

Lesbi in the metropolis: fatal attraction in an Indonesian movie from the early 1990s¹

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Abstract: Indonesian cinema of the early 1990s has often been noted for its lowbrow and erotic content. One film from this era, Gadis metropolis, which earned something of a reputation for its exploitation of the female body, is also notable for its lesbi, and to a lesser extent, gay storylines. This representation of alternative sexualities constitutes the particular concern of this article. The film's producer argued that in making Gadis metropolis he sought to 'explain the lives of lesbi' in Indonesia. Its dominant message, however, was actually a depressing reaffirmation of popular media notions of homosexuality and of societal concerns regarding women's sexuality generally. Analysis of contemporary press reports and reviews show that while reactions to the film initially focused on its lesbi content, by the following year it had become more of a reference for concerns about the deterioration of the quality of domestic film production. Engaging with academic studies on Western representations of female homosexuality, this article draws on the trope of the murderous, deviant lesbian while at the same time contextualising the emergence of this image in Indonesia as a continuation of popular images of the sexually licentious woman as a threat to the moral (heterosexual) order. By comparing the film's representations of male and female homosexuality, it is shown that there was far greater concern with the policing of female sexuality than with the gay subject position. Despite the fact that female homosexuality in Gadis metropolis is principally situated within the ideological framework of the heterosexual viewer, however, this article contends that the film may simultaneously offer, at least for some lesbi and gay viewers, momentary spaces for communal identification.

The first half of the 1990s is generally described as a period in which

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Indonesian cinema went into decline. The film industry was confronted on one side by the growing power of the large cineplexes and increasing domination by foreign, particularly American, movies and on the other side by rising domestic ownership of televisions accompanied by the emergence of private television channels. The response by many involved in the domestic film industry was to resort to the production of films which have been noted for their lowbrow qualities (van Heeren 2009a:20–1). While slapstick style comedies remained popular, many of the films produced during this era are notable for their relatively erotic content.

This period of Indonesian cinematic history remains largely unstudied, perhaps because of its perceived lowbrow nature, but also probably since the post-1998 rebirth of the Indonesian film industry offers current scholars such a wealth of subjects for exploration, from the emergence of independent cinema (van Heeren 2002) and a new wave of documentary filmmakers (Ratna 2007; van Heeren 2009b; Hughes-Freeland 2011), to the challenges to previous representations of women and other marginalised groups by the latest generation of directors and producers (Hatley 2009; Sen 2005; Sen 2006; Sulistyani 2010; Hughes-Freeland 2011).

The post-1998 period is also often cited as one in which filmmakers have shown particular interest in engaging and challenging dominant ideas regarding homosexuality (Widjaya 2007; Maimunah 2008; Murtagh 2008; Murtagh 2010; Murtagh 2011; Coppens 2009). In stressing this contemporary interest in non-normative genders and sexualities, however, it is important not to dismiss the era of the New Order (1966–98) as a period in which *gay*, *waria* and *lesbi*² subject positions were absent. The *waria* or transgender subject position was certainly visible in films of the New Order period as it was in Indonesian society generally, and while most commonly featured in films for their irreverent or slapstick potential, from the 1970s the situation and place of *waria* in Indonesian society was also the subject of a number of more serious films. So too the New Order period was notable for a small body of films, groundbreaking in their day, which brought *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions to the fore (Murtagh 2006; Murtagh 2011).

The early 1990s, that very period of lowbrow erotic film, saw the production of some of the most notable cinematic representations of *lesbi* of the New Order period. One of these films, *Gadis metropolis* (*Metropolitan girls*, dir. Slamet Riyadi 1993),³ is the focus of this article. In turning my attention to *Gadis metropolis*, I wish to explore how an examination of both Western and Indonesian traditions of representing lesbians on the silver screen adds to our understanding of the portrayals of *lesbi* in that film. In considering my response to the film I also intend to draw on the work of Western academics who have proposed that certain negative depictions of female homosexuality might simultaneously be empowering to lesbian viewers. Furthermore, analysis of this film will be complemented by a discussion of contemporaneous press responses to the movie, in terms of the film's depiction of homosexuality and with regard to the place the film came to occupy in common perceptions of a trajectory towards eroticisation of Indonesian cinema in the early 1990s.

Before discussing *Gadis metropolis*, it will be useful to briefly chart the emergence of the *lesbi* subject position in the Indonesian mass media generally.

The emergence of the *lesbi* subject position in the mass media and film

Excellent surveys of the emergence of popular discourse related to homosexuality in the print media have been provided by Tom Boellstorff (2005) and Evelyn Blackwood (2010). As these anthropologists note, Indonesian press and media interest in homosexual subject positions, both in Indonesia and to a lesser extent overseas, seems to have begun in the 1970s. The type of media representations included letters to agony aunts, exposés on *gay* life in Indonesia and news items on advances in gay rights overseas. Boellstorff cites one story from 1981 which was highlighted by his interlocutors as really marking the entry of *gay* and *lesbi* into the mass media (2005:62). This story of an unofficial 'marriage' between two women in Jakarta, Jossie and Bonnie, was reported in *Tempo* and later took the front cover of *Liberty* magazine (Boellstorff 2005:62–4).⁴ Around the same time *Tempo* reported the story of another female

couple, Aty and Nona, who ran away so that they could stay together, only for Aty, the older of the two, to be arrested on charges of kidnapping (Blackwood 2010:50; Boellstorff 2005:65). Boellstorff also cites a *Liberty* article from this period that recorded the joint suicide of two women, Suratmi and Isnaini, so that they could stay together rather than be separated by their families (2005:65).

Relationships between women certainly existed in Indonesia before the 1980s. Indeed a press report from as early as 1939 revealed the case of two women in West Sumatra who presented themselves to their village headman for permission to be married (Blackwood 2010:37–8). What differentiates this intriguing story from those cited above is the lack of language available to portray the relationship between the two women in terms of sexual identities: the apparent understanding of the transgression was one based on gender and not on sexual identity.⁵ It is only with the mass media reports that began to appear sporadically from the 1970s onwards, that a focus on a new sexual identity, that of *lesbi* or *lesbian*, arises.⁶

The emergence of the *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions in the mass media does not equate with their normalisation. Indeed, the fact that there seem to have been more stories in the print media concerning *lesbi* than *gay* men, is ascribed by Boellstorff to greater policing of female sexuality in national discourse (2005:66). As Blackwood notes in her summary of research on media representations of *lesbi*, the dominant tendency was to treat homosexuality as a crime, and to equate lesbians with criminality, including murder and deviance (2010:53).

While recognising the dominant role of the print media in bringing these subject positions into popular discourse in Indonesia, the place of film in engaging with marginalised genders and sexualities has been somewhat understated. Furthermore, it is not just the actual films, but also reports about films, national and foreign, as well as the unrecorded conversations by audience members as they leave the cinema, that play a part in developing knowledge about these alternative gendered and sexual identities.

Unfortunately, data on which foreign films featuring homosexualities played in Indonesia is piecemeal and a thorough study of reporting on such films would be useful. Certain foreign films,

however, did provoke discussion in the Indonesian print media. For example, Eddy Iskandar observed that ‘*kelainan seksual* (deviant sexualities)’ were a feature of certain foreign releases in a 1987 article, making specific reference to the lesbian content of the film *Berlin affair* (dir. Liliani Cavani 1985), the story of a love triangle involving a diplomat’s wife and another woman. Indonesian films engaging with homosexuality have also provoked a variety of news articles and essays (Murtagh 2011). As will be shown below, *Gadis metropolis* is important not simply for its content, but also for the media attention it attracted.

Foretastes of female same-sex erotic desire in Indonesian cinema

Representations of same sex erotic desire between women is to be found in a number of New Order films which preceded *Gadis metropolis*. Unfortunately, copies of several of these films are very difficult to come by, and we are therefore somewhat reliant on scripts, synopses and posters to piece together the complete history.⁷ We should note, however, that films such as *Jang djatuh dikaki lelaki* (*Those who fall at men’s feet*, dir. Nico Pelamonia 1971)⁸ and *Perawan-perawan* (*Virgins*, dir. Ida Farida 1981)⁹ have significant *lesbi* story lines where the *lesbi* identity seems to be based on wrong upbringing or trauma resulting from the violent or inappropriate behaviour of men.

A brief but telling glimpse of same-sex erotic behaviour between women is to be found in Chaerul Umam’s *Titian serambut dibelah tujuh* (*The narrow bridge*, 1982). This film is about a young Islamic teacher, Ibrahim, sent to work in a West Sumatran village riven by corruption and immorality. The film draws on the story of Nabi Yusuf to explore the challenges and rewards of staying true to one’s faith in Allah despite temptation, false accusation and feelings of despair.

In that film, Suleha, the wife of the corrupt and immoral Pak Harun, the wealthiest man in the village, is shown to turn her sexual attentions elsewhere as a result of her husband’s interest in a younger and somewhat simple man. When Ibrahim rejects her advances, one short scene is structured to firmly reinforce the sense of her degraded sexual morality. Not only does she lust after the devout and decent Ibrahim, but even worse, she secretly enjoys same sex relations with her maid.

First, Suleha is shown complaining of a headache and calling her maid to massage her temples before the film cuts to images of her husband japing around with his young companion outside the house, pulling him towards his lap and patting his buttocks. The film then cuts back to a close-up of Suleha grasping the hands of her maid and guiding them down towards her breasts. Suleha closes her eyes and seems to lose consciousness in sexual bliss as she caresses her maid's hands and moistens her lips before the camera cuts to her maid's face; as she closes her eyes and looks to the side, she too is seemingly absorbed in her own erotic pleasure.

The scenes showing both Pak Harun and Suleha engaging in such wayward sexual behaviour clearly function to accentuate the complete moral void at the heart of Pak Harun's household. There is also, however, an important difference in their particular motivations which is indicative of Indonesian representations of male and female sexuality more generally. While Pak Harun chose to reject his wife and instead follow his homosexual desire, Suleha only turned to homosexuality once she had been rejected by two different men. As will become clear below, this notion of women 'becoming' *lesbi* as a result of their rejection by men has clear resonances with constructions of female desire in *Gadis metropolis*.

A very different perspective on erotic attraction between women is offered, albeit elusively, in the third of the *Si Boy* series *Catatan Si Boy III (Boy's Diary III*, dir. Nasry Cheppy 1990).¹⁰ In one scene, the somewhat androgynous Sheila makes a pass at Vera, Boy's girlfriend. Sheila's advance, as the two sit side by side on the beach with only a can of Pepsi between them, is brief and rebuffed by Vera. Nonetheless the film does not reject Sheila (and her sexuality) outright. As Krishna Sen (1991) has pointed out, at the end of the film Vera and Boy plan to set up their camp male friend Emon with Sheila 'because they are both just a bit off.' Sen makes the important argument that the 'unending' nature of the *Si Boy* series enabled the directors to avoid full closure at the conclusion of each movie, so evading the censors' demands for a morally correct ending. Thus, she argues, homosexuality was not shown as being an aberration, but rather just another aspect of sexuality (Sen 1991).¹¹

This ambivalent attitude towards female homosexuality marks it as quite different to *Titian serambut dibelab tujub*. The film does not judge female homosexuality to be overtly wrong, even if Sheila's advance is repelled. Rather, there is a brief hint of tolerance from the main characters in the film, though both Emon and Sheila, notable for their effeminacy and androgyny seem to be marked as different as much as a result of their gender identities as for their alternative sexualities.

These two films contain attitudes and ideas regarding female homosexuality, which resonate throughout later constructions of *lesbi* sexuality Indonesian cinema. It was the 1993 film, *Gadis metropolis*, which really brought the *lesbi* subject position to the fore and it is to those metropolitan girls that we will now turn. Given that *Gadis metropolis* is today relatively difficult to access and has never been subtitled, I will first present a reasonably detailed synopsis of the film.

***Gadis metropolis* – a synopsis**

Gadis metropolis is the story of three young women, Lisa (Sally Marcelina), Fanny (Inneke Koesherawati) and Sandra (Febby R Lawrence), all from upper middle class Jakarta backgrounds. Each of the young women face a number of problems, and the three friends comfort and advise each other as the film progresses. Lisa's story is the most prominent.

The opening credits are interspersed with scenes of three women dressing themselves for a night out. The upbeat music becomes part of the diegesis as they meet to walk up some steps and into a nightclub. This opening sets the tone for the film generally, which features several disco scenes. Such settings give plenty of opportunity to show women in revealing costume. For instance, in this opening sequence the camera focuses on two of the friends on the dance floor. An overhead shot fixes down on their breasts as they dance opposite each other — suggestive of an intimacy between women that goes beyond mere friendship. The voyeuristic camera slowly pans down the women's dancing bodies from head to foot, focusing particularly on their thighs and calves.¹²

As the three friends stand surveying the dancing before them, Lisa sees a man she knows and goes over to him. Her two friends look

momentarily confused, apparently not knowing who he is, but soon start dancing and having a good time. There is a sudden cut to Lisa being hit hard across the face by her boyfriend, Jacky, outside the disco. He is angry that Lisa has been dancing with another man saying 'After all I've given you, you want to leave me just like that.' Lisa spits in his face saying 'You have no right to control my life' then runs down some steps where a group of men catch her. Jacky calls to the men 'Take care of everything, brothers.' As the camera cuts back to the disco, we see Jacky invite Sandra to dance, which she does gladly. Next morning Sandra wakes up in bed with Jacky. Fanny phones to tell Sandra that Lisa has suffered an accident and, as we find out from several flashbacks, Lisa has been raped and violently abused by Jacky's henchmen.

The story then turns to Fanny, an aspiring singer. She is persuaded by a record producer to sleep with him in order to get a contract for her first album; it is clear from the bedroom scene that she gains no pleasure from the experience. Then she agrees to marry the keyboard player, Maxi (Alex Kembar), despite knowing he is *gay*. Meanwhile Sandra, an aspiring model, is shown to be sleeping with a number of men, all of whom are buying her expensive gifts. This story allows us to view her dancing for a modelling shoot dressed in a variety of swimming costumes and bikinis flanked by two men in swimming trunks. The subversive eye cannot but note that, when Sandra is called away from the shoot to answer a phone call, the two male dancers carry on dancing with each other. In another scene she dances and seduces her older lover, Teguh, as he films her on a newly bought camcorder.

We then turn back to Lisa, who has her credit card declined in a fancy boutique. She has already caught the eye of another female shopper, and this woman, Tante (Aunt) Mirna (Baby Zelvina), steps in to complete the purchase for her. While initially Lisa appears reluctant in responding to Mirna's advances, over the course of several scenes she becomes ever more entranced by the older woman. In one scene Lisa models on a bed wearing a satin negligee as Mirna reproduces her image in oils. While in earlier scenes Lisa pushed Mirna away when she put her hand on Lisa's thigh, by the middle of the film, she holds her hand in place, allowing Mirna to go down on her knees and lower her

head towards Lisa's lap, before the camera cuts away to Fanny coming in the room and catching the two by surprise.

Despite Lisa's developing relationship with Mirna, Jacky makes repeated efforts to get her back. Jacky starts to follow Lisa. When Mirna and Lisa go to Mirna's house, we discover that she is married to a crazed and violent man who brings numerous women back to the family home. He tries to rape Lisa, but Jacky sees what is going on and comes to her rescue. While Mirna can only try to pull her husband off Lisa, Jacky fights him and saves the day. Later he clarifies that he never meant for his henchmen to rape and abuse her, rather he merely intended them to beat up the man she had been dancing with. Lisa accepts this explanation and goes back to Jacky.

In a key conversation between the three women, Fanny warns Lisa off same-sex relationships saying 'Same-sex love sometimes has a stronger bind. They're not like men who can just exchange one love for another in the span of a night.' While Lisa agrees, she is left to wonder if there are still good men in the world, and whether it is realistic to dream of starting a family. Sandra also sees the error of her ways, saying she is going to give up her life of clubbing, and instead look for something more meaningful. Then Sandra's remaining partner reveals he knows she has been sleeping with other men and she is left humiliated and alone. Mirna is then thrown out by her husband and starts to stalk Lisa.

The film comes to a climax when Mirna, in disguise as a male plumber, attempts to kill Lisa in her own home, though luckily Fanny saves the day. It seems that Fanny's engagement party marks the happy resolution of the movie. Sandra has a new and decent partner, Ricky; Lisa is happy with Jacky; and Fanny is seemingly happy with her marriage to the *gay* keyboardist Maxi. The happiness is not to last, however. As Jacky leaves the party, Mirna tries to run him over. A car chase ensues, and Mirna manages to stab Jacky. Mirna staggers off laughing and almost dancing in delight as Lisa weeps, raising her bloody hands to her face in grief. It is the *gay* character Maxi who catches and secures Mirna. As the credits begin to roll the final cut is to Mirna behind bars in prison uniform, first laughing hysterically, but then gripping her head in anguish.

Gadis metropolis was produced by Ferry Angriawan of Virgo Putra Film and the screenplay is credited to Zara Zettira ZR. The director was Slamet Riyadi. The idea for the film apparently came from Zara Zettira and was initially taken up reluctantly by the production company because of its treatment of homosexuality (Zara Zettira ZR, personal communication 2011).¹³ A comparison of the initial script with the final film shows significant divergence, particularly in its second half. It is clear from the script that the film was always envisaged as one that would be full of disco scenes and sexy images. Several storylines, however, were changed quite considerably. Firstly, Fanny becomes pregnant from the record producer, giving further impetus to marry Maxi. This also has an impact on the key moment in the film when the three women discuss what has gone wrong in their lives and their hopes for the future. In the initial script this was written as a somewhat drunken scene hinting at the inability of the girls to make the right decisions in life. Secondly, the role of Aunt Mirna is really quite small in the initial script. Those scenes in which she attacks Lisa and kills Jacky, together with the story of her abusive and drunken husband, were all added later. Thirdly, there is no attempt in that earlier script to redeem Jacky by explaining the rape of Lisa as a misunderstanding. The most significant difference, however, in the original script is that Mirna, having been rejected by Lisa, kills her in a car chase as she leaves the wedding. After Lisa's funeral, the plot turns full circle as the two remaining metropolitan girls visit a nightclub. When Jacky appears and invites Fanny to dance, she says that rumours of her marriage to Maxi are only gossip and gladly joins him. Thus, the film ends with the two remaining girls ignoring the possible dangers of the Jakarta night and returning to the world of the disco where the film started.

The differences outlined above are more than divergences in plot. The changes made reflect a need to respond to the expectations of censors. The initial screenplay provided no punishment of crimes committed and no return to the moral order, both key structural characteristics of Indonesian cinema of the New Order period (Sen 1994:157–61). While Lisa, the victim, is killed and therefore removed from the diegesis, Mirna, the agent of violence, remains unpunished and at large. There is no attempt to excuse the rape of Lisa as mistaken

and Jacky is neither punished nor reformed. The crucial fact that 'Directors and producers working during the New Order period knew that any crime that was central to a film's narrative had to be resolved and its agents had to be punished' (Sen 2010:208–9) does much to explain the subsequent revisions. Similarly we can understand the changes affecting Sandra and Fanny as indicative of a need to show the young women realising the errors of their ways and being brought back into the moral order. The result of all these modifications is that the character of Mirna is developed to accentuate her deviant, murderous and predatory behaviour.

The murderous lesbian; a global cinematic phenomena?

Anyone who watches *Gadis metropolis* with a knowledge of Western cinema, in particular cinematic representations of lesbians, will be struck by a number of apparent similarities to Western films. Critics have noted the relative invisibility of lesbians in Western mainstream cinema, with the exception of two genres: pornography (aimed at the heterosexual male) and horror (Daniel 1997:11). Indeed a notable body of writing exists which looks precisely at Hollywood's creation of deadly, deranged, predatory lesbians spawning a number of epithets such as 'lethal women' (Daniel 1997), the 'deadly doll' (Homlund 1994), 'lesbians who bite' (Hanson 1999), 'fatal women' (Hart 1994), the 'deadly woman' (Tasker 1994), and the 'lesbian vampire' (Weiss 1992). Commenting mainly on American film production, Kelly Kessler notes that there was a boom in movies depicting lesbians in the 1990s, and that while those films directed by women often presented images of lesbian love, male directors were more likely to continue the tradition of focusing on lesbians as 'deviant threats to the social order' (2001:18). Indeed one of the 'classic' movies of this type, *Basic instinct* (dir. Peter Verhoeven),¹⁴ in which all four central characters are linked to both lesbianism and murder, was released in 1992, the year before *Gadis metropolis*.

The tradition of the predatory lesbian in European cinema goes back to the 1920s. Andrea Weiss describes Countess Geschwitz in the German film *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*, dir. GW Pabst 1929) as the first in a long line of these predators, drawing on Smith-Rosenberg's description of the character as 'the aggressive seducer of

other women, the ruthless, perverted competitor of the male suitor' (Weiss 1992:22). Thus, the basic triangular pattern in which the younger more innocent woman is fought over by a heterosexual male and an older lesbian was established. By the 1950s and 1960s, and reflecting ideas from popular psychiatry of the time as well as the demands of the American Motion Picture Code, Weiss notes a general formula in Hollywood depictions of lesbianism, in which one (the predator) would be killed, and the other cured (1992:51–7). To explain why so many of these predatory lesbians end up as murderers, a common argument is that by rejecting not just hetero-normativity, but also patriarchy, they are a group who position themselves outside the law. To exemplify their lawlessness these sexually deviant women are depicted as committing the ultimate deviant act, that of murder.

As Lisa Daniel observes, the horror genre has proved ideal for presenting lesbians as 'unpredictable, malevolent and deadly' and the ultimate portrayal of this is in the lesbian vampire sub-genre (Weiss 1992; Daniel 1997). In these movies, we commonly see the female vampire and the mortal heterosexual male compete for the possession of the younger, 'innocent' female (Daniel 1997:12). These films, which became particularly common in the 1970s when the relaxation of censorship laws began to allow for the representation of more sexually explicit scenes were, Daniel argues, both titillating and cathartic for the male heterosexual viewer; there was the opportunity to view the overt female sexuality of the vampire, safe in the knowledge that she would be destroyed (or destroy herself) by the end of the movie. Feminist responses to these films have generally been negative, on the grounds that violent depictions of lesbians empower the heterosexual viewer while alienating the lesbian viewer, coupled with the use of stereotypes which trivialise, marginalise and exoticise lesbians. Nonetheless other scholars have argued that these films can simultaneously meet the fantasies of heterosexual men while proving empowering to lesbians (Weiss 1992:106). Kessler has made a particularly interesting argument for one film, *Bound* (1996, Larry and Andy Wachowski), which she argues utilises 'stereotypes which provide a space for communal identification for lesbians and an ideological framework for the heterosexual viewer' (2001:35). As such, she argues, the film can be

read as ‘family fun for everyone’ (2001:19), a point which will be picked up on again in the conclusion to this article.

There is much about the Western cinematic lesbian murderer which lends itself to a reading of *Gadis metropolis*. While, however, Tante Mirna can be identified as a predatory older woman competing with a heterosexual male for the possession of a younger female, she is not a vampire. Nonetheless, there is one scene in which she is most definitely vampire-like. The scene begins with Jacky (now living with Lisa) answering the phone to be called away to a meeting. As he speaks on the phone a bell tolls. From where this tolling comes is not clear, but its five chimes are not indicative of the time. As the echo of the bell merges into one of the eerie tunes used repeatedly in the film to hint at danger, it is clear there is trouble ahead; someone is spying on him from behind a partially opened door. As Jacky lightly kisses Lisa goodbye he tells her there is plumber in the house to clear a blocked tap, but to be careful, for he seems a bit ‘scary (*nyeremin*)’. As the haunting music plays and Lisa has her back turned, the bedroom door opens and we see first an oversize glistening wrench, then the full body of the plumber, tool in hand. As Jacky had warned, there is indeed something scary about this handyman, for he is not what he seems.

As he lifts the wrench into an upright position, we see that this is no ordinary plumber, rather it is Mirna in drag. Throwing the wrench towards Lisa, she first pulls off her baseball cap, and her hair tumbles down. Then with a loud ripping sound she tears off her fake moustache while Lisa looks on in terror. She grabs Lisa and wrestles her to the convenient bed — Mirna is, of course, on top. The two rise up momentarily while Mirna warns ‘Lisa, if I can’t have you, then no one can.’ Mirna then slaps Lisa hard across the face causing her to fall back on to the bed. As Mirna stands above Lisa, she takes a few deep breaths, her chest rising and falling as she does so, while Lisa lies panting in fear on the bed. Then, raising her arms above her head she leaps, almost flies, on top of Lisa, her black jacket reminiscent of Dracula’s cloak. After a brief struggle, Mirna once more stands before Lisa, saying ‘Lisa, you’ve ruined my life and now you want to experience happiness on the back of my suffering. I won’t let that happen. No way. I won’t let it be. We’ll be destroyed together.’ This time

she holds a dagger before her, though in the battle that ensues Lisa manages to force it away from her. In close-up we see the face of the almost still Mirna, hypnotically, longingly, repeating Lisa's name, the camera's gaze fixed on her glistening purple lips, as she holds the woman beneath her. Then slowly she sinks her head down and out of shot towards Lisa. What exactly she was intending to do we will never know, for a quick kick by Lisa and the somewhat comical arrival of Fanny has Mirna suddenly dazed and lying on the on the floor rubbing her head!

Certainly there is more to Mirna than we realised, and as she lies on the floor, she too seems confused by what has just happened. With the eerie music, the tolling bell, the black leather jacket, and Mirna's momentary ability to fly, one cannot help but be reminded of a vampire. When Mirna looks down on her prey, disabled of her two phallic tools, with only her purple lips as a weapon, it is surely blood from Lisa's neck that she wants. On this occasion she is stopped short, but at the end of the movie she finally gets the blood she needs. As Jacky lies (almost) dead on the floor, she emerges from the shadows of the night to plunge her weapon into his neck. As she pulls the bloody dagger from his wound, and puts her hand to his neck to check that he is truly dead, it is again her purple lips that become the focus of the gaze as she throws back her head and begins to laugh in delight.

Care must be taken in drawing too many comparisons with Western traditions. First and foremost Mirna is not actually a vampire or any other type of supernatural being, though in the above scenes she does seem to be suffering some sort of psychic disorder. Secondly, the image of the predatory and overtly sexual female is not unique to Western cinema. If we turn now to Indonesian cinema and literature, we will find that representations of the dangerous and deranged woman, though not the dangerous *lesbi*, were already an established aspect of the cultural output of the New Order period.

Popular representations of women in Indonesian cinema

The New Order period has been highlighted by various scholars for its state ideology regarding women. In particular, the moral precepts of *Panca Dharma Wanita*, which set out the five main duties of Indonesian wives as being to support their husbands, provide offspring, care for

and rear the children, be good housekeepers, and be the guardians of the community, were central to public notions of women's roles under the patriarchal New Order. While women were certainly not forbidden from participation in the public sphere, and indeed most Indonesian women had to work to help support the family, this ideology nonetheless privileged men and, as Julia Suryakusuma (1996) has observed, female dependency on men was cast as the ideal.

In her analysis of images of women in popular Indonesian print media, Suzanne Brenner has argued that discussions on the role and place of women in Indonesian society were very much bound up with the question of what it was to be modern 'and whether or not Indonesians are on the right path toward the right kind of modernity' (Brenner 1999:17). Crucially, Brenner argues that the choices of women became a major preoccupation of the New Order state, as all of the anxieties that accompanied political repressions, rapid modernisation and economic inequality were displaced on to the figure of women and the family (Brenner 1999:36). Karl Heider (1991:86) has identified a similar dilemma with regard to Indonesian cinema, highlighting a dominant concern of 'how to modernize and yet retain Indonesian identity; how to avoid the perils of excessive conservatism on the one hand and destructive Western-ness on the other.' The very title of the film *Gadis metropolis*, highlighting young women and the capital city, clearly encapsulates this preoccupation.

While much of the discourse about women in Indonesia revolves around the conduct of wives and mothers the role of daughters is also implied, and it is this that we see being specifically treated in the characters of the three metropolitan girls. Daughters using their bodies to win record contracts (Fanny), expensive presents (Sandra) and clothes (Lisa); daughters sleeping with various male (and female) partners; daughters deceiving their parents; and of course daughters being sexually active before marriage. *Gadis metropolis* almost fully encapsulates the notion of 'modernity gone awry' as observed by Brenner:

the picture of uncontrollable women — wantonly sexual; reversing the 'proper' order of things by dominating males instead of being dominated by them; shirking their 'natural' roles as wives and mothers — is the very image of modernity gone awry (Brenner 1999:37)

The one aspect in which the behaviour of the metropolitan girls does not match this image is with regard to the question of dominating males. It is, however, arguably in the same-sex behaviour of Lisa and Mirna, not dominating men but rejecting them completely, that this aspect of modernity gone awry is also fulfilled.

While the range of options available to women were, of course, numerous as they negotiated the demands of modernity and tradition, media images of women tended towards a dichotomised system of representations, variously described as models and maniacs (Tiwon 1996), or victim and virago (Hughes-Freeland 2011). Sen draws our attention to one film in particular which has clear resonances with *Gadis metropolis* and falls into the theme of ‘salvaging the feminine essence of a female’. *Guruku cantik sekali* (*My teacher is very pretty*, dir. Ida Farida 1979) is the story of Dina, a female school teacher who fiercely defends the idea of gender equality and for some reason hates men. We find out in a flashback that this hatred results from the sexual advances of her former boyfriend. Eventually she ‘recovers’ and is able to respond to the loving attention of Dan, with the previous aversion to men depicted as a ‘psychic disorder’ resulting from past trauma (Sen 1994:141). As Sen says of another film of this type, men are the social agents of both the corruption of natural femininity and its natural restoration (1994:140). Thus in keeping with the requirements of an ordered cinema — that is, one in which order is restored by the conclusion of the film — the woman who has strayed can be rescued and brought back to normality.

In other films, however, the corruption of women cannot be reversed, particularly Sen argues, ‘when a woman’s sexuality is aroused outside of monogamy’ (1994:144). The haunting or stalking of past tormentors by a female ghost, witch or other such abject being has a long tradition in Indonesian horror cinema and provides one means of dealing with the woman who has been violated in some way or another by a man. Just as in the previous example the right man is needed to eradicate the evil spirit, though in this case it is normally in the person of an Islamic figure (van Heeren 2009a:97–9; Sen 2010:205). Sen also points to the prostitution movie as another genre of films in which women abused by men end up ‘unforgivably stained’, often dying in the

arms of their only true love. Clearly such films also carry the possibility of exhibiting plenty of female flesh for the delight of the audience (Sen 1994:144–7). It is at this point that it is useful to recall Sen's oft-repeated observation that even in those films where women dominate the screen, they are often about presenting them 'to be seen so that the film is seen (sold)' (1994:134).

While the representation of *lesbi* as seen in *Gadis metropolis* marks something new in Indonesian cinema it is clear from the above discussion that there are a number of parallels with existing popular discourse about women. The two images of *lesbi* that are presented in this film — that of the predatory, murderous *lesbi* who ends up in jail, and the abused *lesbi* who only finds meaning and a restoration of order in her life when she is taken in hand by an upstanding male member of the society — can both be understood within the binary of victim and virago, or model and maniac.

The trajectory of Lisa's character shares many similarities with those Indonesian cinematic women who have gone before her. Traumatized by rape she temporarily steps outside her heterosexuality. But it is also the very experience of that trauma and her temporary homosexuality that leads her to the epiphanic moment when she wants to pull back from the disorder, pondering 'Are there still good men who will marry us? Can we still dream of having a family?' However the resolution is not quite as we would expect. Despite her decision to return to monogamous heterosexuality, it is not to be. Her partner is killed and Lisa's fate remains unknown. She does not die in the arms of her lover like the tragic heroines of those earlier prostitution films, but rather the position is reversed. As her male lover dies, it is she who is left alone. Her future remains unresolved, but it seems that the idealised marriage and family for which she yearns is an impossibility.

Mirna's seemingly permanent aversion to men is explained as resulting from the humiliation of her husband's womanising, drunken and violent behaviour. Furthermore, she was already in the 'valley of sin' when he first took her in, as she is reminded by her husband in one confrontation. In the case of the character of Tante Mirna, there is no firmer rejection of the ideals of *Panca Dharma Wanita*. The *lesbi* killer (of men) challenges the male order in two vital respects; she is beyond

the sexual control of men and, in committing the act of murder, she is also outside of the social control of men. With Sen's comment on psychic disorder in mind, there is no possibility of bringing Mirna back to normality, the only option is incarceration.

The trope of the woman who succeeds in taking her revenge on men can be found in various forms in Indonesian cinema, particularly from the late 1980s and early 1990s when the concerns of censors were beginning to focus more on television. Felicia Hughes-Freeland cites the example of the film *Ranjang yang ternoda* (*The spotted bed*, dir. Norman Benny 1994) which showed a betrayed woman who avenges herself on her wealthy lover by beating him at his own business game and finally destroying him. As she argues, not only was female sexuality more overt but 'the film's narrative shows a change in representation: how a victim becomes a virago and then triumphs' (Hughes-Freeland 2011:421). Whether Tante Mirna can be said to be successful in her revenge is clearly open to interpretation; she is successful in killing her rival Jacky, but she does not win back Lisa and ends up in jail.

A slightly earlier film which saw a woman creating far greater havoc than Aunt Mirna was *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan* (English title: '*Lady terminator*', dir. Tjut Djilil), a remarkable film from 1988 which, after protests, was withdrawn by the censors to be eventually released in shortened form in 1994 (Kristanto 2007:314; van Heeren 2009a:118). The film, which has become something of a cult classic in the West following its release on the Mondo Macabro label,¹⁵ tells the story of the Queen of the Southern Ocean who lures men into her realm for a night of passion. Those unable to satisfy her have their genitalia cut off by a dagger/snake which emerges from her vagina. When one man manages to seize the dagger from her while he is still intact she swears to take revenge on his great-granddaughter. A hundred years later an American anthropologist dives into the ocean to try to discover the truth of the legend. She becomes possessed and in a clear parody of the American film *Terminator* (dir. James Cameron 1984) wreaks havoc on Jakarta as she tries to track down and destroy the great-granddaughter, killing numerous men in a particularly emasculating way. Finally, after a car chase, she is destroyed by the

great-granddaughter's boyfriend. One cannot but notice the parallels between this film and *Gadis metropolis* and it is clear that the character of the strong, crazed and violent woman, with particular aversion to men, was far from unique to Tante Mirna in Indonesian cinema in the closing years of the New Order period.

While the attention of this article has so far been concerned primarily with representations of female sexuality in *Gadis metropolis*, it is useful to note that the film also contains a subplot focusing on a *gay* male character. By taking a comparative approach to the film's representations of male and female homosexualities, particular concerns related to the expression of female (homo)sexuality become apparent.

Male homosexuality in *Gadis metropolis*

The *gay* sub-plot in *Gadis metropolis* revolves around Maxi, the *gay* keyboardist who gets engaged to Fanny. We are also introduced to his friend Tony, who introduces Michael, the record producer, to Fanny and Maxi. From his dress (a low-cut black vest top, with a yellow jacket, and a blue headband) and mannerism Tony is clearly marked as camp. When Fanny explains that she is distracted because her friend has been raped, Tony makes an exaggerated response with elaborate hand gestures, moving behind the seated Maxi to embrace him exclaiming, 'What? Raped? Scary, being raped. I want that, Maxi. We're into rape and being raped, too.' Maxi, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, brushes his friend off and shows concern for Fanny. The remark did not impress Fanny as is clear from the following dialogue in which she and Maxi discuss Michael:

Fanny: Max, I think this guy (Michael) isn't right.

Maxi: Let it go. Trust Tony. He's the best when it comes to this sort of business.

Fanny: Why do you trust Tony so much? I'm a woman. My intuition is stronger than that fag's (*banci*).

Maxi: Be careful when you speak, Fan.

Fanny: But he really is a fag (*banci*). I don't understand. Why are you defending him so much?

Maxi: Well, that's you, Fan. We're all good friends. It would be bad if Tony heard what you said.

At this point in the film, it is still not clear that Maxi is *gay*, and the above dialogue might be understood to serve to hint to the viewer that there is more to Maxi and Tony's friendship than first meets the eye. But, it is also important that it is Fanny's pejorative use of the word *banci* that is admonished in this scene.

A little while later, Fanny seems to have overcome her homophobia when she meets Lisa and Mirna at a nightclub. She affectionately jokes to Lisa, 'I didn't know you liked girls as well. If that's the case, you should be with me.' Thus while Lisa's friends are undoubtedly troubled by the predatory character of Mirna, they also demonstrate, or learn to show, a tolerance of alternate sexualities as the film progresses. What is more, despite introducing Fanny to the manipulative Michael, Tony is at the same time shown to be concerned for her wellbeing. As he drops her off at Michael's hotel, undoubtedly knowing that Fanny will be forced to have sex with Michael in order to clinch the record deal, he urges her to rethink despite the potential consequences for the band. Tony appears again at the engagement party near the end of the movie, certainly providing a brief moment of humour, but also being supportive of his friends despite knowing perhaps that his relationship with Maxi would be altered forever.

In contrast to the camp and exaggerated character of Tony, there are no obvious visual signifiers used to convey Maxi's homosexuality when he is first introduced. It is in a bedroom scene with Fanny that we learn of his somewhat tragic situation. Maxi is unable to respond to Fanny's sexual advances, forcing him to explain why he is unable to satisfy her — though the explanation seems to be more for the audience's benefit. While a decent man is able to 'cure' Lisa of her *lesbi*-ism, the nature of Maxi's same-sex desire is different. It is not something that can be cured by the affection and sexual advances of a beautiful woman. Rather it is something he must hide if he is to advance his career:

- Maxi: You must be disappointed, Fan.
 Fanny: I'm not disappointed. Because I love you.
 Maxi: I care about you, Fan, but ...
 Fanny: You should be honest with me.
 Maxi: Be honest? You think people can easily accept the presence of a *gay* man? I have goals, Fan.

- Fanny: I have goals, too.
- Maxi: Yes, but if they know I'm a *gay* man, I'll never achieve those goals and dreams.
- Fanny: Then why do you think I slept with Michael? All of that was about reaching goals, yours and mine. A large part of those goals is to marry you, Max.
- Maxi: Then let's get married. If you'll accept me the way I am and don't mind a marriage of convenience.

At the end of this conversation Fanny's facial expression is one of uncertainty, as if it suddenly hits home that she is to be in a sexless, if not loveless, marriage. Nonetheless, when the marriage is next mentioned she is happy again and certainly seems to be content at the engagement party. This aspect of the storyline is confusing and can be read in a number of ways. On the one hand, the marriage to the deviant homosexual might be interpreted as just one further act Fanny is prepared to undergo in order to achieve her goal of success in the music business. Given, however, the behaviour of many of the heterosexual men that the metropolitan girls encounter — they are rapists, abusive, violent and manipulative — we might perhaps more easily understand how it is that Fanny falls in love with Maxi. His very lack of sexual desire (for women) promises her physical safety as well as her career success.¹⁶

Maxi's predicament is reminiscent of that of Nico in the 1988 film *Istana kecantikan* (*The Palace of Beauty*, dir. Wahyu Sihombing). In that film Nico marries the pregnant mistress of a work colleague in order to satisfy parental pressure for their son to marry and give them a grandchild. Like Maxi, Nico is shown to be unable to meet his partner's sexual advances. Tom 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. 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 2005:107). *Gadis metropolis*, like *Istana kecantikan*, seems to be picking up on this predicament that many *gay* men face. Just as I argued was the case with Nico in *Istana kecantikan* (Murtagh 2006:227–8), however, the concern of this movie is that Maxi cannot function sexually with women. Maxi's desire to marry is not shown to result from a need for acceptance, but

rather to hide his homosexuality so that his musical career is not hindered. What we have here, like in *Istana kecantikan*, is reflective of a heterosexual fantasy, albeit a sympathetic one, of what it is to be *gay* in Indonesia.

This attempt to show Maxi as ‘decent’ is further reflected in the final scene in which Mirna has run amok. While Lisa cries over Jacky’s bloody body, and Fanny looks on, it is Maxi who restrains Mirna, keeping hold of the frenzied woman until, presumably, the police finally arrive. As he struggles to hold her from behind, he takes a momentary sideways glance at Mirna. His look seems to be one of shock and disbelief at what she has done. But for an instant the look also seems to be one of recognition. In the final scene of *Istana kecantikan* it is the *gay* man who ends up behind bars, having accidentally murdered his former lover. In *Gadis metropolis* things have moved on and it is the *gay* male character who behaves as a good citizen and restrains the homosexual killer; given, however, that this was no accidental killing but rather a crazed and pre-meditated attack, there seems to be far less opportunity to sympathise with Mirna the *lesbi*. These differences in attitude to *gay* and *lesbi* subject positions are a further indication of what Boellstorff has described as the greater policing of female sexuality (2005:66), demonstrated though a clearly less tolerant approach to female than male homosexuality.

Explaining the lives of *lesbi*; or an Indonesian film porno?

Reviews of *Gadis metropolis* published in March 1993 all pick up on the *lesbi* relationship in the film, with several of them including a still of the two women in bed together as their main illustration. While most of the reports highlighted a didactic function in warning of the dangers that await young women in the city, specifically those who seek fame and glamour (*Kartini* 1993; Elisa T 1993; SK Martha 1993), none of the articles specifically condemn the portrayal of the same-sex scenes between Mirna and Lisa. Elisa T (1993) notes that because the screenwriter is a woman those scenes depicting the *lesbi* relationship are not at all vulgar. SK Martha’s report (1993) in *Berita Buana* describes the growing relationship between the two women at some length, including snippets of dialogue to explain their same-sex desire. A more critical

approach was taken by Untung SP in *Media Indonesia* (1993). In addition to highlighting a 'lack of depth' and a 'plot that made little sense', he pointed to a shallowness in the scriptwriter Zarra Zettira ZR's understanding of homosexuality, and even of 'free sex (*pergaulan bebas*)'.

Opinions were split on the images of young people included in the film. For example, *Pos Kota Minggu's* review (1993) saw the film as a courageous attempt by the director to attract a younger audience in the face of stiff competition from foreign imports, drawing on reality to tell the stories of celebrities and the children of rich businessmen (*anak konglomerat*). This contrasts with a review in the women's magazine *Kartini* which takes the cynical viewpoint that the director clearly wanted to serve up 'hot images (*gambar-gambar panas*)' from the young actors, specifically citing the scenes featuring Mirna and Lisa. Another report points to the presence of breasts and thighs in almost every scene as the main attraction of the film — cinematically it was said to be nothing new or special — though not to the extent that it becomes a *film porno* (M/FB 1993). This same report includes a quote from Ferry Angriawan saying that the main point about the film is that it flows, the breasts and thighs being only a 'sweetener (*kembangnya*)'.

The writer of the screenplay, Zara Zettira ZR, is quoted in one review of the film as saying that there are various types of lifestyle lived by young women in Jakarta, and she thought it important to bring the lives of those seeking glamour to the big screen so that this side of life would be better known by people (Elisa T. 1993). This approach is reaffirmed in comments by the film's producer published in *Majalah film* in January 1994. Questioned as to why he continued to make films in such a tough climate, he replied that he was responding to a demand by the people. Referring specifically to *Gadis metropolis* he argued that in making the film he was breaking new ground in Indonesian cinematic history and pushing the boundaries of what Indonesian society was able or prepared to accept:

The above mentioned film [*Gadis metropolis*] explains the lives of *lesbi*. Lives such as this have existed for some years, but for various reasons, themes such as these can only now be brought to the silver screen. If we had produced this film five years ago, it was still not yet certain that

it would have been allowed by the government. Neither was there any certainty that the people would accept it (translated from *Majalah Film* 1994).

These comments should perhaps be seen in the context of an interview and a more general climate where the producer was being attacked from various quarters of the community for the content of his films. It might be that the producer set out to give Indonesian *lesbi* a voice, as is suggested in the above quote. A more cynical critic, however, may be tempted to suggest that this was merely a ploy to bring gravitas to a film which was symptomatic of a decline in production values and a shift in moral values.

Judging by the popularity (or notoriety) of the theme in Indonesian newspaper and magazine reports from the early 1990s, the proliferation of 'erotic' content in Indonesian films was an ongoing source of preoccupation. These articles seem to have come in waves, certainly from the late 1980s onwards, but by the 1990s, with the demise of what was perceived to be more serious cinema, critical voices were becoming ever more strident. In reports from the mid-1990s a number of films are repeatedly referred to as encapsulating the current problem. Among the main culprits listed is *Gadis metropolis* together with the Warkop comedy *Bagi-bagi dong* (dir. Tjut Djalil 1993),¹⁷ *Gairah yang nakal* (dir. Maman Firmansjah 1993) and *Skandal Iblis* (dir. Tjut Djalil 1992). While on its release most reviewers credited *Gadis metropolis* with bringing a previously hidden side of young metropolitan life to the attention of the public, with only minor criticism from some sections of the press of the 'hot scenes', a year later the film was being referenced for its exploitative and even pornographic content.

Even by the end of 1993 opinions were beginning to change, with a review of that year's films noting that the big successes were comedies or films with 'sexy themes (*bertema seks*)', citing *Gadis metropolis* as an example (Wijaya 1993). In early January 1994, Zaenuddin argued in the newspaper *Merdeka* that Indonesian film was not dead but that it had moved to television. He noted that the only national films that tended to be watched in Indonesian movie houses were those films which 'exploited sex and violence (*mengeksploitasi seks dan kekerasan*)'. The journalist pointed to the low class audience who

desired to watch films such as *Gadis metropolis*, *Gairab nakal* and comedy films heavily laden with scenes of ‘young women in bikinis (*cewek-cewek berbikini*)’. A piece in *Pos Film* (23 January 1994) stated that Bandung filmgoers had been intoxicated by films of a more ‘sexual flavour (*aroma birabi*)’ and that this followed on from the earlier success of such films as *Gadis metropolis*. In these reports we see familiar warnings not just of the perceived dangers of films of this ilk, but a particular concern that the national film industry was only targeting a lower-class audience — an interesting debate which highlights a perceived inability of lower-class Indonesians to respond appropriately to anything without an overtly didactic message.¹⁸

Purnawaddy’s report in *Pikiran Rakyat* in February 1994 takes another perspective on the crisis in film production, suggesting that one of the ways for the Indonesian film industry to survive at all was for producers to recognise the success of such films as *Gadis metropolis*. It points out that producers were no longer embarrassed to make such films given their profitability, even though these ‘films lacked any intent of information or education (*Tidak ada lagi konsep untuk menjadikan film sebagai media penerangan dan pendidikan*)’. The article is typical of a general air of resignation that the future for national cinema seemed to be in the domain of those cinemas frequented by lower class audiences.

This phenomena of the eroticisation of film was occasionally described in the local media as the problem of *film porno*, though it should be made clear at this point that ‘*porno*’ had a particularly local meaning and one which could well be confusing to those unfamiliar with Indonesian cinematic output of the early 1990s. A flick through the titles of many of the films produced in the 1990s will quickly show that producers were resorting to increasingly suggestive titles for their films, though certainly the titles and their matching film posters would often promise more than was actually delivered within the films.¹⁹ So while costumes (particularly women’s) are revealing, and bedroom scenes often suggestive, there is certainly not, as far as I have seen, any nudity on display.²⁰

Some of these films have quite a comedic slant. Scenes in such films include the inebriated man of the house cuddling up to a blow-up doll and amusing incidents related to embarrassment over the

buying of condoms. There are scenes where the voyeuristic male gaze of one of the characters draws in the look of the presumably male audience to watch the leading lady in her revealing swimming costume in the swimming pool, or even spying on her in her bedroom through a hole in the floor from the room above. We might also find scenes, again reminding us of the presumed heterosexual male gaze, which depict lycra-clad women engaged in vigorous aerobic exercise watched through the lens of the hand-held camera on a modelling shoot. Not all films include comedic elements however, and plot structures are also commonly organised around the theme of women moving to the city to seek a better life, and perhaps being forced into prostitution or seeking to make a fortune in the morally dubious world of modelling or entertainment. The dangers of the city being what they are, these women are often shown becoming the objects of (generally male) violence, which as Sen has demonstrated, presented filmmakers with the best opportunity of all to capture women's flesh on screen (1994:152–5). As will be clear from the synopsis above, *Gadis metropolis* contains many of the elements just described.

Despite commentators' concerns about the nature of *Gadis metropolis*, it was a hit with Indonesian audiences, drawing the fifth highest audience numbers in Jakarta in 1993 (Kristanto 2007:370). While I do not have figures to indicate the financial success of the film, the fact that *Gadis metropolis* was quickly followed by a sequel, *Gadis metropolis 2*, is certainly suggestive of box office success, despite, and perhaps because of, the controversy it generated.²¹ Indeed, the titles of two more films which were released soon afterwards — *Pergaulan metropolis*²² and its sequel *Pergaulan metropolis 2*²³ — are further testimony to the financial rewards the original film must have produced. The similarity between the later films does not rest merely in the derivative nomenclature. The topic of *lesbi*-ism, or at least individuals purporting to be *lesbi*, also continued into *Gadis metropolis 2* and *Pergaulan metropolis*, though for whatever reason the theme had been dropped by the time *Pergaulan metropolis 2* was made.²⁴

Although the debates about the eroticisation of Indonesian cinema frequently cited *Gadis metropolis* as a chief culprit/influence, the *lesbi* content of that film was rarely referred to after its initial release.

Rather it was the general imagining of women, and seemingly the dangers of such images for the (presumably male) lower classes that were of primary concern. There was never a concern expressed that the cinematic engagement with the *lesbi* subject position might lead Indonesian women to explore homosexuality for themselves, or that such films legitimated female homosexuality in any way. This stands in marked contrast to fears expressed by sections of the press at the time of the release of *Istana kecantikan* a few years earlier that by representing male homosexuality on screen it may set a bad and dangerous example to viewers and be seen as legitimating same-sex relationships (Herling 1988).

Conclusion

On its release in 1993, most critics discussed *Gadis metropolis* in terms of casting light on the lives of a certain section of young women in the capital city — photo models, celebrities, artists and the daughters of elite businessmen. The final message was seen as one warning such young women of the dangers that this life might offer if appropriate care was not taken. Certainly the dangers presented in the film were many: rape, exploitation, violence. While it is men that lay at the root of all these dangers, the solution offered by the film is for the women to reform their own behaviour. Following New Order patterns of cinema, there is something of a restoration of the moral order at the end of the film. By renouncing their immoral ways two of the three metropolitan girls seem to find a secure future. No such security, however, awaits the girl who, at least momentarily, rejected men completely. Yes, she is eventually saved from homosexuality and partially brought back from disorder, but there is no happy ending for her; her hero dies in her arms, stabbed by her former female lover.

That this film could be explained by its producer Ferry Angriawan as representative of the lives of *lesbi* is clearly troubling. It is probably better understood as reflecting and perpetuating popular Indonesian understandings of homosexuals generally and *lesbi* specifically as deviant criminals suffering from mental illness. The other part of Ferry Angriawan's comment, that the film would not have

been accepted five years previously, carries more validity. The truth in the statement, however, lies not so much in a change in moral attitudes to homosexuality, but rather a loosening of control from the censors regarding issues of sexual content.

The use of rape, sexual exploitation and violence as a device to display the female body under the guise of exposing the moral dangers posed to women by certain visions of modernity was not unique to *Gadis metropolis*. As Sen has observed, the prostitution movies which were so popular in the 1970s used the female body to sell the film, while at the same time condemning the body. *Gadis metropolis* should be understood as a development of the same tradition. Starring some of the most popular female actors of the day combined with its blatant engagement with male heterosexual fantasies of lesbianism, the film attracted relatively impressive audience figures and notoriety. In turn, the success of *Gadis metropolis* spawned a number of films clearly seeking to draw on its reputation which meant not just an imitation of the 'hot images' but also the promise of same-sex erotic behaviour between women.

Gadis metropolis was not the first Indonesian film to depict erotic behaviour between women. As I discussed earlier, films such as *Catatan Si Boy III* and *Titian serambut dibelah tujuh* demonstrated a variety of attitude towards female homosexuality. In many respects the images of Tante Mirna and Lisa as presented in this film repeat the ideas of the *lesbi* as the confused woman simply in need of the right man to bring her back to 'normality'. Women pursue *lesbi* desire as a result of rejection by men and reject *lesbi* desire once pursued by the appropriate men. Nonetheless the imagining of homosexuality in the film is a little more ambiguous and contradictory than the straightforward trajectory would suggest.

In comparison with Lisa and Mirna, the *gay* male characters in *Gadis metropolis* come across as far more decent and sympathetic. It is Maxi who urges Fanny to be more tolerant of other sexualities and who restrains Mirna when she murders Jacky. While the *lesbi* subject position is transient, the *gay* subject position is imagined as permanent. This echoes the portrayal of male homosexuality in the 1988 film *Istana kecantikan* where Nico the *gay* male character is declared by his

psychiatrist to be 100 per cent *gay*. Not even marriage with a lustful and attractive woman could alter what was deemed to be part of Nico's essential being and the same is true for Maxi in *Gadis metropolis*.

While there is no similar representation of the *lesbi* subject position as permanent, there are moments when the ideas and behaviour of the characters within the diegesis seem to contradict the overall moral message of the film regarding the *lesbi* subject position. In these incidents same-sex behaviour between women is certainly tolerated, or at least treated in a light-hearted manner. Fanny apologises for barging in on Mirna and Lisa, she does not censure her friend for her sexual behaviour. So too, Fanny jokes that had she known Lisa was into women they could have become an item. Just as in *Catatan Si Boy III*, there is a recognition that sexual identities can be complex and those that stray from the norm are not condemned, at least not by the other women, within the diegesis. Even the insults that are hurled at Mirna by her husband are not based on an intrinsic notion that *lesbi* are immoral, but rather on a belief that as her husband he has a right of ownership over her.

Most complex of all in the analysis of *Gadis metropolis* is the character of Tante Mirna. Mirna's transcendence of the ideology of the New Order and the norms of New Order cinema seems to be transitory. Her same-sex relationship is foiled when Lisa is 'saved' from *lesbi*-ism. The final scene depicts her as a maniacal killer rightly brought to justice and incarcerated by the Indonesian state. Nonetheless, Mirna is not actually killed off in this movie, thus defying the resolution that Weiss (1992) noted was so typical for Hollywood's lesbian couples. Rather it is Tony, Lisa's heterosexual saviour, who is killed. In Mirna's last desperate act the happy heterosexual ending is denied. And while we may perhaps view the film's final close up shot of Mirna, in which she is shown to first look despondent before throwing her head back in hysterical laughter as evidence of the madness and sickness of this dangerous, deviant woman, perhaps it might also be viewed as a final act of defiance in the face of a patriarchal system that had treated her so cruelly. Drawing on arguments made by Weiss (1992) and Kessler (2001), while female homosexuality in *Gadis metropolis* is principally situated within the ideological framework of the heterosexual viewer,

the film may simultaneously offer, at least for some *lesbi* and *gay* viewers, momentary spaces for communal identification.

Questions of global and local characteristics are difficult to unpack in *Gadis metropolis*. The rise of erotic cinema in the era in question was in part a response to the availability of foreign soft-core videos. Indonesian filmmakers also parodied, copied and drew inspiration from Western, Bollywood and Hong Kong films, and the example of *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan* is just one such example. So too the trope of the murderous lesbian was an established Western cinematic tradition which had been re-energised in the guise of *Basic instinct* immediately before *Gadis metropolis* was made. Nonetheless, it was the fact that these ideas lent themselves to Indonesian film of the time, with its established patterns for the representation of wayward women that mean that the ‘deadly doll’ could be incorporated into local cinema. While some audience members may have looked on the character of Mirna as a symbol of defiance, and the more positive dialogues regarding homosexuality and difference may have been gratefully received by some, the dominant message was a depressing reaffirmation of popular media notions of homosexuality and of societal concerns regarding women’s sexuality generally.

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Notes

1. This article draws on papers presented at the Centre of South East Asian Studies Seminar Series, SOAS, London, in December 2007, and at the 3rd Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference, in Kuala Lumpur, 14–17 December 2006. Thanks are due to Rachel Harrison who commented on an earlier draft of this article, and to Safitri Widagdo who prepared English language subtitles for the film, on which some of the quotations are based.
2. Following Boellstorff (2005:8), I recognise the Indonesian terms *lesbi* and *gay* to be distinct from the English ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’. The Indonesian terms *lesbi* and *lesbian* have both been used, popularly and also among *lesbi* individuals, since the 1980s. As Blackwood observes the terms tend to be used interchangeably, with their meanings fluctuating according to who is

using them. I follow Blackwood in preferring the term *lesbi* as a reminder of the differences between Indonesian *lesbi* and European-American lesbians (2010:25). Note that Sharyn Graham Davies takes issue with the use of the term *lesbi*, pointing out that none of her informants in South Sulawesi ever used the word to refer to themselves, though the term is used there by others in a derogatory sense (2010:10). It should also be stressed that this article examines popular cinematic representations of the *lesbi* subject and, as will become apparent, the complex and nuanced identities that are covered by the umbrella term of *lesbi* are somewhat missing in the films under discussion. In particular the notion of female-born individuals who ‘rework the category woman and do not necessarily wish to be considered men’ as highlighted by Graham Davies for *calalai* in South Sulawesi (2010:10), and the somewhat similar ‘*tomboi*’ subjectivity described by Blackwood in the case of Padang (2011) is not apparent in these films. Rather it is the contributions to popular understandings of the *lesbi* subject position for which study of these films is useful. *Waria* is an accepted term for Indonesian male to female transvestites. *Waria* 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.

3. The film is occasionally referred to erroneously as *Gadis metropolitan*. We should also note the tendency to translate the title as *Metropolitan girl*. Given that there are three main female characters, it seems clear enough that a more appropriate translation is *Metropolitan girls*.
4. *Tempo* is a high profile Indonesian weekly news magazine. *Liberty* is a weekly magazine based in Surabaya.
5. There are interesting parallels with a recent case from Aceh where two female-born individuals were legally married by an Islamic cleric after one of them apparently ‘passed’ as a man. The marriage was subsequently annulled and the couple were forced to sign an agreement to separate (Budisatrijo 2011; *Serambi Indonesia* 2011).
6. As Blackwood argues, several terms existed in West Sumatra prior to 1980 to describe the category of masculine females, though by the 1980s these seem to have been mainly subsumed by the new categories of *lesbi* and *tomboi* (2010:59). There is no reason to suspect that the situation was unique to that region. These earlier terms had a specific connotation of gender transgression, rather than of sexual identity.
7. An added problem is that the screenplays and synopses held in the archives of Sinematek, the Indonesian film archive, often differ considerably from the films which were eventually produced.

8. According to Kristanto, *Jang djatub dikaki lelaki* tells the story of several people suffering from sexual deviance. This includes Sinta who has suffered a trauma at the hands of her step-father and step-brother. She marries Parmin to cover up her pregnancy, but falls into a *lesbi* relationship with Sumiyati, a woman who is *lesbi* because all her siblings are sisters and her relationships with men have been so tightly monitored by her parents. A story of complicated sexual relations among a number of characters, the film ends with Sinta dying in a car crash, when her relationship with another woman comes to an end (Kristanto 2007:83) The poster for the movie includes an image of two women cheek to cheek. (Pranajaya 2010:12–13).
9. *Perawan-perawan* is apparently about a number of young women at boarding school in Bandung, one of whom, Dhani, ‘contracts the *lesbi* disease (*penyakit*)’ as her father wanted a son rather than a daughter (Kristanto, 2007: 221). Note Sen’s discussion of Ida Farida’s first film, *Guruku cantik sekali*, mentioned later in this article, which also explores the issue of a woman being turned away from her natural femininity due to the actions of men. According to Kristanto, the problems of all the girls, including, one presumes, Dhani’s *lesbi*-ism, are resolved by the end of the film (2007:221).
10. For a discussion of the *Si Boy* series see Sen (1991).
11. Censorship, however, turns out to have been somewhat more pervasive, if even more haphazard, than even Sen imagined. In the copy of the film provided for me on a DVD by staff at Sinematek, the Indonesian film archive, the scene in which Sheila slips her hand into Vera’s has been censored! All we are left with is Sheila’s sideway glance at the object of her affection. Usefully for me however, a trailer for the film contemporary to the film’s initial release was also kindly included on that DVD, and in that 3-minute and 45-second montage of the most enticing scenes, Sheila is clearly shown slipping her hand into Vera’s.
12. Undoubtedly these nightclub scenes, notable for their general lack of dialogue, are a cheap and easy way of padding the film out to the required length of around ninety minutes. One is also reminded of Sen’s remark regarding New Order cinema that ‘women are emphatically presented to be seen, and so that the film is seen (sold)’ (1994:134). Women are not merely presented in order to be seen in *Gadis metropolis*; the over-lengthy gaze on their bodies serves not only to sell the film, but does so in such a way as to ensure maximum profit while keeping production costs to a minimum.
13. Zara Zettira ZR (b. 5 August 1969) was only in her early twenties when she wrote the script for *Gadis metropolis*, her first film script. She had spent much of her life overseas since the age of twelve. The story was her own idea and she part funded the making of the film (personal correspondence by email 22 July 2011).

14. On *Basic instinct* see Hart (1994:124–34); Holmlund (1994).
15. On Indonesia's cult films, including *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan*, and what has been labelled exploitation cinema, see Imanjaya (2009).
16. In the initial screenplay this storyline makes a little more sense because Fanny falls pregnant as a result of sleeping with her producer.
17. *Bagi-bagi dong!* was the second most popular film in Jakarta in 1993 (Kristanto 2007:376).
18. There has not been much movement since. On 8 November 2008 I attended a screening of the uncensored version of *Perempuan punya cerita* (*Chants of lotus*, dirs. Fatimah Tobing, Lasja Fauzia, Nia Dinata, Upi 2007) at Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, which was also attended by Titi Said, the then head of the board of censors. She explained that it was permissible to show the uncensored version of the film — perceived as uneducational and a danger to morals — on that occasion because all of the audience members (mainly students) had a high level of education. For more on the content of this film see Hughes-Freeland (2011).
19. An article in *Pos Film* (19 September 1993) which reports the problem of film posters unapproved by the Regional Film Board (Bafida or Badan Film Daerah) in West Java specifically cites problems with the poster for *Gadis metropolis* which it uses as one of the illustrations for the piece. It features some relatively racy images including a woman in dark panties and a skin-coloured bra; a woman in a low-cut swimming costume; and a close up of a man kissing a woman's cheek.
20. By which I mean male or female genitalia or women's breasts. Men's breasts are often on display. Female nudity does feature in the version of *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan* distributed by Mondo Macabro. One presumes this was not present in the version shown in Indonesia.
21. I have not been able to track down a copy of *Gadis metropolis 2*. Sinematek does not have a copy. VCDs purportedly containing the movie are to be found fairly easily in Glodok market and elsewhere in Jakarta, but they actually contain the original *Gadis metropolis*. Even when the producer Ferry Angriawan kindly sent me a VCD of the film, I was disappointed to find it contained the original movie. Thus what follows is the summary from Kristanto's catalogue (2007:384): 'The story of the adultery and infidelity of three metropolitan girls: Fanny (Inneke Koesherawati), Sandra (Febby R. Lawrence) and Lisa (Windy Chindyana). These three girls are all friends. Fani who is married to Maxi (Hudi Prayogo), the *gay* component, wants to be a famous singer. To achieve this, she is forced to serve her promotor, eventually becoming pregnant. Fortunately, Maxi is happy to accept the pregnancy. She then becomes angry with the promoter over the financing of

- her show. She fights with the promoter and miscarries. After recovering, she is heartbroken when she finds out that Maxi is able to have an affair with a woman. Then, as if forgetting her own problems, she helps to straighten out a fight between Sandra and Lisa. Sandra is sleeping with Pak Teguh (Piet Pagau) for money, which she uses to support her boyfriend a kind of gigolo. Sandra then finds out that this boyfriend has been unfaithful with Lisa. Sandra responds by seducing Sam, Lisa's boyfriend. Then, there is Bu Heru alias Tante Mirna, a *lesbi*, who is piqued at seeing Lisa's behaviour and wants revenge. This continues until the end of the film when she fights with Lisa who is helped by Fanny, eventually dying in a car crash.'
22. *Pergaulan metropolis* (dir. Acok Rachman 1994) is the story of Inneke, played by Inneke Koesharawati, the owner of an advertising agency who becomes a *lesbi* because she is fed up with men. She forms a relationship with her secretary Lisa, who is actually trying to blackmail her boss. In order to do this Lisa is in league with Toni, her boyfriend. Meanwhile Budi is trying to sell insurance, and falls for Inneke, but then sleeps with Lisa the secretary. Toni blackmails Inneke into sleeping with him, and this is discovered by Lisa who tries to kill him, but she herself ends up being stabbed. Finally Budi helps Inneke out of all the difficulties, which includes saving her from homosexuality.
23. *Pergaulan metropolis 2* (dir. Acok Rachman 1995), had the same director and screen writer as *Pergaulan metropolis*, and maintains two of the central characters, Budi and Inneke, played by the same Ferry Tanjung and Inneke Koesharawati. However the *lesbi* story line disappears in the sequel. In what is really a rather dull plot, the narrative tells of Budi who gets Inneke into bed in return for a modelling contract. Meanwhile he succeeds in captivating Lisa (the director of the company where he works) by pretending to break into her house and attack her. Budi and Lisa marry, but because Lisa does not satisfy him sexually, his attention strays back to Inneke. The story turns on the fact that Inneke is actually married and her husband blackmails Budi for a huge sum of money. Nonetheless the compromising pictures of Budi and Inneke still fall into Lisa's hands, and Budi is rejected by Lisa and loses his job. Meanwhile Inneke and her husband who had clearly been in cahoots, drive off into the distance laughing at the hapless Budi.
24. Zara Zettira also wrote the script for *Gadis metropolis 2* and Inneke Koesharawati starred in all four films, undoubtedly adding to the sense of continuity between them. A *lesbi* sub-plot also featured in the 1995 film *Roda-roda asmara di Sirkuit Sentul* (*Wheels of love at Sentul Racing Track*, dir Norman Benny) which was written by Zara Zettira.

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