FINDING ISLAM IN CINEMA:
Islamic Films and the Identity of Indonesian Muslim Youths

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Abstract

This paper discusses Islamic films in Indonesia that have been a phenomenon since a decade. It is reported that Islamic films have been consciously produced to propagate Islamic lessons to the Muslim youths. The paper challenges the notion that young adults are passive recipients as proposed by some popular culture theorists. They did not merely become object of ideologies injected by filmmakers, and their responses were not an unquestioning acceptance. The research found that some Muslim youths have been ambiguous toward the emergence of Islamic films. Watching movie for Indonesian youths is an important way to construct identity, and they feel that there is a sense of religious ritual involved in film viewing, especially with Islamic messages. I argue that Islamic films help Indonesian young people to develop their own distinctive identity, being new sources of authority apart from parents, formal education, and friends.

[Tulisan ini membahas film islami di Indonesia yang menjadi fenomena sejak satu dekade terakhir. Film-film islami sengaja dibuat untuk menyebarkan ajaran Islam dengan sasaran kalangan muda. Makalah ini menolak gagasan bahwa remaja adalah penerima pasif seperti yang diajukan oleh teori budaya popular. Mereka tidak hanya menjadi objek desakan ideologi pembuat film dan mereka juga tidak bisa menerimanya secara bulat. Sebagian pemuda muslim merasa ambigu menghadapi munculnya film-film Islam. Di sisi lain, menonton film menjadi media untuk membangun identitas diri dan dapat

dirasakan sebagai bagian dari ritual agama, khususnya ketika menonton film yang mengandung pesan-pesan Islam. Dengan demikian, film Islam membantu pemuda Indonesia untuk mengembangkan identitas mereka sendiri dan menjadi sumber otoritas baru di luar orang tua, pendidikan formal, dan lingkungan pergaulan.]

A. Introduction

In this paper, I examine Islamic films in Indonesia and discuss how the films were used and interpreted by Islamic young people to construct their identity. At first, I define religious film and frame the relationship between religion and film. Then I focus on the recent emergence of Islamic films in Indonesian cinema, particularly the prominence of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*) and the *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (*When Love Chants*) series. I show how they differ from previous Islamic films. Even though before I started my fieldwork I already knew that it would be important to look at these films, this was not the prime reason for the inclusion of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* in this paper. The main reason I focus on these films is that almost all informants referred to *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* when I asked them which Islamic films they had seen.

In this paper, I argue that young adults are not passive recipients as proposed by some popular culture theorists, including Adorno and Horkheimer.[1] Young people are not merely the object of ideologies injected by filmmakers and their responses to the films did not indicate unquestioning acceptance. I suggest that Muslim youths were very involved in interpreting the films and did not passively accept whatever the films put on screen. They were often critical and spent considerable time discussing the films. Thus, it makes sense when Hall[2] argues

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[1] Thodor W. Adorno and Marx Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Transl. by John Cumming] (London: Verso, 1987), p. 80.

[2] Stuart Hall, Encoding/Decoding in Stuart Hall, et al (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers In Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp.

that audiences are the active producers of meaning, rather than mere consumers. Turner[3] amplifies Hall's notion by theorising that the meaning of the film text is not unitary, but rather is a sort of a battlefield for competing and contradicting ideas. Even though it is possible for a certain idea to emerge as the victor, there are always gaps, cracks, and divisions since young adults are actively engaged in film-viewing activities. In my research, Muslim youths agreed that Islamic films have the potential to deliver religious advice to viewers. However, they were divided over which film they considered more religious and which one they felt was better in terms of quality. They realised that a more religious film is not synonymous with high aesthetic quality. They also argued over whether the films were really anything more than entertainment, indicating that at least some of them did not entirely absorb the values that Islamic producers wished to nurture through the films.

B. Defining Religious Film

As Wright notes, at least on one point, there is similarity between religion and film: both are able to produce narrative.[4] According to Otto, humans have the need to articulate thoughts and feelings in metaphorical and symbolic forms, and religion is the most appropriate medium through which to cater for those needs that are usually located within the depths of the soul.[5] In general, a metaphor is a direct substitution of one idea or object for another and people generally use it to convey an idea or object. A symbol is a thing that is used to represent, stand for, or imply something else. Both can form parts of narrative. Metaphor is useful for developing a narrative because it has the ability to create mental pictures and images with a limited number of words. Symbol is also an important tool for developing a narrative for its ability to illuminate the narrative by creating depth and meaning. There are many religions in the world that able to provide their followers a vast range of metaphors and symbols to narrate the existence of the divine. It seems that film is able to match

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120-25.

[3] Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice IV* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 198

[4] Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008), p. 4.

[5] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 12.

the need for metaphors and symbols as well since its basic features are metaphors and symbols.

Based on Clifford Geertz's definition of religion, Lyden amplifies the reason for associating religion and films: in a similar way to religion, films provide visual and narrative symbols mediating worldviews and systems of values. Films consist of stories that potentially serve the same two functions of religion pointed out by Geertz: 'models of' (worldview) and 'models for' (systems of values) reality. Films present a picture that asserts that the world is a certain way and may simultaneously claim that it should be that way. As with religion, films provide a sense that justice and order exist, even though some events remain unexplained or appear to be unfair. Thus, both religion and film are involved in the complex relationship between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'.[6] Lyden suggests other similarities between films and religion. Equipped with their ability to persuade their respctive audiences, both encourage certain moods and motivations to act.[7] These moods and motivations are based in religion's conception of a general order of existence that includes the attempt of humans to manage their experience of chaos. Most viewers watch films to fulfil the need to experience a neater, better and more orderly world where there is punishment for vice and reward for virtue.[8]

Ida proposes that media consumption can be viewed as cultural experience.[9] While media may offer fantasies and imaginaries, it cannot be separated from daily life experiences; thus there is a strong connection between media practices and culture. Contemporary media technologies have been central in mediating social and cultural change and individual transformation. Studying how people consume media can lead to learning the dynamics of culture. Williams concludes that the uses of media technologies are embedded in everyday life and the media are a new and central 'social complex' in the industrial capitalist world.[10] Concerning

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[6] John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University, 2003), pp. 44-46.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[9] Rachmah Ida, "Watching Indonesian Sinetron: Imagining Communities around the Television," *PhD Thesis*, Curtin University of Technology, 2006, p. 9-11.

[10] Raymond C. Williams, *Television Technology and Cultural Form* (London:Routledge, 1990), p. 31.

media consumption, Ida's theory is not the only theory with which I agree. I also share the view proposed by Lyden that film viewing can be taken as a religious experience.[11] In explaining this notion, Lyden borrowed Geertz's term, 'aura of factuality',[12] to describe that there is a sense of religious ritual involved in film viewing, especially when the audience enters a darkened room with a large screen that draws all attention. The experience of watching a film can also potentially involve a sense of communality. Sometimes people attend a film because of a friend's invitation or recommendation and they discuss their experience in watching it.

The analysis of Islamic films is impossible without a clear definition and understanding of the characteristics of religious films in general and of Islamic films in particular. Lacey states that the types of characters, setting, iconography, narrative, and theme determine the genre of a film.[13] *The Passion of Christ* (2004), a film directed by Mel Gibson, for instance, is clearly a religious film, as it re-tells the story of the last twelve hours in the life of Jesus. It displays the characteristics of religious films in the topic, theme, choice of characters, treatment of narrative, and iconography. In the same way, we could say that an Islamic film is characterised by, say, the utterance of the Islamic greeting *assalāmu'alaikum*, the wearing of the *hijāb* (veil), the extended depiction of prayer, *ādhān* (the call to prayer) and Quranic recitation, and the type of depicted characters (e.g. an Islamic preacher). However, I do not use all the points mentioned by Lacey to define the genre of religious film, and suggest that more profound elements are required to constitute an Islamic film.

Wright proposes a more meaningful list of characteristics of religious films: they have plots that draw upon religion; they are set in the context of religious communities; they use religion for character definition; they deal directly or indirectly with religious characters, texts, or locations; they use religious ideas to explore experiences, transformations, or conversions of characters; and, they address religious themes and

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[11] Lyden, *Film as Religion,* p. 46.

[12] This means that religion deals with reality by asserting that its conceptions are not fictions, but are descriptive of (or sometimes normative for) the actual world.

[13] Nick Lacey, *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 136.

concerns.[14] Some religious films may rely on religious themes and teachings like forgiveness, redemption, sacrifice, and hospitality to develop narrative and characters. Others may deploy religious characters or communities to address more secular themes, such as love and marriage, class conflict, family drama, and anti-colonialism. I do not include iconography as one characteristic of religious film for the reason that a film can use icons associated with religion without being a religious film. I would not categorise a film that merely depicts veil wearing, the Islamic greeting, *ādhān* and Quranic recitation without any other characteristics of religious films (theme, characters, narrative, community or places) as an Islamic film. An Islamic film may or may not have scenes with Islamic icons.[15] I asked my informants to point out to me which films they categorised as 'Islamic', and how they defined them. I will detail their answers in another section, but it is sufficient to say at this point that the categories they employed resemble those in Wright's theory

C. Islamic Films in the Post Reform Period

The year of 1997 witnessed the disappearance of sexually implicit films and the resurgence of non-sex themed-films.[16] Islamic themed films did not appear until 2003 when Dedy Mizwar, the lead actor in *Sunan Kalijaga*, made *Kiamat Sudah Dekat (The End of the World is Nigh)*.[17] He plainly wished his film to say something different about Islam: the stereotypical Islamic films at that time depicted Islam in terms of

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[14] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[15] Few people argue that the most successful Indonesian film to date, *Laskar Pelangi* (officially translated as *Rainbow Troops*), is an Islamic film. It portrays the important role of an Islamic organisation, Muhammadiyah, in delivering basic education to a remote and impoverished area. Even though the film does not portray Islamic iconography, it conveys messages that are deemed highly important by Muslims: the importance of education and the fight against injustice.

[16] Gde D. Arief, "From Sex to Syahadat: The Market and Resurgence of Religion in Indonesian Cinema 1997-2011," http://etnohistori.org/sex-syahadat-market-resurgence-religion-indonesian-cinema-1997-2011-gde-dwitya.html, 2011.

[17] Between 1985, when an Islamic film, *Wali Songo (Nine Islamic Saints)*, was screened, and 2003, there were very few Islamic films being produced, such as *Nada dan Dakwah (Sound and Proselytisation;* 1991) and *Fatahillah* (1997). Rhoma Irama made or starred in some films other than *Nada dan Dakwah* during the period, but with a less Islamic tone than *Nada dan Dakwah*.

magic, miracles, and the supernatural.[18] Mizwar wanted Islamic films to portray Islam as a reality of everyday life, and an everyday life that was not restricted to solely rural societies (as usually illustrated by older Islamic films). The story of *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* mainly revolves around the differences between religion and modern culture in daily life, with a plot of a Westernised rock musician falling in love with a pious girl, the daughter of a Muslim cleric. The film did not do well in the market, but it inspired other filmmakers to resurrect the genre of Islamic films.

In 2004, Garin Nugroho, whose prominence was due to his aesthetically-based productions, made *Rindu Kami Pada Mu* (officially translated as *Of Love and Eggs*), a film that is set in and around a mosque in a metropolitan city. In 2005, Nugroho and other directors co-directed *Serambi* (*Veranda*), a film that portrays the importance of Islam as a source of inspiration for three victims of the tsunami disaster in Aceh to move on from their miseries. After that year, filmmakers started to produce films that were based on commercially successful Islamic novels. I will focus on *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*, 2008) and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1* and *2* (*When Love Praises God*, 2009) since most of my research participants mentioned these films as their favourites.

1. *Ayat-ayat Cinta: A New Style of Indonesian Islamic Film*

The film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*) started the Islamic film boom in 2008. It had massive media coverage due to its association with the novel that had been the best-selling book of 2007. When it went to screen, the film attracted a record-breaking 3.6 million cinema-goers in Indonesia. It created a resounding buzz in the region's Muslim communities for it's portrayal of moderate, compassionate Muslims and understanding of Islamic values. The main protagonist is Fachri bin Abdillah, a poor, intelligent student who wins a scholarship to complete his graduate degree at Egypt's esteemed Al Azhar University. His background and educational experience resemble those of the author of *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, Habiburahman El Shirazy.[19] Fachri embraces his life in Cairo, completing his studies while translating religious books

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[18] Ali Amin, *Religion in Indonesian Cinemas: The Representation of Religion in Indonesian Box Offices 2000-2006* (Saarbrucken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011), p. 14.

[19] Ary Hermawan, "Habiburrahman El Shirazy: No Intentions to Counter 'Satanic Verses'," *The Jakarta Post*, 2008, 4 April.

to earn money with great enthusiasm. Marriage is the only goal he has yet to achieve. For Fachri, marriage is innocent and pure, and he does not believe in having a relationship with a girlfriend prior to marriage.

Before Fachri went to Egypt, only two women had been close to him, his mother and grandmother. During his time in Egypt, four distinctly different, beautiful women admire him. The first woman close to him in Egypt is Maria Girgis: a shy, open-minded Coptic-Christian neighbour who is attracted to the teachings of the Holy Quran. She finds that she has fallen in love with Fachri (a fact she only reveals in her diary). The second is Fachri's campus mate, Nurul, the daughter of a renowned Indonesian Muslim cleric. Fachri feels himself unworthy, because his family background is much humbler than Nurul's. Because of this modesty, he ignores his initial feeling for her, leaving her confused and guessing. Noura is an abused Egyptian neighbour whom Fachri saves and helps to find her true family. She also develops strong romantic feelings for Fachri, but he simply feels sorry for her. Finally, there is Aisha, a German Turkish student in Cairo whose beautiful eyes haunt Fachri. Following an incident on the Metro, where Fachri defends her against narrow-minded bigoted Muslims, both immediately develop feelings for each other.

Ayat-ayat Cinta is a stylishly portrayed Islamic love story–a tale of a virtuous Muslim protagonist who tries to overcome all obstacles in life while maintaining the ideals of Islam. As the story unfolds, the protagonist faces the daunting decisions he has to make while keeping his undying loyalty to the principles of Islamic teaching, as he ultimately makes the choice of a lifetime. Eventually, Fachri marries Aisha, but then Noura accuses him of raping her, and causes him to be thrown in jail. While Maria is the only one who can testify to Fachri's innocence, she is dying of a heart attack after learning of Fachri's marriage and being subjected to an attempted murder by the actual rapist of Noura. To give her a hope of life, but more importantly to free Fachri from the accusation, Aisha begs Fachri to take Maria as his second wife, as both Fachri and Aisha believe that Islamic principles do not allow the opposite sexes to touch each other unless they are a married couple. Fachri refuses at first, but since Maria's condition is critical and she keeps calling his name, Fachri reluctantly agrees. Fachri's touch enables Maria to revive

from her coma; thus she is able to testify in court and Fachri is freed from jail. However, Maria's condition gets better only for a while, and she passes away not long after.

Ayat-ayat Cinta stands out for its Islamic theme since it fits Wright's model as to what constitutes a religious film. The film represents Islamic ideas, rituals, communities, iconography and music, and relies on Islam for the development of narrative, theme, and character. It is also the first film in the history of Indonesian cinema to feature a fully veiled woman (Aisha) as a central character. Nevertheless, it is essentially a melodramatic love story. I categorise it as belonging to an Islamic-romance sub-genre, a new sub-genre within the Islamic film genre, particularly in Indonesia. Because of realising the need for mass appeal in their venture, the producers of *Ayat-ayat Cinta* were keen to emphasise that this film is about love, which is deemed universal. Many pundits recognised that what made *Ayat-ayat Cinta* wildly popular was its recipe of packaging a manual for living in an Islamic way in a melodramatic love story. Despite its richly and markedly Islamic elements, in many sections the film resembles Hollywood and Bollywood films, as well as *sinetron* (Indonesian television dramas).

2. *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih: Propagating Islam to Young Adults*

Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1 and *2* are films directed by Chaerul Umam and released in 2009, based on best-selling books in Indonesia authored by Habiburahman El Shirazy. Both are the first films officially labelled '*halal*' (permissible according to Islamic law) by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic Clerics Association), and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1* is the first Indonesian film made in Egypt.[20] The male protagonist is Abdullah Khairul Azzam, an Al Azhar University student. The film portrays him as a hard worker, a firm and natural leader, and a very pious young man. The main female character is Anna Althafunissa, a Javanese girl, a book lover, an Al Azhar University postgraduate student, and the daughter

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[20] Almost all novels written by El Shirazy take their setting in Egypt, as the author himself completed his education at Al Azhar University. Although *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was intended to be filmed in Egypt, it did not materialise. After the success of this film, the producers who realised the potential of financial gain of an Islamic film committed a much higher budget for the next El Shirazy novel-based film. As a result, the director was able to shoot almost all scenes in Egypt.

of a renowned cleric. She is beautiful and intelligent, as proven by her skills in English, Arabic, and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Islamic legal philosophy). She dresses in an Islamic way by covering her head with a veil, which by no means prevents her from being fashionable. This character is significantly different to the character of Eliana Pramesthi Alam, the only daughter of Indonesian Ambassador for Egypt. Eliana is beautiful, enthusiastic, and determined. She appears in Indonesian TV as a drama actor, and frequently writes in newspapers. In contrast to other female characters depicted, she rarely considers religion in undertaking daily issues and only wears the veil near the end of the film. Azzam also has a best friend, Furqon, who is completely different from him, as he comes from a wealthy family. The postgraduate student of Cairo University is described as foresighted, rational, calculating, and confident. Raised in a family that highly regards competition, quality, prestige and status has made Furqon lavish; he loves to live in luxury.

The story of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1* revolves around the struggle of Khairul Azzam to complete his study and find a wife. He requires nine years to complete his studies, because after his father died, he had to assume the responsibility of supporting his family by producing and selling *tempe* (fermented soybean) and *bakso* (beef ball soup), and being an occasional chef for the Indonesian Ambassador for Egypt. He attempts to marry Anna Althafunissa, also a student of Al Azhar whom he thought he had never met before (actually, he had accidentally helped her when she and her friend were in trouble), but she has already been proposed to by his best friend, Furqon. *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 2* touches more on entrepreneurship, and shows how fate plays a big part in Azzam's life. Although he has attained an overseas university degree, life does not become easy for Azzam when he returns to Indonesia after finally finishing his study at Al Azhar. As he cannot find a worthy job for an overseas graduate, he sets up his own business by selling *bakso* (beef ball soup) called *Bakso Cinta* (Beef Ball Soup of Love) after temporarily working as a courier. After many unsuccessful marriage proposals and a broken engagement, Azzam finally marries Anna, the girl whom he had carried in his heart.

The *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* films were not as commercially successful as *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, but the films, costing US$4 million were popular

among youth. *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1* managed to attact an audience of around three million. While its sequel achieved fewer ticket sales, it gained considerable success at the Indonesian Film Awards in May 2010, and received awards for the Best Male Performance and Best Film. *Ayat-ayat Cinta* has more melodramatic elements befitting a love story than *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. Nevertheless, *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* explores marriage issues in more detail, and offers explanations on why marriage should be pursued through Islamic principles–dating is not allowed and touching the opposite sex is forbidden. The film implies that even though Islamic-style marriage may look like an arranged match, it is not a forced marriage. A woman can reject a marriage proposal if she does not know her suitor beforehand or does not like him. Unlike *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, the *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* films are not merely about love and marriage. *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* portrays a common problem faced by most young adults in Indonesia: the difficulty of finding a good career. A university degree from overseas is not a guarantee of finding a good job.

D. Informants' Response to the Film

Of all research participants I met during fieldwork, only three, A from Jakarta, and L and B from Bandung had doubts that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is a religious film. They said it is a drama-romance film. All other informants thought the film is clearly a religious film. R from Bandung explained that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is a very important Islamic film because:

> It was the first ever Indonesian film to portray modern Muslims on screen. It marked the emergence of the face of Islam within Indonesian cinema. We know, after this move, there were many Islamic films flooding the cinemas, which is a good thing.

He explained that the characters in this film, unlike in other (non-religious) films, displayed overt Islamic attributes. When he was asked about the meaning of 'modern Muslims', he quickly replied, "Just like us, young men, living in the modern world with contemporary problems." Another informant, A, said:

> I really admired *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. The film was so good; perhaps this was the best Indonesian film I ever watched. It contained many Islamic messages that young people need to comprehend.

Meanwhile, R from Bandung, admitted that she only watched the film because she was required by her high school teacher to review an Indonesian film. Yet the film impressed her a lot, and she watched it twice. She recounted her experience:

> I had to thank my teacher. This is a true Islamic film. The story has messages on how to be a true Muslim youth. Had he not assigned me that task [film reviewing], I would never have watched it.

Therefore, it is clear to me that the film has been identified by some Muslim youth as belonging to the Islamic genre and is relevant to them.

L who did not regard *Ayat-ayat Cinta* as an Islamic film said:

> I do not think it is an Islamic film. It is entertainment, a love story between a man and a woman with all the challenges they must face. However, this is a very good one, much better than *sinetron* (TV soap operas). Their acting was more convincing than that of *sinetron* actors.

L and some others even acknowledged that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* entertained them more than *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (KCB). L described her feeling after watching the films:

> Watching KCB was almost the same as attending a *pengajian* (public sermon). While watching AAC was really something enjoyable.

Her view represents a view that the film is, actually, a melodramatic film. It confirms Heryanto argument that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* is, essentially, a love story crafted with good film-making skills, albeit not without some criticism, and that makes the film appealing to most Indonesian Muslim young adults.[21] Therefore, it is not surprising that an important message Bramantyo wanted to convey, the principle of tolerance within Islam, failed to reach the general audience.

Most informants felt that the film deviated from the original (novel) version. Respondent A told me of her opinion about the film:

> I had huge expectations before watching it since I had read the novel. However, the film version was a big disappointment to me. The exotic beauty of Egypt, as written by Kang Abik [the popular name of the author], did not show up on screen. It looks like Egypt is merely dust and dirt. Also, how could Egyptian characters be played by Indonesians?

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[21] Ariel Heryanto, "Upgraded Piety and Pleasure: The New Middle Class and Islam in Indonesian Popular Culture," in Andrew Weintraub (ed.), *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), p. 65.

They talk in Indonesian and really sound like Indonesians.

The choice of actors was another point of dissatisfaction to those informants who happened to be fans of the novel. It is a bit ironic since the need to pull in the younger crowd was the reason to employ popular actors. Fedi Nuril, a model and musician, plays the pious Fachri; Rianti Cartwright, a former popular MTVVJ[22] and model, appears as the burqa-clad German of Turkish descent Aisha; and Carissa Putri, a successful soap opera actress and model, portrays the beautiful Maria Girgis. While there was no objection to the casting of Carissa Putri as Maria (probably because the character is a Coptic-Christian), criticism was directed to the choice of Fedi Nuril and Rianti Cartwright.

My informants questioned why an actor who, in a previous film, had performed a kissing scene, something that does not adhere to Islamic principles, performed the devout Fachri and why an actor who had never worn the veil performed the fully veiled Aisha. One of my respondents, S, a student in Bandung, expressed her concern:

> Why did the director pick un-Islamic stars to play those characters? We have seen how pious they were in the film and were convinced that they were pious too in reality. However, when we learnt about their real life, we were disappointed. Look at Fedi who played Fachri. In his previous film, he did a kissing scene! And Rianti? We thought she became more Islamic after her role as Aisha, but it did not happen. She ended her relationship with a Muslim, then married a Christian in a church. I bet she has converted.

They were also dissatisfied with the performance of Fachri on screen: they said he was "weak and uncertain, completely different to the one in the novel". The novel's fans questioned even the choice of the director. Bramantyo shares a similar background with his actors and almost all his crew; none has special credentials from Islamic institutions, activities, or educational experiences.[23] The exception was El Shirazy –an alumnus of Al Azhar- who plays a cleric in the film.

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[22] VJ is an abbreviation for video jockey. It refers to an announcer who introduces and plays videos on commercial music television such as the United States' station MTV. MTV programmes have been aired in Indonesia through a private TV station for 30 years and the channel is in the centre of an ongoing debate over the cultural and moral influence of music and television on young people and society.

[23] Ariel Heryanto, "Upgraded Piety and Pleasure", p. 70.

The criticism directed at the film was also a result of some scenes being regarded as not fitting into Islamic teaching. For instance, before Fachri met Aisha, he had a close relationship with Maria. Although they never touch each other, they were portrayed as usually in close proximity. B, a student in Bandung, argued that Islam would never allow a man and woman who were *non-muhrim* (not family members) to be in close physical proximity. Furthermore, B explained to me:

> When people, especially Muslims, of the opposite sex meet, they should not deliberately look each other straight in the eyes if they are not a married couple, and the on-screen Fachri and Aisha do not conform to this principle. I suspect the director did not really understand this principle. He should have studied in Egypt at least three months before taking shots.

B said that he watched the film with his family, including an uncle, a lecturer at an IAIN (Institut Agama Islam Negeri / *State Institute for Islamic Studies*) who once went to Al Azhar for a six-month course, and the uncle was very dissatisfied after watching the film. The comments made by B represent a view that film should be a model for reality, as it should set the standards for public morality.

Hanung Bramantyo, the director, had some replies to criticisms such as those above. In an interview, he admitted that he did try to shoot the film in Egypt to fully comply with the depiction of Egypt as written in the novel. Unfortunately, there were financial constraints when his Egyptian counterpart asked for more money, and the producers decided not to increase the budget. Despite this and other difficulties, Bramantyo managed to shoot the film in India, as he thought the place was quite similar to Cairo. The scenes of a traditional market were staged in Semarang, Central Java, and the courtroom scenes were filmed at a cathedral in Jakarta. Despite Bramantyo's efforts, I could not agree more with my informants that he was not able to live up the expectations of being able to capture the nuances of Egypt. In relation to the selection of Fedi Nuril as Fachri, Bramantyo and El Shirazy travelled to various *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) to find a pious, knowledgeable and good-looking Islamic student to portray Fachri. They failed to find such a candidate, and, as a result, they were forced to hold an audition with professional actors. Bramantyo selected Fedi Nuril. He did not want to make this character completely adhere to the depiction in the novel.

Bramantyo felt the novel's character was just too perfect and impossible to find in everyday life. He wanted to make Fachri 'more human', and for him Fedi Nuril was a perfect candidate for the imperfect Fachri. Thus, if one thinks that Fachri is too good to be true, he or she may not have read the novel yet. The character of Fachri in the novel is more like an angel than the one in the film, who is depicted as more fragile, weaker, doubtful, and sometimes losing his confidence.

Many Indonesian youth saw *Ayat-ayat Cinta* as offering fresh entertainment, free from the sex, violence and superstition that had previously dominated Indonesian cinema. Informants regarded the characters of Fachri and Aisha as ideal role models for youth. For them, it did not matter whether the film belongs to the Islamic genre. For instance, I from Bandung, stated:

> I do not really care if that film is not an Islamic film. Fachri is a cool Muslim. He is really like us, from a moderate background. He shows what a good Muslim youth should look like. Fachri is young but pious and smart, and neither radical nor liberal. My older sister also said to me that she wants to be like Aisha, smart, pious, and determined to live by the principles of Islam.

A Christian student in Bandung, H, also praised the characters as offering good role models for Indonesian youth.

> I know some people took it as an Islamic film, but I did not really care about that. I watched it with my Muslim friends. We have never seen films portraying good role models as in AAC. Fachri is a very good example for Indonesian young people: pious but open-minded and modern.

Their comments, which are representative of other informants' views, echo Turner's point that heroes and heroines of films offer a kind of wish fulfilment, and the adoration for them is the expression of a wish that they may unconsciously want to fulfil.[24] Thus, I can conclude Fachri and Aisha offer an attractive blend of piety and modernity, since in these on-screen characters, Muslim young adults found embodiment's of the identities to which they aspired.

Unlike *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1 and 2* were identified as Islamic films by all research participants. R, a student in Jakarta, described how the film contained plenty of Islamic symbols, rituals,

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

and lessons.

> It was obvious for my friends and me that this was a real Islamic film. You can see it in the piety of its characters. They pray five times, read the Quran, and obey Islamic lessons. They maintain their sincerity and good behaviour, no matter how hard the problem they must face. Almost all women there wear the veil. They show us how to be a good Muslim.

She explained that it did not mean that she had never had lessons on how to be a good Muslim before, but rather that the film embodies Islamic teachings taught to her before she went to university. Another respondent, I, said that she watched the film with colleagues, since many of their seniors at an Islamic group recommended it.

> This is a film you don't want to miss. It gives examples of what a good Muslim should look like. Maybe you already know about characters of good Muslims by reading the book and listening to clerics, but if you see it on screen, you will be more sure about it.

A, a student in Jakarta, recounted his experience of how *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1* reminded him about the true Islamic way:

> The story was really touching. I even cried at that time because when I was at high school, I committed many wrongdoings, and the film made me realise that those were sins. Since then, my life has been changed. Now, I am fully committed to Islam.

For my research participants, *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* is a catalyst for self-reflection and for perfecting their lessons on Islam, as a film can have more impact in delivering lessons than books and traditional face-to-face sermons.

The above account conveys how *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* serves as 'a model for reality' or an ethos as proposed by Lyden.[25] Some research participants conceived the film as acting in the interest of Islam to show young Muslims how to be good Muslims. A comment by G, a student in Bandung, exemplifies this:

> If young people want to know what Muslims look like and how Muslims live their life, they should watch this film. It can guide us to be better Muslims.

Another comment by O, a student in Jakarta, reveals that for other

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

participants the *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* series also served as a model of reality.

> These films were not only showing that this is what Muslims should be doing, but also how they are actually doing it, and what can happen to them in real life. You can look at Azzam. His character is something we can easily find in our daily life. He is not out of reach.

The views of these films as both reflection of real life and guide for a good life are two of the reference points guiding my informants as they compared *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. Another one is whether the films adhere to their respective novel versions.

When I asked my informants' opinions of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, they always compared it to *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, and some of them considered the former as the better film. They deemed Chaerul Umam's films better and 'more Islamic' than Bramantyo's film in many respects. Most informants agreed that despite Bramantyo's ability to deliver a melodramatic love story, he failed to deliver the panoramic beauty of Egypt on screen, and Umam did what Bramantyo did not. The latter gave to the audience picturesque views the readers of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* dreamt about. The importance of having scenes filmed in Egypt is not solely due to adherence to the novel version. M said that for her Egypt signifies Islamic modern civilisation, as well as a place where Islamic scholarship is well maintained:

> When I read the novel, I imagine that Egypt is a beautiful, modern city, as modern as Paris. Cairo is where the University of Al Azhar is located. We know that Al Azhar is the best place to go if we want to learn Islam from the best Muslim scholars.

Every scene in *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* was directed and crafted in accordance with Islamic principles where members of the cast had to be Muslims, and every scene needed to follow the principles of sharia.[26] However, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* had a kissing scene and an implied sex scene, although it was not really shown. Some informants felt embarrassed that such scenes existed in a supposedly Islamic film.

My informants evaluated how Azzam and Anna behaved as more

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[26] Renal R. Kasturi, "Chaerul Umam's Ambivalence," in http://www.jurnalfootage.net/v2/en/profile/260-ambivalensi-sikap-chae, 2010, accessed, 12 August 2011.

closely adhering to Islamic values than Fachri and Aisha, and more real. D from Jakarta compared the characters of Fachri and Azzam:

> It is not that Fachri is not Islamic. It is just that Azzam is more determined to apply Islamic principles in his life. Fachri, from what I can see, is not sure. For example, when he has to commit polygamy. It is permissible by Islam. Why does he have to be doubtful? It is different to Azzam. When his beautiful female friend wants to give him a French kiss, he strongly objects to it. It is incorrect according to Islam.

Meanwhile, G, a student in Bandung, saw a better character in Anna as compared to Aisha:

> Aisha is a good and devout Muslim, and she wears a *burqa*, not just a *jilbab*. However, she is not shown as being as pious as Anna. Aisha has doubts concerning Fachri's love and innocence; that is why she is jealous and goes away alone after Fachri takes Maria as his second wife. She could not accept Maria. It is not a good thing to be done by a pious Muslim woman. Aisha also dares to stare at Fachri when they have not been married yet. A fully veiled woman should not do this. Anna is more consistent in adhering to Islamic principles than Aisha.

Moreover, in line with the principle that films can be a model of reality, characters in *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* are counted as 'more real' and down to earth than those in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. O, a student in Jakarta, said:

> I think Fachri is not believable. How could he attract the attention of four beautiful women and manage to marry two of them and one of them is rich? Azzam is more real than Fachri. He is handsome, pious, diligent, and smart, but his marriage proposals are rejected four times. Anna and Eliana are also more real than Aisha. Aisha is beautiful, devout, intelligent, kind and rich. How many women like her can you find in daily life? Anna is a pretty, smart and pious girl but she is not as rich as Aisha. Eliana is smart, beautiful, and rich, but she is not a pious woman.

The notions that pious characters have to be played by film stars who are pious not only in the films, but also in everyday life outside the movies, and that film characters have to be as close as possible to real people in everyday life do matter for my informants. Turner says that film stars must have some representativeness, some recognisable elements, which viewers can use to link the film with their experiences or

aspirations.[27] My research participants could not recognise the existence of a character like Fachri in everyday life and could not accept that an actor who was not pious performed as a pious character. They wanted characters who are down to earth and actors who are devout in their real life. Informants demanded film stars that can link the real with the ideal, the audience with ideal Muslim youth.

The similarity of the film-viewing experience to religious experience, as put forward by Lyde[28] is evident in my research. Films such as *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* encourage certain moods and motivations among Muslim youths. After watching both films, Y felt that she would have to do the right thing according to Islam, and M from Bandung said, "I need to improve my understanding of Islam and apply it in my life." This is in accordance with Lyden's theory that films, as a set of symbols, both visual and narrative, establish moods and motivations.[29] Moods indicate emotional reactions to certain situations and this was visible when informants reacted quickly after they watched the films. The motivations inculcated by the films inclined film viewers to intend to do certain things, such as improve their understanding of Islam and practise Islam in daily life.

Some informants did not intend to actually do the things they had seen done in the films. A, O, R and B told me that they did not want to engage in polygamy as in *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. The film did not present polygyny as ideal, but presented it in a positive manner and made the idea of polygamy may attract the interest of Muslim males. Nevertheless, in the words of R, who wanted to marry in the year 2012, "Engaging in a polygamous marriage is a very big thing that I can never imagine I will be ready for." Yet, as stated by Lyden, film tends to express some of the hopes of the target audience.[30] I found such hopes in a statement by I, a student in Bandung, "Azzam is an inspirational leader and a very pious person that we should have in reality. And every Muslim youth should be like him". The experience of watching both films is communal too, as proposed by Lyden.[31] Almost all informants who watched the

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[27] *Ibid.*, p. 141.
[28] Lyden, *Film as Religion*, p. 46.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

films memorised dialogue from the films, such as 'Patience and *ikhlas* (sincerity)…that is Islam' (from *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*). They also discussed the films, even though they did not remember exactly what had been said by the films' characters after they watched it.

Although to most informants, *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* and *Ayat-ayat Cinta* played an important role in emphasising the importance of Islam for their life, a few research participants deemed the films inadequate in transmitting the messages of Islam to all young people. R pointed out some weaknesses of the films:

> Those films are important to 'Islamise' cinema since sex, horror and violence themes have preoccupied Indonesian cinema.However, if the author, director and producer of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* wanted the film to transmit Islamic lessons to the youth, their intentions were not realised. The films were clearly designated for those who are just about to move forward to be adults. The ones, who need those [Islamic films] much more, are teenagers, and currently there is no teenage Islamic film. The films are also not useful for those who want to have a deeper knowledge of Islam. The films are just for people who only have a limited knowledge. Those who want to further study about Islam should read books and discuss them with established *ustadz*.

His statement was somewhat true, as all current Islamic films for young people were picturing the story of university student-aged characters (around 20 years old and above), and were transmitting only basic knowledge of Islam. None of the films centred upon a narrative about secondary school students, nor were they delivering a higher level Islamic knowledge, which would be necessary for people who are already well versed in Islam. R's statement also signalled the desire to see that Islamic films reach all ages, as well as the acknowledgement that films can be a powerful tool to educate people about religion.

Some of my research informants also showed their awareness of the propagating missions of Islamic films. According to A, apart from their entertainment function, Islamic films are part of a *dakwah* mission:

> Many people would think that the films are merely entertainment but in my opinion they have a sort of mission to teach young people about some basic knowledge of Islam; especially in the *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* films. Almost everybody involved in the production have a significant Islamic background and the story was written by someone who has been

educated in Al Azhar. The love story in the films merely served to deliver their Islamic messages.

Another research participant, N, explained to me why he felt that the directors and producers of Islamic films, particularly of the *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* series, were actually making religious films, but with an entertainment flavour, not the other way around:

> If we read the novels, we can feel that they teach us how important it is to apply Islamic principles in our daily life. Because the director of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* really adhered to the novels, we can also have the same feeling when we watch the movies. The basic story is about how a Muslim youth faces many challenges when he applies Islamic principles to daily life, and, no matter what the challenge is, he can overcome it. I think the author of the novel included the love story only to attract the reader's attention in order to deliver Islamic teachings.

Although it was revealed that a few other informants regarded the films as merely entertainment, I do not have any doubt that my informants were capable of identifying the potential propaganda of the films.

E. Islamic Identity and Modified Appropriation

What is the term that best captures the response of Muslim youngsters to Islamic identity propagation by Islamic films? Bayat introduced the term 'subversive accommodation' to describe the utilisation of the prevailing norms and institutions by Muslim youths in Iran to accommodate their youthful claims.[32] In doing so, they redefined and subverted codes and norms that constrained them in asserting their youthfulness. Certainly, the context within which Bayat coined the term 'subversive accommodation' is different to the context of my research. In Bayat's study, the norms and institutions are authorities limiting the youth from freely expressing their identity. Thus, in attempting to construct their youthfulness, young people in Iran did not challenge the existing structural and cultural barriers, but rather accepted and, at the same time, modified them. For example, the young in Iran turned a highly religious occasion for Shia followers, the ritual of *Muharram* (the mourning of

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[32] Asef Bayat, "Muslim Youth and the Claim of Youthfulness," in Linda Herrera dan Asef Bayat (eds.), *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.36.

the death of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad), into an evening of glamour, fun and sociability.[33]

In my research, films are neither a norm nor a moral institution. At least, if they are, they have a sufficiently different form and style to the religious authorities. Even though they propagate a particular Islamic ideology and offer moral prescriptions to the youth, there is no obligation on the part of youth to adhere. However, as I have discussed, the intention of the authors of Islamic novels and film directors to propagate Islamic principles is crystal clear and my informants could sense their powerful messages. I call my informants' responses 'modified appropriation': they accepted and appropriated some of the messages, but modified others. The common sentiment I found among my informants during the process of acceptance and appropriation is "*Kita sendiri yang harus memilih mana yang tepat mana yang enggak* (we must choose which one is appropriate for us and which one is not)." My informants agreed on the importance of veil wearing for women, but some argued that the most important part to be covered is the heart, not the body. Although they accepted that courtship should be pursued according to the principles of Islamic teaching, no one wanted to marry solely based on piety. Most of them have a boy/girlfriend, something that is visibly prohibited, according to the films they watched. They learnt, or, at least, are keen to learn Arabic but are motivated by the trendiness of Arabic, not by religious imperative as in the films.

There is one question that needs to be answered at this point: did young Muslims take for granted the kind of identity and the version of Islam promoted by Islamic self-help books? To what extent were they affected by the films, or were they affected at all? My research proved that while Islamic films promoted a particular Islamic identity and Muslim youths made them into an important reference against which to construct their own identity, the identity that my informants currently construct is not exactly the same as that propagated by the films.

There are some particular characteristics of Islamic identity displayed in the films, particularly in *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. First, in the films, all female Muslim characters wear the veil, except Eliana in *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, who only takes up the veil in the

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[33] *Ibid.*, p.36.

last scene. In the self-help books, when the cover portrays a Muslim female, she always wears the veil. When the books mention Muslim females, there is always a suggestion that wearing the veil is one of several criteria to being a good Muslim woman. The films and the books reinforce the prevalent idea that being a female Muslim entails wearing the veil.[34] Almost all research participants agree that a female Muslim should cover her body and, in the contemporary Islamic setting, that means wearing the veil. The practice of wearing the veil is popular among university students, and this is not a surprise given that it was university students who started the phenomenon of veiling in Indonesia in the 1990s. However, A told me that 'menjilbabi hati lebih penting daripada menjilbabi tubuh (veiling the heart is more important than veiling the body)'. In his reply to my further question of what he meant by 'veiling the heart', A said that someone would be valued as a good person on the basis of his/her kindness much more than on the basis of what he/she wears. Kindness will be reflected in attitude, behaviour, disposition, character and manner. A said that if a veiled woman could not behave modestly, then a non-veiled woman who behaves modestly is better. E, also a student in Bandung, pointed out another interpretation of the Quran: that actually what Islam meant was not exactly that one must wear a tight veil, but instead one should wear modest dress which depends on circumstance and culture. Her statement resembles Hamdani's argument[35] that the standard of modesty in the case of Islamic attire is different from one culture to another, even though the idea of covering certain parts of the body might be universal. Although E wore the veil, she did not think that she stood on higher moral ground than her non-veiled

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[34] Some Muslim thinkers debated the notion that a female Muslim must wear the veil. According to a renowned Indonesian Muslim thinker, Ulil Abshar Abdall, in a personal conversation, Quran actually said that all Muslims (not only women) must wear modest dress according to local norms. In the Arab Peninsula during the period of Prophet Muhammad, the veil is a modest dress for women, and also the most appropriate dress in regard to the circumstances of the desert. It is fine if a non-Arab woman choose to wear the veil as long as it is a voluntary act, not a decision enforced by others. Other Muslim scholars also agree that veiling is a continuation of regional customs, practiced by women in Arabia in the beginning period of Islam, that has mistakenly become enshrined as a religious edict (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p.51).

[35] Deni Hamdani, "The Quest for Indonesian Islam: Contestation and Consensus Concerning Veiling," *Ph.D. Thesis*, Australian National University, 2007), p. 76.

fellow Muslims.

A second characteristic of Islamic identity is that all aspects of life should be dedicated to the worship of God. All actions by a good Muslim should be directed toward the Almighty, including private aspects, such as love and marriage. Therefore, the conduct of love and marriage should be pursued through religious guidance. I have written elsewhere how the films show the audience how to pursue a proper relationship between man and woman by Islamic principles. All informants agree that their entire life should be dedicated to worshipping God. Smith-Hefner's study[36] found that although currently many Indonesian youth postpone marriage, they have not abandoned marriage and still plan to marry, since marriage remains a religious, as well as a social, imperative. Yet, my research participants did not apply all principles introduced in the films. Some of the participants did not apply the principle of avoiding physically touching people of the opposite sex; none of them wanted to marry without dating. H from Bandung said to me that since he joined Rohis or Unit Kerohanian Islam (Islamic Spiritual Unit) at high school, he greets his female colleagues by putting his hands in front of his chest, instead of shaking hands, a move which caused confusion for his friends the first time he did it. Although he knew the principle before he watched any Islamic film, he felt that this principle was justified by the films of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, as none of the characters physically touched the opposite sex if they were not family members. However, he thought that knowing his partner before marriage was better than an arranged marriage:

> I would be more comfortable if I could marry the girl whom I knew before marriage. It would be strange to marry someone I didn't really know just because she looks like a *sholehah* (pious) girl. Of course, piety is one of the requirements I will be looking for in a wife in the future. But, in order to know whether she is really pious, I would have to know her in daily life.

Inquiring about the process of getting to know his potential wife, I asked, "*Could that be called 'pacaran' (dating)?*", and he replied, '*It's up to other*

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[36] Nancy Smith-Hefner, "Young People Language, Gaul Sociability and the New Indonesian Middle Class," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 2007, Vol. 17, No. 2, December, p.147.

people if they call it that. But I wouldn't see it that way.' Another informant, S, a student in Jakarta, who also agreed with courtship by Islamic principles, was more relax than H:

> Yes, getting close to the one we love is dating, but in an Islamic way. No kissing or anything else beyond that. But holding hands is not a dangerous thing, I guess. The important thing is, like what Aa Gym[37] said, *jagalah hati* (keep your heart pure). As long as we can keep faith in our heart, we're not going to be pulled toward sinful acts'.

In fact, most of my informants have boy/girlfriends, and they live their life in much the same manner as their more 'secular' colleagues, such as having lunch and dinner together, going to the cinema, and hanging out in the malls with their '*pacar*' (boy/girlfriend). Although O, S, Y, M, B and W admired the characters in Islamic films, they shared their stories with me about how they spent their spare time with their opposite sex friends. When I asked further questions of what the differences between dating *a la* Islam with non-Islamic dating, S said that Islamic dating starts by meeting family members. For example, before she and her boyfriend went out for the first time, her boyfriend met with her aunt with whom she lived in Jakarta. B had a different idea about what makes an Islamic courtship differ to a non-Islamic one:

> I think my courtship is in accord with Islamic teachings because I date her [B's girlfriend] not only because of her physical appearance, but also because of her piety. We met when we attended a *pesantren kilat Ramadan* [an informal Islamic class held only during Ramadan). She is a very pious and very kind girl. That a girl can be very Islamic even though her friends and family are not so was very interesting to me and made me fall in love.

Nevertheless, for me, their experiences were not that different to their 'not-so-Islamic' friends. Dating in an Islamic way, as proposed by S and B, is a way to deal with both romance and religion: getting together with the loved one and implementing God's guidance at the same time.

Having said that most research participants chose to have boy/girlfriends, some of them began to think about early marriage after they

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[37] Aa Gym was a very famous Islamic preacher and management guru who popularised the term 'jagalah hati' (keep your heart pure). The term became more popular when, in 2006, he created a song with the same title which was performed by Snada, a popular nasyid (Islamic vocal music) group.

watched the films. The two Islamic films, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, introduced to Muslim youths the principle that it was better to have an early marriage than a girl/boyfriend. Although the character of Furqon in *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* marries only after he has graduated from university and has a decent income, the film holds the same principle as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*: that religion only allows a relationship between a man and a woman within a legal marital status. My Jakartan informant, D, admitted that he and his girlfriend discussed the possibility of marrying at an early age:

> We had this idea shortly after we watched *Ayat-ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. Actually, it was not the first time that we came to know that Islam does not allow *pacaran* (dating). We heard that before, back when we were at high school. However, the films reminded us how important that principle is. Then, almost immediately, I thought "Hey, why don't we marry right now?" My girlfriend argued that we must be sure that we are ready before making any decision. I said to her that we can *nikah siri*[38] if we do not want our study being interrupted.

Currently, D, continues his undergraduate studies, and has updated his status on Facebook as being married but he has yet to publish his wedding photos, something many Facebook users do when they actually marry. He confirmed positively when I asked whether he was *nikah siri*. M and W also stated that their Islamic film-watching experience influenced their intention to have an early marriage, though, until now, it is yet to be realised. Another informant, R, said that most, if not all, of his university fellows agree that it is better for Muslim young people to marry than to have a girl/boyfriend and the films have had a certain impact on this:

> Dating can only bring us to sin. It has been clearly stated by Islam. I think every Muslim would agree with that. However, some of them, particularly my junior colleagues, only understand this after they watch Islamic films like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*.

Here the films serve as a reminder for Muslims that marriage is an

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[38] In Indonesia, every marriage of Muslims should be registered at the Office of Religious Affairs, while non-Muslims should go to the Civil Court. Menikah siri (literally means 'secret marriage') is not a registered marriage, and is not legal according to official rules. However, it is legal according to religious rules because Islam only requires the presence of an ustadz (Islamic preacher) to legalise the marriage and the parents or guardians of both sides to be witnesses.

important step to their lives to prevent them being fallen into sin. The point related to the issue of identity is actually not the early marriage itself, but rather the significance of applying Islamic principles in life. As R puts it, "the willingness to apply Islamic principles is the one that differentiates the real Muslim with the others". Chosing early marriage over dating to avoid the sin is one of many signs that a Muslim applies Islamic principles.

Being a Muslim youth also requires preference for Islamic symbols and taste over non-Islamic ones. Apart from the wearing of Islamic attire, this is also shown in the Islamic films by the use of Arabic terms at every available opportunity. My research participants showed how they were affected by Islamic films in this matter. One respondent, I, told me that before she watched the films, she would say '*terima kasih* (thank you)'. After she watched *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, she used Arabic terms like '*jazākallāh*' or '*shukran*' rather than Indonesian terms to express thanks. Her close friend, M, had already used Arabic terms before watching the films, however, she felt more confident and became more consistent in using the terms. She explained to me the reason why she preferred to employ Arabic terms:

> We, Muslims all over the world, are brothers and sisters. If we don't acknowledge and respect each other, that would be disaster. This was clearly stated in the Quran. The most effective and efficient way to relate with each other as fellow Muslims is by using Arabic, as it is the language used by Allah to deliver His messages through the Quran. Initially, some of my friends did not realise this. Fortunately, thanks to the films, in particular *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*, they became aware, and now they speak Arabic, of course, at the appropriate times.

M's words confirm Hoekstra's argument that religious film watching inspires viewers to link film and life experience, to reflect upon their own life experiences, and, quite often, to change their behaviour.[39] Here, as in the case of the piety movement in Egypt, behaviour is at the core of the enforcement of the norm by Islamic groups.[40]

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[39] Henk Hoekstra, "Film Education in a Christian Perspective," in John R. May (peny.), *New Image of Religious Film* (Franklin: Sheed & Ward, 1997), p. 186.

[40] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 24.

F. Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I reiterate Turner's point that a film text is not unitary in its meaning, but rather is a sort of battlefield for competing and contradicting ideas.[41] Even though it is possible for a certain idea to emerge as a victor, there are always gaps, cracks, and divisions. Islamic authors, film directors and producers, have aimed to disseminate Islamic messages to young viewers. For authors and directors, Islamic films have become a means for Islamic values' propagation. For producers, they have become a new means to financially exploit young people, particularly from urban middle classes. In the propagation endeavour, Islamic films employ romantic elements to attract the attention of Muslim young people. All my research participants agreed that *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* is 'more Islamic' than *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, yet not all of them like it more than *Ayat-ayat Cinta*. Some of them said that the latter touches their heart and engages with their emotions much more than the *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* films do. Some others felt that watching the story of Azzam was similar to their experience of attending a sermon, which was 'not fun', notwithstanding their acknowledgment that it was good for them. Even within the circle of Islamic film production, there are ideological differences between directors. Therefore, the intention of Islamic filmmakers to educate young Muslims to be good Muslims in accordance with the wave of Islamisation is not as successful as some of them may expect.

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[41] Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, p. 198.

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