Reading Religion in the Movies , the Contestation between Religious Identity and Business Industry[1]

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Abstract

The relationship of religion and movies actually has existed since this Industry began. As Andre Bazin (2002), writes, 'The cinema has always been interested in God'. Religion is something personal , in John Tillich terms, it is an area of culture that involve basic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality, our purpose in the world, and we find a meaning in it. That is why, posing a religion or religious idea in the movies is always interesting for the producers or the film industry. However, film is indeed a cultural business, whatever presented on the screen is actually a construction of reality by people behind the screen. Focus on certain Hollywood and Indonesian movies, the research finds that the religious ideas in the movies have consistently appeared since the beginning of this industry, but it is part of co modification of product by using people's intimacy in religious life, thus they feel represented.

Keywords : *religious movie, cultural business, representation*

A. Introduction

Film is a media expression which in some aspects represents the society. Like the religion, film also provides a set of symbol that has a particular meaning and purpose. As Leyden says in his *Film as Religion : Myths , Morals, Rituals., f*ilms offer near-perfect worlds that's do not correspond exactly to reality as we

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experience it, but we often believe they are models of reality as we would like it to be so[2].

The relationship of religion and movies actually has already existed since this Industry began. Since the beginning, the religious themes in various genres, have been coloring the movie industry. Photographic film self was invented by an Episcopal priest, Hannibal Goodwin. The first photographic film shown was *the Passion Play of Oberrammergau*, on January 31, 1898 [3]. As Andre Bazin (2002), writes, 'The cinema has always been interested in God'[4]. Religion is something personal , in John Tillich terms, it is an area of culture that involves basic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality, our purpose in the world, and we find a meaning in it.[5] That is why, posing a religion or religious idea in the movies is always interesting for the producers or the film industry. Because it's close to the audience or society that it represents.

In the early of Hollywood industry for example, most of the cinema are concerned with 'religious' films or with the depiction of spirituality, mostly drawing on Judaeo-Christian thought and theology. Some classical movies with religious themes like *Ben Hur (1956)* and *The Ten Commandment* (1961) were even made twice, for the silent and talkies movies. Moreover, the first decade of cinema saw at least a half dozen filmed versions of the life and passion of Jesus Christ. The figure of Jesus Christ has continued to be a popular topic for film and a touchstone for cinematic controversy throughout the twentieth century, with such directors as Sidney Olcott, D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, George Stevens, Pier

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[2] Leyden, John. Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals. NYU Press. New York.2003
[3] Miles, Margareth. *Seeing and Believing*. Beacon Press, 1996 , p 6
[4] Terry Lindvall. Religion and Film. Communication Research Trend :Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture. Vol 23: 2004
[5] Leyden, John. Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals. NYU Press. New York.2003

Paolo Pasolini, Norman Jewison, Martin Scorsese, and Mel Gibson offering various theological perspectives. [6]

In Indonesia, the development of religious movies got its peaks sinc*e Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008) launched. Following this phenomenon movie, the religious themes (especially Islam) has became a trend in movie industry of Indonesian. Some film which get a lot attentions are : *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban(2008), 3 Doa 3 Cinta (2008), Kun Fayakun (2009), Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1 &2 (2009/2010), Sang Pencerah (2010), Dalam Mihrab Cinta (2010) etc,* Most of these film are seen from Islamic perspective. The Islamic theme is not only explicitly stated in the titles of the movie, but also from message or religious issue, like conversion, religious conflicts, polygamy, women violation, etc. But the most interesting thing on this phenomenon is the portrayal of religious symbols in a 'complete' way, like wearing the *jilbab, kopiah*, Muslim dresses, etc., in order to 'declare' that a certain movie is a portrayal of Islamic life.

Moreover, the intention of religious movie is not only on the wide screen but also on the television. In the last ten years, for example, the audience can perceive a lot religious movies in various themes and genres on television, both in FTV (Film television) like *Dajjal – Harta warisan* (KEP MEDIA), *Rahasia ilahi selalu tenung* (KEP MEDIA) *Kuburan Umi selalu rata dengan tanah* (KEP MEDIA) *Hikayah menuju surga* (Trans TV) and serial movies like, *Muslimah, Islam KTP, Kupinang Kau dengan Bismillah, Para Pencari Tuhan, Pesantren Rock n Roll,* until *Sampeyan Muslim.*[7]

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[6] http:// www. Religion and film - Encyclopedia of Religion Encyclopedia.com
[7] http://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_televisi

Besides, the best presentation of the movie, compared with pictorial and literary, is on its capability to 're-create' of almost the whole elements of art such as narrative, picture, music as well as technology into a new one (Monaco, 2009 : 24). Thus, the effect and criticism of this work are also more complex and wider, not only on its art, appraisal or the industrial revolution which grow up time by time but also on its popularity in which the audience response is the main intention of the production.

Concerning of this popularity, film is indeed about the industry. It is more perceived as a mass culture in which the audience's pleasure is the dominant consideration. Along with the industrial senses whether a certain movie has a selling point or not, the aesthetic analysis of the movie has been the dominant focus to determine a film success. Though the presented idea is derived from specific culture, and mostly about cultural artifact, the discussion of the movie among its complex elements rarely focuses on how and why a certain culture is depicted but more frequently on how successful a film as art is.

However, cinema or film is also a media representation. What we see in film is not the reality, but someone's version of it. Film tells long story with a wealth of detail from the perspective of a narrator or the team behind the scene and each has his/ her own interpretation toward the images, sounds or words presented . Hence, what being represented, has never been neutral nor free from interest. The concept and how the things are represented become more essential since people behind the scene determines and constructs the messages and the objectives of the movie.

This indicates that film representation itself is not an art per se, but eventually a complicated product. It is indeed connected to the constructed models by dominant power which is in some ways interrelated with particular ideology, interest, generalization, stereotyping and even power relation. As Shohat argued, all film are political- or more accurately have a political dimension (2010:5)

Representation here is connected with how to give meaning, to describe or to depict something . To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen or to substitute for the things which are depicted through the images, sounds or words what we are talking about.[8] Here, the representation has never been a complete or a totally reflection of things, but much more than a combination of ideas of various elements.. Referring to Barker (2003), in any representations there is a mixture of thing itself, such as the opinion of the people doing the representation, the reaction of the individual to the representation and also the context of the society in which the representation is taking place (p 4). In this sense, the designs, messages ,the power behind the scene or how and why things are represented are kind of the primary discourse in which the dimension of its impact is particularly intensive and broad.

In this sense, film is such like a media of contestation among different powers that have a chance to construct a certain kind of issues. The industry possibly makes any constructions to happen, weather the represented one might agree or not. In this term, film has been more seen as a social practice which in Fairclough argument, has a dialectical relationship with other social dimension. As Fairclough suggested, this form of social practice both constitutes the social world

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[8] Oxford English Dictionary

and is constituted by other social practices. In this sense, as being perceived in the movie, film offers a kind of concept whose ideas are derived from the social life which in the same way inspire or affect society as well.

Moreover, film is often believed to be a source of information and inspiration as well. People believe in what they see in the screen though the industry often assumes that movie has no effect on the viewers other than an entertainment. However, since it's played over and over, a constructed model which's represented will have a fix meaning. Film is like a lens through which people perceive each other. Hence, it's no wonder that in many cases of prejudices and crimes in society, they often take particular movie as inspiration.

Concerning of its effects, the discussion of representation related to the issues of meaning as being presented in film, become more important and strategic. It's interesting to know more how representation actually works in film including its relationship with ideology especially religious ideas and practices.

B. Religion and Film Relationship

Why is cinema so close to religion?. John Lyden (2003) argues that, cinema is almost a form of religion, as, like religion, it presents and examines images, relationships, ideas, beliefs, desires, fears, and brings to them its own specific forms such as the quasi-divine figures of the stars. As he further explains, cinema also has a certain mystical quality in that we may not understand films but we feel them and respond to their emotions. Similarly, according to Miles (1996), Film, like the religious drama of earlier ages, was understood to have a tremendous

capacity for generating and focusing the desires not only of individuals, but of societies[9]

Moreover, John Leyden tries to define films in term of religion. He says that films are called modern 'myth' and refer to a set of stories that represent the two functions Clifford Geertz calls "model of" and "model for" reality, the audiences can figure out that the director are trying to accommodate and adjust with this viewpoint. The difference is reflective of that between worldview and ethos, that is, the way the world is believed to be and the way is believed the world ought to be. 'Model of' reality describe the way we think the world really is, while 'model for' reality describe how we would like to be.[10]

Leyden says that as being found in the religion, films do provide a set of symbols, both visual and narrative, which act to mediate worldviews as well as system of values. In accordance with Geertz point, these establish both certain modals (e.g. of reassurance or hope) as well as motivation (' to do the right thing,' for example to be true to yourself or to love your family[11].

Moreover, It is not only the content of film that connects film and religion, for as a number of critics have observed, one can find religious interests and implications in the formal style of film, as well as in the cinematic experience of viewing film. As another early film critic and director, Jean Epstein, once said, "I would even go so far as to say that the cinema is polytheistic and theogonic" (Abel, 1988, p. 317). Film, and the experience of viewing film, may be religious in and of

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[9] Miles, Margareth R. 1996. *Seeing and Believing, Religious and Values in the Movies.* Boston: BeaconPress, p : 7

[10] Leyden, John. Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals. NYU Press. New York.2003
[11] ibid

itself, creating its own gods, goddesses, and myths, and film does not merely represent or reflect an already established religion.[12]

From this point, we can infer that, as long as religions exist and part of human being experience, the religious themes will always interest the movie industry. It is because people or audience prefers to see something that's close to them which reflect their experiences.

Let's pay attention to Indonesian cinema *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008) which seems to be a pioneer of various religious movies in Indonesian cinema in the last ten years. Some critics perceive that this movie is merely a normal love story and sacrifice in which the storyline is rather cliche. According to Nauval Yazid, giving religious consideration to this film is in the same vein with fussy trivializing concerns about downplaying the religious theme in *Da Vinci Code*. In other words, neither *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* or *The Da Vinci* are religious films. It is not like we find in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* or a legendary Indonesian filmmaker Chaerul Umam's *Al Kautsar (*1977) and *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh (*1982) (with English title, The Narrow Bridge). Each of these has a storyline which unfolds in a religious contexts, driven by religious teachings[13].

However, many people consider that *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* as a religious movie, because some religious symbols which represent Islamic values and virtues .i.e. the *ta'aruf,* the use of *jilbab* for most of characters, religious practices, are coloring the setting and messages of the film. In some aspects, this movie also

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[12] Ibid

[13] http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/03/02/039ayatayat-cinta039-survives-heavyhanded-treatment.html

reflects people experience and it makes them represented. This kind of representation indeed leads *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* to be accepted and gets a high response both from the audience and film critics. In terms of Oswalt perspective, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, can be analyzed through ideological and mythological approaches. This film does not only represent Islamic idea in symbolic appearance, but also values, messages in universally terms.

Besides, when films are called modern 'myth' and refer to a set of stories that represent the two functions Clifford Geertz calls "model of" and "model for" reality, in *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, the audiences can figure out that the director are trying to accommodate and adjust with this viewpoint. For example, the way of the director poses the storyline, setting, and exploration of the character as well as film message are mostly Islamic (Arabic) in contain. Here, there is desire to view models for and models of as identical, based on our desire to realize a unity of the two, to cause utopia to come to pass. This is not mere escapism, but a real desire to change the world to be more like the way we like to be.[14]

C. Religious Identity vs Business Industry

C.a People's experience

Movie represents people's experience. As Leyden states that If film viewer do have some sense of the unreality of cinema, the power of film is not in its ability to erase or displace our sense of real world but in its ability to provide a temporary escape from it. And yet, that escape is not simply a matter of illusion, but a construction that has the 'aura of factuality' about it that Geertz associates with religious ritual.

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[14] Leyden, John. Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals. NYU Press. New York.2003

There is some confusion between these two, in that the ideal world imagined by religion is represented as the goal toward which empirical reality should reach, but it is also taken as a description of the way 'true' reality is. The imagined world is taken not as an invention of our minds, but as a true representation of reality because it depicts the way things really should be[15].

In addition, the fact that a cultural phenomenon – like religion and film - is humanly constructed does not take away from its power to express another reality, even when people are aware of the constructed, 'imaginary' nature of the phenomenon. Just as people can be affected by stories that they know are fictitious and even change their view of the world as a result.[16]. Here by presenting idea or something that reflect people experience, the acceptance toward this movie would be higher. The more people reflected, the more people amused and relieved.

Moreover, Conrad Ostwalt in *Religion and Popular Movies* also states that films are an excellent medium and tool to initiate an exploration into how religious attitudes can affect and be affected by a wide range of human, social, and political attitudes and issues.[17] Through various themes, movies can be powerful vehicles for communicating religious stories, meanings, and values to mass audiences and to the public sphere. No wonder that beside an entertainment, movie can function as a propaganda, gathering a public opinion, and a media of education as well. In *the Passion of Christ* for example, the audience do not only feel the emotion of the

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[15] Ibid p :19
[16] Ibid p: 19
[17] Conrad Ostwalt .*Religion and Popular Movies* Journal of Religion and Film Vol. 2, No. 3 December 1998

Christ's suffering on his life, but also learn the Christian history and political in trick which happen at that time.

C.b. Religious Identity

When religious messages related to ideology, in some ways,   film   is like a medium of delivering certain 'ideology' in the field of representation. The dominant culture has a certain interest to introduce or strengthen   its ideology or culture to the audience or society. That is it is no wonder that, when Hollywood movies mostly portrays the Christian messages in their movies, Indonesian cinema almost portrays things from Islamic perspectives, and Indian (Bollywood) movies is closely related to Hindu's tradition , although these countries are plurals in religion

Referring to Althusser, an ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and a role within a given society. … Ideology, as a system of representations, is distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge). In this sense, as Althusser further argues, these representations have nothing to do with 'consciousness': they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as *structures* that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their 'consciousness'. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them (Ferreter, 2006: 76). This is the essential idea of film representation that we discuss about. As reflected the film above, Ideology is primarily kind of discourse in which images and ideas determine how we live, think and act

Moreover, Van Dijk (1998 :12) also defines ideologies as a special form of social cognition shared by social group. Ideologies thus form the basis of the representations and practices of group members, including their discourse, which at the same time serves as the means of ideological production, reproduction and challenge. In a more specific way,   according to Turner (1999:173), ideology is used to describe or the workings of language and representation within culture which enable such formations to be constructed as 'natural' .

The representation of ideology in certain movie, as Turner (1999:173) suggested, does not take the form of direct statement or reflections on the culture, but lies in the narratives structure in the discourse employed – the image, myths, conventions and visual styles.   In the narratives, there is always   repetition, construction, or even certain message which   lead or direct people to believe what's being told. Here, what we see in film,   it is like providing such references or insight to the audience or the other production on a certain idea which is not always right and proper to the represented culture. Since the similar portrayal is regularly and widely represented in various movies, it then becomes knowledge and inscribed into all kind of social practice.

C.c. Film as industry

Aside from the religious content and ideal messages delivered in the religious movies, we can not negate that film is about an industry.   According Dedy Miswar, a cineaste, a religious movie is not the same with *dakwah* (preaching) in which the film makers can set his idealistic project/idea in it. There some parties such as the

sponsorship, producers, who design that a film should have a selling point.[18] . In *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, for example, the way the director direct a storyline in such "exaggerated" way is intended to attract and bind the audience.

Moreover, in some cases, especially in the serial movies on television, like *Muslimah, Hareem / Inayah* , religious term is often perceived as an artificial way. For instance, although the antagonistic characters (women) here appear in the *hijab*, conduct the pray or fasting, they are portrayed and described in such a villain character, cruel, both in verbal and non verbal way. Also, the plot and theme exposed is almost about sadism, revenge, and continued violation against the main protagonist (women) . Here, religious symbol is only for physical appearance. The way the villain antagonist set a trap, being jealous, hate, full of hatred and using a lot of rude words and curses seems to be exaggerated and do not really reflect what Geertz called 'model for' and (even) 'model of' reality.

Nevertheless, we need to realize that   movie is indeed a product of capitalism. Under this system, profit oriented is the main concern of the producer or persons who's involved in this industry . Here, in the form of religious or secular, movie offers dreams of which Karl Marx define '*false consciousness*'. According Marx, the class that dominates the economic sphere also dominates such spheres as politics, religions, and so on. The argument here is that the ruling class persuades the other classes that the *status quo* benefits us all. The ideas people have are the ideas the ruling class wants them to have. That is, the ruling class generates an ideology, which we call a *false consciousness*.[19]

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[18] http//www/ Religion and Film\Plus Minus Film Religi Kita.mht
[19] Cline, Austin. Religion as Opium of the People Karl Marx. http//www. About.com Guide

Refers to Marx, the ideology in the sense of film and Industrial movie is one of the capitalist tool to make the people 'forget' or 'escape' from their daily life experienes. By presenting or creating this kind of ' world', in Marx sense, people would forget his real problems. Richard Allen describes the experience of seeing a film as an experience of "projective illusion" that we enter into willingly and knowingly, not unconsciously, but which will affect us powerfully in its impression of reality. Like a conscious fantasy into which we willingly place ourselves, films offer a "fully realized world" we can accept via certain suspension of disbelief.[20] Here, Allen is trying to say that we can be drawn into a film such that we ' forget' its unreality but soon as our intention is diverted we recall its illusionary nature. We are never really fooled, we don't constantly reflect on the fact of its unreality while we are entertaining a fictitious piece of work – like a daydream. [21]. Here, we can infer that agree or not, movie is part of industry. With or without containing ideological messages, it is a merely a entertaining business, nothing is purely religious although some indicators on this movies identify them to.

Referring to Jean Bauldrillard's concept of hyper-reality, this kind of phenomenon has been turning to be a characteristic of post modern society in which there is no clear distinction between what is real and what is fiction. It seems like they are blended and humans are starting to accept simulated version of reality. As Bauldrillard suggested, the reality being seen in the popular culture and media image, is mediated in some way. Like the information which is edited and packaged into news programs, so what is real is often processed and shaped to fit a particular narrative. In hyper-reality, the copy becomes more valuable than the

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20 Leyden, John. Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals. NYU Press. New York.2003
21 Ibid.

real thing, and what something symbolizes is more important than what the thing actually is[22]

However, it can not be argued that , the religious message is kind of magnet to attract the audiences. As people feel represented, it is one of the tools to gain the other benefits namely powers, money, influences , etc. Hence, it is common in this industry, when a certain movie gets a wide attention and positive responses from the audience, it will be followed by the similar movies, just like a copy cat, of the similar content and form, sequels or series, remake, or even adapted to the television serials, etc.

D. Conclusion

Film is a media representation. Into a wide screen, this industry could portray and depict the object, events, or the reality which seems to be real and represent the society including the religious aspect. Yet, since film is a mass production in which the dimension of its impact is particularly intensive and broad what is perceived in the movie is not merely about art nor entertainment. It is a constructed work based on the preferences of the dominant culture behind.

Concerning of the theme, film often describes things in the society which's close and familiar with the people, including certain aspect of religion. Religious theme has already introduced since this industry started. However, when the director tries to present this unpopular theme like the conversion in the movie, the respond is exactly various . not only because of its controversy, but in some ways

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[22] www.m.wisegeek.org/what-is-hyperreality.htm. accesed on August 2, 2013

it potentially triggers such religious conflict. Presenting this kind of idea need a lot of considering and deeply thought, not only because is this belongs to a private area, the basic right of human being, but the impact of it   sometimes beyond what people expected, especially in the time when the religious diversity is endorsed.

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