

# The Image of Children in Cinema

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Children and childhood's appearance in cinema are part of the on going discourse of children's films. The idea of children's film is described by Bazalgette and Staples: This term can mean simply the exhibition of films for general audience containing some children; it can also mean the dedicated production of films for children. In spite of the widespread influence of the state-sanctioned discourses discussed in this chapter, there has been a recent trend to portray children and the family in different terms in contemporary Indonesian cinema. Inharmonious child-parent relationships as well as single-parent families are now commonly found in contemporary Indonesian film. The film representations may imply that the concept of an acceptable Indonesian family is changing. This significant change may, in addition, serve to question the role of the family and children within the frame of the dominant national identity discourse while highlighting the fact that many children remain in a difficult position in Indonesia's society.*

Key words: children, movie, representation, discourse, identity.

Children and childhood's appearance in cinema are part of the on going discourse of children's films. The idea of children's film is described by Bazalgette and Staples: "This term can mean simply the exhibition of films for general audience containing some children; it can also mean the dedicated production of films for children. By 'children' we mean people under the age of about twelve" (Bazalgette & Staples, 1995:92)

This definition, in certain cases, is still debatable because many films are made which present children or contain some children in the main story, but which are not primarily for child audiences. To explain difficulties in defining children's films, Andrews (2000:7) argues that not all children's films are just about children and not all films children see are just children's films. The idea of children's film is shaped by various perspectives of thinking. Andrews (2000:19) describes these perspectives as follows: "There are films aimed at children, films about childhood, and films children see regardless of whether or not they are children's films. There are 'children's films' but there is no such thing as 'children's films'.

Furthermore, children's film, adapting Buckingham's (1995) idea of children's television, is not produced by children but for children. Therefore, it is suggested that children's film: "should be read as reflection not so much of children's interests or fantasies or desires but of adults'. The texts which adults produce for children represent adult construction, both of childhood and (by implication) of adulthood itself" (Buckingham, 1995:47).

Both Andrews and Buckingham's ideas suggest the difficulties to define a film that is purely for children; moreover, both reflect the adult's perspective in children's film. Thus, while children and childhood are popular cinematic subjects, they are represented in many

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ways in film but always from the adult's perspectives. Valet describes children's appearance in cinema as a representation that:

sets up the relation of an order which is para-social, para-historical. The child ceases to belong to society and situates himself on the margin of the story where he is filmed. More than the reflection of a given period and certain customs, he becomes the living witness which speaks itself, conc retizes itself, which remembers itself to us in its pure ontological truth, its absolute presence (Kelleher, 1998:30)

Buckingham and Valet's ideas of the presence of children in film lead to the idea that children's presence in film conveys adult's point of view, the director's in particular, of certain issues for different purposes in the society.

### **The Representation of Children in World Cinema**

Traditionally, childhood has been seen as an innocent world. The European Christian tradition has represented children as irrational and marked them as little monsters. The romantic perspective, for example depicted children as lacking adult's negative aspects (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995:1). Writing in 1762, Rousseau described the child's original naturalness and innocence (Konigsberg, 2000:277) while recognizing that these characteristics are easily affected by the child's social and cultural context. Jenkins describes childhood as a separate domain from the world of adult problems, suggesting that children can be used both as symbols of passing life as well as hope for the future. Furthermore, Jenkins conceives children as active subjects who are engaged in determining their own lives, and who can construct their own culture (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004:8).

Hollywood has often portrayed children as innocent. As Konigsberg states, children in film, from Shirley Temple in *Little Miss Marker* (1934) through Lipnicki in *McGuire* (1996), have largely remained innocent and good (2000:277). Films produced by Disney provide particularly good examples of children portrayed in an ideal family and social life, making Disney's films acceptable to the general public as representative of traditional children and family values (Kramer, 2002). Since millions of people worldwide watch Disney films, these may be influential in reinforcing an idealized view of childhood. Tanner (2003:366) suggests that Disney's animated films place a strong emphasis on family relationships, while simplifying the diversity of concept of the family and representing couples in traditional gender roles. Similarly, Giroux (2004) reveals that while Disney's films merge an ideology of enchantment with an aura of innocence, which are constructed around children's understanding about themselves and their world, they tend to broader conservative views, such as male dominance and racial stereotyping. As cited in Tanner (2003) earlier studies by film scholars such as Tseelon in 1995, Beres in 1999, Wiersma in 2001, and Dundes, also in 2001 found that in Disney's films female characters are consistently placed as subordinate to male characters. These features also can be found in Steven Spielberg's films. Mann (2005:196) argues that Spielberg's films mostly portray boys as representatives of innocence at risk from the adult world. Mann also points out that in Spielberg's films girls are subordinated to a dominant brother.

In contrast to their innocent appearance in Hollywood cinema, children in early British silent films were portrayed as rebellious, prankster children (Sobchack, 1989:15). British silent cinema depicts the idea of rebellious children as a symbol of power and authority vested in the upper-class over the lower class. According to Sobchack (1989:19):

Gypsies, children, tramps, and criminals appear continually during the period in plots that represents attacks on conventional manners and mores, attacks on the patriarchal, authoritative structures of society. Rebelliousness against authority is often seen as adolescent preoccupation, and so it is fitting that children were able to represent this energy in the early films.

Politicisation of children in films is also found in the genre of animation film from US cartoons to Japanese anime. Spigel (1999) finds that children have been politicized and commoditized in US cartoons, with the characters in the cartoons representing the nation, spirit and identity of the United States. Meanwhile, Japanese anime convey Japanese identities through their child characters. Yoshida states that Japanese anime has also been identified as expanding Japanese cultural imperialism in Asia. Thus, Yoshida suggests that, in circumventing apprehension towards Japanese imperialism, the anime's producers present a statelessness and Japanese-ness (2004:11).

In Iranian cinema portraying children has been a strategy to defuse political risk, since the Iranian revolution's censorship restricted the scope of political discourse in cinema. Sadr (2002) argues that children in Iranian cinema have become a substitute for adult roles, in order for filmmakers to be able to discuss sensitive issues. Sadr (2002:235) adds children were freer than adults; they could go anywhere and do more or less anything. This is in line with Mir-Hosseini's statement (2000) that, since the Iranian government restricted love and women in film in the early 1980s, children have been used to convey human emotion.

Children can also be found as the central focus of the narrative in both Italian neo-realist and Brazilian films. In these cinemas, children are presented in a real world that has complicated problems, thus destabilising the innocent child myth (Traverso, 2005). Traverso recounts that, while children are portrayed in Brazilian film as parentless but independent, Italian neo-realism portrays the struggle of children and their problems within the family. Fisher discusses Deleuze's ideas about Italian neorealism to suggest that in this cinema children represent more than just weakness and lack of identity. In Fisher's words:

The passive child however is only part of the story, only half of the constructed contradiction of youth. Deleuze's concept of the child as a naturally weak observer reeks of a constructed discourse about youth as much as any, particularly because children, even in Italian neo-realism, are anything but simply weak and passive (Fisher, 2001:99).

The contradictory representation of children in cinema can also be found in early German DEFA films. Fisher (2001:100) argues that in these films children are represented both as social threat and, in contrast, as social cement. Children's presence, according to Fisher, is a symbol of anti-conservative middle class social relations and denotes the lack and castration of the patriarch in inverted gender relations. Furthermore, Fisher states that in early DEFA cinema children also symbolize the conservative values of bourgeois social relations by shoring up the subjectivity of masculinity. Fisher (2001:102) goes on:

Children personify the bright future, the inheritance and continuation of everything for which the ideal male subject stands and works. Children constitute the foundation of society, its bricks and struts, the very vessel around which the bourgeois house is organized and into which the house pours its resources and ideology.

Like German filmmakers, Chinese filmmakers combine two images of children in their films to portray both a real and a dreamed world. Donald (2005) argues that children in Chinese films are utilised as political messengers to construct a model of citizenship, both as an ideological and an economic icon. Donald further explains that child portraits in Chinese films focus on sentiment, emotion and iconic description of China as a nation. Thus, in the new era of reform, children are portrayed as successful citizens who make great efforts for the future of China.

In French cinema, the child is presented as a victim of loss either in their own life or in their relationship with adults (Hayward, 1999:99). However, Hayward also points out the

political use of representation of children in French cinema to discuss several significant issues such as nationalism and motherhood. Similarly, Powrie finds that in French cinema children are depicted as a means to discuss family relationships: accordingly children's representation in French cinema would question the very existence of the family. Powrie (2005:351) goes on to ask: 'is the family a place of protection, or is it a place of death?.'

Thus, the images of suffering children in global cinema suggest that the romantic vision of innocent and happy children is not eternal. On the contrary, in contemporary European films the portrait of the missing child suggests the lost object of desire, origin and vanishing point (Wilson, 2005:340). Furthermore, another image of children, one that deconstructs cuteness is portrayed by bad children in film (Jackson, 2000:6). In summary, the various ways of portraying children in cinema emphasise the significance of children's presence in film.

### **The Representation of Children in Indonesian Cinema**

Film was introduced to Indonesia by the Dutch colonial government on 5 December 1900. The first films were short documentaries about the Netherlands and South Africa, as well as the daily lives of the Dutch royal family. Since then, film has evolved into a culture and an industry in Indonesia. *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* (1926) directed by L.Houveldrop and G.Kruegers, was recorded as the first Indonesian film although it failed commercially.

Heider (1991) divides Indonesian film history into three different periods up to 1999; the first period comprises the Dutch colonial era to 1942; the second period goes from the Japanese invasion and the start of the Indonesian independence era from 1942 to 1949; and the third period goes from 1950 at the start of the Soekarno regime and continues through the Soeharto era. Sen (1994) also divides Indonesian film history into three different periods but she sets the first one from the early 1900s to 1956; she defines the second period as one of political polarization in cinema, from 1956 to 1966; and she calls the third period 1967 to 1994, institutions of new order cinema.

In this historical context the record is unclear about films for children and films about children produced in Indonesia. Kristanto (2005) notes that when G. Krueger released *Terpaksa Menikah* (*Forced Marriage*) in 1932 children were permitted to watch it. Heider (1991) describes kid films as films about children although not essentially intended for children. Thus by Heider's definition, *Si Pintjang* (1951) would be the first Indonesian kid film as it presents a story about a child: Gimán, the son of a farmer, becomes a war victim and street kid in Jogjakarta. The film is produced by *Perusahaan Film Negara* (State Film Company) and participated in an international film festival at Karlovy-Vary Czechoslovakia in 1951.

Kristanto (2005) notes that since the 1950s Indonesian filmmakers have presented children in a variety of situations: as casualties of war in *Si Pintjang* (1951), children's everyday lives in *Lajang-Lajangku Putus* (1958), as victims of domestic violence in *Arie Hanggara* (1985), and as street children amidst the poverty in Indonesia in *Langitku Rumahku* (1989). Significantly, while *Langitku Rumahku* failed commercially in Indonesia, it nevertheless went on to receive several national and international awards. Earlier on, *Ratapan Anak Tiri* (1973) had become a trendsetter for melodramatic films about children in Indonesia. When it was released, the critics and film distributors claimed the film would not attract audience; in fact, the film was commercially successful. The story is about a child who suffers unfair treatments from his stepmother. The producer made several sequels of this film, while other producers also produced films with similar themes.

In the 1990s the Indonesian film industry started to collapse; the number of Indonesian films significantly declined from 101 in 1989 to 20 films in 1992 (Heider, 1991; Sen, 1994), and only 12 films in 1993 (Wibawa & Sumarno, 2004). Wibawa and Sumarno (2004) also describe the declining cinema audience, down 50% from an average of 150,000 people in 1987-1988 to 77,665 in 1992. Sen (1994) believes that the development of private television and the expansion of American films contributed significantly to the problem. More

specifically, Wibawa and Sumarno (2004) describe three significant contributing factors: (1) the film industry was deficient in human resources, especially technical personnel; (2) an unfair distribution policy disadvantaged Indonesian films against foreign films; and (3) there were infrastructure problems related to equipment availability. However, while from 1992 to 2004, the number of films produced sharply declined, at least fifteen of these placed children as central characters. Between 1992 and 2004 only 13 films a year on average were produced, while in the 1971-1991 period about 100 films a year on average were produced (Kristanto, 2005).

Children are popular as characters in Indonesian films; nevertheless, little attention has been given to the subject in academic discussion. While there are very few works that discuss the representation of children in Indonesian cinema, those published outline a similar argument about the portrayal of innocent children to reduce political risk. Strassler (1999:4), who discusses *children of a thousand islands*, states that use of innocent children as representatives to discuss cultural differences attempts to defuse political effects. Strassler argues that although *children of a thousand islands* is more pseudo than actual documentary, the series places children as cultural subjects, presenting them within the diversity of Indonesia as a nation and attempting to discover resolutions for conflict among the different ethnic groups in Indonesia.

Spyer (2004), who examined *Viva Indonesia!* (2000), argues that the representation of children enables the discussion of current issues, such as the ethnicity conflict in Kalimantan and terrorism in Jakarta. Spyer suggests that the children of *Viva Indonesia!* are used to voice adults' ideas. The image of the innocent child provides a naïve outlook, which reduces the political risk in such circumstances. Spyer (2000:244) goes on:

the child in *viva Indonesia!* and other current productions voices, makes visible, authenticates, and suffuses particular positions with the necessary sentiment that mobilizes their appeal. The child is no mere ventriloquist for adult opinions – rallying recognition and sentiment for certain positions and views, he or she is always much more than that.

The use of children as innocent ambassadors to convey political ideas was evident in one particular children's TV program: *Si Unyil* (Kitley, 1999; 2000). *Si Unyil* was a popular puppet television series in Indonesia from 1981 to 1993. The series presented a schoolboy figure named *Unyil* (little) who lived happily with his family in a harmonious neighbourhood in *Sukamaju* village. In fact, *Si Unyil* was produced to teach children Pancasila values within the context of an entertainment series (Kitley, 1999). This role then was adopted formally by the new order, which promoted the advantages of the series in the national development plan. The series, according to Kitley, promoted national values through *Unyil's* everyday life. *Si Unyil* was a model of a proper citizen: an innocent, loyal Indonesian child located in the context of a model Indonesian community.

Kitley (2000:114) argues that *Si Unyil* conveys the new order's aspiration to create a single expression of loyalty to the state. In Kitley's words: [*Si Unyil*] acknowledges cultural differences but erases their range, specificity and potential political significance to produce a unitary, homogenous national family.

In addition, according to Kitley (2000), the new order-defined objective for *Si Unyil* was to create the ideal image of Indonesian children, who wish both to serve and show loyalty to the state. Kitley further explains that *Si Unyil* achieved this objective by figuring the child in three ways: firstly, by constructing ideal characters within a homogenous community and presenting patronage relationships between children and adults; secondly, by presenting the community as a family whose obligation is to develop the country; and thirdly, by presenting local content to balance out the imported programs dominant on Indonesian television. Furthermore, in *Si Unyil* the new order proposed a genuinely Indonesian national identity. In this respect, Kitley (2000:144) observes that:

the desire to create an 'authentic' or 'identifiably Indonesia' series by drawing on indigenous aesthetic content and the decision to use a children's series to popularise and build consent for national development priorities have been problematic for producers. Overly didactic episodes foreground the production conditions of the series and contribute to a perception that the series sought to manipulate audience.

Yet, *Si Unyil* not only features an ideal image of Indonesian children but also proposed the new order's national family planning. The series in a way similar to that of classroom practices discussed earlier presents an ideal model of family: a father, a mother, and two children. This model is promoted as a better family form for a better future through the slogan *norma keluarga kecil bahagia dan sejahtera* (a norm of happy and wealthy small family).

### Conclusion

In spite of the widespread influence of the state-sanctioned discourses discussed in this chapter, there has been a recent trend to portray children and the family in different terms in contemporary Indonesian cinema. Inharmonious child-parent relationships as well as single-parent families are now commonly found in contemporary Indonesian films. Sasono argues that contemporary Indonesian cinema presents an alternative image of the Indonesian family. This is the case in films such as *Pasir Berbisik* (Whispering Sands), 2000; *Ada Apa dengan Cinta* (What's Up With Love?), 2001; *Eliana-Eliana*, 2002; *Arisan* (The Gathering), 2003; and *Banyu Biru*, 2004. *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta* presents a girl who lives in a troubled family and suggests her mother should divorce her husband. *Pasir Berbisik*, *Eliana-Eliana*, and *Arisan* exclude the figure of the father in the family while proposing a strong role for the mother in the story. In contrast, *Banyu Biru* omits the character of the mother by presenting the life of a son with his father.

In fact, Garin has presented these alternative forms of family in most of his films: *Letter to an Angel* (1993) presents a boy who lost his mother and lives with his father, who is later killed; *Leaf on a Pillow* (1997) tells the story of a group of street children who have no family but then form another family and choose a woman as their mother; *Of Love and Eggs* (2004) presents a story of a group of children who live in troubled and incomplete families.

The film representations mentioned above go against traditional ideals and may imply that the concept of an acceptable Indonesian family is changing. This significant change may, in addition, serve to question the role of the family and children within the frame of the dominant national identity discourse while highlighting the fact that many children remain in a difficult position in Indonesia's society.

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