Often viewed with disdain by snobbish literati and trivialized by the country’s political elites, Indonesian popular culture is an area that has so far generated far less academic interest or research than it should. That is why "Identity and Pleasure: the Politics of Indonesian Screen Culture" by Ariel Heryanto is a much-needed and welcome addition to the small but growing historiography on the subject.

In his book, Heryanto argues convincingly that popular culture is ultimately political in nature and is a product of the country’s history, and in some instances, could even be “a past disremembered.” Indonesia, like several other countries, has its own share of self-censored histories. The book singles out a few of these, particularly those which have been subject to cinematic endeavors.

Prominent in the list were the 1965-66 atrocities against the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and its sympathizers, a bloodbath that took the lives of at least one million Indonesians. Here Heryanto takes to task the cultural amnesia and the ongoing struggle by today’s Indonesians in coming to terms with the tragedy through his incisive analyses of the cinematic works the tragedy has inspired.
Perceptive of the strength of oral and visual tradition in Indonesia, the author shrewdly chose the “screen culture” as a kaleidoscope through which the nation’s popular culture can be properly seen within its historical context. From the anti-communist purges, he moves seamlessly to Islamist orthodox piety and subsequently post-Islamist aspirations as portrayed in Indonesia’s film and entertainment industries.

Central to his book is the Indonesian search for a definitive national identity in the post-colonial era. While fully sympathetic to the forging of this new identity, Ariel highlights the ironic attempts by Indonesian leaders and officials to further affirm and in some cases aggravate the racialist principles once espoused by Dutch colonial authorities.

More often than not, the construction of the new national mythology took on such redactional fervor that the result was academically untenable at best and warped beyond recognition at worst. Due to such conditioning, he concludes that “many Indonesians born and raised in the past two generations have been deprived of a basic and balanced education of their own national history.”

This is also evident in the revelation that the early “official” history of Indonesian cinematography was engineered to weed out important yet inconvenient roles played by ethnic minorities like the Chinese and Europeans. The status of Chinese Indonesians as the national pariah during the rule of Suharto’s New Order was also uncannily mirrored in their unspoken and certainly veiled presence in the film industry throughout the era.

Ariel also exposes us to the seemingly contradictory adulation of oriental, particularly South Korean, pop culture by lower middle and
middle class Indonesian young women in the early 2000s, many of whom identified themselves as Muslims. While escapist traits seem to be unavoidably noted with such a phenomenon, an astute exploration of the subtle nuances of the post-Islamist narrative takes place in the book.

What may appear as an insipid string of South Korean and Taiwanese soap operas like Boys Over Flowers and Meteor Garden to the literate classes were in fact effective in capturing the imagination of a social group hitherto largely ignored in the Indonesian scheme of things: women. Through the burgeoning popular culture inspired by K-Pop, Indonesian women somehow managed to express their new-found identity while retaining their more orthodox attributes at the same time. The phenomenal import of East Asian pop culture here, in Heryanto’s view, also heralded the feminization of the Indonesian identity in the new millennium.

In reminding us that popular culture is irretrievably connected with politics, the author ably demonstrates how in a visual “orality-oriented” culture such as Indonesia, political life sometimes imitates art. In part also mandated by democratic procedures and advances in the communication technology, the 2009 election campaigns, for example, unwittingly followed the dictates of the predominant popular culture of the day.

The outburst of the populist demand was as such that the political elites who traditionally turn up their noses at what they call the “mass culture” had no choice but to dance to the tune of the people. Yet, on a sobering note, the author also observes that “the underside of the politics of identity and pleasure are plight, predicament and pain.”
Ariel’s Identity and Pleasure is a fascinating journey into the subterranean halls of the often-overlooked Indonesian popular culture. In many ways, it is delightful in many of its unexpected twists and turns. The author keeps us going at a nimble pace while leaving us to wonder what to find around every corner: be it new insights or perspectives.

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