



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: T. Barker (2019) Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream]

Arps, A.

DOI

[10.1163/22134379-17702003](https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17702003)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Arps, A. (2021). [Review of: T. Barker (2019) Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream]. *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 177(2-3), 403-406. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17702003>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)



BRILL

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN
VOLKENKUNDE 177 (2021) 403–444



brill.com/bki

Book Reviews



Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019. 244 pp., ISBN: 9789888528073, price: USD 65.00 (hardcover).

Ten years after the fall of the New Order, Thomas Barker flew to Jakarta to begin research on the Indonesian film industry. Although his initial aim was to uncover the “pirate” film industry in Indonesia, his findings forced him to redirect his research towards the local film industry. What followed was a study of the state of the expanding Indonesian film industry in which Barker was able to interview an impressive number of key players, such as filmmakers Monty Tiwa and Mira Lesmana, director Hanung Bramantyo, and media magnate Raam Punjabi (the “king of soap opera”) among many others. Barker’s analytical shift from the pirate industry to the broader Indonesian film industry has resulted in a critical overview that contributes significantly to the field of Indonesian film studies. In a 2017 review essay published in this journal on “the state of the art of the study of Indonesian cinema with a special focus on what is being written in Indonesia”, Intan Paramaditha—one of the main contributors to the burgeoning field of Indonesian film studies herself—stated (p. 358):

Film studies has become an emerging field in the country, and the bibliography on Indonesian cinema has expanded. Monographs in English are still rare, but there have been more theses, dissertations, journal articles, and book chapters published in English and Indonesian.

p. 359

Two years later saw the publication of a new English monograph in the field with *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream*. Thomas Barker’s contribution zooms in on the Indonesian film industry, with a special emphasis on the period from 1998 until 2010. The introduction of the book makes clear that it argues that the “recovery of the Indonesian film industry

after 1998 was a process of going mainstream”, hence the book’s subtitle (p. 4). The book provides a convincing argument for this as it focuses broadly on developments in technical aspects, genres, regulations and exhibition. The book offers a detailed overview of the Indonesian film industry and the driving forces of it, past and present. As such it is an elaborate study of the current state of the Indonesian film industry and how it came to be as it largely is.

An important aspect of the introduction is the delineation between contemporary Indonesian cinema as pop culture relative to national cinema or popular culture (p. 14). What sets this approach apart from earlier imaginations of Indonesian cinema in the Indonesian context is, according to Barker, that the framework of pop culture provides a way for understanding audiences and film in relation to production (p. 14). In addition, Barker uses a semantic difference to distinguish between the mainstream New Order cinema that he defines as popular culture and the post New Order cinema he calls pop culture, theorizing the differences in production, content, marketing and audience (pp. 9–10). Understanding Indonesian cinema as pop culture helps illuminate how Indonesian cinema can be understood as a pop culture industry—that is, how Indonesian cinema has become part of and has integrated with a larger entertainment industry driven by the market rather than the state. In the book, this is a central element of the process of ‘going mainstream’.

In six chapters, introduction and conclusion not included, Barker sets out to explore the journey the Indonesian film industry has made from the beginning of the twentieth century until roughly the present day. In the first chapter Barker gives an overview of Indonesian cinema from the years before the nation’s beginnings until the end of the New Order. This film history sheds light on the role of cinema under governments with different political interests. Chapter 2 continues by exploring how Indonesian cinema shifted from what interviewees called being “in a coma” in the 1990s to an industry capable of going mainstream (p. 50). It explores the role of a generation of young and creative filmmakers in turning a process of practically indie filmmaking into an industry that showed local productions, produced films that catered to local audiences, and had ties with established names in the industry.

Chapters 3 and 4 elaborate on film genres—horror and Islamic-themed films respectively—and how filmmakers have been able to transform them to appeal (again) to a mainstream audience. The strength of the book lies in the sections that have an economic and sociological approach to the industry, Chapter 5, 6 and 7. If the book has any shortcomings it is that it leaves the reader wanting a similar in-depth analysis when exploring genre and film content. This is not to say that the analyses in the book are insufficient, but Barker opens space for further investigation. In his analysis of the films of Islamic pop cul-

ture (Chapter 4), Barker rightly observes that these films “began to imagine a new type of Islamic habitus for Indonesian Muslims” that combines Islamic principles with ideas of modern life (p. 117). To reach this conclusion, he mainly utilizes narrative analysis such as in his discussion of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Hanung Bramantyo, 2008). Yet, a close reading of the film and other so-called *film islami* provides a means of strengthening these arguments on a textual level and can illustrate what this imagining visually entails (Schmidt 2017:111–144). So, for example, when Barker argues for a different reading of the character of Aisha, his descriptions of her appearance, motivation, and struggles invite the reader to ask for an analysis of how this is portrayed in the film (pp. 115–116). The inclusion of textual analysis would have the potential to broaden the arguments in the book, as it would add richness to the presented observations. How this new type of Islamic habitus is aesthetically constructed in these popular genres, thus, remains untouched. In the preceding chapter, the same can be said about the absence of textual analysis for another popular genre: horror. Here, representations of historical trauma are crucial, but a systematic textual analysis of these representations is omitted. Nevertheless, what remains is a thorough study of one of the most-consumed film genres by Indonesian audiences and how filmmakers have reacted to contemporary desires of audiences (Chapter 4) and, in Chapter 3, a study of how a shift has taken place in “who has the power and means of representation” in a genre that has been popular since the 1970s (p. 109).

The Cinema 21 Group in Indonesia is one of the largest players in the exhibition sector and how its dominance has been asserted is the topic of Chapter 5. It exemplifies how cronyism during Soeharto’s rule has permeated even into the present-day film industry. In general, as Chapter 6 explains, an oligopoly of producers stands behind the production of films in Indonesia. What this chapter thus poignantly sets out is how the *reformasi* has partly failed to create the free and open marketplace that many had wished for in developing the film industry. As in Chapter 4, the remnants of the New Order can be seen in the ways in which new players still have to compete with those who never left their seats in the industry. In the last regular chapter, Barker continues into the post New Order era and deals with issues of governmental interferences through regulations and censorship. The main section of the book ends around 2010, but the conclusion hints at developments in the industry since then, such as the adoption of a creative industries policy towards the film industry. It remains to be seen how this develops further in the future.

Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream is a highly informative book and essential reading for researchers interested in the Indonesian film industry, as it provides the context needed to understand where it cur-

rently stands and how this came to be. The book will also appeal to those with a general interest in the Indonesian film industry as it is accessibly written by Barker. It is one of the achievements of the book that it is clear in the information provided and the arguments proposed. In his conclusion, Barker argues that Indonesian cinema as pop culture can give insights into the workings of Indonesia. The final sentence of the book addresses this and reads: "May its cinema continue to grow, informing, entertaining and challenging how we think about Indonesia and its people." (p. 214). The work of excellent scholarship that is this book is an advocate for the same attitude towards the study of Indonesian cinema.

Arnoud Arps

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

A.S.Arps@uva.nl

References

- Paramaditha, Intan (2017). 'Film Studies in Indonesia. An Experiment of a New Generation', *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 173–2/3: 357–375.
- Schmidt, Leonie (2017). *Islamic Modernities in Southeast Asia: Exploring Indonesian Popular and Visual Culture*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.