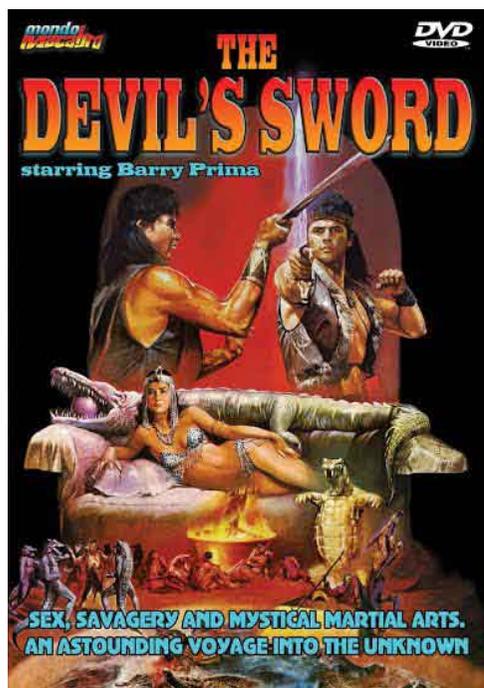


## The Significance of Indonesian Cult, Exploitation, and B Movies

Indonesian exploitation movies are nationally ignored and underrated by most of the nation's own film critics, film journalists, and film scholars. The majority of works of journalism and academic papers dealing with Indonesian cinema history, both in English and Indonesian, generally exclude the significance of these B-grade films. They only discuss these films if there are some controversial issues associated with them—as was the case with the withdrawal of *Lady Terminator* from movie theaters (Jufri, 1992) in 1988 by censorship boards due to sexual and violent scenes (Said, 1991)—or if specific topics, such as representation of social classes and gender, are explored (see Sen, 1994a). Few texts, written by both global and national scholars, discussed the phenomenon of exploitation films: Karl Heider's *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (1991); Krishna Sen's paper on *Primitive* (1994b); Pete Tombs' chapter in *Mondomacabro: Weird and Wonderful Cinema around the World* (1997); documentaries by Andy Starke and Tombs (2008a, 2008b); and my paper on Indonesian exploitation and cult cinema (2009).

It is important to note that most Indonesian exploitation films are bestselling films popular in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s with the national audience, particularly the working and lower class. Borrowing Barry Keith Grant's term, these films have become “mass cult” for local fans (in Telotte 1991, 123). It is important to highlight the “mass cult” status of the films because these films are not marginalized by the mainstream audience in

Indonesia. However, these films are discriminated against by the cultural elite's politics of taste. The cult status of these films is partly shaped by the notorious New Order policies under the totalitarianism of President Suharto (1966-1998). The films were circulated freely and massively through *Layar Tancap* (mobile cinema) and *Misbar* (seasonal movie theater) during the New Order era in rural and suburban areas, because these areas were relatively out of the New Order radar until 1993 (Sen, 1994a; van Heeren, 2012).<sup>1</sup> These kinds of distribution and exhibition became channels of alternative distribution and exhibition for those “marginalized” films, thus producing their own dynamics and characteristic subcultures.



*Devil's Sword*, one of the films from the 1980s recirculated in the 2000s by UK's distributor Mondo Macabro DVD.

distributors (Tombs, 1997). These video cassettes would, in time pave the way for global fans and bootleggers alike to recognize the materials. As such, these videos spurred both the millennial global cult fandom and transnational distribution phenomenon. At the beginning of the millennium, transnational distributors—such as Mondo Macabro DVD, the Troma Team, and Video Asia's “Tales of Voodoo”—began to recirculate and rework the films by retitling, redubbing, contextualizing them using the DVD format's

Interestingly, instead of art-house films directed by auteur directors—commonly considered and celebrated as the official representation of Indonesian culture by the government and culture elites—these “low art,” “lowbrow,” or “bad” movies are circulated in the international film market in Manila, Cannes, and Berlin. The films have been made available in VHS format since 1982 by Pokjabat Prosar (Kelompok Kerja Tetap Promosi dan Pemasaran Film Indonesia di Luar Negeri) or The Permanent Working Committee for the Promotion and Marketing of Indonesia Films Abroad of the National Film Council (Jufri, 1992). Apparently, exploitation movies fit the politics of taste and the demands of international

special features, etc. Thus, the films were made more appealing and easily consumed by foreign audiences.

Both the classic VHS and the recent DVD markets are appreciated and glorified by global fans. They celebrate the films in their blogs, online fanzines, and Internet forums.<sup>2</sup>

Photo: cover of *Devil's Swords*

The phenomenon as discussed above is directly related to the cultural and political situation in Indonesia. Most popular Indonesian exploitation movies were produced and exhibited during the New Order government, infamously known as the regime that exercised the “security” and “stability” approach. Elsewhere, I elaborated on how state control dominated media, particularly by their censorship of films shown by film organizations in film festivals (Imanjaya, 2009). Karl Heider writes (1991):

The government film censorship board must approve the script of a film before shooting, and it must advise again during the editing stage. News items frequently appear in the press announcing titles of films which have been released by the censorship board. (p. 22)

Filmmakers and film scholars Marcelli Sumarno and Nan Triveni Achnas (2002) write:

Until quite recently, film law in Indonesia was subject to red tape and stifling policies. The main objective was to regulate film as stipulated in the state guidelines as “not only an entertainment vehicle but also as a medium for educational and cultural purpose.” (p. 156)

Not only did film unions and organizations suffer from censorship, they were also under state control. All cast and crew must be members of unions. Each job description required several levels of apprenticeship before members were allowed to work in their respective posts (Imanjaya, 2007). During the New Order era, the government and culture elite framed the concept of “film *nasional*” as “film *kultural edukatif*” (film with cultural and educational missions), which attempted to represent “the Real Faces of Indonesia” (Barker, 2010).<sup>3</sup> And, obviously, exploitation movies were (and still are) excluded and considered insignificant, despite their sizeable audience.

Paradoxically, films with sensual and sadistic scenes mushroomed. The 1980s are now considered by some global scholars and fans as “The Golden Age of Exploitation Cinema.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Marginalized, Unexplored, Insignificant? Or, Is It?**

Being marginalized by the government and cultural elites until recently—although celebrated by a large number of local spectators—the films remain underrated and overlooked by Indonesian film scholars and film critics.

In the context of international scholarship, films of this kind also remain unexplored, as with similar films from other developing countries. Unlike in Canada, Latin American countries, Australia, and Mexico, which already have established terms on the topic (namely, *Canuxploitation*,<sup>5</sup> *Latsploitation*,<sup>6</sup> *Ozploitation*,<sup>7</sup> and *Mexploitation*,<sup>8</sup> respectively), I cannot find an exact term for these films in the Indonesian context. Discussion on cult and exploitation cinema rarely occurs in both popular and scholarly discourses in Indonesia or in Western countries. Only a few books discuss this global phenomenon, such as topics included in *Mondo Macabro, Weird and Wonderful Cinema around the World* by Pete Tombs, and a discussion on *Lady Terminator* in *100 Cult Films* (Mendik & Mathijs, 2011).

Considering the above phenomenon, this special issue of *Plaridel* has three main purposes. First, to investigate the significance of these “trashy” movies and to interrogate the extent to which we consider these films part of “film *nasional*”, as national gems, and as part of our heritage.

Second, this issue foregrounds and empowers marginalized films within the discourses of cultural, media, and communication studies, in Indonesia and elsewhere, by remedying the discrimination and differentiation from other kinds of (Indonesian) films, art forms, and other cultural products. This attempt is important because, as mentioned by Eric Sasono, neglecting these low-quality films and downplaying their part in the national cinema are tantamount to denying public taste, public needs, and our own history (Misbach, 2009).

Third, in the field of research on cult and exploitation cinema, this special issue enriches the discussion on global cult cinema issues. Unlike films from other regions, cult, exploitation, and B-movies from Indonesia are rarely discussed. By focusing on Indonesian exploitation cinema—both the popular transnational movies and the relatively unknown ones—the essays in this issue hope to contribute to the understanding of global cult cinema production, mediation, circulation, and consumption.

One of the reasons for the neglect of cult cinema is that most scholars and critics, particularly in Indonesia, tend to use textual analysis, applied to either story or cinematography. By employing a more holistic approach—

for example, by focusing on cultural economy, cultural politics, fan culture studies, audience studies, spectatorship, and industrial studies—scholars will better understand the significance of the films as cultural, social, political, and economic phenomena. In this special issue, this kind of approach is applied by Thomas Barker in “Exploiting Indonesia: From *Primitives* to *Outraged Fugitives*.” Barker explores the origins of Indonesian transnational exploitation cinema, by looking into the historical and structural background of the B-grade movies. His essay investigates the attempts of Indonesian producers to engage with global film markets and networks, between 1979 and 1995.

Notably, most of the articles in this special issue still apply textual and discourse analysis, but they have invigorated the approach by using various kinds of theories and perspectives.

Eric Sasono uses postcolonial theories to dissect B-grade movies in “The Raiding Dutchmen: The Dutch Stereotypes in Indonesian Action Movies,” and he does not differentiate B-grade films from movies directed by auteur directors. Sasono interrogates representation of Dutch colonialism in Indonesian B-grade movies, both those that are already globally recognized (such as the *Jaka Sembung* Series, *Hell Raiders*, *Daredevil Commando*), and those that still remain unknown because they have simply not been exported overseas (for instance, *Si Jampang* and *Si Pitung*). His article connects stereotyping, “othering,” and the formation of national identity, religious tension, and postcolonial condition.

Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze” is given a new interpretation by Dag Yngvesson. The author close reads of one of the pioneering sexploitation films, in Krishna Sen’s words, “prostitution genre” films: *Bumi Makin Panas* (*The Earth is Getting Hotter*). He argues that the brothel in this movie can be read as a vital twist of “the morally bankrupt urban economy.” Yngvesson also connects the movie to the lives of Senen artists, most prominent of them being poet Chairil Anwar and painter Sudjojono.

Maimunah Munir applies gender and LGBT studies in “Challenging the New Order’s Gender Ideology in Benyamin Sueb’s *Betty Bencong Slebor*: A Queer Reading.” She examines *Betty Bencong Slebor* (*Betty the Scatty Bencong*), a film directed by and featuring cult icon Benyamin Sueb. She argues that this comedy criticizes the common opinion of *waria* (male to female transgender) as a second-class citizen. In particular, Munir argues that *Betty* challenged and negotiated the New Order’s patriarchal system and essentialist binary concept of gender. Munir argues further that the film can shed light on the complexity and ambiguity of a *bencong*’s harsh life.

The next essay is “Genre versus Local Specificity: Configuring Rangda and Durga in Balinese and Bengali Films” by Makbul Mubarak. Using

various theories—from Artaud’s conceptualization of theater to Eisenstein’s montage theory—Mubarak highlights the dynamic tension between the nature of horror genre formula (one of the most utilized transnational genres) and cultural specificity (namely, Balinese culture). Mubarak takes Tjut Djalil’s *Mystics in Bali* as his case study. Since the movie is closely related to Indian narratives (*Durga*, *Rangda*, etc), he compares it with the Bengali film *The Elephant God*, directed by Satyajit Ray prior to being considered as an auteur.

Finally, Xavier Mendik closely reads *Amphibious: Creature of the Deep* (2010), one of the latest developments in transnational exploitation cinema related to the Indonesian film industry. Directed by Brian Yuzna, the movie was produced under Jakarta’s Komodo Films project. It attempts to interfuse Indonesian and Western folklores and cinematic traditions. With *Amphibious*, Mendik explores the relations between abject constructions of the transformative womanly body in Indonesian films and Brian Yuzna’s other movies.

## Key Terms

I find it important to highlight some key terms for this special issue.

First, “cult cinema,” refers to films with an active and lively communal following. These films are “highly committed and rebellious in its appreciation, its audience regularly finds itself at odds with the prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics” (Mendik & Mathijs, 2007, p. 11). These films are characterized by their mediocrity (poor cinematic achievement), reliance on genre conventions, the exposure and mockery of a genre’s unwritten rules through satire and exaggeration (Mendik & Mathijs, 2007), and ironic reliance on nostalgia and gore. Such films are actively celebrated by committed fans.

Another term is “exploitation” cinema. Thomas Doherty (1988) writes that exploitation cinema has three distinct and sometimes overlapping meanings:

Exploitation cinema refers both to the advertising *and* promotion that entices an audience into a theatre and to the way the movie then endears itself to that audience... As the object of exploitation, the movie is passive, a product to be advertised and marketed; as the subject doing the exploitation, the movie is active, an agent that caters to its target audience by serving up appetizing or exotic subject matter (p. 3).

According to Eric Schaefer (1999), exploitation cinema is “...ethically dubious, industrially marginal, and aesthetically bankrupt” (Schaefer, 1999, p. 17). In his book, Schaefer uses the term to refer to a mode of film promotion or advertising, particularly through posters, trailers, and newspaper ads. Schaefer writes: “Exploitation producers conceded that because their films lacked identifiable stars or the recognition provided by conventional genres, they needed an extra edge to be ‘put over’ with audiences” (Schaefer, 1999, p. 4). In this issue, the contributors use the term to mean both modes of production and content, as well as modes of marketing and promotion, interchangeably.

Cambridge Dictionaries Online defines “B-movies” as “a cheaply made film, often of poor quality, that in the past was shown before the main film in a cinema” (“B-Movie,” 2014). In the tradition of Western world cinema, B-movies were screened as supporting feature films for double feature or double-bill programs (“B-Movie,” 2014). The authors use both terms interchangeably.

The term “cult cinema” must be differentiated from exploitation cinema and B-grade movies. An exploitation movie does not automatically have cult status, and a cult film is not always an exploitation movie (Telotte 1991). For example, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI (The Treachery of 30 September Movement of Indonesian Communist Party)*, dir. by Arifin C. Noer, 1984) and *Darah dan Doa (The Long March)*, dir. Usmar Ismail, 1950), discussed in Eric Sasono’s essays, may be considered local cult films that do not necessarily belong to the exploitation category. On the other hand, there are plenty of Indonesian exploitation films that have not achieved cult status.

Paule Watson writes that the term “exploitation” is not only related to film production and promotion, but also to how a film is marketed to its prospective spectators (Watson, 1997). Watson argues that an exploitation film is

Brought into focus as a blatantly commercial product, sold on the basis of its apparent revelatory qualities, and designed to ensure maximum possible return from the minimum investment and resources. To what extent the exploitation film itself is defined as a *proactive* commodity in the sense that it *exploits* its audience for economic purposes (p. 76).

Local and international distributors help shape public taste by selecting the films for international markets, redubbing and retitling them, and recirculating them in DVD cult circuits (Lobato & Ryan 2011, p. 196-198). I believe this statement describes the phenomenon of the New Order’s

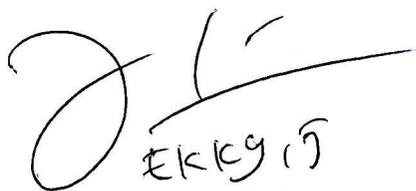
transnational exploitation films recirculated in the 2000s by international distributors, such as VideoAsia and Eastern Horror. This trend is discussed by Barker in general and Mubarak's case study of *Mystics in Bali* in particular, in their respective essays in this issue.

This special issue is enriched by several documents. Bastian Mereisonne has come up with an extensive filmography of early Indonesian action movies (1926-1941), linking it with exploitation cinema and the influence of Chinese and Hollywood films in the birth and development of Indonesian cinema. He collected data from Sinematek Indonesia and [filmindonesia.or.id](http://filmindonesia.or.id), an online film catalog, as part of his documentary on the history of Indonesian action movies, *Garuda Power: The Spirits Within*, which will premiere at this year's Busan International Film Festival.

Included in this issue is an interesting interview with Barbara Anne Constable (known for her role as Lady Terminator) by Andrew Leavold, discussing her involvement in the production of *Lady Terminator*. The discussion reveals the trash film cultures in the late 1980s. Her own status as a global cult icon was unknown to Barbara, who lived a laid back life with her two kids in the suburbs of Brisbane, Australia.

Xavier Mendik interviewed Brian Yuzna (director of *Amphibious 3D* and known for *Bride of Re-Animator*, 1989; and *Beyond Re-Animator*, 2003) and Yuzna's partner, John Penney (scriptwriter of *Amphibious 3D*). Both interviews highlight their efforts to combine Indonesian and Western cultural influences in film.

Hopefully, the special issue will pave the way to engaging discourse on the significance of cult, exploitation, and B-grade movies in Indonesia and abroad. Research in this film genre can be broadened not only via textual and discourse analysis, but also through other approaches, including spectatorship and cultural economy approaches.



**Ekky Imanjaya**

Issue Editor

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## NOTES

[1] There were some unofficial attempts to frame *layar tancap* through New Order cultural policies. Examples are the establishment of PERBIKI (Persatuan Bioskop Keliling Indonesia, or Union of Operators of Mobile Movie Theatres Indonesia, founded in 1978; "Pengusaha Bioskop Keliling Bentuk Organisasi," 1977) and later PERFIKI (*Persatuan Film Keliling Indonesia*, or Association of Mobile Cinema Screening Company, founded in 15 February 1978). The chairperson of PERFIKI for three periods (15 February 1978 to October 1996) was Major General (retired) Acup Zainal, known as "the father of *Layar Tancap*," a former governor of Irian Jaya (the name of Papua Island back then) and former commander of the regional military command XVII/Cendrawasih in Papua ("Rencana Mukernas Perfiki Disambut Dingin Anggotanya," 1996). He and other central board members believed that *Layar Tancap* should become Pagar Budaya (cultural fence) of Indonesian cinema ("Perfiki Harus Jadi Pagar Budaya," 1993). He even made the organization collaborate with the Information Center Department of Indonesia Armed Forces in remote places, such as Flores, Western Nusa Tenggara, for the victims of the tsunami and earthquake in 1993 ("*Layar Tancap* Gelar Di Flores," 1993).

But since movie theaters already had their own organization, the GPBSI (Gabungan Pengusaha Bioskop Seluruh Indonesia, or All-Indonesian Association of Movie Theater Companies), *Layar Tancap* owners were not allowed to establish a new organization, and PERBIKI/PERFIKI did not get official recognition until 1993 ("Program Perfiki Tinggal Kenangan," 1996). Since then, the New Order regime has set some regulations for them.

[2] These include *Cinema Strikes Back*, *DVD Verdict*, *10k Bullets*, *Mondo Digital*, *Monsters At Play*, *DVD Drive-In*, *Shocking Images*, *Box Office Prophets*, *Eccentric Cinema*, *DVD Maniacs*, *Teleport City*, *Cinema Knight Fight*, and the "Crazy Indonesia" thread at *AV Maniacs* forum as well as *Cinehound* forum.

[3] Issues on the lack of attempt to search "for the real face of Indonesia" were surfaced in the 1977 Indonesian Film Festival where the jury criticized and condemned most Indonesian popular films that had sexual and sadistic scenes. Prominent film critic Salim Said (1991) wrote that the jury came to conclude that most Indonesian film producers are mainly merchants of dreams who "fail to portray the realities of Indonesian life" and "the beautiful dreams we see are from a world we do not always recognize" (p.3).

However, one of the jurors, film scholar DA Peransi (2005), had a dissenting opinion. He writes in the daily *Kompas*:

The theme of searching for the Indonesian face in Indonesian films this year is the manifestation of a desire which is as vague as the film industry in this country

trying to find and formulate its own identity. And the formulation of that face is as difficult as the formulation of a personality and identity of Indonesia. (pp. 50-51)

Peransi argues that most culture elites did not get, or did not want to get, the point of the films that tried to picture an Indonesian society “wanting to be modern” (Barker 2011, p. 58).

Likewise, filmmaker Amy Priyono (1977) asserts that it is very difficult to formulate the “real Indonesian face on screen.” He writes that “the vagueness of notion is here the same as the definition of the ‘Indonesian personality’ or ‘Indonesian culture’” (p. 33). And he argues that only a small group of culture elites desired to frame “film Indonesia,” whereas the mainstream audiences’ taste were more attuned to Hong Kong, Indian, or Hollywood films.

Interestingly, in 1968, commenting on the funded national cinema project, Director General for Film, H. Djohardin writes:

Let us not ignore the taste of the millions of people just to please those pseudo intellectuals who give high honors to such (commercial) failures like *What Are You Looking For, Palupi?* In my opinion, the national film industry has made great strides forward: our actors are living better; so too the technical personnel, something never before seen in the last twenty years. (Barker, 2012, p. 55)

[4] One of them is Lew Ojeda who, on February 6, 2010, presented a paper titled “*Lady Terminator and The Golden Era of Indonesian Exploitation Cinema*,” in Chicago. See his lecture video at <http://facetsfeatures.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/watch-facets-night-school-online.html>; see also his blog entries “*Lady Terminator and The Golden Age of Indonesian Exploitation Films*” at <http://damnthatojeda.wordpress.com/2010/02/06/lady-terminator-and-the-golden-age-of-indonesian-exploitation-films/> and “*Indonesian Cine-Insanity*” at <http://damnthatojeda.wordpress.com/2009/11/22/indonesian-cine-insanity/>.

[5] For example, the term is used by a website focusing on Canadian B-movies. See <http://www.canuxploitation.com>.

[6] See V. Ruetalo and D. Tierney (2011).

[7] For this issue, Australian director Mark Hartley made a documentary titled *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!* (2008)

[8] See Greene, D (2005).

[9] For example, Mark Hartley made documentary on the issue titled *Machete Maidens Unleashed* (2010), and has some interviews, including those of Roger Corman, Joe Dante, and John Landis.

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