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Heeren, K. van

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Cruelty, Ghosts, and Verses of Love

KATINKA VAN HEEREN

In February this year, *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love) was released in Indonesian cinemas. The film, based on a best-selling novel by Indonesian novelist Habiburrahman El Shirazy is a departure from the usual production of horror and teen films of the recently resurging film industry in Indonesia. It seeks to overcome western media stereotypes of Islam and aims to show the compassionate face of the religion.

Hanung Bramantyo, the film's director, says he chose to turn the novel into a film because it presents the teachings of Islam in a positive way and where "Muslims are not associated with terrorism and fanaticism, but portrayed as a people who practice tolerance, patience, sincerity and honesty."¹ *Ayat Ayat Cinta* neither portrays Islam as the source of violence, cruelty, and horror – as in many western media – nor as the saviour – as in Indonesian lower class horror films, reality shows, and religious soaps. It shows, in the words of its director "... Muslims who are hip, fashionable and capable of socializing, but at the same time do things in an Islamic way."²

Ayat Ayat Cinta is basically a love story presented in an Islamic wrapping. The setting is at the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, which is to many Indonesians the centre of Islamic knowledge; the protagonists are devout Muslims or, like the Coptic Maria, at the end, a convert to Islam; and throughout the film the uses and benefits of Islamic teachings in daily life are manifest. The main character is Fahri an Indonesian overseas student at Al-Azhar. He is a handsome, chaste, and serious young man. Besides deepening his understanding of religion one of Fahri's main goals is to find a wife and establish a family in line with Islamic teachings. While he is pursuing his studies in Egypt, four different attractive women fall in love with him, each one of whom tries to win his heart. Fahri eventually marries the veiled Turkish-German girl Aisha breaking the heart of the Coptic girl-next-door Maria. Inconsolable, Maria falls into a coma. But when Fahri is jailed and facing death by hanging after being falsely accused of rape by Noura, another girl who is disappointed not to have been the chosen one, comatose Maria appears to be the only one who can prove his innocence. Aisha begs Fahri to take Maria as a second wife so that he can revive her and have her testify in his favour. After Fahri marries the unconscious Maria she indeed awakes, and without much delay saves her newly wed husband from the death penalty. The three

do not live happily ever after though. Suffering from a severe heart-condition Maria soon dies after her marriage. But not before Fahri has taught her how to perform the salat prayer; and just when the three spouses perform *sholat berjamaah* (pray together) Maria peacefully passes away.

A major theme running through the film is how to apply Islamic teachings in the context of modern daily life and contemporary manners of conduct. Fahri, for example, advocates women's rights by reciting from the Quran. But he also takes a second wife, once more in accordance with Islamic teachings. Furthermore, the film addresses concepts of what is

Islamic novels, films, and songs are becoming increasingly popular in Indonesia. One exceptionally well-liked film is the love story *Ayat Ayat Cinta* released in 2008. Even though to some the film is as trivializing religions as *The Da Vinci Code*, *Ayat Ayat Cinta* puts forward a representation of Islam which is different from both western stereotypes and prevalent representations of Islam in popular Indonesian film and television productions.

Islamically right or wrong in the context of contemporary politics as clearly perceptible in the scene when Fahri defends Aisha's decision to give up her seat in a train for an elderly American woman. While some other passengers condemn Aisha for her kindness to the "enemies of Islam," Fahri defends her by referring to the Sunnah teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Islam and popular culture

The production of *Ayat Ayat Cinta* is an example of a recent trend in Indonesia of Islamic teachings becoming part of popular culture through films, books, and songs. Soon after its release it became one of the biggest blockbuster hits in Indonesia. In the first few weeks alone more than three million people, including President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and top government officials, crammed cinemas to watch it. Most spectators, including the President were so touched by the film that they shed tears. Many expressed the view that it is the most successful film to combine Islam and popular culture so far. Earlier Islamic films such as Deddy Mizwar's *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* (Judgment Day Is Nigh, 2003) and Garin Nugroho's *Rindu Kami Padamu* (English title: Of Love and Eggs, 2004) had not attracted that many viewers. Communications expert Ade Armando hailed the film, and said its success showed that to be profitable, a film did not have to contain sex and ghosts.³ Furthermore, President Yudhoyono lauded the film as a piece of art which both represents Indonesian culture and gives a truthful representation of Islam as a religion of harmony, tolerance, and justice. Additionally, a spokesperson for the President called the film an "antithesis" to *Fitna*, a video produced by Dutch Member of Parliament Geert Wilders and released on the Internet in March accusing the Holy Quran of inciting violence.⁴ However, not only in western media, but also in Indonesia, Islam had often been featured in the context of cruelty and violence.

In fact, Armando's juxtaposition of the religious *Ayat Ayat Cinta* with lucrative films which contain sex and ghosts points to two issues touching on media representations and Islam. On the one hand, it expresses a view of audio-visual media more generally held by religious groups and leaders, not only in Indonesia, and not only by Muslims. Worldwide, films which feature scantily dressed women, contain images hinting at or showing sex, or show horror or supernatural occurrences, have incited complaints on the basis of religious morality. Likewise, Indonesian religious leaders often have voiced their objections to popular film productions that contain sex and ghosts calling them *film maksiat* (immoral films). On the other hand, Armando's comment also touches on the paradoxical history of representations of Islam in the majority of domestic media. Apart from melodramatic soaps screened for the month of Ramadan which use Islamic paraphernalia (Muslim attire, salat performances, and iconic jargon such as *assalamu'aleikum*, *alhamdulillah*, and *astagfirullah*), Islam in Indonesian mainstream film and television series had mainly appeared in the context of the horror or supernatural genre. These films were the very same to feature the issues that Indonesian leaders find so problematic: ghosts or other supernatural occurrences, and scantily dressed women.

Several Muslim groups have not supported the mixture of horror and Islam shown in Indonesian film. Their objections were first and foremost based on the fear that a belief in supernatural beings and occurrences other than those acknowledged in the Quran would lead people astray from religious teachings. Ironically, it is partly to get programmes through censorship (either from the state or to shun protests in the name of religious morality), that there has been a long-standing emphasis on the combination of horror and Islam in Indonesian audio-visual media.

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A mixture of Islam and horror

To begin with, already under Soeharto's New Order, horror films which showed sexy women, violence, evil supernatural beings, and everything else that "God has forbidden," used a deus-ex-machina appearance of a *kyai* (a traditionalist Islamic teacher), or other religious symbol, to restore order at the end of the film. While witches and other evil creatures torture and kill people, and spread fear and bloodshed among a community throughout the film at the end they are defeated by some Islamic authority figure. Sometimes quoting verses from the Quran would do to make the wicked creature perish. At other times, the heroic *kyai* also possesses supernatural powers to fight and defy the evil beings. Filmmakers inserted the Islamic authority figure to ensure that the film would pass the Film Censor Board. The unsolicited result, however, was that the general public of these films perceived the horror genre as identical to film *dakwah* (propagation films).

After the resignation of President Soeharto several horror films were produced that did not use any religious symbols. But by 2002 Islamic religious leaders reappeared in Indonesian audio-visual media, taking on a role in the newly created horror reality shows on television. These programmes supposedly show the live images of supernatural occurrences and ghostly beings. The role of the Islamic religious leaders is not only to restore order, but also to explain how to interpret the supernatural occurrences in the context of Islamic teachings. The producers of horror reality shows used Islam both to add to the programmes' popularity as well as to pre-empt censorship. Islamic features like clothes and expressions were used to sell the television series. The appearance on the show of trustworthy Islamic leaders who emphasized that all what was happening in the programmes was real, and not merely camera tricks, added much to the appeal of the shows. And so the Islamic hero coming to the rescue either to contain supernatural beings or to defeat the evil ones was restored a second time. Yet this time, in the context of pre-empting film censorship, producers did not so much bear in mind censorship from the state, but rather from the street: read fear of Muslim protests. Muslim protests were feared most because some groups like the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front) did not shun the use of violence to make their point that they would uphold the morals of the nation.⁵ The fear of FPI and other such groups was realistic since there was a history of violence by the groups attacking nightclubs, bars, and cultural centres. Moreover, as the government and police forces only half-heartedly countered these actions, many people were unsure about whether they would be sufficiently protected if they drew the ire of radical Muslims.

In 2004, the lucrative and safe combination of showing supernatural occurrences under the guidance of Islamic leaders was extended to a new television formula called *sinetron religi* (religious soaps). The soaps were based on true stories of people who had experienced the miracles of God which were published in such popular Islamic magazines as *Hidayah* (God's guidance) and *Allah Maha Besar* (God is Great), or which were based on stories such as hadith-lore from Bukhari and Muslim. However, in due course most of the religious soaps deteriorated into campy horror shows which served Islamic teachings in a mixture of gruesome blood and eaten-by-maggots images. In the words of the journalist Taufiqurrahman, the religious soaps were nothing but "regular soap operas with God's name attached to their title [that] carry a formulaic story line in which sinners of all kinds, from corrupt state officials and gamblers to a misbehaving son, will be punished by God with a very painful death, ranging from literally being burnt in hell, eaten by flesh-eating worms, to being swallowed alive by the earth."⁶ For a third time Indonesian media featured Islam mainly in the context of gruesome images of cruelty and torture. Until Ramadan 2007 Indonesian television was swamped by all kinds of variations on this formula.

Islamic films and Verses of Love

In comparison to the horror films and religious soap productions *Ayat Ayat Cinta* indeed was an odd one out in the way in which popular film and television productions positioned Islam mainly in the context of horror, the supernatural, violence and torture from hell. This is not to say that any of the horror films, religious soaps, or *Ayat Ayat Cinta* for that matter, was readily seen as Islamic film or television productions.



COURTESY OF HANUNG BRAMANTYO, 2007

To those with the strictest Islamic backgrounds the medium film itself was perceived as incompatible with Islamic teachings. To other Muslim groups it depended on how the films with Islamic themes were composed. Many Indonesian Islamic groups discarded horror films as dumb entertainment for the lower classes who believed in the supernatural, and who, merely because of their lack in education, regarded horror films as *dakwah*.

The religious soaps were not much discussed as constituting a problematic representation of Islam. Particularly since some stories were based on hadith and nearly all programmes involved the participation of famous Indonesian Islamic leaders, there were few comments about their religious value. However, if any, there were hardly pious Muslims who regretted the end of the increasingly horrific religious soaps after Ramadan 2007. Finally, the romance *Ayat Ayat Cinta* was, as Nauval Yasid wrote, as trivializing an Islamic film as *The Da Vinci Code* was a Roman Catholic one.⁷ Moreover, because the film was mainly a melodramatic love story, and, according to some Muslim groups, contained misrepresentations of the correct Islam and its teachings – such as how to socialize with non-Muslims –, some Muslims believed *Ayat Ayat Cinta* to be even more harmful to Islam than the sex and horror *maksiat* films. Nevertheless, despite the heated debate whether or not *Ayat Ayat Cinta* really is Islamic it clearly is a film that tries to convey Islamic teachings, and differs from general representations of Islam found in both domestic and transnational media. Bramantyo believed that it was important to make this film in order to show Indonesians and the West alike that Muslims can be proud of their religion. Hence, *Ayat Ayat Cinta* does not portray Islam in the context of violence, cruelty, and horror as in many media productions from both the West and Indonesia. It shows modern Muslims who are tolerant and strive to adjust themselves to current times while leading their lives an Islamic way.⁸ That is just the way Indonesia's President wishes to see it.

Shooting *Ayat Ayat Cinta*

Notes

1. See interview with Bramantyo by Nancy Amelia Collins, "Islamic Movie 'Ayat Ayat Cinta' Wows Indonesian Audiences," *Voice Of America News*, 13 March 2008, at www.voanews.com.
2. "Ayat Ayat Cinta shows gentle Islam face," *Arab Times Kuwait*, 1 April 2008.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. For more on the FPI see also the article by Leena Avonius in this issue (pp. 48-49).
6. M. Taufiqurrahman, "Indonesia: be good God is on television," *Jakarta Post*, 16 July 2005.
7. Nauval Yazid, "Ayat-ayat Cinta survives heavy-handed treatment," *Jakarta Post*, 2 March 2008.
8. "Ayat Ayat Cinta shows gentle Islam face."

Katinka van Heeren is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Indonesian Languages and Cultures, Leiden University.
Email: Cvanheeren@yahoo.com