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Popular photography and national modernity in Java**
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Karen Strassler, *Refracted visions: Popular photography and national modernity in Java*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, xxi + 375 pp. ISBN 0822345935 and 9780822345930, price: USD 89.95 (hardback); 0822346117 and 9780822346111, USD 24.95 (paperback).

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Although photography first came to Indonesia through European travelers in Java around the 1870s, the study of its influences on Indonesian society are still quite rare. It is no exaggeration to say that to date *Refracted visions: Popular photography and national modernity in Java* is the only extensive investigation of popular photography in Indonesia. Growing out of Strassler's 2003 PhD thesis from the University of Michigan, the book examines how popular photographs recast national iconographies in an intimate register and how they convey modern longings for Indonesian nationhood. The text is printed on acid-free paper and illustrated with 127 photographs, including black-white and colored photos that capture Indonesia's natural environment, its socio-political settings, as well as individual and family portraits. In *Refracted visions*, Strassler considers the cultural significance of popular photography in contemporary Indonesia.

The book consists of eight chapters including an Introduction and an Epilogue. In the Introduction ('Popular photography and Indonesian national modernity', pp. 1-28), Strassler defines the theoretical considerations of her study. She contends that popular photographic genres have cultivated distinctive ways of seeing and positioning oneself and others within the affective, ideological, and temporal terrain of Indonesia. She argues that popular photographic practices have played a crucial role in creating modern national subjects in postcolonial Java by connecting personal sentiments and memories with public iconographies thereby binding individual people to broader historical trajectories and narratives of national modernity (p. 28).

In Chapter One ('Amateur vision', pp. 29-71), Strassler traces the history of amateur photography in Indonesia and its contemporary development. She points out that the majority of the amateur photographers were upper-middle-class urban Chinese Indonesians who adopted this kind of amusement as a kind of hobby throughout the postcolonial period (p. 36). She shows how these amateur Indonesian photographers have produced a remarkably consistent iconography of idyllic tropical landscapes and picturesque 'traditional' people from the end of colonial period until recent Reformation (*Reformasi*) era.

In Chapter Two ('Landscape of imagination', pp. 73-122), Strassler looks at the backdrops and decorations used in photo studios. By tracing the shifting trends in studio backdrops, she shows how these types of photographs have played an integral part in the creation of national subjects who project themselves into the picture of national modernity (p. 79). In contrast to the visual images made by the amateur photographers, the portraits made in the studios tend to place the subject with the picture of an anticipated national modernity and make the desired contact with various images of 'elsewhere' gathered from the global media. Studio photographers, the author contends, provided a space for their customers to realize their own cosmopolitan longings and transcend the limits of the here and now. Strassler also describes the involvement of Chinese Indonesian's in the emergence and development of this genre. She points out that cosmopolitan Chinese Indonesian photographers have played a key role as cultural mediators by translating globally circulating imageries into 'Indonesian' idioms. However, the role of Chinese descendants in Indonesian media has not just been limited to only photography. Some of my own published work has shown that from the late nineteenth century, Chinese descendants in Indonesia like Tan Hoe Lo and Tio Tek Hong also played an important role in marketing of the gramophone in the Netherlands East Indies and were strong competitors with their European counterparts. Descendants of Chinese Indonesians were also pioneers in producing early Indonesian films.

Chapter Three ('Identifying citizens', pp. 123-63) focuses on the genre of identity photographs (*pasfoto*). *Pasfoto*'s were used not only as proof of identity (*bukti diri*), but also were employed in many other socio-political contexts. One important thing discussed by Strassler in this chapter is the use by the New Order Regime of identity photographs to distinguish between *asli* (indigenous) and non-*asli* (descendants of Chinese) citizens. She discusses how identity photography is rooted in the state's faith in the camera's powers of indexical transcription and its own ability to map appearances reliably onto one's official identity. Unfortunately, the author does not take a closer look at the use of identity photographs in Indonesia in various kinds of letters of application (*surat lamaran*) and their cultural meanings. She also does not investigate why all over Indonesia many owners of Padang restaurants, including those in Yogyakarta, display their identity photographs along with pictures of military figures on the walls of their restaurants. Exploring such issues might have enriched her analysis.

Chapter Four ('Family documentation', pp. 165-206) examines how Indonesian families are represented in popular photographs. Strassler analyses not only wedding photography which is very popular in Indonesia, but also the new trend in funeral photography, which has become the subject of debate among Indonesian Muslims. Chapter Five ('Witnessing history',

pp. 207-49) looks at the photography of political events in Indonesia. Here Strassler concentrates on photographs which pictures the political oppression of Soeharto's repressive New Order Regime (1967-1998) and documents the counter movements against them. However, these photographs denote political acts and like other genres of photography are mediated entities. They are representations of reality captured with specific angles of the camera lens taken by individuals (photographers) who are themselves not immune to particular ideologies. Strassler explores in detail the significance of these 'photographic "witnesses" [of] history' – to borrow her own terms – as the recognized official historical record and collective memories of political accounts in Indonesia, but she does not investigate how this genre of photography has contributed to shaping an orientalist image of Indonesia, as if it is a country that seems to have genetic culture for violence (*budaya kekerasan*) spiced with political unrest.

In Chapter Six ('Revelatory sign', pp. 251-93), Strassler discusses how photographs create a counter history. She investigates the unique collection of photographs, posters and printed slogans owned by Noorman in Yogyakarta. He is a retired veteran of the Indonesian revolution and an ardent supporter of Indonesia's former first President Soekarno. The author shows how Noorman uses photographs and other technologies, including mechanical productions such as prints and photocopying, to question the validity of the New Order historical narratives which treated former President Soekarno, his political idol, cruelly. 'Noorman exploits photocopying and photography to collect texts and images circulating in the public sphere and transform them into new kinds of documents for his alternative history' (p. 255).

In the Epilogue ('Beyond the paper', pp. 295-300) Strassler considers significant developments in the technology of photography due to the invention of the digital camera. As has occurred in other parts of the world, the new technology of the digital camera has transformed the practice of photography in Indonesia, sweeping aside the film and paper-based photography. Strassler discusses how this elemental change has created a new digitally based 'discourse network' that includes new forms of photographic production and storage, new modes of circulation and fundamentally altered relationships between the visual image and materiality (p. 300), as with Facebook and other social networking sites.

The Indonesian state, with its distinctive bureaucracy and inimitable political logic, has characterized the way its citizens employ and consume various kinds of media technologies, crossing ethnic and geographic boundaries. The *Afdruk Kilat* (Express Printing) stand, for example, can be found in Yogyakarta, as well as in Padang. And photography at wedding ceremonies is found not only in Yogyakarta, but also all over Indonesia. Also, the widespread distribution of printed copies of local politicians' identity photographs

in public sphere can be found all over the country during *pilkada* (*pemilihan kepala daerah*, 'direct elections for local leaders'). Unfortunately, Strassler does not investigate the use of identity photos or their reproductions in this manner by local leaders. Although this is intended to be a study of photography on Java, it seems to me that it actually represents the wider study of the world of photography in a multiethnic and archipelagic country called Indonesia.
