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Author/s	Anton Sutandio 
Affiliation	English Department, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Bandung, Indonesia
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Research Article

Skinned Performance: Female Body Horror in Joko Anwar's *Impetigore*

Anton Sutandio

English Department, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract

This article discusses the 2019 Indonesian horror film, *Impetigore* (*Perempuan Tanah Jahanam*) directed by Joko Anwar. In 2021, *Impetigore* became the first Indonesian horror film to represent the country at the Academy Awards. This article focuses on the film's mystification of the female body, which points towards gender relations. This research utilizes the concept of body horror, particularly relating to the skin, gender relations, and *wayang* mysticism. The findings show that the film metaphorically underlines the ongoing disconcerting perspective of contemporary Indonesian society on women's embodied agency. The film's portrayal of non-traditional female characters suggests an attempt to challenge the mainstream patriarchal narrative in contemporary Indonesian horror cinema, and at the same time hints at the perpetuating subjectification of woman's bodies as a threatening yet desirable agency.

Keywords: body horror, mystification, female body, *Impetigore*, Indonesian horror film

Introduction

In early November 2020, the Indonesian Oscar Selection Committee decided to choose *Impetigore* (Anwar, 2019) to represent Indonesia at the 93rd Academy Awards in the International Feature Film Award category. The chairperson of the committee and a well-known director, Garin Nugroho, states that the film has fulfilled all the required technical criteria and it carries local Indonesian values. Anwar claims that it took him 10 years to develop the film (Prambors, 2020) and the result is not disappointing. The film breaks the record for most nominations in the history of the Indonesian Film Festival in 17 different categories and won 6 of them including the best film, the best director, and the best supporting actress.

Impetigore is important as a horror film because it is the first Indonesian horror film that represents the country in the Academic Award and the film has been screened in a number of international film festivals: Spain Sitges Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival, and Sundance Film Festival. *Impetigore* is different from other Indonesian horror films for several reasons. First, the 10-year process is a proof of how much effort and research are done to produce the film. Secondly, the presence of dominant and memorable female characters, and thirdly, the original premise of the story that mixes mysticism, traditional *wayang* performance, and gender relations.

This article explores female body horror in Joko Anwar's *Impetigore*. More specifically, it focuses on the mystification of the female body that equates women's worth with their biological functions and appearance, which—in this context—centers on the skin. Jay McRoy stated, "skin, the membranes that separate us from other objects, functions in the horror film 'at once as a point of contact, a site of resistance, and a method of transference' of the inside to the outside" (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 3). When the inside is shown through the skinless character, it becomes what Kristeva called an abject which existence threatens normality. The female skin that is transformed into a *wayang* adds another layer to *Impetigore*'s body horror.

The concept of mystification is reflected through the theory of objectification, which is simply defined as "the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object" (Papadaki, 2019), particularly in a sexual nature. *Impetigore*, however, does not suggest a sexual objectification of women, but a mystical one, specifically when a woman's body is seen as an object that carries certain supernatural properties. This kind of mystification of women and their bodies has almost become a trope in the Indonesian horror genre where, in many instances of horror films from different periods, women are apt to carry a mystical aura. "When women are shown in horror films, the impression of sensuality is slowly fading replaced by a mystical impression that makes the audience always guess the female character who appears in the film is a ghostly figure" (Tiwahyupriadi & Ayuningtyas, 2020: 121). Metaphorically, it conforms to the dominant underlying patriarchal ideology of the Indonesian society that constantly attempts to subjugate women's position by representing them in films in such ways that date back, as Sen argues, to the New Order regime between 1966 to 1998 with its "ideological emphasis on women being seen primarily as wives and mothers rather than as career women or being able to lead independent productive lives" (quoted in Hanan, 2017: 246).

The metaphor is strengthened by the *wayang* performance in the film. The *wayang* scene is a direct reference to the traditional medium of entertainment and guidance. *Wayang* performance is often seen as a symbolic language of spiritual life and referred to as moral guidance for how people should live and treat others (Soetarno, 2011: 301). The world of *wayang* is patriarchal both in the gender relation of the *wayang* characters where the dominant characters are mostly male, and in the context of the *dalang* which is a male-dominated profession. In this line of reasoning, the presence of the *wayang* performance on screen not only strengthens the mystical aspect of the film but also signifies the problematic gender relations.

The body horror has almost always been emphasising body spectacle: bodies being transformed, mutated, cut, decapitated, burnt, or broken that provide a visceral experience and "stage a spectacle of human body defamiliarized, rendered other" (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 7). In Indonesia, something similar has been seen since the 1970s, mostly focusing on the destruction and degeneration of the female body, which says a lot about the views of the Indonesian cinema on the female body. For instance, the film *Beranak dalam Kubur* (1972) depicts a protagonist whose face is destroyed by acid; in *Sundelbolong* (1981) the monster is a female ghost with a gaping hole in her back; and *Perkawinan Nyi Blorong* (1983) depicts a mythical creature who has a head of a female and a body of a snake.

Impetigore's narrative is driven by the major female characters. This is in stark contrast to the New Order regime's representation of female characters in Indonesian horror cinema in the

last four decades of the 20th century. During that period (1966—1998), women were politically and culturally subdued under the strong authoritarian and patriarchal regime of Soeharto, the second president of Indonesia. As a result, unless their on-screen portrayal abided by the ideology, the film would be harshly censored. During that period, Suzzana's roles as powerful and mystical characters in horror films such as *Nyi Roro Kidul* or *Nyi Blorong* (demi-god creature) or monsters such as *kuntilanak* or *sundel bolong* (vengeful female ghost) can be seen as a challenge and negotiation of the gender relations. However, her show of power and domination on screen was still limited by strict rules that usually involved specific plot templates aligned with the regime ideology. No matter how strong or dominating the female characters were, there had to be a higher power which usually came in the form of a powerful male such as wise and pious man, or *Ustaz* (Islamic religious leader) that will restore order. Kusumaryati affirms this assertion, arguing that "the feminine grotesque deeply tying together motifs of femininity with horror, is a common element of Indonesian horror" (Guttman, 2016: 4).

The fall of the regime in 1998 opened new possibilities in gender relations. The concept of "final girl" coined by Clover started to emerge in Indonesian horror films. For example, Rizal Mantovani's *Kuntilanak* (2006), *Kuntilanak 2* (2007), and *Air Terjun Pengantin* (2009), and Mo Brothers' *Macabre* (2009) feature female characters who become the sole survivor of tragic events. However, even in these cases, in order to defeat their male counterparts, these women need to incorporate what is traditionally in Indonesian context viewed as male characteristics, such as rational and dominant. In other words, if they did not transform into a masculinized female, they would not survive.

Impetigore depicts non-typical female characters. The protagonist, Rahayu, her friend, Dini, and the antagonist, Nyi Misni do not show stereotypical female traits in horror films such as dependent, emotional or masculinized. They are independent, resilient, and are not chained to traditional social norms that bind women to certain roles and positions which suggest a different negotiation of the gender relations.

The Gender Contender and the Mystical Skinned Performance

Impetigore's body horror may remind the audience of Tobe Hooper's 1984 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the presence of skinned bodies, a deranged family, and a final girl. Even the escape scene in the ending is quite similar: when Rahayu stops and climbs a truck, she screams in relief and horror knowing that she is away from the hellish place. But that's where the similarities stop as *Impetigore* has its original storyline in that it is uniquely Indonesian. This is one characteristic of young Indonesian filmmakers, who, as Barker (2019: 84) argues, "have successfully combined features of global horror with locally resonant tropes, iconography and references." The film opens in a metropolitan setting, yet it carries strong Javanese tropes through the icon of *wayang*, the Javanese traditional house, colloquial language, and the *kejawen* belief. *Kejawen* is a Javanese philosophy which is applied in everyday life and manifested in symbols and rituals (Prakoso & Wilianto, 2020: 165). The aim of Javanese' life is to find and create a balance between the microcosmos and macrocosmos (Mulyani, 2015: 2-3). The curse that falls upon the village creates imbalance and the film's narrative focuses on the effort to regain the balance.

The film revolves around the protagonist, Rahayu, a young, low-class female worker. When she runs out of fortune working in the city, she decides to return to her unfamiliar home-village where her parents used to live. She does not know why her parents sent her to the city when she was small, but she knows that they own a property in her home-village, which may change her fortune. Rahayu (see figure 1) is depicted as a single, carefree, hardworking, and independent woman. *Impetigore* shows a shift in gender relations mostly through her portrayal. Throughout the narrative, there are no dialogues about love, man or marriage that emphasise her independence. The absence of a strong male figure in the film that usually protects the female main character signals the shift in the gender relations.



Figure 1: The main female character, Rahayu: "Do you want to buy a bra?"

The screenshot above depicts the scene in a market. This scene shows a significant shift in the presentation of the female body when she is casually offering a bra to another character and almost to the audience. In most Indonesian horror films, when a bra is shown on-screen, it always hints at sexuality as the bra is attached to the female's breast. Thus, when Rahayu separates the bra from the context of the female skin, her action symbolically removes the sexual context of the bra and turns it into a common object.



Figure 2: Rahayu takes out a talisman from her inner thigh

The second instance is related to a vulgar visualisation when Rahayu is taking a pee while the camera is with her inside the restroom. Although a part of Rahayu's body is exposed, it is not in a sexual context. In the mainstream popular Indonesian horror cinema, the exposure of the female body is almost always sexual, but this scene has no sense of sexual innuendo because it reveals an important clue when Rahayu unintentionally discovers a piece of talisman inside her inner thigh (figure 2). Thus, besides providing a clue for the audience, the scene symbolises a

disassociation of the female body with sexuality that supports the film's non-traditional portrayal of the female characters.

However, when Rahayu arrives in the village, she encounters womanhood in its conservative role as a wife and child-bearer. All the women in the villages are depicted to be submissive, passive and bound to their traditional role, except for Ratih, a young widow, and Nyi Misni, the matriarchal figure. Rahayu has to face the patriarch of the village, Ki Saptadi, a local *dalang*. He is merely the authoritative face of the village; the brain is his mother, Nyi Misni, a black magic practitioner. Nyi Misni also hides the fact that Rahayu is her son's biological daughter. Later in the story, it is revealed that Ki Saptadi had an affair with Rahayu's mother.

Near the end of the story, Rahayu, helped by Ratih and the three ghost girls, manages to figure out what happens to the village. They represent the marginalised who have to confront a much powerful adversary. The way the restless spirits are depicted in the film is uncommon because usually the ghosts become the main antagonist. The three restless spirits, however, bring no harm to anyone; in fact, they seem helpless. Although they are minor characters, their existence in the film is significant. The director clearly understands the need to have restless spirits in a horror film as "spirit remain key to the realm of the invisible or inscrutable (*gaib*) and continue to have a strong hold on the popular imagination in communities and on TV screens across the archipelago" (Bubandt, 2017: 103). In addition, "they continue to play an important role in the post-colonial present...spirits of the dead remain ubiquitous" (Bräunlein & Lauser, 2016: 1) in Southeast Asian countries. The collaboration among the young female characters emphasises Anwar's trademark in portraying the weak or the marginalised as the hero/heroine which is also a way of negotiating the gender relations by giving them a voice to challenge the patriarchal or traditional authority.

Another important scene that signifies the negotiation of the gender relations occurs at the end when after knowing the reality of the curse, Ki Saptadi who feels guilty slices his own throat in front of his mother, who later follows his action. It is unusual for a patriarchal figure to admit their mistake and take responsibility, let alone committing suicide. The mystification of the female body does not end with the death of Nyi Misni because in the film denouement, Nyi Misni returns to the village as a baby-eating monster. The film ends with a long hysterical scream of a pregnant woman who suddenly loses her baby and the shot of Nyi Misni's bloody mouth. This scene reconfirms the subjugation of women by depicting them as the abject. However, her powerful afterlife presence in the film's epilogue can be seen as the negotiation of the gender relations when the female antagonist, albeit turned into an abject, is undefeated and possess supernatural power that challenge normality. The fate of the two major female characters at the end of the film suggests that the shift in gender relations is unsettled. Nyi Misni, although she is now feared and powerful as a monster, is living in a different realm. Rahayu probably returns to her normal life in a worse condition than before as she does not only lose her chance for a better life, but she also loses her best friend, Dini.

In *Impetigore*, skin becomes the ultimate part that the cursed village lacks. Due to the curse, every local couple cannot give birth to normal babies as all of them are born skinless and murdered right away. Rahayu's skin transformation into *wayang* is believed to lift the curse and bring back normalcy. The skinless newborn is an abject and becomes a threat to the villagers

because they are different and visually horrifying. It needs skin to be accepted as normal. In this line of reasoning, the skin becomes the mechanism that negotiates normalcy although to achieve it, the villagers have to kill and skin a person who is believed to be the source of the curse.

The skin and its transformation are inscribed with a narrative of gender relations. The skin has to be of women and when it is transformed into a *wayang* character, it is controlled by a male *dalang* or puppeteer in any narrative of their choice, to be performed as a spectacle. Gender relations become the root of the problem when the powerful male lusts after a woman who is not his wife which then ends up in the curse. The lust always comes from looking at the skin, or outer beauty, as can be seen from Ki Donowongso's, Rahayu's non-biological father, act of impregnating his servant, Nyi Misni. Later, he sees the beautiful Nyai Shinta and also lusts after her and finally marries her. Ki Saptadi, Ki Donowongso's illegitimate child, lusts after Nyai Shinta and their affair gives birth to Rahayu. This skin-deep lust is ended when Nyi Misni curses Rahayu who is born skinless. This drives Ki Donowongso to perform a demonic ritual by skinning three local little girls and transforming their skin into *wayang* puppets, and, mystically, Rahayu is gradually covered with skin. The villagers who suspect Ki Donowongso's foul play kill him, and Rahayu is saved by the house servant who takes her to the city. The narrative unravels "gender, at its heart, [as] a structural power relation that rests upon a central set of distinctions between categories of people, valuing some over others" (Mazurana & Proctor, 2013: 2). The value of Rahayu is based on her skin, and the value of the other women in the village is for their reproductive property only.

The corporeal monstrosity in *Impetigore* is not overtly exploited, as there are only four notable scenes when the skin and the skinless are exposed. The first is when Dini is hanged upside down and her throat is slit (see figure 3). The second one is when Nyi Misni dries Dini's skin under the sun, the third when Nyi Misni thins and smoothens the skins to be transformed into a *wayang* and the fourth is when Rahayu and Ratih meet Tole, a skinless individual who lives by himself in the forest. The skinning of the three little girls is not shown on-screen but the audience can see the *wayang* as the final product, made of the girls' skin.

The female skinning is staged as a sort of a ritualistic performance when the victim is hung upside down with a bucket right under her head to hold the blood as her throat is slit (see figure 3). This scene takes place when Dini, who is mistaken as Rahayu, is prepared for the ritual. The villagers only realise the mistake when Nyi Misni, who makes the *wayang*, says that they have slit the wrong girl's throat because the curse remains even after Ki Saptadi performs a *wayang* performance with the new *wayang* made of Dini's skin.



Figure 3: Dini is hanged upside down for the ritual preparation

The image above, which occurs twice with Rahayu in the same position later in the story, also serves as a metaphorical reference to how the two women's lives are turned upside down when they decide to visit the village. The upside-down position also symbolises the gender relations and the gap between urban and the rural. The arrival of two independent and non-traditional women is metaphorically seen as a threat to the village's patriarchal society led by Ki Saptadi. When the villagers are searching for Rahayu, they refer to her as "the city girl", which further emphasises the urban/rural dichotomy.

The scene after Dini's horrifying death follows the process of *wayang*-making. First, the skin is dried, which can be seen when Nyi Misni hangs Dini's fresh skin in front of her house (figure 4). The heavy Javanese background is shown in the image with the looming *joglo* house (a traditional Javanese house) in the back, and Nyi Misni as the matriarch is taking the central point in this shot to highlight her power. The choice of the breast skin to be exposed, besides providing an easy identification for the audience, is to emphasise the mystification of the female body in a non-sexual way and to prompt horror.



Figure 4: Nyi Misni hangs Dini's skin

The second scene is when Nyi Misni thins and smoothens the dried skin as the next step before it is turned into a *wayang* (see figure 5). Again, Nyi Misni becomes the central point of the shot to show her significant role in the whole events that happen in the village. She is scraping the skin to remove the left flesh or hair before drying it again for the second time. Besides being informative to a common audience on the *wayang*-making process, the scene wants to underline the value of the skin.



Figure 5: Nyi Misni smoothens Dini's skin

The skin is treated in such ways to produce a beautiful *wayang* (see figure 6) that will look alive on stage once the *dalang* manipulates it. The 'skin performance' in the four screenshots emphasising the *wayang*-making process signifies the abjection and mystification of the female body in which it is treated as an object. The revelation that Nyi Misni is the source of the curse suggests unsettled gender relations: on the one hand, she is seen as a cruel monster that deserves to be punished, but on the other hand, her position puts the woman in charge that challenges the patriarchy. In fact, the whole narrative is triggered by Nyi Misni's actions of punishing the lustful men who bring disorder in the first place.



Figure 6: The *wayang* as the end product made of Dini's skin

Impetigore strengthens its superstitious element by incorporating a symbolic Javanese *wayang kulit* performance (skin-leathered puppet show) as an important aspect of the film. The performance is conducted by a person called *dalang*. The *dalang* is a male-dominated and highly respected profession. The way the *dalang* controls the puppets and chooses the narrative is a direct metaphor to how patriarchy controls "the stage" and treats the women as subordinates. Indeed, "Javanese culture, when juxtaposed with other cultures, has a dark track-record in positioning women. As happens in the majority of cultures, women are positioned as a second-class under men" (Ardiani, 2018: 1). This subordination is also evident in the *wayang* narratives where the male characters are always depicted to be more powerful than the female characters. Thus, the whole universe of the *wayang* performance and the village of Hardjosari revolves around perpetuating the status quo and undermining women as the marginalised.

The *wayang* is traditionally made of water buffalo hide, dated back as far as the early 11th century. The existence of a *wayang* made of human skin, though, remains a mystery, although some believe it exists. One study mentions that a small village called Kedakan in Magelang regency, Central Java is said to have one leather puppet made of human skin, which is considered a sacred object. It is passed down from one generation of puppet master to another, and only performed on special occasions such as Javanese Syawal or Safar months (Dananjaya, 2020). The *wayang* is known to be symbolic, representing the Javanese nature. The film suggests the reminiscent of the New Order patriarchal regime with its *kejawen* belief, as subtly reflected through the villagers' belief. *Kejawen* is inseparable from mysticism that contains Javanese life philosophy, art, culture, tradition, ritual, manner and virtue (Ulya, 2019: 2). A high-level *kejawen* practitioner needs to prevent oneself from misusing the skill to perform black magic/mysticism, which is what the film depicts through Nyi Misni. She uses black magic to curse Ki Donowongso's daughter, Rahayu, who is born skinless as a revenge for his lust for beautiful women. In return, Ki

Donowongso performs his black magic to cure Rahayu by butchering three local little girls whose skin is turned into leather puppets that he uses during the village's ritual *wayang* performance. The performance is known to be a medium to attract the ancestors' power or spirit to ward off evil or, in this case, to make a certain magic work. To protect Rahayu, he inscribes a talisman which he inserts in her daughter's thigh skin. Ki Donowongso's action results in all babies being born skinless, and the villagers are made to believe that the only way to lift the curse is to skin Rahayu and transform her skin into a leather puppet.

The skin becomes the leitmotif of this film as events that unfold revolve around the absence/presence of the skin. Halberstam argues that "...skin functions as the material that divides the inside from the outside" (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 3), that when the inside becomes the outside like the skinless babies, they turn into the abject or the monster; thus, drowning them right after they were born is considered right and merciful. The skin becomes a significant aspect in the story that can bring normalcy and things back in order. Under a patriarchal authority, women's physicality is also of great concern, considering their features, including the skin, is an investment to ensure a traditional life as a wife and a mother. Just like the *wayang* in which the most important feature is the skin, so are women. Without the leather, the puppet will be soulless and incomplete. Without smooth and beautiful skin, women will find difficulties in finding partners.

In the film, the new human-skin *wayang* then has to be used in a ritual performance for its mystical power to take effect, as Ki Donowongso carries out the mystical *wayang* performance once he completes making the *wayang* characters out of the girls' skin. The chosen narrative is called *Banjaran Jarasanda*. It tells a story about a king with his twin wives. After years of having no children, both the wives finally get pregnant, but each only carries half of the baby (Salim et al., 2020: 45). The narrative resonates Ki Donowongso's own life where he has no child after years of marriage. When his wife is finally pregnant, she gives birth to a skinless baby. The portrayal of a respected yet infertile male *dalang* strongly suggests a challenge to the patriarchal authority who, in this case, is incapable of giving offspring. Thus, the presence of human skin *wayang* relates to the supernatural although the *wayang* themselves do not show any obvious power in the film. Rahayu's father performs black magic to "transfer" the little girls' skin to Rahayu. The skin as the "outside" is removed from the body only to be transformed into an object that makes the skin to be both "inside" and "outside" in the form of the *wayang*.

The film manages to challenge this male domination through some events surrounding the *wayang* performance. First, the choice of the *wayang* narrative, *Banjaran Jarasanda*, sheds light on a powerless king who cannot have normal offspring. This condition is also reflected by the infertile Ki Donowongso, who is later killed by Ki Saptadi. Ki Saptadi himself, being a respected *dalang*, slashes his own throat when he learns about the truth. Thus, the death of all the male authorities is metaphorically interpreted as a challenge towards the perpetual patriarchal domination.

Conclusion

The mystification of the female body (skin) is the film premise that sees the body as the means to achieve something mystical. The mystification of the body is amplified through how the female

skin is transformed into a spiritual and mystical *wayang* character. Skin, through the morbid scene, represents the mystic of the surfaces and, as the skin is transformed into a *wayang*, the female characters' essence becomes skin deep. Compared to the mainstream Indonesian horror films, there is an obvious difference between the visual eroticization of the sexualized female body and the visual objectification of the skin in *Impetigore*. In it, the skin is detached from the context of sexuality by firstly, visualizing it in an unusual setting, such as in the toilet or hung under the sun, secondly by literally detaching the skin from the body, and thirdly by transforming it into a *wayang* which generates horror, not lust.

Metaphorically, *Impetigore's* utilisation of its mystical bodily imagery through the transformation of female body skin also signifies the desired/threatening nature of women in the context of gender relation within a patriarchal society. Women's threatening body is symbolically "neutralised" when its part is turned into a *wayang* and later controlled by the male *dalang*. However, the film also challenges the traditional gender relations that appear in many contemporary Indonesian horror films. The depiction of Rahayu as a non-traditional character becomes the symbol of resistance against the patriarchal power and superstitious society when she manages to escape. Rahayu also embodies strong womanhood through unusual collaboration with Ratih and the girl ghosts. These marginalised females break both the curse and the powerful authority that controls the villagers' lives.

Impetigore's skinned performance does not reflect skin-deep meaning. Through the mystification of the female body and the *wayang* performance, the film succeeds in both confirming the perpetual gender conflict and challenging it. The *wayang* performance symbolises the traditional Javanese patriarchy that often subjugates women's position. What is interesting is that the male characters' roles are made diminutive, as seen in the character Ki Saptadi, the villagers, and Ki Donowongso. Ki Satpadi and the villagers become "puppets" to Nyi Misni who orchestrates the village affairs and Ki Donowongso is literally infertile. The character of Rahayu becomes a symbol of the resistance against the discourse of female body mystification while the character Nyi Misni embodies it, first metaphorically when she is still alive and then literally when she is dead and turned into a monster. However, at the same time, Nyi Misni also symbolises the power of matriarchy when she cunningly manages to overtake the patriarchy in the village through black magic. Even after she is dead, she remains a threat to normalcy. In conclusion, *Impetigore* is never a simple horror story; it carries deeper issues beyond the skin-deep mystification of the female body that it depicts.

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Author's bio-note

Anton Sutandio is a full-time lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung. He specializes in teaching drama, film, philosophy and cultural studies. He got his master's degree from the University of Indonesia majoring in Literature and Cultural Studies. In 2014 he received his doctoral degree from the School of Interdisciplinary Arts, Ohio University, USA majoring in film and theatre. His dissertation is on contemporary Indonesian horror films. At present he is the Dean of the Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung.
