At the Crossroad of Genre and Gender:
The Absence of Female Investigators in Indonesian Crime Films

Evi Eliyanah

Biodata: Evi Eliyanah is a faculty member at Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. She is currently completing her PhD at Australian National University. Her doctoral research topic is representations of masculinities in Indonesian cinema. evi.eliyanah@anu.edu.au

Abstract

This article examines the relative absence of female investigator characters in contemporary Indonesian crime films. In order to better understand this absence, I place contemporary crime films into historical perspective and argue that the development trajectory of the crime film genre in Indonesia, coupled with the everyday realities of Indonesian gender politics, contribute to the persistent absence of this particular form of female protagonists. While the gender politics in the twenty-first century Indonesia has indeed progressively advanced women’s rights and status culturally, politically and economically, this progress is at best selective, and has not yet been extended to the extremely male dominated professions such as crime investigation, both on and off the screen. Off-screen realities indirectly structure the representations of gender on-screen, making female investigator characters remain largely unthinkable. Meanwhile, the consistent favouring of male heroism in Indonesian cinema continues to reinforce everyday gender stereotypes. This article reflects on these complex interactions between fictional representation and lived realities, and ultimately reveals the potent symbolic potential of the female investigator character.

Introduction

This article investigates the relative absence of female investigator characters in contemporary Indonesian crime films. To understand the absence of this character today, it is vital to place the development of the genre into historical perspective, taking into account the various shifts that have occurred since the early twentieth century. The twenty-first century Indonesian cinema represents progress in many respects. Sasono (2012) and Barker (2011) associate the era with the emergence of a new generation of Indonesian filmmakers, which breaks away from the previous generation under the authoritarian regime. Many films produced by this new generation of filmmakers represent progress in terms of themes, such as Arisan! (2003, Nia Dinata) with its positive portrayals of gay men. They also represent progress in terms of characters, such as Fahri of Ayat-Ayat Cinta (2008, Hanung Bramantyo), which emphasises religious piety in depicting an ideal masculine figure. The flourishing women’s cinema at this given time also marks the intensified struggle to produce screen representations of women as more independent and autonomous individuals (Kurnia 2014). Yet progress has not been extended to making significant changes in the representations of women, especially the ‘good women’, in crime films. Good women are more likely to be victims of crime perpetrated by men. Men continue to represent the solution to crime; they investigate the crime scene and catch the criminals. Until 2014, there was hardly any Indonesian commercial crime film offering
independent, strong and autonomous female investigators as a crucial element in crime solving. This essay seeks to understand the underlying reasons behind this absence. It does so by exploring the intersection between the development of crime film genre in Indonesian cinema and gender politics in Indonesia.

I argue that the contemporary gender politics and the development of the crime film genre in Indonesia since the early twentieth century contribute significantly to the persistent absence of female protagonists. The gender politics in the twenty first century Indonesia has indeed progressively advanced women’s rights and status culturally, politically and economically. The notion of ‘working women’ has emerged as a strong alternative feminine gender norm in contemporary Indonesia. However, this progress is at best selective and has not been extended to extremely male dominated professions such as crime investigation. Not only do female investigators remain scarce, media and popular culture continue to reproduce the male domination of this profession. Off-screen reality indirectly structures the representations of gender on-screen; it makes female investigator characters remain largely unconceivable. Moreover, the consistent favouring of male heroism in Indonesian crime films further contributes to the ongoing strength of stereotypical gender roles in contemporary Indonesia.

Before going on further, I need to clarify my use of the term of crime film. Indeed, there is no unanimous definition of this genre, and the broader debate over definition of this genre and its features is beyond the scope of this article. For the sake of clari ty, I borrow Rafter’s (2000) generic definition of crime films as films which mainly focus on crime and its consequences (p.5). They are films which on the one hand criticise some legal aspects of the society, i.e. police violence, prison violence, legal obstacles to justice, or the threat of crime; and, on the other, they characteristically offer the viewers some solace or resolution by showing the triumph over the corruption and brutality, regardless of the existence of hero (Rafter 2000:3). I maintain that crime film is a genre mainly because it has generic features, albeit very broad. This is indeed a large ‘umbrella’ genre. Under the crime film genre are a number of sub-genres, such as detective films, gangster films, police and prison films, courtroom dramas, and many other films which may fall under no better generic label than simply, crime stories (Rafter 2000:5). I address the absence of female crime investigators in crime film genre in general since I believe that such characters are not exclusively bound to the detective sub-genre.

The above definition thus excludes films in which crime may feature in the plot but is not central to its narrative progression. For example, this definition will certainly exclude Ayat-ayat Cinta (2008, Hanung Bramantyo) although the plot features the obstacles to the protagonist’s efforts to obtain justice. The film’s plot is not driven by the crime or the trial, but mainly by the protagonist’s search for the ideal marriage partner. This definition also excludes films like Sule Detektif Tokek (2013, Reka Wijaya) and Comic 8 franchise (Comic 8 Casino Kings Part 1, 2014, Comic 8 Casino Kings Part 2, 2015, Anggy Umbara) because they are predominantly intended as comedy. It finally also excludes horror films, such as Suster Ngesot (2007, Arie Azis) because the film revolves more around the spirit, who is a victim of crime, seeking vengeance against the perpetrators.

I begin this paper by examining the significance of female investigators in crime films. Why do these characters matter and what is their symbolic potential? Keeping in mind the complex relationship between fictional representations and lived realities, I then turn to the off-screen gender politics in contemporary Indonesia in order to understand the selective progress achieved in gender equality in post-authoritarian Indonesia, since the fall of Suharto’s New Oder
regime in 1998. The extremely low rate of women’s involvement in military and security related professions, below 5% of the total number, has arguably sustained the masculine domination of investigative professions. It has made the role of women as female investigators far less visible than that of men, which has implications both on and off the screen. To further develop the nuances of this picture, I will then discuss the historical development of crime film genre in Indonesian cinema. I will show that crime films in Indonesian cinema since its inception in the early twentieth century have favoured male heroism and left women as victims and *femme fatale*. I reflect on the broader cultural impacts of these representations, and conclude that if female investigators remain unfamiliar off- and on-screen, the stereotypical masculine nature of crime film will continue to go un-challenged.

**On the Relevance of Female Investigators in Cinema**

This section examines why female investigator characters in cinema matter. Reflecting on the cinema traditions in other patriarchal societies, this section argues that female investigators characters have been deployed as a strategy to legitimise women’s claim of power, especially regarding their control of the environment in which women are often the victims. The female investigator characters represent a potent challenge to not only the male domination of the crime film genre and investigative professions, but also to the dominant construction of culturally exalted femininity and masculinity. Consequently, the absence of female investigators in any cinematic tradition in which crime films thrive creates a wide lacuna of potential representations of gender equality.

First, female investigator characters can play a vital role in challenging or even overturning the hegemony of male investigators in the crime films. The narrative of crime films conventionally is driven either male criminals or male crime investigators; women are often objectified in the crime act and/or in the process of investigation (Mizejewski 1993:6). Indonesian crime films are no exception, with male investigators representing the legal and knowledge authority in crime investigation. The rare representations of women who are legally armed and become the primary drivers of films’ narratives signals a serious transgression of the genre’s formal conventions. Female investigators represent women’s legal and knowledge authority in solving crime—a power generally reserved for male detectives, such as the legendary Sherlock Holmes, James Bond 007, or in the Indonesian case, Rama of *The Raid* franchise (2011, 2014, Gareth Evans), one of the most popular undercover male investigators in contemporary Indonesian cinema. Crime films with female investigators disrupt such norms, as these characters’ intellectual authority and physical strength in navigating the precarious environment of crime scenes and their investigation afford them power to be equal to men or even to be team leaders in crime investigation, particularly in areas in which women tend to be victims. Moreover, female investigator characters, especially those positioned within official law-enforcing institutions, can be a legitimate representation of feminism’s suspicion of legal institutions, such as the police and the department of justice (Mizejewski 1993:6). Female detectives can question the legitimacy of male heroism and expose their male counterparts’ complicity with crime, repression and abuse (see Cooper 1989; Cawelti 2012). Thus, female investigators are crucial to counter the dominance of male investigators in crime film and help to normalise the idea of women as investigators off-screen.

Historically, female investigator characters usually appear later than their male counterparts in patriarchal cinema traditions which tend to valorise male heroism and female submission. This is despite the fact that the crime film genre has captivated both male and
female audience. In Hollywood, while crime film first became popular in the early twentieth century, the female investigator characters did not appear until the 1930s (see Todd 2000; Gates 2009; Gates 2011). Indonesian cinema follows a similar trajectory. The first crime film in the Netherland East Indies was arguably a silent film titled Si Tjonat (1929, Nelson Wong).\(^1\) However, to the best of my knowledge, the first female investigator appeared in 1961,\(^2\) in 1000 Langkah (Turino Djunaidy), in which a female undercover police officer was sent on a mission to solve a murder case. Yet, the female investigator was soon turned into a victim ultimately to be saved by male police. This trope continues in the contemporary era: the recently released Azrax (2013, Dedi Setiadi) explores the theme of trafficking in women and places a female investigative journalist as the investigating authority. Eventually, her role is made less significant by the hard-boiled hero as she turns into a victim of the crime herself, in need of rescuing. In short, the shift in the representations of gender in crime films in Indonesian cinema has lagged even further behind the norms of Hollywood.

Moreover, Indonesian crime films are more likely to portray strong women as a *femme fatale*, instead of as a female investigator. Grossman (2007) defines *femme fatale* as the evil woman whose main purpose is to corrupt and murder the male law enforcers, including the male detectives. The *femme fatale*’s power is often represented as unnatural and their sexuality is portrayed as dangerous (Cawelti 2012:186). Generally, there has been increasingly innovative characterisation of women in the burgeoning women’s cinema in contemporary Indonesia, yet the *femme fatale* character persists. However, the crime films made by idealist women filmmakers are more likely to present the *femme fatale* as having strong agency in determining the course of her life, rather than submitting to male authority. We can make a brief comparison between the *femme fatales* in Gareth Evan’s hard-boiled *The Raid 2: Berandal* (2014) and the one in Mouly Surya’s *Fiksi*. (Fiction. 2008, Mouly Surya). In Evan’s, the *femme fatale* is a traditional female outlaw to be disciplined by the male hard-boiled police. In Surya’s, the *femme fatale* takes her own life when her foiled crime is exposed. As in the case of Indonesian fiction, in which Wilson (2016) suggests that the *femme fatale* can indeed be relevant to representations of feminist struggles against the contemporary ‘endo-colonisation’, the cinematic *femme fatale* in *Fiksi* can also be the vehicle of critique against the stereotypical helplessness of women. There has been much research on how *femme fatale* characters in cinema can act to positively represent for women in patriarchal society (see Mizejewski 2004; Mizejewski 2005; Grossman 2007; Farrimond 2011). However, *femme fatales* cannot represent women’s legal and knowledge authority in navigating the precarious environment in which women often fall victims. Thus, the emergence of strong, autonomous and independent female investigators is still very relevant.

Furthermore, the mere presence of strong, autonomous and independent female investigators, regardless of their occupying marginal or more legitimate positions in relations to the law, can threaten the established gender relations of power. The subject matters of crime films, crime and its investigation, are largely associated with men and masculinity (Krutnik 1991:86); therefore, the criminals represent delinquent masculinities, while the male investigators represent the corrective force of patriarchal masculinity. In contrast, women are often the victims of crime. In many films, women tend to become a liability rather than an asset

\(^1\) This claim is made based on my interpretation of the film’s summary provided in Katalog Film Indonesia (Indonesian Film Catalogue, Kristanto 2007).

\(^2\) The first film produced in the now Indonesia was in 1926.
in crime solving. Although the patriarchal Hollywood, British and some other Western crime film traditions have slightly changed, it is still easier to view women as victims of rather than as assets to the elimination of crime. Women are often stereotypically characterised as meek and weak and thus prone to being victims of crime. Numerous Indonesian crime films in the past or in recent years show women as victims of kidnapping (i.e. *Pirate Brothers*, 2013, Asun Mawardi), trafficking (i.e. *Azrax: Melawan Sindikat Perdagangan Perempuan*, 2013, Dedi Setiadi), domestic violence (i.e. *Black Honeymoon*, 2015, Hengki Kurniawan), murder (i.e. *Marsinah*, 2000, Slamet Rahardjo), rape (i.e. *Tebus*, 2011, Muhammad Yusuf), and other forms of crime. Like its Western counterpart, crime investigation is traditionally reserved for male characters. Posing as the legitimate mind and authority in crime investigation female investigators can represent a potential disruption to the dominant social construction of masculinity (Gates 2009:25). They subvert the dichotomy of male/female, public/private, protector/victim, and intellect/emotion which characterise the privileged form of the patterning of gender relations. Moreover, the high probability that women will become the victims of crime makes the presence of strong, autonomous and independent female investigators even more pressing; they can offer women’s perspectives on the process of crime investigation which may be overlooked by their male counterparts.

In short, female investigator characters have been deployed as a strategy to legitimise women’s claim of power, especially regarding their control of the environment in which women are often the victims. The female investigator characters represent a potent challenge against not only the male domination of the crime film genre and investigative profession, but also the society’s dominant construction of femininity and masculinity. Consequently, the (relative) absence of female investigators in any cinematic tradition in which crime films thrive, including in Indonesia, is arguably a missed opportunity to harness the symbolic potential of these characters.

**Selective Progress: Struggle for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Post-authoritarian Indonesia**

This section is concerned with the socio-political conditions underlying the under-representation of female investigators in the contemporary Indonesian cinema. Here I question why the socio-political need for creating female investigator characters in cinema has been largely ignored in Indonesia and easily escapes filmmakers. The selective progress of the struggle towards gender equality is partly responsible for the persistent male domination in professions dealing with crime investigation. In turn, the persistent male domination in crime investigation off-screen makes female investigators remains largely unimaginable and, therefore, less crucial on-screen.

Certainly, cinematic representations in films intended for commercial distribution are not pure reflections of social reality. Yet, cinematic representations are not produced in a social vacuum. They are partly inspired by social reality. Intended or otherwise, a commercially-produced feature film constitutes a collective statement about what is considered ‘normal’ (and for that matter what is considered ‘not normal’: the ‘odd’, ‘humorous’, ‘attractive’ or ‘scary’) within the social setting of a state-regulated territory, and what is approved or tolerated by societal organizations and state-sanctioned bodies (Heryanto 2014:51). For the same reason, the absence of certain form of representations may inform us of what is considered as unimaginable, impossible or of lesser importance. There is a dynamic relation between social reality and its representations on screen.
Gender equality has been one of the reform-era buzzwords in Indonesia since 1998. Although the struggle for women empowerment and gender equality is not confined to the post-authoritarian moment, it has intensified and involved more varied segments of Indonesian society than in other eras. Challenges against the relatively established patriarchal patterning of gender relations have become more visible in various fronts. The legitimacy of *Bapakism* masculinity—an amalgamation of middle class Javanese and hierarchical masculinity which legitimates men’s authority as leaders of familial units, literally and metaphorically (Suryakusuma 2011:4-7) —as a culturally exalted form has been substantially eroded by emerging alternative ideal masculinities. Women’s public roles, which were previously largely limited by the deeply ingrained notion of *kodrat wanita* (women’s nature) in order to legitimise their domesticity (Suryakusuma 2011), have significantly expanded in politics, economy and culture. However, as I will show, progress is still at best selective, and has not extended to women’s representations and active participation in security and military.

There have been several signs of advancement for gender equality and women’s empowerment in the post-authoritarian Indonesia. The struggle to increase women’s political participation has resulted in the mandatory 30% quota of women representation in political party’s legislative candidates is regulated in the General Election Act of 2003 (Parawansa 2005:84), although the actual gap between *de facto* and *de jure* representation of women in politics remains subject to debate. In 2001, despite the heated discussion over a female president, Indonesia inaugurated Megawati Soekarnoputri as the fifth president in 2001. Megawati’s inauguration was a major development even in comparison to developed countries and was soon followed by the elections of several women as regional leaders. The struggle to establish the National Commission of Elimination of Violence against Women (KOMNAS Perempuan) in 1999, the endorsement of Elimination of Domestic Violence Law in 2004, and the implementation of gender mainstreaming policy since 2000 are among other achievements in the struggle to advance women’s rights in the post-authoritarian era.

Participation of women in the economy and in culture has also been increasing. The increased participation of women filmmakers, for instance, in cinema has contributed to the flourishing of women’s cinema and the more visible women’s perspectives in Indonesian cinema (see Kurnia 2013; Michalik 2013; Kurnia 2014). In terms of economic participation, historically Indonesian women have been actively contributing in the economy, although under the authoritarian regime, their economic participation was considered secondary to their roles as mothers; however, the post-economic crisis labour market favoured women over men. As a result, women’s participation in the formal workforce has also increased (Betcherman and Islam 2001). However, in an area where male domination is deeply entrenched, such as the military and the security sectors, in which crime investigation is part, hegemonic masculinity and its supporting ‘male-friendly’ femininity are still deeply ingrained, partly due to the lack of mobilisation of women and the very slow evolution of public institutions in terms of gender equality. This is partly in line with Sunindyo’s argument (1998) concerning women’s participation in Indonesian military: women are generally mobilised during times of national crisis, yet when the crisis is over, and before the next crisis emerges, women’s participation is adjusted to suit the heterosexual familial model to prioritise their roles as mothers.

A useful example of the limited progress of women’s participation in male-dominated security sectors is the role women in the Indonesian National Police Force (NPF). The NPF is one the most important state institutions which host female investigators off-screen. The number
of police women, especially in crime investigation units, is still low. In 2014, women constituted around 3.5% of the total number of police officers, 400,000 people in 2013 (Badudu 2013); prior to 2000, women only made up 1% of the total number of police officers (Muradi 2014:72). Adrianus Meliala, a member of the National Police Commission also affirms that the role of women in Indonesian National Police Force, like their counterparts in the army, is generally of low significance due to the lingering gender stereotype: “They (the police women) unfortunately are more likely to be a back-up. Police institution is still stereotypically macho; it is still culturally very masculine” (Meliala quoted in Aisha 2013). Neta S. Pane (quoted in Rosarians 2013) of the Indonesian Police Watch also criticises way that Indonesian police women are assigned the less-strategic roles, at times unrelated to the core function of NPF. Consequently, men, rather than women, have more opportunities in this type of profession.

Female investigators at NPF generally work under the Special Care Unit (RPK). This unit is a woman-led unit and basically deals with crime in which women, children, and senior citizens are either the victims or the perpetrators of crime (Muradi 2014:72). Even within this unit the number of female investigators is still far from adequate. For example, in RPK of Depok Municipality Police, which receives approximately fifteen reports of domestic violence each month, there are only nine (female) investigators, as stated by Lahmudin, a legislative member of Depok Municipality (Hutapea 2014). Nationally, the number of reported cases of violence against women have been increasing every year. In 2010, there were 105,103 reported cases (KOMNAS Perempuan 2011) and in 2016 the number tripled to reach 321,752 cases (KOMNAS Perempuan 2017). The number of female investigators, even to just handle these cases is still unsatisfactory (Badudu 2013). According to Titik Valentina, there is less than 10% of female investigators at NPF (quoted in KOMPAS 2012). Crime investigation in Indonesia remains a highly-gendered profession.

The deeply ingrained culturally idealised femininity, which Suryakusuma terms as Ibuism, arguably also factors in women’s own reluctance to hold more challenging posts. Female police themselves may not be interested in stereotypically masculine roles, such as crime investigation. This partly explains the consistently small number of female investigators in Indonesian police force: “They (female police officers) like office job, which is clean, better. When they are already in their comfort zone, they are less likely willing to accept work mutation.” (Meliala, member of National Police Commission, Aisha 2013) This is understandable partly because juggling career and family is always a challenge for female police officers, let alone female investigators. The social construction of culturally exalted masculinity and femininity has rendered women’s careers as more dispensable than men’s because the latter is socially constructed as the head of the family and the main provider. Thus, a woman’s career is generally perceived as complementary to that of a man’s. A senior intelligence officer in the NFP, AKBP Titik Valentina, claims that female investigators in the NFP are likely to bear the double burden, which make them work extra loads compared to their male counterparts; “Maybe most of them still believe in the notion of kodrat wanita, which requires them to prioritise their motherly roles, in addition to their work as secret agents.” (Titik Valentina, quoted in Rudi 2012) It is often women, instead of men, who have to negotiate their career pursuits to suit their familial obligations. Unlike men, many women, as indicated by Valentina (in Rudi 2012), are reluctant to accept work placement out of town, let alone feel motivated to break the glass ceiling in the male-dominated profession, fearing they would find it more difficult to juggle between career and family, an issue which is rarely raised by male police
officers. There are certainly a few exceptions, such as Inspector General Basaria Panjaitan who became the first woman in NPF to reach the rank of General. She also has extensive experience in crime investigation and is currently the Vice Chief Commissioner of Indonesia’s Commission of Corruption Eradication (KPK). Yet, Basaria Panjaitan is among the very small number of women able to aspire to be (high-ranking) female investigators.

Moreover, media continues to reinforce the gendering of NPF and crime investigation. Police women are more likely to make headlines because they are too pretty to be a police officer, a profession commonly associated with tough macho masculinity; they are much less likely to do so because of their works. Admittedly, male police officers do make headlines for being handsome, but when they do they are likely to have been spotted working on an heroic police operation; for example, Teuku Arsykhadafi or Rino Soedarjo, who instantly shot to fame in the wake of their heroic role during Sarinah Bombing in 2016. Bripda Ismi, on the contrary, became famous when her picture was virally spread over the internet showing her taking photos of her superior, who fought terrorists. At that time, she was the personal assistant to the West Java Province’s chief of police—a desk job stereotypically linked to women. She became an internet sensation as a ‘police beauty’ (polwan cantik) because the mayor of Bandung, Ridwan Kamil, posted her picture on his Instagram page and then promoted her Instagram account. Bripda Ismi soon attracted media attention and generated more interest in the discovery of police beauties rather than with their roles in the male dominated institutions. The fascination of police beauties in media and social media eventually reproduced the social construction emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity. It also indicated the very slow progress of gender reform in the traditionally masculine profession.

Gender reform of police institution is not yet a priority in the overall struggle for gender empowerment in contemporary Indonesia. The pressure to revolutionise this sector is less pressing compared to the politics, economy, health, education and culture, for instance. These priorities are also reflected in popular representations. In cinema, it is very common to encounter cinematic representations of women who pursue career in health, education, corporate, culture and politics. Yet, it is still rare to represent women as police officers, let alone crime investigators. The burgeoning women’s cinema in the twenty-first century Indonesia reflects these priorities; it tends to revolve around women’s rights to their bodies, women’s agency in determining their lives, women’s roles, status and rights in the family and society, as well as crime and violence against women and children.

Amidst these other issues, there is considerable pressure to innovate in creating the representations of female investigators on screen. Indeed, social pressure is often significant in inspiring the production of certain forms of gender representations. For example, in 2006, amidst the heated public debate on polygamy, Dinata released her film Berbagi Suami (Love for

3 Indeed, Kamil is a public figure and has 6.1M followers. Roughly, each of his Instagram post gathers up to 200,000 likes and about 2,000 comments.
4 Such as in the omnibus Pertaruhan (At Stake, 2008, Ucu Agustin, Lucky Kuswandi, Anni Emma Susanti, Muhammad Ichsan and Iwan Setiawan)
5 Such as in Demi Ucok (For Ucok, 2012, Sammaria Simanjuntak), Ini Kisah Tiga Dara (This is the Story of Three Ladies, 2016, Nia Dinata)
6 Such as in Berbagi Suami (Love for Share, 2006, Nia Dinata) and Arisan II (The Gathering 2, 2011, Nia Dinata)
7 Berbagi Suami is also a good example.
8 Such as in Pasir Berbisik (Whispering Sand, 2001, Nan T. Achnas), and some films in the omnibus Perempuan Punya Cerita (Chants of Lotus, 2007, Upi Avianto, Lasja Fauziah, Nia Dinata and Fatimah Rony).
Share) to voice women’s diverse perspectives and experience in relation to the issue. Preceding the film, the controversial Polygamy Award was held in 2003 (Nurmila 2009) and a famous televangelist, Abdullah Gymnastiar, took a second wife—a decision which eventually led to career suicide (Hoesterey 2008; Holden 2009). The production of Berbagi Suami was thus a response to the contemporary pressure from various segments of civil society concerning the issue. So far, there is barely any pressure which renders the creation of female investigators a priority, despite their clear relevance to overturning the masculine stereotype of the genre and in empowering representations of women’s power in the area in which they often fall victims.

The small number and lack of visibility of female investigators off-screen as well as their scant cinematic representations reflect the dynamic interplay of art and life. As suggested by Rafter (2004: 1), not only do crime films shape the way we see crime, but they also reflect our ideas about fundamental social, economic, and political issues. This section has shown that the partly off-screen social reality of the very slow progress and lack of pressure of gender reform in institutions hosting female investigators partly contributes to their relative absence on-screen. The off-screen social reality does not make the creation of female investigator characters on screen pressing, at least when the gender struggle for equality and women empowerment still commands attention other sectors. The next section places this issue in historical context by discussing the development of crime films in Indonesia since the early twentieth century.

**Male Heroism in Indonesian Crime Films**

This section discusses how the historical development of crime films in Indonesian cinema limited the on-screen development of female characters. I argue that the relative absence of female investigators is partly attributable to the relatively stagnant development of the crime film genre itself in Indonesian cinema. Indonesian crime films are mostly trapped in their male-oriented visual representations of crime, its detection, and its solution. The underlying male-oriented visual representations tend to favour male heroism and position women as either victims of crime or the femme fatale, both equally subject to ultimate male authority: to save or to eliminate. The intertwining dominant gender norms and the rooted influence of popular foreign crime films, particularly Hollywood films of the 1960s-1970s, significantly contributes to the relatively low interests of cinema in developing progressive female characters, such as police investigators, in Indonesian cinema. On top of this, the ideological concerns of the newly independent Indonesian nation state, and then the stability-focused New Order regime, did not provide fertile ground for critical cinematic exploration of these issues. This historical trajectory, as well as the stagnation of the Indonesian film industry in general during the 1990s, means that the impulse to present strong, independent and agentic female investigators is still un-appealing to domestic film production even today.

In crime films produced prior to Indonesia’s independence in 1945, women were generally represented as victims of crime perpetrated by men. Women were victims of kidnapping (such as in Si Tjonat, a film of character of the same name, made in 1929, Nelson Wong), or murder (such as in Njai Dasima I, Ms. Dasima, 1929, Njai Dasima II, Njai Dasima III, 1930, all directed by Lie Tek Swie). These women were victims of crime committed by men. In addition, it is the ability of the male heroes to physically confront the criminals, as opposed to their capacity for intellectual analysis and solving the crime puzzles, were the staple of such films. Even in films which did not foreground crime but used it as part of the narrative, such as in the blockbuster Terang Boelan (1937, Albert Balink), the female victim/male hero was the
common gender relation depicted in the context of crime. Crime detection, let alone by women, was absent from the catalogue of crime films in the Netherland East Indies in the 1920s-1930s. It is indeed a striking contrast to the increasing popularity of detective fiction in Indonesia during the period. Detective fiction, particularly *Sherlock Holmes* (Arthur C. Doyle) was quite popular among the educated indigenous population; they were even made available in Malay translation version, albeit selectively and subject to the approval of the colonial government (Jedamski 2009; Chandra 2016).

Crime films produced in the late 1920s and throughout 1930s mostly hybridised local crime narratives and martial-art melodramas, such as *Pembakaran Bio Hong Lian Sie* (1936, The Teng Chun), and/or the scenic views of the Indies, such as the blockbuster *Terang Boelan* (1937, Albert Balink). The popularity of martial-art and action-packed crime films were largely inspired by the commercially successful imported films at that time. Hollywood cinema not only influenced the technique of filmmaking but also provided ample repertoires of narratives to Indonesian cinema at that time (Setijadi-Dunn and Barker 2010). Since the turn of the century, there had been an influx of action-packed crime films featuring bandits and cowboys. These films were generally very popular among audiences, especially among the lower classes and the less well educated, who were the primary target audience for the domestic cinema at that time. These action-packed crime films could be screened for weeks or months, while other films which portrayed no male heroic action moves often had a single-day screening (Biran 2009:35). Among the most popular were cowboy films, starring Eddie Polo and action-packed films starring James Jeffries (Biran 2009:35). These films, including the commercially successful *Oedjan Djotosan,*9 starring the boxing legend Jeffries, valorised male heroism in challenging the authority through criminal acts as well as in rescuing their female love interests. These films had shaped the audience taste for movies at that time and inspired the production of domestic action-packed crime films, such as *Rampok Preanger* (1929, Wong Brothers). According to Joshua Wong, one of the three directors of the film, it was reportedly inspired by a commercially successful American film, which he and his two brothers watched prior to the production (Biran 2009:113).

Despite the strong influence of Hollywood cinema on the domestic crime films in 1920s-1930s, this influence was selective, and did not extend to female leads. Progressive female investigators appeared in a number of Hollywood films in the 1930s-1940s, but they did not ‘migrate’ to Indonesian cinema. Hollywood-films’ female investigators during this period, such as Nora Charles (*The Thin Man*, 1934, W.S. Van Dyke) and Sally Reardan (*There’s Always a Woman*, 1938, Alexander Hall), were progressive proto-feminist-feminist role models who challenged their socially prescribed feminine gender roles, even when compared to contemporary counterparts (Gates 2011:5). A female investigator in Hollywood films of this period was “allowed—throughout the course of the story—a freedom and voice as the film’s protagonist rarely offered to women in film—then and now” (Gates 2011:6). This change was arguably linked to the active involvement of women in the public sphere during war-time. Women were vital in the running of state and economy when most men were drafted for war. Yet, these proto-feminist role models were repatriated to their stereotypical domestic domain in the post-war Hollywood cinema (Todd 2000; Gates 2011). Given that Hollywood films were

---

9 The original English title is unknown. According to Imanjaya (2006:120) and Biran (2009:35), the film was a box-office success in the Netherland Indies in 1924.
almost immediately distributed in the Netherland East Indies at that time (Biran 2009:34), it is striking that no progressive female role models emerged in domestic film production.

In addition to the Hollywood influence, the cultural role played by crime films involving martial arts fights from the newly established Mandarin cinema based in Shanghai was also prevalent. The martial arts formula in handling crime was a strategy deployed to attract the Sino-Malay audience in the Netherland East Indies. These audience’s taste had been shaped by their consumption of Mandarin films which foregrounded men’s martial arts skills. The domestic filmmakers then produced films, such as Setangan Berloemoer Darah (1927, Boen Soan). The film’s narrative was structured using the Mandarin martial art film’s model, which foregrounded male heroism in defeating the criminals and rescuing or avenging for the female victims (Biran 2009: 92-93). This formula apparently worked relatively well in appealing to the target audience (Said 1991:17).

Culturally, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Netherland East Indies experienced substantial shifts in the patterning of gender relations, often to the detriment of women’s involvement in the public sphere. As in many other colonised Asian regions, the European urban-middle class/gender/moral visions, which also resonated with those of the Javanese elites, were popularly adopted as signifier of progress with in the region (Reid 2014). Increasing employment in formal sectors favoured men rather than women. Masculinity became increasingly associated with male rationality and breadwinning; ideal femininity was exhibited in women’s withdrawal from the workforce, including trades, ownership and control of property, as well as from politics, and in their increasing domesticity (Reid 2014). Ideal women, thus, were not imagined as strong, independent and pursuing career in the public sphere, let alone becoming a detective. Doing so would have undermined the male authority in the public sphere. In short between 1926-1942, the production of female investigators in cinema of the Netherland Indies, now Indonesia, were likely to be hindered by the intersection of the genre convention and gender patterning of the period, which largely disfavoured strong, independent, and intelligent women.

In the first decade after Indonesia's independence, the cinematic innovation of female investigators was likely to be impeded by the increasingly low interest of filmmakers in crime films and the low industry output in the Indonesian cinema across the board. In the struggle to define national identity, crime films became increasingly looked down upon by now fashionable ideological filmmakers. The first half of the 1950s was dominated by films depicting independence movement which showcased the male chivalry and pride of the newly independent nation. Certainly, ideal women were likely to be represented as those supporting men’s physical struggle in the independence movement, although in historical fact women’s roles were no less crucial in the struggle of development (Sunindyo 1998). From the end of the 1940s until the first half of 1960s cinema served as an arena of intensified political struggle between polarising political factions (Jonathan 2010, Lindsay 2012). Obviously, crime films were further marginalised in his situation. The negative moral excesses of crime fiction and films continued being debated in this decade. A prominent film director, Usmar Ismail (reported by Barus Siregar 1953, quoted in Plomp 2012:377) condemned crime stories as offering nothing except “shallow emotions, cheap sentiments, and moral irresponsibility, and that they would
ultimately poison the mind.”

Despite the sparse production of crime films from 1950-1965, there was one film featuring a female investigator which I mentioned in the previous section. Yet, typical of the post-war female investigator characters, *1000 Langkah*’s female investigator worked under the supervision of a senior male colleague. The female investigator in *1000 Langkah* was commissioned by her superior to undertake undercover investigation on a murder of a woman. The female investigator, moreover, fell victim and was eventually saved by the male heroes—namely, the all-male police department. The film broke the tradition of cinematic representations of investigators of the period by innovating on the female investigator character. Yet, the film reinforced women’s subordinate position in its contemporary bureaucratic structure by reducing the female investigator to a non-autonomous agent. This innovation apparently did not lead to further development of women’s position in Indonesian crime films until at least three decades later.

The next phase of development is the era of the authoritarian regime (1966-1998). During those three decades, the crime film genre developed to favour the formula of sex and violence. In this formula, women were represented as victims, objects not only of male heroes’ sexual pleasure but of their fantasy life as well. The formula was largely inspired by American crime films of the 1960s-1970s, the cinematic norms of which, in Indonesia, were largely maintained until the turn of the millennium. The increasing flow of imported film in the late 1960s, facilitated by the New Order policy, led to the reinforcement of women’s representation as victims of crime, and also introduced women as the *femme fatale* in crime stories. The New Order supported the import of foreign films, especially American, to Indonesia as part of its film policy during its first year of power, 1966. The policy was aimed at fixing the chaos in the film distribution system, implicated by the political chaos of the first half of the 1960s. Among the imported films, crime genre, such as James Bond franchise, became the favourite among audience in Indonesia despite concerns from moralists (Said 1989:98).

The 1960’s titular character Bond himself has been widely discussed by film/gender studies scholars as representing the Western status quo-patriarchal ideal masculinity of the period. The characterisation of Bond was rife in both the Cold War rivalry as well as in the sexual revolution inspired by the second-wave feminism struggle (Neuendorf, Gore et al. 2010; Funnell 2011). Bond, especially of the 1960-1970’s, operated within the tradition of male heroism which linked masculinity to both male physical strength and romantic conquest. The titular character of the early Bond films had sexual relations with both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women. The good women generally fell victims to the criminal under Bond’s investigation. On the contrary, the villainous women were the *femme fatale* aiming to seduce him and distract him from his mission. These bad girls in Bond were a hostile critique of liberated female sexuality afforded by second wave feminism (Funnell 2011). It turned out Bond’s courting of both ‘bad’ and ‘good’ women became the franchise’s, as well as many other crime investigation films’ signature in character development in many years to come. Strong, independent, autonomous female investigators then barely had a place as heroes in the era of this male-spy heroism.

---

10 The original publication of the article from which Ismail’s view was quoted was in Bahasa Indonesia. This translated version is the one provided by Plomp (2012).
With the increasingly hegemonic legitimacy of *Bapakism* masculinity during the authoritarian period in Indonesia, the domination of male heroism, in crime films as well as the other genres in Indonesian cinema, was left largely unchallenged. It is also during this time that Indonesian crime films started to deliberately cater to the insatiable international market for crime and action films. As should be expected, the male domination of crime films was consistently reproduced.

Despite the heated public debate on the moral excesses on display in foreign crime films, the commercial success of the sex-and-violence formula, which recorded male heroism, was soon reproduced by domestic filmmakers in their movies. *Djakarta, Hongkong Macao* (1968, Turino Djunaedy) is a good example of how Hollywood crime films, especially James Bond franchise, inspired domestic film production—it was Bond who pioneered the scene of “kissing while shooting” (Said 1989: 98). In this especially formulaic crime film women are mostly either helpless victims of violence perpetrated by men, such as in the previously mentioned *Djakarta, Hongkong, Macao* or *femme fatales* who seduced or killed men, such as in *Ciuman Beracun* (1976, Ratno Timoer). Other films which Salim (1989) argued to be very much like deeply influenced by the Hollywood crime films include *Orang-orang Liar* (1969), *Bernapas dalam Lumpur* (1970, Turino Djunaedy), *Hidup, Tjinta dan Air Mata* (1970). The combination of violence and sex in crime films, including the detective genre such as *Spy and Journalist* (1971, F Sutrisno), was to simultaneously valorise male heroism and emphasise both female victimisation and woman’s exploitation of (mostly female) sexuality. The formula of violence and sex in crime films was continued into the 1980s when the production of exploitation films reached its peak, and then again in the 1990s, perhaps not coincidentally when Indonesian cinema was at its lowest point of productivity since 1942.

The expansion of Indonesia’s exploitation cinema into the international market in 1980s and 1990s, while often objectifying women, also conversely paved the way for the re-emergence of female investigators on screen. In the 1980s-1990s, Indonesia’s exploitation cinema attracted foreign film distributors. Some titles within this wave are *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (1981, Lilik Sudjio), *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan* (1988, Tjut Djalil), and *Perawan di Sarang Sindikat* (1986, Fred Wardy Piliang). Some of these exploitation films can also be categorised as crime films. The awareness for international distribution led to co-production between Indonesian and American production houses and filmmakers. It also triggered innovations in narratives and characters, as well as involvement of foreign actors and actresses. International crime syndicate portrayed in Indonesian crime films were now no longer bound to the Asian region but expanded to the US and to Europe. The female investigator character in *Membela Harga Diri* (1992, Guy Leslie Norris and Ackyl Anwari) was part of the character and narrative innovations during this period. Yet, critically, this independent and strong female CIA agent was a foreigner instead of Indonesian. The use of a foreign actress to represent a progressive kind of femininity implied the foreign-ness of such subversive social constructions of gender. In another co-production film, produced by the same production house, *Pemburu Teroris* (1994, Norman Benny and Robert Chapell), the Indonesian female investigator only played a very minor role in the criminal investigation and was quite secondary to the male lead investigator; another Indonesian actress also played the character who provides sexual pleasure to the male hero and

---

11 Imanjaya (2009) has provided an important account on Indonesia’s exploitation cinema between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Exploitation cinema generally incorporates films produced in low budget studios and exploiting sensational themes such as sex, nudity, vice and violence (Schaefer 1999:2).
who eventually falls victim to the criminal under investigation. Although these films are not listed in the Catalogue of Indonesian Cinema, they were extremely popular in the archipelago and were broadcast on television quite a number of times in the 1990s (Irwansyah 2013).

Arguably, the cinematic representations of women in crime films of Indonesian cinema in the late 1960s-1990s resonated with the social construction of ideal femininity at the time. The domestic roles of women as wives and mothers became more deeply entrenched. The domestic roles of women were ‘naturalised’ through various strategies, including state policies and bureaucracy (Robinson 2009). The notion of **kodrat wanita** (women’s nature) was naturalised so that its violation was generally represented as a sign of moral decadence, including in its on-screen presentations (Sen 1994). Thus, it is unsurprising to see the scarce representations of working women on screen as the social construction of ideal masculinity and femininity barely allowed room for such, especially in the 1970s. Indeed, Said (1991:254) states that based on his observation of Indonesian cinema of the 1970s, working women were scarcely represented, and if they were, mostly were as prostitutes—displaying a sexual promiscuity to be corrected, taken advantage, or eliminated by the male heroes. The tendency slightly changed in 1980s; women were represented as pursuing career in formal employment in the public sphere. However, various films which depicted working women still emphasised women’s domestic roles as primary. Sen (1994) shows that while working women were no longer an impossible object of representation in 1980s, they were still depicted negatively—the cause of husbands’ extra-marital affairs, the reason for divorce, and the source of their children’s delinquencies.

Finally, the long-standing male heroism/female victimisation formula is still maintained mostly in the twenty-first century Indonesian cinema, although some development is worth noting. The emerging new generation of Indonesian cinema paved the way for more vibrant explorations of representations of gender in Indonesian cinema, including the crime genre. This does not mean that the sex-and-violence formula from the 1970s has vanished. It is still employed by many filmmakers producing crime films in today’s Indonesia. It is still part of the cash-crop films being produced in the contemporary Indonesian cinema, in addition to romance, Islamic-themed films, and horror films. Among these films are *Tarung* (2011, Nayato Fio Nuala) and *Black Honeymoon* (2015, Henky Kurniawan). Yet, there have been few developments in the representation of women in this genre which are worth noting. The success of *The Raid* (2011) and its sequel *The Raid 2* (2014) at the domestic and international markets and festivals was a milestone in making sex a less important feature but, at the same time, reinforcing male heroism through acts of violence wholly consistent the generic formula in Indonesian contemporary crime and martial-arts films. The burgeoning women’s cinema, on the other hand, has slightly changed the representations of **femme fatale**. The female villains are representations of women who have the agency in determining the course of their actions and their lives. I mentioned earlier about the female villain who is also the primary driver of the film *Fiksi*: she displays a robust agency through all of her acts of murder, including her own death. Female investigator characters re-emerge in the contemporary Indonesian crime films too, albeit still very minimally and barely improved upon from the clichés of the previous era. Between 2000-2015, there are two films featuring female journalists investigating murder (*Kanibal-Sumanto*, 2004, Christ Helweldery) and trafficking in women (*Azrax: Melawan Sindikat Perdagangan Perempuan*, 2013, Dedi Setiadi). In both films, the female investigative journalists eventually fall victims to

---

12 This film was not distributed in Indonesia. It was distributed in several European countries in the form of video (Irwansyah 2013).
the criminals under their investigation and are saved by the male heroes. Authoritative female investigative agents are, in short, still barely present.

There continues to be economic reluctance to take risk in anti-formulaic innovation amidst the tight competition with foreign films as well as among the domestic productions themselves. None of the films featuring female investigators has been a box-office success and none of the existing female investigator characters has particularly stood out ever since such character first appeared in the early 1960s. Such innovation is also risky considering that crime films have long been closely associated with sex and violence and which have therefore been disproportionately subjected to public debate and state scrutiny in comparison to other genres. This section has shown that innovation around the representation of women as strong, independent female investigators has been partly hindered by how the crime film genre itself has developed in Indonesia. I have shown that historically the crime film genre in Indonesia has not been able to liberate itself from its multiple generic conventions. In favouring male heroism women are more often than not represented as the victims of crime or femme fatale, both of whom are equally subjected to the power of male heroes.

**Conclusion**

This article has investigated the persistent lack of female investigator characters in Indonesian crime films. As the Indonesian cinema post 1998 has often been associated with progress and departure from the cinema of the previous generation under the New Order, one thing remains largely unchanged: the male domination of the crime film genre. This article has discussed one aspect of this domination: inequality in the gender representations of crime investigators. Indeed, the detective sub-genre of crime films has not developed well in Indonesia. Yet, investigator characters are not bound to this sub-genre. They are found in gangster films, such as in *Djakarta Hongkong Macau*, in police films like *Naga Merah* (Red Dragon, 1976, Fritz G. Schadt), as well in films from other sub genres. It is almost taken for granted that investigators, private or police, should be represented as male. Certainly, there are a few exceptions, but still very few. While men are often represented as both the criminals and the solution to the crime, women are mostly represented as victims of crime and/or as femme fatales. In this article I have examined the multiple causes for this, and the complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between fictional representations and everyday realities.

I investigated the nexus between gender politics and the parallel development of the crime film genre in Indonesian cinema. I have shown that the relative absence of female investigator characters in Indonesian cinema is due to the selective achievement and prioritization of struggle of gender equality in the post-authoritarian Indonesia. The post-authoritarian gender politics has not quite extended to areas in which hegemonic masculinity is deeply entrenched such as crime investigation. The consistent absence of women in this off-screen sector has indirectly rendered the cinematic on-screen representation of women as crime investigators largely unimaginable if not objectively impossible. This relative absence is also due to the very slow development of the genre itself, which continues to favour male heroism. Indonesian crime films are structured to please stereotypically male audience. Thus, most of them foreground crime solving through physical combat which is mostly associated with male heroism. Women in this type of crime films are often represented as the victims or the perpetrators of crime. These cinematic representations of women do not in any way challenge the superiority of the male heroes; instead they are submitted to the latter’s authority—to either save or eliminate them. Even in gender-based crime, such as trafficking, women, including
female investigators if there are any, are still subordinate to the power of the male heroes who will physically encounter the criminals.

Consequently, the relative absence of female investigators produces a wide lacuna of representations of women, not only in crime films, but Indonesian cinema in general. Strong, independent, autonomous female investigators on screen have the potential to disrupt and overturn the domination of male investigators, which has virtually defined investigation and crime films in Indonesian cinema. In addition, cinematic representation of women as crime investigators can facilitate the ascent of women into positions of power in areas where they often fall victim. Ultimately, they hold potent symbolic power to challenge the existing patriarchal gender patterning as they disrupt the dichotomy of male/female, public/private, protector/victim, and intellect/emotion which characterise the dominant patterning of gender relations both in the real world and in Indonesia’s cinematic landscapes. Therefore, the screen presence of the female investigator is definitely worth pursuing.

References


International Journal of Indonesian Studies (IJIS) by [http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/indonesian-studies-journal/](http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/indonesian-studies-journal/) is licensed under Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) ([https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).