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Ariel Heryanto, Valuing popular culture

Aimee Dawis , Contributor , Jakarta | Thu, 06/25/2009 11:08 AM | People

Most regular readers of Kompas between 1995 and 2008 would be familiar with Ariel Heryanto from his column "Asal Usul" (Origins), in which he tackled such provocative subjects as pornography and communism.

During its run under Heryanto, "Asal Usul" garnered a loyal following of readers who appreciated Heryanto's candor, his skillful and elegant use of Indonesian, and his creative insight.



(Courtesy of Ariel Heryanto)

The writer, social commentator and academic, currently head of the Southeast Asia Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra, was in Indonesia last month to deliver a lecture on "Popular Culture in Southeast Asian Studies: An Indonesian Perspective." This lecture was part of a series of lectures sponsored by the Southeast Asian Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) at the University of Indonesia.

Addressing students from Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Indonesia, Heryanto argued that the study of popular culture is a recent phenomenon. In the past, he pointed out, centers for Southeast Asian Studies all over the world focused on nation-building, international relations, militarism and terrorism.

Since the early 1990s, increasing globalization has caused shifts in Southeast Asian Studies. The complexities arising from globalization mean that experts in the field have moved away from a focus on nation-state to one on trans-nationalization, from political-economy to media and cultural studies, and from the dichotomy of

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East-versus-West to hybrid identity, mobility and diaspora.

The explosion of East Asian cultural products, in the form of television series and films from South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan, attest to the trans-Asian appeal of these media. Heryanto pointed out that East Asian cultural products have enjoyed enormous popularity because "they are trans-Asian in flavor and representation and usually characterize young people who consume Western products *e.g. iPods and iPhones*, strive to be wealthy and dine at Western restaurants." He compared this to films made in Thailand, which are less successful because of "language and cultural barriers" that not all viewers across Asia can identify with.

In Indonesia, Heryanto's latest work deals with the rise of East Asian popular culture and the new celebration of "Chineseness" that has taken place since 1998. Because of the country's "unresolved history of ethnic tensions", Heryanto is interested in looking at "what the viewers found so appealing".

By showing clips and images from Meteor Garden, the extremely popular Taiwanese series that caused mass hysteria in Indonesia when it was released in 2002, Heryanto showed how "the quest for wealth and respect is a dominant theme in almost all trans-Asian cultural products". Moreover, well-known Korean series such as Winter Sonata and Autumn in My Heart (also known as Endless Love) charm viewers through "the characters' successful engagement with the conditions of modern living in big cities, beautiful scenery and the actors' superior physical appearance".

In post-1998 Indonesia, Heryanto discovered not only the popularity of East Asian cultural products but also new portrayals of "Chineseness" on the movie screen. Several films produced after 1998, however, tended not to use local Chinese stars, he pointed out. The leftist Gie, based on the life of the activist Soe Hok Gie, released in 2005, features the teenage heartthrob Nicholas Saputra, who is Eurasian. The Photograph, released in 2007, focuses on a middle-aged Chinese-Indonesian man's relationship with a pribumi (indigenous Indonesian) woman and features Lim Kay Tong, a veteran actor from Singapore. An exception is the 2002 release Ca Bau Kan, starring Ferry Salim, a Chinese-Indonesian actor who portrays a successful businessman with a pribumi woman as his wife.

The emphasis on race and ethnicity is much less obvious in recent films such as the teenage romantic comedy 30 Hari Mencari Cinta (Looking for Love in 30 Days). In this film, one of the main characters is a Chinese-Indonesian girl but she is not distinguished from the others by her ethnicity. Heryanto's clip of the Chinese-Indonesian girl singing the theme song to Meteor Garden in Mandarin also shows how accepting Indonesian society has become of Chinese culture and language after it was banned for more than 33 years during the Soeharto era.

Another point of interest that Heryanto shared in his lecture is the increasing popularity of religious films in Indonesia, such as Ayat-Ayat Cinta (Verses of Love). According to Heryanto, "Islam teaches its followers to exercise restraint of pleasure and extols piety. In Indonesia, however, which is predominantly Muslim, Indonesian popular culture is all about pleasure." An example of this would be Inul Darastita's sexually suggestive ngebor (drilling) moves that catapulted her to dangdut stardom.

In 2008, however, Ayat-Ayat Cinta surprised everyone by becoming one of the

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biggest blockbusters in Indonesia. Ayat-Ayat Cinta's male protagonist is a young, handsome Muslim intellectual who falls for a girl who wears a veil for most of the film. Heryanto argued that Ayat-Ayat Cinta became so popular because it introduced a new expression of desire contained in a religious theme. Following the success of Ayat-Ayat Cinta, many religious soap operas and films have been produced in Indonesia, although none has enjoyed the spectacular success of their predecessor.

As Heryanto concluded his lecture, he reminded the students that globalization has brought Asian cultural products into homes all over the world. Hence, studying popular culture will reveal new insights into the constantly changing nature of identities.

"It is time," he stated, "to recognize the immense potential of popular culture, which is often overlooked, undervalued and misunderstood. William Shakespeare's works, after all, were also part of popular culture at his time. Look how revered they are today."

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