nino sits down for a pre-arranged interview with a journalist, who asks, 'You've been running this [LGBT] festival now for seven years, why has there only been a demonstration this year?' Nino answers, 'Aah, that's a good question, I still

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¹The scene is clearly referencing real protests that threatened Jakarta's Q! Film festival in 2010. For a more detailed discussion of those events see Paramaditha (2018). See also the short documentary, *FPI mob threatens Q! Film festival Jakarta 2010* (dirs. Ucu Agustin and Lucky Kuswandi, 2010) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYF10YZMXxc>>

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have to find the answer. But I think this country may be going in a different direction now.' Prescient words indeed.

This 2011 sequel to the 2003 film *Arisan! (The gathering)*, dir. Nia Dinata) depicts a society and group of friends that have changed quite significantly in the eight intervening years.² The excesses of the elite class within which the friends mix have become perhaps even more extreme as they try to cling on to their youth and vitality despite the inevitable passage of time. But so too, wider Jakarta and Indonesian society seems to have changed. In overtly referencing the threats against the 2010 iteration of the Q! Film Festival, and the fictional director's statement that the country may be going in a different direction, the film can now be read as having documented a shift which at the time of its release still seemed more of an unpleasant possibility.

In 2016, five years after the release of *Arisan! 2*, a wave of intense anti-LGBT discourse from government ministers and public officials dominated the media for several months and continues to reverberate to this day.³ In response to these publicly expressed anxieties about the regulation of non-normative sexualities, local governments and police forces, neighbourhood groups and other vigilantes took isolated actions against individuals they identified as being LGBT. In hindsight, given those events and their aftermath, this scene from *Arisan! 2* carries a much greater sense of foreboding.

The immediate years after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 saw a flourishing if nascent democracy (Bourchier 2019) and the liberalisation of media laws (Barker 2019; Sen 2010). In the world of screen media, growing numbers of films engaged with *lesbian*, *gay* and *waria* subject positions (Coppens 2015; Maimunah 2008; Murtagh 2013), and this seemed to match a visible proliferation of sexual and gender identities in Indonesian society more generally.⁴ When completing my book which looked at cinematic representations of *gay*, *lesbian*, *waria* and trans Indonesians from the 1970s to around 2008 (Murtagh 2013), I never imagined that just a few years later the climate would have changed so dramatically. Even when I was fortunate enough to be invited to discuss the book at the 2014 Q! Film Festival, despite the more guarded atmosphere compared with the openness of the earlier iteration I had attended in 2008, I still did not anticipate anything like the events of early 2016. However, the situation has changed, and on reflection a number of films, discussed below in this article, seem to anticipate the overt shift in public discourse post-2016, and highlight the tactics used by some queer characters to imagine other spaces, often beyond Indonesia, in which queer lives are imagined to be more possible.

This article will discuss a number of films united by an awareness of the difficulties of being *lesbian* or *gay*⁵ in Indonesia. The discussion will focus on *Selamat pagi, malam* (*In the absence of the sun*, dir. Lucky Kuswandi 2013), but reference will also be made to a number of other films including *Janji Joni* (*Joni's promise*, dir. Joko Anwar, 2005),

²The earlier film attracted international headlines for its representation of a group of elite Jakarta 30-somethings including the first uncensored *gay* kiss. For discussions of *Arisan!* See Coppens (2009), Maimunah (2010; 2011), Murtagh (2013).

³The emergence of this anti-LGBT hysteria in 2016 is discussed at some length in the introduction to this special issue (García Rodríguez and Murtagh 2022). See also the excellent report compiled by Human Rights Watch (2016), and useful analyses by Boellstorff (2016); Davies (2016); Hegarty and Thajib (2016); Paramaditha (2016); Wieringa (2019).

⁴This is certainly not to say that censorship and self-censorship suddenly ended in 1998. See Barker (2019: 182–195) for discussion of a number of key censorship cases in the early 21st century

⁵As in my previous writing, and following Boellstorff (2005: 8), I italicise *gay* and *lesbian* as Indonesian words, distinct from the English language *gay* and *lesbian*.

Coklat stroberi (Chocolate strawberry, Dir. Ardy Octaviand 2007), and *Arisan! 2 (The gathering 2)*, dir. Nia Dinata 2011). Each of the films has at least one moment when a *lesbian or gay* character either refers to imagined worlds where a space for their sexuality might exist, or adjusts or moderates their behaviour because of who they are or might be perceived to be. In each case, the sentiment behind the tagline from the movie *Selamat pagi, malam* which is referenced in the title of this article — ‘There’s no place for us here’ – is further amplified given the subsequent implication of the public hysteria of 2016.

In approaching these films, I am interested in De Certeau’s concept of strategies and tactics (1984). I will discuss this more fully below, but my focus will be on the tactics used by queer film characters to negotiate, evade and sometimes resist the demands and expectations of family, friends, and society. They do this by creating spaces – real or imaginary – where they can be their queer selves, thereby, momentarily at least, evading the apparent discrimination and hostility which surrounds them. Queer Indonesians are not merely passive victims of a conservative state. In drawing on visual culture, this article will argue that the imagined queer moments and scenes drawn from a range of recent films provide glimpses into the responses by Indonesian creatives to a discourse on alternative sexualities and genders which has been becoming more polarised and occasionally intolerant.

Twenty years ago, film scholar Chris Berry (2001: 211–212), referring to queer films from East Asia, argued that films, while not telling us about the ‘empirical realities of gay lives’, are important for ‘registering and expressing some of the ways in which being gay (or sometimes one of the other queer identities) is imagined both by self-identified gay men and by others’. Romit Dasgupta (2014: 101), drawing on this point in a discussion of queer imaginings of family in films from Japan, Korea and Singapore, has argued that visual culture is able to ‘bring out ambiguities and shades of grey, which may not necessarily come to the surface using sociological methods’. Here Dasgupta is arguing, among other things, for the appropriateness of examining the cinematic representation of familial relations as a conduit for exploring some of the spaces that may be carved out within patriarchal conceptions of the family by queer individuals; and these are spaces which often challenge dominant understanding of the family in Asian societies. In exploring cinematic imaginings of queer lives in contemporary Indonesia, I aim to show how those involved in creating these films imagine the complex ways in which Indonesians can and do navigate sometimes hostile aspects of their own society.

Anti-LGBT and its impact on screen cultures

In early 2016, a wave of hatred and prejudice towards what had come to be known in Indonesia as *LGBT*⁶ dominated media headlines. For several months, a day rarely seemed to pass without a government minister, city politician or religious leader saying something to add to the increasingly difficult environment in which queer Indonesians found themselves trying to live their lives. The intensity of the anti-*LGBT* discourse may have diminished somewhat for now, but there is no doubt that the

⁶I use the term *LGBT* here as a category increasingly used in public discourse with a negative sense. Hegarty and Thajib argue that *LGBT* is used in the Indonesian media in such a way as to paint it as a movement in the process of taking shape – thus both elusive, but also particularly threatening (2016). Hendri Yulius (2022) notes that activists have increasingly made use of queer post-2016 in order to find a language free from this popular discourse.

climate for queer Indonesians has changed, as have the possibilities for representing queer characters on screen.

There had, of course, been prejudice and violence against queer Indonesians in the past. For example, Kemala Atmojo's journalistic expose of the life of Jakarta *waria* in the 1980s highlights the occasional harassment and violence faced by *waria*, particularly those suspected of engaging in sex work. Atmojo records the death of three *waria* who had drowned in separate incidents while trying to escape police raids (1986: 11–13), a tragic outcome also hinted at in Benjamin S's 1979 comedy *Betty bencong selebor* (Murtagh 2013: 35). However, Dédé Oetomo's article of 2001, describing an attack on a 2000 meeting for AIDS activists in Kaliurang, Central Java, highlights what he described as 'a new phase of Indonesian homosexualities, one where homophobic attacks, previously unknown, are becoming a bitter reality'. In addition to the violence of that attack, we should note the intimidation of some NGOs and journalists who had initially defended the organisers of the event, such that their support partially dissipated because of pressure from leaders of those Islamic groups associated with the attacks (Oetomo 2001, see also Boellstorff 2004). The era since the fall of Soeharto has not only been marked by sporadic homophobic attacks, but also it seems by intimidation of those organisations that might have countered such violence. More recently, in March 2010, there was an attack on the regional meeting of the ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) which was scheduled to be held in Surabaya, East Java. A workshop on trans rights due to be held in Depok, West Java, was similarly attacked the following month (Liang 2010). The radical Islamic organisation Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front) was strongly linked to both attacks. As Liang (2010) notes, one of the most disturbing aspects of the attack was an apparent reluctance or inability of the police to protect the safety of participants and the meetings both of which had been permitted in advance by authorities.

That same year, as mentioned earlier, the 2010 iteration of the Jakarta based Q! Film Festival became the target of threats and demonstrations by FPI as referenced in the fictional film *Arisan!* 2. While the actions did not shut down the festival, they marked a moment of change. As Intan Paramaditha (2018: 74) writes, reflecting on her attendance of the festival in the following year, the Q! Film Festival had been transformed from a 'lively, urban celebration into a clandestine event'. In subsequent years, the festival had to become less publicly oriented, with audience members required to register to obtain screening details. The anti-LGBT hysteria of 2016, then, marked a moment when it became clear that occasional and seemingly rather random incidents of homophobia had been surpassed by a far more sustained discourse.

In screen media it is not so easy to register the impact of the more hostile environment – self-censorship and projects left unfunded are difficult to quantify – but the number of queer film characters or sub-plots has clearly declined in recent years, certainly in mainstream releases. In terrestrial television, which is inherently more conservative in its engagement with matters of sexuality and gender diversity, there was perhaps less openness to pull back from, though there have long been several TV hosts and personalities who do not conform to Indonesian notions of normative masculinity. Nonetheless, in 2016, as part of the general backlash against LGBT and following on from a couple of high profile scandals involving allegations of sexual impropriety against TV personalities, the National Broadcasting Commission (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, KPI)

re-emphasised an existing policy banning the normalisation of LGBT behaviour on TV and radio (2016).⁷ The regulations are primarily concerned with ensuring that male bodied individuals behave, dress and speak as it is thought men should, and do not betray any characteristics which might be considered effeminate (*Republika* 2016). A search of the KPI website soon reveals a steady flow of reports and written warnings issued since 2016 to TV stations for programming judged to have broken these guidelines. For example, a recent report dating from 30 September 2020 regarding the SCTV show *3 Sempruuul penjaga pantai* states that the show featured several men with the look, make-up and style of women (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia 2020). While such sanctions undoubtedly have impact in terms of self-censorship, the KPI is often seen as being rather ineffectual. They do not have the power to issue or retract licences, for example, though they can refer serious transgressions to the Communications and Information Ministry (Ramdhani 2016). Even when the KPI has ordered TV shows to be pulled from the air, the same programmes have often returned with just a slightly different name. More recently, however, there have been discussion to allow the KPI to fine broadcasters (VOI 2021).

The cases of *CONQ*, a 2014–15 web series, and the 2019 film *Kucumbu tubuh indahku* (*Memories of my body*, dir. Garin Nugroho) also highlight the caution and difficulties with which screen creatives are increasingly having to operate. In September 2015 – so just before the storm of anti-LGBT declarations that marked the opening of 2016 – the team behind *CONQ*, a website popular with gay middle-class men in Jakarta, felt compelled to stop access to the site (Coconuts Jakarta 2015). At the same time, they removed the remarkably successful web series of the same name (dir. Lucky Kuswandi) from open access on YouTube, though the web series was later made available on the Singaporean-based platform Vidsee (Murtagh 2015, 2019).⁸ The recent response to Garin Nugroho's 2019 film *Kucumbu tubuh indahku*, also demonstrates the tensions with which production companies must contend. Loosely based on the life of Indonesian dancer Rianto, the film tells the story of a *lengger* dancer and follows a coming-of-age story arc. Petitions called for the film to be banned even before it had been released, due to its apparent promotion of LGBT lifestyle (Salman 2019). Most criticism seems to have been based on the film's trailer rather than the film itself, but this was enough to garner condemnation from the MUI (Indonesian Council of Ulamas), and local bans in a number of regencies including Depok, Palembang, Pekanbaru and Lampung (Aziza 2019; Harsono 2019). While highlighting that it is still possible to make films which engage with alternative gender performativity – the film has been highly acclaimed internationally and nationally (*Jakarta Post* 2019) – the potential for boycotts and demonstrations by those purporting to defend the nation's morality severely limit the potential for local screenings.

Meanwhile, in addition to attacks and hurdles encountered in the film industry, a steady stream of incidents continues to reach the national press, and occasionally the international press too. Doubtless many incidents are never reported. The public

⁷The two regulations of note are 184/K/KPI/02/16 and 203/K/KPI/02/16, the first relating to prohibiting the promotion of LGBT, and the second prohibiting men dressing, speaking or acting in an 'effeminate' (*kewanaitan*) way.

⁸As noted elsewhere (Murtagh 2019: 56), Lucky Kuswandi countered suggestions that the site and series had been taken down due specifically to censorship, clarifying that everything was made private 'as a precaution and to ensure the safety of the filmmakers' (Coconuts Jakarta 2015).

lashing of two young men in Aceh (Knight 2017, see also McKirdy 2018), the arrest of a number of men at the Atlantis Sauna in Jakarta (*Guardian* 2017), the forcing of a number of men to take HIV tests following a police raid on a private gathering in Surabaya in 2017 (Sergeant 2017), and the 2020 raid and subsequent arrest of nine men attending what the police described as a ‘gay party’ held at an apartment in the Kuningan area of Jakarta (Coconuts Jakarta 2020), are all examples of events that have grabbed media headlines beyond Indonesia. These incidents also demonstrate the new levels of harassment and surveillance since the emergence of anti-LGBT discourses in 2016, and perhaps most importantly, the increased anxiety and stigmatisation which many queer Indonesians live with and negotiate.

Lesbian and gay characters in cinema since the 1970s

Indonesian film has been engaging with issues of non-normative sexuality and gender since the early 1970s. The breadth and variety of representations is significant. Today, audiences and industry professionals are often critical of those films from the New Order period (1966–98), noting a tendency to pathologise non-normative sexualities, with film endings that are often marked by death, incarceration or ‘rescue’ of gay and lesbian characters. As argued elsewhere, representations of *lesbian*, *gay* and *waria* characters in the New Order period are nonetheless more complex than often acknowledged. There are really quite remarkable queer scenes and moments to be found within a number of films from the New Order era (Murtagh 2013). There was censorship of course, which sometimes led to scenes being cut (or self-censored from the outset), and endings adapted to fit the demand for a return to order. For example, scenes from the 1987 film *Istana kecantikan* (*The palace of beauty*, dir. Wahyu Sihombing) were pared back from what was included in the original screenplay, and the incarceration of the *gay* character at the film’s conclusion is certainly depressing (Murtagh 2006, 2013: 63–73), though the film itself provoked meaningful and lively debate on the position of *gay* men in Indonesian society at the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival screening (Murtagh 2013: 72). A focus group discussion I conducted with *gay*-identifying men in 2008 demonstrated that there was still much in the film that contemporary *gay* audiences might find relevant and meaningful given its focus on the predicament of those facing family pressure to marry heterosexually, the fear of one’s sexuality becoming known in the workplace, and a still relatable middle-class setting (Murtagh 2011a).

To cite two more examples, the 1971 film *Jang djatuh dikaki lelaki* (*Those who fall at men’s feet*, dir. Nico Pelamonia), is marked by an ending which sees the *lesbian* characters either dead from a car crash, converted to heterosexuality or trapped in a heterosexual marriage. But there are also numerous scenes which depict women sharing moments of intimacy and providing (momentarily, at least) alternatives to heterosexuality and patriarchy. When looking back at the contemporary press responses to that movie, it is striking that there was little or no condemnation of same-sex behaviour per se, though critics did question whether audiences would understand and accept the representation of *lesbian* sexuality, given that it was something so unknown or new in the country (Durahman 1972, Atit and Murtagh forthcoming). Another film from the 1970s, *Remaja di lampu merah* (*Youth at the stop light*, dir. Syamsul Fuad, 1979), carried an overall message on the dangers of homosexuality, but includes many scenes

of male intimacy, and was still deemed fit for screening on Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia (TPI, Indonesian Educational TV) in 1991 (Murtagh 2013: 55). One review of note (Rotan 1979) drew on the novel content of the film and was accompanied by a still of the male stars El Manik and Rano Karno in bed together. The playful reviewer wrote, ‘El Manik who has recently been awarded Best Supporting Actor has been caught red-handed having sex with the popular teenage actor Rano Karno’ (Murtagh 2013: 51). While the review was teasingly sensationalist, it did not question whether such a film should actually be screened. There is little doubt that such films would not be deemed suitable for general release today.

The aftermath of the fall of Suharto saw a flourishing of films which engaged with alternative genders and sexualities in ways which would have seemed unimaginable a few years previously. The much discussed *Kuldesak* (*Cul-de-sac*, dirs Nan Triveni Achnas, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani and Riri Riza, 1999), filmed in the final years of the New Order but released in the excitement of the immediate aftermath of Suharto’s fall, is often seen retrospectively as hailing a new cultural and cinematic era.⁹ The film includes a gay couple who end the film separated due to the pressures of living in the oppressively intolerant Jakarta, but it also includes a number of other characters open to queer readings (Murtagh 2013: 104–105). *Kuldesak* also features a frequently discussed gay kiss which was blurred by the censors. What is perhaps most remarkable in this scene between the two young men is not that it was censored, but that the director chose the back of a city bus, such a public place, for the kiss. While some responses to the film have seen it as pessimistic in its representation of homosexuality (Coppens 2009; Ellis 2011), as argued elsewhere it is perhaps a pessimism about Indonesian society and its attitude to its queer inhabitants that is reflected in the film; a pessimism only compounded by the censors’ approval of scenes of violence against its gay subjects while censoring scenes of queer intimacy (Murtagh 2013: 104).

As a film made on the cusp of reformasi, *Kuldesak* was soon surpassed – in terms of positive gay images at least – by Nia Dinata’s 2004 film *Arisan!* with its uncensored gay kiss. I had previously understood *Kuldesak* as a somewhat transitional film in the sense that it is remarkable for its realistic depictions of queer intimacy, but the intimacy is still thwarted not just by the censor but also the imagined intolerance of wider Jakarta society. Viewed from a post-2016 perspective, it now seems perhaps that that intolerance never really went away.

Tactics, places and queer spaces

In thinking about how groups of people might performatively carve out spaces of freedom, even momentarily, within the places they have little choice but to inhabit, I have found it useful to draw on Michel de Certeau (1984) and his work on tactics and strategies as laid out in his key work *The practice of everyday life*. In particular, I draw on de Certeau’s theorising of the use of tactics by marginalised and oppressed groups in the face of political strategies used by dominant groups. De Certeau (1984: 30) describes this as a process whereby the individual, ‘without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its laws for him, he establishes within it

⁹See in particular Clark (2004), Paramaditha (2011), Setiyawan (2009) and Yngvesson (2015),

a degree of plurality and creativity'. Evoking metaphors from the battlefield, de Certeau (1984: 37) illustrates his ideas by pointing to the fact that those in power pin their security strategies on 'establishment of a place', while those less powerful will rely on tactics related to moments of time, quick isolated actions, and the ability to 'seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at a given moment'.

Rather than seeing spaces of the city as fixed, in terms of the official regulated version of the city, we can see that the use of tactics may actually produce urban meaning, instead of simply highlighting the binary of power and resistance. For alongside, indeed within the formalised, hygienic and purified own space of the city (*espace propre*) exists the fact of the city, the space experienced by people, and the places that are invested with multiple meanings and memories and desires by 'the ordinary practitioners of the city' (de Certeau 1984: 93). As de Certeau (ibid.) notes, the unique and unseen trajectories of each of these practitioners, and 'the urban text that they write' come together to form 'a manifold story without author or spectator'.

There are clear parallels between de Certeau's work and that of queer geographers who have theorised the notion of queer urban spaces, or queering of the city (for example Bell et al. 1994; Brown and Browne 2016; Oswin 2004, 2014). Just as it is recognised that sexuality and gender are socially constructed, so too queer spaces are 'performatively and discursively produced' (Oswin 2014: 142). While much of the work on geographies of sexualities has focused on gay villages and community building in the west and more recently cities in the Global South, queer geographers have been key in highlighting the way that various subjects 'are rendered abject, abnormal or "queer" in urban heteronormativity' (Oswin 2014: 140). Browne's argument that 'queer is always fleeting, defying control and boundaries' (2006: 890) is particularly pertinent for the recognition of those cinematic moments analysed below where the codes and norms of heterosexuality are contested, and in so doing the Indonesian state's presumption of its cities' heteronormativity is queered. While the protagonists in the films discussed here do not visit or inhabit spaces which might be recognised as *gay* or *lesbian* spaces – though the film festival in *Arisan 2!* mentioned in the introduction to this article is a rare exception¹⁰ – they do, on occasion, queer spaces as they move around the city, despite the presumed heteronormativity of the urban landscape as regulated by the state.

The tag line for Lucky Kuswandi's film *Selamat pagi, malam* – 'There's no place for us here' – neatly captures a sense of queer oppression, of the impossibility of being queer in Jakarta.¹¹ Paradoxically, the very use of this line in the movie in a conversation between two women who had formerly been lovers, brings to the fore the fact that there are queer people in Jakarta and despite the heteronormativity of the city's official conception of itself, doing queer in Jakarta is indeed still possible. In her recent article on queer envisioning, Eden Kinkaid (2018: 439) proposes that 'the search for a different way of seeing cannot be separated from practices of inhabiting space otherwise'. She expands this point, adding 'embodying queer subjecthood presents us with a kind of disorientation, an irreducible double vision that might yet make another space possible' (Kinkaid 2018: 439).

¹⁰We should also note the village of Beyond the Clouds in Lucky Kuswandi's earlier film *Madame X*. In that fictional village in an unnamed country, queer characters create space for themselves beyond the increasing homophobia in the rest of the country.

¹¹The film actually follows three different women, only one of whom is *lesbian*, and that tagline equally applies to the position of the other marginalised heterosexual women.

As we will see there might not be an officially recognised place in the city for queer Indonesians, but the resistive use of tactics allows for the embodiment of spaces whereby the queer imaginary can open up different ways of seeing the future. As Kinkaid (2018: 441) asks, ‘what is the future but a place, a horizon of the here and now?’ *Selamat pagi, malam*’s narrative highlights the tactics that gay and lesbian Indonesians might use to queer urban spaces for themselves, to ‘traffic towards that horizon of possibility’ (*ibid.*). While the Indonesian state might not allow for lesbian or gay identities in Jakarta’s hegemonic representation of spaces, I want to show how cinema can open up glimpses of potential for queer ways of inhabiting space.

It is the cinematic engagement with these manifold urban imaginaries – ‘what we think about a city and how we perceive the ways we act in it’ (Huyssen 2008: 3) – that is central to the analysis of the films below. The imagining of Indonesian urban centres and their contrast with cities and places beyond Indonesia, when viewed through a queer lens, gives rise to a sense of both abjection and belonging, a sense of an imagined, perhaps utopic, community extending beyond the borders of Indonesia. Drawing on the seminal work of Benedict Anderson (2006: 6) on imagined communities whereby members of nation states ‘will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’, various queer scholars have drawn on the imagining of queer community that extends beyond national borders. Tom Boellstorff (2005) cites the importance of knowledge of a gay and lesbian world beyond Indonesia in the understanding of self of many gay and lesbian Indonesians. While certainly seeing themselves as Indonesians, Boellstorff (2005: 72) argues that gay and lesbian Indonesians also see ‘their subjectivities as linked to a transnational imagined community; it is as if they are one island in a global archipelago’. It is the cinematic imagining of what queer Indonesians think about their own cities and those cities in that global archipelago to which I will now turn. In particular I am interested in how this sense of belonging to both worlds informs how queer characters are imagined to carve out queer moments and opportunities within Indonesian urban centres.

Queering spaces in film

In my exploration of the queering of space in a selection of Indonesian films I will turn first to Joko Anwar’s first film as a director, *Janji Joni*. Joko Anwar, undoubtedly one of the most innovative and successful film makers working in Indonesia today, has frequently included references to non-normative sexuality and gender in his work as director, screenwriter and also actor. He notably co-wrote the screenplay for the first iteration of *Arisan!* just before directing *Janji Joni* in 2005.¹² Around this time *Tempo* magazine (Anwar 2005) reported him saying that he felt close to the ‘gay world’ (*dunia gay*), and that he could not imagine making a film in which that *dunia gay* was not reflected (Murtagh 2013). Other later films also include characters who may be read as

¹²*Janji Joni* was produced by Kalyana Shira Films, Nia Dinata’s film company, which also produced the *Arisan!* films, and Lucky Kuswandi’s first feature movie *Madame X*. There is no space here to detail Joko Anwar’s full artistic output, but he has become increasingly high profile and is recognised both nationally and internationally. Key directorial successes have included *Pintu terlarang* (*Forbidden door*, 2009) *Pengabdi Setan* (*Satan’s slaves*, 2017), *Gundala* (2018), and *Perempuan tanah jahanam* (*Impetigore*, 2019).

queer or certainly whose sexuality or gender are non-normative. For example, his 2007 neo-noir film *Kala* has been praised for its quiet reveal that the lead detective Eros happens to be gay (see, for example, Emond 2010).¹³ We should also note Joko Anwar's performance as Aline, trans sidekick to their best friend Adam (who transforms into a trans superhero) in Lucky Kuswandi's 2010 movie *Madame X*.

In Joko Anwar's romantic comedy/adventure film, *Janji Joni*, an opening montage on the importance of cinema in the lives of Jakarta folk includes the private thoughts of various individuals as they walk around the city. One woman thinks about how her life resembles that of Bridget Jones, and wonders when she will find her Hugh Grant; another woman thinks about taking a dance class so she could have a body like J-Lo in *Shall we dance*.¹⁴ Then, after hearing a woman thinking about Tom Cruise as her ideal lover, we switch to a male city worker, who is also thinking about Tom Cruise in *The last samurai* (dir. Edward Zwick, 2003), but perhaps in a slightly more visceral way: 'Tom Cruise is so sexy' (*sexy banget*). This montage, introduced by the offscreen narrator, highlights the importance of movies in people's lives, and we cannot but note that all of the Jakarta city workers are drawing on international films and western actors, to imagine other possibilities, other realities, as they follow their multiple trajectories in the central business district. The preference for international films as the inspiration for thoughts and imaginings that take these individuals beyond the quotidian may be explained by Joko Anwar's extensive knowledge of global film. But this imaginary of a world beyond Indonesia, through the lens of cinema in this particular case, is a trope which runs through all the films discussed in this section.

Returning to that male city worker fixating on Tom Cruise, it is no coincidence that he creates a private queer space for himself by thinking about an actor from the world beyond Indonesia. In the manifold unseen stories imagined by these 'ordinary practitioners of the city' (de Certeau 1984: 93), director Joko Anwar proposed fleeting moments of escape to divert from the mundane, banal and perhaps oppressive realities of everyday existence. The scene closes by panning out from the queer desire of the male office worker to capture the numerous workers physically crossing paths just as the sound of their private thoughts merge into one indistinguishable sound. The audience is left to imagine how many other queer thoughts, how many other queer worlds in and beyond Indonesia are being privately evoked in those lived Jakarta streets.

The 2008 movie *Coklat stroberi*¹⁵ centres around two male university students who have been living together as a couple, though their family and friends think that theirs is simply a male friendship along the lines typical of young men in Indonesia. Nesta is a fit and muscular young man who is terrified of people finding out about the relationship. Aldi is more effeminate and is keen for the relationships to develop beyond the secret lives he and Nesta are living. The two university students are falling behind on their rent, and so agree to their landlady's proposal that two female students move

¹³See also my discussion of the scene where Eros sits up in bed in a motel and the audience suddenly finds out that his sexual partner (at least on that occasion) is another cisgender man (Murtagh 2013: 120–121). This might be interpreted as another example of the queering of previously imagined normative spaces.

¹⁴The character is referring to the US movie *Shall we dance* (2004 dir. Peter Chelsom), starring Jennifer Lopez (J-Lo) and Richard Gere.

¹⁵See Murtagh (2010) for a discussion of this film, and its other iterations in pop video and fiction.



into the house to help share the costs. Nesta starts flirting with one of the female students, in order that they do not suspect he might be *gay*.

The film reaches a turning point midway as it becomes clear the two men are heading in different directions. When Aldi explains to Nesta that he has just come out to his parents – that he does not want to pretend anymore and that he is tired of hiding (*ditutup-tutupin*) 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 him ‘Where do you think we are living? (*lu pikir kita hidup di mana?*)’. Implicit in that question ‘where do you think we are?’ is his view that being open about their relationship in Indonesia – as opposed to some other unmentioned location – is impossible. Here, more than anywhere 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 (for him) to be replaced by a publicly acceptable and socially essential heterosexual pairing.

Nesta tells his partner Aldi, ‘you are too naive’ [for imagining this could ever work here]. The reason for this crisis and almost panic from Nesta is further contextualised as the scene ends with a show of intimacy in the privacy of their bedroom, perhaps as the two of them imagine that they may indeed be somewhere else. Just as they are about to kiss, the two are disturbed by their female housemates. Private spaces are not really private after all when it comes to same-sex relationships, their secret is no longer, and even their friendship is destabilised; by the end of the film Nesta is openly dating one of his female flatmates. But in the final scene we do indeed see that Aldi is able to hold the hand of another guy, not in a mall maybe, but in a music venue in the city, surrounded by his friends.

Nesta, even in his lived experience of the spaces of the city, was unable to imagine a queer future. For him the dominant hegemonic conception of the shopping mall and of the university campus as a heterosexual space left him with no option but to imagine those public spaces as ones where he too had to be heterosexual. The resonance of his fear of being seen as *gay* on the university campus is, of course, all the stronger given the specific focus on university campuses in the various anti-LGBT pronouncements of 2016.¹⁶ Aldi however – perhaps reflecting an understanding of self which meant that he had no other option – is able to imagine other possibilities, other spaces. When, at the end of the film, he arrives in the music venue, hand-in-hand with Dani, a character with a decidedly more edgy and less mainstream look, we have perhaps an example of a way of being and seeing that does not line up with straight, normative modes of acting in the world. As Sara Ahmed (2006: 560) puts it, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘the queer couple in straight space might look like they are slanting, or oblique. The queer bodies, if they gather round the table, might even seem out of line’. To use Ahmed’s terms they appear ‘slantwise’ or ‘wonky’ (2006). ‘The looks of puzzlement and

¹⁶In January 2016 Muhammad Nasir, the Minister for Higher Education, said that he wanted to ban LGBT student organisations from university campuses, specifically targeting the Support Group and Resource Center on Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Indonesia. The minister later backtracked on his pronouncement somewhat, but as many commentators have noted, by that point the damage had been done. In preceding months, the rector of Lampung University had threatened to expel students or lecturers involved in LGBT activities, and Brawijaya University cancelled an event with an LGBT theme (Human Rights Watch 2016).

surprise from Nesta and his girlfriend capture the different spaces imagined by Aldi and Nesta. For Nesta, Aldi's presence is both confusing and challenging; how can this queer character publicly exist in this heterosexual space of Jakarta? For Aldi (and his partner Dani), however, it is the imagining of other possibilities, other horizons from the here and now, which allow them to embody a space for themselves in Jakarta.

Coklat stroberi's ending might to many seem overly optimistic, unrealistic perhaps for the reality that is Jakarta. But on further reflection this split between Nesta's retreat to normativity as the only future he could imagine for himself, and the queer possibilities for the future opened up by Aldi and Dani's slanting of the straight space, captures very well the tactics that some queer Indonesians adopt in their lived experience of the city's spaces.

The pulling in opposite directions of these two main characters as they try to imagine a future for themselves in Jakarta also pre-empts a similar struggle which plays out in *Selamat pagi, malam*, the second full length film directed by Lucky Kuswandi. Throughout Kuswandi's creative output we can see a strong commitment to social commentary and questions of acceptance and belonging. His first feature film, *Madame X*, was released in 2010. This comic movie features a trans superhero who takes on the militant leader of a homophobic political party on the verge of electoral success. Kuswandi has engaged further with issue of non-normative genders and sexualities in his acclaimed 2015 short film *The fox exploits the tiger's might*, and in the web-series CONQ (see Murtagh 2015, 2019). More recently his 2021 Netflix film *Ali & ratu ratu queens*, a feel-good movie about a teenage boy who travels to New York to find his mother (and himself), can also be noted for continuing a theme of looking beyond Indonesia to find space to explore one's sense of self.

Lucky Kuswandi's 2014 film *Selamat pagi, malam* focuses on the lives of three different women during the span of a single night in Jakarta. Each of the women face different challenges but their experiences are united by the impositions placed on their lives by the state, social convention and religious norms. These limits are somewhat less tightly policed, or perhaps easier to evade, during the night-time hours, and the stories of all three women eventually overlap in the space of the Lone Star love hotel in north Jakarta.

Of particular interest for this article is the relationship between Gia and Naomi. Gia has just returned to Jakarta after living in New York for some years. On her first night back in the city she gets in contact with Naomi, a fellow Indonesian woman, with whom it becomes evident she had had a relationship in New York. Still feeling like a stranger in her own land, Gia is surprised by how Naomi seems to have sold out on her former ideals. Midway through the film, as Gia and Naomi travel in Naomi's chauffeured car, Gia suggests they get out the car and walk instead, to get away from the 'aquarium', the spaces where their lives are forever on show, watched and monitored by the other members of their class. 'You can't walk in Jakarta. There are no sidewalks in Jakarta,' Naomi replies, referring most obviously to the physical difficulty of moving around the city on foot (for middle class people at least), but on another level perhaps hinting at a fear of leaving the prescribed trajectories of travel created by the city planners, by social convention and the market. With Gia listening in disbelief to her friend's arguments, Naomi then invokes the late hour and the danger for women in walking on the street to support her argument. Then, as a last attempt at thwarting the plan to get out and walk, she points to the unsuitability of her footwear, useless



for walking anywhere but the polished floors of a mall or upmarket restaurant. Gia is having none of it, however. She admonishes Naomi for sounding like her mother for invoking the danger of the city as a way to control women's movements, and suggests that Naomi put on her gym shoes instead.

As they begin to walk in the city they can finally appreciate where they are and begin to make space for who they are. Looking up at the Welcome Monument (*Tugu Selamat Datang*)¹⁷ at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout at the very heart of Jakarta, Gia smiles as she looks up at the iconic monument, and finds the moment to take Naomi's hand. As the camera captures the two women standing hand-in-hand, the brightly lit word 'Indonesia' from the sign of the Plaza Indonesia shopping mall radiates between the two, before the shot fades into the reflection of the Welcome Monument in the water of the fountain below. This fleeting moment, 'seized on the wing' to use de Certeau's words, captures the possibility for what Indonesia could be, a country where queer couples make a space for themselves, where everyone is welcomed. Finally, as they begin to walk in the city, they remember and re-feel their past history as a couple.

As they move through the quiet side streets (Figure 1), trying to find a food stall remembered from the past, Gia asks Naomi about what she has been doing since returning to Jakarta. Naomi has given up on her hopes of becoming an artist, despite having studied art in New York, claiming that in Jakarta one needs to be practical; she'd rather be a patron of the arts than make art. Reminding us of de Certeau's 'ordinary practitioners of the city', those countless individuals who actually experience the city and invest the city with meaning through their unique and unseen trajectories (1984: 93), the two are able to finally talk about what matters. While Gia clearly hopes that they can find a trajectory together, it becomes evident that that is not to be. When the subject of an old dream to visit South America comes up in conversation, we discover that Naomi is already booked to go, though when Gia asks if she can go too, her enthusiasm is met with silence; as we find out later Naomi will actually be going there with her soon-to-be husband.¹⁸ As we have heard from Naomi, Jakarta demands one to be practical, and perhaps just as with Nesta in *Coklat stroberi*, the practical and realistic option seems to be to follow the safe, condoned heteronormative path.

Back in the car, as they first pass by the Istiqlal Mosque and then Jakarta Cathedral, Gia remarks that she had never realised the two buildings stood side by side. After a quick discussion on unity in diversity, the Indonesian national motto, Gia says in English, somewhat naively, 'religions plays such a big role here'. Naomi can only respond with a knowing 'That's why' (*makanya*). 'That's why what?' queries Gia. 'There is no place for us here' answers Naomi. This brief conversation, focusing as it does on the centrality of religions in Indonesian society, and the national motto which carries a suggestion of tolerance, captures the very different perspectives of the two women. Naomi, already back in Jakarta some time and worn down by pressures of family, religion, social and class expectations, is resigned to the intolerance of Indonesia and can see no option but to follow a path of heterosexuality and compliance. Gia still sees

¹⁷The monument features a woman and man in waving gesture of welcome. Erected in advance of the 4th Asian Games, held in Jakarta in August-September 1962, it was intended to welcome athletes to the city and 'to welcome the future society that is just and welcome' (*Star Weekly* 1961, quoted in Kusno 2004: 2387).

¹⁸A reference perhaps to Wong Kar-wai's 1997 film *Happy together*, where the gay Hong Kong couple Po-Wing and Fai travel to Buenos Aires in the hope of reigniting their relationship.



Figure 1. Gia (left) and Naomi walk along a side street in Jakarta. Courtesy of Kepompong Gendut Films.

things with fresh, perhaps naïve eyes, and is not yet ready to give up on her New York sense of self. As their car heads towards north Jakarta, Gia's eye is drawn towards the Lone Star hotel, one of the many sex hotels they are passing. Drawn by the American name perhaps, and calling on their New York sensibilities rather than Jakarta excuses, Gia proposes they spend the night there. Naomi first protests that the hotel will be 'dingy and gross' and then becomes almost lost for words, as she can't quite believe what Gia is suggesting. 'What happened to New York Naomi?' Gia challenges. 'It's completely different here' (*Di sini beda sekali*) says Naomi, almost incredulous that Gia does not understand the place they are in. But Gia is not to be deflected, and rather than accept the place of Jakarta as defined by convention, religion and family she proposes an apparently simple tactic 'Well, pretend this is New York.' Looking out the window Naomi does not quite get it, cannot quite imagine. 'It's not', she says perhaps trying to bring her friend back to reality of place but for Naomi, there are still queer possibilities, 'We can pretend ... for this one night ... please ... let's just pretend.'

In one sense we have here a reiteration of the common trope that same sex relationships are not possible in Indonesia and are only imagined as possible overseas. Incidentally, Kuswandi continues this idea of New York as a space of possibilities and liberation in his recent Netflix film *Ali & ratu-ratu queens*, though in this case it is the story of a young man who is able to explore his potential as a creative when away from the confines of Indonesia. The idea of a space beyond Indonesia as a place where the limitations of Indonesia may be overcome is not unique to Kuswandi,¹⁹ However, we should

¹⁹ Andrei Aksana's 2004 novel *Lelaki terindah* (The most beautiful man), for example, features a relationship between two Indonesian men that thrives in Bangkok, but literally dies when the two central characters return to Jakarta. See



recognise that this linking of escape with opportunities tied to consumption that are only available to an elite minority, might be seen as offering little hope for the majority who do not have access to such possibilities; that is if we interpret the films as always being about physical movement. In this trope, distance from family matters, but seemingly more important, at least in these fictional representations, is the distance from the individual's own sense of how they should behave in Indonesia. But as Boellstorff (2005: 203–207) has observed, queer Indonesians often tend to perform different identities according to the space they inhabit. *Gay* Indonesians might be 'closed' at work but 'open' in cruising zones or certain public parks which are recognised as *gay* spaces. Other spaces such as the shopping mall might be more multifarious – while apparently a closed public space, some *gay* men will use certain malls as spaces in which they can be open with other *gay* men.²⁰ Diego García Rodríguez (2020: 1332) makes a similar point in examining the ways in which some of his queer Indonesian Muslim interlocutors “do” various versions of themselves’ depending on the place and also the time of day or night.

Similar ideas of open and closed spaces are being represented cinematically in the short scene where Naomi declares there is no place for them in Jakarta. While Indonesia is generally perceived as a closed space, in comparison with the open space of New York, Gia introduces the seemingly unimagined possibility of inhabiting various identities within the same geographical place of Jakarta. In this case it is conceptualised by the imagining (or pretending) that they are once more in New York, a city of freedom and openness. As soon as that conceptual leap has been made, a queering of the space of Jakarta, an opening of spaces previously imagined to be closed, becomes possible. The idea that there is no space for them in Jakarta, the impossibility of being queer, is part of that discourse that constructs Jakarta as a heterosexual space. Through this cinematic imagining of the multiple identities and subjectivities that *gay* and *lesbian* Indonesian may inhabit in order to live their lives queerly, the notion of the permanence of the city’s heterosexual identity is destabilised.

One of the spaces that they make for themselves, and certainly the space with the most potential for intimacy, is within the confines of a rented room in that love hotel in north Jakarta, and we can note a parallel here with the village of Beyond the Clouds in Kuswandi’s earlier film *Madame X*. Like the hotel room in *Selamat pagi, malam*, the village in *Madame X* serves as an escape or refuge from the heteronormativity, or even homophobic violence of the outside world, though as we see in both films it is only a temporary refuge, for the problems and realities beyond the safe confines of the queer space cannot be avoided forever.²¹ So it is in the north Jakarta love hotel that the two women can imagine they are once again in New York (or at least that is what Gia hopes). But whereas the other two women that we are following in this film find themselves in rooms with double beds and are able to have sex with their chosen partners – Ci Surya, an older widow, performs fellatio on a male escort, while Indri, a younger woman, loses her virginity to a handsome waiter she had met earlier in the evening – the two women find themselves in a room

Murtagh (2007, 2011b) for a full discussion of that novel. The idea of queer space in Indonesian literature is undoubtedly a subject inviting further discussion.

²⁰Evelyn Blackwood (2010: 151) has drawn on a similar framing in thinking about how *tomboy* Indonesians in Padang perform their gender differently, taking up different subject positions, according to the particular space they are in.

²¹Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for suggesting that I note this parallel with Kuswandi’s earlier film.



Figure 2. Gia and Naomi lie on one of the single beds in the Lone Star hotel. Courtesy of Kepompong Gendut Films.

with two single beds (Figure 2). Try as they might, they cannot push the beds together. So even here, having created their private space, they allow their desire to make love to be confounded; it is as if the sexual surveillance of women's lives (Davies 2015) has even pervaded this supposedly private space. Eventually they seem to give up, instead reminiscing about past times in New York. One of the women gets rather too drunk. Finally, the reason that the previous New York love affair cannot be rekindled becomes clear. Naomi is soon to marry heterosexually, against her desires but due to the seeming impossibility of imagining another tactic for surviving in the city.

Gia again resorts to the imaginary to try to shake Naomi from the shackles she feels that Jakarta is imposing on her former lover. 'Let's just restart', she says, 'Like in video-games? You press a button and then restart from the very beginning.' Here Gia is leaving behind the tactic of envisioning another real space for the two of them; her next tactic is to retreat to the virtual world, the world of video games, of second lives. But the night is already coming to an end, and as the morning call for prayer is about to sound, the day replaces the night once more. With its cinematic foreclosure of the opportunity for the queer encounters offered by Jakarta by night, Naomi can only reply to Gia's tactics with the words 'I can't.' It is simply too difficult. For Naomi at least, not being *normal* – to use a common Indonesian term for not being queer – in Jakarta is just too difficult.

Concluding comments

In each of the examples discussed above, Indonesian filmmakers have invoked an imagining of other spaces – whether overseas, virtual, or cinematic – as a way of thinking

about the place of *gay* and *lesbian* Indonesians in contemporary Indonesian society. Just as Tom Boellstorff, Evelyn Blackwood and Diego García Rodríguez have shown how queer Indonesians inhabit multiple identities according to their conception of the space in which they are moving at any given moment, so too in the films discussed here, when the characters embody their queer subjectivities as they go about their lives, they also queer certain spaces. Returning to de Certeau, the tactics used by these characters are often seized on the wing as they move around the city, but in doing so they create new urban meanings, which not only allow for queer embodiment but deconstruct the very notion of the city as a permanently heterosexual space. Not all characters are able to do this. Indeed, the conflicts in the films often arise when the two individuals in a couple – for example Aldi and Nesta in *Coklat stroberi*, or Naomi and Gia in *Selamat pagi, malam* – are mismatched in their ability or willingness to imagine other possibilities, other futures, leading to discord and break up. The films recognise that the strategies devised by the state and wider society to maintain the illusion of the heterosexuality of the spaces of the city can be oppressive and overwhelming. But in doing so the films highlight the tactics that queer Indonesians can and do invoke to carve out spaces for themselves, thus destabilising the notion that the space of the city is inevitably heterosexual.

These tactics are most apparent in *Selamat pagi, malam*, a film in which director Lucky Kuswandi engages with the reality that queer Indonesians are able, at times, to resist heteronormativity and to reshape, to reimagine and to queer certain spaces of the lived city as a tactic for survival, creativity and freedom. In so doing, Lucky Kuswandi recognises that there is a possibility for queer Indonesians to live their sexuality amid a culture which is generally perceived to be conservative, restricting and intolerant of non-normative desires. So too in that opening montage from Joko Anwar's *Janji Joni*, where a male city worker privately lusts over Tom Cruise, and in *Coklat stroberi*, where Aldi and Dani's arrival at the bar hand-in-hand creates a sense of double vision for what a queered Indonesia could be, we see a variety of tactics for how queer Indonesians might queer space in the city. Reflecting on the title of this article, while there might be no official place for *gay* and *lesbian* Indonesians in Indonesia, we can see persistent evidence for how in visual cultures, some *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are able to open up queer spaces, real, imaginary and virtual, within what sometimes appears to be an increasingly intolerant nation. Returning to Romit Dasgupta's point about the value of film for highlighting the shades of grey sometimes lost elsewhere, we can see how these films carve out multiple possibilities for living queer lives and inhabiting queer spaces in Indonesia, despite the current circumstances.

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