

CHAPTER V

HYBRID PRODUCTION: GENRE AND NARRATIVE

Introduction

A major criticism of globalization is that it leads to cultural homogenization. Yet Barker, for example, has argued that homogenization only happens in some fields, especially in commodities and consumer culture, while in others “cultural artefacts and meaning from different historical periods and geographical places can mix together and be juxtaposed”.¹ Similarly, Dissanayake has asserted that what happens is not a homogenous culture rather one that is heterogenous and hybrid: “the culture that is coming to being as a consequence of globalization gives pride of place to multiplicity, transgression, and hybridity”.²

In the case of the Indonesian television industry, Barkin has argued that “Indonesian television production relies greatly on media narratives and forms, linked in popular constellations and disembedded from those global sources”.³ He has also argued that “derived form and narrative can be selectively and creatively incorporated into local programs, and the resultant shifts in popular meaning and audience subjectivity”.⁴ The success of the *sinetron* in attracting a huge audience suggests that the producer and the production team are able to integrate local and global elements of entertainment to produce such commercially successful productions. This chapter explores how *Misteri Gunung Merapi* negotiates the

¹ Chris Barker, *Global Television: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 18-9.

² Wimal Dissanayake, "Globalization and the Experience of Culture: The Resilience of Nationhood," in *Globalization, Cultural Identities, and Media Representations*, ed. Natascha Gentz and Stefan Kramer (Albany: State University of New York Press 2006), 25.

³ Gareth Barkin, "The Foreigning Gaze: Producers, Audiences, and Symbols of the 'Traditional'," *Asian Journal of Communication* 16, no. 4 (2006): 352.

⁴ Ibid.

global and the local, especially in incorporating both global action-adventure genre and female narrative together with traditional performance into a sinetron that appeals to majority Indonesian audiences.

With its setting in a purported Javanese culture of the 17th century, the popularity of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is an interesting phenomenon. What make Indonesian audiences, which are culturally diverse, watch this sinetron? The enormous popularity of the sinetron *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan* (“Educated Doel”, broadcast since 1994)⁵, which emphasized the local culture of old Betawi, “indigenous residents of the Jakarta area”, in their *kampung*, “lower class housing”,⁶ offers a comparison. Loven argued that the success of *Si Doel* was due to the discovery of a formula for “truly Indonesian television” which was “due to a large extent to its exploration and exploitation of local culture”. However, in the view of other scholars, the popularity of *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan* was not simply that this sinetron was a product of local culture; rather, to a certain extent, that its culture and relevance was national and could be global. Many Betawi people felt that their society and culture were misrepresented in the sinetron, and yet it was more like “local sensitivity in a global package”⁷ (in Garin’s words) because “local culture was supported by professional camerawork, compatible with international standard quality”.⁸ Wardhana argued that “*Doel adalah anak kandung globalisasi*” (Doel was the son of globalization) because he went to university and had a relationship with the emancipated Sarah.⁹

Similarly, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has both global and local appeal. In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, however, the global element comes from its mixture of

⁵ Loven’s interpretation based on the context of the serials which were broadcast during 1994 and were still continuing in 2003.

⁶ Klarijn Loven, “Local Sensitivity in a Global Package: The Discursive Mediation of Ethnic Identity in Present-Day Indonesia” (paper presented at the Media and Identity in Asia, Curtin University of Technology Serawak Malaysia, 15-16 February 2006).

⁷ Loven’s personal communication with Garin Nugroho on 9 June 2000 in Jakarta.

⁸ Loven, “Local Sensitivity in a Global Package: The Discursive Mediation of Ethnic Identity in Present-Day Indonesia”.

⁹ Veven Sp Wardhana, *Kapitalisme Televisi Dan Strategi Budaya Massa [Television Capitalism and Strategy of Mass Culture]*, Cet. 1. ed. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1997), 267.

genres, not from the narrative. The local element comes from the historical setting (rather than from contemporary urban Indonesia society) and from the sinetron's uses of some traditional theatrical performance styles. These global and local elements in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are the subject of this chapter.

Indonesia has its own traditions of entertainment, which are highly stylised, with great emphasis on spectacle. I want to look at several features of traditional entertainments which, I believe, have an important bearing on the construction of this sinetron and how the traditional performance is modified by the sinetron to construct a post-New Order Indonesian-ness. In doing this, I draw on my own extensive experience of these forms of entertainment; including my training in classical Javanese dance. Through this discussion, the process of transformation from traditional entertainment to modern television serial can be identified.

Indonesia also has its own traditions of martial art as self-defence and entertainment. Martial art has long been part of Indonesian theatrical performances and films. People are familiar with the names of S.H. Mintardja's and Kho Ping Ho's martial art stories. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was produced following the popularity of *wuxia* television series in Indonesia. Did the Chinese martial art television series, such as *Return of the Condor Heroes*, influence the making of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*?

In television, genre (French for 'type' or 'kind') refers to a system of classifying of programs which is important in relation to the organization and structure of television production. Considering the huge audiences, the function of genre is to define and determine the target audiences as shows are identified by genre. The genre of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is 'action', so my question is, how is the action genre adapted in it? I will use the theory of intertextuality, especially horizontal intertextuality,¹⁰ in order to link genre, character and content of *Misteri*

¹⁰ John Fiske, "Intertextuality," in *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption*, ed. C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 219.

Gunung Merapi with other action television series as well as traditional entertainments.

Genre also influences narrative. Audiences recognise the genre of a *sinetron* and expect a certain kind of story from it. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is categorised as *sinetron kolosal laga* (large-scale action *sinetron*). So it is expected to be the story, with a large cast, of a hero who goes on a journey and has many adventures, most of which involve fighting. In Western television series, the action genre is targeted at male audiences, however *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has also attracted female viewers (see Chapter 3). The last part of this chapter is a discussion of whether the *sinetron* is constructed as male or female narrative or as a mixture.

From Traditional Stage-Performance to Television Serials

Tillis, in his observations on ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ theatre, has said that basically they are almost the same. He claims that the difference between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ in theatre, as argued by Pronko,¹¹ is only a myth. Some traits, such as music and dance, associated with the ‘Western spirit’ can be found in *ludruk* and *kethoprak*, although they are used more as curtain raisers rather than wholly integrated as in the American musical dramas. Yet *ludruk* and *kethoprak* were actually relatively recent innovations, born in the twentieth century when the influence of European spoken theatre in modernising Indonesia had become strong.¹² It can be said that what has been taken to be ‘traditional Eastern theatre’ has been hybrid for many years, because of the cultural influences of Dutch colonialization and the global reach of popular American culture.

¹¹ Pronko argued that “eastern theatre is participative in expectations of its audiences, total in its integrations of theatrical resources, and stylized in its performance techniques” ... (whereas) “the western spirit of theatre would seem to be intellectual and reason-based in its demands on audience, selective in its deployment of resources, and realistic in its performance technique”, Bestantia Indraswati, "Petrus H. Kristianto Urson: Sudah Isi Suara Ribuan Iklan [Petrus H. Kristianto Urson: Voice over of Thousands Advertisements]," *Nova*, <http://www.tabloidnova.com/articles.asp?id=505>, (accessed viewed 12 December 2006).

¹² Steve Tillis, "East, West, and World Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 20, no. 1 (2003): 76-8.

Television drama, which has developed from capitalist modernity, is different from traditional folk performance, which grew from communal agrarian culture. Although television drama and traditional performance both originated from forms of popular theatre, they are different especially in the expectation of audience participation. However, *sinetron*, “heavily influenced by international popular culture, concentrates on spectacle and sensation to attract viewers and advertising revenue”.¹³ As traditionally Eastern theatre is stylized in performance, the movement from theatre to spectacular *sinetron* is smooth. Thus it is easy for rural people to enjoy television *sinetron* drama since they are used to getting similar pleasure from traditional folk entertainment.

When I watched the earlier episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, I had the impression that I was watching a modern version of *kethoprak*, traditional Central Javanese theatre, on television. The traditional costumes of the characters in this *sinetron*, in some ways, reminded me of *kethoprak gaya baru Siswa Budaya* (new style of *kethoprak Siswa Budaya*) that I used to watch on TVRI. The difference was that it was not performed on stage. *Kethoprak* usually performs stories taken from popular Javanese histories and legends. However, it is also possible to perform stories from popular martial art fictions. The specialty of this local traditional theatre is the improvisation of dialogue: as most audiences are familiar with the narratives and they know the ending of the stories, the actors and actresses improvise dialogue to generate conflict and present love scenes. But the favourite scene is the humorous dialogue of *abdi*¹⁴. In this scene, dialogue between audiences and performers can happen and recent social problems can be discussed in a humorous way. The two-way communication shows that folk theatre creates a sense of intimacy and belonging. The two-way communication is not only found in *kethoprak* but also in any other traditional theatre forms such as *wayang kulit*, *wayang wong*, *ludrug*, and *lenong*. Although communalism in the sense of communication between performers and audiences is absent in television

¹³ Barbara Hatley, "More Voices: Women and Marginalised Group Seize New Opportunities in the Arts," *Inside Indonesia* 2005.

¹⁴ Refers to clowns in traditional performance. Usually two people in *kethoprak*, their duty is both as the protagonists' servants and commentators in accompanying their journey for special purpose. Characteristically they are both wise and funny.

drama, as rural people are used to gathering to watch television and talk interactively, they do not really lose this tradition.

In her article “Wayang and Ludruk: Polarities in Java”, Hatley differentiates among traditional performances especially between *wayang* and *ludruk*. She argues that unlike *wayang*, which is associated with the court culture of Central Java, *ludruk*, and also other popular traditional performance such as *kethoprak*, *lenong*, and *ardja*, are more about contemporary themes in which modern daily life can be reflected.¹⁵ Foulcher, in his observation of *lenong*, found that almost half of the scenes of this performance were not about the plot of the story but rather they were concerned with something else such as humour, relationships, money and problems of everyday life¹⁶. Hatley, in another article, “Theatrical Imagery and Gender Ideology in Java”, also described how contemporary social problems, such as romantic love and freedom of choice of marriage partner, can be presented in traditional theatre. As “performances are created ‘on the spot’ without script, by a process of adjustment between the details of a particular story and the standard framework of scenes, passages of dialogue, and character types” it is open to the performers to interpret and develop their own role and dialogues.¹⁷ As performers are free to develop their dialogue, the translation of the theme and the characterizations in terms of modern ideologies is possible, although it may mislead distort the narrative. Sometimes they talk about their own problems on stage. In other words, legend and traditional stories are only used as the story background, but the problems, the characterization and the dialogue can be contemporary.

As traditional performances, such as *wayang wong* and *wayang kulit*, within their set sequences of scenes change with every performance, are open to

¹⁵ Barbara Hatley, "Wayang and Ludruk: Polarities in Java," *The Drama Review* 15, no. 2 (1971): 93-4.

¹⁶ Keith Foulcher, "Community and the Metropolis: Lenong, Nyai Dasima, and the New New Order," *Asia Research Institute: working paper series*, no. 20 (2004), http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/wps/wps04_020.pdf.

¹⁷ Barbara Hatley, "Theatrical Imagery and Gender Ideology in Java," in *Power and Difference: Gender in Sland Southeast Asia*, ed. J Atkinson and S Errington (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 188-9.

innovation and improvisation, improvisation can be seen in those *wayang* which are intended to carry a special purpose or message.¹⁸ For instance, Lent noted that “during 1945-49 the birth of *Wayang Suluh*”, torch or guiding light puppet, was “to encourage armed struggle against the Dutch” and in the 1960s, *Wayang Pancasila* was to propaganda *Pancasila*, the five principles which had been established as “the ideological pillars of the nation”. He also cited Colletta and Newman about the use of *wayang* to spread messages about family planning, birth control, rice production, and national elections.¹⁹ In other words, Indonesians have been used to watching folk performances which slip current issues into the overt narratives.

With the popularity of television, watching traditional performance became less and less popular. Undoubtedly, in some ways, the coming of television has ruined local popular entertainment, as audiences are now more attracted to ‘modern’ entertainment on television. However, it does not mean traditional performance has died out. As noted by Sen, in the 1980s TVRI Yogyakarta regularly broadcasted *kethoprak* and *wayang* in prime time.²⁰ These two programs were always eagerly awaited by their audiences, and I remember that people gathered especially to watch these programs together, since television sets were still too expensive for many people. Also, at every New Year celebration, very early in the morning of the first day of the New Year, TVRI Jakarta always broadcasted *wayang*. I remember that my neighbours did anything to keep awake in order not to miss this program. This phenomenon is in line with Lent’s opinion back in 1980 that mass media, such as television, have contributed to preserving the continuity of folk culture, although it needed adaptation because

¹⁸ Laurie Lobell Sears, "Aesthetic Displacement in Javanese Shadow Theater: Three Contemporary Performance Styles" *The Drama Review* 33, no. 3 (1988); Hardja Susilo, "Improvisation in Wayang Wong Panggung: Creativity within Cultural Constraint," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 19 (1987).

¹⁹ John A. Lent, "Grassroots Renaissance: The Increasing Importance of Folk Media in Third World Nation," *Asian Folklore Studies* 39, no. 2 (1980): 151.

²⁰ Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125.

of its characteristics and medium of performance.²¹ Hatley argued that the flexibility of the traditional theatre performance forms, such as *kethoprak*, enabled them to borrow from other media, such as *kung fu*, and were suitable to broadcast on television because of their unique blend of acting, dance, folksong, instrumental music and martial art.²² In the 1990s, I remember TVRI Jakarta even broadcasted *wayang wong* with the help of modern technology. Instead of performing on stage, the dances were in an open air area such as the forest, the beach or the river side, employing special effects technology for the fighting scenes. Although it was still poor in effects, this shows that there was already an effort to combine traditional performance and modern filmmaking. It can be concluded that the transformation of traditional Indonesian entertainment from the communal audience of traditional performance on stage into individual viewers of modern television could more readily happen because it has been a gradual process.

The Construction of Post-New Order Indonesian-ness

Before the popularity of the sinetron in Indonesia, TVRI had screened the *Keluarga Rahmat* (“The Rahmat Family”) series in the late 1990s when TVRI was still the only nationally broadcasted television. Although this series was considered unsuccessful, it shows an attempt to produce a television drama with local characteristics. In Schadt’s account, the local aspect of this sinetron was in “an attempt to represent the authentic ‘colour’ of Indonesia (*‘warna’ khas Indonesia*), where life as part of a community is the fundamental condition of social existence”.²³ In *Keluarga Rachmat*, Kitley argues, the national discourses of *kekeluargaan* (kinship), *kerukunan*, (“social harmony”), *hidup sederhana*

²¹ Lent, "Grassroots Renaissance: The Increasing Importance of Folk Media in Third World Nation," 153.

²² Barbara Hatley, "Global Influence, National Politics and Local Identity in Central Javanese Theatre," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2004): 65.

²³ Philip Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia*, Research in International Studies. Southeast Asia Series; No. 104. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 147.

(living modestly) and *wawasan nusantara* (“national perspective”) were emphasized. Further, Kitley argued that the difference between this sinetron and Western soaps such as *Dynasty* or *Return to Eden* is the absence of the intricate and complex elements of soaps and their stress on “human relationships”.²⁴

Sen, in her study of the films *Catatan Si Boy* (‘Boy’s Journals’)²⁵ found that although these films, which are set in the contemporary West, contained “westernised” values and life-style, there were many elements of “distinctly a postcolonial joke” which deconstruct the dominant-subordinate relationship between the West and Indonesia.²⁶ Although Boy was very westernised in his life style, his attitude to his parents and women was still Indonesian.

Sinetron, as a continuation of film on television, tend to portray the vicissitudes of urban life. In Nugroho’s opinion this creates a hunger among Indonesians to enjoy films or sinetron which are distinctively Indonesian.²⁷ Yet the depiction of luxurious lives of the ‘big city’, and young and beautiful actors and actresses, dominate most programs produced and broadcast in Indonesia. More than 70% of shooting locations are in Jakarta. The use of Jakarta as a setting narrows the presentation of the content materials in which the depiction of urban social problems dominates. Yet 70% of Indonesian citizens live in rural areas and experience economic burdens.²⁸ *Misteri Gunung Merapi* offers different nuances that most Indonesians find lacking in the other sinetron: a distinctive panorama of Indonesia in which their own cultural values are represented.

As I will discuss later in this chapter, the popularity of martial art stories in Indonesia derives from the ability of the writer to mix fictional characters with a story of the past with accurate locations and myths still existing in society. In

²⁴ Ibid., 147-9.

²⁵ Because this film was immensely popular, up to four sequels have been produced, *Catatan si Boy I, II, III, and IV*.

²⁶ Krishna Sen, "Si Boy Looked at Johny: Indonesian Screen at the Turn of the Decade," *Continuum* 4, no. 2 (1991), <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/4.2/Sen.html>.

²⁷ Garin Nugroho’s lecture at Flinders University on 13 June 2007.

²⁸ Sunardian Wiradono, *Matikan TV-Mu! Teror Media Televisi Indonesia [Turn Off Your TV! Media Terror in Indonesian Television]* (Yogyakarta: Resist Book, 2005), 18-9.

some ways, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has followed this tradition, especially in the earlier episodes. There was an element of epic in the fictional heroic figure that fights against Dutch colonialisation in the context of Sultan Agung's plan to attack Batavia, the fortified Dutch headquarters, in 1630-35. However, this story is undeveloped in the sinetron, in response to changing social trends.²⁹

As the setting is Java in the past, a cursory look at the sinetron gives an impression of Javanese traditional performance, but in the Indonesian language. It has this in common with recent versions of the twentieth-century Javanese theatre style known as *kethoprak*. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes on elements of *kethoprak*, although it is not performed on stage but rather is set in the open air. The hero's quest, for example, is typical of conventional *kethoprak*'s themes. The sinetron has some elements of *kethoprak humor* (humorous *kethoprak*), although it is more serious, in the characters' conversation and the story. *Kethoprak humor* was a favourite prime time Saturday night program broadcast on Indosiar. This show was still performed on stage with modified traditional costumes. As it was a television show with broader target audiences, it was performed in Indonesian language and by popular comedians. The aspects of humour were more dominant than the narrative plot and people were more entertained by the humorous conversations than the story. Another modern version of *kethoprak* developed in the 1990s and became popular as *kethoprak plesetan*. As Hatley noted, this is "a subversively humorous style of show". Although it is still performed on stage, "all aspects of performance", including language "could be subverted and overturned".³⁰ *Misteri Gunung Merapi* lacks the satirical, subversive and political elements of *kethoprak plesetan*.

However, there are some elements of Javanese traditional theatre, not only from *kethoprak*, used in building the story. *Malih*, for example, is popular in both *wayang wong* and *wayang kulit*. As Parnickel noted, *malih* or *alihan* (the noun of *malih*) "refers to the capacity of one character to take on the appearance, manner,

²⁹ Such as the trend of sinetron to present teen themes.

³⁰ Hatley, "Global Influence, National Politics and Local Identity in Central Javanese Theatre," 78-9.

and voice of another, often entirely different sort of figure”.³¹ This process is repeatedly used in this sinetron. With her supernatural power, Mak Lampir takes on the appearance of Nyai Blorong in order to seduce Kala Gondhang. In another episode, Nyai Blorong can change her form into a village girl to lure Sembara. However in its narrative *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is not the story of court culture (the prince and the princess as *kethoprak* used to present); rather the heroes are common people although they are on a heroic journey (I will discuss gender and heroism in a later chapter). With its elements of modified traditional performance, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* can communicate to rural audiences who are still unfamiliar with and/or do not live in the modern settings of other sinetron; but at the same time it also appeals to urban audiences who have left behind their traditional culture.

Language, as Teo has argued, is one of the manifestations of identity.³² With Indonesian language as the medium for communication, this sinetron shows the construction of Indonesian national identity. Although the Javanese elements are strong in the story, Indonesian spoken with a Javanese accent is rarely heard. As most settings are in areas of largely ethnically Sundanese West Java where the open-air studios are located, Indonesian with a Sundanese accent is more dominant, although it is limited to the crowd characters, played by extras who are mainly locally employed. As I have discussed in Chapter 4 most central characters in this sinetron are dubbed by the professional voice-overs³³ from the Sanggar Prativi Company, who do not have any particular ethnic accent in the way they speak Indonesian.

Clothing also signifies cultural identity. Every ethnic group in Indonesia has its own distinctive clothing. Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes a

³¹ Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 207.

³² Stephen Teo, "Local and Global Identity: Whither Hong Kong Cinema?," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 7 (2000), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/7/hongkong.html>.

³³ Petrus H. Kristanto, a professional voice-over who began his career in 1983, explained that his struggle as a voice-over has been to reduce his Sumatranese accent. Eric Yin, "Introduction to Wuxia Genre," *Heroic Cinema: a guide to Asian movies in Australia* <http://www.heroic-cinema.com/eric/xia.html2001>, (accessed 3 March 2006).

historical Javanese setting, it does not employ Javanese costume in its depiction of the central characters. Although the crowd characters wear Javanese traditional clothes of *kebaya*, *jarik* and *kemben*³⁴, their role is not central in the story. The costume of Farida, particularly considering her hairstyle, is more Balinese than Javanese, while the costume of Sembara and most male characters, considering the pattern of their *blangkon* (headscarf), is a combination of Javanese and Sundanese. The colour and pattern of their *jarik* is Northern Coastal Javanese (the colours of *jarik* in Central Java are only dark and light brown for Surakarta and dark brown and white for Jogjakarta). *Kyai*, the Islamic teachers, who are also dominant characters in this sinetron, wear an Arabic *abaya*-like, loose garment with an Arabic style of head scarf. For other female characters, there are elements of Chinese *kung fu* costuming, especially in their hairstyles, combined with modern Javanese. Their costumes are a combination of Balinese body-binding, in the wearing of their *kemben*, with an Indian sari, in the way of putting a long scarf over their shoulder. This makes ethnic identity in this sinetron fluid, open to various identifications. It also shows borrowing from *kung fu* cinema or TV series, especially *Return of the Condor Heroes* and *Journey to the West* which were popular in Indonesia.

Music is also culturally specific. Although the dominant music in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is Western diatonic, there are some scenes in which the background is pentatonic music. However this pentatonic music is not Central Javanese. The Central Java settings are often accompanied by a *suling* (a type of flute, particularly popular in West Java) or a *gamelan* with a West Javanese or Sundanese tone and rhythm.³⁵

The domination of Sundanese or West Javanese culture can also be seen in greetings used. Although the setting is supposedly Central Java, the dominant greeting in the sinetron is the Sundanese way of greeting.

³⁴ *Jarik* and *kemben* are traditional costumes for Javanese people. The *jarik* is a piece of loose cloth with a special motif for covering the lower part of the body and the *kemben* is a form of blouse to cover the upper part of the body. They represent the female costume of lower class society while the aristocrats, wear *jarik* and *kebaya*, a special blouse with long sleeves.

³⁵ The central difference between Javanese and Sundanese tone is in the way the *kendhang* is played. The rhythm in West Javanese is more dynamic.

Names in Indonesia also indicate ethnic identity. Considering the setting of Java in the seventeenth century, the names of the characters should be Javanese. However, the names in the sinetron include Javanese, Melayu, Sundanese, and modern Indonesian names. As the writer of the original story is was Asmadi Syafar, a West Sumatranese, the central characters in this story have Minang (the major ethnicity in West Sumatra) names such as Sembara, Farida, Basir, Mardian, Rosminah, Datuk Larang Tapa and Mak Lampir. Javanese names are present among the legendary and historical figures such as Sultan Agung, Sunan Kalijaga, Nyai Rara Kidul, and Nyai Blorong. Also, as there are some Dutch figures in this sinetron, Dutch names also are also evident, such as Karen and de Voss. Other names such as Pitaloka and Mayang Sari are currently popular Indonesian girls' names. There is an impression of ethnic diversity in the choice of the names of the characters.

The spectacle of *kung fu*-derived martial art film and television series depends on the presentation of muscle and weaponry which “tends to be displayed with a particular sense of engorged urgency in the moments just before a fight, in anticipation of the testing conflict to come”.³⁶ However, the spectacle in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* depends on the visualization of oral stories of supernatural power: people's ability to fly, to see beyond their physical sight, and to be invulnerable to any weapon.

Looking at all the entertainment elements in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* - the historical background, the costumes, the choice of names, the language of communication - shows that it does not communicate only an indigenous Javanese culture, rather it mixes many elements of the dominant ethnic cultures in Indonesia with several aspects of global popular entertainment. With all these

³⁶ David Chute. "Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Art Films." ed David Chute and Lim Cheng-Sim. (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 2003), <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/newsletter/MartialArtsBrochure.pdf>.

mixed elements, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has tried to produce “glocal³⁷” entertainment for its multi-ethnic cultural target audience.

The Popularity of Martial Art Stories in Indonesia

The term ‘martial art’, in Indonesian *pencak silat*, “fighting using technique of self defence”, refers to a hand-to-hand combat. This art is widely known in Indonesia and Malaysia and in these countries there are dozens of styles and schools of self-defence, such as *Merpati Putih* and *Tapak Suci Putra Muhammadiyah*. These forms of *pencak silat* look more like an elaborate dance than combat, however they are considered a powerful method of self-defence. The techniques are developed from the observation of wild animals such as tigers and monkeys. The duels begin with a calm and deliberate dance, followed by a series of lightning quick attacks and repelling, evading or blocking in defence, and counter-attacks, sending whole bodies airborne or slinking across the ground. Although hands, elbows, arms, legs and feet are used as weapons, knowledge of other weaponry is also important. Most of the practitioners of this martial art use a double dagger, stick or sword although it is also possible to use a long scarf, flower, whip, or other items which are not normally considered a weapon. A distinctive element of *pencak silat* is the importance of spiritual exercise to gain *tenaga dalam*, inner or supernatural power, although aspects of disciplined physical training are also important. The mythological version of *pencak silat* involves mystical and spiritual aspects which make its skilled practitioners, *pendekar* (warriors), impervious to weapons and enables them to fly effortlessly through the air, or attain the strength of many men.³⁸

Martial art stories have been popular in Indonesia for a long time. Chinese martial art stories or *wuxia xiaoshuo*, “knightly romances”, were translated into Indonesian and have been published as serialised stories in newspapers since the

³⁷ From ‘global and local’.

³⁸ From various websites of schools of martial art and my own experience when I learnt martial art.

end of the 19th century. The first example was probably *Tjie Tjin Koeij* (The Revenge of Miss Moedah).³⁹ They were aimed to satisfy the Chinese Indonesian market, most of whom were by then unable to speak or read their ancestral language. After World War II, Chinese Indonesians published a newspaper in Chinese in which martial art stories were one of the main attractions. Because of its popularity the martial art stories then were published in books. These books, in fact, were popular not only among the Chinese Indonesians but also among other Indonesians.⁴⁰

Considered as Chinese popular literature, the martial art stories originally were historical romances of aristocrats and their troubles. Then, in the beginning of the 19th century, the genre was developed into investigative stories with a magistrate as the main character. By the end of the 19th century, the central characters changed into warriors⁴¹ whose duty was to fight against evil.

In 1961 these Chinese martial art stories were banned in Indonesia because of officially sponsored anti-Chinese sentiments, but this did not stop their popularity. As the desire for martial art stories was so great, Chinese Indonesian writers of them emerged. Kho Ping Hoo is considered as the pioneer, followed by Tjoe Beng Siang and The Eng Gie. Born in Indonesia and not speaking Chinese, they learned how to write their stories from their reading of the existing translated storybooks. Most took China as their setting with Chinese characters. Kho Ping Hoo was the most popular writer for Indonesian readers. Suryadinata suggested that from reading Kho's earlier books and looking at the stories, book-titles and characters he got an impression that his writings were deeply influenced by

³⁹ Phek Tauwtoo Hiang, "Perjalanan Cerita Silat Di Indonesia [the Journey of Martial Art Story in Indonesia]," *Koran Tempo*, 30 Oktober 2005, <http://www.ruangbaca.com/ruangbaca/?doky=MjAwNQ==&dokm=MTA=&dokd=MzA=&dig=YXJjaGl2ZXM=&on=Q1JT&uniq=MTY5>, (accessed 6 June 2006).

⁴⁰ Alwi Shahab, "Cerita Silat: Shao Lin Sie and Bu Tong Pai," *Republika Online*, 17 April 2005 2005, http://www.republika.co.id/koran_detail.asp?id=194589&kat_id=84&kat_id1=&kat_id2=, (accessed 3 February 2006).

⁴¹ "the traditional xia of fiction is a non-conformist who fights for justice. He is honourable to a fault, his word is inviolable, and his reputation is more important than life itself. Moreover, he is a master of martial arts who does not hesitate to use his skills in the defence of his beliefs. Philip Kitley, "Fine Tuning Control: Commercial Television in Indonesia," *Continuum* 8, no. 2 (1994), <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/8.2/Kitley.html>.

Chinese *kung fu* novels. However, in his later novels he initiated “a new ‘tradition’ in which when he preached intermarriage based on love, as in his nine-volume *Kilat Pedang Membela Cinta* (The Shine of the Sword defends Love) published in 1981”.⁴²

At the same time, there was also a development of martial art stories with local settings. In 1967 S.H. Mintardja started to write the serial *Api di Bukit Menoreh*, (Fire on Menoreh Hill) with the Javanese Islamic empire of Mataram as its setting. There were 300 books in this serial and when he passed away the story still had not ended. The other famously popular story was *Nagasasra Sabuk Inten* (A Pair of Double Daggers), which takes the north-east coastal Javanese sultanate of Demak as the setting of the story. The story appears so realistic and lively that many people thought that the main character of the story, Mahesa Jenar, actually existed in history. Mintardja also wrote *Pelangi di Langit Singasari* (Rainbow in the Sky of Singosari) which was published in the daily newspaper *Berita Nasional* in the 1970s and continued into *Hijaunya Lembah Hijaunya Lereng Pegunungan* (The Green of the Valley, the Green of the Mountain). The last story he wrote was episode 848 of *Mendung di Atas Cakrawala* (The Clouds on the Horizon) published in the daily newspaper *Bernas*. The distinctive quality of his story was the strong element of Javanese culture where he introduced to his readers old Javanese traditions which had almost disappeared.⁴³

Another major native Indonesian writer is Widi Widajat with his *Cinta dan Tipu Muslihat* (Love and Deceit) and *Terbentur Nasib* (Struck by Fate). Herman Pratikto was also well-known from his story of *Bende Mataram* (Mataram’s Sacred Weapon). Recent writers are the late Bastian Tito with *Wiro Sableng* (Wiro the Insane) and Arswendo Atmowiloto with *Senopati Pamungkas* (The Last Commander). Most of their stories are still republished today, some on

⁴² Olivia Mok, "Translational Migration of Martial Arts Fiction East and West" *Target* 13, no. 1 (2002), <http://esc.ziyi.org/filmography/cthd/wuxiafiction/migration.html>; Nurkhoiri, "Jurus Para Pendekar Lokal [the Art of the Local Warrior]," *Tempo*, 30 Oktober 2005 2005, <http://www.ruangbaca.com/ruangbaca/?doky=MjAwNQ==&dokm=MTA=&dokd=MzA=&dig=aW5kZXg=&on=Q1JT>, (accessed 6 June 2006).

⁴³ Nurkhoiri, "Jurus Para Pendekar Lokal [the Art of the Local Warrior]."

the Web. Obviously the tradition of martial art stories has been continued in Indonesia.⁴⁴

Although the genre of martial art narratives is often left out of literary discussion, it is popular among all class levels. According to Suyono and Idayani, everyone from *becak* (pedicab) drivers to office workers read these stories. The popularity of Javanese martial art stories is due to S H Mintardja's ability to mix his fictional characters, Javanese *Babad* (traditional accounts of the past), with accurate locations and existing myths in society. Some people even think that the fictional characters in his stories existed in the past, and many people searched for the tombs of the characters to pay respect to them.⁴⁵

Looking at the popularity of martial art stories in Indonesia, it is not surprising if martial art cinema and television series are also popular in Indonesia. For example, if we look at the first films which were produced in Indonesia in 1930s, such as *Si Tjonat*, we can see how this genre has been part of Indonesian entertainment for a long time. Does the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi* mainly follow the tradition of Indonesian martial art, combining fictional characters with existing myths in society, or is it more influenced by transnational martial art cinema and television series in its attempts to attract such diverse Indonesian audiences?

The Popularity of *Kung Fu* and *Wuxia* Film in Indonesia

Kung fu films have been popular since the beginning of the film industry and the rise of television in Indonesia. In 1979 following the introduction of colour television in Indonesia, video cassettes became available as an alternative home entertainment. The cassettes, which included the latest international movies,

⁴⁴ Seno Joko Suyono and L.N. Idayanie, "The Return of Mahesa Jenar," *Tempo*, 21-27 March 2006 2006, http://www.mail-archive.com/referensi_maya@yahoogroups.com/msg00052.html, (accessed 5 June 2006).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

films embargoed in Indonesia, and pornography, could be rented cheaply from video shops.⁴⁶ The most popular were martial art series such as *Kung Fu Master* or *Once Upon a Time in China*. In 1991-1992 when RCTI and SCTV, as the first Indonesian commercial television stations, still required a decoder for their reception as broadcasting was restricted to subscribers and was only in metropolitan areas, they broadcast Mandarin serials. In 1995, after private television stopped using decoders and broadcast nationally, SCTV screened another Mandarin serial, *White Snake Legend* which achieved the incredible rating of 36 points on 14 March that year. Because of the tremendous success of this *kung fu* serial, RCTI also broadcast *kung fu* cinema as prime time programs to compete.⁴⁷ Similarly, beginning 8 May 1995, Indosiar broadcast every weekday *Return of the Condor Heroes* which in June achieved a rating of around 34-37.⁴⁸ The popularity of this series even exceeded major Hollywood box office successes which were broadcast at prime time on both RCTI and SCTV.⁴⁹

Chinese martial art cinema, popular in the West under the general term *kung fu*, are action-packed screen dramas drawn from contemporary popular pulp fiction and from traditional tales and legends of superhuman swordsmen and magical feats. *Wuxia*, meaning martial arts chivalry, is a genre which was peculiar to Chinese culture. *Wuxia pian* denotes to martial art films with sword-fights, while the term *kung fu* strictly refers to those containing unarmed fist-fights. However, these terms are often confused terminologically, with many people considering *kung fu* as both sword-fighting and unarmed fist-fighting.⁵⁰

The lure of the *kung fu* genre, according to Nugroho, is the element of violence in these films, as violence is forbidden in real everyday life. There is a special formula in the narrative, which creates escapism for male viewers. As the story is about a male hero who takes revenge for his friend or lover's death, this

⁴⁶ Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia*, 217-18.

⁴⁷ Wardhana, *Kapitalisme Televisi Dan Strategi Budaya Massa [Television Capitalism and Strategy of Mass Culture]*, 218-20.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁰ Dissanayake, "Globalization and the Experience of Culture: The Resilience of Nationhood," 38.

genre offers to the imagination a heroic figure of the kind that men might dream about, that is more difficult to find in recent every day life with its economic and social burdens.⁵¹ In contrast, Garcia argues that the escapism in *kung fu* cinema feeds the audience's fantasy of "the desire for a link with tradition", as most *kung fu* cinema serves its watchers with "childhood myths and legends, underpinned by a historical tradition of institutions such as the Shaolin Temple".⁵² Differently again, Anderson argues that martial art films offer an "aesthetics of violent spectacles" through dance-like fighting sequences in which the pleasures are diverse, "based on viewers' perceptions of differences in the violent imagery's 'type of genre' and further differentiated by individual viewer preferences based on memory, body, and culture".⁵³

The global market in the entertainment industry is not simple to imagine or accurately recognise. It "is an idea that is constructed in a specific way by the entertainment industry, and made up in contrasting but similar manner by other industries".⁵⁴ Most entertainment industries will look at Hollywood as paradigm of their production. Success transnationally depends on the capability to be versatile and adaptable. To understand the global market, particular considerations have to be made, which include aesthetic judgment and semiotic consideration of the type of images acceptable and suitable for international audiences.⁵⁵ Although Hollywood is often considered as definitive of global culture, Hong Kong cinema has its own transnational paradigm. It was originally an ethnic cinema but its market has become almost worldwide although it is not entirely global. Hong

⁵¹ Garin Nugroho, *Seni Merayu Massa [the Art of Wooing the Masses]* (Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara, 2005), 56-9.

⁵² Roger Garcia, "Alive and Kicking: The Kung Fu Film Is a Legend," *Brights Lights film journal*, no. 31 (2001), http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/31/hk_alive.html.

⁵³ Aaron Anderson, "Violent Dances in Martial Art Films," *Jump Cut: A review of Contemporary Media* 44, (2001), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/aarona/andersontextonly.html>.

⁵⁴ Keith Negus and Patria Roman-Velazquez, "Globalization and Cultural Identities," in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Arnold, 2000), 340.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Kong cinema understands market diversity and Hong Kong filmmakers often produce films to suit the tastes and demands of individual markets.⁵⁶

Hong Kong cinema may be considered ethnic and local, as the language used to construct identity is Cantonese, the major dialect of Chinese used there. Yet it is also exported to regions where Chinese communities have settled, either in Southeast Asian or Western countries. To cater to the overseas Chinese community, Hong Kong cinema not only sells Cantonese dialect features but also Chaozhou and Amoy transnationally. To expand its international market beyond the traditional Chinese-speaking market, Hong Kong has made co-productions with Shaw Brothers, Hammer Films, Warner Bros and Golden Harvest, especially in *kung fu*, and attempted to penetrate the US market. The characteristics of these co-productions are the blending and balance of cultural elements from both sides.⁵⁷ With Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan as the stars, martial art films began to create their popularity among Western audiences. Today, martial art films from both Hong Kong and mainland China have become a worldwide phenomenon, with the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* evidence of the global popularity of martial art cinema.

One key to the success of *wuxia pian* internationally is the ability of the producer to “tell a story with a global sense”, as it has to be “accessible to a Euro-American audience, but it also had to have cultural appeal to Asian audiences”.⁵⁸ Eperjesi asserts that the popularity of this film is caused by its ability to create “an occasion for constructing Chineseness as a territorially dispersed, yet ethnically integrated imagined community” and the exotic images of Chinese cultural tradition. In this way, this film offers fluid identification to Chinese everywhere, as “the local, national and regional conflicts that structure Greater China” were “imaginatively suspended”, and also to Western audiences, through “reinforcing”

⁵⁶ Teo, "Local and Global Identity: Whither Hong Kong Cinema?."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kenneth Chan, "The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (2004): 5.

the image of Cultural China in the West.⁵⁹ Lee, the producer of ‘*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*’, explained that it is his boyhood fantasy of innocence and idealism and he has used “traditional myths and cinematic conventions” to express his fantasies. Chan argues that as Lee built his theme within the stereotype of East versus West, “the perennial cultural desire for individual freedom and rights versus a concern with social and communal responsibility”, he could communicate with global audiences. Besides, he still included “filial piety, Chinese patriarchy, and the social and cultural authority of the father figure” This example suggests that the popularity of *wuxia* film transnationally is caused by the construction of an “imagined community” of China which is wholly integrated despite the fact that China is ethnically diverse.⁶⁰

As *kung fu* and *wuxia* are also popular in Indonesia, does *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, in some ways, imitate their success in constructing to a transnational Chinese identity in the way it constructs ‘Indonesian-ness’, as I discussed above?

The Hybrid Action-Adventure Genre

As mentioned previously, at a glance, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is like *kethoprak* on television. However, there are many elements of global entertainment. As Indonesian people are used to dealing with modern content in traditional theatre, it is easy for them to enjoy modern entertainment on Western-originated television. In this section, I am going to examine more deeply how this sinetron is influenced by global entertainment, focusing especially on genre. As television is of Western origin, I want to discuss how *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents traditional epic themes in television format.

⁵⁹ John R. Eperjesi, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Kung Fu Diplomacy and the Dream of Cultural China," *Asian Studies Review* 28 (2004): 26-9.

⁶⁰ Chan, "The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 7-8.

The television schedule is organized according to the genre of the program because it is the way to organize “ideas about social issues, human experience”, and “cultural behaviour”.⁶¹ In the West, television programs are conventionally classified into genres such as ‘commercials’, ‘news programs’, ‘situation comedies’, ‘soap operas’, ‘documentaries’, ‘sports shows’, ‘talk shows’, ‘action-adventure programs’, ‘detective shows’, ‘science fiction shows’, ‘hospital dramas’, and ‘westerns’. Each genre has its own formula. Television, indeed, tends to be formulaic: observing certain familiar conventions and following them. The conventions of setting, character and characterization, plot, theme, costumes, ‘means of locomotion’, or ‘weaponry’ vary from one genre to another.⁶²

Genres can be mixed. Although the formula, for example, in action-adventure, may be well established, variations such as “intertextual borrowings from one genre to another genre” are possible, depending on the audiences who are intended to watch this program. The intertextual borrowings from one genre to another can lead to the rise of new genres. Hollywood genres, according to Neale, are “hybrid and multi-generic” so that there are different nuances among action, adventure, and action adventure.⁶³ Further Bean points out that hybridity can be seen in most contemporary or post-classical action films, where there is a combination of “generic plots, setting, and characters types from sources including science fiction, the western, horror, the epic, war films, crime cinema and thrillers, disaster movies, swordplay and martial arts, even comedy”.⁶⁴

Action-adventure has been popular in Hollywood cinema although it attracts criticism for its failure to meet “the markers of aesthetic and cultural value typically applied within contemporary film culture”. James Welsh said that “they

⁶¹ Arthur Asa Berger, "Genre," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/G/htmlG/genre/genre.htm>, (accessed 12 March 2006).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Linda Ruth Williams, "Ready for Action: GI Jane, Demi Moore's Body and the Female Combat Movie " in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

⁶⁴ Jennifer M. Bean, "Trauma Thrills: Notes on Early Action Cinema," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

are usually big and often brainless and they are extraordinarily popular”.⁶⁵ Action-adventure is also popular in television series format. This genre is often screened in prime time in Western television.

Action-adventure cinema is characterised by the domination of spectacular physical action to such an extent that, as Jennifer Bean puts it, “the body takes primacy over voice in the genre, that the action film ‘speaks’ through visual spectacle, that spectacle, in fact, takes precedence over narrative meaning”.⁶⁶ As narrative is important in popular cinema, the narrative is incorporated into the spectacular action sequences. This genre entertains the viewers with lots of collision, conflict, movement, risk and thrills through “the special effects, artful editing and percussive music”.⁶⁷ As action refers to a sort of film making (in effect, technique) and a specific set of pleasures, new technology opens the possibility of producing greater action, larger special effects, and more panoramic scenes. Thus, it appeals to its audiences in a particular thrilling way.⁶⁸

There are distinctions between ‘action’ and ‘adventure’. The expectations of ‘action’ are the production of ‘combat’, ‘a distinctive’ and ‘typically fragmented orchestration of space’, ‘an accelerated sense of time’ and ‘pace’, ‘visual and aural spectacle and special effect’. With ‘adventure’, the expectation is more on narrative because the audiences want to follow the journey or the quest of the protagonist into unknown territories where the protagonist overcomes the obstacles in his path. Nevertheless, as both ‘adventure’ and ‘action’ emphasize action rather than emotion, ‘adventure’ is connected with ‘action’.⁶⁹ Typically, ‘action-adventure’ shows offer a solution through the triumph of the male hero over his enemies and environment. The hero exercises his power over villains, typically manifesting his power through the expression of the body rather than the mind.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ Williams, "Ready for Action: GI Jane, Demi Moore's Body and the Female Combat Movie ", 7.

⁶⁹ Bean, "Trauma Thrills: Notes on Early Action Cinema," 4-8.

Looking at the narrative structure of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, this sinetron can be categorised in the ‘action-adventure’ genre. It stresses the quest of the protagonist, Sembara, into the unknown forest and the mysterious world of spirits to find and free his lover, Farida, kidnapped by the evil witch, Mak Lampir. As in typical action-adventures, this sinetron emphasizes physical movement and (mild) violence. And, as narrative structure in action-adventure involves fights, chases, explosions with the addition of special effects and emphasis on the performance of the stunt, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has a lot of combat with visual and aural spectacle and special effects. Even more spectacular effects are achieved through the screening of fighting in the air, producing a visual impression of supernatural power.

The uniqueness of this sinetron is in its combination of action-adventure and epic genres. The hybridity of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* can be seen through its moving from action drama into “colossal action”⁷⁰ where, with the help of technology, it can produce an effect of a large cast of characters such as in the scenes of war between Mataram and Dutch soldiers. Certainly, this sinetron involves a lot of extras as minor characters and as crowds. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is also large in scale, which puts it into the category of *sinetron kolosal laga*, which also implies an epic theme.

‘Epic’ here refers to “films with historical, especially ancient-world setting; and large-scale films of all kinds which used new technologies, high production values and special modes of distribution and exhibition”; as a genre epic film is characterised by its “emphasis on aural and visual spectacle”.⁷¹ Fitting this definition of ‘epic’, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* combines various elements taken from history, legend, rituals, and tradition: its historical setting in the 17th century and the spectacles of exotic locations of jungle and forest, bodies, costumes, religion and rituals, and ancient court culture.

⁷⁰ ‘Colossal’ refers to its large casts of characters involving many actors, actresses, extras and stunts.

⁷¹ Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), 85.

The combination of humour and violence in action-adventure contributes to its popularity. It is a major element of the Hollywood tradition, from the classic action dramas starring John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Chuck Norris until more recent films such as *Indiana Jones*, *Die Hard*, and *Lethal Weapon*. Citing Freud's account of comedy, King argued that humour in action cinema tends to humiliate and make someone into the victim of the other.⁷² This is true of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, and I think it enhances its popularity although the humorous scenes are different, as much humour is culturally specific. In some scenes we see how Basir disparages Mak Lampir when she repeatedly loses fights against Sembara. Some 'rude' scenes, which children find very funny, occur, for example when Basir tries to attack the enemy by farting before he strikes with his hands or fists. Other humorous scenes derive from the way Mak Lampir changes her face to look like Nyi Blorong and tempts Kala Gondang so that he will do anything she tells him. This humorous scene belittles man's weaknesses in being easily attracted to a beautiful woman.

The characteristic of the action hero, according to Tasker, is in the representation of "spectacular bodies" for which she devises the term "musculinity".⁷³ She argued that the images of the muscular body in action are central to fight-films. "The feats of near-naked action heroes" showing his muscular body offer the body to-be-looked-at in both motion and posed positions.⁷⁴ As there are different traditions of fighting between East and West, there is no articulation of masculine strength and power through the hard body conflict that is depicted in most Western action cinema. Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not offer "the feats of near-naked action heroes", the costume of the heroes reveals the health, fitness, and bodybuilding of the actors. Nor does this sinetron present impressive fighting movements like *kung fu*, which exhibits both

⁷² Cynthia M. King, "Effects of Humorous Heroes and Villains in Violent Action Films," *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 1 (2000): 5-6.

⁷³ "Musculinity indicates the extent to which physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body representation" Yin, "Introduction to Wuxia Genre."

⁷⁴ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodie : Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema*, Comedia (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 77.

muscular body and spectacular movement, although the focus is on “the apparent willpower” as well as virtuosity of movement.⁷⁵ Conflict in this sinetron is characteristically between supernatural powers, which produce a lot of explosions. The beautiful movements of attack and counter-attack characteristic of Javanese martial art are rarely displayed in this sinetron. Instead, there are a lot of explosions, which are not generated by guns, but by an empty hand, showing the exercise of supernatural power. The similarity between this sinetron and *kung fu* cinema is in the ability of the fighters to control gravity so that it looks like they can fly and fight in the air.

Most action-adventure films are characterised by a ‘buddy’ relationship between the protagonists, as is *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. Tasker has argued that a pair of male protagonists offers the possibility to create comedy through their different characterization.⁷⁶ The friendship between Sembara and Basir with their contrasting characters suggests that this sinetron has applied this element of the genre of buddy film. Although both of them are disciples of the Islamic teacher Kyai Jabat in martial art skills, Sembara’s skill is far beyond Basir’s. Every time they are in a difficult situation, Basir prefers to hide behind a tree or bushes rather than helping Sembara to fight against their enemy. Nevertheless, when Basir has to fight, he shows that he has good martial art skills and it is not easy for his enemy to defeat him. Another distinct personality trait is Basir’s craving appetite for food which is not appropriate to his role as *pendekar* (warrior), while Sembara, in order to develop his supernatural power, is often shown practising meditation and controlling his hunger in order to cultivate his faculties and strengthen his supernatural power. However their pairing is successful, as Basir is wiser in understanding the problems they face and how to cope. In terms of traditional entertainment, the pairing between Sembara and Basir is like the relationship between the protagonist and the clown. As in traditional performance, the clown is to create amusement with his behaviour and dialogue. And since clowns are *abdi*, servants of the protagonist, they function to remind the

⁷⁵ Aaron Anderson, "Kinesthesia in Martial Art Films," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 42, (1998), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC42folder/anderson2/text.html>.

⁷⁶ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodie : Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema*, 43-7.

protagonist to stay on the right track, as Basir does. However, while there are two clowns in folk theatre so that their comic behaviour does not disturb the seriousness of the protagonist, in this sinetron, all comedic aspects are in the hands of Basir.

Further generic elements in the hybrid mix of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are melodrama and romance. As the action genre is male-oriented, it typically shows little interest in the aspects of “motivation and romance” which are usually found in the soap opera genre. It also tends to hide away “sentiment, character, dialogue and family” as they are considered feminine. But some critics, as Tasker notes, argue that action can be melodramatic because of “the incorporation of a central female protagonist and/or a concern with familial themes”, and this incorporates an element of the feminine into this masculine genre.⁷⁷ Williams (2004) has argued that melodrama offers “moral legibility”, so it works in action films. The characteristics of melodrama shared by both traditional melodrama and action cinema, as well as “visual spectacle and excess” and “overwrought emotions and situations,” are “Manichean distinctions between good and evil”.⁷⁸

The elements of melodrama in film can be seen through “its rapid and exciting physical action, sharply contrasted and simplified characters, and colourful alternations of violence, pathos, and humour”.⁷⁹ These can also be found in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. The central situations are melodramatic: the several kidnaps of helpless and innocent Farida by a powerful evil witch Mak Lampir and the triumph of the hero, Sembara, through sequences of spectacular action in hunting down the kidnappers serves a moral necessity. Sen argued that Indonesian cinema did not employ the Western concept of melodrama because the central key of Indonesian melodrama was about victimization without clear representation of

⁷⁷ Yvonne Tasker, ed., *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 5.

⁷⁸ Russell Meeuf, "Collateral Damage: Terrorism, Melodrama, and the Action Film on the Eve of 9/11," *Jump Cut: A review of contemporary media* 48, (2006), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/CollatDamage/text.html>.

⁷⁹ Wimal Dissanayake, *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-2.

villainy.⁸⁰ However, in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, the villain is clearly represented through the figure of Mak Lampir and her followers, although the triumph of the hero has never been absolute. Like Superman serials with their continual presence of Lex Luthor, Mak Lampir has never been absolutely defeated by Sembara. This allows the continuing production of the story.

Although its title is *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, the ancestry of this sinetron is not from within the Indonesian mystery genre that was popular in the 1980s. Most of those mystery films tell the story of a body rising from the dead to take revenge. The motivation of this zombie, an apparition from the tomb as ‘God’s messenger’, is to take revenge and to uphold justice. The ghostly zombie can transform into a beautiful human to trap her victims: the rapist, the killer, the corruptor, or the robber. She looks terrifying only in front of the victims. As the end of the story, the soul trapped in the dead body is released with the help of a *kyai* and his prayers.⁸¹ *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not employ this plot: although there is one episode where a dead body rises out of the tomb, it is not for the same vengeful purpose. Rather it is about a man who cannot accept his wife’s death and tries to resurrect her with the help of Mak Lampir and the evil spirits. Mak Lampir in this episode is a mediator between the human and spirit worlds. This episode shows how the Islamic concept of a zombie or a dead body is different from the Javanese belief of a soul trapped in a dead body. I will discuss how the supernatural is communicated by this sinetron to national audiences in Chapter 7.

Looking at *Misteri Gunung Merapi* in terms of the theory of intertextuality shows that the sinetron employs an action-adventure genre similar to the Western one. Elements that are found in most action-adventures such as male buddies, comedy and melodrama are also developed in it. However, it cannot be simply categorised as being an action sinetron because of the elements of the epic genre,

⁸⁰ Krishna Sen, "Politics of Melodrama in Asian Cinema," in *Melodrama in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁸¹ Aulia A Muhammad, "Berharap Pada Yang Bangkit Dari Kubur [Expectation from the Dead Spirit]," *Suara Merdeka* 2004, <http://www.suaramerdeka.com/cybernews/layar/iqra/1qra39.html>, (accessed 2 August 2006).

which involves a large cast of characters and scenes of war as well as elements of Javanese traditional performance. This makes this sinetron a hybrid production with its combination of past and present, traditional and modern, Western and Eastern elements of genre.

Female Narratives and Female Perspectives

The love story between Sembara and Farida with its many hindrances is a popular theme in both traditional and modern Indonesian theatre, film, TV soaps and so on. The theme of romantic love against the background of war that has been so popular, for example in the film *The English Patient*, can also be found in Chinese martial art stories and cinema. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents the love theme through Sembara's loyalty and efforts to protect Farida from danger, and Farida's refusal of her arranged marriage. The audiences do not see actual expressions of their romantic love but they can feel the nuances, a style of presentation which is more common in the tradition of Asian cinema, such as the romantic love between Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or between Guo Jing and Huang Rong in the *Legend of Condor Heroes*.

Female narrative, according to Maria La Place, is characterised by the existence of the "the heroine's process of self discovery on her progression from ignorance about herself to knowledge and some kind of strength".⁸² Although not positioned as principal characters, both Pitaloka's and Mayang Sari's transformation embodies a similar process of self-discovery. Pitaloka becomes aware that she has special skills which she can use for human benefit, while Mayang Sari realizes that she has undertaken a morally wrong journey which causes many problems to other people. Focusing on the inner conflicts of the female figures, the sinetron has built female narratives into the action-adventure genre. However, its female narratives may also encourage women viewers to be

⁸² Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema*, 137.

content with domestic ambitions through the representation of the main female character, Farida.

Hedley has differentiated two kinds of gendered conflict: male-centred dynamics and female-centred dynamics. In male-centred dynamics, the male characters are involved in a romantic and/or sexual triangular relationship invoking the Madonna/Whore dualism.

The dynamics of male-centered triangles are initiated by the actions of immoral women. The vulnerability of men to these actions is conditioned upon their own moral standing but in any case, the ultimate responsibility for the conflict that results is hers. The resolution of this conflict signifies his redemption, a redemption marked by the reestablishment of a stable and monogamous relationship with a good woman.⁸³

Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents Sembara's inner conflict between his despair of finding Farida and his attraction to Rindi Antika's love, it does not invoke the Madonna/Whore dualism. Rindi Antika is a good spirit who falls in love with Sembara: she does not try to seduce him, rather she shyly shows her care and attention to all his problems. In his despair of finding any trace of Farida, he is touched by Rindi Antika's attention and feels that he is in love with her. However he feels guilty about this love because Rindi Antika is a spirit, not a human being like him. Then Panglima Kumbang advises him to forget Rindi Antika and shows him where Farida is, so that he can keep focussed on his search for Farida and his love for her.

In contrast, in female-centred dynamics the male characters occupy four, rather than two, stereotypes. The morally superior male is divided into "prince charming" and the "courageous hero" while the morally inferior male is represented through the stereotypes of "villain" and "scoundrel":

⁸³ Mark Hedley, "The Geometry of Gendered Conflict in Popular Film: 1986-2000," *Sex Roles* 47, no. 5/6 (2002): 209.

the dynamics of female-centered triangles tend to be initiated by the actions of women of questionable moral character toward morally righteous men. The conflict that results is her responsibility. However, unlike male-centered triangles, the resolution of female centered triangles is not equated with the reestablishment of a new and better one. The triangle itself, then symbolizes her potential for redemption.⁸⁴

Although the journey the sinetron's female characters undertake is in search for a true love, their conflict does not resemble this female-centred triangle of the conventional soap genre. Conflict for the female characters is not about determining who her true love is. Pitaloka, for example, is not torn between prince charming and courageous hero. Both Lindu Aji (a hero) and Banu Seta (a villain) are in love with Pitaloka, but from the beginning she is not attracted to Banu Seta, although he does attempt to flatter her. Her conflict is more between a desire to be protected by Lindu Aji and to sacrifice herself for her country (when she asks Lindu Aji to leave her to do his duty). In this way, female narrative is also modified from love-centred, as mostly found in soaps, into ambition-centred. However, with this modification, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* invites identification from young Indonesian women who are beginning to think that love and marriage is not the main purpose in life.

Following the episode when Lindu Aji is successful in freeing her from Mayang Sari's hands, Pitaloka accidentally steps on a fragile rock during her fight with a group of men. She falls down into a gulch. She faints and loses her memory. A robber finds her and attempts to rape her. But Jatmika saves her. Because she has lost her memory, Jatmika gives her a new name, Prihatini. To describe the inner conflict of Prihatini, during her sleep, she dreams that she is seized by both Jatmika and Lindu Aji and she cannot decide which man she chooses. She wakes in deep confusion. Again, in this episode the sinetron employs female inner conflict but this does not necessarily result in female redemption.

⁸⁴ Ibid.: 210.

Although it can be categorised as action adventure, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* may attract many female viewers because of its ability to represent male characters who are motivated by love. Also, most narratives of the female secondary characters are developed in searching for ‘true love’. The audience is not only touched by Sembara’s journey to find Farida but also Lindu Aji’s love for Pitaloka. He willingly surrenders himself to be a prisoner to save her life. When Kyai Lingga Jati frees him, he asks to be returned as a prisoner to look after Pitaloka. There is also the male figure who announces that since his wife passed away he prefers to serve society and fight against evil rather than marry again. There are even some evil male figures who are constructed as loyal to their late wife.⁸⁵ One of them tries to bring his wife back to life by making offerings to supernatural creatures. So, overall, love is a theme enacted by male as well as female characters.

As a male genre, narrative in action-adventure is often built from a male perspective. In this a woman is only the object of a male, both in his desiring gaze and his ambition. The story centres on male conflicts and male problems. However *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not build this perspective in the narrative. Although in some way the sinetron places Farida, a female, as the object of Sembara’s journey and ambition and constructs her as passive in the narrative, there are many sub-plots which are built as female narratives. Lesser conflicts are about love, and may finally lead to open conflict (fighting). Conflict between Panglima Kumbang and Datuk Jampang arises when Panglima Kumbang refuses Datuk Jampang’s proposal that his daughter should marry Sembara. In Panglima Kumbang’s view, it would be a wrong marriage arrangement because they are tiger spirits while Sembara is human and marriage between spirit and human breaks the rule. Secondly, Panglima Kumbang considers Sembara’s relationship with Farida and in his view Sembara should be loyal to his future wife. As his daughter has fallen in love with Sembara at first sight, Datuk Jampang wants to

⁸⁵ There is widely-held belief, circulated among women especially, that most men will get married soon after their wife passes away, but most women will stay a widow after their husband died. There is also the advice passed from mother to daughter that once your husband leaves the door of the house, he is a man, not your husband, so that we do not expect that our husbands will be loyal to us.

break the rule. He tries to make an arrangement to introduce Sembara to his daughter but does not realize that Mak Lampir has seen all of his plans through her magic bowl. Mak Lampir transforms Mardian's face into Sembara's and introduces him to Datuk Jampang and his daughter. Mak Lampir knows that both of them are tiger spirits and she expects a child from their marriage, as her grandchild. As Mak Lampir has predicted, Mardian is easily attracted to her beauty and he agrees to marry her, although, Datuk Jampang and his daughter think that she is going to marry Sembara, not Mardian. Both Datuk Jampang and his daughter are happy with this marriage and they, without realizing it, do not break the rule against marriage between human and spirit.

Analysing the narratives of the episodes in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, although both male and female conflicts are found there, female perspectives on men dominate the stories. It can be said that although this sinetron is categorised as action genre, targeted for male audiences, it constructs the male characters as sensitive men, and this makes it appeal to female viewers. This also shows its complex relationship to the Hollywood action-adventure genre, as well as the *wuxia* genre, which it resembles more closely.

Conclusion

With its rural and traditional setting, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is distinctive compared to most other sinetron which take urban and modern settings. This sinetron could be considered as an innovative production which has created a new trend in sinetron production in Indonesia. The sinetron, with its specific genre of 'colossal-action', shows an innovation and break from the genre's traditional conventions and formats. That is possibly why, although around 300 episodes have been produced and some viewers have become bored with it, it does not get a lot of criticism. Its position in the top 20 programs, and ratings still around 10, show that it is still very popular. In considering the popularity of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, I agree with Wirodono's argument that production houses should not be

trapped into producing conventional stereotypes because of profit considerations. They should not forget that creative exploration is a good medium to gain popularity, ratings, and thus advertising.

The success of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is also due to its hybrid mixture of local and global elements. Although the setting is Javanese in the seventeenth century, the values and the forms of the entertainment are modern and global. The Javanese element is limited to the depiction of hero and his mastery of supernatural power. Yet hybridity has been a tradition since Indonesia was under Dutch colonial rule, which can be seen in the development of traditional entertainment styles of *kethoprak* and *ludruk*. Hybridity can also be seen in the birth and continued popularity of martial art stories which were adapted to radio drama and sinetron. However, local martial art styles are not well elaborated in this sinetron since the focus is on the combat of supernatural powers.

I would also suggest that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is a success nationally because of its ability to construct a post-New Order Indonesian-ness. Despite its setting it is not constructed as authentic Javanese, rather it is a mixture with elements of other ethnic groups. From music, clothing, and language accents, it is more of a manifestation of a modern Indonesia which disregards exclusivity in ethnic roots and ethnic consciousness. It also shows how the sinetron does not have the burden of representing a national culture as a distinctive Indonesian culture, rather it portrays modern Indonesia as integrating many different elements, indigenous and foreign.

Misteri Gunung Merapi is also successful in making complex modifications of the global action-adventure genre. An intertextual analysis of the genre of this sinetron shows that it develops some elements of action-adventure which make it appeal to male viewers, while at the same time building narratives which attract female viewers.