

**Identity and pleasure: The politics of Indonesian Screen Culture**, by Ariel Heryanto, NUS Press, 2014, 268 pp., \$32.00 (paperback), ISBN-13 978-9971-69-821-8

Amidst a growing body of academic works dealing with inter-Asian cultural flows and transnational cultural phenomena (Chua, 2012; Iwabuchi, Muecke, & Thomas, 2004), the truth is that there is a remarkable shortage of in-depth explorations of popular culture in Asia's third most populated country, Indonesia. A glance through syllabi of courses on contemporary South East Asia will return few mentions, if any, to Indonesia's most successful *sinetron* (soap operas). Similarly, as opposed to the detailed scrutiny that television formats and commercial blockbusters in North East Asia countries have undergone in academia, South East Asia's have received very scant attention beyond some scattered exceptions. Yet these, and other very popular forms of mediated-communication are some of the most powerful social institutions in contemporary Indonesia, as their counterparts are in other cultural settings. This dire need to avail of contextualized analyses of the production and reception of popular culture, of the politics of everyday life, in increasingly media saturated societies makes Ariel Heryanto's contribution undoubtedly very timely.

Based on rich descriptions of ethnographic data collected mostly around the island of Java and using a diverse range of cases, *Identity and pleasure: The politics of Indonesian Screen Culture*, introduces us to cultural politics in contemporary Indonesia and how these are intertwined with two on-going and opposing processes of identity formation: the predominance of normative understandings of what it means to be Indonesian in the twenty-first century and the contestations in an ethnically diverse and culturally rich archipelago. As with many other societies, after an extended period of repressive governments, Indonesia saw the flourishing of democratic hope and freedom at the turn of the century, just to be followed by disenchantment due to the hardships of economic development and the difficulties of democratic capacity building. The book is situated in this socio-political context, with a focus on the urban youth and rising middle classes, which, as Heryanto reminds us, are only a small number of the nation's population, but one that is very visible and vocal in public opinion.

Thematically, the cases presented in the book can be divided into two groups. Three chapters focus on issues related to the politics of identity that have been widely debated publicly: the increasing popularity of cultural artefacts, most notably films, rich in Islam-related topics (chapters 2 and 3) and the influence of popular culture from North-East Asia, particularly South Korea (chapter 7). The other four cover aspects of cultural politics that have been largely erased from public discourse: the killings of Leftists in 1965-66 (chapters 4 and 5), the discrimination against ethnic Chinese (chapter 6) and the lower classes (chapter 8). Running across the entirety of the book, we encounter three recurrent topics in Heryanto's previous works: the historical amnesia that has come to prevail, the negotiations between the global and the local and the persistence of class struggles in contemporary Indonesia.

We find the book's most compelling arguments in Heryanto's discussion about the increasing Islamisation of Indonesian society after 1998 and how this rise is reflected in the film industry. In chapter 2, we are introduced to Asef Bayat's idea of post-Islamism, its characteristics in Arab countries and suitability to the Indonesian context. Heryanto problematizes the dichotomy Islam-modernity among young urban populations and posits that the relationship between the two concepts, far from being antagonistic, as

often described by political conservatives, is much more nuanced. The link between popular culture, identity formation, pleasure and post-Islamism is illustrated in the book with references to one of the most notable filmic successes in recent years in Indonesia, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Bramantyo, 2008). The influence and importance of the film is discussed further in chapter 3, where we are introduced to an enduring cinematic dialogue between different forms of post-Islamism represented, for example, in two other popular films, *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (Umam, 2009) and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Bramantyo, 2009). The chapter's underlying idea is that, in post-New Order Indonesia, as "Islam is modernised" and as "modernity is Islamised" identity becomes increasingly fluid. Today's urban middle classes in the country are juggling three balls: they aspire to be observant pious Muslims, respectful citizens and members of a global community of consumers.

Towards the end of the book, Heryanto moves away from the film industry, which is also at the centre of the chapters addressing the killings of Communists and the discrimination of ethnic Chinese, to focus on two other screen cultures: television and the new media. In chapter 7, the attention is on the "active agency" of middle-class young Indonesian women in embracing elements of the screen cultures of Northeast Asian countries as a means to construct their identity as "modern and cosmopolitan oriented persons" (p. 188); and chapter 8 focuses on the role of the media, particularly television and the Internet, in shaping Indonesia's political culture after the demise of the New Order governments. Heryanto argues that, contrary to prevailing narratives in other countries, in certain contexts, as demonstrated with the case of Indonesia's 2009 general elections, the advent of social media "can lead to political disempowerment, splintering local communities in unexpected ways" (p. 189). Although both chapters have abundant information and descriptions of the two phenomena under analysis, it is difficult not to wonder why the author has opted not to voice more in detail, in the form of direct or indirect quotes, the subjects of study, young women and highly politicised lower classes. Similarly, and given that both the popularity of North East Asian culture and the tendency towards more mediated forms of political campaigning, are processes which are not exclusive to Indonesia, the book could benefit from a more detailed discussion on how these local developments are connected—by similarity or by opposition—to those occurring globally.

Written from a cultural studies perspective, *Identity and pleasure's* diversity of cases will be of interest not only to scholars of media and critical studies, but to those interested in cultural politics and South East Asian studies in general. The book fills in a gap in the study of popular culture, which is too often forgotten in academic examinations of contemporary media usage and consumption, particularly in regards to how it relates to cultural politics and identity formation.

## References

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