

*Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* by Thomas Barker. Pp 234. Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2019.

Ben Murtagh, SOAS University of London.

Thomas Barker's new monograph *Indonesian cinema after the New Order; going mainstream* makes an important and welcome contribution to our understanding of Indonesian cinema and Indonesian cultural studies more generally. As the title tells us, Barker is mainly interested in the Indonesian film industry after 1998, the year that marked the end of Suharto's New Order regime and the beginning of a period known as *reformasi*. However, as the author recognizes, despite the abrupt and violent political changes of that year, the ghosts of the New Order continue to haunt Indonesian culture and politics post-1998. The Indonesian film industry is no exception, and links between the two periods are far more apparent than some commentators have suggested, despite cinema's temporary comatose state a result of the financial crisis and political turmoil at the end of the 1990s. The new generation of directors associated with *reformasi* had come of age and been educated or trained under the old regime. Old production companies adapted and reinvented themselves as they sought to maintain and even strengthen their position in the face of competition from new startups. In terms of content, the trauma of 1965-66 lived on in the cultural memory, and influences recent film in various ways.

Barker's book, drawing on his 2011 PhD thesis from the National University of Singapore, relies extensively on his main period of fieldwork from 2008-2009. Ten years on from the end of the New Order, this was an exciting year for Indonesian cinema. The release of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* in 2008 broke box-office records with audience numbers in excess of 3.7 million. Its success showed, Barker argues, that 'local films were at the forefront of pop culture, attracting large audiences and earning big profits' (1-2). Barker interviewed more than fifty key industry personnel and attended numerous press review screenings, resulting in a monograph rich in valuable insights and anecdotes from directors, producers, screenwriters and other industry professionals. As the author recognises, he was conducting his research at exactly the right time to capture 'something quite monumental that was happening in local production' (2).

Barker's key argument is that the 'recovery of the Indonesian film industry after 1998 was a process of going mainstream' (4). His approach, in contrast to those earlier key studies from the New Order period which have looked at cinema from Indonesia as either national cinema or from a state-centred perspective, is to see post-1998 cinema 'as a form of pop culture' (9). While Barker is interested in genre and content, thinking about how producers and directors 'tapped into emerging trends and fashions popular among Indonesian youth', the book is also very much grounded in 'the economics and sociology of film production, circulation and distribution'.

Chapter 1 presents the necessary context by looking at this history of Indonesian cinema prior to 1998, primarily thinking about the concept of

national cinema or *film nasional* and the tension between this idealized form of production with the tastes of audiences, the majority of whom preferred to watch less serious films for entertainment purpose. But whatever the film, it was the New Order's regime of censorship and regulation of the local film industry which Barker argues led to local films which were 'controlled, predictable and unable to adapt to changing social and cultural conditions'. After the vibrancy of the 1970s into the 1980s, Indonesian cinema was no longer able to respond to changing market conditions. Political and institutional control meant that Indonesian productions became increasingly inferior.

Chapter 2 explores the reemergence of Indonesian cinema after 1998, exploring the impact of a new generation of young film makers that experimented with new technologies and new storytelling techniques. However, as Barker notes, the beginnings of this revival really began some years earlier at the beginning of the 1990s. Indonesian cinema might have been in something of a coma during the 1990s, but nonetheless it was a decade which saw a new generation of creatives leaving education and going into the entertainment industries. Barker shows how a number of key industry professionals started their careers during this period producing content, advertisements and music videos for television. As these young filmmakers - who initially at least worked within an indie framework - made ties with older producers, Barker argues that Indonesia provides an exciting example of 'how a cultural form such as cinema can re-enter mainstream pop culture' (22).

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on two of the genres or sub-genres of film which have been most popular in the post New-Order period. Chapter 3 looks at horror film and Chapter 4 at Islamic films. In addition to innovative analysis of a number of films, Barker is particularly interested to think about how these films and their production companies have sought to meet audience demands. In Chapter 3, Barker notes that horror films accounted for almost a third of all films made between 1998 and 2010, arguing that they represent a defining genre of the post-1998 period. Horror movies have of course long been a staple of cinema in Indonesia, though generally dismissed by critics as 'as cheap, shallow and vacuous' (84). Barker however relooks at several of these films, proposing that they 'articulate a deeply repressed form of national trauma and a collective fear about its reemergence' (86). He is here of course referring to the events of September 30 1965 and their aftermath. Noting that this new generation of horror films rarely have final resolution, unlike their New Order counterparts, Barker uses this chapter to show how so many of the films are based around a 'generational power struggle' whereby it is inquisitive urban teenagers who inevitably challenge the older generation in pursuit of truth about repressed traumas from the past. Thus Barker argues these films provide a space for new audiences to come together and 'seek communal catharsis for the residual trauma' still experienced by many Indonesians. This, he notes, is all part of a shift in the power of representation from the state to the people themselves (109).

In Chapter 4 Barker turns to Islamic films. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps for a country with such a large Muslim population, there had actually been very

few films which one might describe as Islamic prior to 2008. Those that have been identified as being 'Islamic' tended to have a *dakwah* or proselytising function. However, beginning in 2008 a new body of Islamic films has emerged which have replaced 'didactic Islam with lifestyle Islam' (112). As part of his argument on Indonesian cinema going mainstream, Barker draws on recent discussion on the commodification of Islam for middle class consumption and the intertwining of Islam and pop culture. He argues that screen media, first television and then film, have sought to meet audience interest and demand by dramatizing 'a newly imagined Islamic life' (113), which articulates a new type of middle class normativity that is religious but also deeply committed to the ideals of worldly success. Barker discusses a range of themes and films in this chapter, for example providing a very useful discussion of a number of films such as *Haji Backpacker* which have featured Indonesian Muslims travelling to non-Muslim majority countries, where religion 'is foregrounded and becomes a prism through which they encounter foreign locations' (125). He also makes welcome additions to the extant literature on polygamy-themed films.

Chapter 5 focuses on the exhibition sector, mapping the rise to dominance of the Cinema 21 Group during the New Order period, and then in more recent years the emergence of some smaller chains such as Blitz. Barker provides useful background on the early rise of Cinema 21 Group, exploring the money politics behind their ascendancy and the concerns and limitation on the creative industry as a result of that monopoly. As Barker notes, even at its peak in the 1980s, Indonesia had a relatively small number of cinemas per head of the population. After the massive retraction of the industry following the Asian financial crisis, numbers have grown again, but the number of screens is still comparatively small, and particularly focused in the larger cities of the country. Barker provides an excellent discussion of how Cinema 21 Group's market dominance creates particular challenges for the production companies, when failure to gain minimum ticket sales can result in a film being pulled within days, and where attempts to work with smaller cinema groups is not always looked on favorably by the dominant Cinema 21 Group.

In Chapter 6, Barker's attention turns specifically to the production companies. Noting that to be successful in pop culture, it is not just the product that matters. It is just as important to gain advantage and use influence within the wider political economy of the industry. Barker's chapter expertly unpicks the apparent rupture of 1998, showing how while new production houses did emerge, key players from the New Order did not just disappear. Indeed he points out that by 2008 film production had come to be dominated by seven big companies, five of which had been in business since the New Order and the other two were offshoots of companies from the time of the New Order. Furthermore Barker argues, while under the New Order the production houses were subordinate to the state, these companies' power is now such that they constitute an oligopoly. One fascinating aspect of this dominance of the film industry is the part played by Chinese and Indian heritage producers. As well as an overview of the rise to influence of these producers during the New Order period, the chapter pays particular attention to the remarkable success of a small number of Sindhi producers who have been influential in the Indonesian film

industry for more than forty years. The success of the larger companies has undoubtedly enabled many new filmmakers to get their films made and screened, but their dominance of the market has meant that the newer production houses - despite notable successes in producing innovative and successful films - have not been able to challenge the dominance of these legacy companies.

Chapter 7 looks at how Indonesian film makers have tried to negotiate ongoing state regulation, state censorship, and an increasingly vocal and occasionally intolerant civil society. Despite the euphoria of *reformasi*, when for a moment perhaps it seemed that the regulation and censorship of the past might come to an end, Barker shows that filmmakers somehow missed the opportunity to assert a collective voice in trying to ensure that national regulations and policy might work better to support the industry. In addition to discussing the various initiatives led by some filmmakers to influence and contest policy, the author explores some of the reasons that might explain their limited success. Particularly interesting is where he discusses a number of key moments of censorship and even banning of films that have occurred up to around 2009; for example the banning of the 2006 horror movie *Dendam Pocong* due to its direct reference back to the violence of 1998; the controversy over *Buruan Cium Gue* (Kiss Me Quick) when a popular Islamic preacher led protests claiming the film's title would lead to promiscuity; and *Balibo*, an Australian film about the killing of five Australian journalists in East Timor in 1975, banned from screening at the Jakarta International Film Festival. These fascinating case studies show that despite the initial hopes for *reformasi* the Indonesian Censorship Board has managed to strengthen its position leaving filmmakers with little option but to sidestep the local market completely and only aim for the international film festival circuit, or to work within a censorship framework that continues to restrain creative expression.

It should be noted that the book is very much a development from Barker's 2011 PhD thesis. The majority of interviews were conducted around 2008-9. Subsequent updates and consideration of more recent sources and developments are more complete in some chapters than others. However, this is a minor quibble. The book is thoroughly engaging from beginning to end, and is certain to become essential reading for researchers and students of the cinema, creative industries and pop culture of Indonesia.