

**THE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN QUEER SPECTATORSHIP
AND QUEER TEXT ON RIRI RIZA'S *SOE HOK GIE***
Negosiasi antara Penonton *Queer* dan Teks *Queer* pada *Soe Hok Gie* Karya Riri Riza

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Abstract: The emergence of young generation filmmakers who are more confident in depicting gender and sexual issues after the Soeharto era (1998), significantly changes the construction of sexual diversity in 2003—2006 Indonesian films. One of the considerable phenomena is the personal experience and social commitment to support sexual minorities such as gay and lesbian issues. At the same time Indonesian queer communities strive to read the discourse of homosexuality in different way. Physical contact and even intimacy between persons of the same-sex, in both public and private spaces, was common practice in Indonesian cultures, and did not carry any suggestion of homoerotic desire. In this Riri Riza's film, *Soe Hok Gie*, however, cinematic technique, narrative and dialogue all contribute to an eroticising of same-sex relationships that is particularly perceptible in cultures that previously regarded physical and emotional interactions between persons of the same-sex as unremarkable. This article based on Benschhoff and Griffin's (2006) theory on queer film.

Key Words: queer spectatorship, homoeroticism, *Soe Hok Gie*

Abstrak: Perkembangan film Indonesia setelah tumbangannya rezim Soeharto menunjukkan adanya fenomena di kalangan sutradara muda untuk mengeksplorasi tema tentang gender dan seksualitas. Isu tentang seksual minoritas seperti seksualitas gay dan lesbian adalah salah satu ciri yang cukup menonjol dalam film-film yang diproduksi setelah tahun 2003. Pada saat yang sama, penonton *queer* (seksualitas nonnormatif) terutama yang berasal dari komunitas *queer* membaca *scene* sebuah film terutama yang menampilkan kontak fisik dan keintiman antara orang-orang sesama jenis dengan cara yang baru. Dalam tradisi budaya Indonesia, kontak fisik dan keintiman itu tidak diterjemahkan dalam sebuah hubungan *homoerotika*. Pembacaan yang berbeda ditunjukkan pembaca dalam film *Soe Hok Gie* karya Riri Riza. Artikel ini menggunakan teori Queer Film yang dikemukakan oleh Benschhoff dan Griffin (2006).

Kata-Kata Kunci: *queer spectatorship*, homoerotisme, *Soe Hok Gie*

INTRODUCTION

Gie is a dramatization of the life of Soe Hok Gie, a student activist at the University of Indonesia in the mid 1960s, who came to prominence through the publication of his diary *Catatan Seorang Demonstran* in 1983. The diary itself is an intimate record of the thoughts of a student activist in the turbulent period between the end of the Soekarno era and

the rise to power of Soeharto's New Order.

In Riri Riza's film, *Gie* is represented as an idealistic youth who constantly battles for justice and truth, regardless of race, religion and ethnicity. In the film's opening scene, the young *Gie* is a smart and critical student at the Xin Hwa Elementary School who appreciates philosophy, literature and politics. Growing

up in a lower-middle class Chinese-Indonesian family in Jakarta, Gie has a great concern for justice and human rights. When Han, his close friend, experiences domestic abuse, Gie strives to save him from mistreatment. Gie also criticizes the unfairness and the lack of integrity of his teachers both at the Strada Junior High School and Kanisius College. He criticizes the corruption, social inequality and power abuse under the government of Soekarno, which causes the poor and the oppressed to suffer.

At the time of the fall of the Soekarno regime in 1966 and the rise to power of Soeharto, Gie refuses to form alliances with any political party, and continues to fight for his idealism, even as some of his fellow student activists come to adjust to the new regime. As an eternal oppositionist, he challenges all of kinds of establishments. An avid proponent of living close to nature, Gie spends his leisure time hiking and watching films. His involvement in the student movement and his uncompromising idealism has a negative effect on his personal life. His intimacy with his two female friends Ira and Sinta never develops, since the girls' parents are worried about their daughters' involvement with someone well-known for his rebellious spirit.¹ One day, Gie meets Han, his childhood friend, who has become closely involved with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), while Gie has remained politically neutral. Gie suggests that Han should abandon his ties with the PKI, but Han refuses. At the time of the conflict between the military and the PKI, Han's political affiliation is very dangerous. Finally, Han and a band of PKI followers are massacred by Soeharto's New Order soldiers on a beach in Bali, an event which outrages Gie's sense of humanity. Gie then criticises the brutal massacre in articles published in some

prominent newspapers. He dreams of meeting up again with Han, and again enjoying the carefree times they used to spend together. The film ends with Gie's untimely death during a mountain climbing expedition to Mount Semeru, one day before his twenty-seventh birthday on 16 December 1969.

Released on 14 July 2005, *Gie* won awards in Indonesian and international film festivals, including best movie, actor and cinematography at the 2005 Indonesian film festival. It was also awarded the Hubert Bals Fund prize at the Rotterdam International Film Festival for its content and artistic value. Eric Sasono (2005) argues that *Gie* is an important film since it includes communist symbols such as the hammer and sickle, and it uses the *genjer-genjer* song that is associated with the PKI as part of its soundtrack, both of which would have been impossible in the New Order era.² The film is also important since it tackles a controversial period in Indonesian history, involving the destruction of the PKI and the rise to power of Soeharto's New Order. In the history of Indonesian cinema, there is only one other film, the 1982 government-sponsored *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The Indonesian Communist Party's Betrayal of 30 September), that deals with this sensitive theme. Directed by Arifin C. Noer, this film is viewed by contemporary Indonesian film critics as an epic propaganda film, centring on the role of Soeharto as a military leader and his defeat of the attempted coup of 30 September 1965 that was led by Colonel Untung, a Communist Party sympathiser (Kristanto, 1995:244).

Coming twenty-three years after *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, *Gie* immediately provoked controversy because it was produced without government sponsorship. Many film critics applauded its content and artistic value, but expressed reservations and

disappointment about its lack of focus and weak screenplay and dialogue. For example, an article by Hera Diani entitled “High Expectation overwhelms *Gie*” criticised the film’s superficial portrayal of the main characters. Diani argues that “*Gie* concentrates too much on the political movement aspect and not on the human relationships between its characters”. She suggests that Riri should have focused on the friendship between Gie and Han, who was a victim of the massacres of PKI supporters, or maybe on the friendship between the activists, or Gie as a rare-breed activist hailing from the Chinese Indonesian community (Diani, 2005).

METHOD

As a film study, the primary data is Riri Riza’s *Soe Hok Gie* which is studied as a cinematic text, taking into account both form and style. As part of a film’s form, narrative is the key element in shaping the film’s overall meaning. As a system, it includes plot, story, space and time. However, as an art form, film differs from other aesthetic products, in that form is not its only aspect. Unlike the novel or painting, for example, film is a total experience (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008: 111). This introduces film style, or the non-narrative aspects of form, as the second area of analysis. Style, in this context, includes cinematic techniques such as *mise-en-scène*, cinematography and sound. By taking into account both these areas of analysis, the study attempts to see the complete film as a coherent and integrated text. However it also recognises the need for attention to specific shots and scenes that can challenge the film’s overall meaning. It argues that these individual components have the potential to subvert the overall coherence of the film narrative. As the film is analysed as an aesthetic text, extracts from the film dialogues are quoted in their original

Indonesian, with English translations provided in a footnote.

In the analysis of film text, the study has used published film screenplay where it is available. This publication is very useful, as they contain significant supplementary data on the film production process. The published script of *Gie* describes the fascinating but also complicated process of adapting Soe Hok Gie’s biography *Catatan Seorang Demonstran* to the cinema screen. It includes notes on the re-drafting process, which reveal that the script went through eight drafts before reaching its final form, as well as analyses of the script by Eric Sasono (Riza, 2005: vi).

Like film reviews and other media reports, this screenplay contribute to the secondary data that assists in film analysis. Qualitative methodology has been used in the collection of other forms of secondary data. In-depth interviews with the filmmakers were conducted to gain supplementary data on their perceptions of gender and sexual diversity. Interviews were conducted in person interview or electronically. It is acknowledged that the electronic interview format provides a more limited opportunity to explore the filmmaker’s arguments and opinions. Where relevant, data from film posters and advertisements have also been included in the body of secondary material analysed.

DISCUSSION

Between Queer Spectatorship and Queer Text

One interesting aspect of the reception and criticism of *Gie* was the perception among some observers that the film has a homoerotic subtext. This recalls the phenomenon which Benschoff and Griffin refer to as “queer spectatorship” in their list of the five criteria that a film might qualify a film as “queer”. In their discussion of queer film, Benschoff and

Griffin (2006:15—16) describe a number of formulaic representations of queer characters and queer images. Firstly, the way characters act or speak, especially when they use language or mannerisms that are associated with stereotypical images of homosexual people, can evoke queer associations for audiences. Secondly, an “unusual name”, costumes or make up of the characters can serve to disrupt viewers’ perceptions of the fixed sexual or gender identities of the characters. For instance, if a woman character uses a male name (or vice versa), some gender disruption is likely to ensue. Thirdly, the appearance of an object, image or colour closely associated with same-sex desire can raise associations with non-normative sexuality. For instance, purple is stereotyped as a lesbian/gay colour. Lastly, music, songs or singers that are recognisable as queer icons can introduce a queer presence into film, such as is the case with reference to, or appearances by, Kylie Minogue or Madonna. In contemporary queer film, these cliché representations are rejected. In the TV series such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003) and *Queer as Folk* (1999), queer culture is depicted openly and directly as a celebration of non-normative expressions of sexual desire.

Benshoff and Griffin (2006:9—10) also suggest five criteria which might define a cinematic portrayal as “queer” film. Together, these five criteria refer to the interrelation between film, filmmaking and film spectators. Firstly, a film may contain queer characters and deal with queer issues. The second criterion is authorship. A film might be classified as a queer film if the directors, the producers or the film stars can be identified as queer. The third criterion by which a film may qualify as queer is queer spectatorship. A queer viewing position potentially offers a model of

resistance reading resistance reading and challenges dominant perceptions of gender and sexuality. The fourth possibility is related to film genre. Horror and science fiction films can often be considered as queer in their representation of sexual identity as fluid, blurring the boundary of the real and the unreal. Lastly, factors involving the spectators’ psychological processes may be considered. The act of identification with the queer characters may involve a questioning or a confirmation of the spectators’ own gender and sexual identities.

In their view, the queer viewing position offers a model of resistance reading that potentially “challenges dominant perceptions about gender and sexuality”. They argue that in many cases, personal experience means that queer spectators read film differently from the way straight viewers might view the same film (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:10).

The question of “queer spectatorship” builds on film theory’s interest in the interrelation between spectator and film. In the 1970s, some French and then British and American film scholars began applying psychoanalysis to film studies in an attempt to analyse the screen-spectator relationship as well as the textual relationships within the film. Based on Freud’s theory of libido drives and Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, they argued that cinema works at the level of unconsciousness. In a dark room, the spectator looks at the screen and derives visual pleasure from the screen. Part of that pleasure comes from a narcissistic identification with the person on the screen. In 1975, Christian Metz drew on the analogy of the screen with the mirror as a way of talking about spectator positioning and the voyeuristic aspect of film viewing, whereby the spectator is identified with camera’s gaze. He argued

that the spectator exhibits similar properties to those of the male child at Lacan's mirror stage (Hayward, 2006:176).

Metz's theory, which relates exclusively to male spectators, was revised by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In this essay, Mulvey argued that classical cinema invariably constructs a male gaze. She describes the way the camera, diegetic characters, and actual spectators all join together to objectify women as erotic spectacles and create a male subject position for those in the audience, regardless of their actual sex (Mulvey, 1992:24). This means, for Mulvey, the spectator position offered by Hollywood cinema is masculine, with female characters positioned merely as objects of male desire. Karen Hollinger (1998:17) suggests that Mulvey's article has been influential because it is not only related to the issue of pleasure, spectatorship and gender, but also raises a significant challenge to a feminist theorisation of female spectatorship. In the context of queer theory, however, Mulvey's argument has come to be seen as an inadequate description of the female spectator's position. Her theory "only concludes that [female viewers] must either identify with passive, fetishized position of the female character on screen [...] or, if she is to derive pleasure, must assume a male positioning (a masculine third person)" (Hayward, 2006:372—373).

In an attempt to counter the "phallogentrism" of Mulvey's theory, some film studies scholars suggested a different perspective on the spectator as a subject which is not passive but fluid. In the mid 1980s, Ann Kaplan, for instance, argued that both men and women can adopt dominant or submissive roles. She raises the possibility of "reading against the grain",

as a way of formulating readings that do not necessarily show the woman as object of the gaze (Hayward, 2006:178). The process of "reading against the grain", which maximises the possibility of the viewer's interpretation, plays an important role in film analysis, and has come to occupy a significant place in queer film studies. "Reading against the grain method aims to renegotiate the dominant hetero-normative ideology that is often naturalized rhetorically within film" (Krzywinska, 2006:26). As Sen and Hill (2000:147) point out, interpretation of film as a cultural text is never perfect or complete. Film potentially encourages the gay audience to "read against the grain", to produce readings that resist the standard interpretations of a particular film. This model of resistance reading challenges the relationship between the audience and text, making it not fixed but fluid.

Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman in their article "reviewing queer viewing" argue that all text potentially can be viewed queerly. Some texts actually "encourage" queer viewing or a queer gaze: anti-essentialist, fluid, multiple, and historically constructed. For instance, the ambiguity of the sexual image of Madonna's *Justify Your Love* pop promo suggests the fluidity of gender identification (2004:218). Similarly, Judith Mayne (1994:159) asserts that "one of the most significant directions in spectatorship studies has investigated the gap opened up between the ways in which texts construct viewers and how those texts may be read or used in ways that depart from what the institution valorizes". Queer film scholars maximise the power of cinematic representation by resisting the official meaning.

The response to Riri Riza's *Gie* by some queer viewers needs to be explored in the light of this aspect of queer theory and its application to film studies. The

“queer spectatorship perspective” suggests that there are aspects of the film text of *Gie* – described below – that encourage the emergence of a “queer gaze”.

Homosociality and the Homoerotic Interpretation of *Gie*

The homoerotic interpretation of *Gie* first emerged in a film discussion between Lisabona Rahman and Paul Agusta, who argued that *Gie* is the first homoerotic Indonesian film (Rahman, 2005). They asserted that this film should be entitled *Gie dan Han* (Gie and Han) since the close relationship between the two male characters is the central motif of the whole film. In their view, the homoerotic aspects of *Gie* can be found, firstly, in the angle of the shots that focus on the boys’ legs and tight short pants when Gie and Han are sitting together on a roof in the film’s opening scenes. In a later scene, when Gie is asleep on a couch, they point out that the light is aimed directly at his crotch in central frame, a device which in their view focuses attention on the question of Gie’s sexuality. Secondly, the intimacy between Gie and Han and the way Gie is physically uncomfortable when he is around Ira and Sinta but very much ease when he is around his male friends, is one of the main recurring motifs of the film. Rahman and Agusta believe that the function of the two women in the story is to create a conflict in Gie’s sexuality. Thirdly, when Ira reads Gie’s last letter at the end of the film, the letter’s function at first seems to be to quell any thoughts of homosexuality in Gie. But after the first two sentences, the letter starts using *kalian*, the plural form of “you” for Gie’s references to those he “loves”, something which in their view negates whatever proposition was initially suggested. The use of *kalian* can unsettle the viewer’s assumptions about Gie’s feelings for Ira, because it

implicitly includes Gie’s male friends among those he “loves”. For Rahman and Agusta, all these aspects raise questions about Gie’s sexual desire. They believe that this film is very homoerotic even though this aspect of this film never came to be discussed publicly (Rahman, 2005).

A similar identification of a homoerotic subtext also emerged in a gay mailing list group discussion named *undercover_id* on 31 July 2005.³ “Undercover person”, according to the mailing list coordinator, is a gay or bisexual male who hides his homosexual identity from his straight counterparts.⁴ Dewa Rajasa, one of the list members, wrote his impression of the film by comparing it with Soe Hok Gie’s diary. I quote Rajasa’s email to examine the way queer spectators with their own experiences may read film differently from straight viewers.

*Gie: Paling beruntung adalah mereka yang tidak pernah dilahirkan, lebih beruntung lagi mereka yang mati muda, dan yang paling sial adalah mereka yang berumur panjang.*⁵

*Kalimat ini cermin dari Soe Hok Gie yang entah kenapa desperate banget. Gue jadi ingat saat2 dulu waktu gue masih bingung nyari identitas gue. Kenapa sih si Gie ini desperate banget? Orang putus asa biasanya karena masalah pribadi, mungkin karena broken home, narkoba, atau orientasi seks. Apakah si Gie ini gay? Kalo di film keluarga dia sepertinya baik-baik aja. Kalo emang dia gay, kenapa di catatan hariannya gak ada sama sekali clue yang nunjukin ini? Padahal as u know, maybe 99% gay itu punya buku harian, kepada siapa menangis dan mengeluh (being gay is tough...so all alone). Apa mungkin sebelum dipublikasikan, catatan hariannya diedit dulu oleh entah siapa? Karena jika tidak, nilai keheroannya jadi berkurang.*⁶

A similar commentary was made by other member, Andree Lim on 1 August 2005.

*Hi all,
Setelah gue nonton film Gie, gue merasa Gie itu KK alias undercover. Bagaimana menurut teman-teman yang lain?*⁷

A very different perspective was put by Rehan Putra on 2 August, 2005.

*Gie bukan gay, bukan hetero, bukan Bi, bukan apa-apa. Gie adalah sosok manusia yang telah mencapai tingkat pencerahan yang lebih tinggi dari pencarian jati diri dia. Gay, hetro, bi atau apapun namanya, itu semua adalah istilah yang gak dipakai dalam kamus Gie. Lewat pencarian jati diri itu, dia menemukan yang namanya arti cinta yang sesungguhnya. Dia juga menentang pernikahan karena merupakan bentuk kekuasaan laki-laki terhadap perempuan.*⁸

Lacking any detailed argument and explanation, the queer responses above suggest that the interpretations of these viewers are mostly based on their personal impressions. Rajasa's opinion tends to be influenced by his reading of Gie's diary, while Andree Lim bases his opinion on the film itself. Rehan Putra's argument may be based by both Gie's diary and Riri Riza's film. Rajasa's belief that for most *gay* men, "being gay is tough...so all alone", may be one reason why he classifies the desperate Gie as an "undercover person". Rajasa's statement, which is based on his own experience as a *gay* man helps explain the process of identification between the male spectator and the male protagonist. However, it is also possible that Rajasa and Andree Lim are simply expressing a narcissistic identification with the Gie character in the film. Laura Mulvey (cited in Neale, 1992:279) argues that "a narcissistic identification involves

fantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control. The glamorous male movie star and the fantasy of the more perfect, more complete and more powerful ideal ego influence the narcissistic identification". The fact that Soe Hok Gie is played by Nicholas Saputra, the most popular and good-looking of contemporary young Indonesian film actors, may be what sparks the narcissistic identification. The *gay* spectator is appropriating Gie, through Saputra, as one of his own.

What is interesting here is the different interpretation suggested by Rehan Putra. By arguing that love is more sublime and wider than a sexual identity, Rehan is expressing the view that Gie is a kind of higher being who cannot be understood according to ordinary categories. In this perspective, the common binary opposition of heterosexual and homosexual categories is not applicable in understanding Gie's identity. How then does Rehan Putra's reading relate to the idea of "queer spectatorship"? At first sight, this might appear to be a reading by a "queer spectator" that rejects the queer gaze. However, it is also possible to argue that a radical queer viewing position would reject the assumption that sexuality must be expressed in a recognisable form. The very absence of a recognisable sexuality can, in some circumstances, be "queer".

In his reading of the homoerotic interpretation by contributors to the *undercover_id* mailing list group discussion, Mujiarso (2005) explores in detail what he believes is the film's homoerotic sub-text. He argues that the film narrative itself offers some possibilities for such an interpretation (2005). In his view, the portrayal of the intimate friendship between Han and Gie builds up through the film narrative from the beginning to the end. The emphasis on a repeated male bonding between Gie and Han in their adolescence is

represented by the filmmakers from the opening scene when the two boys are chased by a group of *kampung* residents after they are suspected of spilling the paint the group is using to paint a revolutionary slogan on a brick wall. The boys hide, together joining a Betawi wedding parade to escape their pursuers. The soundtrack moves to Gie's voice-over telling his date of birth. The Gie-Han story continues when they enter an alley. Gie's book on Soekarno drops from his pocket and Han instinctively picks it up. They climb a roof to hide from their pursuers. They sit together on the roof and Han returns Gie's book. The camera then moves to the interior of Gie's home with the rain coming down hard. Suddenly Han comes in with wet clothes. Gie wipes Han's hair with a towel outside, while all of Gie's family watch the incident suspiciously. Dien, one of Gie's older sisters, suggests Han should return to his aunt's home, but Gie quickly and confidently interrupts, saying that Han should stay with them. When Gie's older brother, Soe Hok Djin, says that Han's problem is not their problem and suggests Gie accompany Han to back to his aunt's place, Gie replies firmly that returning means a return to domestic violence. When Nio, Han's aunt comes with two civil guards (*pamong praja*) and forces Han to return home, Gie pulls Han's hand while his aunt pulls his other hand. One of the guards hits Gie and Han returns home with Nio.

The following day, at the Strada junior high school, the two students are walking together. Gie stares at Han's injured cheek, while Gie has only a scratch on his temple. Their companionship is reaffirmed when Gie is punished by his teacher, *pak* Arifin. Han accompanies Gie, and waits for him while he is punished on the school playing field. Han also strives to understand Gie's thoughts and idealism.

Gie asserts that Soekarno, Hatta and Syahrir always rebelled against injustice and repression. Han seems confused and asks Gie to go to with him to the beach. But the boys are suddenly separated when Han and his aunt move to another city. The viewer sees Gie chasing the truck that is taking Han away from him. Gie and Han are separated for a long time, and the film starts to focus on Gie as a student activist at the University of Indonesia.

At this point in the film, Mujiarso (2005) argues, the repetition and dramatisation of male bonding between Gie and Han can be viewed as male homosocial desire. He is referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument (1985:1—2) that the homosocial is "a social bond between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'". Sedgwick describes the homosocial as a "potential unbrokenness of a continuum with homosexual, a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is radically disrupted" (1985:1—2). She acknowledges that the nature of this boundary varies from society to society and from era to era, and even within one society it can differ between women and men since they may have different access to power (1985:2).

As the film narrative develops, however, Mujiarso believes that homosociality is not an adequate framework to interpret the emotional bonding between the two boys, since the film narrative repeatedly portrays Gie's deep emotional bonding with Han. He argues that the intimacy between Gie and Han should be considered as homoeroticism rather than male homosocial desire.⁹ The homoerotic aspect can be found especially in the key scene on the beach when two boys chase each other. Later, they unexpectedly

meet again as young men in their twenties with different political affiliations. Deeply surprised by the event, Gie dreams they spend time together on the same beach where they played together as adolescents. In his second dream, Gie, who has greatly missed Han, asks in the intimate and informal style the boys once used with each other, “*Kemana aja lu, Han?*”¹⁰ They laugh and run together all along the beach. The scene is supported by voice over which recites Gie’s poem:

*Kabut tipis pun turun pelan-pelan di lembah kasih, lembah Mandalawangi. Kau dan aku tegak berdiri melihat hutan-hutan yang menjadi suram...Apakah kau masih membelaiku semesra dahulu ketika kudekap, kau dekaplah lebih mesra, lebih dekat.*¹¹

Gie’s poem, in Mujiarso’s view, can be read as a homoerotic symbol of the bond between the two young men (2005).

Mujiarso’s interpretation of the homoerotic subtext of the film suggests that there are aspects of the film text itself that encourage the “narcissistic identification” and “queer gaze” which some queer viewers have brought to this film. Together, the gay film critic (Mujiarso) and the queer spectators (*undercover_id*) have succeeded in producing a “resistance reading” of Gie as mainstream cinema. In this case, they can be seen as constituting what Janet Staiger calls “perverse spectators” (2000:1). The term implies “a wilful turning away from the dominant notions of right or good. Perverse spectators do not do what is expected, it is precisely the unexpected readings, meanings and an effective power to negotiate the dominant cinematic interpretation that they embody”.

There remains, however, the question of what is the “expected reading” of Riri Riza’s film. For beyond

the points noted by Mujiarso in support of his interpretation of the film, there are other aspects to the film narrative of *Gie* that support the homoerotic interpretation Mujiarso has proposed. First among these is the focus on Gie’s uneasiness with girls, that is referred to in the article by Lisabona Rahman mentioned above. Gie is more confident with his male friends or when he is immersed in the beauty of nature. A significant scene occurs when Gie’s male friends introduce him to Santi, an attractive prostitute. Gie is unable to speak easily; he seems to be very frigid in front of a mature woman. This scene can be read in two possible ways. Firstly, it may indicate that Gie is a faithful man who is consistently fights to the honesty and integrity. Secondly, the scene can be read as an attempt by Gie’s male friends to make him more confident with women. Gie’s friends want to educate him about what it means to be male. In the masculine activist world, his friends perceive Gie as not having enough experience with women.

Another aspect of Gie’s uneasiness with girls can be seen in his failure to maintain his relationships with Ira and Sinta. Gie cannot communicate clearly his desire, even for Ira, his “fighter spirit”. One scene shows how uneasy he is in Ira’s company.

Gie: *Kamu pernah rikuh gak sih kalo berduaan sama aku begini?*

Ira: *Hah?*

Gie: *Ya...kalau berduaan sama aku begini...maksudnya kamu tuh merasa kita berduaan tuh gimana, apa sama kayak kakakmu, pacarmu, atau...?*

Ira: *Kamu ngomong apaan?*¹²

The dialogue suggests that Gie is not physically confident about the future of his relationship with Ira. Similarly, in the kissing scene between Gie and Sinta, it is Sinta herself who initiates the kiss, although Gie clearly does return her

initiative.¹³ Evidence external to the film itself also suggests the possibility of a fluid interpretation of Gie's personal identity. Riri Riza has described Soe Hok Gie as a complex human being:

“He talked a lot of big politics. Some other times, he also talked about pets and how difficult it was to talk to women. If we read *Catatan Seorang Demonstran*, we will sense that there was a never ending battle in himself. That is what I am trying to capture in this film. Gie is a human being full of paradox, a human being with so many battles on his mind” (*Miles Film*, 2005).

From this point of view, Riri Riza reconstructs Soe Hok Gie's profile based on his own perceptions. On the release of *Gie*, *Tempo* questioned Riri about the beach scene at the end of the film. Riri replied firmly: “Everyone asks about it, let it remain a mystery” (*Tempo*, 17 July 2005:70). Moreover, Riri has asserted that the characterisation of Han is the central point of the whole film. Han is a representation of “someone who dreams of freedom” (*Tempo*, 17 July 2005:70). Han may be seen as an “alter-ego” for Gie in his struggle for freedom. The dramatisation of Han's death on the beach and Gie's death in the mountain seems to symbolise their deep emotional bonding.

The speculation by *gay* spectators about Gie's sexuality is thus underpinned both intrinsically, in the way particular scenes in the film can be read, as well as extrinsically, in the discourse that accompanied the film at the time of its release. In every respect, *Gie* emerges as a multi-interpretable film, an interpretation of an era whose meaning is always multiple and fluid. Arief Budiman, Gie's older brother, asserts that the story of Soe Hok Gie belongs to the public. “It is an interpretation and perception by the

director especially, about Soe Hok Gie and the era. A film does not belong to us. It is the right of the audience to have their own perception” (*Miles Film*, 2005).

The emergence of this model of “perverse reading” in the queer community is a good indication of the way sexual diversity in Indonesia is understood by a particular film audience. At the same time, the way the filmmakers negotiate the emotional bonding between persons of the same sex in *Gie* can be seen as a breakthrough in the development of Indonesian film culture in general. The film's move away from normative assumptions about same-sex relationships is a further indication of the queering of Indonesian cinema during the Reform era.

CONCLUSION

The portrayals of intimacy and togetherness of the two male characters, Han and Gie, in this film are ambiguous. In addition, internal narrative consistency in the films is sometimes disrupted by a reluctance to pursue the homoerotic suggestions towards their logical conclusions. The presence of the homoerotic element in these films means that they can be seen as contributing to the “queering” of contemporary Indonesian cinema. One of significant developments is the emergence of queer spectators who progressively read the film from queer perspective. Moreover, male bonding in *Gie* leads to the issue of social change. For Gie, Han is not only his “alter ego”, but also a symbol of his political commitment and dedication to marginalised people. In this way, *Gie* can be seen as a celebration and idealisation of the way male relationships can lead to more progressive social change. The dramatic death of Han inspires Gie to be more critical of social inequality and power abuse. It can be said that the film

encourages the possibility of a “perverse reading” by their queer viewers. They illustrate the way texts that are identified as queer have the potential to affirm and validate their queer spectators, instilling in them self-confidence in their non-normative sexuality. This emergence of queer viewing in the act of experiencing film and identifying with characters can be seen as a significant innovation in the development of Indonesian film culture.

¹ Riri Riza has said that Ira and Sinta are fictional characters who are representative of five of Soe Hok Gie’s female friends (*Tempo*, 17 July 2005:70). Gie’s diary, *Catatan Seorang Demonstan*, mentions three intimate female friends: Maria, Rina and Sunarti. Maria is Gie’s “fighter spirit” but their romance is rejected by Maria’s parents, while Rina’s parents also reject Gie because of his different religion and ethnicity. Sunarti is the woman who is with Gie the day before his untimely death (Dhakidae, 1983:65—66; Gie, 1983).

² The song *Genjer-genjer* was written by Muhammad Arief, a Banyuwangi-born composer in 1943. In the 1960s, it became something of the PKI anthem. In the New Order era, the song became closely associated with the supposed torture of the generals in the attempted coup of 30 September 1965 (Nugroho, 2007).

³ Founded on 7 June 2002, the group is the most prolific gay internet discussion forum. It has almost 3,000 members (Mujiarso, 2005).

⁴ See (Undercover_id Website, 2005).

⁵ Gie: The luckiest are those who have never been born. Even luckier are those who die young, and the unluckiest are those who live long lives. This sentence is an adaptation of the following passage in Soe Hok Gie’s diary: “Seorang filsuf Yunani pernah berkata bahwa nasib terbaik adalah tidak dilahirkan, yang kedua dilahirkan tetapi mati muda, dan yang tersial adalah umur tua. Rasa-rasanya memang begitu. Bahagialah mereka yang mati muda” (Gie, 1983:125—126).

⁶ This statement is a reflection of Soe Hok Gie who, for some reason, is very desperate. It reminds me of the times when I was still searching for my own identity. Why is it that this Gie character is so desperate? Usually people lose hope as a result of personal problems, maybe because of a broken home, drugs, or sexual orientation. Is Gie gay? In

the film, his family seems normal. If he really is gay, why is it that in his diary there’s no clue at all that points to this? Even though, as you know, maybe 99% of gay people have diaries, to whom they cry and complain (being gay is tough...so all alone). Is it possible that before it was published, his diary was first edited by who knows whom? Because if not, his level of ‘hero-ness’ would decrease.

⁷ Hi all. After watching the film, Gie, I felt like Gie was KK or ‘undercover’. What do others think?

⁸ Gie is not gay, hetero, bi, or anything else, Gie is a human being who has already attained a higher level of enlightenment from the process of searching for his own identity. Gay, hetero, bi, or whatever it is called, they are all terms which are not used in Gie’s dictionary. Through the process of searching for self-identity, he found what is called the meaning of true love. He also opposed marriage because it represents a form of male authority over women.

⁹ Martti Nissinen (1998:17) defines homoeroticism as an erotic mutual interaction between persons of the same sex, even though there is not an exclusive homosexual orientation.

¹⁰ “Where have you been, Han?”

¹¹ A light fog falls slowly in the valley of love, Mandalawangi valley. You and I stand tall watching the forests grow dark...Do you still caress me as warmly as before when I would embrace you? Embrace me even more warmly, even closer.

¹² Gie: Ra, do you feel uncomfortable when we are together like this?

Ira: Hah?

Gie: Yeah...when you are together with me...I mean, what do you feel about us? Do you think of me as your older brother, your boyfriend, or ...

Ira: What are you talking about?

¹³ In a response to this kissing scene in the film, Herman Lantang and Jopie Lasut, two of Soe Hok Gie’s friends, stated that it would be impossible for Gie to have initiated the kiss (*Tempo*, 17 July 2005:62). The Australian scholar John Maxwell, who made a detailed study of Soe Hok Gie and his diary, and was an adviser to Riri Riza during the film production, also commented that “Gie was certainly very popular among the young female students at Sastra, where he seems to have become someone looked up to for advice when personal problems arose. But as far as more private and personal relationships there were three young women who stood out

at different times. These appear to have never moved beyond rather conventional and conservative boyfriend-girlfriend relationships given what appears to have been Soe's rather prudish personal morality" (personal communication with Keith Foulcher, 7 May 2008).

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