

Research Article

# Alternative Film Screening Venues and Post-Pandemic Sustainability of Indonesian Film Industry

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**Abstract.**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Indonesia, the Indonesian film industry has experienced stagnation in production and exhibition. Due to their affordability, alternative screening venues can drive the wheels of the Indonesian film industry forward. This paper discusses the potential of these spaces to support the sustainability of the post-pandemic Indonesian film industry.

**Keywords:** alternative screening venues, film, Indonesia, post-pandemic, sustainability

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## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic arrived in early 2020 and disrupted people’s lives in all parts of the world, including Indonesia. The 2020 report released by [filmindonesia.or.id](#) shows a significant decline in the number of cinemas and screens in Indonesia from 2019. Below is the overview of this data, grouped according to their locations.

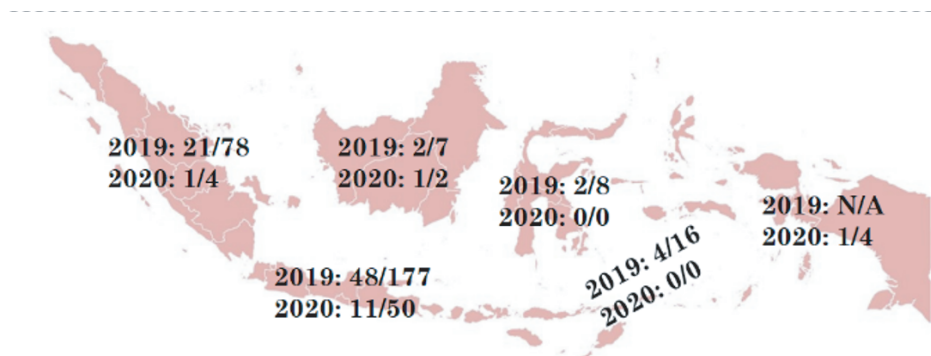


Figure 1: Overview of Number of Cinemas in Indonesia in 2019 and 2020 (1).

As we can see in Image 1, Java Island has the highest number of cinemas, namely 48 cinemas and 177 screens in 2019, and in 2020 this number decreased with the

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closure of cinemas due to COVID-19, to only 11 cinemas and 50 screens operating. In Sulawesi, Bali, NTB, and Maluku, this number is zero. The same report also states that the closure of cinemas impacted the high turnover of film workers, which threatens the sustainability of the post-pandemic Indonesian film industry. Even with the production assistance funds programs in 2021, Indonesian film exhibitions are still struggling. This paper looks into the trajectory of alternative screening venues throughout Indonesia in ensuring the sustainability of the Indonesian film industry post-COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Methods

This paper uses diagnostic analysis method to breakdown the potentials of alternative screening venues, both offline and online, throughout Indonesia by looking into data released by the government of Indonesia, film communities, and the media during COVID-19 pandemic in 2019-2021. The analysis is used to see the trajectory of alternative screening spaces in creating a sustainable post-pandemic Indonesian film industry.

## 3. Alternative Screening Venues

Alternative screening venues are not something foreign in the repertoire of film distribution in Indonesia. Historically, the Indonesian movie-going culture is based on *layar tancap*, village screenings done by projecting the film onto screens bolted down to the ground of open fields. This tradition comes as film producers take their films from village to village to meet their customers. This technique was implemented due to Indonesian archipelagic geography and its then-centralized government that creates unevenly distributed infrastructure, leaving many regions without fixed places to watch movies such as cinemas. This tradition now turns into what local communities call *gerimis bubar*, which means the show will be over when the drizzle of rain pours down from the sky. This tradition is a form of assimilation with local *wayang* performances held for weddings or circumcision parties and can also be accompanied by a *dangdut* music show. These were gatherings massive social events as people would flock into the field and watch the films while mingling and consuming food and beverages.

## 4. The Potentials of Alternative Screening Venues in Indonesia

Local film communities, such as Minikino in Bali, preserve this tradition by going to remote villages regularly to bring films as alternatives to TV shows and soap operas. In an interview with Medium Magazine, Edo Wulia from Minikino admitted that alternative or arthouse cinema offers “endless and diverse topics” whereas “in commercial movies, they always go back to love or action as a repeated genre” (2). Wulia added, “In arthouse or through short films, filmmakers often use this freedom to ‘destroy’ the constraints of genres by blurring the boundaries that are already established” (2). He concluded by saying that in arthouse cinema, we can see “different filmmakers’ perspectives on the 1965 political turmoil, issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, and human rights issues in general” (2).

Therefore, community-driven alternative screening spaces in Indonesia become essential for films that show forms, styles, or narratives different from those shown in mainstream theaters. As mentioned by Adrian Jonathan Pasaribu, “Throughout its history, the film community has filled niches that have not been or are not contained in the film ecosystem” (3). As an examples, Pasaribu mentions the potential of alternative screening venues to screen short films, student films, or documentaries. These types of films alternative to the mainstream feature fiction films shown in the mainstream cinema needs alternative venues such as community-driven film festivals and “independent screens specifically for these films and the communities that produce the films” (3). In these alternative spaces, public conversations and discussions can also happen “on issues limited by the state through censorship, ranging from matters of politics, beliefs, and sexuality” (3). Pasaribu concludes that regional film community networks enable banned films such as *The Act of Killing*, *The Look of Silence*, and *Behind the Frequency* to reach Indonesian audience (3).

Alternative screenings are also more adaptable to the needs of the place and the situation of the social community. In Aceh, which applies Sharia law, Islamic values must be considered in organizing film screening activities. Deden Ramadani wrote, “Although no written regulations are governing, in terms of film performances, there are two agreements that become references for those currently wanting to screen films in Aceh: Re-censorship and the separation of male and female audiences” (4). For the first point, “The main focus of this recensorship tends to be scenes that show sexual activity or lead to sexual activity... Content related to politics, ideological clashes, or other social issues is not the focus of this recensorship” (4). Meanwhile, for the second point, film

distributors usually hire sharia police who ensure that women and men are separated before the film starts to avoid sexual activity in a dark room during the screening (4).

In 2021, several alternative venues are starting to reopen their screening spaces with strict health protocols. Because these screenings are community-based, usually events can be done for free with a donation option. For example, Minikino screened Myanmar films to raise a solidarity fund for Myanmar in early 2021. They also held Minikino Film Week, their annual film festival with strict protocols, such as registration before film screenings, mandatory regulation of at least (minimum) first shot of COVID-19 vaccine or a swab document with negative result per September 2021, restrictions on the number of film audience for each screening, audience seating distances, sterilization of screening venues, and data tracking of audience before entering each venue. Because of all of these safety protocols and measurements, no COVID-19 cases were reported to the festival. On September 18, 2021, the swab test results for all guests that made their return flight to their hometown outside Bali resulted negative (5).

## 5. Online Alternative Screening Venues

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many face-to-face screenings have moved from the cinema spaces to cyberspace. The General Outlook for the 2020 Indonesian Film Industry stated that online viewing platforms such as Netflix, Hooq, Iflix, Viu, and Klikfilm provided Indonesian films in their catalogs before the pandemic [1]. During the pandemic, one of the platforms, Hooq, closed its services while two new online platforms emerged: Online Cinema and Disney+ Hotstar (1).

Interestingly, this report does not include YouTube as Indonesia's most popular social media platform (6). This point is critical to underline because YouTube's position is unique. Its extensive audience base promises to reach a broader audience and generate income from its monetization scheme. On the other hand, as a platform, it also "fits neatly with the egalitarian and populist appeal to ordinary users and grassroots creativity, offering all of us a 'raised, level surface.'" (7).

The affordances of online alternative screening venues attract many filmmakers to take this path. One of them is Joshua Oppenheimer. *The Act of Killing*, the first film in his dilogy about the 1960s genocide, was screened guerrilla in Jakarta through community initiative-based screenings. Most of the screenings are held in private for a limited invitation only. Starting September 30, 2013, the film *Jagal* can be downloaded free from Indonesia via its official website. On January 16, 2014, as the film was nominated for an Oscar, Oppenheimer uploaded the film to YouTube. The official website states

that this distribution model is based on the principle, “As many—if not all—Indonesians watch as comfortably as possible to create the greatest impact” (8). As for the second film, *The Look of Silence*, viewers can rent or buy the film on YouTube with prices ranging from \$ 3.99 to \$ 12.99.

## 6. Other Faces of Alternative Screening Venues

Due to their fluidity, alternative screening spaces also create film exhibition potentials in unusual places. In Lumajang Prison, a film screening activity was held once a week before COVID-19 hit. Agus Wahono, Head of Lumajang Prison, said that under the pretext of “providing therapy or refreshing to prisoners,” this activity was also carried out to “strengthen the relationship between prisoners and officers” (9). Meanwhile, in 2020, a mosque in Malang, East Java, screened the propaganda film “The Treachery of G30SPKI” and generated much controversy (10). The film is a narrative of the New Order government in their anti-communism campaign, which later became the basis for mass genocide in Indonesia in the 1960s. On the other hand, many have questioned the screening of films with many violent scenes in houses of worship. These two cases show that even when any spaces can become alternative screening spaces, we also need to consider the appropriate context to use such spaces, the films shown, and to which audience.

On the other hand, YouTube and other online platforms can also reduce piracy risk and demonstrate the filmmakers’ accountability. As many filmmakers utilize an online platform such as YouTube to reach more audiences, local film festivals begin to cooperate with film platforms that provide higher security features such as Eventive and Shift32. Several film festivals also open their geo-blocking so that audiences could include the diaspora and Indonesian film enthusiasts abroad. However, at the same time, with the highly unequal access to computers, smartphones, and the internet in Indonesia, in the end, the viewers of these independent films are not the general public. Instead, they circulate within urban and suburban demographics deemed suitable audiences by the YouTube algorithm.

## 7. Conclusion

Besides the many losses it causes, the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed us to think creatively about film distribution in Indonesia and globally. During a global pandemic, when people are restricted to stay at home, filmmakers and film distributors creates

smaller scale screening events in alternative venues or screen their films online. Tapping into the affordances of these virtual spaces can be a safe and relatively more affordable alternative to having to go outside the region to attend specific film festivals. However, we still have to admit that internet capacity in Indonesia is often unstable and even absent in many remote areas. Thus, alternative face-to-face spaces are still needed to provide more equitable access to media literacy for the public. This is especially true for films that are outside of the mainstream consumption of the Indonesian general public, such as short films, documentaries, student films, arthouse cinema, as well as “banned” films with topics deemed to be censored by the government, such as 1965, LGBTQ, and other human rights issues. These alternative venues also serve as a safe haven to create public discussions related to the topics carried by these alternative films. Therefore, alternative screening venues are still very much needed in the landscape of Indonesian media ecology in ensuring film industry sustainability post-COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

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