

From Colonial Aesthetics to Nationalist Visuals: Film Advertising Design in Indonesia, 1950s–1970s

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Abstract

Film is a modern medium used to deliver entertainment that has previously been a tradition in society, including presenting elements such as narrative, events, music, drama, comedy and other elements to a wide audience. The novelty of this study lies in examining the visual shift in Indonesian film advertisements from colonial-influenced Western styles toward emerging nationalist aesthetics during the 1950s–1970s, a transformation that has not been previously explored in historical cinema research. The aim of this study is to provide a focused analysis of the visual representation and graphic design of Indonesian film advertisements from the 1950s–1970s using the theoretical perspectives of visual culture and advertising theory to clarify how typography, image composition, and stylistic choices in these promotional materials reflected the cultural context of the era. The method used in this research is the historical method according to Kuntowijoyo which starts from (1) topic selection, (2) heuristics, (3) criticism, (4) interpretation and (5) historiography. The results of this study provide a descriptive account of Indonesian cinema in the 1950s–1970s while showing how film advertisements in newspapers and magazines reflected the broader social and political transitions of the period, including the shift from colonial-influenced visual styles toward emerging nationalist expressions. Movie advertisements in the early 1950s still displayed strong colonial visual nuances, especially through Hollywood-style image composition that imitated the promotional aesthetics of Western imported films dominating Indonesian cinemas at the time. This visual tendency was closely related to the dominance of imported Western films in Indonesian cinemas at the time, which influenced the stylistic choices of local promotional designs. Although there were still few domestically made films, the advertisements had begun to insert symbols of resistance to western domination by incorporating local elements.

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Introduction

Nowadays, films are not only reviewed in terms of art and culture as a mere expression of beauty, but now they also receive attention for a scientific study. Some research on film history, such as research on the growth of the film industry linked to the cultural, social, and economic realities of society, the relationship between film and its promotion and social has been extensively researched (Akdağ, 2024). Studies on Indonesian cinema have generally emphasized production, policy, or industry development, while the visual dimension of film advertising has received very limited attention. To address this gap, the present research directs its focus specifically toward the visual examination of film advertisements in newspapers and magazines from the 1950s to the 1970s. The analysis centers on how elements such as composition, illustration style, typography, linguistic choices, and representational strategies construct meaning within the socio-political atmosphere of the period. By foregrounding visual analysis as its primary approach, this study aims to reveal how film advertisements negotiated the shift from colonial aesthetic legacies to emerging forms of national visual identity (Ayesha Latif et al., 2025; Fruzzetti, 2023; Motrescu-Mayes, 2021).

Film is a modern medium used to convey entertainment that has previously been a tradition in society, including presenting elements such as narratives, events, music, drama, comedy and other elements to a wide audience (Zhuang, 2023). Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Indonesian people have known the world of cinema known as ‘Gambar Hidoep’. This is evidenced by the existence of a film advertisement in the daily newspaper *Bintang Betawi*, December 5, 1900. The classification of the types of cinema for the audience at that time was still fairly racist, where the audience would be classified into three, namely European cinema, middle-class cinema, and suburban cinema (Utomo, 2018). These findings indicate that film advertising circulated through newspapers and magazines played an early role in introducing forms of visual modernity to Indonesian audiences, as demonstrated by the adoption of Western-style photographic composition and Hollywood-influenced portrait layouts that shaped new visual habits in the early postcolonial period.

Film advertising is the main medium in introducing films to a wide audience. In the early days of film development in the Dutch East Indies, film advertisements were widely published in various print media such as newspapers and magazines (Akbar & Pranata, 2023). The design of a movie advertisement not only displays factual information about the movie title, screening location, and screening schedule, but also functions as a visual persuasion tool to attract potential audiences. During the Dutch East Indies period, newspapers and magazines were shaped within a media environment that primarily served European readerships (Bayona, 2023; Putri & Wibowo, 2025). This orientation influenced not only the content but also the visual politics embedded in film advertisements. Instead of merely displaying Dutch models as central figures, the advertisements constructed a representational hierarchy that reflected colonial ideology.

In many cases, European actors were rendered with sharper detail, commanding poses, and central placement, signaling their status as the idealized modern subject. Indigenous figures when present were typically positioned at the margins of the frame, reduced in size, or assigned symbolic roles, reproducing the logic of colonial othering. Viewed through the lens of colonial discourse analysis, these visual patterns constituted a system of meaning in which the European body was framed as the natural consumer and cultural protagonist. The layout, framing, and relational positioning of figures all worked together to reinforce a colonial worldview that differentiated who belonged at the center of modern cultural life and who was relegated to the periphery (Suwardikun, 2017). Such visual arrangements reflected a colonial discourse in which whiteness, modernity, and authority were visually associated with Europeans, while natives were represented as subordinate and lacking agency.” However, since the collapse of the Dutch East Indies to Japan in 1942, the position of film, which was previously considered a medium of entertainment, underwent a significant change (Agustin et al., 2023; Kawashima, 2014; Safitri, 2022). This shift became apparent when films began to emerge that explored themes of reflection on the daily realities of society. During the Japanese occupation, several films were produced in Tokyo using the Indonesian language. One of the film production programs run by the Japanese military at that time was called *Java Baroe* (Anwar, 2024; Hanan, 2017; Hashina Rosalini & Dwi Prianti, 2022). The newspaper *Pustaka Timur* called this program a major change in the world of filmmaking because film was no longer positioned as mere entertainment, but was used as a tool for propaganda (Arief, 2009). At the same time, film advertisements that appeared began to

appear featured the faces of Japanese women, while the natives were no longer a supporting image but were positioned as characters (Suwardikun, 2017).

The 50s were an important early period in the development of cinema in Indonesia. This period was marked by the spirit of independence that encouraged the birth of two film studios owned by the Indonesian nation itself, namely PERFINI (National Film Company of Indonesia) which was founded by Usmar Ismail in 1950 and PERSARI (Indonesian Artist Company) which was founded by Djamaludin Malik in 1951 (Fahmi & Aji, 2022). These two figures played a strategic role in reorganizing the post-independence film sector. The establishment of PPFI in 1954, three years after PERSARI was founded, provided a formal framework that regulated how film companies circulated and promoted their works (Utomo, 2018). This institutional consolidation also had implications for advertising practices. As national film production gained institutional support, producers began to adjust the visual presentation of their advertisements to signal a distinction from imported films. Promotional materials that appeared in newspapers such as *Java-Bode*, *De Nieuwsgier*, *Algemeen Indisch Dagblad: de Preangerbode*, *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, and *Indonesia Raya* increasingly incorporated local performers, familiar settings, or narrative cues that emphasized Indonesian identity. The shift was subtle, but it showed an emerging tendency for advertisement design to align with policy-driven efforts to project Indonesian cinema as culturally distinct from Western imports. Although PERSARI and PERFINI did not yet display distinct visual identities in their early advertisements, the increased production of local films encouraged a gradual shift from Western-dominated imagery toward the emergence of nationalist elements in promotional layouts, marking an early phase of visual transition that is central to this study.

However, public expectations for the quality of national films began to decline. Although a number of Indonesian films have received recognition up to the Asian level, the film industry faces tough challenges such as fierce competition for imported films and growing public disillusionment with the content of local films. At its peak on March 19, 1957, PPFI officially announced to close the studio, which meant that all its members would close film production (Panuju & Juraman, 2019).

From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, Indonesian cinema experienced a period of crisis. This decline in national film production affected promotional practices, as newspapers and magazines were increasingly filled with advertisements for imported films, causing the visual landscape of film advertising to remain dominated by Western-style imagery during this period. The closure of PPFI is a marker of the decline in the passion of the national film industry. This crisis was also exacerbated by the arrest of Djamaludin Malik without any definite reason. In the midst of this situation, Indonesian cinema has become an arena for ideological battles. This is evidenced by the ban on the screening of the film *Pagar Kawat Berduri* (1961) which was considered pro-Dutch. Even in the midst of a precarious situation, there are still many other filmmakers who have produced quality works such as Usmar Ismail, Wim Umboh, and Asrul Sani.

In the late 1960s to 1970s, the government tried to revive the image of national cinema through funding policies and the implementation of a national film appreciation week in 1967 (Komalawati, 2018). On the other hand, the government also opened its wide tap for imported films to enter. This has led to a flood of foreign films that are loaded with elements of sex and violence, thus, the popularity of local films began to shift. During the transition of the Minister of Information from B.M. Diah to Budiardjo, national film production increased significantly, particularly with the introduction of color technology and widescreen formats. These technological changes were also reflected in film advertising, as newspaper and magazine promotions increasingly featured bold color elements, larger photographic compositions, and more elaborate layouts to highlight the 'modern' visual appeal of these new productions, even though the overall film quality did not always improve.

Weak quality control has also encouraged local films to imitate negative elements of imported films, such as nudity, sex and violence. Seeing this condition, the government began to tighten censorship with the passage of Presidential Decree No. 1 of 1964 concerning the affirmation of cinema, the mandatory content of which encourages cinemas to pay attention to the following things; (1) be a supporter and defender of the basics of the Pancasila ideology, (2) contain the news of wisdom that is constructive (3) pay attention to public order and applicable regulations (Fahmi & Aji, 2022). The government also enforced a policy that required foreign film importers to produce national films as a condition for the entry of foreign films into the country. However, this regulation is not well implemented. This is evident from the rampant advertisements or film footage that violates these rules, such as the one in *Aktuil* magazine in its 137th edition in 1974, in the movie 'Scorpio' scene showing a

couple and a woman on a bed without clothes as if in a shocked position when raided by a group of police.

An important turning point in the history of Indonesian cinema was when Ali Murtopo was appointed as the Minister of Information in 1978. He formed the National Film Council which formulated the Basic Pattern for National Film Development (P4N) in 1980 (Aulia & Kurniawati, 2023; Murtagh, 2022). This pattern emphasizes that national films must be "culturally educational", meaning that they must display Indonesian culture and have educational value.

Research Methods

The method used in this study is the historical method. The historical method involves analyzing and critically examining records and relics of the past (Heller, 2023). However, because this research also examines the visual representation of film advertisements, the historical approach is complemented by visual analysis to interpret elements such as composition, imagery, and stylistic characteristics. This combination allows the study not only to reconstruct the chronological development of Indonesian cinema, but also to explain the representational meanings conveyed through the design of film advertisements. The historical method used is Kuntowijoyo's method which is divided into five stages, namely 1) Topic Selection, 2) Heuristic, 3) Criticism, 4) Interpretation, 5) Historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2013).

The first stage, topic selection. The researcher reads several relevant scientific studies related to the topic. For example, the article by Ardanareswari (2012) 'Film Advertising and Changes in Urban Socio Economic Life 1950-1966' History Sheet, which provides an opportunity for this article to be written. There are many studies that discuss the development of Indonesian film from the Dutch colonial period to the post-independence era, yet research specifically addressing the visual design and representational strategies of film advertisements remains very limited. One study that provides partial insight is Yuhana Setianingrum's (2012) 'Creativity in Cigarette Advertisement Design in Java, 1930–1970s', which opens a perspective on how visual culture in print media can be approached historically. Building on this gap, the novelty of the present study lies in examining the visual representation of film advertisements in Indonesia during the 1950–1970s, particularly the transition from colonial influenced imagery to emerging nationalist aesthetics. This focus positions the study as a contribution to refining the historical analysis of Indonesian cinema through the lens of its promotional visual culture.

The second stage, heuristic. At this stage, the researcher collected relevant sources, both primary and secondary, each consisting of books, journals, theses, and archives including newspapers, magazines, and photographs. The primary sources used in this study consist of photographs from KITLV (ID 115142) and several colonial and postcolonial newspapers, including *Java-bode*, *Nieuws en Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, and others. These media were not selected arbitrarily, they were chosen based on three methodological criteria. First, they were newspapers with wide circulation and consistent publication during the periods under study, ensuring the availability of film advertisements across different decades. Second, these newspapers represented distinct readership segments ranging from Dutch and Indo-European audiences to emerging Indonesian readers making them suitable for analyzing changes in visual orientation and target consumers. Third, the selected titles are known to contain a relatively high density of commercial advertisements, including film promotions, which made them an effective corpus for examining visual and representational patterns in film advertising. Batavia edition 3 September 1951, *Algemeen Indisch dagblad: de Preangerbode*, edition 17 March 1951, "*De nieuwsgier*". Batavia, edition 06 July 1954, *Java-bode: nieuws, handels-en advertblad voor Nederlandsch-Indie*". Batavia edition of December 16, 1955, *Java-bode: nieuws, handels- en advertentieblad voor Nederlandsch-Indie*" Batavia, edition of August 13, 1956, and several others. Meanwhile, the primary sources of Indonesian newspapers and magazines include the newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, edition of November 8, 1950, the newspaper *Indoensia Raya*, edition of May 20, 1955, the newspaper *Pikiran Rakjat* edition of May 5, 1960, and the newspaper *Harian Pedoman*, August 23, 1960, while the magazine includes the *Aktuil Magazine* edition 09 of 1968 and edition 137 of 1974. *Star Magazine* issue 04, issue 7, and issue 08 in 1972. These primary sources will be supported by citing related secondary sources.

The third stage, criticism. The researcher conducts an in-depth assessment of the sources that have been collected. Criticism is carried out in two ways, namely internal criticism and external criticism. In conducting source criticism, this study focuses not only on the origin and publication

context of the materials but also on the visual biases embedded within the advertisements. For visual sources such as film posters and newspaper advertisements, criticism includes examining how colonial hierarchies, ethnic representation, and Western-oriented aesthetic conventions appear in the imagery, as well as assessing composition, illustration style, and the clarity of visual reproduction to ensure that the materials can be accurately interpreted. Such an approach enables the validity of primary sources to be evaluated based on their visual characteristics, rather than solely on textual criteria.

The fourth stage, interpretation, is carried out after the visual sources have undergone a process of source criticism suited to visual materials. In this study, source criticism does not only examine authenticity or publication context but also evaluates the visual construction of the advertisements themselves. This includes assessing the production context of the images, identifying stylistic conventions, analyzing framing choices, and examining how typography, illustration techniques, and spatial arrangements shape the intended meaning. Using Stuart Hall's representation framework, these elements are interpreted as culturally mediated codes that articulate power relations, colonial residues, or nationalist aspirations. Through this approach, each advertisement is treated not simply as a historical artifact but as a visual discourse that communicates meaning through specific aesthetic decisions. The results of this visual source criticism and interpretation are then integrated into an analytical narrative that connects the visual form of the advertisements with the broader social and historical dynamics of Indonesian cinema."

The last stage, historiography. The researcher conducts historical writing objectively referring to the sources that have been interpreted. In this stage, cooperation between researchers is urgently needed. Several discussions were held to minimize the occurrence of double interpretation (ambiguity).

Result

The Development of Film Advertising in Indonesia 1950-1970s

Print media is the first media to popularize advertising as part of promotions carried out by entrepreneurs. If we look at modern advertisements, it is clear that the main purpose is to encourage people to consume the products offered. This kind of process has started since the beginning of the 20th century in Indonesia. Then its influence expanded even more after independence, especially in big cities that have good facilities and economic stability.

Regarding the history of cinema in Indonesia, it cannot be separated from the dynamics of colonialism. In the 1920s, the development of silent films progressed quite rapidly. The Dutch East Indies film industry at that time was dominated by imported films, especially productions from Universal Studios in Hollywood. This dominance not only increased the volume of film imports reaching at least 17 active distributors in 1924, with Pathe Theater under M. Swemlaar being the largest (Arief, 2009), but also shaped the visual conventions of film advertising in local print media. Advertisements for these imported films introduced Hollywood-style visual aesthetics, including Western typography, portrait-centered layouts, and the use of European actors as the primary figures in the imagery. Such stylistic influences established a visual template that local cinemas and newspapers frequently adopted, embedding Western cultural values as the dominant representational standard in film advertisements during the colonial period. During this period, the number of indigenous spectators began to increase. One of the driving factors was the implementation of the Ethical Policy by the Dutch government, which included programs in irrigation, education, and migration. Through its educational component, the policy expanded access for indigenous elites to Western-style schools, exposing them to European languages, visual literacy, and modern cultural trends (Dewanthi, 2022). This growing familiarity with Western culture was reflected in film advertisements of the period, which adopted Hollywood-inspired visual aesthetics, Western typography, and European models as symbols of modernity. As a result, the circulation of imported films through print media found an increasingly receptive audience whose visual preferences had been shaped by the cultural effects of Ethical Policy education.

From the beginning of 1900-1925, all films screened in the Dutch East Indies were imported films from abroad. It was only in 1926 that the first attempt in the production of local story films was made. The originator was a German citizen named G. Krunger who collaborated with Heuveldop, a Dutch figure. Both of them produced the film 'Loetoeng Kasaroeng' whose story is based on a legend in the West Java region. In the production of this film, a number of Indo-Bandung people act as intermediaries of communication between foreigners and local communities. In fact, the producer

entrusted Raden Kartabrata to lead the group for the actors, most of whom were cast in the first film made in the Dutch East Indies (Muhlisiun, 2016). The emergence of collaborations between Indigenous filmmakers and Dutch producers not only facilitated early production activities but also carried significant consequences for the visual form of film advertisements. Through these partnerships, local film companies frequently adopted the stylistic conventions that Dutch producers were accustomed to such as portrait centered layouts, European illustration techniques, and typographic styles modeled after Dutch commercial printing. These shared production networks allowed colonial visual norms to be transferred directly into advertising practices, resulting in promotional designs that continued to display Western compositional logic even when the content featured local actors or narratives. The inclusion of indigenous actors alongside European performers slowly altered the iconography of printed film promotions, creating hybrid visual narratives that combined Western-style layouts with emerging local representations. These shifts indicate that the expanding collaboration also broadened the target market of film advertisements, addressing both colonial audiences and the increasingly educated indigenous readership.

As time went by, the application of sound technology that began in 1927 marked the end of the silent film era and opened a new chapter in the history of cinema, namely the era of sound films. The arrival of sound films generated a visible shift in the visual language of film advertisements in the Dutch East Indies. A close reading of advertisements in *De Sumatra Post* (1 September 1931 and 8 February 1934) shows that promotional designs no longer relied solely on listing film titles but actively constructed a spectacle through their visual composition. Dramatic effects were produced through the use of sharply angled illustrations, heightened contrasts, and enlarged facial expressions that conveyed emotional intensity associated with the 'talkie' experience. Sensational appeal was further reinforced by the inclusion of dynamic action poses raised weapons, running bodies, or scenes of confrontation framed to suggest movement within the still image. In several advertisements, women's bodies were also foregrounded through selective framing, tighter cropping, and accentuated posture to attract attention, reflecting the period's reliance on spectacle to signal modern entertainment. These visual strategies collectively demonstrate that the transition to sound cinema was accompanied by a deliberate shift toward more theatrical, movement-oriented advertising aesthetics. The advertisements were therefore not merely historical artifacts but visual attempts to translate the novelty of sound technology into graphic form, using intensity, emotion, and bodily display to entice prospective audiences.

One of the films that will be screened raises the theme of the adventure of two men in exploring wildlife in Africa (Batubara, 2020). The enthusiasm for film screening is also seen in Batavia through portraits stored in KITLV. The portrait shows the crowd at the Rex Cinema during the screening of the film *The Dawn Patrol* starring Errol Flynn in 1939.



Figure 1. Bezoekers van de film *The dawn patrol* met Errol Flynn voor bioscoop Rex te Batavia, 1939
Source(s): (KITLV, 115142)



Figure 2. Skit 'Ku bunuh Ajahku', *Algemeen Indisch dagblad: de Preangerbode*, 17 March 1951
Source(s): (Delpher)

The development of film in the Dutch East Indies shows that the emergence of sound films and Ethical Politics provides great opportunities for the growth of films, especially for imported films. The

majority of imported films circulating at that time emphasized purely entertainment elements, such as the themes of romance, rape, and fights. From the large cost of film production in the Dutch East Indies, it is inevitable that film producers must follow market tastes so that the risk of losses can be minimized. Then came films with harmonious themes, such as *Sea Eagle*, *Noisy Tiger*, *Alang-Alang*, *Sea Lion*, *Si Comat*, and *Terang Boelan* (late 1937). Meanwhile, to reach Chinese audiences, sound films adapted from Chinese novels were also made, such as *Poei Sie Giok* (Arief, 2009).

Looking back to the past, advertising has been a part of newspapers since the colonial era. At that time, most advertisements contained information on the auction of particulate matter. However, the situation changed significantly after independence. Rapid population growth in urban areas and the expansion of commercial activities created a new consumer market in Indonesian cities. This post-war economic recovery stimulated the growth of local cinemas, film distributors, and national newspapers sectors that relied heavily on printed advertising. As a result, film advertisements began to appear more frequently and targeted an increasingly diverse urban readership, providing greater space for local filmmakers to promote their works and gradually shifting the visual orientation of film advertising from a purely colonial audience toward a broader post-independence public (Ardanareswari, 2012).

In addition to economic conditions that began to show a passion to rise, Indonesia in the 1950s also experienced a transition period in the mass media. The print press began to undergo a modernization process. This can be seen from the increasing number of Indonesian-language newspapers. Since 1949, there have been 166 newspapers published, 99 of which have been in Indonesian (Kartodirdjo, 1974). Even some Dutch newspapers also followed the change, such as the film advertisement in the newspaper *Algemeen Indisch dagblad: de Preangerbode* published on March 17, 1951 about the schedule of theatrical performances (film) '*Ku Bunuh Ajahku*' directed by Usmar Ismail. This development goes hand in hand with economic development, such as the increase in industrial products in urban areas.

Seeing the opportunities that exist, print products, especially newspapers, began to take into account economic aspects and people's needs for industrial products. This is different from what happened in the 1950s, where the newspaper industry did not have the goal of making a profit. The increasing commercial orientation of newspapers did not only affect their circulation figures but also reshaped the visual treatment of advertisements, including those promoting films. As newspapers competed for revenue, advertising sections were redesigned to be more visually assertive, often employing larger headline fonts, denser image placement, and layouts optimized to capture the reader's attention quickly. For film advertisements, this shift meant greater reliance on eye-catching visual elements such as bold typography, enlarged illustrations, and strategically positioned actor portraits so that the ads could stand out within increasingly crowded advertising pages. The profit-driven restructuring of newspaper layouts therefore played a direct role in stimulating more competitive and visually intensive film advertisement design. This development also affected the visual strategies of film advertisements. In profit-driven newspapers, film ads tended to appear in larger formats, used bolder headlines for film titles, and highlighted striking visual elements such as dramatic scenes, expressive portraits of actors, or sensational taglines to attract readers' attention. Several advertisements in newspapers like *Kedaulatan Rakyat* and *Indonesia Raya* show this shift, presenting more dynamic layouts and visually competitive designs tailored to the demands of a growing urban readership. Such examples indicate that the commercialization of newspapers directly influenced the aesthetic and promotional strategies of film advertising in the post-independence period.

As a result of industrial development, advertising columns in print media, especially newspapers at that time, were filled with mass consumption products, both from household needs, cosmetics, medicines and so on. In fact, these types of advertisements have not undergone significant changes compared to the pre-independence period. However, what has been the difference since the early 1950s is the increasing frequency of film advertisements in Indonesia from time to time. If previously foreign film advertisements dominated the advertising pages of print media, their position gradually shifted with the rise of domestic productions, especially films directed by Usmar Ismail, who became a central figure in the growth of national cinema. This shift was reflected not only in the increasing frequency of local film advertisements but also in their visual design. Unlike Hollywood-style ads that emphasized glamorous European actors and dramatic illustrated scenes, advertisements for early Indonesian films began to foreground local actors, simpler portrait layouts, and narrative cues rooted in Indonesian social realities. The visual tone became less Westernized, presenting images and story

elements that were more familiar to local audiences. This representational shift marked an important transition in the graphic style of film advertising from imported cinematic imagery to the gradual emergence of an Indonesian visual identity. However, it does not demand the possibility that there will still be advertisements for foreign films because the government also opens up wide opportunities to include the film in the country. This depiction can be seen from several newspaper advertisements both owned by the Dutch and Indonesians such as the Java-Bode News newspaper published on December 16, 1955 and the newspaper Kedaulatan Rakyat on November 8, 1950.



Figure 3. Movie "Darah dan Do'a "Newspaper Kedaulatan Rakyat, 8 November 1950
Source(s): (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia)



Figure 4. The Robe, Java-bode, 16 December 1955
Source(s): (Delpher)

Although the progress of film in Indonesia has shown progress compared to the era of theatrical films during the war, local film production still tends to lag behind imported films. Since the 1950s, imported films have been widely distributed and stored by film importers. This can be proven by the appearance in the Java-Bode newspaper on September 3, 1951 where all information on film rounds in Indonesia was dominated by imported films from abroad. Large cinemas in urban areas, such as Astoria Menteng, Capitol, Grand, Cinema, Sin Tu, and Rivoli in Batavia are the main means of showing these films.



Figure 5. 'United Cinemas Combination' Java-bode, 3 September 1951,
Source(s): (Dephler)



Figure 6. "Hercules (Orang Kuat)", Newspaper Pikiran Rakjat, 5 Mei 1960
Source(s): (Sanubary, 2025)

In addition, Indonesian film actors still face difficulties in adjusting to the applicable censorship rules. Censorship policies are heavily influenced by political interests and power. A clear example is the cutting of the film "Blood and Prayer" and the rejection of its screening in some areas, so that this shows that political interests limit the freedom to work in cinema. The film depicts the struggle of the Long March of the Siliwangi Division troops after the Renville agreement in 1948, as well as the reaction of the Darul Islam troops to the return of the troops. The film Blood and Do'a at that time was

considered to have the potential to trigger a peaceful settlement with Darul Islam, so some parties were reluctant to accept the film (Kurnia et al., 2004). In addition, the difficulties in producing Indonesian films were reflected in the declining number of local productions from year to year. In 1955, local films accounted for only around 15% of all titles screened in Indonesian cinemas (Ismail, 1983). This numerical dominance of imported films also shaped the visual standards of film advertising. Because most advertisements in newspapers featured Hollywood and other foreign productions, the graphic aesthetics that circulated widely were Western-oriented using dramatic illustrated scenes, stylized typography, and glamorous portraits of European actors. As a result, the limited advertisements for local films often had to compete within a visual field defined by imported aesthetics, which influenced the representational norms and promotional strategies adopted by domestic filmmakers.

Apart from newspapers that became a medium for film advertising in the 1950s, local film producers also often used other promotional media that were still open. The promotional media are posters or banners and billboards that are installed in front of the building or cinema waiting room (Ardanareswari, 2012). The increase in the number of domestic film productions from the 1950s to the 1960s prompted the need for more efficient, extensive and rapid promotion. As a result, the publication of film advertisements is no longer only through posters in cinemas, but film producers make maximum use of print media as a promotional medium because digital media such as TVRI which has been present since 1962 still tend to be less accessible to all circles of society. This increase was also strengthened by the passage of the Foreign Investment Law during the 1967 New Order period, thus providing a wide space for multinational companies to be involved in the advertising sector. This condition triggered the industrial revolution which also had an impact on the development of the printing industry in Indonesia (Naredi & Rahmawati, 2022; Pratama et al., 2024).

The closure of a number of Dutch-language newspapers, such as *De Preanger Bode*, *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, and *De Java-Bode News* in 1957 (Ilafi & Larasaty, 2024), marked the end of colonial media dominance. Although explicit colonial markers such as Dutch-language captions or references to colonial era cinemas gradually disappeared, the early post-independence period did not yet produce substantial innovation in the visual language of film advertising. This continuity becomes evident when examining specific visual features. For instance, film advertisements from the early 1950s such as *The Long March* (1950) in *Kedaulatan Rakyat* or the 1960 advertisement for *Hercules in Pikiran Rakjat* still employed colonial style layouts characterized by rigid vertical block divisions separating text and imagery. Typographically, many advertisements continued to use old-style serif fonts similar to those found in Dutch East Indies newspapers, while the illustrated human figures retained European-style figurative drawing techniques, including dramatic shading, idealized body proportions, and theatrical poses reminiscent of Hollywood posters from the 1930s to the 1950s. These visual elements demonstrate that despite the changing political landscape, the aesthetic framework of film advertising remained deeply rooted in the design traditions inherited from the Dutch colonial period. In other words, early post-independence film advertisements did not yet construct a distinctly Indonesian visual identity but instead continued to rely on representational patterns and stylistic conventions carried over from the colonial era.

Around 1960, the number of cinemas in Indonesia reached around 890 units. The number of cinemas in circulation is driven by the diversity of various types of films screened, so that it reaches various social strata of society. During this period, it is often considered the heyday of the cinema industry in Indonesia with a total audience of 450 million people. Of the 450 million people, 270 million viewers were dominated by western films (United States and Britain), followed by films from India, Malaya, and Japan as many as 135 million, while for domestically produced films only around 45 million viewers were recorded (Kurnia et al., 2004).

As a result, the movie commercials that appeared featured foreign-made films, especially from the United States and India. The print media is the main channel for the promotion of the film and the pages are filled with representative illustrations of the film and usually appear prominently with the names of the movie stars to attract the public's interest. As is the case in *Aktuil* magazine in its 09th edition in 1968, especially in two pages it displays clichés and typical images of Bollywood films with stories that often raise romance stories accompanied by musical and dance elements. The existence of Indian films at that time was also strengthened by the narrative as if Indian films were one of the films in demand at that time.

"Where is Indian film?" is the question posed by Indian film critics in our country today. If some time ago we see Indian films in cinemas, then indeed this achir is lacking if we don't want to be used, we rarely see Indian films..." (Majalah Aktuil Edisi 09, 1968)

In the same decade, as seen in the strong dominance of foreign films, especially against western films. Foreign advertisements also appeared massively in various print media, as seen in the May 5, 1960 edition of the *Pikiran Rakyat* newspaper which featured a film titled "Hercules (Strong People)" promoted with the visual style of the physical strength of the main character typical of Hollywood movies that had many action scenes. Meanwhile, local film advertisements actually also circulate in several print media and tend to appear simpler as seen in the newspaper *Harian Pedoman*, edition of August 23, 1960 which visually displays a film entitled "Lost Darkness Comes Bright" typical of national films, so this reflects the real inequality that the national film industry does not have production or promotional power comparable to foreign films.



Figure 7. 'Diujung Badik' Star Magazine 7th issue of 1972
Source(s): (Star Edisi 04-08, 1972)

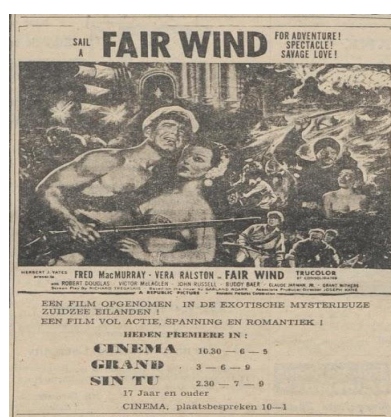


Figure 8. American film 'Fair Wind', Java-bode 7 July 1954
Source(s): (Dephler)

The years 1962 to 1965 are often described as a tumultuous period for Indonesian cinema due to widespread rejection of films considered to represent American imperialism. These actions manifested in film boycotts, the forced removal of cinema billboards, and even the burning of several theaters. This political climate also influenced the visual orientation of film advertisements. During these years, advertisements for American and other Western films began to disappear from major newspapers, while ads for domestic productions adapted to the nationalist tone promoted by the state. Visual elements such as heroic poses of Indonesian actors, themes of struggle and social justice, and straightforward typographic layouts were increasingly used to align advertisements with anti-imperialist cultural policy. Thus, political tensions not only shaped film circulation but also redirected the representational strategies of film advertising toward a more explicitly national visual identity. As a result, the number of cinemas has decreased drastically. It went from about 700 cinemas in 1964 to only about 350 in 1965. This condition was further aggravated in the period between 1965 and the end of the 60s. The political turmoil after the G30 S damaged the film distribution system, while national film production was still unable to meet market needs. Many cinema entrepreneurs end up facing a tough dilemma with a lack of film supply. This situation was also exacerbated by inflation in 1966. So as to weaken people's purchasing power which directly results in many cinemas that were previously dying and finally closed because there are no more audiences who want to see movies.

As an effort to overcome the crisis in the Indonesian film industry, the government attempted to revive it by allowing the large scale importation of foreign films. In 1967 alone, 499 imported titles entered Indonesia, while national production amounted to only six films. This policy not only revived cinema operations but also reshaped the aesthetics of film advertising. The renewed dominance of Hollywood titles reintroduced Western visual conventions into Indonesian print media such as dramatic illustrated scenes, bold decorative serif typography, and glamourized portraits typical of American studio advertising. In contrast, advertisements for the few domestic films that appeared during this period tended to adopt simpler and more restrained layouts, creating a visual disparity that reflected the

unequal production landscape. Although some local ads retained national themes, there was no significant visual resistance; instead, the advertising field became saturated once again with Western stylistic norms. From the previous 100 units in 1967, to 450 units in 1968 with an explosion of film imports of 784 titles. This trend continued until 1969, when the number of cinemas increased to 580 units, but national film production remained stagnant at only six titles while imported films jumped to 800 film titles. It was only in 1970 that changes began to be seen with an increase in the number of national film productions and a slight decrease in the number of imported films to 787, thus marking the beginning of the revival of Indonesian cinema (Kurnia et al., 2004).

As a result, national films began to gain space, both in terms of distribution and from the attention of the audience. The increasing presence of national films has also encouraged the emergence of more serious promotional strategies. This seriousness can be seen from the increasing number of film advertisements that have emerged and often fill a full page in print media (Aulia & Kurniawati, 2023). This can be seen in the national film advertisement in Star magazine in 1972 in its 04th edition which featured a film titled "Bengawan Solo (River of Love)" starring Rima Melati and W. D. Mochtar, issue 07 featured the film "Diujung Badik" and issue 08 featured the film "Anggrek Berbunga" starring Suzan Tolani, Dicky Zulkarnaen, Paula Rumokoy and Helmi Sungkar, Where local movie ads are given a full page space, on the other hand, if you look at previous years, it seems rare to find them.



Figure 9. "Lewat Djam Malam" Newspaper Raya Indonesia 20 May 1955
Source(s): (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia)



Figure 10. Bengawan Solo Film, Star Magazine 4th edition, 1972
Source(s): (Star Edisi 04)

The display of ads appears to no longer use the old spelling style since 1972. The government has established Enhanced Spelling (EYD) as the Indonesian language standard throughout the Republic of Indonesia through Presidential Decree No. 57 of 1972, thus marking the end of the use of the old spelling (Keppres Nomor 57, 1972). In the subsequent era of development between the late 1970s and 1991, Indonesian cinema entered a period known as 'advanced technological turmoil and competition'. Global technological advancements are starting to affect the film industry especially with the advent of video piracy (Ballano, 2016). The rise of the practice of type video piracy is closely related to the widespread ownership of type recorders by the public, so that they can watch movies comfortably in their homes. This marked the end of dependence on cinema.

Discussion

The development of printing technology in the Indonesian archipelago began to expand significantly not in the early 16th century, but during the 17th century following the establishment of Dutch colonial power under the VOC. It was during this period that printing presses were introduced to support administrative needs, missionary activities, and commercial communication. By the 19th century, the colonial government had further institutionalized printing through state-owned and private presses, creating the infrastructural foundation that later enabled the growth of newspapers and, eventually, the circulation of film advertisements in the early 20th century. The existence of printing then encouraged the birth of mass communication media such as newspapers (Setianingrum, 2012). In its development, the use of advertising by the Dutch East Indies could not be separated from the

important role of printing technology which became the main means of disseminating information at that time. This marked the early stage of colonial intervention in shaping advertising practices in the Dutch East Indies, an influence that continued to structure visual conventions well into the 1950s. The persistence of this legacy can be seen in several representational patterns typical of film advertisements in the period. Many ads retained colonial-era serif typography, portrait-centric compositions, and European-style illustrative techniques that foregrounded Western actors as symbols of modernity. Viewed through a postcolonial lens particularly the concept of the ‘colonial gaze’ these visual forms demonstrate how aesthetic norms established during Dutch rule continued to define what was considered appealing, modern, or cinematic in Indonesian print culture. Examples such as the illustrated advertisements for *The Robe* and *Fair Wind* show how these conventions remained dominant, indicating that colonial visual grammar did not disappear after independence but was reproduced and adapted within the film advertising landscape of the 1950s.

One of the colonial elements that remained visible in 1950s film advertisements was the continued use of Dutch alongside Indonesian. The presence of Dutch-language captions was not merely a linguistic residue but indicated a form of class segmentation, as newspapers and cinemas using Dutch were historically oriented toward European and Indo-European audiences. In this context, the choice of language functioned as a marker of cultural prestige and social hierarchy. Viewed through a postcolonial framework particularly the understanding of language as a symbol of power the persistence of Dutch in film advertisements reveals how colonial structures continued to shape the imagined audience. Ads written in Dutch implicitly positioned Europeans and educated Indo elites as the primary subjects of consumption, while the bumiputra readership was relegated to the role of secondary observers rather than central consumers. This linguistic hierarchy contributed to a representational gap in which the local populace was seldom visualized as the intended audience, reinforcing colonial patterns of inclusion and exclusion even in the post-independence advertising landscape.

This language is not only used in film titles or descriptions, but also in visual elements and promotional narratives, as contained in the newspaper *Java-Bode Nieuws*, December 16, 1955; clearly displays the promotional narrative in the screening of *The Robe* film 'This film is just as much ver-toond tot iedereen ze gezien heeft, u will verrukt zijn!' which if interpreted more or less like this 'This film will be played until everyone has seen it, you will be happy!'.

A further colonial residue visible in 1950s film advertisements is the use of the Florin (f) currency symbol, such as in the advertisement for *The Long March (Blood and Prayer)* published in *Kedaulatan Rakyat* on 8 November 1950. Beyond indicating a transitional economic system, the Florin also operated as a visual signifier within the compositional structure of the advertisement. Its placement near the ticket price worked as a semiotic marker of class distinction, since Florin based pricing was historically associated with European and Indo-European middle-class audiences who dominated cinema consumption in the late colonial period. From a visual perspective, the currency symbol functioned not only as monetary information but as a graphic cue that encoded cultural hierarchy. The clean, bold typographic treatment of the “f–1” price visually aligned the advertisement with colonial-era commercial aesthetics, subtly reinforcing exclusivity and signaling that the imagined spectators were those economically conversant with the Florin system. For Indigenous viewers many of whom were unfamiliar with the colonial monetary hierarchy the symbol could imply distance or limited accessibility. Thus, the presence of the Florin in film advertisements should be read as both a remnant of colonial economic practice and a deliberate visual element that reproduced class-based segmentation within early post-independence film culture.

Since the early development of film in the Dutch East Indies, Western cultural influence has been strongly embedded in film advertising design. This was evident in the adoption of visual conventions resembling Hollywood posters, particularly in the use of portrait-centered compositions, dramatic body poses, and expressive facial framing. The advertisement for the 1958 film *Hercules*, published in *Pikiran Rakjat* on 5 May 1960, clearly reflects these elements. The image displays a muscular heroic figure positioned in a dominant stance, rendered using high-contrast shading similar to the illustration techniques of American studio posters. The typography also follows Western norms, using bold serif letters with hierarchical sizing to emphasize strength and spectacle key traits of Hollywood’s visual vocabulary. Viewed through the lens of visual culture and Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, this imitation of Western poster aesthetics illustrates how colonial and postcolonial

advertising practices reproduced the visual codes of the West as markers of modernity and commercial appeal. Rather than constructing an alternative local visual identity, film advertisements in the 1950s continued to 'mimic' Hollywood's representational strategies almost the same, but never quite replacing the original revealing the enduring hierarchy of Western visual authority in Indonesian print media.

In addition to the dominance of Western figures, the widespread use of English visible in film titles, taglines, and descriptive text served as another clear marker of Western cultural influence in 1950s film advertising. The choice of English did not merely reflect linguistic preference but operated as part of a broader discourse of Western modernity. In the cultural imagination of the period, English functioned as a symbol of global progress, sophistication, and technological advancement, allowing producers to associate their films with the prestige of international cinema. Within this framework, the presence of English in advertisements positioned Western culture as the benchmark of cinematic 'modernity,' reinforcing the idea that films aligned with Western linguistic and aesthetic codes were superior or more desirable. This linguistic strategy helped construct an aspirational identity for both the films and their audiences, embedding the notion that participation in modern cultural life required engagement with Western particularly Anglo American forms of expression.

The impact of post-independence is a reflection of the birth of freedom in voicing independence. The spirit of nationalism is increasingly emerging and living in various forms, such as congratulatory messages, independence ceremonies, the obligation to raise the red and white flag every August, and so on. This pervasive national awakening marks a crucial phase of postcolonial nation-building. In this context, following the conceptualization of 'imagined communities' by Benedict Anderson, a newly independent state urgently required common symbols, narratives, and shared experiences to bind its diverse populace into a cohesive national body. Film, and particularly its public-facing material such as advertisements, did not merely reflect this burgeoning nationalism but actively functioned as a vital cultural medium for constructing and disseminating the narrative of national identity. Therefore, the visual shifts observed in film advertising during the 1950s-1970s must be analyzed not just as commercial art but as integral components of the postcolonial visual discourse used to imagine and legitimize the new Indonesian nation. One of them is Usmar Ismail's work entitled "Lewat Djam Malam" in 1954. This film raises themes related to identity confusion after independence. A character named Iskandar, a former revolutionary fighter who returned to civilian life in Bandung, experienced anxiety and disappointment when reality did not match idealism during the struggle. He felt that the world he was now entering was filled with corruption, hypocrisy and injustice that was far from the original ideals of Indonesian independence. Consequently, the iconography of struggle is visually manifested through the strategic deployment of a heroic pose and compositional dominance, which is exemplified in the promotion for the film *Lewat Djam Malam* (1954) (Figure 9). The main character (Iskandar), often depicted wearing a semi-military jacket or coat, serves as the central visual anchor. The pose is rigid and serious, signifying determination and the burden of sacrifice, while the clothing acts as a direct visual marker of the revolutionary fighter. In terms of layout composition, the protagonist is placed centrally and dominantly within the frame, ensuring immediate visual recognition. This deliberate central placement rather than showing mass gatherings or external battle scenes focuses the audience's attention on the individual revolutionary hero. This compositional choice functions to affirm the revolutionary past and visually constructs the ideal figure of national strength required for the newly 'imagined community' in the post-independence era.

A closer examination of the visual structure of the *Lewat Djam Malam* advertisement reveals several deliberate stylistic strategies that encode its ideological message. The central figure, Iskandar, is illustrated with a rigid upright posture, shoulders squared, and the torso slightly angled, producing a strong vertical axis that stabilizes the composition. His gaze, directed outward and slightly off-frame, creates a tension between presence and contemplation, inviting viewers to imagine the psychological weight he carries. The advertisement adopts a unilateral visual hierarchy in which Iskandar's figure

dominates nearly two-thirds of the spatial field, making his body the primary locus of meaning. Supporting visual elements such as smaller secondary characters or architectural silhouettes are pushed toward the margins in lower contrast, functioning only as contextual anchors rather than competing focal points.

The layout employs a classical triangular arrangement, with the protagonist forming the apex and the typography arranged as the base. The title lettering, set in bold condensed type, is placed directly beneath the figure, creating a tight visual block that anchors the composition and ensures legibility even amid the dramatic illustration. The spacing between text and image is intentionally narrow, producing an integrated visual field where narrative and representation mutually reinforce each other. Negative space is strategically concentrated around the upper background to draw attention to the protagonist's head and gaze, while darker shading around the lower frame emphasizes his silhouetted posture. Through this interplay of pose, compositional hierarchy, and typographic organization, the advertisement constructs a heroic visual identity that aligns the protagonist with post-revolutionary nationalist ideals, demonstrating how film advertising participated in shaping the postcolonial public imagination.

In this era, the use of Indonesian in film advertisements is increasingly dominant as a form of affirmation of national identity and resistance to colonial hegemony in the past. This shift reflects a collective awareness of the importance of building a film industry that is rooted in its own culture and reaches a wider audience across Indonesia. The use of Indonesian in advertisements in the 50-60s still shows old spelling. It was only after the Government established Enhanced Spelling (EYD) as the Indonesian standard throughout Indonesia in 1972 that the use of language in film advertisements experienced a uniformity of spelling that we can read today.

To clarify what constitutes 'Indonesian elements' in post-independence film advertisements, this study conceptually defines the term through four analytical categories: Iconography, Language, Narrative Themes, and Visual Aesthetics, each of which functions as a measurable indicator of cultural indigenization. Iconography refers to the presence of culturally specific visual symbols such as traditional clothing (kebaya, sarong, blangkon), local architectural forms, indigenous objects, or landscape motifs that visually anchor the advertisement within Indonesian cultural references. Language denotes the linguistic register used in the promotional text titles, taglines, and captions—where the shift toward standardized Bahasa Indonesia signals a conscious departure from the Dutch- and English-dominated colonial visual sphere. Narrative Themes encompass the storylines or representational focus of the film, including adaptations of local folklore, depictions of national historical events, or social realities experienced by Indonesian communities, which together re-center Indonesian subjectivity in the promotional image. Visual Aesthetics captures stylistic choices such as illustration techniques, color palettes, and compositional tendencies that diverge from Western poster conventions and incorporate localized artistic sensibilities, including flatter shading, regionally inspired ornamentation, or non-Hollywood facial portrayals. By operationalizing 'Indonesian elements' through these four categories, advertisements that depict indigenous figures or culturally rooted scenes can be analytically understood not merely as isolated occurrences but as part of a broader visual strategy aimed at countering Western cultural dominance and articulating a postcolonial national identity.

The drive toward cultural indigenization (the absorption of local elements) is evident in the iconography of post-independence film advertisements. This is a strategic process for defining Indonesia's distinct cultural identity. Conceptually, this phenomenon is more accurately understood as a process of vernacularization (localization) or indigenization, where local attributes are strategically elevated to national symbols, rather than a 'privatization process' whose terminology is irrelevant. This indigenization is manifested through the emergence of specific local attribute symbols, such as sarongs, peci, and specific Bugis attributes like headbands (Patonro or Passapu) and traditional weapons (badik).

The film *Diujung Badik* (1971) is the strongest example of this shift. The depiction of these Bugis attributes is not merely a decorative element or cultural backdrop, but rather the central axis of the visual narrative in the advertisement. The central placement of this figure with local attributes effectively positions the hero and their cultural markers as fundamental representations of the national narrative. This compositional choice serves to balance and differentiate Indonesian esthetic values from the remnants of Western design dominance. This visual shift was also supported by the dominance of film themes in the 1950s-1970s era, which often featured nationalism, legends, or folklore embellished with romantic stories. By emphasizing distinctively Indonesian symbols and narratives in popular visual media such as film advertisements, these materials actively contribute to the construction of a collective imagination of national identity and the assertion of post-colonial visual autonomy.

Conclusion

This study directly addresses the research gap identified in previous scholarship on Indonesian cinema, in which film advertisements have generally been discussed only as historical appendices rather than as structured visual texts embedded in postcolonial cultural politics. Prior studies rarely employed an explicit analytical framework capable of explaining how colonial visual legacies, nationalist expressions, and vernacular aesthetics intersect within the medium of film advertising. By integrating representation theory, postcolonial visual culture, and Anderson's concept of imagined communities as the guiding theoretical framework, this research provides the first systematic account of how Indonesian film advertisements from the 1950s to the 1970s transformed their visual language in response to shifting socio-political contexts. The findings establish that this transformation unfolded in two intersecting trajectories decolonization and indigenization both of which illuminate the political, cultural, and semiotic work performed by film advertisements. The early 1950s are characterized by the persistence of colonial visual codes: Dutch and English typographies, Florin currency notation, Hollywood-derived compositional styles, and Europeanized bodily representation. When placed within a postcolonial analytical framework, these elements reveal how colonial visual regimes continued to shape the representational field of film advertising even after Indonesia had formally gained independence. The advertisements did not merely replicate these codes but functioned as sites where colonial aesthetics were negotiated and gradually displaced. The second trajectory demonstrates a deliberate and increasingly coherent visual turn toward cultural indigenization, particularly visible in the late 1960s and 1970s. This shift is evidenced by the introduction of vernacular iconography (kebaya, sarong, peci, headbands, local weaponry), nationalistic imagery (military uniforms, heroic poses), and the adoption of Bahasa Indonesia as the dominant linguistic register. Positioned within Anderson's theory of imagined communities, these visual elements can be understood as symbolic tools designed to produce shared meanings and cultivate a collective national identity. Rather than functioning merely as decorative motifs, they operated as visual signifiers that re-centered Indonesian subjectivity and reshaped the public's conception of what an "Indonesian" film looked like, both in narrative and aesthetic form.

By linking these empirical observations with the broader theoretical framework, the study concludes that film advertisements were not passive reflections of political developments but active visual agents in the nation-building process. Their evolution from reproducing colonial aesthetic norms to articulating vernacularized and nationalistic visual codes illustrates how the medium became a crucial site of postcolonial cultural negotiation. Ultimately, this study contributes new understanding to Indonesian film historiography by demonstrating that print-based film advertisements played a decisive role in constructing the visual foundations of Indonesian national identity, thereby closing the analytical gap left open by prior historical accounts that overlooked their representational and ideological significance.

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