

Chapter 4

Negotiating Spirituality: Commodification of Religious Content in the Entertainment Industry

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ABSTRACT

Religion in popular culture is inevitable from the packaging that led to the commodification of religion itself. This commodification becomes possible due to the natural properties of agents of popular culture. If we look at it closely, there are some attempts for this commodification to some religious rituals/activities. In some media, this commodification is packed with an effort that blends musical and theatrical compositions. This chapter describes the reality of commodification on religion that exists commonly in some media entertainment. This chapter is a kind of reflection towards the “being religious” situation that is commonly found in the everyday life and daily media consumption, especially on television during religious holidays.

INTRODUCTION

Entertainment industry seems to be closely related to commodification. They will constantly commodify all potential materials and then turn them into a specific program to be presented to audiences with new performance and new taste as well. In this kind of entertainment industry, the suitability of the material and/or content to audiences' pleasure is a very important thing. For the agent of television industry, any unsuitability of material to such quality may result in the decline of program's rating and, eventually, has a consequence on financial losses of the enterprise.

The commodification of such material also includes religious matter. This commodification is easy to find when there is a religious moment. Almost all the materials associated with religious contents are packaged so it will appear to be pleasurable entertainment commodities. Being religious in the era of popular culture is inseparable from the endless process of commodification of religion itself. It is natural for agents of popular culture to do such things. Based on observations, the range of commodification might be found from religious activities or rituals, the content of religious sermons, to the appearance of religious leaders. All of these are blended together in some

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musical composition, property constructions, and theatrical arrangement before being presented as the entertainment show.

This chapter would like to discuss more critically about the commodification of religious material/content in entertainment industry. The ideas of this chapter are based on a number of cases that occurred in Indonesia. In addition, it will focus particularly on commodification of religious content that is presented as visual entertainment on television during the holy month of Ramadan.

BACKGROUND

In today's contemporary life, the existence of the image has its own interests. The image here can be used as a device primarily for the benefit of life existence. Consequently, there are many circumstances that are related to 'imaging'. This imagery is nothing but an attempt to attach a particular value to the individual and/or people. What value and why this value seems to be important? It is a value that is related with self-esteem. It becomes important because of its significance in putting people at a particular level in society. In fact, this is the ultimate goal of such use of image. By attaching image to the self, people do not expect equality. They intended use a particular image to be different with others. The real intention is to obtain a value that makes them becomes 'more' in somebody else's perspective. For example is the head of state. As a head of state, there must an image which is already attached to him. It retains a value as the 'number one' and as a very-very-important-person. However, the imaging process is a next attempt to add more value than just being a head of state. This imaging is intended to produce a persona of head of state who appeared to be 'more' polite, fairer, caring. And expect others will see him that way.

Imaging process is an attempt to shape reality. But this kind of reality is obviously not the perfect reality. The reality is actually a framed reality.

Framing here can be similar to a picture frame. A photo frame does not only serve as a barrier. Picture frames also serves as a focus for the photo inside. It means that the important content of reality is what in the bounds of the picture frame. On the contrary, the content outside the picture frame is considered to be something unimportant. Thus, there is a reduction of reality. Reality is somewhat cropped so that the significant content will be separated from the insignificant one.

BEYOND MOVING IMAGE

Beside as still picture, some images can be composed together and be presented in a moving line of scenes, for instance, like a film. A film is presented through a framed screen, such as television screens, theaters, or even a mobile phone screens. Every film presents a kind of reality; that is the reality of the film. The reality of the film is the reality that has been re-constructed based on the script, screenplay or story line that was written earlier. Structured plotline of such film may obtain inspiration ranging from some real life events to the imagination of film makers (in this case, generally, the director or producer). Anyhow, the content in a film is purely imaginative. And all the scenes would be a translation of such imagination.

The reality in a film may actually similar with the reality of everyday life experiences. However, there is still a difference which lies in the framing of reality itself. If we draw a simple scheme that shows a timeline in which there are many moments/events, we then realize the difference between the real life reality and film reality.

The timeline shown in Figure 1 represents the real narration of life. Within this timeline, there are moments/events. People will obviously experience the different moments/events with different significances. For example is the moment for a student when he won a first prize in math Olympiad. For him, this moment is unforgettably

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