

*Istana kecantikan: the first Indonesian gay movie*¹

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Abstract: This article discusses the first Indonesian film to deal with specifically gay rather than *waria* (male to female transvestites) subjectivities. The 1980s was a period that saw growing public consciousness of the gay subject position, and the release of this film in 1988 may be seen as the first cinematic attempt to react to this new level of awareness. For this reason, it can be argued that the film says as much about Indonesian perceptions of the gay world as it does about the reality of life as a gay man in Jakarta. The movie has been criticized for its pessimism and negativity regarding the portrayal of gay life in Indonesia, the main character being imprisoned for murder in the final scene. This stands in contrast with more upbeat representations in the recent film, *Arisan*. However, despite a generally pessimistic ending, the film's portrayal of homosexuality is perhaps more complex, particularly with regard to how family, friends and even psychiatrists relate to the principal gay character. This article argues that rather than the lead character's homosexuality being the reason for his eventual demise, it is his perceived hypocrisy that leads to his ultimate incarceration.

Keywords: citizenship; homosexuality; queer cinema; Indonesian cinema; Indonesia

Homosexuality and cinema in Indonesia

The release of the film *Arisan* (*The Gathering*, director Nia diNata, 2003) was accompanied both in Indonesia and internationally by newspaper reports that focused on the fact that among other groundbreaking

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issues, the film included Indonesia's first *gay*² kiss on the silver screen. While there were some reports of negative reactions from audiences, the film was generally well received, with critics and filmgoers noting the positive portrayal of the two main *gay* characters, Sakti and Nino. The overall message was to 'be yourself' and, among other plotlines, the audience followed Sakti as he overcame his struggle with his own sexuality. The film ends with Sakti and his lover Nino accepted as a couple by Sakti's family and friends. On its release, the film attracted attention both in Indonesia and internationally. Articles and reports in the Indonesian media continue to refer to the film due to the groundbreaking issues it tackles. Rarely is it mentioned, however, that around 15 years previously, the issue of homosexuality had been the central theme of an Indonesian film, *Istana kecantikan* (*The Palace of Beauty*, director Wahyu Sihombing,³ 1988). *The Palace of Beauty*,⁴ while re-released in VCD format in the late 1990s,⁵ remains fairly inaccessible. It is difficult to find copies of the film in Indonesia today, and few Western libraries hold copies. What is more, the film is not subtitled. Thus, with the aim of bringing this important film to the attention of those working in the field of queer cinema in particular, and South East Asian cinema more generally, this article will not only present a certain amount of empirical information regarding the plot and content of the film, but will also analyse some of its key themes and ideas.

² Following Boellstorff (2005, p 8), I recognize the Indonesian terms *gay* and *lesbi* to be distinct from the English 'gay' and 'lesbian'. The Indonesian term, *normal*, which is used by *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, refers to dominant understandings of modern sexuality (Boellstorff, 2005, p 8) and should similarly be seen as distinct from the English term 'normal'.

³ Wahyu Sihombing (also sometimes spelt Wahyoe) was born in 1932 in Tapanuli. Krishna Sen writes that Sihombing, along with several other of Usmar Ismail's associates, was in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s (1994, p 38). *Istana kecantikan* was his last film. He also directed *Penginapan Bu Broto* (1987); *Gadis hitam putih* (1985); *Gara-gara isteri muda* (1977); *Gersang tapi damai* (1977); *Rahasia seorang ibu* (1977); *Cinta abadi* (1976); *Last Tango in Jakarta* (1973); *Mutiara dalam lumpur* (1972); *Akhir cinta di atas bukit* (1972); *Matinja seorang bidadari* (1971); *Disela-sela kelapa sawit* (1967); *Impian bukit harapan* (1964); *Ballada kota besar* (1963); and *Tjita-tjita Ayah* (1960) (Kristanto, 2005). The current author has not seen all of the above films and has therefore chosen not to translate their titles into English.

⁴ This translation of the title follows the film itself, in which the salon has the English name 'Palace of Beauty'.

⁵ The current author has had access to the film only in the form in which it was released as a VCD in 1997 by PT Tobali Indah Film. Mathias Muchus confirms that several scenes in the film were censored by the Indonesian authorities prior to its original

Many of the reviews and reports on the film, *The Gathering*, which tended to focus on the story of the first *gay* kiss, made the point that it represented a serious change from films that had gone before. An Associated Press report by Lely T. Djuhari (2004), which appeared on a number of online news sites, stated that 'before *Arisan*, homosexuals were typically portrayed in an unsympathetic light in Indonesian cinema'. The reporter went on to cite *The Palace of Beauty* as an example of an unsympathetic portrayal of homosexuality. Djuhari also mentioned the more recent *Kuldesak* (*Culdesac*, directors Nan Triveni Achnas, Mira Lesmana, Rizai Mantovani and Riri Riza, 1999), which she noted that, despite a generally more positive presentation of *gay* men, nonetheless depicted them as being ostracized by their community and beaten up by neighbours. In an interview in 2005, Joko Anwar⁶ noted that prior to *The Gathering*, *The Palace of Beauty* had raised *gay* issues, but that it was very pessimistic. He stated that the film showed *gay* life as people suffering (*sengsara*) and crazy (*sakit jiwa*).

Despite its apparent historical importance, it seems that *The Palace of Beauty* is in danger of remaining a film that is at best occasionally mentioned in passing, but never discussed in depth. While *The Gathering* and *Culdesac* have received a reasonable amount of attention both in academic writing and in the media (see Boellstorff, 2005; and Budiman and Chudori, 2003 on the former; see Clark, 2004; and Kristanto, 2004, pp 175–179 on the latter) it is notable that *The Palace of Beauty* is not referred to at all in either of the main studies on Indonesian cinema that have been published subsequent to the film's production (Heider, 1991; Sen, 1994). Likewise, Tom Boellstorff's authoritative and most welcome publication, *The Gay Archipelago; Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, makes no mention of the film.

It seems that the film did not attract a great deal of attention in the

cinematic release (private interview with the author, 7 April 2006). It is notable that the cover of this VCD includes the statements 'Religion finds fault in them, society denies them, they themselves don't want it to happen, so who is wrong?' (*Agama mempersalahkan mereka, masyarakat mengingkari mereka, mereka sendiri tak ingin itu terjadi, lalu, salah siapa?*) As should be evident from this article, there is almost no mention of religion in the film, and very little rejection of the *gay* characters by society.

⁶ Joko Anwar is co-writer of the screenplay of *The Gathering*, and has recently directed the film *Janji Joni* (*Joni's Promise*, 2005).

written media even when it was released in 1988.⁷ It did win an award for best male actor at the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival,⁸ but was largely eclipsed that year by the success of *Tjoet Nya' Dhien* (*Tjoet Nya Dhien*, director Eros Djarot, 1986), which won eight awards. While several articles in the Indonesian weekly *Tempo* were dedicated to *Tjoet Nya Dhien* (12 December 1988; 31 December 1988), *The Palace of Beauty* was only mentioned in those reports that covered the Film Festival as a whole. Even these comments are mainly related to the fact that Mathias Muchus had finally won an award for his acting after disappointment in previous years. Budiono Darsono (1988) reported in *Tempo* that:

‘In the role of a gay man, Muchus gave a dazzling performance. He entered completely into the life of the gay community in order to understand the situation. He studied the style of talking, the way of thinking, and everything which is related to the homosexual community through books, “It was like I had become truly gay” he said. “Now, OK, not any more.”’⁹

⁷ Mathias Muchus states that the film was popular at the time, playing in cities throughout the archipelago. He also said that the film was watched particularly by *gay* men and also by *waria* (private interview with the author, 7 April 2006).

⁸ In addition to the award for best male lead that went to Mathias Muchus, *The Palace of Beauty* was nominated for the categories of best film, director, female lead (Nurul Arifin) and screenplay (Asrul Sani) at the 1988 Indonesian Film Festival (Kristanto, 2005, p 310). The film subsequently featured at the 17th Festival des 3 Continents in Nantes in 1995.

⁹ *Sebagai gay, Muchus bermain cemerlang. Ia sudah merasuk dalam kehidupan kaum gay begitu menerima skenario. Ia mempelajari gaya bicara, jalan pikiran, dan segala sesuatu yang menyangkut kehidupan kaum homo itu lewat buku-buku. “Saya seperti sudah jadi gay beneran” katanya. “Sekarang, ya, tak lagi”.* It is notable that, just as in the West (Hensher, 2005), there is a tendency for actors who play gay roles to need to stress their straight credentials. In the book that accompanied the film *The Gathering* for example, Tora Sudiro who played Sakti, described it as the most difficult role he had ever had to play, not just in terms of the athletic body he had to develop, but also in terms of the psychological difficulties in playing a homosexual. Only with the support of the crew and director did he have the self-belief to kiss Surya Saputra (diNata, 2004, p 23). In summing up his role as Nino, Surya Saputra also stressed that while the role he was playing was an open homosexual, in real life he was straight (diNata, 2004, p 51). Saputra also stresses the research necessary to understand the *gay* lifestyle, including watching the American TV series (based on a British TV series of the same name), *Queer as Folk* (Saputra, 2005).

It seems that *The Palace of Beauty* is the first Indonesian film to look at specifically *gay* rather than *waria* subject areas.¹⁰ The term *gay* here is used to indicate men who are erotically attracted to people of the same gender as themselves, and who identify themselves as being *gay*. *Gay* is different from *waria* (male to female transvestites), in that *waria*, who will often see themselves as men with women's souls (Boellstorff, 2005), dress as women and therefore in their attraction to men are expressing an attraction to the other rather than the same. *Waria* occupy a visible and recognized place in Indonesian society and this includes their representation in the mass media. Boellstorff suggests that the *waria* issue took form during the mid-nineteenth century in metropolitan areas, and that it is now so well known 'that most *warias* begin identifying as such while children'. He notes that while before the late 1970s, *waria* tended to dress as women only at night, more recently *waria* have been dressing as women all day long (Boellstorff, 2005, p 57). In contrast to this rather long history, the *gay* issue seems to have become widely known in Indonesia only in the 1970s and 1980s (Boellstorff, 2005, p 60). One of the key challenges in understanding the portrayal of the lead *gay* character in this film is recognizing that Western and Indonesian gay subjectivities, while sharing many similarities, also have many differences. In particular, attitudes to heterosexual marriage, which constitute a key theme in the movie, differ substantially (Boellstorff, 2005).

Reports on *gay* and *lesbi* issues have certainly been appearing sporadically in Indonesian print media from the 1980s onwards. For example, there was an autobiographical coming-out story in the magazine *Anda* in 1980 and reports in *Tempo* and *Liberty* magazines of a lesbian marriage in Jakarta in 1981 (Boellstorff, 2005, pp 59–66). On 10 October 1987, just prior to the release of *The Palace of Beauty*, *Tempo* magazine ran a nine-page feature on homosexuality, with reports on the contemporary *gay* scene in Jakarta and a look at the gay liberation movements in the West. The feature also included a

¹⁰ The current author has clearly not watched every Indonesian film made before 1988. However, based on Kristanto's (2005) catalogue of Indonesian film, it seems that this assertion is correct. *Waria* characters had been included in a number of films prior to this date, often as a focus of comedy, for example the film *Benyamin Brengsek* (director Nawi Ismail, 1973). This is an area that requires a great deal more research.

discussion of the *gemblak*¹¹ tradition in Java. An analysis of the medical/scientific basis of homosexuality was followed by a report on Islamic views on same-sex relationships. Thus the feature contained a variety of opinions, which included the input of *gay*-rights activist Dede Oetomo, and while occasionally voyeuristic in tone, and certainly giving voice to attitudes negative to homosexuality, it also gave space to *gay* men themselves, thereby allowing more positive representations as well. The letters pages in subsequent issues showed readers, both positive and negative in their attitude to homosexuality, engaging in a continued discussion. However, homosexuality was still far from being a common topic in the mass media. It was only really from the mid-1990s onwards that there was a notable, albeit small, presence of *gay* and *lesbi* voices in the general mass media, 'with a substantial increase after 2002' (Boellstorff, 2005, p 75). Boellstorff (2005, p 77) argues that this voice is particularly evident on the new private television channels, radio and in magazines, although he is careful to point out that this new visibility is fragmentary and still far from being an everyday occurrence. (This presence can also be seen in the number of novels and short stories recently published, which have at least a *gay* or *lesbi* subplot, if not a dominant theme (eg among others, Aksana, 2004; Ezinky, 2004; Herlinatiens, 2003; Wen, 2004).

In addition to *The Gathering*, *gay* and *lesbi* characters have appeared in a number of recent films, including *Tentang dia* (*About Her*, director Rudi Soedjarwo, 2005), which has an 'is she/isn't she lesbian?' storyline, and *Janji Joni* (*Joni's Promise*, director Joko Anwar, 2005), which features several very minor *gay* characters.¹² Joko Anwar has also written a screenplay, *Andri dan Haryo Terus Berdansa* (*Andri and Haryo Keep on Dancing*), based on two teenage boys who fall in love, but he suggests that there is no producer brave enough to make the film (Anwar, 2005). Thus, while recent years have seen an interest in *gay* and *lesbi*

¹¹ Coming from the Ponorogo region of eastern Java, *gemblak* are younger men, generally between eight and sixteen years of age, who work as understudies to *warok*, male actors in the Javanese genre of dramas known as *reog*. *Warok* tend to be associated with masculinity and prowess, and their mystical powers purportedly depend on the avoidance of sexual relations with women. While *warok* generally deny that sexual relations with *gemblak* take place, it seems that this is probably not the case (Boellstorff, 2005, pp 40–41). For discussions of this tradition, see Wilson, 1999; Petkovic and Oetomo, 1999; and Boellstorff, 2005.

¹² Joko Anwar recently declared in an interview in *Tempo* magazine that he felt very close to the *gay* world (*dunia gay*) and that it was essential for this world to be included in his films (Anwar, 2005).

subjectivities on the part of the Indonesian film industry, this is a decidedly new phenomenon, and its limitations must be recognized. However, while Indonesian audiences were exposed to gay and lesbian characters in Western films and TV shows prior to the mid-1990s, it was a different matter when it came to indigenous film production. Other than *The Palace of Beauty*, the only exceptions to this were the somewhat formulaic depictions of *gay* and *lesbi* characters in *Gadis Metropolis (Metropolitan Girls)*, director Slamet Riyadi, (1992) and *Pergaulan Metroplis (Metropolitan Intercourse)*, director Acok Rachman, (1994), which had two central *lesbi* characters. These films are also notable for what might be described as their erotic or soft-core flavour. Certainly it seems that titillation rather than a serious grappling with issues of sexuality was the concern foremost in the minds of the directors of these films. However, these soft-core films seem to have been popular with Indonesian audiences, and several remain available in VCD format in many Indonesian cities today.

Thus *The Palace of Beauty* is not only notable for being the first film to portray major *gay* characters, but also, in contrast to those more exploitative films from the 1990s, it engages with issues of homosexuality and the position of *gay* men in Indonesian society. Chris Berry (1997, p 14) argues that a recent trend in various Asian countries has been the upsurge in the production of *gay* films, which is paralleled by an increase in identifiable *gay* cultures and communities in those countries. He cautions, however, that the films do not necessarily represent these *gay* cultures, but rather tell us how *gay* culture is being thought about in those countries. *The Palace of Beauty* is a film that deals particularly with ideas of *gay* identity and their place in Indonesia, specifically in the capital city. The emergence of this film in Indonesia in the late 1980s can be seen as reflective of the beginnings of a popular imagining of the *gay* issue, at least in the metropolitan centres, which had begun in the late 1980s. The actor Mathias Muchus suggests that the director and writer of the film chose the topic in the knowledge that it was something new and controversial. He argues that the aim in making the film was simply to bring the situation of *gay* people into the public sphere, not actually to make a judgment, positive or negative.¹³ In this light, we should remember Andrew Grossman's (2000, p xv) warning that 'a great many of the most commercial/visible queer films are made by heterosexual directors whose

¹³ Private interview with the author, 7 April 2006.

intentions are often at odds with their queer audience'. Indeed, a viewing of *The Palace of Beauty* will also tell the audience much about how heterosexuality, being *normal*, was understood at that particular time.

The Palace of Beauty

The plot of *The Palace of Beauty* can be briefly summarized as the story of Nico, a self-identified *gay* man who, under pressure from his family to marry, decides to marry Siksa, who is pregnant from an affair with his work colleague, the already married Sumitro. Despite the marriage and the birth of the child, rumours continue to circulate at Nico's workplace regarding his homosexuality. So he resigns and opens a beauty salon, the *Istana kecantikan (Palace of Beauty)*. One stormy night, Siksa finds Nico in bed with Toni, one of the male hairdressers. Arguments and a struggle ensue, but the couple pledge to go on with their marriage. The marriage continues for a number of years, until Nico discovers Siksa in bed with Toni, his previous lover. Nico chases his wife with a knife and, while in pursuit of her, accidentally stabs Toni, who dies in his arms. The film closes with Nico behind bars.

This brief summary affirms the idea that *The Palace of Beauty* does not present a particularly positive representation of homosexuality. However, a detailed analysis of the film shows a far more nuanced approach from the director, and while the incarceration of Nico can hardly be seen as an optimistic end to the narrative, there is much else in the film that is more sympathetic towards the lead character and his sexuality.

At the beginning of the film, there is a scene that must surely be seen as groundbreaking in the history of Indonesian cinema. Nico is brought along by a friend to a party exclusively for *gay* men.¹⁴ Men are shown dancing together, and certainly to make it clear to the audience what is being seen, the somewhat naive Nico asks his friend of a particular individual, 'is he *gay*?' (*dia gay?*) The more streetwise friend replies that 'there is no one at the party who is not *gay*' (*di sini tidak ada yang bukan gay*). Thus, from the opening minutes of this film, there is no doubt as to the sexual orientation of the lead character. Further details are used to explain the somewhat secretive nature of the club. As Nico arrives, he has to present his 'invitation' and he remarks that it is the

¹⁴ Mathias Muchus confirms that this is one of the scenes censored by the authorities. Images of men holding hands and kissing were cut, although not to the extent that the meaning or narrative flow was disrupted (interview with the author, 7 April 2006).

first time he has ever had to give an invite back in order to gain admission. His friend explains that it is merely a device to control who comes into the club. No doubt this explanation was as useful for the audience as it was for the apparently naive Nico, as they were introduced to this particular aspect of Jakarta nightlife. When Nico arrives, he is described by one of the men on the door as looking like someone who had newly hatched (*baru menetas*), ie having newly emerged on to the *gay* scene.

In this opening view of the *gay* world into which Nico has entered, we are introduced to two of the key themes of the movie. First, Nico's friend describes his dislike for a certain individual due to his being a hypocrite¹⁵ (*munaḡik*). On this occasion the idea of hypocrisy surrounds a particular man's failure to use his real name. The concept of hypocrisy returns as a subject of discussion when Nico discusses his options with the same friend midway through the film. His friend tells him that he has the choice of admitting his homosexuality to his parents, or getting married and thus surrendering to hypocrisy (*menyerah munaḡik*). A second key idea that resonates throughout the film is the inevitable loneliness and sadness of *gay* men. This is illustrated through the character of an older man. We first see him sitting next to a young club attendant. When he puts his arm around the young guy's shoulder, he is at first shrugged off and eventually pushed to the ground. Nico asks his friend why the older man is alone, when all the other men are paired up (*berpasang-pasangan*). The reply sets a tone of foreboding and helplessness for the rest of the film. No-one wants him because he is old and ugly. This older man then gives Nico and his friend a lift home, the friend getting out first. Nico is invited to join the older man, but he declines. However, he is kind and respectful, and listens as the older man pours out his frustration and sadness that in the *gay* world¹⁶ there is no place for those who are old and ugly (*di dunia gay tidak ada*

¹⁵ Boellstorff discusses the meaning of hypocrisy in relation to notions of authenticity for *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. He notes the common use of the concept of hypocrisy by *gay* men when reflecting on relationships, desire, and movement between the *gay* and *normal* worlds (2005, pp 214–215).

¹⁶ The idea of a *gay* world (*dunia gay*) as distinguished from the *normal* world (*dunia normal*) is common among many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians (Boellstorff, 2005, p 91). Boellstorff argues that, as opposed to the Western *gay* ideal of *gay* men being open in every aspect of their lives, *gay* Indonesians did not necessarily see a contradiction in their only being open (*terbuka*) in certain *gay* spaces. In other spaces, those of the *normal* world, it was neither desirable nor necessary to be open (Boellstorff, 2005).

tempat untuk yang usia tua dan muka buruk). No-one likes him any more, and his future is a life of solitude. Nico is clearly disturbed by his new friend's outpourings and tries to comfort him by saying he will stop by another time. He does not, however, try to dispute the pessimism of his older companion. The conversation ends with Nico reaching over and giving the other man a peck on the cheek, and telling him to look after himself as he gets out of the car. Thus in this opening scene, there is certainly no idea of hatred or revulsion at homosexuality. Neither could it be described as being particularly voyeuristic. Rather, issues of hypocrisy and the inevitability of loneliness for *gay* men are raised. Nico himself is presented as a sympathetic and perhaps naive character. He does not seem to be as at home on the Jakarta *gay* scene as his friend, although he is confident enough to show some sign of intimacy with the older man.

The next scene shows Nico as he leaves the *gay* world and re-enters the *normal* world, where we are introduced to his family. His mother is concerned that he is staying out until 4 am every night, leading us to suppose that he is not as naive as we had imagined from the previous scene. On asking her husband where he could possibly be every night until the early hours, he laughs at his wife, saying where else could their son be but out wooing the ladies (*ke mana lagi kalau bukan main perempuan*). Urged on by his wife, Nico's father asks him when he intends to get married, and voices his wife's fear that they will die without seeing their grandchildren. Nico does nothing but behave respectfully and try to avoid making any commitment. Thus the source of the conflict is set. Nico is under family pressure to marry, his parents apparently oblivious of his lack of interest in women.

If we are in any doubt as to the pleasant and likeable nature of Nico, this is only confirmed in the next scene set in his office, another aspect of the *normal* world. Nico is shown as being on good terms with many of his colleagues. He chats to the lift attendant, who thanks Nico for the present he had given to his child. His female colleagues seem to be quite enchanted by him, and indeed one secretary brings in a flower that she has grown especially for him. Perhaps we should notice that he is overly thrilled by the beauty of the flower rather than by the beauty of the woman who presents it to him, but as a whole the scene is one of a kind, diligent employee, liked by his colleagues, and who clearly enjoys his work. At one point, a colleague suggests that he is destined for a high position. Beneath this ideal lies Nico's anxiety stemming from his obligation to wed, and the calm is disturbed by a call from his

sister Tuti, keen to know when he will be getting married, stressing the expectation of his parents. The long pensive shot of Nico after Tuti's call highlights the impossible situation in which Nico finds himself.

When Tuti confronts Nico again, this time at home, Nico is forced to be truthful to his sister in explaining why he is in no hurry to marry. Under pressure, he declares, 'I cannot marry a woman. I am *gay*' (*Aku tidak bisa kawin dengan perempuan. Aku gay*). Tuti is at first horrified, and her first reaction is to deny the words she has just heard, 'That is a lie, it's not possible, it can't be' (*Itu bohong, tidak mungkin, tidak bisa*). However, after this initial shock, Tuti is seemingly compassionate, and certainly does not reject her brother. While she tries to persuade him that it was all in his head, Nico comes out with a strong and emotional declaration of his understanding of his own sexuality. Prompted by her question of how long he has been *gay*, he states 'Since I was born. I don't like women. . . . I've already been to a psychiatrist, I am not sick. I am different. I didn't want to be born like this' (*Sejak lahir. . . . Aku sudah ke psikiater. Aku tak sakit. Aku beda. Aku tak mau lahir begini*).¹⁷ As Tuti tries to come to terms with the situation, she cries on his shoulder and demonstrates her inability to comprehend fully the otherness of his sexuality. She asks if he has tried sleeping with a woman, and why not. He can only answer that she would not understand. Thus, while the unavoidable fracture is finally revealed, this does not result in rejection from Tuti. However, she does not give up hope that her brother will marry, but stresses that marriage need not be forever, merely long enough to please his parents. When later she hears that Nico is to marry, she shows none of the confusion that might be expected, given what she knows of his lack of interest in women. She is simply delighted that he is fulfilling his familial duty as a son and brother.

The attitudes of the other characters towards Nico's sexuality are generally sympathetic, or at least rarely negative. It also seems that there is a certain amount of denial going on, most obviously from Nico's mother. As we have already seen, she cannot imagine what her son is up to when he stays out late every night. When Nico and Tuti are having an emotionally charged discussion, with Nico shouting out to his sister that he is *gay*, his mother is the other side of the door in the hallway. She is clearly concerned at the raised voices, to the extent that

¹⁷ Since January 1982, homosexuality has no longer been considered as a psychological disorder (Boellstorff, 2005, p 235, n 3).

she asks through the closed door what is going on, but she is perhaps too easily put at ease. Can it really be that the mother has no idea of her son's sexuality, or that she did not hear Nico finally speak the truth to his sister? She might perhaps be seen as a character that sees what she wants to see and hears what she wants to hear, as a woman more concerned with family obligations and duties than the realities of what is going on around her. Rather than face confrontation, she would sooner see her son married, and have the grandchildren that this arrangement should inevitably produce.

Nico's colleague Sumitro is quite at ease in his company; they seem to have a good friendship, although it is not clear whether Sumitro is fully aware that Nico is *gay*. However, when Sumitro gets his mistress pregnant, he recognizes that the ideal candidate to resolve the problem would be Nico, a friend who he realizes will be happy to marry a woman he does not love and to raise the child of another man as his own, in order to fall in with the wishes of his parents. It might be argued that Sumitro is simply using Nico, although this possibility is countered by the fact that they were already friends before the problem of Siksa's pregnancy arose.

Nico's relationships at work are good, but when an anonymous letter is sent to his boss, it seems that personal relationships are relegated to the requirements of appearances. When Nico is called into the office, the picture of the then president Suharto stares down from the wall, and it is on the grounds of propriety that Nico's boss has to confront him. He tries hard to explain that it is not a personal issue, but rather that business requires a certain behaviour and morality. While the boss tells Nico that it is not necessary for him to resign, he nonetheless makes the decision to leave his job and to establish his own business instead, a beauty salon that he names *The Palace of Beauty*. In this official setting, it seems that the Indonesian nation is speaking and refusing to allow the blind eye to be turned any longer. The national ideology demands a level of conformity that, despite Nico's marriage and the birth of his child, he is unable to meet. It is here perhaps that the idea that Nico is tolerated but not accepted is highlighted.¹⁸ Hence

¹⁸ Peter Jackson (1999) has argued that a key difference in attitudes towards homosexuality in Thailand and the West is that, while in the West homosexuality was formerly neither tolerated nor accepted, but is now both accepted and tolerated, in Thailand tolerance does not imply acceptance, an opposition that is perhaps confusing for the Western observer. It seems that in the scenario painted in *The Palace of Beauty*, tolerance without acceptance is also a useful model for understanding people's reactions to Nico. Boellstorff (2004b) makes the point that in Indonesia, heterosexism does not necessarily equate to homophobia.

it is no surprise that on leaving his employer he chooses to open a beauty salon, a place recognized by many Indonesians as being linked particularly with *waria* and *gay* men. Indeed, as Boellstorff (2005, p 137) notes, salons are ‘an important venue by which knowledge of the *gay* world crosses, however fitfully, into Indonesian popular culture’. Thus the film is certainly doing nothing here to challenge stereotypes. Of all the business opportunities, Nico chooses the one most obviously associated in the Indonesian mind with *waria and gay* men. Or perhaps we should see this as the only choice for Nico, as the only space that allows *gay* men to be free from the hetero-normative judgments of the state.

While Sumitro never has to confront the truth that Nico is *gay*, Nico’s wife does eventually learn the fact in quite dramatic fashion. After several months of marriage during which, despite her best efforts, she fails to get Nico aroused sexually, she discovers Nico in bed with one of the male hairdressers. Her first reaction is one of revulsion and shock, calling Nico’s male lover a pig (*babi*), a strong term of abuse. The word that she spits at Nico, and which occurs elsewhere in the film on several occasions, is *jijik*,¹⁹ disgusted or nauseated. This scene is loaded with typical Indonesian cinematic motifs: rain and thunder hint at the ensuing disaster, and contrast with the previous scene showing the birth of Siksa’s child preceded by a beautiful sunrise. As the Palace of Beauty’s sign comes crashing down, Nico chases the crazed Siksa out into the pouring rain, before pursuing her back inside, where she grabs a knife as if she is going to kill someone. But then she collapses, and Nico puts her to bed. In this key scene, we see Nico admit to his wife that he is *busuk* (vile) and *homo*, and that he is different. He then admits to his wife that he was forced to lie, and how ashamed he is. The two then hug and make up, saying that they will stay together, and Nico declares that he will be a good father.

Thus like Tuti, after a period of initial shock, Siksa is reconciled to the truth, which she then chooses to ignore in pursuit of an ideal of marriage, which she surely knows will never happen. The encounter clearly has an effect on Nico, for soon after he visits a psychiatrist. We

¹⁹ In using the term *jijik*, we are also reminded of an earlier scene in which Nico had told his wife he knew that the expected child was not his own. When she went to kiss him to thank him for his understanding, he turned away, unable to engage in this expression of erotic love, and her reaction was to ask if he was *jijik*, disgusted, one presumes by the thought of her being the mother of another man’s child. It does not occur to her that it is her sexuality that is the cause of his discontent.

know that he had already been to a psychiatrist, for he divulged this information to Tuti when explaining that he was not sick, but rather just different. On this occasion, the psychiatrist explains to Nico, and one presumes to the audience, the state of current thinking and research on homosexuality. The medical expert explains that he likes his own gender more than the opposite gender and that there is no scientific explanation offered for this. Neither is there any medicine to cure the problem, and the tendency will always arise. The psychiatrist then pronounces that, according various studies, Nico is of the type 'one hundred percent homosexual' (*seratus persen homoseks*). The scene ends with a look of devastation on Nico's face.

The remainder of the film shows the decline in the relationship between Nico and Siksa, as they both realize that the lie they are trying to live is impossible. We see another bedroom scene with Siksa astride her husband, but she cannot arouse him, and he can only whimper at the impossibility of the situation. Then, presumably because of the hollowness of the marriage, Siksa attempts suicide, only to be prevented from doing so by Nico. As a result of this, Nico allows his wife to resume relations with her previous lover Sumitro, and we are left in no doubt as to the satisfaction that Siksa gains from this relationship.²⁰ Indeed, from then on it seems that Siksa cannot be held back, as she next embarks on an affair with Toni, the same salon worker who had previously been in bed with Nico. Finally, she tells Nico that she wishes to separate, and he is content. It is only when he finds the two of them in bed, and discovers who her lover is that he goes crazy, and in what is almost a repetition in reverse of the earlier scene, he grabs a knife and chases his wife through the house. However, unlike his wife in the earlier scene, Nico does not calm down or collapse from exhaustion, but accidentally stabs the man who has been both his and his wife's lover. Nico is clearly distraught and holds his former lover's head as he dies in his lap.

Thus it is this final discovery that provokes the actions that result in Nico being put behind bars. Certainly, this ending dominates the film, and the audience remembers that the *gay* man ends up in jail. However, it was not his homosexuality but rather the accidental killing of his lover that brought about his imprisonment. Furthermore, it was a conversation between Nico and his wife, and her threat to take away

²⁰ This bedroom scene is another that appears to have been censored, to the extent that even the soundtrack is disjointed.

his child that really caused him to flip. Toni urges her to be calm and sympathetic, but Siska's frustrations boil over, and the violent chase ensues. This was added to by Toni's declaration that he was a real man and this was why he was sleeping with Siska and rejecting Nico. It was not the idea of his wife having an affair that pushed Nico over the edge, for after all he had already agreed to a separation. It was the knowledge that her new lover and intended husband was Toni, his former lover, which provoked the anger and despair. The double threat of losing his lover and his child was more than he could bear, prompting him to shout at his wife, 'you are taking away everything that I have'. Nico was not just threatened with losing those he loved, but he would also be consigned to the loneliness warned of in the opening scene.

It may be that we should interpret Nico's emotional outburst, similar to his wife's earlier rage, as some sort of weakness linked to his homosexuality. In mirroring the earlier behaviour of his wife, he is also mimicking feminine behaviour. Perhaps we should understand that this weakness, this inability to control his emotions, is linked with his homosexuality. The mental stress of the situation pushes Nico into a position where he commits murder. Or perhaps from another perspective, to be *gay* is to be unstable, crazy and dangerous. Certainly, this is hinted at earlier on in the film when Nico discusses with his *gay* friend the pressure to marry, and drinks two beers in quick succession, provoking his friends to remark that he should calm down and that he is behaving as if he is crazy (*gila*). As Heider (1991, p 60) has noted, drinking in Indonesian films tends to signify a weak or coarse character. He also argues that it is suggestive of individuals who lack the strength of character to make difficult decisions, and are left in confusion.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that in the next Indonesian film with a *gay* or *lesbi* storyline, *Metropolitan Girls (Gadis Metropolitan)*,²¹ the *lesbi* character Mirna also ends up behind bars. The parallel continues in that this woman's crime was to murder her ex-lover's partner. With so few films featuring significant *gay* and *lesbi* protagonists, we should be cautious in making too firm a conclusion on the tendency of Indonesian directors to incarcerate their homosexual

²¹ A movie that features a central lesbian plot and a minor *gay* character who marries a reformed female prostitute; the film centres on Lisa, who, having been raped by her husband, is seduced by a *lesbi* character, Mirna. This film was apparently the fifth most popular film in Jakarta in 1993, watched by 209,361 viewers (Kristanto, 2005, p 370).

leads;²² yet neither, however, should this similarity be pushed aside as mere coincidence. However, in other ways these two films are very different, for from the very outset in *Metropolitan Girls*, the *lesbi* character is portrayed as a predatory, domineering individual.²³ In comparison with Nico, there is nothing likeable and certainly nothing psychologically complex about her. When the main character Lisa leaves her for her previous male lover, she first attempts to force herself on Lisa, and then after a climactic car chase, stabs the man while continuing to laugh hysterically. Even when we see her behind bars, she appears to show no remorse. As noted in Kristanto (2005, p 370), this film seems to have been made for a predominantly erotic purpose, a feature it shares with many other films from that era, with its titillating representations of women, coupled with fight scenes and car chases, rather than as an attempt to engage with issues of homosexual subjectivities. Nonetheless, we are left with the question, was it not possible to end a film without the main *gay* or *lesbi* character in jail or destroyed in some way? Despite the seemingly sympathetic character of Nico as established throughout the film, did the director somehow feel that he had no choice but to incarcerate him at the end? Is it that, despite everything, it was felt that the *gay* character had to be shown as dangerous and crazy, regardless of the fact that there had been little hint of this in the movie generally? There would after all have been the perfect opportunity to voice such an idea in the appointment with the psychiatrist.²⁴ In this respect, it seems that the film is flawed due to its ending. We are not forewarned about Nico's final murderous behaviour. Heider (1991, p 35) has argued that Indonesian films are overwhelmingly concerned with order and disorder. However, there is no happy reunion or resolution at the end of this film. But the jailing of the *gay* character, and hence his removal from society, can perhaps be seen as signifying a restoration of order, an order free from dangerous crazed characters such as Nico. Those who commit crimes are seen to be punished in accordance with the law.

The Palace of Beauty is not a film overladen with stereotypes. Most

²² In the sequel to this film, *Gadis Metropolis 2* (*Metropolitan Girls 2*, director Bobby Sandy, 1994), the lesbian character is killed off at the end of the film in a car accident (Kristanto, 2005, pp 381–382).

²³ This is not of course an uncommon cinematic image of lesbians generally (see Daniel, 1997).

²⁴ Note also the role of the psychiatrist in *The Gathering* in convincing the lead character that there was nothing wrong with being *gay*.

importantly, we do not see *waria* characters or flamboyant effeminacy, which is not uncommon in Indonesian cinema. Rather, we see *gay* men who in many aspects of their behaviour do not seem so different from their *normal* counterparts. Sure, Nico is at times camp, but not ridiculously so, and never as an object of humour.²⁵ Even films such as *The Gathering* include a minor, highly effeminate character, presumably for comic effect. The choice of the beauty parlour may be clichéd, but even there, where we would most expect it, there are no *waria* to be seen. One stereotype that is perhaps evident in this film is the linkage of *gay* culture with the middle class. The portrayal of Nico and his life is set firmly in a middle class world, where houses are large, offices are air-conditioned and men wear suits. While as Boellstorff (2005) has clearly shown, *gay* subjectivities are not confined to the Indonesian middle classes, *The Palace of Beauty* does seem to be part of a cinematic trend in Indonesia, which tends to present the *gay* world as a middle class one. It is this middle class *gay* lifestyle, based in Jakarta with its already established *gay* nightclubs – perhaps most visible to Indonesians with *normal* subjectivities – which is the subject of this movie.

Boellstorff has argued that it is through marriage and having children that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians show their proper citizenship in the modern Indonesian nation. While recognizing that there is a minority of *gay* men who choose not to marry, for most *gay* men the failure to love and thus to enter into heterosexual marriage is seen as a failure of self and citizenship (Boellstorff, 2005, p 107). However, the case of Nico does not seem to fit into this pattern, and this scenario seems to owe more to the heterosexual fantasy of what it is to be *gay*. Thus key ideas such as the almost inevitable loneliness of the *gay* man and the inability of *gay* men to father children are dominant in the plot. The central *gay* character is represented as dreading marriage. It was only his inability to tell the truth to his parents of his being *gay* that forced him into considering the idea of marriage. It was perhaps also the fear of being left alone, as described by the older man at the opening of the film, which affected his decision to marry; not just being

²⁵ Mathias Muchus recalls that he tried to portray Nico as conscious of having to put up a front of straightness when in the presence of others. When he was alone, he tried to play him as able to be his natural, more expressive self. Mathias himself chose the clothes and style for the character, and remembers growing the manicured thin moustache specially for the role. Neatness was also a characteristic that he ascribed to the character (private interview with the author, 7 April 2006).

alone, but without love. For what finally convinced him to marry was the promise of children.

As is shown on numerous occasions, Nico gained immense pleasure and happiness from playing and being with his child. It was also the birth of the child that brought happiness and recognition from his family and his workmates. Thus the arrival of the child precipitated a reaffirmation of love from his family as well as the loving relationship with the child. The escape from loneliness offered by having children is also confirmed in a scene where Nico's child assures him that he will still love him when he is old and ugly. Thus, unlike the unfortunate older man in the opening scene, Nico avoids this threat of loneliness by having children. However, despite perhaps the hope of his sister Tuti, we see that even the ready availability of a willing female partner did not alter or 'normalize' Nico's sexuality. As we had already been told by the psychiatrist, he was one hundred per cent homosexual and nothing would change that. Nico is depicted as unable to consummate his marriage and the child comes instead from his wife's previous relationship. Thus, contrary to Boellstorff's evidence that *gay* Indonesian men commonly father children (2005, pp 109–125), this film portrays its *gay* lead as unable to perform such a masculine and *normal* role. As we see in *The Palace of Beauty*, the choice of marriage does not mean an end to Nico's friendships with other *gay* men, though nonetheless the film does equate marriage with the closing of a chapter. When leaving the marriage ceremony, Nico's former *gay* confidant and a group of male friends are left standing, simply watching on as the bride and groom drive off and the rest of the wedding party moves on happily. The perceived loneliness of the *gay* man is again reinforced.

Hypocrisy is a central theme throughout the film. The chain of events that led Nico to commit murder, or at least manslaughter, is sparked by his surrender to hypocrisy. The choice portrayed for *gay* men in this film is not the one that, as Boellstorff argues, is successfully made by many *gay* Indonesians, that is, the successful negotiation of two worlds concurrently. At this point, it is important to heed Berry's (1997) warning that films do not necessarily represent the gay community, but rather tell us something of how the gay community is perceived. So for Nico, the decision to lie, and to attempt either to inhabit both worlds concurrently, or even to cross from one to the other, is presented as a disaster. Thus, following the theme of *The Gathering*, if Nico had chosen to 'be himself', he might have avoided prison. But it seems that the time was

not right for such a film and that the film's makers did not imagine that such an option existed for *gay* Indonesian men.

While *The Palace of Beauty* is certainly not a positive portrayal of *gay* life in Indonesia, it is more complex, and perhaps not as pessimistic as has been suggested. The fact that the film deals exclusively and centrally with this topic at all should be seen as a reflection of the emerging understanding and public recognition of *gay* culture in Indonesia in the 1980s. Nico does not end up in prison because of his homosexuality, but rather because he has accidentally killed someone. While there is a hint that Nico is somewhat unbalanced in that final scene, this is not a film that overtly casts homosexuality as wrong and wicked. Nico is shown as a kind and loving father, a diligent employee, and a respectful and dutiful son and brother. The attitudes of others towards him are rarely hostile; indeed, the only real hostility comes in the form of the anonymous letter sent to his boss. The initial shock of his wife and sister soon revert to love, though neither is truly able to understand what Nico is saying. Even in the climactic final scene with his wife, her anger seems to be more about her lack of sexual fulfilment than any disdain or revulsion at Nico. Most importantly, the scientific opinions offered by the psychiatrist do not go against Nico's own understanding and explanation of his sexuality. While in many respects marriage is a source of happiness for Nico, the hypocrisy warned of at the beginning of the film results in a relationship that is false and doomed to failure. Finally, it is the threat of losing all that he loves – his child and his lover, Toni – that leads to the actions resulting in his imprisonment.

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