

Cinema, Social Disparity and Urban Infrastructure in Case of the Indonesian Blockbuster Film “Ajari Aku Islam (Teach Me Islam)”

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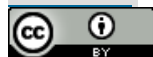
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ABSTRACT

The feature film *Ajari Aku Islam* (Teach Me Islam) was directed by Deni Pusung in 2019 and is based on the story of Jaymes Riyanto (Setuningsih, N., 2020) who worked also as one a film producer and scriptwriter. The film was mostly shot in the city center of Medan such as at the Chinese Pecinan Area Kesawan, Masjid Agung Sumatra Utara, and the old settlement of Jalan Sei Sirah. The film shows the love relationship between Kenny Huang, who has Chinese roots, in the Confucianist religion, and Fidy Lubis, a Muslim woman from Batak ethnic group. They both come from the middle economic class and live in the city center of Medan. According to the producer Jaymes Riyanto, the film has the intention to remove the ethnic gap and show the potential co-existence of Muslims and non-Muslims in Medan (*Padang Time*, 2019). Using Christian Metz's semiotic analysis, the paper will show how the film due to using the stereotypes in its mise en scène reproduces on the contrary, even more, the prejudices and solidifies the stigmatization and segregation among the two ethnicities. However, this paper also suggests potential measures to overcome the social disparity and ethnic segregation such as through the just urban transportation system, the urban green infrastructure, and the production of local cinema culture which can produce inter-ethnic and religious dialogues among ethnic groups.

INTRODUCTION

Ajari Aku Islam (Teach Me Islam) film spent about nine billion Rupiahs in film budget (*Orbitdigital*, 2019) and was screened in the XXI and CGV cinemas across the Indonesian archipelago. Most of the film scenes were shot in the city center of Medan. The film thematizes the love relationship which is shadowed by the ethnic gap between the Chinese ethnic family and the Batak ethnic Muslim family. According to the 2018 local census, the Chinese ethnic group belongs to the three largest ethnic groups in Medan after the Javanese ethnic group and before the Batak ethnic group (*Kependudukan*, 2020). The paper of Kunarsih & Tampilen (2022) shows the current

segregation of ethnic groups in Medan and a Bachelor Thesis by Sinuhaji (2017) examines the exclusion of Chinese ethnic groups in social activity in Medan due to the violent event in Chinese and Chinese women of May 1998 riots in Medan. The film uses the *mise en scène* (a french term for everything which is seen and heard on screen such as actors, film property, lighting, dialogues, sound, etc.) which refers to the ethnic and religious belonging of the two main protagonists Kenny Huang who is played by Roger Danuarta and Fidy Lubis who is played by Cut Meyriska.

METHODS

According to Kunarsih and Tampilen, the Chinese ethnicity in Medan is stereotyped as exclusive, egoistic, unable to integrate, and arrogant. This stigmatization is combined and amplified with the physical segregation in the city of Medan such as the Chinese settlement in Sukaramai (about five km from Kesawan), the Javanese ethnic settlement in Sei Agul and Helvetia and the Batak Karo ethnic settlement in Padang Bulan (Kinarsih S. & Tampilen, 2022). On the other hand, regarding qualitative research from Sinuhaji at three Chinese main areas such as Sukaramai, the Chinese in Medan prefer not to interact with other ethnicities due to the traumatic experience of 1998 Medan's racial riots (Sinuhaji, & Kesitha, D., 2017).

Wendy Griswold, an American anthropologist emphasizes the dialectic relation between the cinema and the society in *Cultures and Societies in Changing World* as "Cinema reflects society, and society reflects the cinema." (Metz, C., & Taylor, M., 1991). This reciprocal interaction between the 'reality' in society and the 'imaginary' on the cinema's screen intertwines with each other. Christian Metz, a French film theorist applied Ferdinand Saussure's semiotic in reading a film by categorizing the image, text, sound, colour, camera position, image composition, or all *mise en scène* into signifiers and its interpretation or its meaning which is consensual, cultural, and ideological into signified (Griswold, W., 2012).

By using Christian Metz's film semiotics based on three examples of *mise en scène* in the film we will read that *mise en scène* as signifiers whose signifiers are the stigmatization and segregation of the ethnics in Medan. In figure 1 Kenny Huang and his parents celebrate the birthday of Chelsea Tan, a daughter of a rich Medan-Chinese businessman, allegedly an illegal online casino owner. In a glamorous living room of a huge family house with a vast garden they are wearing European dresses and listening to Chelsea's piano recital. Some westerners are attending the recital and holding a glass of red wine, standing beside a luxury grand piano. The *mise en scène* stereotypes the Medan Chinese as an economically privileged ethnicity, living in a social bubble, separated from the rest of society.



Figure 1. The stereotyping of Chinese ethnicity in Medan as a rich and economically privileged ethnic group (Pusung, 2019).

In the story plot, Kenny Huang abandons Chelsea Tan's love and chooses to approach Fidya Lubis, the Moslem Batak woman whom he is in love with. But Kenny's father forced Kenny to marry Chelsea. She comes from the same ethnic background and is wealthier than his family for the sake of keeping their Chinese culture such as respecting their ancestor and having more economic security. Kenny's father who looks like a Gen X might have experienced the 1980 New Order's repression which suspected Chinese-Indonesian and other Chinese look people as communist (PKI) sympathizers and the 1998 anti-Suharto movement which made the Chinese-Indonesian and other Chinese look as the scapegoat for the economic disaster such as high inflation for nine basic foods (*sembako*). Those two events created a strong traumatic experience for Chinese Indonesians who lived in those eras. While Kenny looks like a mid-20-year-old man who does not fully remember what was going on during the 98's reformation. Kenny's Father belongs to the generation who has limited access to information compared with his son Kenny, a millennial who is native to the internet technology which makes his mindset more less the same as the previous generation: keeping the ancestry alive and listening to the elders. Also, the Chinese who belong to the minority have bigger anxiety because of their population number, and the memory of repression during the New Order and 98's riots (Sinuhaji, & Kesitha, D., 2017).

On the other hand, Fidya who was born and raised in a Moslem family and environment has a similar issue to Kenny. Fidya is a very open-minded and caring woman. In the film, she is supporting a donation campaign for the poor. Even Though she knows that cross-religion dating in Indonesia is a very sensitive issue (Yunus, M., 2022) but Fidya does not pay attention to it until she overheard the

discussion between her conservative authoritarian religious Batak ethnic father and Kenny about his bad experience with the Medan Chinese family in the past.



Figure 2. The ethnic ‘wall’ segregation between Chinese ethnic group and Batak Muslim ethnic group (Pusung, 2019).

In figure 2 Kenny meets Fidyas father who surprisingly can speak with Kenny in the Chinese dialect. Even though he grew up in a Medan Chinese family he stigmatizes the Chinese by saying that he knows exactly the attitude of the Chinese and emphasizes the huge gap between the two ethnicities. In this figure, Fidyas stands on the right side separated by a wall. This image is a metaphor for the segregation and the gap between the two dominant ethnicities and religions in the city of Medan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film *Ajari Aku Islam* (Teach Me Islam) reproduces the stigma and solidifies the segregation towards the Chinese ethnic and Batak Muslim ethnic in Medan although the producer Jaymes Riyanto said in a press conference: "[...]saya ingin menghapus celah diskriminasi antar ras dan mengangkat sisi toleransi, demi mendorong isu pembauran budaya, terutama antara non-Muslim dan Muslim" ("I would like to remove discrimination between ethnicities and support the cultural integration, especially between the Muslim and non-Muslim") (Kunarsih & Tampilen, 2022). The film's ending shows Kenny converting to Islam as if the producer suggested this solution as the only way to overcome segregation. On another hand obviously, this film is trying to milk out the Indonesian major market, the Moslems which covered 87% of Indonesia's population (229,62M people) in 2019 (Kusnandar, V. B., 2019). In fact, according to an online Indonesian cinema magazine

KINCIR, the film only reached 213.962 theatre audiences although the producer targeted the film to reach 2 million audiences (*ProSumut*, 2019).



Figure 3. The potential of the film in breaking the social disparity through the encounter of two main protagonists in city's public transport “Sudako” (Pusung, 2019).

However, the film also implies a way to reduce the social disparity and stigmatization between ethnicities in Medan such as shown in figure 3 when Kenny and Fidyas are using public transportation called “Sudako” (an acronym from Suzuki, Daihatsu, and Mitsubishi Colt) and meet each other. This kind of public transport, which was owned by private persons and companies has vanished in the last 5 years in Medan due to its limited 12 seats capacity (Lubis, A. A. F., 2021) and has been replaced with the bigger seat capacity of the Trans Metro Deli Bus system called as BTS since December 2020 which is owned and operated by Indonesian Ministry of Transportation. This transportation system should be service oriented rather than money-profit-oriented and support mobility, access to the city, and encounter between different ethnicities, gender, and economic class. Indeed, one month after it launching this transportation model has taken 82.000 passengers successfully (*Sumut Pos*, 2020). Regarding the thesis of the American geographer Edward Soja in *Seeking Spatial Justice*, just access and rights for different ethnicities and social layers to public transport can challenge ethnic and social segregation (Soja, E., 2010).

The urban infrastructure such as the city's green spaces can challenge the social disparity as well. Medan has about six large public green parks such as the largest park called Sri Deli Park with 14.884 m2 areas, Avros Education Park, Teladan Park, Gajah Mada Park, and Cadika Pramuka Park. Most of the green spaces in Medan are owned and

maintained by the local government. In 2022 the local government revitalized the abandoned Avros Education Park which is located near the Deli River and has free access for its citizens. According to the 2014 research from Helmholtz Center for Environmental Research in several urban green spaces in Santiago de Chile, the green spaces especially those owned by the state or city can play a key role to evoke social interaction and contact between ethnic groups and the economic layers of (Krellenberg K., Welz J., Reyes-Päcke S., 2014). Research with the qualitative method from Wageningen University in the year 2021 about the role of urban green space in the Netherlands shows how green spaces can enhance social equality and promote inclusion for underprivileged neighbourhood (De Haas W., Hassink J., Stuiver M., 2021).

In the case of the city of Medan, the local government still faces the challenge of expanding and maintaining the city's green spaces because its urban green spaces are still 8%, below 20 % Indonesian infrastructure law standard UU No.26/2007 (Khairiah, N., & Harahap, M. I. B., 2021). Some public parks such as Teladan Park still cannot take a significant role to increase social interaction and reduce air pollution due to poor maintenance and security which makes the citizens not feel secure and comfortable while visiting Teladan Garden. However, in 2017 the city passed a local regulation to support the plan (Rencana Tata Ruang Wilayah) for expanding the urban green spaces by 30 percent until 2037 to provide places for its citizens to interact apart from different cultural, and economic backgrounds (Khairiah, N., & Harahap, M. I. B., 2021).

No	Cities	Total Area	Total Green Space	%
1.	Jakarta	661.5 km ²	65.95 km ²	9.97
2.	Kota Bandung	167.3 km ²	14.66 km ²	8.76
3.	Bogor	118.5 km ²	22.89 km ²	19.32
4.	Surabaya	326.8 km ²	29.41 km ²	9
5.	Surakarta	44.02 km ²	7.04 km ²	16
6.	Malang	110.1 km ²	4.4 km ²	4
7.	Makassar	175.8 km ²	5.27 km ²	3

8.	Medan	265.1 km ²	21.2 km ²	8
9.	Jambi	205.4 km ²	8.22 km ²	4
10.	Palembang	400.6 km ²	20.03 km ²	5
National Average Big Urban Cities Green Space (%)				8.69

Table 1. Indonesia's Big Urban Cities Green Spaces (Khairiah, N., & Harahap, M. I. B., 2021).

CONCLUSION

To challenge the social disparity in Medan is the consistent governmental intervention and support for local film production, which is non-profit, non-market-oriented, and rather highlights the collaborative works and inter-religious dialogue between filmmakers from different ethnic groups. The current city mayor of Medan, Bobby Nasution has secured the film fund for local cinema production (*Portal Pemko Medan*, 2022). He also promised to support the building of the film ecosystem in Medan. (*Portal Pemko Medan*, 2022). A cinema culture that involves local filmmakers, local producers, and local cinephiles from multi-ethnic backgrounds will enrich society and will shape the city of Medan more humane and friendly. In other words, such Cinema could be a powerful medium against stigmatization, racism, segregation, and marginalization of gender, class, and ethnicity.

The film *Ajari Aku Islam* (Teach Me Islam) has also great potential in showing the city of Medan as a multi-ethnic travel destination and supporting the Medan tourism economy by showing local kelenteng (Chinese temple), Medan Pecinan Area (Chinatown) Kesawan, Masjid Agung Sumatera Utara (greater mosque of North Sumatra), and the old settlement of Jalan Sei Sirah. Showing travel destinations in film scenes may attract local tourists from different archipel and cultural backgrounds to visit Medan. This marketing strategy has been implemented by the *Laskar Pelangi* (Riza, 2008) film that successfully boosted the Belitung tourism economy to 1800% after the film was released (Yustiana, K. 2015).

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