Ben Murtagh


As a member of the research community of scholars who have studied gay, lesbi and waria Indonesians, I can state without reservation that Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema (hereafter, GSIC) makes a major contribution to our understanding of contemporary Indonesia and the relationship between film and society more generally. It is remarkable that Murtagh is able to accomplish so much in only 176 pages of main text. My primary concern is that this book will not achieve the readership it deserves: It is not of interest only to area studies scholars or scholars of sexuality. I, thus, have two goals in this review: First, to summarise the argument, but, secondly, to also indicate just how this text is so innovative.

GSIC is composed of an introduction and six subsequent chapters. In the introduction (Chapter 1), Murtagh frames the overall project of the book. He correctly notes that cinema has played a key role in Indonesian national identity and popular culture, and a particularly crucial role in the history of nonnormative sexualities and genders. In Chapter 2, Murtagh examines three films from the 1970s whose stories focus on warias (roughly, male transvestites). I cannot overstate the importance of this chapter. This was the period that that particular waria subject position was taking its contemporary form in the archipelago. Through a detailed approach that includes not just narrative analysis, but attention to scripts, social context and even focus groups with contemporary warias watching the film, Murtagh has saved these films from obscurity and has shown how they helped shape the waria subject position. Here and elsewhere in GSIC, Murtagh shows how this influence works not only through relatively accurate glimpses into the everyday lives of warias (or gay men or lesbi women), but also through stereotypes and misleading caricatures. To select just one insight from this chapter, Murtagh shows how warias in these
films are never presented as “passing” as women, their filmic representation reflecting the broader pattern where warias see themselves (and are seen by others) as a form of feminine masculinity, rather than a “third gender”.

Chapter 3 is perhaps even more important than the one before it. Here, Murtagh focuses on gay-themed films of the 1980s. We know from the broader ethnographic and historical record that the gay subject position took form significantly during this time and that films played a central role in that formation. The detailed analysis of crucial films from this time is deeply welcome—in the case of Istana Kecantikan, the most significant film from this period, Murtagh’s analysis is based not only on the movie, but the original script (which differs from the final film in several ways). In Chapter 4, Murtagh moves to the 1990s but also turns his attention to the filmic presentation of lesbi women. As in the case of gay, the lesbi subject position was powerfully shaped by mass media and, due to the difficulties women in Indonesia often face in spending unsupervised time away from their families, the role of film is, if anything, more pivotal. Murtagh notes similarities with representations of lesbians in Western film (e.g., the historical limitation of lesbian representation to horror films and pornography), as well as specifically Indonesian dimensions of these cinematic narratives (like links to the economic and political transformations of the late New Order period of the Suharto dictatorship, which ended in 1998).

Chapter 5 marks a temporal break in Murtagh’s analysis, as he turns his attention to the post-Suharto “era of reform”. A new generation of films appeared early in this period, with substantially different representations of gay men than before. Films like Kuldesak and Arisan! shaped public debates, community conversations and individual subjectivities, and Murtagh’s careful analysis of these and other films represents an indispensible addition to the existing scholarly literature. Chapter 6 complements Chapter 5 by focusing on images of lesbi women in post-2000 Indonesian film. While noting that there are far fewer Indonesian films from this (or any) period featuring lesbi characters compared to gay characters (and narratives where lesbi couples “survive intact to the end of a film” [p. 127] are rarer still), Murtagh discusses four films that “feature erotic desire between women which has been interpreted by certain commentators as lesbi” (p. 127). This effort to include lesbi women, as well as gay men—and thus produce a co-gendered, inclusive analysis even when the available data is not in balance—is salutary and both sharpens the argument and contributes to the badly needed corpus of data on female homosexuality and transgenderism. In Chapter 7, the final chapter of gsic, Murtagh explores alternative sexualities in Indonesian cinema in the 2000s, analysing in particular the film Coklat Stroberi, which broke new ground by presenting what many saw as a relatively sympathetic and accurate portrayal of gay youth.