Screening Piety, Class, and Romance in Indonesia

Scenes from an Argument Already Well Underway

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Abstract

The collapse of the New Order ushered in what many had hoped would be a new era of openness and transparency for Indonesia. The loosening of laws pertaining to broadcast and print publication gave rise to a proliferation of new media and cultural production. This had a profound effect on everything, from politics, religion, and the economy to popular conceptions of romantic intimacy and personal accomplishment. The question is whether prevailing approaches to media and popular culture are adequate to the task of accounting for these oft-cited transformations in Indonesian public life. Focusing on issues of piety, class, and romance, this article examines a sequence of films, pop songs, and YouTube parody videos to offer a presuppositional critique of the current scholarship. Its central contention is that closer attention to pop culture as a form of ‘argument’ offers an important corrective to the reifying tendencies of prevailing approaches.

Keywords

Indonesia – popular culture – media – film – YouTube – intimacy – piety

Indonesian attitudes toward romantic intimacy and companionship are presently undergoing a profound transformation. Evidence of this transformation may be seen in demographic studies charting things such as age at first marriage (Situmorang 2011); courtship patterns (Smith-Hefner 2005, 2019); parental influence on choice of partner (Utomo et al. 2016); the consequences of marrying someone of a different religion or ethnicity (Jones, Leng and Mohamad 2009); the growing visibility of same-sex desire and LGBTQ identities (Davies 2018); the relationship between marriage and childbearing (Hull 2012:50–5);

FIGURE 1 Nella Kharisma singing *Jaran Goyang*, a popular song about sorcery and unrequited love

YOUTUBE, [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=8NA-APWQ0AY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NA-APWQ0AY)

gendered divisions of labour, and their transformation both within and beyond marriage (Newberry 2006); and the shape, size, and nature of the family (Newland 2001), as well as its relationship to other social institutions. In a broader survey of marriage trends across the region, it has been suggested that 'urbanization and changing aspirations and lifestyles have affected both men and women across the board throughout Southeast Asia, irrespective of their levels of education' (Jones and Gubhaju 2012:65).¹ Yet this wide-reaching transformation is not only discernible in demographic studies—as an array of variables, statistics, and ideal types. Rather, it is something that Indonesians and others across the region are actively reflecting upon and debating. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the central displacements thrown up by these developments have also come to figure prominently in what scholars are in the habit of calling 'popular culture'.

The problem is that the nature of popular culture, and the conditions under which it may be taken as an object of study, are not always entirely clear. To specify the issues at stake, this article examines a sequence of films, pop songs, and YouTube parody videos to offer a presuppositional critique of the current scholarship. The examples presented were chosen to highlight a set of theoretical difficulties more generally characteristic of our approach to social, cultural, and political life in Indonesia. My central contention is that more nuanced atten-

1 For a recent survey of Asian demography, see Zhao and Hayes 2018.

tion to pop culture as a form of ‘argument’ may offer an important corrective to the reifying tendencies of prevailing approaches—as exemplified by their invocation of totalizing notions such as ‘the public sphere’, ‘mediascapes’, or ‘the marketplace of ideas’.² With an eye to the demographic studies cited above, the transformation of romantic intimacy offers a helpful way into the problem.

1 In Love, But Different

Consider, for example, a 2012 feature film entitled *Cinta tapi beda* (In love, but different), which staged the controversial and legally fraught debate over interfaith marriage through a series of overlapping intergenerational conflicts.³ Having fallen in love with Diana, a Christian woman from West Sumatra, the film’s central figure, Cahyo (a young, traditionalist Muslim), invites her home to meet his family in the Central Javanese court city of Yogyakarta—only to be censured by his parents. The following exchange takes place in Indonesian, with occasional Javanese terms and phrases in **boldface**.

Character	Transcription	Gloss ⁴
Son <i>plaintively</i>	Pak, saya keberatan dengan Bapak nyindir di depan orang banyak tadi. Kasihan Diana, Pak. Harusnya kita tuh memuliakan tamu.	Dad, I’m having a hard time with all your criticism just now in front of everyone. Poor Diana, Dad. We’ve got to show respect for guests.
Father <i>dismissively</i>	Siapa yang menyindir?	Who’s criticizing?
Son	Itu kekanak-kanakan namanya, Pak.	Now that’s what I’d call childish, Dad.

See figure 2

2 My approach to styles of argumentation owes much to the 2016 and 2017 symposia ‘How Indonesians Argue’ (see criticalia.org).

3 *Cinta tapi beda* was directed by Hanung Bramantyo and Hestu Saputra and was produced by Raam Punjabi and MVP Pictures. The film was first screened in theatres in Indonesia in December 2012. For her performance as Diana’s mother, Jajang C. Noer won Best Supporting Female Actor at the Festival Film Indonesia (Indonesian Film Festival), and the film itself received an ASEAN Spirit Award at the 2013 ASEAN International Film Festival.

4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

(cont.)

Character	Transcription	Gloss
Father <i>growing angry</i>	Kamu kok kuminter? Jelas-jelas kamu membawa calon istri yang tidak seiman dan seagama. Apa aku tidak boleh marah ... di rumahku sendiri? Coba baca <i>Surat al-Maidah</i> . Bagi seorang Muslim, itu dilarang membawa wanita musyrik, yang tidak beriman, untuk dijadikan istri.	Why are ya trying to be so clever? You've obviously brought home a prospective wife who's not of our faith and religion. Can't I get angry ... here in my own home? Go read <i>Surat al-Maidah</i> . For a Muslim, it is forbidden to take a heathen woman, one of another faith, and make her one's wife.
<i>See figure 3</i>		
Son <i>increasingly distressed</i>	Pak, yang punya otoritas untuk menentukan seseorang beriman atau tidak ... musyrik atau bukan ... itu sinten , Pak? Sinten? Bapak? Kula? Sing kula ngerti, Pak ... mboten wonten peksan dalam beragama. Bukannya bapak yang mengajarkan toleransi sama warga di sini? Lha kok sekarang ...	Dad, the one with the authority to determine whether someone's faithful or not ... a heretic or not ... who is it , Dad? Who? You? Me? What I know , Dad ... is there's no compulsion in religious commitment. Aren't you the one who's been teaching tolerance to members of the community here? And yet now ...
<i>See figure 4</i>		
Father	Yang jelas ... dalam sejarah keluarga kita, tidak pernah ada perkawinan beda agama. Kalau tetap kau lakukan itu, itu artinya sama saja dengan memutus ikatan keluarga.	What's clear ... in the history of our family, there's never been a marriage between people differing in religion. If you persist in this, it'll be the same as cutting off ties with the family.

FIGURE 2 Cahyo and his father in the front room of their Yogyakarta home

FIGURE 3 Cut to Cahyo's mother with his Christian girlfriend, Diana

FIGURE 4 Father: 'Why are ya trying to be so clever?'

Playing on interpersonal drama, both the argument and the film more broadly centre on the tension between an ostensibly traditional commitment to religion and family, on the one hand, as against individual feeling and the right to choose one's life partner, on the other, mapped diegetically onto a conflict of generations. The young couple are depicted as having met in the capital city of Jakarta, where their interfaith relationship meshes well with their friendships, professional lives, and other obligations. As one might expect, the trouble comes when they try to bring this relationship home, where different expectations prevail. It is there, in their respective family homes—one Muslim, one Christian—that the displacements wrought by changing aspirations for personal flourishing and collective life become palpable—and must be addressed.

The issues raised by this film have figured prominently in public debate. And yet, its topicality aside, what may be most interesting about *Cinta tapi beda* is not so much its treatment of interfaith romance, but that it was able to be made at all. For, historically, Indonesian media—from radio and television to cinema and print news—were long governed by a strictly enforced prohibition banning the coverage of issues deemed likely to incite controversy around differences of ethnicity, religion, race, and socio-economic class.⁵

The collapse of former president Soeharto's New Order regime in 1998 ushered in what many hoped would be a new era of openness and transparency for Indonesia. Press laws were relaxed; new investigative bodies were established for rooting out corruption and human rights violations; the legal definition of religion was expanded to include a wider range of communities and traditions; and governance was decentralized, shifting a share of administrative power and resources to the provinces. In the early years of the reform movement, these and related developments were widely hailed as marking a qualitative break with the country's authoritarian past. The push for change, led by students and a new cadre of media-savvy politicians, seemed at the time to bode well for the future.

With the benefit of some twenty years' hindsight, these high hopes for political renewal may appear naive, or perhaps unduly optimistic. However, despite frustration on other fronts, the reform movement was unambiguously successful in bringing about a transformation of public life—as evidenced by films such as *Cinta tapi beda*.⁶ When B.J. Habibie was appointed as Soeharto's interim

5 This longstanding press policy was associated with the acronym 'MISS SARA', which stood for the Indonesian terms *Menghasut* (to instigate, incite, excite), *Insiniasi*, *Sensasi*, *Spekulasi*, *Suku* (ethnicity), *Agama* (religion), *Ras* (race), *Aliran* (stream [of belief])—or, alternatively, *Antar-golongan* (inter-group, class); see Hill 1994:45.

6 *Cinta tapi beda* is relatively conservative in orientation, particularly in comparison to Indonesia's varied and rapidly transforming independent film scene. Indeed, the film's driving moral of intergroup 'tolerance' (*toléransi*) is lifted directly from the New Order playbook.

successor, he rescinded the right of the Ministry of Information to issue (and so withhold or cancel) publishing permits—one of the former regime's most effective instruments for controlling public discussion and the distribution of information. Subsequently, President Abdurrahman Wahid dissolved the ministry altogether.⁷ Although it would eventually be re-established under a new directive, the proverbial cat was now out of the bag. Public life in Indonesia had been irrevocably changed by the sudden proliferation of commercial television channels, radio stations, print publications, and independent cinema—to say nothing of the internet and social media.

2 The Idea of Popular Culture

The scholarship on post-authoritarian Indonesia has linked this proliferation of new media to the growing importance of popular culture for politics, religion, and the economy (Hatley 2015:5). Following the legislative elections of 2004, Jennifer Lindsay (2005:11, 12) noted that 'political parties actively sought "names" from the world of popular culture both as candidates and as campaign supporters', with 'the worlds of arts and politics thoroughly intersect[ing] in the media of popular culture'.⁸ Moving from politics to religion, Andrew Weintraub (2011) has observed that '[p]opular culture and Islam have become mutually constitutive as sites for defining Muslim lives'—a development that, for Greg Fealy (2008:36), was explicable with reference to the market: 'Market dynamics dictate that religion be brought increasingly into popular culture, particularly via electronic media, and that it be presented in an entertaining and easily digestible form.' As Lyn Parker and Pam Nilan (2013:7) have argued, 'There is no arena more potent for stirring up moral panics about Indonesian youth than the realm of popular culture.' For, as elsewhere in the global south, popular culture in Indonesia was seen to have drawn heavily from American television, films, and music (Budianta 2000)—which were widely decried as a source of undesirable foreign influence and moral permissiveness. With entertainment media from Korea, Japan, and Taiwan gaining increasing prominence

7 'The [Ministry of Information], established in 1945 by the nationalist government in Yogyakarta, had been central to the ideological drive of both the leftist Sukarno government and the developmentalist New Order under Suharto. But [...] through the last decade of Suharto's rule the legitimacy of censorship and propaganda—the key functions of the department—eroded. Indeed, in a mediascape that was increasingly diverse and global, it became impossible for the department to carry out those functions' (Sen and Hill 2007 [2000]:8).

8 Compare: 'Popular culture [...] is important, not simply for whatever it informs us about something else more important, such as national politics. The two are inseparable' (Heryanto 2008:4; similarly, see Heryanto 2014:202).

in more recent years, Ariel Heryanto has observed that ‘the West suddenly ceased to be the sole center of orientation for the consumption of popular culture in Indonesia’ (Heryanto 2014:169). Similarly complicating the picture, Alicia Izharuddin (2017:31–2) noted that ‘[t]he meteoric rebirth of [Islamic cinema] during the post-New Order period precipitated by [the film] *Ayat-ayat cinta* signaled the culmination of Islamisation of Indonesian popular culture’. It was on grounds of these and related observations that Robert Hefner (2018:4) recently suggested that ‘by any and all standards, Indonesia is a richly complex country with not one but a multiplicity of popular cultures, political ethics, and social imaginaries’.⁹

Given its seeming importance for the scholarship on post-authoritarian Indonesia, one might expect the concept of popular culture to have received nuanced theoretical attention. Such, however, is not the case. To be sure, Heryanto has gone further than most in offering a critical account of popular culture for Indonesian studies. His broadly Gramscian approach to culture as a ‘site of struggle’ has driven a series of insightful analyses, which have provided both inspiration and an important point of reference for a new generation of scholars—among whom I count myself. In reflecting on popular culture, Heryanto refers to Storey (2006) on the fraught nature of the term. But here it is worth noting that, although frequently cited on the topic, Storey’s volume does not offer an explicit account of its own—presenting instead a survey of ‘how the changing terrain of popular culture has been explored and mapped by different cultural theorists and different theoretical approaches’ (Storey 2009:14). In this connection, the hesitance in Sen and Hill’s relatively early account is telling, where they referred to ‘what is *probably* best described as popular culture—newspaper articles, fashions, advertising, television soaps, box-office hits’ (2007 [2000]:9; emphasis added). Their reticence notwithstanding, this usage fits well with how the term is frequently deployed in the current literature—both in Indonesian studies (see above), and more generally.¹⁰ But it also hypostasizes a disparate array of institutions and ‘media’, collapsing them into a single, synoptic category—when, in fact, each of the key items (advertising, fashions, and so on) would dissipate on closer inspection into its constitutive activities and practices.¹¹

9 This brief excerpt is lifted from a longer passage that astutely observes that ‘[n]ot all of the latter soar to their aspirational heights in redolent harmony; this is a land of cultural contrasts, contests, and contradictions’ (Hefner 2018:4).

10 See McGuigan 1992 for an early, if still pertinent, critique of cultural studies and the idea of popular culture.

11 Not all of these activities and practices would be mutually commensurate, a problem with arguably wide-reaching implications for the human sciences (see Fox 2011:38–42).

Stepping back for a moment, it seems clear enough that something has changed following the demise of the New Order, and that ‘media’ has something to do with it. It appears equally plausible that a critical approach to ‘popular culture’ may help to clarify the matter. And this, in turn, might provide some insight into the transformation of attitudes toward romantic intimacy with which we began. But, so far, our efforts to specify what we mean by each of the operative terms (media, pop culture, et cetera) have been more than a little imprecise. So, what is this thing called popular culture? How is it related to media? (Indeed, what is/are *media*?) And what sorts of questions should we be asking when it comes specifically to post-authoritarian Indonesia? To draw out what is at stake, I would like to begin by reflecting briefly on a short film by the Indonesian director and producer Candra Aditya.

3 On Desire

Candra Aditya's *Desire* (2016)¹² offers an insightful commentary on romantic intimacy and companionship in 15 minutes of black-and-white realism.¹³ The opening scene sets a tone of uneventful everydayness, with a twenty-something Iskandar reclining on his bed in track-suit bottoms and a tee shirt, casually dragging on an electric cigarette. With the exception of a brief cut to the outside hallway and the arrival of his girlfriend, Tatiana, the rest of the film takes place right there on the mattress in what appears to be a one-room apartment. Despite its title, the film seems to focus more on intimacy than desire—using close camerawork and humorous, if often poignant, dialogue to meditate on the relationship between these two young people, and their concern for the future, as Tatiana prepares to leave for a period of postgraduate study in Germany.¹⁴ The couple's conversation is conducted in colloquial Jakartan Indonesian (Sneddon 2006), with the frequent use of English terms and phrases (in **boldface**) common among young, world-wise Indonesians.

12 The film was originally shown as part of a larger screening of Candra's short films, organized in Jakarta—under the title *Rants*—by *Provoke!* magazine and Sinemasochist films. Films by Angkasa Ramadhan were also shown at the screening.

13 A closer examination of realism in contemporary Indonesian cinema goes beyond the scope of the present essay. For a closely observed study addressing a series of related topics, see Paramaditha 2011.

14 I have taken the names Iskandar and Tatiana from the screenplay, which Candra Aditya very generously supplied on request. However, apart from a brief mention of ‘Mr Iqbal’, Tatiana's driver—and Tatiana once calling to ‘Isk’—no names are actually used in the film's dialogue; neither are they listed in the credits.

FIGURE 5 Iskandar and Tatiana in Candra Aditya's *Desire*

FIGURE 6 Iskandar and Tatiana

FIGURE 7 Iskandar: 'You know, I will miss this.'
Tatiana: 'Yeah. Me too.'

Character	Transcription ¹⁵	Gloss
Iskandar	You know, I will miss this. [clasping Tatiana's hand]	You know, I will miss this. [clasping Tatiana's hand]
Tatiana	Yeah. Me too.	Yeah. Me too.
Iskandar	Kamu udah packing?	Are you all packed?
Tatiana	[nodding] Udah. Mama aku kalo liat aku kayak nangis gitu.	[nodding] Yeah. My mama cries like every time she sees me.

See figures 6 and 7

15 With thanks to Candra Aditya for providing both a copy of the screenplay and a transcription of the actors' dialogue as actually spoken—on which more in a moment.

(cont.)

Character	Transcription	Gloss
Iskandar	Sekarang jam berapa sih?	So what time is it now?
Tatiana	Pokoknya kita ada tiga jam.	The important thing is we've got three hours.
Iskandar	Oke.	OK.
Tatiana	[turning to face Iskandar] Isk, kamu kenapa sih nggak apply juga? Ikut aku.	[turning to face Iskandar] Isk, so why don't you apply too? Come with me.
Iskandar	Kamu ngapain bahas ini lagi sih, sayang?	Why d'ya wanna go over this again, babe?
Tatiana	Nggak usah ke Jerman deh. Ke Eropa lainnya. Yang penting kita juga masih punya kesempatan untuk ketemu. Kamu taulah orang kayak kamu tuh nggak bakalan susah buat dapetin beasiswa. Kamu pinter banget 'gitu.	Doesn't have to be Germany, ya know. Could be another part of Europe. What's important is we'd still have a chance to meet. You've gotta know someone like you wouldn't have trouble getting a scholarship. You're so clever.
Iskandar	Kita udah sering banget loh bahas ini.	We've already discussed this so many times.
Tatiana	Aku tahu. Aku juga nggak tau bakalan seberat ini. Dan kamu lucu banget lagi malam ini.	I know. I didn't know it was gonna be this hard either. And what's more yer lookin' so cute tonight.

There is much that could be said about this conversation, and about the film more generally. But I would like to focus on its ambivalent articulation of intimacy, as something at once effortlessly—even inadvertently—experienced and, at the same time, difficult to realize or sustain. For, through its studied attention to dialogue, the film depicts the young couple *experiencing intimately* a shared uncertainty in working out how to experience their intimacy—with the latter figuring as an ideal with multiple 'pop cultural' points of reference.

FIGURE 8 Publicity poster for the first screening of *Desire*, as one of several short films by Candra Aditya and Angkasa Ramadhan that were shown at an event organized by *Provoke!* magazine and Sinemasochist. *Desire* now circulates on various online platforms, including YouTube and Viddsee. Note the use of English, despite the location of the screening in Jakarta.

When Tatiana arrives at his apartment in the opening scenes, Iskandar is watching *Ada apa dengan cinta 2* (AADC2, What's up with love 2), the recent sequel to a blockbuster film from 2002, which was widely admired—and imitated—for its depiction of a modern-day high-school romance.¹⁶ As Thomas Barker (2011:18) observed, 'Not only did the film speak in the language of teen-

16 Cinta is the name of the central figure in the film, but it is also the Indonesian word most commonly glossed in English as 'love'. So, the title plays on the pun *What's up with Cinta/love?*

agers, using slang and Jakartan dialect, it also concluded with the lead couple kissing in the airport, in a scene that captured the spirit of the youth and their refusal to abide by the old standards of morality.¹⁷ The 2016 sequel picks up the story over a decade later, with Rangga and Cinta—the lead couple—now separated and living on opposite sides of the world, their stormy teenage romance now re-spun through a new iteration of Cinta’s dilemma: should she stay with her wealthy fiancé and the secure life he provides for her in the privileged sphere of upper-middle-class Jakarta? Or should she steal away with her high-school flame, the brooding poet Rangga, who has been running a small café in faraway New York?

As a film within a film, *What’s up with love 2* plays almost inaudibly off-screen, while Iskandar and Tatiana sit on the mattress eating biscuits, swigging from a bottle of booze she had brought along as a special treat (see figure 9, below).¹⁸

Character	Transcription	Gloss
Tatiana	[...] kalo di AADC jadi pertanyaan banget nih kenapa sih si Cinta sama Rangga padahal Trian tuh kayak udah settle ‘gitu. Emang mau dikasih makan puisi tiap hari? Nggak kan?	[...] in AADC the big question is why Cinta would wanna be with Rangga, when Trian ¹⁹ is the one who’s already settled. Whadya gonna do, eat poetry every day? No way, right?
Iskandar	Yeah, well ... the heart wants what the heart wants.	Yeah, well ... the heart wants what the heart wants.
Tatiana	Ya kalo gitu my heart wants- nya Hugh Jackman ‘gitu.	Yeah, well in that case, what my heart wants is Hugh Jackman. ²⁰

See figures 9 and 10

17

Here Barker was citing Hanan’s (2008) comparative study of Indonesian and Thai ‘teen movies’.

18

When she arrives, Iskandar asks, ‘D’ya bring it, or not?’ (*Bawa nggak?*).

19

Trian is the name of Cinta’s well-heeled fiancé, who has stayed behind in Jakarta while Cinta and her high-school friends take a trip to Yogyakarta.

20

Hugh Jackman is the well-known Australian actor known for, among other things, his role as Wolverine in the X-Men film series.

FIGURE 9 'Ta-daaa!' Tatiana revealing the bottle of booze that she brought for them to drink (see below)

FIGURE 10 Iskandar: 'Yeah, well ... the heart wants what the heart wants.'

As a filmic commentary on a filmic commentary—problematizing 'love' (*cinta*) in modern, middle-class Indonesia—Iskandar and Tatiana's dialogue highlights the multiply mediated nature of this most intimate of relationships.²¹ AADC2 provides the young couple with a foil for thinking through the nature of their predicament, as lovers soon to be separated. They speak candidly about emotional longing, sexual pleasure, companionship, and jealousy. And, ironically, their jokes about the prospective sexual partners they might enjoy while apart only further underline the intimate nature of their partnership.

FIGURE 11 Screenshot from *Desire*; subtitle reflects my retranslation of the transcript

21 In many ways, the AADC films may be interpreted as enacting the struggle over what it means to be middle class in contemporary Indonesia—pitting crass materialism against a forward-looking and cosmopolitan ideal tempered by fealty to artistic sophistication and cultural tradition.

Character	Transcription	Gloss
Iskandar	Kayak ... kamu kan ntar di Jerman ... kamu bisa nyobain tuh sosis Jerman. Dari yang pendek, panjang sampai yang muter-muter. Kamu cobain tuh.	Like ... you'll soon be in Germany ... you can try out all that German sausage. From the short and long, to the ones that go round-and-round. You give 'em a try.
Tatiana	[Laughs]	[Laughs]
Iskandar	[Smiling] Nah, while you're there doing at it ... aku bisa nyobain cewek-cewek Indramayu.	[Smiling] And while you're there doing at it ... (sic) I can have a go with the Indramayu girls.
Tatiana	[With mock anger] Nggak ... Nggak ... Nggak ... Nggak ... kalo kamu ketauan tungs sama Della, aku potong titit kamu.	[With mock anger] Nope ... Nope ... Nope ... Nope ... if I catch you getting off with Della, I'll chop off yer willy.

If playful jokes around infidelity exemplify the young couple's closeness, so too does their discussion of the various ways they might remain intimate while Tatiana is away in Germany. When she suggests 'phone sex', Iskandar teases her about the last time they tried—comically mimicking her efforts to simulate sexual pleasure on the telephone. But, when he then demonstrates for her 'how it's supposed to be done', she just laughs: 'Ha! You've been watching too much porn. Nobody talks like that in the real world—not a chance!' (see screenshot, above).²² Then, when Iskandar demurs at the idea of texting her pictures of his penis—offering as an excuse that her friends might want a piece of the action—she pokes fun at his 'little candy' (*dodol garut*)—echoing a self-deprecating remark he had made about himself just a moment beforehand. The point is that in this banter intimacy comes naturally and yet, at the same time, poses a problem. They are caught between an effortless trust, comfort, and mutual affection, on the one hand, and an array of expectations associated with romantic involvement to which they share an ambivalent relationship, on the other.

22 *Kamu kebanyakan nonton bokep. Di kehidupan asli nggak ada orang kayak gitu. Nggak mungkin.*

The film's ethical impetus becomes more readily apparent when juxtaposed with the opening example from *Cinta tapi beda*. The latter explicitly cast the issue of interfaith marriage in the idiom of 'tolerance' (I. *toléransi*), a central pillar of state bureaucratic morality under the New Order. By contrast, Candra Aditya's *Desire* sets off on an almost diametrically opposed trajectory—flagging its hostility to the staid mores of an earlier era through a combination of language, aesthetics, and comportment.²³ Iskandar and Tatiana have three hours together before she leaves for Germany to begin her degree. And we subsequently learn, in passing, that Iskandar is both an artist and an author—but also, on Tatiana's account, eminently capable of securing a postgraduate scholarship of his own.²⁴ ('... someone like you wouldn't have trouble getting a scholarship. You're so clever.') Taken together with the books and movie posters adorning Iskandar's wall, these are clear markers of their social standing as young, educated—but independently minded—middle-class Indonesians with their eye on the wider world.²⁵ Iskandar's name may point to an Islamic family background, but he and his girlfriend are spending their last hours together quaffing brandy on his bed, teasing each other about sex and romantic commitment.

This oppositional attitude is pointed up briefly in a short montage that plays while the young couple are napping—when the camera pans across a photograph bearing the message, *HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BANDEL* (*SELAMAT ULANG TAHUN, BANDEL*; see screenshot above). It is difficult to know just how to translate *bandel* in this context. A standard dictionary entry for the term offers 'obstinate, stubborn, difficult (in behavior), rogue (cop, etc.).'²⁶ But, on my read-

23 For a more explicit example, see Aditya's short film *Sensor* (2017), in which a young man and woman discuss in graphic detail their sexual exploits, tastes, and frustrations. A growing body of scholarship points to the complexity—and situational nature—of contemporary attitudes toward sex, intimacy, and romance in Indonesia (see Munti 2005; Bennett and Davies 2015; Hoesterey 2016; Arymami 2017).

24 Note that the figure of 'the artist'—or *seniman*—appears in all three of these films. Iskandar is tacitly compared with Rangga, the poet, from *AADC*; meanwhile, in *Cinta tapi beda*, Diana is a modern dancer, and Cahyo is a chef, who explicitly discusses his cooking in artistic terms. In each case, the trope of creativity appears to point toward the figure of the individual as the subject of desire, struggle, accomplishment, and recognition.

25 A closer look at the movie posters on Iskandar's wall suggests an interesting range of associations—from *High fidelity* to *Moonrise kingdom*.

26 Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2010:86. The KBBI offers a somewhat more informative entry: 'to oppose what others say or advise; not wanting to follow or hear what others have to say; bloody-minded' ('stone-headed'; *melawan kata atau nasihat orang; tidak mau menurut atau mendengar kata orang; kepala batu*).

FIGURE 12 Happy Birthday, Bandel—Tatiana

ing, a recent remark from the Indonesian writer and film scholar Intan Paramaditha offers a more pertinent gloss:

[...] I always want to reclaim the term 'bandel'. For me 'bandel' isn't a woman who makes explicit gestures, say, wearing a tattoo, smoking, or doing all those things conventionally thought to be roguish (*bandel*), but rather a woman who truly crosses boundaries. For me they are the *bandel* women, and [if] heaven is already claimed by the conservatives, well let's us just take another route. We don't have to enter heaven, we can just meander.²⁷

Iskandar and Tatiana are *bandel*. They are young, smart, and full of desire. They are going somewhere, even if they don't yet know just where. And they are moral. But their morality differs from that of their parents' generation. So, too, does their way of speaking. To cite Paramaditha (2014:55) once again, the highly formalized style of Indonesian propagated under the New Order has often been experienced as alienating by a younger, post-authoritarian gener-

27 '[...] saya selalu ingin mereklaim kata "bandel". Buat saya "bandel" itu bukan perempuan yang menunjukkan gestur, katakanlah, dia bertato, merokok, atau melakukan hal-hal yang secara konvensional bandel, tapi perempuan yang benar-benar melewati batas. Buat saya mereka adalah perempuan yang bandel, dan saya merasa [kalau] surga itu sudah jadi klaim para konservatif, ya sudah kita pilih jalur lain saja, yuk. Kita tidak usah masuk surga, kita gentayangan saja' (Anindita and Paramaditha 2017).

ation. This formalized style of speaking, and the institutional violence that it helped to mediate, have outlived the regime itself—as evident, for example, in the strong articulation of ‘tolerance’ in *Cinta tapi beda*. But, as one sees in *Desire*, when faced with the unbearable heaviness of formal Indonesian, a more colloquial style of speaking—with a liberal smattering of English—has provided an alternative register, ostensibly free of these associations. So, what does this say about intimacy and companionship in contemporary Indonesia? And, more generally speaking, how might we link these examples of so-called popular culture to the lives of those they are presumed to address and represent?

4 More Trouble with Media

Both films—*Desire* and *Cinta tapi beda*—stage a set of circumstances in which romantic intimacy and commitment have become problematic, albeit in different ways. In doing so, they address a series of displacements reflected in the demographic studies that I cited at the outset (see opening paragraph). So, for example, an emphasis on individual sentiment and personal choice has gradually gained prominence where family and community concerns previously carried greater weight.²⁸ Meanwhile, the limits of the family itself—as both a moral and domestic unit—have contracted with the rise of the ‘small, prosperous, and happy family’ propagated through decades of national development. Changing aspirations for education and professional accomplishment are taking young Indonesians abroad in ever larger numbers, aided by scholarship programmes in Europe, America, and other parts of Asia.²⁹ On return, their expectations for the future have often changed. These and related trends have complicated the terrain on which young Indonesians envisage and work toward a better life. And, again unsurprisingly, they are also precisely the issues we find addressed in what scholars are in the habit of calling ‘popular culture’.

28 To argue for the prominence of such tendencies toward individualism is not to suggest the wholesale displacement of earlier patterns of romantic intimacy and commitment; on the complexities involved, see Nilan 2008, Nilan et al. 2011.

29 There have been several films in recent years featuring the experiences of Indonesians abroad—most commonly travelling for education, and often with an Islamic theme. A few of the more prominent titles include *99 cahaya di langit Eropa 1* and *2* (2013, 2014); *Ayat-ayat cinta 1* and *2* (2008, 2017); *Ketika cinta bertasbih 1* and *2* (2009); *Habibie & Ainun* (2012); *Laskar pelangi 2: Edensor* (2013); *Haji Backpacker* (2014); and *Assalamualaikum Beijing* (2014).

The question is how we are to relate the results of demographic and other empirical studies to these mass-mediated—and usually commercial—articulations of contemporary life. One of the difficulties we encounter in this respect is the double life led by many of the key terms—media, communication, religion, popular culture, et cetera. There is often a degree of slippage between colloquial usage ('we all know what we mean by *media*') and the effort to provide a more critical account, cognizant of the underlying theoretical problems in play. The most common recourse is to an unreflective reliance on something akin to *collective representation*—a notion that, albeit convenient, performs its critical function by conceptual sleight of hand. Here I am thinking in particular of the sensibility exemplified by the quotations cited above, in which scholars of Indonesia have linked wide-ranging social and political changes to the growing importance of media and popular culture (see section *The Idea of Popular Culture*, above). To understand how this approach works, and why we might wish to think differently, it is worth pausing briefly to reflect on how scholarship tends to imagine 'media'. For, as we have seen, the idea of media is inextricably tied up with scholarly invocations of popular culture—and, by extension, prevailing accounts of religion, politics, and economy in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Without wishing to generalize unduly, scholarship addressing media tends to make a series of regular moves that may be described schematically as follows.³⁰

- **First**, an object is posited. This object appears under the description of text, image, media text, message, the film, the song, the media object, or something analogous. Critically speaking, this entails naturalizing a particular version of the world—namely, as it has been imagined or represented through a series of media-related activities that are indigenous to scholarly enquiry pursued in the idiom of a discipline such as anthropology, religious studies, political science, history, et cetera. It is precisely through these scholarly activities—for example, reading, viewing, transcribing, translating, collocating—that the very idea of 'media' itself becomes intelligible as a frame of reference. Varying with the proclivities of the discipline in question, this object will be constituted as a structure of signification, a vehicle for meaning, a resource for identity-construction or meaning-making, discourse, ideology, and so on. Re-described in post-Gramscian

³⁰ In practice, these interpretive moves are not made sequentially but rather are abstracted here—for the purpose of analysis—from a congeries of activities and practices that taken together work to constitute 'media' as a critical frame of reference or line of enquiry.

terms: this is the initial movement in a particularist claim to universality (Laclau 2005).

- **Second**, a spatialized field of circulation is posited under the rubric of the public sphere, the mediascape, the marketplace of ideas or, again, something analogous. The character of this second posit also tends to vary according to the disciplinary—and political—commitments of the research in question (see Appendix).
- Notably, it is in accounting for its movement through this field of circulation (Step Two) that the object (Step One) is implicitly substantialized.³¹ The dominant metaphors here include broadcast, transmission, distribution, dissemination, et cetera.³²
- **Third**, a subject is posited in the position of consumer, reader, viewer, receiver, or audience member. On closer inspection, this is usually (a) a projection extrapolating from the scholar's own position in relation to the object posited in Step One; (b) a naturalization of the 'receiving' subject presupposed in practices of 'production'; or (c) a combination of the two.³³ It must be emphasized that, despite their protestations to the contrary, neither Ang (1991) nor Hartley (1992) followed through on the radicality of their own insights with respect to the impossibility of 'the audience' (on which, see Hobart 2010)—which, albeit momentarily, drew back the curtain revealing the workings of this process of obfuscation. In the final section, we shall return to reflect on some of the questions this raises regarding agency in relation to media.
- **Fourth**, extrapolating from Step Two (mediascape, public sphere, et cetera), an autonomous field of signification is often posited to explain a perceived regularity between Steps One ('the message' interpreted as a text) and Three ('the audience' interpreted as prospective interlocutors, 'fans', and the like). The terminology used here is usually something like 'the national imaginary', 'the consumerist culture', 'the networked society', or something of the sort. (The specific register depends very much on the institutions in question, the field's attitude toward them, and their preferred methods of analysis.)

31 That is, the 'media text'—or its 'meaning'—is treated as a substance linking the various occasions on which it may be interpreted, invoked, or otherwise encountered. For the philosophical difficulties entailed in such an approach, see Collingwood 1993 [1946]:42–8; for a critique of this approach as it figures in Old Javanese philology, see Fox 2003, 2005; for its role in the field of religion and media, see Fox 2017.

32 It is an open question as to whether new media and their constitutive metaphors—trending, going viral, et cetera—differ in this respect.

33 Option (c) may in part be explained by the historical and institutional overlaps between media scholarship and the media industry.

This step articulates the social or cultural totality within which individuals are rendered intelligible to scholarly analysis as ‘citizens’, ‘consumers’, or whatever.³⁴

As long as these media objects, fields of circulation, and subjects are taken as given, the study of media will remain Gramscian *common sense* masquerading as *good sense*.³⁵ To put the point rather more sharply: the field of enquiry has been constituted in terms subordinate to the sensibilities of production.³⁶ So, the political commitments of the media industry—and of the interests supporting it—are always already inscribed as the limits of contestation. This is the particularism on whose behalf media-based scholarship tends to make its articulations—if only inadvertently. So, how might we think differently? To what end? And with what prospective consequences? As a preliminary step toward an alternative approach, I briefly would like to consider one last example, an Islamic YouTube parody of a well-known Indonesian pop song titled *Jaran Goyang* (The Rocking Horse).

5 The Rocking Horse

Nella Kharisma’s live³⁷ rendition of *Jaran Goyang* has been among the most frequently played Indonesian pop songs online, garnering some 170 million views in its first year on YouTube.³⁸ Covered by several other well-known artists,

34 It is important to recognize that, in the absence of a substantialized ‘message’ (as above), the entire sender-message-receiver model collapses—and arguably, with it, the theoretical foundations for much of cultural studies.

35 In using the terms ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’, Gramsci was differentiating between ‘the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become “common” in any given epoch’ and a more sensible attitude that comes from using one’s own mind in a manner at once practical and grounded in experience (see Gramsci 1971:321–51).

36 Why, for example, should the television ‘programme’ or ‘series’ be the unit of analysis (Loven 2008)? Or films be taken as the ‘work’ of their directors? (On which, see section *Whose Argument Is It, Anyway?*, below.) Sociologically speaking, this framing would appear arbitrary were it not for the hegemony of the industry’s categories, which derive from an understanding of the world as imagined through the practices of production.

37 As Andrea Decker explained to me, such performances are often pre-recorded and then synced to the video. So, appearances notwithstanding, they are not ‘live’ in the usual sense of the term. In this case, the performance was organized by the record label, most likely with the purpose of creating the video, and perhaps to sell their karaoke VCDs. The song itself is attributed to Andi Mbendol, and has been covered numerous times—initially by Cornelius & Junior, and later by the likes of Via Vallen, Vita Alvia, and NDX.

38 This of course begs the question of what an electronically tallied ‘view’ (or ‘like’) means empirically.

FIGURE 13 Nella Kharisma, *Jaran Goyang*

YOUTUBE, [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=8NA-APWQ0AY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NA-APWQ0AY)

this song is frequently cited as typifying *dangdut koplo*, a subgenre of self-consciously underclass pop that commonly brings together elements of East Javanese language and culture with the longer-established Indonesian pop musical style of *dangdut* (see Weintraub 2006). Nella Kharisma's stage performance is more or less similar to other *dangdut koplo* videos circulated online by stars such as Via Vallen, Vita Alvia, and others. Here she is depicted singing and dancing on stage in cut-off denim shorts and a sleeveless tee shirt, shot with quickly shifting camera angles (see figure 13).

The music itself is played by a large, all-male band, who dance—or simply sway—in unison, with occasional interjections from a stylishly dressed male MC—who shimmies into and out of the limelight sporting jeans, a tee shirt and bright-red sneakers, with his blazer collar popped (see screenshot above).³⁹ As Nella dances back and forth across the stage, the camera periodically pans out across the audience to a sea of swaying bodies and waving arms packed together in the night, surrounded by brightly lit tents and steaming food stalls in the distant background (see opening screenshot, above). The scene is one very much in line with the demotic image actively cultivated by many *dangdut* stars and their promoters.

39 If Nella and the MC stand out on stage as unique characters, the row of male band members is contrastingly sedate—lined up neatly, wearing uniforms not entirely dissimilar to those worn by Indonesian convenience store employees.

In Nella Kharisma's rendition, the lyrics of *Jaran Goyang* tell the story of a woman who has been abandoned by her lover and is now desirous of winning him back. The song's title, 'The Rocking Horse', refers to a form of love magic that she intends to use for this purpose.⁴⁰ The tale is related by the woman herself, and, for the most part, her words are addressed directly to her erstwhile lover. She begins by asking him what she has done wrong—things were great at first, but have now gone sour (*kecut bagaikan asem*). The woman insists that she doesn't know why he left. She then tauntingly threatens to lure him back with the help of a sorcerer (*dukun*) and 'The Rocking Horse'. If that doesn't work, she goes on, there's always 'Smiling Semar' (Semar Méssem), another infamous spell, which will be her second gambit (*jurus*). Almost as an afterthought, she adds plainly that, if that doesn't work, 'I'm gonna poison you' (*ku kan racuni dirimu*).

FIGURE 14 Kery Astina, *Baca Qur'an*

YOUTUBE, [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=WCHO8MUYXJO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCHO8MUYXJO)

Coming some six months after Nella Kharisma's original video, an amateur Indonesian musician and YouTuber, Kery Astina, riffed off *Jaran Goyang*, giving the song a pious rewrite under the title *Baca Qur'an*, or 'Read the Qur'an'.⁴¹ Using almost identical music and parallel language, his parody tells a similar story—but this time from the man's point of view, adding a moralizing Islamic perspective on unrequited love, infidelity, and sorcery. In parallel to the original song, the lyrics are sung as if spoken directly to the woman hoping to win him

⁴⁰ On the history and character of the *mantra* *Jaran Goyang*, see Van der Meij 2003.

⁴¹ In 18 months Astina's video garnered more than 20 million views on YouTube.

over by means of the spell. Though she plans to deploy the Jaran Goyang, the man singing the song claims to have an antidote or deterrent (*penangkal*). The terms he employs rhyme nicely: it is her Jaran Goyang versus his Baca Qur'an; her Semar Mésem versus his Sholat Malam (praying at night). When juxtaposed, the lyrics of the two songs can be read as if in dialogue. In the following excerpt, Indonesian appears in regular typeface, Javanese terms in **boldface**, and English underlined.

FIGURE 15 'The one solution's enough
Just go see the old sorcerer'

FIGURE 16 'The one solution's enough
Go to the nearest mosque'

Jaran Goyang, Nella Kharisma	Baca Qur'an, Kery Astina
The move that's really effective Tried and trusted Without a doctor's recommendation No need to go running around	The deterrent that's indeed effective Indeed, it's already trusted No need to see the doctor Don't have to go to a sorcerer/healer
<i>Jurus yang sangat ampuh Teruji terpercaya Tanpa anjuran dokter Tanpa harus muter-muter</i>	<i>Penangkal yang memang ampuh, Memang sudah terpercaya Tanpa harus ke dokter Tak perlu ke orang pintar</i>
*	*
The one solution's enough Just go see the old sorcerer Directly say it 'Sir, I've had a break up.'	The one solution's enough Go to the nearest mosque Directly pray Don't forget to read the Qur'an
<i>Cukup siji solusinya Pergi ke mbah dukun saja Langsung sambat 'Mbah, saya putus cinta.'</i>	<i>Cukup satu solusinya Pergi ke masjid terdekat Langsung sholat Jangan lupa baca Qur'an</i>

See figures 15 and 16

(cont.)

Jaran Goyang, Nella Kharisma**Baca Qur'an, Kery Astina**

If that doesn't work
Use the second move
It's called Smiling Semar
Rocking Horse is his soul mate

Wanna be more effective still?
Use the second deterrent
It's called nighttime prayers
Read the Qur'an afterward

*Kalau tidak berhasil
Pakai jurus yang kedua
Semar Mésém namanya
Jaran Goyang jodohnya*

*Pengen tambah berhasil?
Paké penangkal kedua
Sholat malam namanya
Baca Qur'an setelahnya*

*

*

The process is a little strange
What's important is just to do it
Hurry up and try
Its power will be proven, right away!

Don't be lazy, gotta move quickly
So the curse won't stick
Repent right away
You've definitely hexed me ... get out,
all!

*'Cen rodok ndagel syaraté
Penting di lakoni waé
Ndang di cubo
Mesthi kasil terbukti kasiaté, genjrot!*

*Ojo males kudu gercep
Bén pélété ora némpél
Langsung taubat
Pasti engko pélét-pélété ... podo get out!*

*

*

And I say 'dudidam' to you⁴²
I love you, I can't stop loving you
Oh darling, the Rocking Horse awaits
you

Babe don't be vengeful toward me
I love you, but I can't be with you
Oh darling, make repentance soon

*Dan dudidam aku padamu
I love you, I can't stop loving you
Oh darling, Jaran Goyang menung-
gumu*

*Dék janganlah dendam padaku
I love you, but I can't be with you
Oh darling, segeralah taubat dirimu*

42 This phrase (*dudidam*) is lifted from a well-known children's song.

As with the film clips discussed above, there is much that could be said about these excerpts—from their juxtaposition of Indonesian, Javanese, and English terms and phrases, to the specific issues and controversies they might be seen to address. Speaking very generally, Astina’s parody pits a reformist and moralizing Islam against a pop music riff on old-school Javanist conceptions of potency and sexual conquest—an opposition articulated through imagery, attire, language, and gesture. Again, there is much else that could be said here. But what I wish to emphasize for present purposes is the argumentative nature of the parody—as an effort to address, rebut, and persuade. Astina lays down his response as a challenge in the opening lines:

Jaran Goyang, Nella Kharisma	Baca Qur’an, Kery Astina
What’s my fault and crime, baby My pure love you cast away See the moves I’m gonna throw down The Rocking Horse, the Rocking Horse	Please just give it a try, baby If you wanna use the Rocking Horse— Coz I’ve already got a deterrent Reading the Qur’an, reading the Qur’an
<i>Apa salah dan dosaku, sayang Cinta suciku kau buang-buang Lihat jurus yang kan ku berikan Jaran Goyang, Jaran Goyang</i>	<i>Silahkan saja dicoba, sayang Kalau mau paké Jaran Goyang— Karena ku sudah punya penangkal Baca Qur’an, baca Qur’an</i>

Looking back over the lyrics, it is interesting to note that at no point does *Baca Qur’an* suggest that love magic is ineffectual. For this would go against much of what many Indonesians take to be the case. What it does say, instead, is that Jaran Goyang and Semar Mésém pale in comparison to the power of Islam.⁴³ Much like amulets, inscriptions, and incantations, the parody casts Qur’anic recitation and prayer as an ‘effective deterrent’—an idea widely attested in the ethnographic and historical research on Islamic practice in the region (see Yahya 2016; compare Fox 2018).

43 This is an idea with clear resonances across purported religious divides throughout South-east Asia. For a Buddhist variation, one might turn to the closing scenes of *Nang Nak*, in which it is only the Buddhist abbot who can defeat a powerful ghost, after failed efforts by a Brahman exorcist.

Returning briefly to the two films, we may note a similarly argumentative orientation—again, aiming to address, rebut, and persuade. *Cinta tapi beda* uses the drama of a Muslim–Christian romance to espouse individual freedom in matters of the heart, and of faith. Here the language of interreligious ‘tolerance’—a hangover from the New Order—is deployed against a more exclusionary interpretation of religious obligation that would preclude inter-faith marriage. Meanwhile, religiosity is more or less irrelevant to the predicament faced by the young couple in Candra Aditya’s *Desire*. Confronted with his girlfriend’s disbelief at Cinta’s seemingly irrational love for Rangga in AADC2, Iskandar’s response is that ‘[t]he heart wants what the heart wants’—a sentiment from which he later appears to back away. In leaving things so open-ended, Candra’s film may appear to avoid making an explicit argument. And yet, with its serially critical reflections on what intimacy is ‘supposed’ to look like—and the irony of the young couple’s intimate experience of their ambivalence regarding those ideals—the film might also be taken as a closely observed critique of the ongoing Indonesian argument over love.

6 Whose Argument Is It, Anyway?

My central contention has been that the films and other examples discussed above may usefully be approached as arguments regarding the nature of romantic intimacy and companionship. But whose argument is it? Where exactly is this taking place? And how is it related to the cultural and demographic trends tracked by recent studies of social life in post-authoritarian Indonesia? My emphasis on argument may seem amenable to broadly Habermasian (1989) analysis in terms of an Indonesian ‘public sphere’. This would certainly find support in the scholarly literature on public life in Indonesia—with title phrases such as ‘Private moralities in the public sphere’ (Brenner 2011); ‘Television and the public sphere in Indonesia after *Reformasi*’ (Kitley 2003); or ‘Women activists, religion and the public sphere in Indonesia’ (Rinaldo 2008). But, given my earlier remarks on the scholarly invocation of ‘media’, are things really so straightforward?

Setting aside well-worn criticisms from the exclusionary nature of the model, or the accuracy of Habermas’s interpretation of history,⁴⁴ there are other,

44 For a helpful overview of early Anglophone responses to Habermas, see contributions to Calhoun 1992.

more fundamental reasons to question the suitability of the 'public sphere' metaphor. A complex commentarial literature has grown up around Habermas and his interpreters, and it goes beyond the scope of this essay to engage that literature in any detail. For now, I would simply like to suggest that beyond criticism of exclusion and historical particulars, the metaphor of an 'Indonesian public sphere' naturalizes precisely what is in question—namely, the forum of contestation itself, and the conditions under which argument may be conducted. This, I hasten to add, is not an especially novel observation. The literature on agonism and radical democracy takes this as its point of departure (see, for example, Mouffe 2000, 2013). But it also raises some interesting questions regarding our approach to political difference as it relates to the various projects for collective life embodied in public argument—not least as pursued through the medium of scholarship.

There is then the related question of agency. The allied concepts of civil society and the public sphere presuppose the idea of argument as contributing to a rational debate between individuals regarding both their respective interests and common goods. Yet few, if any, of the events that make up 'popular culture' in Indonesia can be attributed to an individual. I referred to *Desire* as Candra Aditya's film. And indeed it is. Yet, as he himself remarked, when I noted a discrepancy between the screenplay and the filmic dialogue, 'I always let the actors say whatever they wanna say if the dialogue made sense and suited the scene.'⁴⁵ At the very least, this problematizes the tendency to attribute filmic discourse to the will of its directors. To similar effect, Heryanto (2014) has neatly documented the conflict between the director of Indonesia's first Islamic blockbuster, *Ayat-ayat cinta*, and the author of the novel on which it was based. Their 'cinematic battle' was but one component of the events that gave rise to the resulting film, which included countless other factors—from fundraising, screenwriting, filming, editing, production, and advertising to everything that occurred after the film was in theatres. Examining any one of these moments would reveal a swirling mêlée of conflicting purposes, stratagems, and unforeseen outcomes. Sharper attention to this open-endedness—and the various forms of complex agency in play—would arguably complicate our approach to popular culture, raising a number of difficult questions. We might ask, for instance, what sort of rationality can we attribute to the agency exemplified by a popular film? A television advertisement? A YouTube parody? Or, for that matter, scholarship on all of the above? These are not easy questions to ask, let alone answer—as they probably require

45 Personal communication with Aditya via email, 15 August 2018.

a more theoretically nuanced account of media and popular culture than is currently available.

So, where do we go from here? At this stage, I would not presume to offer an entirely new approach as if cut from whole cloth. Whatever its other disappointments, poststructuralist criticism has laid bare the impossibility of radical emancipation (Laclau 1996)—the idea that we could ‘escape’ to a form of thought, and practice, so totally ‘other’ that it removes us from the constraints of our current predicament *in toto* and without remainder. Perhaps the lesson to be taken, then, is that our theorizing must begin from where we are, here and now. Practically speaking, it is unlikely that concepts such as the public sphere and the ‘scapes’ will disappear any time soon, much less the notion of ‘popular culture’. These are among the dominant terms in which scholarship imagines public life and our prospects for transforming it. They are, as it were, concepts indigenous to scholarly modes of argument. Accordingly, the first task will be to work out what precisely these concepts accomplish—empirically, critically, and politically—for the projects that presuppose and deploy them—in this case, in the study of contemporary life in Indonesia. Such an endeavour must be at once analytic and genealogical: teasing out presuppositions, tracing the history of their emergence, and following the consequences that have ensued. The next step will be to work out what these lines of enquiry have missed, or overlooked, in articulating their guiding questions in such terms. How, for instance, might accounts of an ‘Indonesian public sphere’ reshape, obfuscate, or simply fail to recognize the claims of other forms of collective rationality and political agency—such as those sought through Islamist and other non-liberal projects? By specifying the nature and provenance of these foundational concepts, we will be better able to recognize the contingency of their implicit and oft-unacknowledged commitments regarding what it means to live well, both individually and collectively. Only then can scholarship engage ‘other’ projects on a level playing field—opening up to a more radically open-ended form of dialogue.

Appendix: A Conjectural Comparison

The following is a conjectural comparison of approaches that most commonly inform scholarly accounts of media and popular culture. The tabular format for presenting these ideas is lifted from Ronald Inden’s unpublished essay ‘Human agency in the social sciences’ (n.d.). The analysis is rough and ready, and primarily meant to provoke discussion.

TABLE 1 A conjectural comparison

Figure/Author	Hall	Habermas	Appadurai
Explicandum	Hegemony	Democracy	Global Capitalism
Substance	Ideology	Reason	Capital/Commodities
Spatialized field of circulation	Society/Culture	Public Sphere	-Scapes
Subject	Audiences	Citizens	Consumers
Dominant metaphor for the movement of substance through space	Circulation	Communication	Flow
Practice	Decoding/Negotiation	Participation	Consumption/Use
Intellect	Organic Intellectual	Rights Advocate	Critical Theorist
Institution	Localized politics	NGO	Academia
Ethic	Socialist/Progressive	Humanist/Progressive	Liberal/Progressive
Action	Intervention Analysis	Development	Critique

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