JERMAL: DE-ROMANTICIZATION OF AN (ARTIFICIAL) ISLAND IN INDONESIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

As an archipelagic nation, Indonesian films are inseparable from depicting islands. However, most of the main-stream Indonesian popular films tend to romanticize the island, especially when referring to other islands besides the "mainland" Java. For example, when films are set in Bali, Lombok, or other tourist islands, they tend to capture the island as an exotic, beautiful, and magical place. The film Jermal, on the other hand, moves away from romanticizing the "island" by depicting a harsh reality through its narrative, dialogue, and visuals. The research investigated a 2008 Indonesian film, Jermal (Fishing Platform), directed by Ravi Bharwani, by focusing on how the film de-romanticized the island through a more realistic and harsh portrayal of people living in a jermal/fishing platform. The research was qualitative research using a film studies approach. The method was observation and data collection that were drawn from the film's cinematography and mise-en-scène aspects, such as camera movement and position, props, characters, actions, and dialogue. After collecting and interpreting the visual data, the researcher finds that the film manages to de-romanticize the notion of an "island" that is often seen as a place of beauty or mystery through visualization as reflected in the cinematography and mise-en-scène aspects.

Keywords: artificial island, de-romanticization, Indonesian film, fishing platform

INTRODUCTION

During the Indonesian Reformation period that began in the early 2000s, Indonesia witnessed some transformations in the political landscape, such as "…the creation of new institutions of democratic governance and oversight and "big bang" decentralization reforms" (Diprose et al., 2019). "Decentralization has been crucial in creating better local government performance in Indonesia. Governance quality, public service quality, local election, and economic development are the key outcomes of Indonesia's local government impact" (Baidhowah, 2022). The idea of decentralization is also apparent in the film industry when filmmakers and producers begin to move from Javacentric locations and topics and shift to different parts of Indonesia or nonurban locations, rarely exposed in popular films. It happens especially after the fall of the authoritarian

New Order regime. "…filmmakers were able to work with minimal state interference…Reformation was in part characterized by a plethora of new publications, broadcasters, and voices across the media and cultural industries as content producers and publishers were liberated from state control" (Barker, 2019).

During the Reformation Era, many films began exploring regions outside Java. For example, a 2006 film, Denias: *Senandung di atas Awan* (Denias, Humming above the Clouds), focuses on the life of Denias, a Papuan inland tribe. It talks about "the limitations of schools including teachers and the difficulty of access to education in Papua" (Rumtini et al., 2023). Arswendo Atmowiloto's *Anak-Anak Borobudur* (Borobudur's Children) (2007) narrates children's struggles near the Borobudur temple. In the same year, Akhlis Surapati directs *Lari dari Blora* (Running from Blora) in the Blora area, Central Java. The film depicts a local tribe, Samin. Then in 2008,

Riri Riza adapts a film based on a book titled *Laskar Pelangi* (Rainbow Troops) set on Belitung Island near the coast of Sumatra. This film is adapted from Andrea Hirata's novel which becomes a bestseller worldwide in 130 countries and has been translated into 34 foreign languages (Abidin & Suyatno, 2024). The film becomes a box office with more than 4,5 million viewers. It tells about the struggle of some children on the island to get a proper education and to realize their dreams. The film *Nagabonar* (2008), directed by MT Risyaf, is another film set in North Sumatra during pre-independence Indonesia. It highlights a fictitious character, Nagabonar, "a freedom fighter who was previously a pickpocket and eventually became the leader of the movement against the colonialists with the title General Naga Bonar" (Erlangga et al., 2023). Outside the 2009 drama genre, the film Merantau (Wandering) is a film "which not only highlighted Minangkabau culture in general, but also incorporated more specific cultures, such as *pencak silat*, wandering tradition, and regional languages" (Fitri & Mastanora, 2022).

There are more films set on islands after the second decade of the 2000s. For example, the film *Tanah Air Beta* (My Homeland) in 2010 tells the problem of refugees (exodus) of Timorese people to East Nusa Tenggara as a consequence of the referendum on 8 May 1999 in East Timor (Robot, 2020). *Cahaya dari Timur: Beta Maluku* (We are Moluccans) (2014) tells the story of the conflict in Maluku with religion and identity as its source. The main character in this film, Sani Tawainella, uses football as an instrument to influence children not to take part in religious and identity conflicts (Sartre & Aviandy, 2024). *Labuan Hati* (Heart Harbor) (2017), a romantic drama, is set in Labuan Bajo, East Nusa Tenggara. Then, in 2018, the film *Kulari ke Pantai* (Running to the Beach) is a road trip film that starts in Jakarta, Temanggung, Pacitan, Blitar, Bromo, Jember, and ends in G-Land beach in Banyuwangi, internationally known for surf break (Palupi et al., 2022). Then, a film "that tells the story of a poor couple who want to find a better life working as migrant workers in Singapore" (Halimah, 2023) and they spend most of their time living on a ship. Many other non-Javacentric films have been produced in that period, aligned with the spirit of decentralization that the government tries to implement.

The research focuses on Bharwani's *Jermal* (Fishing Platform) (2008), an 88-minute film that becomes the first non-documentary Indonesian film highlighting people's lives on a fishing platform in the middle of the sea. *Jermal* premiered at the Busan International Film Festival in October 2008 (Bharwani et al., 2009). It has won several awards for Best Feature Film at the Kerala International Film Festival, India, and the Milan African Film Festival, Italy (Film Indonesia, n.d.). However, *Jermal*, which carries unpopular and unfamiliar issue, is not a box office in Indonesia. *Jermal* is inspired by the lives of people working on the fishing platform. The whole shooting is done on the fishing platform with the

production cost around USD 260,000. The choice of location and topic raised in *Jermal* is original, as commonly most Indonesian popular films are set in Java or metropolitan areas, which relates to the period when the film is produced.

Jermal is not the only popular film dealing with life at sea or islands. It is the first Indonesian film and the only one that depicts the life of child workers on a *jermal*. The children in the *jermal* are marginalized but have not yet been discussed intensively in Indonesian cinema (Wibawa, 2020). Unlike many films that use islands as exotic settings, Jermal presents a starkly different perspective by portraying the harsh realities of life on an artificial island. It makes the film unique and, at the same time, poses a challenge as there are no other films to compare because most of the other Indonesian island films are set on natural islands, not an artificial one. Analysis shows that Indonesian films set on islands mostly use the islands as a backdrop without deeply raising the issue of the local people. In other words, the films depict islands as exotic, mysterious, or romantic places, as can be seen in *Pulau Hantu* (Ghost Island) in 2007 and *Air Terjun Pengantin* (Bride Waterfall), *Eat, Pray, and Love* (2010), and *A Perfect Fit* (2020), which is a romantic love story set in a Balinese atmosphere which is dominated by strong cultural diversity (MP et al., 2022).

The research subject, *Jermal*, is a film that is fully shot on an artificial island in the form of a fishing platform. An artificial island is defined as "an island that has been constructed by humans rather than formed through natural processes" (Sreekumar & Hassan, 2020). The purpose of the construction ranges from residential to strategic factors. In Jermal, the purpose is economical, to extract fisheries products, because setting a fishing platform in the middle of the sea will cut costs and create efficiency as the fishermen can fish anytime without having to be on a boat back and forth from the land to the sea. *Jermal* functions as a place for fishing activities for several marine products, such as anchovies, shrimp, squid, and other catches (Siadari, 2021). However, Johar's and Jaka's existence on the fishing platform is not due to economic problems. Johar takes refuge on the fishing platform to avoid the authorities, while Jaya is unwillingly sent there because his mother passed away. With less than a dozen people living on the platform, the location represents a microcosm of the real world with social dynamics and issues among the inhabitants. The fact that the film is based on the true account of the people living on the fishing platform makes the story more realistic. The research purpose is to show how the film, through the interpretation of the aspects of cinematography and mise-en-scène, de-romanticizes the life of an artificial island, in this case, the jermal.

METHODS

The research adopts a film studies approach as

the primary analytical tool. The research compares *Jermal* with other films set on islands or artificial islands by focusing on the film's narrative and visual elements. The research begins with multiple screenings of *Jermal* to collect visual and narrative data essential for analysis. Other island-based films serve as comparative references to contextualize *Jermal* within the discourse of de-romanticization. The analysis draws from cinematographic aspects, such as camera movement and framing, as well as mise-en-scène elements, including set design, sound, costumes, and color. These data are then examined to demonstrate how *Jermal* challenges the romanticized portrayal of islands in comparison to other films within the same setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

"Frankie wakes up for work around midnight and wakes up for work again at 1.30 am. And 4 am. And also at dawn. That night is relatively quiet for Frankie. On a busy night, he can get up and work seven times.

Frankie has been doing this job every night for the last four years. He works in a jermal, a wooden building located about 8 kilometers off the coast of North Sumatra. He claims to be 20 years old, but he may be younger than that. Indonesian law prohibits children under the age of 18 from doing such hard and dangerous work"

The first topic analyzed is child labor and social reality in *Jermal*. The quotes are taken from the production note of *Jermal* that narrates the life of an underage worker on the fishing platform. The quote shows the reality of a teenage worker and implies the isolation and marginalization of those workers on the platform. The film tries to depict these young workers who are underage, underpaid, and mistreated.

"Many say that Jermal's children are a real manifestation of slavery in the fishing industry. In Indonesia, jermal children are often found along the East Coast of Sumatra. There are impacts on children's physical, mental, social, intellectual, and even sexual health and safety. The location of Jermal, which is in the middle of the sea and off the coast, is very risky for jermal children because they could fall or be thrown into the sea due to the waves and then drown" (Siadari, 2021).

Jermal or fishing platforms can be found scattered in Malacca Strait, offshore of Sumatra Island (see Figure 1). To date, it is estimated that there are around 370 jermal units on the East Coast of Sumatra (Siadari, 2021). As an archipelagic nation, fishery has been part of people's lives, especially those on the seashore. In addition, Indonesia is known to have abundant marine products that Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) of fish resources reaches more than 12 million tons per year (Purwanto et al., 2021). As the famous children's song lyrics by Ibu Sud say: My ancestors were sailors, like to sail the vast ocean (Iswatiningsih & Fauzan, 2021); Indonesia and its sea are inseparable.

During the production of the film, there are about 150 fishing platforms in Malacca Strait. *Jermal* is a wooden-constructed platform in various sizes. Usually, it has one huge house-like construction to house the workers, which also serves as the main building where the work is done. In addition, there is usually one smaller hut to house the supervisor. Unlike natural islands, the advantage of artificial island construction is that it can be constructed as efficiently and as precise as it can be to serve its main purpose. In *jermal*, everything on the platform serves efficiently to catch fish at the expense of comfort and livability for the workers. The workers on *jermal* are cut off from the mainland, and a boat will come once a week to deliver goods and water. Their only means of communication is through radio, as cell phones have no frequent service. In this case, "the sea has the role of the conduit, but can also be an obstacle in colonization, settling, movement, communication, and exchange…" (Yassin et al., 2023). One interesting nature of *jermal's* workers is that it commonly employs underage workers who are still teenagers under 17 years old. The film also raises this issue as most of the cast in *Jermal* are teenagers who unwillingly work due to their family's economic disadvantage. They roughly receive around USD 20 per month for a salary with no working hour standard, as they can work any time, even at dawn. They must work for at least three months on the platform or until they have replacements. To give the film a more realistic nuance, out of the three major characters who are professional actors, the rest of the cast are local teenagers.

Figure 1 Map of Malacca Strait (left) and a fishing platform/*jermal* (right)

The second topic examined is visual representation and cinematography in *Jermal*. *Jermal* revolves around the story of a 12-year-old teenage character named Jaya, who is forced to move to a jermal after the death of his mother. His father, Johar,

works as a supervisor at the *jermal*. Johar escapes to the fishing platform and is literally stuck there because the police want him after he beats up a man who flirts with his wife. At first, Johar does not acknowledge Jaya as his son, whom he has never met in his life. Jaya must experience bullying from the other teenagers who are there before him. As the story goes, Johar and Jaya build a father-son relationship. Johar manages to overcome his fear of going back to the main island, and Jaya eventually gets his father back. The film ends with them leaving the Jermal on a small wooden boat.

The film opens with a close-up shot of a cricket inside a small wooden cage in Figure 2. The close-up shot emphasizes the smallness of the cage, thus generating an emotional response of being in a constrained condition. It is aligned with the study of close-up shots that "closer shots increase the intensity of emotional responses in general" (Bálint & Rooney, 2019). In the background, the audience can see a blurred shot of Jaya's face when he stares at the caged cricket. The shot foreshadows Jaya's future in the *jermal*. Then, the dark lighting emphasizes the gloomy atmosphere as well. The cricket is one of Jaya's belongings when he is sent to the *jermal* after his mother's death. There are some interpretations as to why a shot of a caged cricket becomes the opening visual of the film. Cricket is a land insect, sometimes seen as a nuisance pest due to its sound, especially at night. It is known for its resilience, as it can survive in any environment as long as the place is warm, moist, and shaded. In Indonesia, especially in villages or suburbs, children play with crickets and sometimes have cricket fights. The cricket sound may relieve longing for the land, being in the middle of the ocean on a jermal. Thus, the cricket represents the land. Cricket also symbolizes Jaya's and Johar's lives. Jaya, like the cricket, is about to be "caged" on the fishing platform, and at first, his father sees him as a nuisance to his life, just like cricket that is often considered a nuisance insect due to its loud noise. Meanwhile, Johar's life is already like a caged cricket as he deliberately isolates himself on the small fishing platform to avoid his problem on the land.

Figure 2 Jaya's cricket in a small wooden cage

The idea of being constrained and isolated becomes the main idea of the film, as seen in the example of caged cricket. It is achieved through the regular use of wide shots in the film to emphasize the characters' feelings of isolation and constraint, as seen in Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 occurs at the beginning of the film when Jaya rides on a boat at night to reach the *jermal*. The wide shot captures the boat with the background of still and dark water on a dark night. A wide shot is where the entire subject or character appears in the shot, along with the surrounding environment (Sutandio, 2020), which, in this case, is the vast ocean. It also suggests de-romanticization as the shot portrays the reality of boat riding at night when people cannot see the border between the sea and the sky. There is no effort by the filmmakers to make the boat riding more dramatic, such as adding some lighting or moon reflection on the ocean; instead, the shot captures the condition as it is. The shot generates a sense of loneliness and isolation and foreshadows Jaya's bleak future on the fishing platform.

Figure 3 Jaya on the boat with Johar's mute friend heading for the fishing platfor

Figure 4 Johar and Jaya on their way back to the main island

The end of the film also shows the film's de-romanticization when Johar and Jaya return to the mainland in Figure 4. In a close-up shot from behind, Johar and Jaya face the vast sea, which symbolizes isolation, dominated by a blue tone. Even though Johar has accepted Jaya as his son, the shot does not suggest intimacy between them as seen from the absence of physical touch and the gap between them. This visual again suggests de-romanticization by showing a more realistic nuance in their relationship. Here, the sea seems to be neutral. It does not suggest beauty or mystery but rather a distance that the two characters

must travel to reach the main island and the isolation they have faced or may face in the future.

Figure 5 uses a wide shot to capture both the fishing platform and the vast sea in the background. It shows the activities of the teenage workers on the platform when they see the boat approaching the platform. Here, the visual suggests isolation and focuses on the reality of life on the fishing platform. The blue sky and sea reflect the workers' feelings of isolation, in addition to the small fishing platform that generates a constrained feeling. The wooden platform generates a stark contrast with the blue background of the sea and the sky. The composition of the shot shows imbalance and asymmetricity to emphasize the reality of the platform, drawing the life of the platform away from being romanticized.

Figure 6, which is also a wide shot, shows another view of the fishing platform from Jaya's point of view when he is close to the platform. Due to the waves, the shaky camera gives the audience a more realistic feeling that they are always moving even though they are still sitting. The looming yet seemingly unstable fishing platform creates a stark contrast to its blue-dominated surroundings, emphasizing a visual detachment from the sea around it. It suggests that the film has no effort to romanticize both the *jermal* and the sea as the film depicts them the way they are.

Figure 5 Johar (in a grey T-shirt and black short pants) gives an order to the workers when they see a boat approaching the platform

Figure 6 Jaya (on the upper left, only part of his face appears) looks at the fishing platform for the first time

Throughout the story, the film shows the harsh reality of the teenage workers on the *jermal*. They fight over small matters such as a place to lie down

when they sleep or empty used plastic bottle to store drinking water. As a newbie, Jaya must face bullying from others, and when Jaya tries to approach his father for protection, his father denies it. The film also raises the issue of illiteracy among these young workers. Being the only literate boy, Jaka becomes the channel for his fellow workers to express their feelings through letters.

Besides the use of wide shots to emphasize isolation, the film uses close-up shots many times to emphasize the psychological condition of the characters, as seen in Figures 7 and 8. "The close-up shot is more intimate than other shots because the expressions and emotions of an actor are more visible and affecting and are meant to engage the character in a direct and personal manner" (Hanmakyugh, 2020). Figure 7 shows Jaya's expressionless face when he first sees the platform. The camera captures his face at a close distance to show Jaya's psychological condition, which he fears and is worried about his future on the platform. Then, the audience can as well feel his concern. In Figure 8, the close-up shot shows Johar who converses with his mute friend about Jaya. The set is inside his tiny and cramped cabin, and the shot also shows shallow space, which means that there is hardly a distance between the subject and its background. The use of shallow space in Figure 8 emphasizes Johar's isolated life and reflects the fact that he hides from the outside world. In contrast, Figure 7 uses deep space where the audience can see the vastness of the sea as the background. It can also suggest freedom, but in this case, Jaya's expression shows that he leaves his freedom behind, just like the vast sea behind him.

Figure 7 Jaya's reaction when he looks at the fishing platform for the first time

Figure 8 Johar talking to his mute friend about Jaya who has just arrived

Another interesting aspect that shows the de-romanticization of the artificial island is the actors themselves. In popular films, the physicality and attractiveness of the actors or actresses are important factors to ensure that the film will sell. However, as seen in Figures 7 and 8, the characters playing the major roles are depicted to be unattractive to maintain the reality of people living on the fishing platform. It can be seen from their hairstyle, costumes, and lack of make-up. The film does not sell beauty and keeps everything as authentic as it can in terms of depicting people living on the *jermal*. In addition, there are no female casts in the film, and the only appearance of a female cast is through the photo of Johar's wife. All these aspects support the nuance of reality that the film wants to achieve. At the same time, it de-romanticizes the idea of living surrounded by sea as something beautiful or mysterious.

The last topic is the comparison with island representation in other films. As a comparison to *Jermal*, although not exactly similar, Figure 9 is taken from the 2020 film *Kajeng Kliwon*, a horror film set in Bali about the mythical leak monster. The opening scene already romanticizes the island as a mysterious place through a close-up shot showing a group of people praying at night in front of a shrine. The costumes, props, location, and color tone emphasize the mysterious nuance of the scene.
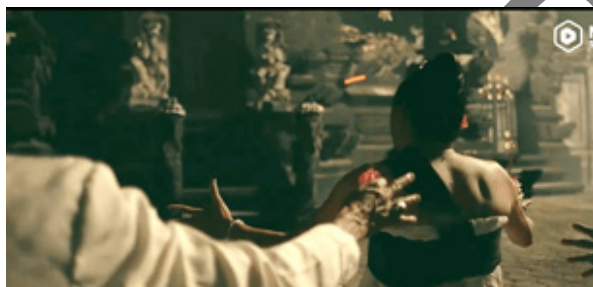

Figure 9 The opening shot of *Kajeng Kliwon* showing Bali as a mysterious place through the scene of praying in front of a shrine

Figure 10 One of the scenes of *Pulau Hantu* emphasizing the beauty of an island before turning it into a horrifying place

Another horror film, *Pulau Hantu (Ghost Island)* (2007), romanticizes the island by showing it to be beautiful in the beginning but mysterious and deadly at the end. The wide shot of the island in Figure 10 shows the beautiful beach where the main characters play. The combination of brown sand, white water, blue sky, and green trees produces a beautiful sight for the audience. This shift of the aura of the island from beautiful to horrifying is an obvious romanticization of the island as it plays with the audience's emotions.

Susah Sinyal (No Signal) (2017) exposes the beauty of Sumba Island. However, they do not deal with the lives of local people, only focusing on a group of tourists, including the two main characters, who try to escape from their everyday routine and fix their relationships. In one of the scenes, the film depicts the beauty of one of Sumba's tourist attractions in a wide shot to capture the subjects and their beautiful surroundings (see Figure 11). There is a strong effort to romanticize the island, especially with the narrative about people from Jakarta going to that island to heal from the stressful city life, emphasizing the island as an exotic and relaxing place.
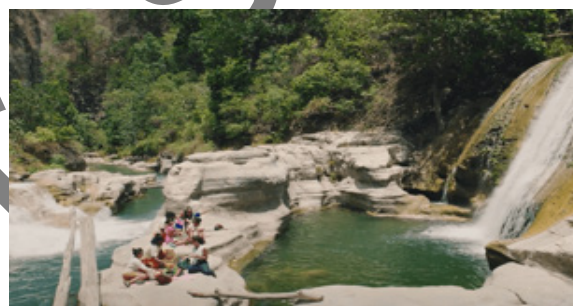

Figure 11 A beautiful waterfall at Sumba Island

Another film showcasing the beauty and, at the same time, the danger of Sumba Island is *Marlina: The Murderer in Four Acts* (2017). It deals with the struggle of women against the strong patriarchal culture of Sumba. In Figure 12, the audience is amazed and horrified at the same time when the shot shows the major character standing at the side of the road with a beautiful landscape behind her while holding the head of a man whom she killed.

Figure 12 Marlina holding a machete and the head of a man she kills

Aligned with the decentralization policy, the first and second decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed many film productions set on different islands outside Java. As the research argues, almost all of them attempt to romanticize the islands by exposing their beauty and mystery. Different from those films, *Jermal* goes in a different direction by de-romanticizing the artificial island as a place of struggle and hardship. The filmmakers do not try to create beautiful scenes or visuals on the platform. Instead, most of the time, the camera merely lingers and follows the everyday life of the characters on the *jermal*. The sea is seen as a neutral barrier between the *jermal* and the main island. The *jermal* is depicted to be plain and indistinctive (see Figure 13). The dominant shots used in the film are, firstly, wide shots that emphasize the isolation that the characters feel. In addition, through wide shots, "…the viewer's emotional response is neutral, yet part of the scene, but only [as] an observer"(Hanmakyugh, 2020). The second dominating shot is close-up shots to show the psychological and physical challenge of living on a fishing platform. Even though this story is about a father-son relationship, the film does not romanticize their relationship. Most of the time, Jaya and Johar are in conflict. Although, in the end, Jaya agrees to return to the mainland with Johar to start a new life together supposedly, the film does not suggest an intimacy between them because they are still depicted as strangers to each other, as visualized in Figure 4.

Figure 13 The life of teenage workers on the platform

CONCLUSIONS

There are not many Indonesian films set on artificial islands that can be compared to *Jermal*. *Cross the Line* (2022), which depicts the lives of migrant workers on a ship, may share a similar approach in portraying the harsh realities of working at sea. However, *Jermal* stands out as its entire narrative unfolds on the fishing platform without excessive dramatization. The research argues that unlike other films set on islands or artificial islands that mostly romanticize the islands, Jermal de-romanticizes life on an island, in this case, an artificial island. The research notes that no similar Indonesian films are set on an artificial island to compare with Jermal, which makes Jermal special. The closest comparison to a film about life on an artificial land is *Cross the Line* (2022), a romantic film about the lives of Indonesian migrant workers who work on a ship. However, unlike *Jermal*, this film is not entirely set on the boat. Although, like Jermal, the film tries to be as realistic as it can, de-romanticizes the lives on an artificial island (a ship), and focuses on the challenges and hardships that the workers face.

De-romanticization in the research refers to a more realistic nuance instead of dramatization of island living. Almost all Indonesian films set on islands produced in the 21st century romanticize the islands by capturing the islands as beautiful, exotic, mysterious, or horrifying. In addition, the choice of actors and actresses adds to the overall romanticization of the islands. It does not happen with Jermal because the film tries to be realistic and avoids exaggerating or dramatizing the narrative or the visuals. The research finds that wide shots and close-up shots become two dominating types of shots to emphasize the isolation and the psychological and physical state of the major characters. The camera movement is mostly static to make the film documentary-like. To add to the realistic feeling, the color tone used throughout the story is mostly bleak, between blue, grey, and brown. The production notes of the film confirm this statement when the cast and crews feel continuous sway throughout the shooting on the platform. When they return to the main island after the shooting, they still feel the ground shaking.

Recommendations for further research include studies on a detailed mapping of popular Indonesian films about islands or set on islands, both artificial and natural, to see how filmmakers treat islands and how the audience perceives islands in popular films. As an archipelagic nation, the research is necessary to provide an overall idea of the portrayal of islands in popular Indonesian cinema.

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