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A Political Dance in the Rain

Queer Short Film in Indonesia and the Cinematic Creation of Social and Material Spaces for Argument

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Abstract

Queer films are largely absent from Indonesian cinema and television screens due to the country's current climate of LGBT 'moral panic'. This article examines how, two decades after the reformation, Indonesian film practitioners are forced to navigate complex configurations of power and knowledge—negotiating social, political, and religious entanglements through their cinematic practices. My analysis is focused on *komunitas film* (film community/ies) and, more specifically, events and activities surrounding Luhki Herwanayogi's short film *On Friday Noon* (2016), which chronicles the emotionally and physically fraught journey of a transgender Muslim woman as she seeks to perform Friday prayers. Drawing on this example, the article explores the disruptive potential of cinematic practice to challenge and nullify the ostensible binary between Islam and queerness, showing alternative ways of being Muslim in contemporary Indonesia, where piety and sexual identity often come together in unexpected ways.

Keywords

LGBT – alternative cinema – performative-art activism – queer Islam

1 Introduction¹

The central argument of this article is that in the current socio-political climate of LGBT moral panic, the cinematic practices of *komunitas film* (film communities) rupture mainstream hegemonic discourses on LGBT subjectivities.² Such practices create spaces, both material (the film) and social (the production and screening and the discussion event), where they performatively and cinematically nullify³ the LGBT/Islam binary. Linking my analysis to the socio-political climate of contemporary Indonesia, I will point to the political potential of the cinematic practices of *komunitas film*. I will then illuminate how we can imagine these disruptive spaces and draw on ‘ethnographically informed film analysis’—going beyond a discussion of the film as text, or its socio-political backdrop, to consider ethnographic insights into the production of the film—and shed light on the making and constitution of these material and social spaces for argument. By focusing on the micro-processes of film production, I will show how the LGBT/Islam binary is performatively nullified through the cinematic practices of *komunitas film*, not only on-screen but also off-screen. I will then turn to an analysis of the film itself and develop

1 The article was originally presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion (November 2018, Denver, CO), at a panel discussion entitled “Pop Culture as Argument: Contesting Religion, Gender and Romance in Contemporary Indonesia” and at the Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World, Harvard University (April 2019, Boston, MA), at a workshop entitled “Bureaucratizing Diversity in Muslim Southeast Asia”. The research is based on my ongoing dissertation fieldwork in Indonesia since 2018 as part of the DFG Emmy Noether Research Group “The Bureaucratization of Islam and its Socio-Legal Dimensions in Southeast Asia” at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Department of Law and Anthropology, Halle. Research for this article was supported by the German Research Foundation’s Emmy Noether Program and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). I would like to thank Andrea Decker, Richard Fox, Arnika Fuhrmann, Veronika Kusumaryati, Dominik Müller, Richard Oh and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts. I am truly grateful to Luhki Herwanayogi, the director of the film *On Friday Noon*, for his unlimited patience and willingness to engage in conversations about the film. I am also grateful to all the *komunitas film* actors whom I have met during my research, who welcomed me into their community and who still support my research by keeping engaged in an ongoing conversation about their cinematic practices.

2 I am using ‘LGBT’ instead of ‘LGBTQ+’ because this is the term that is mostly used in the Indonesian context.

3 I am using the term nullify to signify that I conceptualize the cinematic practices as something other than just an attempt at subversion or a straightforward challenge. I argue that through the performative act of making the film and in the cinematic reality the LGBT/Islam binary is not only challenged but has already been overcome. In the social space of the screening event, the overcoming of the binary is different for every spectator and is therefore a possibility. Thus, the screening event is a space where the binary is challenged.

the notion of the cinematic evocation of empathy as a rhetorical strategy that translates into a distinctive filmic form and style. Finally, a closer look at the social space in which the screening and discussion take place will position these practices and spaces in the wider public sphere and popular culture of Indonesia—conceptualizing them not as an echo chamber but as a microcosm with potential for a hopeful future: a ‘micro-utopia’.

2 Queer Screenings

It was in the Central Javanese city of Solo that I first saw *On Friday Noon*, a film depicting the story of Wina, a transgender Muslim woman on her way to perform Friday prayers. This was in 2018, at a time when the socio-political climate in Indonesia had become increasingly hostile to LGBT issues, as exemplified by the Q! Film Festival closing down due to pressure from religious groups. Under the circumstances, it was surprising to see a film so bold in its call to sympathy for the transgendered; yet, this was not the only instance. *Bulu Mata (Eyelashes)*, a documentary on a group of transgender women in Aceh, was screened at the Islamic university Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang during the Saturday evening prime-time session of the Malang Film Festival. The previous year this documentary had won the Citra Award, the ‘Indonesian Oscar’, for best documentary.

In contemporary Indonesia, the diminishing space available to queer film against the backdrop of increasing Islamic conservatism is a reality and a development that Van Bruinessen (2013) has called the ‘conservative turn’. Still, this is not the only story to be told about spaces for queer film in contemporary Indonesia—for there is also a more hopeful narrative that can be found while seeking different stories, alternative realities, and optimistic utopias (see also Oertner 2016).⁴ The focus of this article is on the cinematic practices of komunitas film, because it is there that I sensed the potential for a hopeful future for Indonesia. While the horrifying scope of the current situation for queer subjectivities in Indonesia must not be neglected, my aim is to focus on the possibility of a time and place where things are different and there is ample

4 See Oertner (2016) for a discussion on the “dark anthropology”, that is, anthropology that focuses on the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression), as well as on the subjective experience of these dimensions in the form of depression and hopelessness’. It is her consideration of ‘a range of work that is explicitly or implicitly a reaction to this dark turn’ that I identify with as a researcher and where I aim to position my writing practice.

space for queer film. Therefore, the following analysis of the cinematic practices of komunitas film speaks from within, but also against, the rising trend of Islamic conservatism since Indonesia's 1998 political reformation. My aim is to explore cinematic practice as a process of creation, embedded in a socio-political climate that Indonesian film practitioners are not passively exposed to but which they actively negotiate. I am interested in the dynamic and continuously evolving relationship between these cinematic practices and the socio-political climate.

Due to its locality in the Indonesian context, and to the medium of film, my enquiry falls into the category of studies on Indonesian popular culture—more specifically, Indonesian cinema and research that deals with queer film in Indonesia. As discussed by Paramaditha (2017), there is a growing body of research on Indonesian cinema, which is found not just in academic publications. *Cinema Poetica* and *Jurnal Footage* (published by Forum Lenteng), for example, are online publications that publish sophisticated analyses on film in Indonesia without institutional affiliation. The seminal works on Indonesian cinema during the New Order (Heider 1991; Said 1991; Sen 1995) discuss cinema from the perspective of what it represents and reflects in terms of Indonesian culture, and how it is embedded in, and shaped by, commercial and state powers (Heider 1991; Said 1991; Sen 1995). Later works look at Indonesian cinema from different angles, grasping its role in the negotiating, contesting and shaping of what it means to be Indonesian.⁵ In an environment where there is more freedom of expression, the agency of filmmakers and media producers takes centre stage in research. Several studies have engaged with LGBT films, looking at representation (Murtagh 2013), making and screening (Coppens 2012), and the politics of screening practices (Paramaditha 2018).

The topical diversity of existing research is reflective of the fact that there is no such thing as 'Indonesian popular culture' or 'cinema' but rather a diverse field of competing and co-existing media forms in circulation, especially since the fall of the New Order regime. Indonesia now hosts 'not one but a multiplicity of popular cultures' (Hefner 2018:4) and 'film culture in Indonesia is not limited to theater screen and television'.⁶ My research is indebted to, and builds on, these earlier works but turns its attention to a different genre: short films (as opposed to feature films) and the cinematic practices of komunitas

5 Barker 2011; Hanan 2017; Izharuddin 2018; Michalik 2015; Paramaditha 2014; Van Heeren 2012; Ruppin 2016, to mention only a few.

6 Adrian Jonathan Pasaribu, 'Alternative histories of Indonesian cinema', *Cinema Poetica*, 29-11-2015. <https://cinemapoetica.com/alternative-histories-of-indonesian-cinema/> (accessed 27-2-2019).

film (as opposed to commercial cinemas or television). This has only sporadically been discussed in academic discourse, mostly by film practitioners who documented their practices.⁷ An outstanding exception is Kurnia's work on the Cinema Lovers Community (CLC) Purbalingga, which has 'contribut[ed] to the revitalization and the redefinition of local independent filmmaking in Indonesia' (Kurnia 2018:298), challenging (in terms of both filmmaking style and representations) Jakarta-based independent filmmaking.

Building on these earlier works, this article takes a slightly different approach. The scope of my research goes beyond the medium of film, as I am looking at particular 'forms and milieus of artistic production' (Blanes et al. 2016:6). Thus, I engage with scholarship that focuses on participatory artistic practices (see Jurriëns 2017; Bourriaud 2002; Blanes et al. 2016) and look at komunitas film as reminiscent of 'extra-institutional collectives seeking change' (Blanes et al. 2016:10) and 'interventions that propose [...] political reconfiguration' (Blanes et al. 2016:10). The notion of 'micro-utopia', taken up in the special issue of *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia* (Journal of Art & Anthropology), titled 'Micro-Utopias: Anthropological Perspectives on Art, Relationality and Creativity' and by Jurriëns (2017), who has worked with Indonesian video artists, becomes vital in my conceptualization of the cinematic practices of komunitas film as a form of political action that holds the potential for a hopeful future. Moreover, the study of young people as transformative actors has a long history in Indonesian studies.⁸

On a methodological level, I follow calls to look at the 'meso and micro levels of cultural production and consumption' (Jurriëns 2011:204) and go 'beyond close reading of a particular work of pop culture' (Heryanto 2008:4). This article is based on my methodology of 'ethnographically informed film analysis', bringing into conversation two different strands of data—the film and my ethnography—to bridge the gap between the textual analysis of films and the cultural, historical, and political environments of their production. The argument developed here derives from 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia during 2018 and 2019, mainly on the island of Java, where I engaged in participant observation and conducted interviews at film festivals and screenings, and witnessed the production of several short films.⁹ My analysis and

7 Jayasrana 2007; Prakosa 2005; Kunci Cultural Studies Center and EngageMedia 2009; Ratna 2007.

8 See, for example, Benedict Anderson (1972) on the role of youth in the Indonesian revolution; Karen Strassler's (2010) study of young photographers; and Doreen Lee's (2016) work on student activists.

9 I also did ethnographic research with government bodies in charge of administering and sup-

readings of the film *On Friday Noon* are grounded in a process of ongoing conversations with the filmmaker and his team.

3 Making, Screening, and Discussing Film to Address Social Issues

'Komunitas film' is a term that can be translated¹⁰ as film community/ies; it refers to hundreds of film communities all over Indonesia who make, screen, and discuss short films. These non-government, non-commercial, often university- or high school-based groups bring together people with a genuine love for film. Most komunitas film emerged in the more liberal environment that developed following Indonesia's political reformation in 1998, along with the deregulation of the film industry that had been heavily centralized during the preceding New Order regime. The dawn of digital filmmaking technologies was a key enabler in the expansion of film communities, as it made the medium of film accessible to wider ranges of society. Technology offered new 'ways of imagining and acting upon the world' (Blanes et al. 2016:16) through making, screening, and discussing films, and Indonesian film practitioners made use of it. Digital video cameras entered the Indonesian market in 1995, and the year 2002 saw 1,071 short films (Prakosa 2005:5) submitted to the Festival Film Independent Indonesia (FFII, Indonesian Independent Film Festival) organized by Surya Citra Televisi (SCTV). Beyond the purview of state censorship, and outside of commercial distribution channels, the films produced and screened within komunitas film are different. An Indonesian film activist frequently told me, 'If you want to understand Indonesia, watch short films.'¹¹ Many films address local issues close to the immediate social experience of the filmmaker, such as gender, the environment, religion, and the political events of 1965 and 1998, which differentiates them from mainstream productions that tend to portray idealistic aspirations as 'an escape for the lower classes from the conditions of everyday life' (Kunci and EngageMedia 2009:19). The local-

porting the film industry, such as the Badan Perfilman Indonesia (Indonesian Film Board), Badan Ekonomi Kreatif Indonesia (BEKRAF, Agency for Creative Economy), Pusat Pengembangan Perfilman Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Pusbang Film, Indonesian Film Development Centre) and Lembaga Sensor Film (LSF, Film Censorship Board), experiences that informed my writing of this article.

10 All translations in the text are mine. I conducted my interviews and informal conversations in English, *bahasa Indonesia*, or a mix of both, depending on the fluency of my interlocutor and other people present. During my participant-observation activities most conversations were in *bahasa Indonesia*.

11 Personal communication with an Indonesian film activist in 2018.

issue orientation, where film is a medium for discussing current issues, is the reason that the stages of making, screening, and discussing films are organically interrelated. These films are made and screened to become door-openers for discussions during the public moment of the film, the screening event, which the organizer of the Festival Film Dokumenter Yogyakarta (FFD Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta Documentary Film Festival) describes as ‘a public space to learn from each other’.¹² At the heart of cinematic practices is thus the ‘distinctive social function’ (Maltby 2011:19) to trigger discussions on local social issues. These screenings and discussions take place in universities, cafes, alternative cinemas, villages, and during national film festivals all over Indonesia. Experts are often invited to join and engage with the audience about the social issues raised in the film.

The film *On Friday Noon* stems from the komunitas film environment and aims at addressing the issue of discrimination against transgender persons. I will use it as a case study to develop this argument. The film tells the story of Wina, a transgender woman on her way to Friday prayers. In an early scene, she is talking to another transgender woman as they are riding in what appears to be a police truck, and she suddenly realizes that it is Friday. Muslim men are supposed to perform Friday prayers in a mosque at noon on Friday.¹³ Wina’s desire to perform Friday prayers is the central conflict of this short film, and the focus throughout is on Wina and her experience of trying to make it to the mosque in time. On her journey she encounters various obstacles: a shop worker who treats her dismissively and refuses to lend her a sarong (Muslim men are required to cover certain parts of their body during prayers); a group of children who violently attack her; and a man who sexually harasses her in a public toilet. Towards the end of the film, Wina finally finds a sarong in an abandoned house. She takes it and runs to the mosque in a scene that is intense and dramatic, with emotive classical music and a montage of Wina running and men praying in the mosque. In the end she is too late, and as the men are leaving the mosque, she falls to the ground and surrenders to God.

This article is a micro-analysis of the cinematic practices of one particular film that provides a very dense investigation of a multitude of dimensions. This

12 Opening speech by the organizer of the FFD Yogyakarta at the opening of the festival, 5-12-2018.

13 It is beyond the scope of this article, but the fact that a transgender woman has the desire to perform a ritual that is mandatory for men deserves further discussion. It points to the inflexibility of categories that are externally imposed on subject positions and exposes their violence and absurdity at the intersection of state, religion, society, and individual experience.

microscopic perspective occurs at the expense of an analysis of other films. It is therefore important to note that even though it is not a trending topic, other queer short films are being made by film practitioners in Indonesian film communities. One that resembles the approach of *On Friday Noon* is *Jakarta Subuh "A Piece of Hope"* (2019) by Syahreza Fahlevi, a film that also tells the story of a transgender woman praying in a mosque. The most prominent example is *Kado (A Gift)* (2018) by Aditya Ahmad, on the experience of a child struggling to conform to gender norms. I am also following a student film production that centres on a marriage between two men—another kind of performative nullification of societal norms.¹⁴

4 The Socio-Political Climate of LGBT Moral Panic

Some contextual background regarding the current LGBT moral panic in Indonesia is required to grasp the significance of this film. Notions of 'normal' sexuality and gender expression are discursively constructed through hegemonic discourses, along the binaries of what is thought of as 'normal' and 'deviant' behaviour (Foucault 1978:68–9). This discourse constitutes a body of knowledge and practices that defines what is normal/deviant with regard to sexuality and gender expression. In contemporary Indonesia, the creation of LGBT moral panic has led to a mainstream discourse that is decidedly anti-LGBT and internalized by many as a fact, codified in law and bureaucratic practice, despising 'the possibility that things could have been (and still could be) otherwise' (Bourdieu 1994:4).

The end of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 was a moment of immense hope for change. New spaces and possibilities for the expression of arguments opened up and many voices emerged out of 'a Pandora's box from the past' (Suryakusuma 2016:196). However, along with more liberal movements like komunitas film, previously repressed voices for a monolithic interpretation of Islam became louder, and today Islam is more visible, audible, and palpable in Indonesia. Popular culture experienced a wave of *film Islami*, religiously themed films (Izharuddin 2018). At the same time, Islamic apparel was becoming increasingly fashionable (Jones 2010). The public performance of piety increased: young girls in hijab now look at old photographs of their mothers with uncovered hair—traces of a past when things were different.

14 This is not a complete list of films, and in other spaces (feature film and cinema) and time periods (before and in the early years after the reformation), many queer films have been made in Indonesia. See also Murtagh 2013.

In parallel with the resurgence of Islam, anti-queer discourse emerged at the end of the 1990s in unprecedented dimensions. Lesbian and gay events in Yogyakarta and Solo were violently attacked by vigilante groups (Boellstorff 2004). In 2010, the holding of the Q! Film Festival, at that time Asia's biggest gay and lesbian film festival, was protested by the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front), who assembled in front of the Goethe Institute in Jakarta to march against the alleged spread of homosexuality (Paramaditha 2018). In 2014, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council), a major Muslim clerical organization, issued a fatwa (Islamic legal opinion) against LGBT persons, officially positioning being a good Muslim as incompatible with being queer.¹⁵ The overarching claim was that being queer is forbidden by Islam, which has put queer Muslims into what Boellstorff (2005) has termed 'ungrammatical' subject positions. In contemporary Indonesia, 'conservative values have become more dominant and understood as representing the public' (Paramaditha 2018:77), while tolerant discourses within Islam are silenced and the genealogy of the incompatibility discourse is no longer questioned, even though gender transgression does have a history in both Indonesia and Islam more generally (Peletz 2006).

It is true that many hateful statements against queers are Islamically framed and articulated by self-identified Muslims. Still, analysing the emergence of anti-queer discourse solely in religious terms feeds Orientalist fantasies about an intolerant Islam but does not grasp what is actually happening in Indonesia. In moral-panic discourse, a diverse fusion of very different kinds of arguments culminates in something bigger than its individual constituents. Lancaster describes these dynamics as "condensation"—the production of amalgamated, blurred, or composite figures in dream work' (Lancaster 2011:25). In 2016, the minister for higher education called for queer student groups to be banned from university campuses, arguing that queerness must be forbidden 'because it destroys national morality'.¹⁶ Others followed with similar statements that linked the presence of queerness to questioning the nature and future of the Indonesian nation. Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu talked about 'a proxy war from outside', more dangerous than a nuclear war.¹⁷ Some even argued that queerness is against the Indonesian law because the state morality of Pancasila stipulates the belief in one god and homosexuality is framed as forbidden in

15 Fatwa MUI Nomor 57 Tahun 2014, issued 31 December 2014.

16 Hetih Rusli, 'Menuju kematian fiksi LGBT', *JURNAL Ruang*, 7-6-2017. <https://jurnalruang.com/read/1496220414-menuju-kematian-fiksi-queer> (accessed 27-2-2019).

17 Syaiful Hakim, 'Menhan: LGBT bagian "proxy war"', *ANTARA News*, 23-2-2016. <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/546668/menhan-LGBT-bagian-proxy-war> (accessed 27-2-2019).

all religions.¹⁸ This argument renders queerness not only incompatible with religion but also incompatible with the nation. These examples illustrate that anti-queer discourse in contemporary Indonesia is a potpourri of religious, moralistic, allegedly scientific, and nationalistic claims.

As Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994:149) state, ‘moral panics always leave an informal, and often an institutional, legacy’. In Indonesia, moral panic created the momentum for religiously framed normativity to gradually encroach on state law, regulations, and bureaucratic practice. The law against pornography (Undang-Undang Pornografi, UUP) includes homosexuality as a deviant behaviour and there are attempts to criminalize extramarital and gay sex (Rancangan Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana, RKUHP). International NGOs report of regulations against funding for LGBT-related projects in Indonesia.¹⁹ The Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia (KPI, Indonesian Broadcasting Commission), responsible for overseeing radio and television content, is also clear in its stance, ‘reminding all broadcasting institutions, both television and radio, not to give space to the “promotion of LGBT matters” on any broadcasting channel’.²⁰

The emergence of moral panic and its institutional and structural legacy fundamentally transformed the parameters for queer film. Every film to be screened in Indonesian cinemas needs a censorship certificate from the state censorship board (Lembaga Sensor Film, LSF).²¹ There is no regulation against queerness on screen per se, but there is against the violation of religious norms and harmony. As stated by an LSF official, there is now a ‘growing antipathy in society against scenes that show LGBT with the aim of influencing [society]’.²² This translates into more strict decisions. In 2018 a male-to-male cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) scene in the film *Jumanji: Welcome to the jungle* was censored, allegedly because it might provoke homosexual beha-

18 See, for example, Abba Gabrillin, ‘MUI dan ormas Islam: LGBT haram’, *Kompas*, 17-2-2016. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/02/17/14134511/MUI.dan.Ormas.Islam.LGBT.Haram> (accessed 27-2-2019).

19 Several personal conversations with film practitioners during 2018.

20 Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, ‘Tampilkan muatan transgender, KPI Pusat beri sanksi “Brownis Tonight” Trans TV’, *KPI*, 9-4-2018. <http://www.kpi.go.id/index.php/id/umum/38-dalam-negeri/34439-tampilkan-muatan-transgender-kpi-pusat-beri-sanksi-brownis-tonight-trans-tv?detail3=5198&start=15> (accessed 27-2-2019).

21 The board is the final gatekeeper for commercial releases in Indonesian theatres, as regulated in the 2009 Film Law and Government Regulation No. 18 of 2014.

22 Rulianto Angga, ‘Rommy Fibri: LSF tak kekang gambar dan tafsir’, *Jurnal Ruang*, 22-9-2017. <https://jurnalruang.com/read/1506097252-rommy-fibri-lsf-tak-kekang-gambar-dan-tafsir> (accessed 27-2-2019).

viours. In a situation where homosexuality is not yet illegal, the interpretative acts of the censorship board become pivotal because they render queerness illegal on screens. Getting a queer film into Indonesian cinemas is now thought impossible by Indonesian film practitioners. What is crucial is that this impossibility is already structural. It is no longer contested but normalized as fact, and this has had immediate consequences. What is likely to be censored is no longer made. In this climate, officially licenced cinemas and television lack any kind of representation of LGBT persons. Only a few years ago mainstream cinemas were still engaged in the production of queer films: in 2015, *On Friday Noon* received funding from the XXI Short Film Festival 2015 pitching forum.²³

These dynamics have led to a situation where negative statements about LGBT persons are flooding from various kinds of media and channels, while laws and regulations aim to erase queer subjectivities from screens altogether, creating a 'clear sky' in the most brutal and problematic sense—in effect deleting queers from the social consciousness. Or, as Pasaribu observes: 'Censorship policy sanitizes the cinematic storytelling in terms of social representations and political expressions, as if it seeks to reimagine Indonesia as an apolitical and intrinsically good society.'²⁴ The screen is imagined as the blueprint for the ideal Indonesian nation, one where there are no queers.

But the climate is never the same in every space. The picture looks different beyond commercial cinema and television. Some of the latest Indonesian films at international festivals feature queer stories, such as Garin Nugroho's *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* (*Memories of my Body*) or *Kado* (*A Gift*) by Aditya Ahmad at the 2018 Venice Film Festival. The BEKRAF, founded in 2015 and operating directly under the president of Indonesia, financially supported the filmmakers' attendance at international film festivals, and this was proudly announced on the agency's website and social media.²⁵ The 2019 Academy Awards nomination for Indonesia is *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* (*Memories of my Body*), a film that was banned in several provinces and protested against with an online petition on Change.org that was signed by more than 70,000 people.²⁶ These examples show that the state in this scenario is an actor of col-

23 CINEMA 21 is the biggest cinema chain in Indonesia.

24 Adrian Jonathan Pasaribu, 'Beyond the boxoffice: On the cultural relevance of Indonesian cinema', *Cinema Poetica*, 13-5-2018. <https://cinemapoetica.com/beyond-the-boxoffice-on-the-cultural-relevance-of-indonesian-cinema/> (accessed 27-2-2019).

25 BEKRAF, 'Bekraf dukung film *Kado* (A gift) di SFF', BEKRAF, 21-1-2019. <https://www.bekraf.go.id/galeri/detail/bekraf-dukung-film-kado-a-gift-di-sff> (accessed 25-9-2019).

26 According to the director, Garin Nugroho, societal censorship is now happening mostly on social media platforms and no longer on the streets. Garin Nugroho, panel discussion at

lective agency with conflicting agendas, sometimes censoring a queer film and in other instances supporting the promotion of a queer Indonesian film. Also, grassroots film communities still screen queer films on a regular basis. The case of queer film in Indonesia implies that any attempt at censorship, even when enshrined in laws and bureaucratic practice, is never absolute. There is always the possibility of friction and resistance.

5 Navigating Stormy Weathers: Cinematic Practices and the Creation of Spaces

Against this backdrop, how do Indonesian film practitioners navigate and negotiate social, political, and religious configurations—entanglements of power and knowledge—through their cinematic practices? During my fieldwork, Indonesian film practitioners often referred to ‘the climate of the country’ when I asked them about queer film. They told me that securing funding for a queer film, screening it, or even finding actors willing to take roles as queer characters has become increasingly difficult. The use of this weather-related metaphor reveals a lot about the way they experience and negotiate this situation. The climate cannot instantly be changed, but it is also not a dead end to agency. It is something that can be adapted to, like using an umbrella when it rains. And this is precisely what Indonesian film practitioners are doing with their cinematic practices.

In the title, I refer to cinematic practices as a ‘dance’. I propose to conceive of these practices as a ‘dance’, because in addition to the local ‘social issue’ orientation and interrelatedness of cinematic practices in komunitas film, there is another distinct characteristic that I became aware of during my time on film sets—namely, their process-focused modes of cultural production. Most komunitas film members do not earn money from their cinematic practices—but they are still doing it and have fun doing it. At a film shoot in Yogyakarta, I was astonished that people would gather on the film set without having an actual role in its production. Mothers brought babies in strollers, friends met to catch up, food and stories were shared, and there was a lot of laughter. At one point the director of photography turned to me, smiled, and said, ‘See? This is komunitas. You always meet friends.’²⁷ For many, the motivation to take part in these projects is not a capitalist, transactional one. This is because what is

Arkipel Jakarta International Documentary and Experimental Film Festival ‘Bromocorah within Film Aesthetics’, Jakarta, 19-8-2019.

27 Personal conversation on a film set, 24-8-2018.

created is not only the film but also the experience of making it together, with the emphasis on the collaborative process rather than merely the result. It is about doing something together—an ideal or mindset that Indonesian film practitioners refer to as *gotong royong*.²⁸ Experiences like this bring to mind the analogy of a dance, where the focus is on the process and not merely the end point. The concept of dance here refers to a particular style of collective filmmaking that is made possible by the embodied and performed mindset of *gotong royong*.

Drawing on my involvement on film sets, which I have experienced as playful and process-oriented, and Indonesian filmmaker's use of the climate metaphor, I refer to these cinematic practices as analogous to dancing (enjoying something for the process) in the rain (in unfavourable conditions). In a climate where negative arguments on the LGBT community drizzle down from the sky, making a queer film becomes an act of 'dancing in the rain'.

However, just because the process is a joyful ride, that does not mean that the outcome is not significant. In the following, I suggest a conceptual focus on 'spaces for argument' to theoretically grasp the political power of these cinematic practices. It is precisely the interrelatedness of cinematic practices that creates spaces for argument—both material (the film) and social (the screening and discussion event). What is at stake in these cinematic practices is the creation of public spaces, because without them arguments will have no effect. Or, as Hito Steyerl (2017:6,7) puts it: '[I]t is public access, to a certain degree, that makes art what it is in the first place, [...] art requires visibility to be what it is.' The logic is not that a 'good' argument will automatically be heard but that an argument with access to space will have an impact. Or, as Ostashevsky points out: 'People don't say things because they believe them, they believe them because they say them' (Metahaven and Ostashevsky 2018:78).

28 This focus on doing something together rather than making something is referred to as *gotong royong*. *Gotong royong* is 'a key cultural operator' (Bowen 1986:545) manifested in Indonesian philosophical and political discourses. Bowen discusses *gotong royong* in relation to the mobilization of rural labour in the agricultural sector, as a signifier for obligatory labour. During my fieldwork, *gotong royong* was presented to me as an essential part of Indonesian-ness. The notion became the topic of a panel on collaborations and the art at the 2018 edition of *Arkipel*, an international experimental film festival in Jakarta. It is also one of the key signifiers that the artist collective *Ruangrupa* use in their capacity as the curators of the 2022 edition of *documenta*. The trajectory and shifting of meanings from a government-constructed element of culture signifying *corvée* labour to being used by independent film and artist communities is worth further investigation. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article, but it will be extensively discussed in my upcoming dissertation.

In Indonesia, the quest for and against queerness was always about access to public spaces to make arguments. The attacks against LGBT events in Solo and Yogyakarta, as Boellstorff observed, were ‘directed at demands for inclusion in a new public sphere and not at the mundane romances and seductions of everyday life’ (Boellstorff 2004:480).²⁹ Kusumaryati (2019) continues:

This demand, I argue, is a result of a process of medicalization of politics and religion in Indonesia where a language of visibility is and should be read as a political grammar. Film as an audiovisual medium makes the question of visibility very important.

The fight is about access to public space. But spaces for argument are not equally accessible to everyone; they are guarded by exclusionary mechanisms. Moral panic and its function in mainstreaming, normalizing, and institutionalizing anti-LGBT discourse has shut down many spaces for argument on queerness, creating a situation where queer content has vanished from television and commercial cinema screens. In these spaces the sky is already terrifyingly clear (of queer representations). At the same time, arguments against queerness are mushrooming and dominating religious speeches, news coverage, and social media posts, and are slowly becoming norms that are no longer questioned because people lack access to other kinds of arguments. These arguments easily spread because their proponents have access to spaces in which they can be voiced. Islamic figures, for example, make their arguments from a position of institutionalized authority, resorting to established spaces like the fatwa or Friday prayer sermons.³⁰ Political actors who jump on the bandwagon later on likewise benefit from already established platforms for voicing their arguments. Making and screening a queer film in alternative spaces then becomes a rhetorical strategy for those who have something to say but lack access to established spaces to do so. Cinematic practice becomes a rhetorical

29 Paramaditha also discusses the problematic implications of ‘confining LGBT issues to the private realm’—a project which is impossible in the first place because the private is always political. See Intan Paramaditha, ‘The LGBT debate and the fear of “Gerakan”’, *The Jakarta Post*, 27-2-2016. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/02/27/the-LGBT-debate-and-fear-gerakan.html> (accessed 27-2-2019).

30 Friday prayer sermons in mosques are infamous spaces for the spread of radical ideas, a trend which the MUI is recently trying to tackle by providing trainings on ‘moderation and nationalist Islam’. See, for example, Ivany Atina Arbi, ‘MUI to train, certify preachers amid rising radicalism’, *The Jakarta Post*, 26-2-2019. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/02/26/mui-to-train-certify-preachers-amid-rising-radicalism> (accessed 27-2-2019).

strategy for making an argument and creating a public space to voice arguments that are shunned elsewhere. Komunitas films are among many ‘competing publics’ (Paramaditha 2018:77) in post-Reformasi Indonesia. Precisely because they are actively creating these spaces from the grassroots, they have ‘a presence in the public sphere’ (Jurriëns 2011:200). For this reason, I conceptualize the cinematic practices of komunitas film as more than a rebellious act or an attempt at subversion. Rather, these practices are a performative act of creation of material (the film) and space (the screening event) that ruptures mainstream hegemonic discourse and performatively and cinematically nullifies the LGBT/Islam binary. In the current situation, where queerness is on the verge of becoming illegal, making and screening a queer film is more than just a rebellious act—it is a political act.

6 The Cinematic Practices Around *On Friday Noon*

Framing these practices as political may be relatively obvious. What is more interesting is an enquiry into the workings of these practices, an analytical orientation towards the process: turning the gaze not merely on what they do but also on how they do it. To illustrate my argument, I will draw on ethnographic insights around the film *On Friday Noon* and illuminate how we can imagine the making and constitution of these material and social spaces that, I argue, will rupture hegemonic discourse. This requires dissecting the interrelated levels of cinematic practice: the micro-processes during filmmaking, the film itself, and the screening and discussion event. Thinking through these three stages exposes the different levels of argument-making and space-creating at play.

6.1 *The Stories before the Film: Performatively Rupturing the LGBT/Islam Binary*

The story of *On Friday Noon* is one of ‘dancing in the rain’, and it illustrates how Indonesian film practitioners—in this particular case—negotiated the climate of LGBT moral panic. I contacted Luhki, the film’s director, after seeing *On Friday Noon* at the Solo film festival. Luhki runs a production company and produces content for a range of commercial clients. His first contacts with filmmaking were with his komunitas film while he was at university and through workshops. Even though business is more profitable in the urban centre of Jakarta, he has decided to stay in Yogyakarta. He and his friends, who have their own companies and work as freelancers, have made a commitment to always—no matter how busy they are—work on ‘idealistic’ projects (short films), one

of which is the film discussed here. The story of *On Friday Noon* started when Luhki was working on a commissioned documentary film with a transgender community in Yogyakarta. He recalls that some expressed the desire to pray, to be 'close to God'. Luhki told me that 'many people don't know this'—including himself at the time.³¹ He was used to the mainstream arguments about transgender people, where they are associated with sex work and both embedded in a milieu and embodying a notion that is considered godless. Engaging with the transgender community was an eye-opening experience for him. He was confronted with alternative arguments about transgenderism that did not fit the LGBT/Islam binary. In the middle of the research process, the project was put on hold for administrative reasons. Luhki still wanted to make the film: 'I think it's very important for me to debunk these many misleading perceptions about them.'³² Making the film was his strategy for disseminating his eye-opening experience with the transgender community. Filmmaking here was a socio-technical process of reflecting on social reality through the medium of film by constructing a cinematic reality. The film became a vehicle to materialize his argument and create the spaces (the film itself and the screening events) to disseminate it. He told me that during that time 'the rejection (of LGBT) had already started'.³³ The urge to make this filmic argument came not despite but because of the climate, and the making of this film becomes a prime example of the productive effects of censorship: some dance precisely because it is raining.

It was by looking at 'the stories before the film' that I understood that *On Friday Noon* is an Islamic argument, arising from within the Muslim community. On film sets, every shooting day starts with the ritual performance of a prayer, followed by a moment of silence. The world freezes for a brief moment, and then the hectic pace of the shooting continues. This ritual is a liminal space where religion, spiritual beliefs, and film production protocol merge. There are many spirit- and ghost-related stories of what happens when this prayer does not take place.³⁴ Beyond that, film shoots are scheduled around the performance of ritual prayers. Audiences do not see the production process, but in the film credits the title Allah SWT (God Almighty) is listed first—this communicates something important: we, the makers, are religious. This film—both the end product and the production—is argued from within Islam and thus complicates the alleged binary between being Muslim and supporting queers.

31 Personal conversation with Luhki, 5-9-2018.

32 Email correspondence with Luhki, 15-2-2019.

33 Personal conversation with Luhki, 5-9-2018.

34 Regrettably, however interesting, addressing this topic would take us beyond the scope of this article.



FIGURE 1 Visual: Screenshot from the film *On Friday Noon* showing Wina performing the Friday prayers outside of the mosque.
 Sound: 'May the peace, mercy and blessings of God be with you', signifying the end of the prayers (fading out) and classical music.

The production of this film is more than a suggestive act; it can be read as an actualized performative statement on queerness and Islam. Looking at the micro-processes during film production reveals that the LGBT/Islam binary is performatively nullified through their practices, not only on- but also, and already, off-screen.

6.2 *The Material Space of the Film: Cinematically Breaking the LGBT/Islam Binary*

The film becomes a material space for an alternative argument on transgender persons. The central argument is that it does not have to be a contradiction to be both queer and a good Muslim. This core argument is visually most palpable in one of the last shots of the film (see Figure 1).

In this scene, Wina finally reaches the mosque, having overcome the obstacles on her journey, only to see that the others have already finished their prayers. At that moment, she falls to her knees, surrenders to God, and prays. These shots are accompanied by emotionally stirring classical music, chosen by the filmmaker and his sound designer to increase the dramatic dimension depicted in the visual layers of the scene. The plot of the film—a transgender person who wants to pray—nullifies the binary fostered in mainstream hegemonic discourse by creating a filmic reality where things are different. It is one of those 'actualised, albeit fictional, realities' (Blanes et al. 2016:15, referring to Howells

2015) that in an act of protention on screen conveys an argument towards the possibility of an alternative reality off-screen.

Although the events depicted are important, the film's argument is layered and developed in ways that go beyond the plot. It is not only about the story, but also about how the film tells this story—and why. On-screen depictions are both coming from, and speaking to, a particular off-screen socio-political climate—a climate that the film is not external to but part of. In order to get a deeper sense of the relationship between the on- and off-screen worlds, the intellectual labour of the filmmaker in the construction and composition of the film requires further unpacking. In the following analysis, I look at the efforts and intentions of the filmmakers in their own terms. My analysis was developed in close collaboration with the filmmaker and therefore takes a slightly different approach than a more conventional film analysis that rests on the interpretation of the scholar. My analytical gaze here is on the intentions of the filmmaker, not on the actual effects the film has on audiences, which will be discussed in the next section of this article.

In terms of narrative structure, the film follows the template of a hero tale incorporating some of the stages of the classical monomyth.³⁵ But the hero is Wina, a transgender person who wants to pray. This is a person who would not very likely be depicted as a hero off-screen. However, alternative filmmaking practice allows for alternative heroes. In making Wina the hero of this story, the filmmaker is subverting conventional storytelling—which is more accessible to audiences—by featuring an unexpected hero. In a climate where the sky is laden with anti-LGBT arguments, this film represents a different kind of raindrop.

The decision to embed this story in the fiction genre also deserves attention. In terms of film form, *On Friday Noon* is an assemblage of the stories that Luhki experienced during his research with the transgender community. The film was never meant to be a 'real' documentary-style representation of their lived reality. However, the cinematic world on screen is something that Nichols (1991:240) calls an 'indefinite approximation' of 'reality'; it is deeply anchored in the social reality of the transgender community. Luhki remarked that 'all the scenes are things that have been experienced'.³⁶ Luhki's choice to turn a documentary project into fiction is worthy of attention for two reasons. Firstly, it is a pragmatic way to talk about things that cannot be represented easily. LGBT is considered a sensitive issue in contemporary Indonesia, and the socio-

35 See Campbell (1949) for an elaborate exploration of the hero tale across time and cultures.

36 Personal conversation with Luhki, Yogyakarta, 5-9-2018.

political climate makes it dangerous to expose transgender subjectivities on screen. When I talked with Luhki about the actor who portrays Wina, he told me that it would have been too dangerous to use the transgender women he had been researching. His concerns were justified; when the transgender documentary *Bulu Mata (Eyelashes)* was released in Aceh, the subjects of the film were attacked and had to flee their homes. Secondly, turning to the fiction genre is making a creative choice to work around the ‘crisis of representation’, because the filmmaker has to deal with the same kinds of considerations as an anthropologist. Resorting to fiction alleviates the pressures related to making a documentary for the filmmaker, who himself is an outsider to the transgender community. Thus, for pragmatic and creative reasons, he consciously relocated his practice ‘from the realm of “reality” to fiction that references reality’ (Nannicelli 2006:135). In doing so, he embarked on a creative path of evoking rather than representing, resulting in the metaphorical and symbolic form of the film:³⁷

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art.

TOLSTOY 1899:43

This statement beautifully alludes to the centrality of evoking feelings through artistic practices. When I asked why they make and screen films, one of the film community members remarked, ‘Empathy is the most important thing—moral values in society can lead to bad things, not empathy.’³⁸ At a filmmaking workshop held by a senior Indonesian filmmaker, there was a consensus that making a film is about conveying ‘a feeling, not a message’.³⁹ One filmmaker jokingly remarked that she can just send a text message when she wants to deliver a message. These examples illustrate that the power to evoke empathetic feelings characterizes a ‘good film’ for some film practitioners.

Through my conversations with the filmmaker of *On Friday Noon*, I came to understand that his aim was to create an experience that could evoke empathy with transgender persons and their everyday struggle. He wanted the audience to experience ‘what it feels like’ to be Wina.⁴⁰ The rhetorical strategy he

37 Refer to Nannicelli (2006) for an elaborate discussion on these notions.

38 Personal conversation, 27-2-2018.

39 Personal conversation, Malang Film Festival, 8-4-2018.

40 Personal conversation, Yogyakarta, 5-9-2018.



FIGURE 2 Visual: Screenshot from the film *On Friday Noon* showing children throwing stones at Wina.

Sound: 'Pansy! Pansy!' shouts, children clapping hands, and stones hitting the ground.

opted for is an attempt at what I call the cinematic evocation of empathy. Here, empathy broadly refers to the ability to put oneself into the position of another person's experience. Achebe speaks of 'imaginative identification' (Achebe 1989:144) as a process through which audiences experience 'vicariously, "the road not taken"' (Achebe 1989:145). Films as 'extensions of our perceptual field' (Gupta 2015:37) inherently have the potential to evoke empathy because they offer audiences an experience that is not their own. The story of *On Friday Noon* is told from the perspective of Wina (beyond a depiction of her body) and offers audiences the experience of 'the road not taken'—being a transgender person in contemporary Indonesia. Inspired by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, Gupta thinks of film as offering 'a slice of the world that is more perceptually heightened compared with our typical experience of it' (Gupta 2015:37). The aim of creating this kind of dense and focused experience, which holds the potential to evoke empathy, translates into a very particular kind of filmic language, and cinematic tools are employed by the filmmaker in order to create the intended effect of evoking empathy. The following analysis of two scenes will illustrate how this affects filmic form and style in *On Friday Noon*.

In the scene depicted in Figure 2, Wina is passing a group of children who are shouting 'Pansy! Pansy!' (*banci* in Indonesian is a degrading term for a transgender person) and throwing stones at her. This scene illuminates how the filmmaker's experience of the 'climate' translates into, and manifests in, a cine-

matic reality that is intended to make a comment on the current socio-political situation. As Luhki told me, ‘the sequence purpose in this film [was] to show how judgemental society is’ through the experience of Wina.⁴¹ In the film, children turn violent towards a human being whom they have never met before; but these same children would not throw stones at a gender-conforming person. The children’s actions embody corrupt social mores, and the reason for their violence is the normalized claim that a transgender person is someone who can and should be violently attacked. This is a sad reality in off-screen contemporary Indonesia, where there are (too) many stories of violence against queer subjectivities. Showing children rather than adults in this scene contrasts with the innocent stereotype usually afforded to children. Here it is a cinematic tool to exaggerate and expose on screen the brute absurdity of the situation off-screen.

In the next shot, depicted in Figure 3, Wina walks, shoes in hand, on a stony road that is not made for walking barefoot. The camera is with Wina, not with the children in the village, which draws the viewer closer to her experience. On a sonic level, the cries of ‘Pansy! Pansy!’ still echo. This echoing sound alludes to the haunting nature of her experience. Wina has physically left the place of the attack, but the sound remains, and she cannot escape the horror of the attack by simply going somewhere else. The high, sharp cricket sounds further underscore the disquieting situation. Sound is an essential element of the audio-visual experience. A sound designer once told me, ‘It tells you how to feel.’ In this shot, the shrill, high sound of crickets is unbearable and becomes a metaphor for the situation Wina finds herself in: not a comfortable place.⁴² There were no crickets on location during the shooting of this film—these are cinematic choices employed by the filmmaker because they were thought to support the argument. According to the filmmaker, the sound in *On Friday Noon* was designed to ‘add to the arid atmosphere that is already captured in the visuals’.⁴³ As this example illustrates, the project of cinematically evoking empathy for Wina translates into a very particular kind of filmmaking and choice of cinematic tools.

41 Personal correspondence via email with Luhki, 15-2-2019.

42 The sound of crickets was recently identified as the cause for what was first thought to be a sonic attack on US diplomats in Cuba, who suffered from ‘headaches, nausea and hearing loss’ after exposure to these sounds. See Carl Zimmer, ‘“Sonic attack” on US diplomats in Cuba was just a very loud cricket, scientists say’, *The Independent*, 7-1-2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/cuba-sonic-attacks-crickets-diplomats-havana-ill-scientists-research-stubbs-montealegrez-a8715071.html> (accessed 27-2-2019).

43 Personal communication via WhatsApp with Luhki, 31-12-2018.



FIGURE 3 Visual: Screenshot from the film *On Friday Noon* showing Wina walking barefoot alone on a stony path.
Sound: 'Pansy! Pansy!' shouting getting lower and lower and the sound of crickets (constant).

Returning to the film as a raindrop allegory, we have now learned about the composition of the water molecules that constitute the raindrop and of its intended potential to evoke feelings. I will now turn to a discussion of the reception of the film and look at its relationship to other raindrops and the overall climate.

6.3 *The Screening Event: A Social Space for Rupture*

In the end, regardless of the beautiful composition and intended potential to evoke sympathetic feelings through this raindrop, it is but one raindrop among many others—and it might as well touch the burning ground and evaporate into nothingness. The ultimate question is: do the dance and the raindrop it creates have the power to change the climate? I argue that they have the potential to do exactly that—to rupture mainstream hegemonic discourse on the LGBT community. In order to conceptually ground my claim, I will turn my analysis to the social event of the screening, the public moment of the film, the moment when the raindrop touches the audience.

The following glimpses from a post-screening discussion, organized by the film community Sinema Kita (Our Cinema) on the topic of religion and sexuality, are illustrative of the variety of audience reactions that were triggered by the screening and discussion of *On Friday Noon*. The screening was attended by 26 students from different universities in Jakarta. The post-screening discussion

was led by a lecturer from Atma Jaya University. The reactions were diverse: some found it strange or even conflicting to see the relationship between religion and transgender persons depicted in such a way. To them the film did not trigger a transformation in how they think about the relationship between transgender and religion; rather, it reinforced their thinking. Others said they were sad because Wina was too late for prayer. Their reactions can be read as these viewers feeling empathetic towards her. Some of the audience members also went on to analyse the film on a more abstract level. They talked about the location—‘dry and arid’—and wondered if this was symbolic of the emotions that Wina feels. Others understood the film as providing insight into the injustice experienced by transgender persons, seeing it as an appeal to the audience to learn to have more empathy towards them.⁴⁴

What these reactions illustrate is that there are diverse opinions and reactions at play during the discussion of the film. It is a scenario that is the opposite of an echo chamber, where existing opinions are mutually reinforced in the absence of alternative arguments. Instead, the discussion provides a space where varying and contesting opinions are present. My argument for the disruptive potential of such occasions is based on the premise that the mere existence of the film creates the possibility of social transformation, by exposing audiences to alternative perspectives that are shunned in mainstream media. It is a scenario that is quite different from a place where only negative arguments about transgender persons circulate. Thus, the potential to rupture mainstream hegemonic discourse lies in the mere creation of spaces for alternative arguments. The significance of these practices lies not in everyone agreeing—the aim is not consensus—but in having options and a debate.⁴⁵

7 The Socially Transformative Potential of Cinematic Practices

The socially transformative potential of the film materializes in the social space of the screening event, when the issue depicted in the film transcends the screen and triggers a discussion. Returning to the beginning of this article, where I introduced *komunitas film* as a distinct kind of popular culture that is different from the mainstream, I would like to ask: how should one think of

44 ‘April 2016—agama dan seksualitas: “On Friday Noon”’, *Sinema Kita*, 15-5-2016. <http://sinemakita.weebly.com/ulasan/program-april-2016-on-friday-noon> (accessed 27-2-2019).

45 I am referring to Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical considerations on agonistic democracy with ‘clear differences and clear alternatives, between which citizens can choose’ because ‘the aim of democracy is not consensus’ (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014:267).

the cinematic practices of komunitas film and their embeddedness in, and relations to, the wider public sphere in Indonesia? In terms of numbers alone, it is a minority phenomenon. Those who are part of komunitas film, who engage in cinematic practices on a regular basis, are fewer in number than ‘the rest’ of Indonesian society—who have never heard of them and don’t know what they do. Komunitas film is not inaccessible to others though, as most screenings are open to the public; they take place in public spaces, in the middle of cities and villages. It was at komunitas film screenings that I saw a queer film on the grounds of a State Islamic University.

Further, a look at who constitute these komunitas film deserves attention. Those who participate in komunitas film come from a variety of geographical, social, and economic backgrounds. The people who watch and screen films are not only urban middle-class Jakartans; they are high-school students from different social classes, who have not even decided what they want to do with their lives. They are university students, not just film students; some of them will become doctors, engineers, or politicians. They are village people or farmers, who use film as a means to communicate, or are simply interested in watching a film. Komunitas film are not mainstream in quantitative terms, but their constituents represent many layers of society (see also Kurnia 2018:301). The constitution of komunitas film can be thought of as a microcosm of Indonesian society. The fact that, to many, komunitas film is a liminal space—something they do during their university years—further increases its impact, as there are a lot of people who float through this space temporarily. And these experiences will reverberate, even when the people themselves are no longer part of it.

8 Conclusion

Precisely because komunitas film are not an echo chamber but a public and open microcosmic entity, I propose to think of them as a kind of ‘micro-utopia’. This term was coined by curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his work on relational aesthetics as a ‘utopia [...] lived on a subjective everyday basis’ in contrast to a ‘radical and universalist utopia’ (Bourriaud 2002:70). He talks about ‘artworks that focus on the creation of concrete instances of intersubjective and social encounters’ (Blanes et al. 2016:9) that ‘provoke a glimpse into a democratic, “micro-utopian” space’ (Blanes et al. 2016:9). Bourriaud is inspired by Guattari’s ideas on the molecular revolution that draws our attention to the small ‘hands-on strategies’ in everyday social life as ‘play[ing] an absolutely crucial role’ (Bourriaud 2002:31) in societal transformations—much more than the illusion of ‘a step-by-step transformation of society’ (Bourriaud 2002:31). What

they are doing is performatively creating ‘micro-utopias’ within the wider public sphere in Indonesia. This brings me back to the potential for a hopeful future for Indonesia that I mentioned at the beginning of this article. It is a consideration of the cinematic practices of komunitas film within the conceptual framework of the ‘micro-utopia’ that allows me to look at the ‘aesthetic realisations and instantiations of struggles’ (Blanes et al. 2016:10)—of their filmmaking and films—in a way that theoretically grasps my subjective experience of komunitas film as embodying the potential for a hopeful future for Indonesia. From this perspective, the dance does have the potential to change the weather, because the dance creates social spaces and thus makes certain that (some) actors in the microcosmic space of the screening event are touched by the raindrop. Likewise, the engagement of komunitas film with LGBT persons in their film ‘represents always already plural aspirations of Indonesian Islam’ (Kusumaryati 2019)—thus complicating the picture of Islam in Indonesia and allowing for a more refined and complicated analysis of the ‘conservative turn’ in Indonesian Islam.

8.1 *Outlook and Reflection: A Comment on the ‘Progressiveness’ of On Friday Noon, the Methodology, and the Act of Analysis*

When analytically engaging with cultural artefacts like the short film *On Friday Noon*, it is important to not just foreground the positive aspects and contribute to the romanticizing of social realities. From a Western-rooted and Western-centric standpoint on queer rights, many would (and rightly so) contest the ‘progressiveness’ of this film. The kind of empathy that this film attempts to create is bound to the performance of the ideal of being a ‘good Muslim’. This film does not create spaces and acceptance for those outside the boundaries of ‘good Muslimness’, such as atheist gays or lesbian couples. There are other binaries, problematic and violent, that the film does not address.

However, within my methodology of ‘ethnographically informed film analysis’, my interest lies not in judging the progressiveness of a film but in untangling the complex networks beyond cinematic practices. I want to understand the motivations of social actors, and, in the case of *On Friday Noon*, the filmmaker clearly does not come from the centre of a Western-rooted and Western-centric discourse on queer rights. In this particular case, it was the filmmaker’s experience of meeting a transgender woman who wanted to pray in a mosque that changed his view on the world—an experience he decided to share through the medium of film. This is the point of departure from where I try to understand, and also analytically make sense of, the cinematic practices surrounding this film. In Indonesia the struggle for LGBT rights is taking place in a different temporality of the queer-rights movement. In some Euro-

American contexts it is now (after a very long fight by queer activists and rooted in precisely these fights) intolerable to have a queer film directed by a non-queer filmmaker, and only queer people are allowed to speak on film festival panels—speaking for themselves instead of being spoken for or about. While all this is beautiful, the situation in Indonesia is different. During my many conversations with the queer American-Indonesian filmmaker Paul Agusta, he repeatedly told me that he does not like it when people say it has to be like it is in the US—not because he does not want it, but because it is delusional: ‘It is like asking for a million rupiah when they won’t even give you ten.’⁴⁶ While I personally believe in queer rights and am strongly against marginalization and discrimination, I also do not deem it productive to posit this ideal as a universalized standard of queer rights,⁴⁷ the reason being that this ‘universality’ is an ideal, not an empirical reality of the people I am working with. Thus, my interest is in understanding why and how localized struggles for queer rights by unexpected actors occur, not in judging their achievements according to the benchmarks of an allegedly ‘universal’ but in its essence Western-rooted and Western-centric ideal. Such judgements are perennially missing the point.

In this analysis, I am using terms like nullification, empathy, and micro-utopia not as idealized universal notions but in a contextual and locally rooted, bottom-up analytical act. Consequently, it is necessary for me to further qualify what I mean by them in this article. Nullification refers to the Islam/LGBT binary—the idea that being a ‘good Muslim’ is incompatible with being queer or supporting queers. This is rooted in the filmmaker’s experience with the transgender community. The kind of ‘empathy’ created here remains bound to the common ground of Islam as something that people can identify with. This again is rooted in the filmmaker’s own subjectivity of being a Muslim and his embeddedness in a social community where the majority of people adhere to Islam. The ‘micro-utopia’ created here is not universal. In other contexts—for example, the queer film festivals I participate in in Germany—this film would be seen as problematic because of how it speaks ‘for’ and ‘about’ queer people and its ‘solution’ of conformity with Islam. But this analysis is rooted in a particular empirical reality, and in contemporary Indonesia, spaces where queer films are screened and queer characters are portrayed in a sympathetic view are indeed small, utopian enclaves surrounded by a climate that is not favourable to their existence.

46 Personal conversation with Paul, 20-8-2019.

47 See Massad (2002) for a critical examination of the problems of imposing Western-rooted and Western-centric concepts on non-Western contexts as ‘universal’.

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