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**Locating Southeast
Asian Horror Cinema**

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The cover: The cover is a still from Yam Laranas's *The Road* (2011). The scene captures the folksy and earthy dimension of Southeast Asian horror films, punctuated by the presence of modernity in the form of the automobile. Image captured and used with permission.

The Return of the Repressed: *Pemuda* and the Historical Trauma in Rizal Mantovani and Jose Purnomo's *Jelangkung*

Anton Sutandio

Being the first horror film produced after the Reformation period, Rizal Mantovani and Jose Purnomo's *Jelangkung* (2001) played an important role in resurrecting the horror genre. As a commercially successful film, it became the blueprint for horror films produced afterwards. It challenged the New Order horror narrative pattern, introducing significant changes such as the shift towards *pemudas* or the youth as the central characters in the film, the absence of a patriarchal figure, and the open ending. These changes could well have been influenced by trends in global horror cinema, but for Indonesian films specifically, on the allegorical level, they have been able to effectively capture the anxiety and fear *pemudas* felt during the Reformation, especially about what it means to be a young Indonesian in post-Soeharto times.

This study explores the allegorical function of this contemporary Indonesian horror film, focusing on how *Jelangkung* represents "the return of the repressed" through what Lowenstein (2005) calls "allegorical moments." It also attempts to locate these moments in *Jelangkung*, contextualizing the return of the repressed as the fear and anxiety toward the unresolved May 1998 traumatic event in Indonesia and the existing patriarchal system.

Keywords: Indonesian horror genre, allegorical moments, New Order regime, historical trauma

*"If you serve fear,
we only prolong the line of slavery"*

Introduction

This study investigates Rizal Mantovani and Jose Purnomo's *Jelangkung* (2001), an Indonesian contemporary horror film, and focuses on the film's "allegorical moments" (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 6) as they relate to the unresolved 1998 tragedy in Indonesia.

The tragedy was triggered by Soeharto's unwillingness to resign despite his people's demand, especially after Indonesia's economy plunged to its lowest level partly due to the 1998 global recession and partly because of the deeply rooted corruption, collusion and nepotism in his regime. It reached its climax in May when thousands of activists marched down the capital and managed to occupy the building of the People's Consultative Assembly or "The Dome." The demonstration was not peaceful at all. Clashes between the military and police, and the protestors led to hundreds being injured and

caused the death of 4 Trisakti University students. In the midst of the chaos, an unidentified group incited people to loot and burn shops, especially those that belonged to Chinese-Indonesians, resulting in hundreds of people being trapped in one of the burning buildings. What was more tragic was the rape of 85 Chinese-Indonesian women by this mob. To this day, none of the culprits have been brought to justice. And even after Soeharto stepped down in May 1998, the terror did not immediately stop as many activists, such as the poet Widji Thukul, whose whereabouts is unknown to this day, were abducted.

Every year since then, activists and the victims' relatives have asked the government to acknowledge the tragic incident and give justice to the victims. It was only on May 13, 2015, seventeen years later, that the Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, inaugurated a monument to commemorate the tragedy. The monument is in a *Pondok Rangan* [Rangan Hut] Public Cemetery Complex, the mass cemetery for the 1998 victims. A month before the inauguration, the attorney general began to form a Truth and Reconciliation Committee as the follow-up action to solve the human rights violations in Indonesia. The committee will include the Politics, Law and Security Coordinator Ministry, the Attorney General, the Indonesian Police Force, the Indonesian Military, the Indonesian Intelligence Bureau, and the Human Rights National Committee.

The fall of Soeharto indirectly opened a wider opportunity for filmmakers to produce films that criticized the regime's politics. However, this freer atmosphere did not automatically result in productive political filmmaking. As Imanjaya (2007) noted, "Indonesia is lack of [*sic*] critical and political films" (para. 17). This, he elaborated, was due to the apolitical attitude of filmmakers, the lack of demand for such films, and the economic disadvantage of making them.

In the early 2000s, Indonesian filmmakers breathed in this "air of democracy" and saw it as an opportunity to make money after the stagnation of the film industry during the 1990s. At the same time, they created films that served as a "release" for an audience already grown tired of the endless political tension in the country. The filmmakers seem to prefer to produce popular genre such as comedy, horror, drama or the combination of the three because they are economically advantageous, easy to comprehend by the picture illiterate audience, and there is market for such films. It is not surprising then that movies such as *Kuldesak* [*Culdesac*] (Riza, Lesmana, Mentovani, & Achnas, 1998) and *Jelangkung* [*The Uninvited*] (Mantovani & Purnomo, 2001) were well received. Thus, how come *Jelangkung*, an early 2000s popular film brings a political message? What it definitely brings is something new and fresh that is different from the New Order narrative style.

Treating popular horror films as an allegory that represents certain horror of history is nothing new.² Most horror films, according to them, deal with the return of the past or the reluctance of the past to remain in the past and the need to heal historical traumas. Lowenstein (2005) argued that “allegorical moments” in popular horror films could reveal “shocking representations” that may help in understanding the complexity and importance of reconciling with the historical past. He stated that:

The allegorical moment involves questioning how history is narrated, and more specifically, how cinematic representation works to communicate historical trauma. The allegorical moment exists as a mode of confrontation, where representation’s location between past and present, as well as between film, spectator, and history, demands to be recalibrated. (p. 12)

He further stated that this allegorical moment “opens a space where [popular] films may be considered as representations of historical trauma” (p. 6). In terms of Indonesian cinema, Kusuma (2011) has posited that,

The presence of a ghost and revenge in Indonesian horror films can be read as the return of things that are repressed or oppressed. The ghost becomes the metaphor to the frightening, painful or traumatic past. Horror films, unlike other genres in Indonesian cinema, present images from the past that show pain, cruelty, atrocity, and revenge which are brought to the present time. (p. 215)

Jelangkung has all the aspects Kusuma (2011) mentioned: it has a revengeful spirit coming back from the painful past. In addition, the fact that the film was produced merely three years from the tragic 1998 event strongly suggests that the ghost, revenge, and traumatic past that the film presents lead to that particular moment of history. Using Lowenstein and Wood’s arguments on the nature of horror film, I attempt to locate the allegorical moments in *Jelangkung* and examine the film as a representation of the 1998 tragedy. My view on allegory is informed by Wood’s (2003) notion of “the return of the repressed” (p. 69) and his view of horror films as “our collective nightmares” (p. 70) in his study of American horror films of the 1970s. I adapt his ideas on the “other,” especially the “alternative ideologies and political systems” (p. 67) to the Indonesian context.

In order to understand the allegorical connection between the film and historical trauma, it is necessary to compare the New Order regime's ideology-based narrative structure and that of the post-New Order regime.

New Order Regime, Trauma, and Horror Cinema

According to Kusuma (2011), local folklore and legend have always been important sources of materials for Indonesian horror films, which help in the preservation of traditional values, an important element in strengthening national identity.

But when it comes to the question of which film is the first Indonesian horror film, the debate is still ongoing between Tan Tjoei Hock's *Tengkorak Hidoep*, (1941) and M. Sharieffudin's *Lisa* (1971). According to Nurrudin Asyhadie as quoted by Darma Ismayanto (n.d.) in "Horror *Bangkit dari Kubur*" [Horror of Rising from the Grave], the debate seems to root from the different definition of what horror is. Asyhadie categorized Indonesian horror into two: the "horror of the demonic" and the "horror of the personality" (Ismayanto, para. 20-21), and Kusuma (2011) proposes a typology of classical Indonesian horror films as follows: psychological horror, black magic/shamanism, supernatural beings (ghosts, monsters), which is a more elaborated version of Asyhadie's categorization. Her typology and Asyhadie's categorization do not change much in the contemporary era. I myself would go with *Tengkorak Hidoep* [*Living Skull*] (Tjoei Hock, 1941) as the first Indonesian horror film because firstly, *Jelangkung* has monsters and secondly, the majority of Indonesian audience considers a film to be horror if it has a monster or demon. Ismayanto argues that horror of the personality or psychological horror like *Lisa* (Sharieffudin, 1971) does not attract many audiences as they see it as a "serious film" (Ismayanto, para. 21). Since its early production to this day, the horror genre has maintained its popularity with the Indonesian audience.

The mystical and unpredictable nature of the monsters in Indonesian horror cinema is inevitably the locus of people's greatest fears. The monsters in the New Order narrative style are part of this genre's "master narrative" that aims to generate fear and highlight the dangers of disorder, and aside from atheism, it is the specter of communism that is the ultimate monster constructed by the New Order regime.

The New Order regime relied on religion and the nation's ideology, *Pancasila* [Five Principles], to deal with these "monsters" (Picard, 2011, p. 14). *Pancasila* is the official philosophical foundation of Indonesia that consists of five principles: (1) belief in the one and only God, (2) a just and civilized humanity, (3) the unity of Indonesia, (4) democracy led by the wisdom of deliberations among representatives, and (5) social justice

for the people of Indonesia. These five principles, which were formulated by the founding fathers, were exploited by Soeharto who turned *Pancasila* into an Orwellian “thought police,” especially, according to Siddique (2002), through the regime’s “implicit assumption” of the first principle that “God is masculine and...Soeharto was recast as the ultimate and all-powerful Bapak or father” (p. 27).

The most powerful *Pancasila*-based indoctrination program was the “Penataran P4 (*Pedoman Penghayatan dan Pengamalan Pancasila*),” freely translated as “Training on Guidance of *Pancasila* Implementation and Comprehension” which began in 1978 and lasted for more than two decades. It intentionally functioned as an assertive, systematic, and ideological indoctrination that covered all levels of Indonesian institutions, both private and public, stressing the importance of *Pancasila* as a single and unified ideology of the nation. No other form of ideology could exist. Thus, as Liddle (1999) argued, the regime’s ideology was “*Pancasila* Democracy” (p. 39). The P4 program was intensive and obligatory in nature. The duration ranged from three to four days to as long as a week, with sessions lasting six to eight hours daily. As I myself experienced more than once, this program was exhausting and ineffectual as it mostly discussed conceptual and impractical topics. At the end of the program, the participants received certificates and were supposedly “changed” into individuals who comprehended and implemented *Pancasila* in their daily lives.

According to Sen (1994), “the New Order government from the beginning aimed at creating ‘a mechanism of ‘ordered politics’ to guarantee a fast, effective and efficient process of policy-making and policy-implementation” (pp. 157-58). Sen and Hill (2000) added that “explicitly in some instances (especially film and television) and implicitly in all, the New Order defined the media as vehicles for the creation of ‘national culture’ that would allow uncontested implementation of its development policies and more generally its authoritarian rule” (p. 11). One of the instruments used to achieve this end was the Board of Film Censorship (BSF). The BSF, “the oldest and most persistent of the institutions of Indonesian cinema” (Sen, 1994, p. 66) whose ordinance is based on what the 1940 Dutch censorship board promulgated, was tasked “to fight the dangers to morality and dangers to society that are related to the screening of films” (p. 69). According to Barker (2013), the government wanted full control of national film productions due to film’s potency to influence the masses. Censorship began from the scriptwriting to the post-production stage, which made Indonesian film censorship distinctive. Moreover, certain standards of filmmaking were set for the film to pass censorship (Sen & Hill, 2000). These standards reflected the form of national identity that the regime attempted to construct. Sen (1994) listed

the guidelines as follows: Films should express the harmonious co-existence of religions and mutual respect for the practice of faith in accordance with the religion and belief of each person (in other words, no films that contest religions); films are urged to show how Indonesian people put unity, unification as well as the well-being of the nation and the state above personal and group interests and particularly to include episodes which emphasize the values of national unity; films are forbidden to project scenes which show the conflict of one religion with another; films should not express ideology of colonialism, imperialism, fascism and all manifestations of communism in any form; films are to be banned if they are regarded as harmful to Indonesia's internal or foreign politics or in conflict with policies of the government (which means no film about politics or government); films should exclude any statement which may lead to the decline of the community's trust in the organizations of justice and specifically forbids mocking the upholders of law and order; films are not to discuss many aspects of social conflict (p. 70).

The popular narrative during the New Order regime (1966-1998) clearly supported a single ideology and political system. Film narratives followed the order-disorder-order plot structure, whereby the status quo was usually threatened by monsters who were always defeated in the end, and order was then restored. The ending was always conclusive, leaving nothing unanswered. Any deviation from this template was considered subversive.

Allegorically, the monsters or supernatural beings in the New Order horror narrative were the embodiment of disorder, and they represented either an unresolved tragedy, communism, women, young people, the ethnic minority or simply anything that was different, Order was always restored by certain patriarchal figures—wise men, religious leaders, an authority or father figure—which reflected the “*bapak-ism*” [father-ism] value asserted by Soeharto who claimed to be the “father of the nation.” Thus, the ending of these films reinforced the regime ideology, at the same time implying the importance of civic obedience to guarantee a safe and peaceful life. One can study Suzanna's film *Beranak dalam Kubur* [*Birth in a Grave*] (Awaludin, 1971), for example, to find these elements. In the film, Dhora, the evil daughter, triggered the chaos and order was restored through the sacrifice of the father. Kusuma (2011) claimed that the film provided the template for the Indonesian horror narratives and ghost icons that came after it (p. 203).

In contrast, most post-New Order horror narratives, influenced by modern western and eastern horror narratives, were open-ended and order was not restored. *Jelangkung* is an example of this new type of Indonesian horror film.

Following the fall of the New Order regime under Soeharto in May 1998, Indonesia's film industry experienced a new sense of creative freedom, although this did not necessarily mean that filmmakers took this opportunity to explore sensitive issues such as politics, race, or gender. Eric Sasono observed that the post-Reformation Indonesian cinema industry relied instead on "horror and teenage love stories" (as cited in Imanda, 2014, p. 171). The emergence of young filmmakers who had lived for decades under the repressive regime did not guarantee rich and varied productions of Indonesian films, and this condition, added Sasono, was "ironic considering our relatively free political condition" (171).

The fall of the New Order regime did not necessarily mean the beginning of a new era. The regime's ideology had been deeply embedded in various facets of Indonesian cultural life, and it was not easy to simply erase. Many people still believed in it, and they were thus hesitant to talk about the past, more so demand full resolution of the atrocities committed during those oppressive decades. Moreover, the political dynamics during the Reformation era showed attempts to preserve the ideology, for example when government officials who were once part of the regime were placed in newly created positions. In short, many of the regime's cronies still remained in power. Consequently, people still lived under the shadow of the fallen regime.

This ideological residue of the New Order may explain why in the beginning there were not many post-1998 film productions that tackled sensitive issues, let alone the trauma experienced during the New Order regime. Hikmat Darmawan, commented that "It takes 10 years before a trauma can be retold" (as cited in Sasono, 2010, para. 1), and in a way, he is right. The sensitivity of the issues and the existence of the continuing censorship board may have prevented the production of such films by Indonesians.

It was not until 2008 that two films that explicitly talked about the May 1998 tragedy were released. The first one was *May* (Westi, 2008) and the second one was *9808* (Priambodo, Darmawan, Edwin, Hafiz, Kuswandi, Widasari, Agustin, Setiabudi, & Suryapratama, 2008), an anthology which consisted of ten short films. Both films looked back at the still open wounds caused by the tragedy and, as Sasono (2010) argued, were meant to become "...a path to restart a discussion on this nation: identity, history, and the incidents that shaped it. Just by not being heedless of the significant incident, we can already restart the discussion" (para. 54). Interestingly, *May* and *9808* were not the first that attempted to raise the issue. In the early years of the Reformation, one Indonesian horror film did so but was banned: Sudjarwo's *Pocong* [*Ghost in Shroud*] (2006). Sudjarwo's film foregrounded

the May 1998 tragedy, but the censorship board then was concerned that the film would open old wounds. The strictness of the board then was an indication that the nation was not yet ready to either address the trauma or acknowledge its past.

***Jelangkung* and the Post-Soeharto Horror Genre**

Jelangkung is inarguably one of the most commercially successful Indonesian horror films ever produced. It was initially intended for TV, yet when the producer showed it in a limited number of movie theaters, it was well received. Soon after, the film was bought by 21 Cinema Group and released in their theaters.

Jelangkung is the story of four young characters who share a similar interest: to prove the existence of supernatural beings. They are Ferdi, the leader; Gita, Ferdi's girlfriend; Soni, the aggressive, soldier-wannabe; and Gembol, the merrymaker. Most nights they visit sites people believe to be haunted. When they could not find supernatural beings in the city, they decide to go to a haunted village outside the city limit. Unbeknownst to anyone, Soni stabs a *jelangkung* doll in a lone grave that they find, and his action leads to their tragic ending.

The film's title refers to a game derived from the belief of summoning the spirit of the dead. It is a centuries-old Indonesian-mystic game, especially well known in Java. Endraswara (2004) described *jelangkung* as "man-made idolatrous spirits/ghosts" (p. 172), referring to its materials and creation process. Similar to the western Ouija board, it mediates between the spirits and the living. The puppet, which serves as the mediator, has a coconut shell head and crossed wood as the body and arms, with a piece of linen covering the latter. Certain incantations and rituals must be performed and, if successful, the possessed puppet will move and communicate in writing using a pencil tied to its hand. Historically, this ritual of summoning ancestors who are believed to be protectors of children came from China. The ritual, pronounced *Cay Lan Kung* in its original form, became *jelangkung*. According to El-Atimi (2012), in time, the ritual evolved into a summoning-of-spirits game. Summoning spirits signifies an intersection between the past and the present.

The significance of *Jelangkung* lies in the fact that it is the first horror film produced after the fall of the New Order regime under Soeharto, and the first to have a different aesthetics and narrative structure compared to Suzanna's film in the 1970s or the sex-horror films of the 1990s. Its narrative and style then became the blueprint for post-Soeharto horror films such as *Tusuk Jelangkung [Jelangkung Pin]* (Mantovani, 2003), *Di Sini ada Setan [There's a Ghost Here]* (Chakil, 2004), *Bangsai 13 [Ward 13]* (Harahap, 2004),

Ada Hantu di Sekolah [School Ghost] (Nuala, 2004), *Mirror* (Saputra, 2005), and *12 AM* (Pagayo, 2005).

Jelangkung revived Indonesian horror genre production. In fact, according to Kristianto (2007), from the period of 2000-2007, the number of horror films increased and was 40% of the total films produced during that period. But *Jelangkung* did more than this for Indonesian films. It also indirectly challenged the New-Order horror narrative. The supernatural beings that were once a representation of what Heider (1991) called “agent of disorder” (p.35) were shown in the film as the return of the regime itself.

An agent of disorder, according to Heider (1991), refers to the monsters that challenge the normality in the New Order horror narrative where monsters are always defeated, and this defeat brings back order to the community. The closed ending of the New Order horror narrative that always show a return of the order had been challenged by the open ending of the contemporary horror narrative. However, noticeable is that many contemporary horror narratives still have “typical figures” such as shamans or religious leaders whom the younger characters consult when faced with the unknown. Albeit these typical figures have insignificant roles, this constant return to the patriarchal authority not only suggests a harkening back to the past, but also allegorically can be seen as the powerful past’s attempt to “return to the present” and regain power. By treating the horror cinema as an allegory to this condition, the film may help raise the audience’s awareness of the passing regime’s latent threat as represented in the chaotic and often tragic ending of the contemporary Indonesian horror narrative. The monsters and supernatural entities, which previously serve as “controlling instruments” of the New Order regime, now represent the “haunting” regime itself.

Moreover, despite the new narrative style, the supernatural beings in *Jelangkung* are still derived from the traditional ghost icon, with the additional focus on urban legends. An interesting fact though about *Jelangkung* is that some urban legends that the characters mentioned in the film have been made into films such as *Rumah Kentang* [Potato House] (Poernomo, 2012), *Suster Ngesot* [Paralyzed Nurse] (Azis, 2007), and *Hantu Jeruk Purut* [Kaffir Lime Ghost] (Nuala, 2006). This affirms the influence of *Jelangkung* in Indonesia’s horror genre.

Mantovani and Purnomo used Indonesian urban legends as the backdrop for *Jelangkung*, and at the same time creating an urban legend for itself.³ Mantovani has consistently produced horror films with a similar premise, such as the *Kuntilanak* series (2006-2008), *Kesurupan* [Possessed] (Mantovani, 2008), *Mati Suri* [Comatose] (Mantovani, 2009), *Air Terjun Pengantin* [Bride Waterfall] (Mantovani, 2009), *Taring* [Fangs] (Mantovani,

2010), *Jenglot Pantai Selatan* [*South Beach Jenglot*] (Mantovani, 2011), *Air Terjun Pengantin Phuket* [*Bride Waterfall Phuket*] (mantovani, 2013), and *Wewe* (Mantovani, 2015), all of which, except for *Wewe*, which at the time of this writing had not yet been released, have been commercially successful. Similarly, Purnomo has directed horror films such as *Angkerbatu* (Purnomo, 2007), the *Pulau Hantu* [*Ghost Island*] series (2007, 2008, 2012), *Rumah Kentang* [*Potato House*] (Purnomo, 2012), *KM 97* (2013), *308* (2013), *Oo Nina Bobo* [*Lullaby*] (Purnomo, 2014), *Rumah Gurita* [*Octopus House*] (Purnomo, 2014) and is currently finishing *Tarot* (2015), most of which are based on urban legends.

Jelangkung's plot, premise, and camerawork clearly show a reference to 1999's successful independent film production, *The Blair Witch Project*. By adapting the setting and the supernatural background to Indonesian context, *Jelangkung* became the pioneer for Indonesian documentary-like horror subgenre, despite having a ghost that still mirrored the 1970s ghost. In addition, Purnomo's experience as a music video clip director early in his career added a different touch to the film. With his inclusion of popular music in the film, his use of young people as the central focus of the story, and the absence of so-called "wise men" characters, which characterized the horror narratives of the New Order regime, *Jelangkung* became the embodiment of Indonesia's rebellious MTV generation.

The Rise of Indonesia's Youth

Indonesia's youth or *pemuda* as the central character in film is a significant aspect that differentiates the post-New Order from the New Order horror narrative. In the Reformation era (post-1998), they play major roles in popular films. They are usually depicted as active, independent, vocal and bold. Lee (2012) argued that the fall of the New Order regime made activists and *pemuda* the locus of desire in film and popular media, which included contemporary horror cinema. This youth landscape has become a pattern in Indonesian popular cinematic genre.

This shift in character focus could be explained by Indonesia's changing demographics. Based on a study by Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional (Bappenas) or National Demographic Board (2013), Indonesia's population is 40% youth and this percentage is expected to remain constant until the year 2035. Commercially, the *pemuda* are the ones filmmakers target because they are the ones who spend more time and money to watch films. Fathnurfirda's (2012) demographic survey on Indonesian moviegoers in the early 21st century shows that the young audience (17-30 years of age) takes up 62% of the total Indonesian moviegoers.

Pemuda, as defined in the first Article of the Republic of Indonesia's Constitution No. 40/2009 on Youth, refers to Indonesian citizens who enter the critical developmental and growing phase and are between 16 to 30 years old. Politically, most countries consider their youth as the core of the nation-state and the voice of the people. More specifically, in almost all developing countries, the youth sector is the major force that brings about change, and Indonesia's *pemuda* is no exception. Indonesian Constitution No. 40/2009 on Youth explicitly states that they are the nation's "moral strength, social controller and agent of change" (Chapter V, Article 16). Soekarno, the first Indonesian president, has spoken highly of them: "Give me ten youths and I will shake the world" ("Sumpa Pemuda," 2013, n.p.).

Sebastian, et.al (2014), explained that "historically, Indonesian youth have been a pivotal driver and major feature at crucial junctures that defined the trajectory of modern Indonesia" (p. xi). Indeed, the Indonesian *pemuda* helped topple Soeharto in 1998. Moreover, Aspinall (1993) stated that historically speaking, the *pemuda*, with their reputation as moral enforcers, bear the heaviest burden when power corrupts, and proofs of their initiatives toward change, their criticisms of the corrupt regimes and their efforts to topple them are apparent throughout the nation's history (Ali, 2008; Aspinall, 1993; Kurnia, 2005; Lee, 2012; Piliang, 2005; Ryter, 2001, 2002; Yudhistira, 2010).

From another perspective, though, Sebastian, et.al. (2014) describes the role of the *pemuda* in the nation's dynamics as:

Romanticised and vilified in their nationalistic struggles as evidenced in their various embodiments as firebrand revolutionaries (*pemuda*) and earnest reformists (primarily the area of the *mahasiswa* or the archetypal university student). (pp. xi-xii)

These differing images can also be seen in the various representations of the *pemuda* in popular films. Thus, I cannot help connecting the re-emergence of *pemuda* in the nation politics after being politically isolated to only inside-campus-political life for more than 30 years, with the growing importance of their roles in Indonesian film industry as actors/actresses or directors. Rizal Mantovani and Jose Purnomo, for example, were in their late twenties when they directed *Jelangkung*, and the major characters in *Jelangkung* are Indonesian famous young artists at that time, such as DJ Winky Wirawan; Rony Dozer, a comedian; and Harry Pantja, a host of the then famous *Dunia Lain* reality show on TV (which perfectly fits the film genre). One similarity that they have is they all experienced living under the

New Order regime and most probably are familiar with the 1998 tragedy. This elaboration shows that the post-New Order horror films in many ways correlate with *pemuda* and their political dynamics.

The young urban and modern characters in *Jelangkung* undergo excruciating and horrifying experiences when they encounter the supernatural. They share a similar fate with some of the *pemudas* who criticized and protested against the New Order regime: their voices were suppressed by the powerful elite; some were abducted and even killed, as what happened to the Trisakti students or the other activists such as the poet Widji Thukul. Thus, the characters in *Jelangkung* may be seen as a representation of the *pemudas'* roles as the nation's moral strength, social controller, and agent of change. The deaths of the characters in *Jelangkung* seem to be a message to the *pemuda* that their task is far from over and that the threat of the powerful past remains as long as the historical trauma is not reconciled.

I locate *Jelangkung* as a representation of the *pemudas'* political activism and its consequences. The curious and independent characters in *Jelangkung* represent the critical and politically active *pemuda* during the Reformation period, whom Sebastian et. al. (2014) dubbed as "raging students activists/reformists" (p. 10). The supernatural powers in the films act as a metaphor of the threat from the past, which materializes in the tragic fate of the young characters. The conflict between old and new, modernity and traditional, young and old is apparent in *Jelangkung*, echoing sociologist Aswab Mahasin's argument of post-Indonesian society as ever-swinging between Western Modernism and Eastern traditionalism (as cited by Vatikiotis, 1993). In Sebastian's (2014) words, the post-Reformation *pemudas* are the "generation Y," who are "fragmented, decentralized and at times ambivalent and partially apathetic" (p. 7), as the film clearly shows through the diverse and sometimes conflicting types of the young characters.

The Allegorical Moments

The film opens with a flashback to the year 1938 in a fictitious Javanese village, Angkerbatu. It is nighttime, and a group of angry people led by a shaman, holds down an eight-year-old boy whose eyes and mouth are wide open as he gurgles continuously while thrashing about to free himself. From a modern point of view, the boy's state might be caused by some medical condition, but a superstitious society does not have such a consideration. Because his actions seem to appear to be those of one possessed by evil spirits, the boy is quickly labeled as the "Other." The shaman, the film's figure of power, tries to cast out the spirits through chants. The eerie score, the shaky camera movements, and the alternating close-up shots between

the angry villagers and the boy heighten the tension in the scene. The chants grow louder, accompanied by deafening bamboo instruments that muffle the boy's cries. Finally, believing that the child's death will restore order to the village, the shaman butchers the boy.

The violent opening scene is reminiscent of the New Order narrative's typical "mass scene." Although the scene occurs at the beginning rather than at the end of the film, it was executed precisely as it had been done in the past: it is set at night, and the hysterical masses holds torches while beating on some bamboo instruments. The intensity of this scene is reminiscent of the 1998 incident when a mob looted and burned shops, and raped Chinese-Indonesian women. At the same time, the action of the shaman, who is one of the patriarchal figures during the New Order regime, eerily resembles the arbitrary violent actions that occurred during said regime. Thus, this scene reawakens fears associated with the past ideology.

The New Order horror narrative often focused on the importance of the controlled masses, emphasizing obedience and homogeneity. The masses represented two aspects of the regime's discourse on Indonesian-ness: unity and integration. Individuality as the Other was undermined to create a populace that was easier to control. Siegel (1998) described the masses or *massa* as comprised mostly of underclass people who are economically weak, and middle class people who "transform" themselves into the underclass for fear of losing what they have during a major mass movement. Anderson (2001) also added that the *massa* is activated at certain anxious or difficult moments and that it is only realized when the middle class finds its fears about to come true. Thus, the hysterical buildup of the mass in the opening of the film hints at the moment when continuous disaster would fall upon the village.

However, the opening scene is the only scene reverberating with the New Order's narrative and its rhetorical order restoration. Immediately after the boy's murder, a strong wind suddenly sweeps through the village, and with low-level camera shots is shown quickly zigzagging through the streets, suggesting the arrival of an other-worldly force or perhaps the boy's vengeful spirit. The scene ends with the camera zooming in on the shaman's terrorized face before it cuts to the opening title. The villagers mysteriously disappear one by one after the incident.

From a plot perspective, the whole opening scene leads to the disruption of the New Order horror narrative that glorifies order restoration. Instead of the expected restoration of order, the villagers experience terror and chaos. The chaos that occurs at the end of the opening sequence could be interpreted as the Reformation force going against the powerful elite. There is no place for the *massa* nor for the religious leader or authority figure. They

are all replaced by individuals who act and make decisions independently. As if countering the authoritarian and patriarchal style of the New Order regime, *Jelangkung* undermines the role of authority and uplifts the power of individual thinking and action, regardless of the outcome. Moreover, the director's decision to begin the film with a scene that is usually the closing and conclusive scene is a clear break from the New Order horror narrative and thus adds more layer to the disruption.

The next scene jumps to the present time. The scene is at night and is set inside an abandoned old house somewhere in Jakarta. A popular song is playing in the background, which signifies an even stronger break from the New Order horror narrative. *Jelangkung* is the first contemporary horror film loaded with popular songs which became an important part of the film. The score clearly was meant to grab the attention of the *pemuda*, the movie's target audience. The camera is at a low angle and tilts upward to reveal the major characters' silhouettes. Instead of torches, the young characters hold flashlights, and instead of casting out ghosts, they are looking for them, indicating another shift in the narrative style. Long before the Reformation era, Indonesian horror film, according to Heider (1991), had concerned itself with the traditional legends and folklores of the monsters' repertoire such as *Nyi Roro Kidul*, *Telaga Angker* [Haunted Lake], *Siluman Ular* [Snake Spirit], and other stories. The New Order horror narrative mainly dealt with the supernatural beings or rituals that were a source of spiritual power and knowledge. The narrative circulated around the characters' quest to achieve them, and the supernatural power was always feared and respected. In contrast, the search for supernatural beings in the contemporary horror films is mostly driven by curiosity and thrill. Often the encounter is not intended but accidental. *Jelangkung* is a case in which the protagonists deliberately seek out the supernatural beings.

There is an obvious shift in the characters' mindset in the contemporary horror narrative based on the way characters treat the supernatural. Most characters in the New Order horror narrative undoubtedly believed in and respected the existence of a supernatural world and its beings. They saw the supernatural world as existing side-by-side with our world. This kind of portrayal mirrored a superstitious society and allegorically, it was the effect of the New Order regime's totalizing discourse that permeated all aspects of Indonesian life.

On the other hand, most characters in contemporary horror films are more skeptical and logical. This does not mean that they completely disregard the possibility of the existence of the supernatural world, although some characters do see it as a myth or a make-believe world. The young characters in *Jelangkung* are not only skeptical but also bold. Their nightly

adventures to prove the existence of supernatural beings are seen as an attempt to break away from the superstitious beliefs of their ancestors. Although they know that there is always a risk in their action, they are unafraid to move on and face the powerful unknown. These characters may be seen as a representation of the reformation *pemuda*, who fought against the powerful elite and who are still searching for their identity and life's meaning. They serve as the new face of Indonesia's youth—*pemudas* who are able to exercise freedom of expression. The growth in characterization following the Reformation reflects the transformation of Indonesia's political sphere from one fueled by fear and compliance to one that is more critical of the government. In Heider's (1991) words, there is an apparent shift in the characters' basic drive, from the desire for "social embeddedness" like the *massa*, to "individual autonomy" (p. 29), like the *pemuda*. Although the characters in *Jelangkung* work as a group, the film focuses more on individual struggles and their inner state. Most of the film is in stark contrast to the opening scene wherein people act as an unidentified mass and are driven by social rather than individual force.

There is another scene in *Jelangkung* which carries a significant allegorical meaning about young Indonesians and how they contend with the return of the repressed. Zul and Ferdi, the group leaders, are having a discussion about Ferdi's obsession with the supernatural. Zul's question, "So, you still want to find the supernatural?" becomes a kind of warning to Ferdi not to toy around with the "other world." As a response, Ferdi says that he does not fear the supernatural because since the beginning, the supernatural has existed to tempt human beings, and it is absurd for humans to be more afraid of evil than of God.

The supernatural in contemporary horror films is related to the return of the repressed. Drawing a parallelism between "evil" and the New Order regime, in *Jelangkung*, the supernatural could symbolize the regime's circle of power and the 1998 historical trauma, and its ability to tempt humans is the regime's hegemonic control over the people. In this scene, Zul could signify the common people who in their right mind would not risk their lives seeking out supernatural beings. He may represent people's lack of awareness of how repressive the New Order regime was, or people who play it safe by submitting themselves to authority and keeping their distance from the powerful. The allegory may be explained by the fact that the regime had been in power for more than thirty years and their hegemonic policies had put people under their spell. Besides, just as it is taboo to fiddle with the supernatural beings, it is also unwise and foolish to confront a strong and powerful opponent like the New Order regime. This sort of attitude, though results in repressed traumas that will continue to haunt people. On

the other hand, Ferdi's insistence on proving the existence of supernatural beings represents the strong-willed nature of the *pemuda* in confronting the latent threat of the New Order regime and dealing with the historical trauma despite the risk and danger. The terror Ferdi and his friends experience once they confront the unknown seems to remind us how frustrating it is for *pemudas* to uncover past atrocities because the regime's ideology is still very much alive. This scene with Ferdi and Zul highlights the movie's underlying themes: fear and anxiety caused by the return of the repressed and the uncertainty of the future.

In the Post-New Order era when the regime's ideology seems to be still pretty much alive, the similarity between the *jelangkung* doll and the rules and policies that the New Order regime set up to preserve power then becomes evident. Like the doll, these rules and policies are man-made ideological tools which are ironically considered "sacred" and not to be questioned. In addition, just like the doll, they become a mediator between the powerful elite and the common people. People have to respect and enforce these rules and policies if they want to live safely and peacefully. And those who question them will face overt or covert punishments, just like the spirits that haunt the protagonists after one of them "plays" with *jelangkung*.

The representation of trauma, haunting, punishment and death in *Jelangkung* occurs at the turning point of the film when the protagonists decide to visit Angkerbatu village to hunt supernatural beings. Zul warns them not to go there, saying they will only dig their own graves, and this warning foreshadows their fate. The trip from Jakarta to Angkerbatu metaphorically means a one-way-ticket, the contrast between the city's well-lit and wide, even highways and the suburb's dark, uneven dirt paths signifying their journey from light to darkness. Their decision to go outside the city is reminiscent of the New Order horror narrative style, which often treats the suburb or village as the monsters' dwelling. Often, the educated characters or intellectuals, aside from the local wise men, come from the city and become the heroes who defeat the monsters. This narrative style is a form of "othering" whereby the suburbs and villages become the antecedent of the supernatural world while the city and its modern people are the emissaries of order and prosperity. This part of *Jelangkung* acknowledges villages and suburban areas as an integral part of the nation, but at the same time fosters the stereotype of the uneducated and superstitious villagers. But the film later on turns the role of urban versus village upside down when the intelligent and modern *pemuda* from the city become helpless against the monsters that reside in the forest. They are caught in a traditional world with which they are unfamiliar. The four characters' skeptical attitude toward

the supernatural turns into terror once the supernatural beings follow them back to Jakarta.

Two of the characters, Ferdi and Soni, play more significant roles. Ferdi is the leader of the pack, with Soni as his right hand man as well as his opposition. In some scenes, the two argue over leadership and decision-making. Ferdi is portrayed as logical, smart, and brave while Soni, is agile, focused, and physically well-built, a soldier-wannabe character, as seen in his affinity with military things, such as green shirts, a collection of magazines about weapons, a military-like bed, a combat knife and of course, his military-bald head. It is Soni's selfish agenda when he discreetly brings a *jelangkung* puppet to Angkerbatu that becomes the source of their tragic fate. In addition, it is Soni who provokes the others to trespass a forbidden pathway, despite the warning from an old couple. So, even though Ferdi is the one who initiates the trip to Angkerbatu, it is Soni who invites chaos and terror to their life. Allegorically, Ferdi and Soni's clashes mirror the opposition during the New Order regime between the *pemudas* and the military. Ferdi could represent the *pemudas*, and Soni, despite being a *pemuda* himself, could represent the military.

After the long drive from Jakarta, Ferdi and the others arrive at a lone house in Angkerbatu where an old couple lives. The old man resembles the shaman in the opening scene. This strategy of using the same actor for two roles intensifies the suspense and cues the audience to connect the old man with the opening scene. Clearly, it signifies the return of the past. The old shaman could be interpreted as Heider's "agent of disorder," and this explains why he is still alive, unpunished for the murder of the young boy. In the New Order narrative, the concept of order and disorder is apparent. But *Jelangkung* uses neither the disorder to order nor the good versus bad concept. It intentionally stays in a grey area where the boundary between good and bad, order and disorder remains unclear. *Jelangkung* even severely punishes its characters even when they are innocent, as seen later on in the way the film ends.

When the four protagonists return to the city, they start to experience strange and unexplained events, and when they go about their ghost-hunting trip, they realize that now they can see the supernatural beings and that the beings follow and disturb them. The characters' disrespect towards the unknown supernatural power by playing *jelangkung* represents the subversive and curious *pemudas* who struggle against the repressive regime and question the regime's ideology and past atrocity; thus, they have to be punished. Terrorized, these protagonists submit themselves to the traditional means of dealing with a supernatural problem through a shaman. Their action reminds the audience of the opening scene, where people do anything that the shaman tells them to do. In this way, the shaman

represents the return of the repressed, when they eventually forego logical thinking and submit to superstition. The influence of the past on the present cannot be clearer than in this scene. One could read the characters' action as the struggle of contemporary Indonesia with its dualistic nature—the traditional and the modern.

The shaman tells them to go back to the lone grave and remove the *jelangkung* puppet. His remark somehow reminds people of the values of the New Order regime concerning respect and obedience towards the elderly and the powerful. Their decision to contact the shaman is in a way a sign of their submission to the traditional way of dealing with the supernatural. Although they do not want to go back to the grave, they follow the shaman's advice, and as a result they die. They are killed for digging up the past. If the characters did not follow his advice, they may still be alive but forever haunted by the supernatural, ironically fulfilling their obsession to encounter the supernatural. Thus in this case, the shaman could also be allegorically an agent of the New Order who muffles the subversive force, as if resuming his role in the New Order horror narrative.

The film's open ending indicates the latent danger of the New Order ideology and a reminder of the old-regime unresolved atrocities. It also reinforces the theme of a post-Reformation Indonesia that is characterized by two contrasting values: the traditional and the modern. An Indonesian post-1998 has become a hybrid creature constructed by both the "modernized traditional" and the "traditionalized modern," that is, by the constant tension between old influences, the country's unresolved historical trauma, and the desire to move forward.

In the wake of the Post-Reformation era that in particular witnessed a sort of "space-clearing" in the realm of the imagination and more specifically in filmmaking, most contemporary horror films break away from the conventional close-ended narrative. The usually-defeated monsters now become more powerful and die harder while at the same time the young and independent characters that replaced the traditional wise-old men as protagonists turn into the victims of the monsters. The New Order horror narrative punished only those who committed evil—the supernatural beings. On the other hand, the contemporary horror narrative in general, shows no pity towards its young protagonists and often ends with their tragic deaths. This whole set of novel elements found in *Jelangkung* was successful in re-igniting the audience's passion for horror. And this success opened up a new channel for exorcising the historic traumas that were repressed for decades. As the first horror film released after the fall of the regime that alluded to those difficult times in the country's painful past, *Jelangkung* definitely has claimed an important spot in the history of Indonesian horror cinema.

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Notes

- ¹ A fragment of Wiji Thukul's poem. He is an Indonesian activist and poet, whose whereabouts are unknown to this day as a result of his political activism against the New Order regime (*Tempo* special edition on May 1998-2013. "Opini" section (p.35)). The original text is as follows: "*Jika kau menghamba kepada ketakutan, kita memperpanjang barisan perbudakan.*"
- ² See Adam Lowenstein's *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (2005), and Linnie Blake's *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (2008), in which they explore some contemporary Asian horror films that represent certain allegorical moments to the historical traumas of their nations. Lowenstein focuses on how the films are related to the concept of national cinema, while Blake focuses more on the horror films as part of the nation building process through the reconciliation and remembrance of the trauma.
- ³ During some screenings of the film, the first row of the movie theater is intentionally left empty because they are intended for the supernatural beings which are supposedly present at the screening. Thus, the film itself has created its own urban legend and at the same time created an effective marketing strategy to draw audience.

ANTON SUTANDIO is a Senior Lecture/Film and Theatre scholar at the English Department, Maranatha Christian University, Indonesia. He is currently the Assistant to Dean of the Faculty of Letters. (corresponding author: anton.sutandio@gmail.com).