

From internum to externum: adaptation, censorship, and governing atheism-communism in *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) under Suharto's New Order

Awla Akbar Ilma[✉], Laga Adhi Dharma

Department of Indonesian Literature, Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

Department of Indonesian Literature, Ahmad Dahlan University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

This article examines how *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) transformed an inward crisis of faith into an outwardly governable problem of atheism and communism under Suharto's regime. Rather than treating Sjuman Djaya's film as a neutral literary adaptation or a simple anti-communist vehicle, this study asks how adaptation and censorship redirected Hasan's religious doubt, Rusli's revolutionary charisma, and Anwar's anarchic unbelief into a state-legible morality tale about belief, deviance, and ideological danger.

Design/methodology/approach

This article uses close intermedial reading of novel and film. Adaptation mapping identifies changes in plot, characterization, focalization, closure, and visual form, while paratextual and censorship-oriented analysis situates those changes within *Orde Baru* (New Order) cultural governance. This study also draws on Indonesian film historiography that positions Sjuman Djaya as a major auteur whose work combined social critique, intellectual intensity, humour, melodrama, and negotiation with regulatory constraint.

Findings

This film does not simply condemn every figure outside religious orthodoxy. Sjuman Djaya's work presents Hasan's strict religious formation, his encounter with secular modernity, Rusli's non-totalitarian revolutionary idealism, Anwar's destructive unbelief, and Islam's positive ethical and meditative dimensions. Yet censorship and adaptation reshape this complexity into a governed field of visibility. The movement from "internum" to "externum" occurs when private doubt becomes public deviance, and atheism becomes readable through the political grammar of communism.

Originality/value

This study repositions *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) as a key case for understanding adaptation, censorship, and religious-political governance in New Order cinema. It shows that atheism-communism nexus was not formed by state censorship alone, but through the meeting of literary interiority, film form, Sjuman Djaya's auteurist negotiation, and the regime's demand for moral regulation.

CONTACT: [✉]awlaakbar@uny.ac.id

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Introduction

Indonesia post-1965, atheism and communism did not circulate as neutral ideas (Duile, 2020). They were made suspect, surveilled, and morally dangerous under Suharto's *Orde Baru* (New Order, 1966-1998). After destruction of PKI and consolidation of military-bureaucratic rule, cinema entered a tightly governed field: film was treated not only as entertainment but also as mass communication, national pedagogy, and an object of censorship (Paramaditha, 2011; Heeren, 2007). Within this landscape, Sjuman Djaya's film, *Atheis/Kafir* (1974), adapted from Achdiat K. Mihadja's novel, *Atheis* (1949), became a crucial site of negotiation. This film carried Sjuman's intellectual energy and concern with religion, modernity, and social change, yet it also had to move through New Order pre-censorship and postproduction control (Hanan & Soehadi, 2020). What was inward in novel (Hasan's doubt, Rusli's revolutionary appeal, Anwar's nihilistic unbelief) was pushed outward as public deviance. The rewritten ending, especially Rusli's death, turned adaptation into governance: philosophical uncertainty became visible, classifiable, and punishable within an anti-communist moral order (Imanjaya, 2024; Paramaditha, 2011). Thus, film marks a historical threshold where literary interiority, state censorship, religious anxiety, and Cold War anti-communism converged in screen culture in modern Indonesian society (Heryanto, 1999).

Previous studies of New Order cinema have shown how screen culture worked within anti-communist pedagogy, censorship, and state memory. Hanan and Soehadi (2020) read Sjuman as an auteur who negotiated social criticism, melodrama, religion, and regulatory pressure rather than as a simple propagandist. Heeren (2007) shows how Indonesian screen culture relied on moral authorities and censorship to restore social order. Parahita and Yulianto (2020) and Ikhwan et al. (2019) trace how the 1965 killings remain contested through official and vernacular memory, while McGregor (2009) and Heryanto (2012) underline how post-1965 violence was sustained through official narration, silence, and visual pedagogy. Eddyono (2024) further confirms that post-New Order representations still inherit selective erasure. Foucault's (1977) *dispositif* helps clarify pattern: censorship does not only prohibit; it produces visibility, categories, and conduct. Yet one problem remains under-read. How did *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) convert Achdiat's novelistic ambiguity into New Order legibility? More specifically, how did Hasan's religious doubt, Rusli's revolutionary charisma, and Anwar's anarchic unbelief become signs of belief, deviance, and ideological danger? This article addresses that gap by reading adaptation and censorship together, especially through Rusli's death, Japanese-occupation frame, and film's paratextual silences.

This study is to investigate adaptation process of *Atheis* (1949) into *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) and explore how the film functions as a cultural product shaped by state censorship. Also, this research will examine how narrative shifts serve ideological purposes in transforming novel's personal reflection on atheism into a New Order moral lesson (Wahid, 1982). Additionally, this study will analyze how censorship process influenced portrayal of atheism and communism in film, particularly in terms of how film reduced atheism to a political threat. Under Suharto, screen culture operated through censorship, moral pedagogy, and anti-communist memory, especially after G30S/PKI (Heeren, 2007; McGregor, 2009; Parahita & Yulianto, 2020). Film's narrative changes (such as the death of Rusli) worked as political instruction. They reduced atheism from personal reflection to public threat. They also made communism readable as an internal danger that had to be exposed, contained, and punished. Censorship is read not only as prohibition but as production: it shapes what can appear, how it can be named, and how audiences should judge it. This study therefore shows how Sjuman Djaya's adaptation intersects with state

propaganda, religious morality, and political conformity in post-1965 Indonesia (Hanan & Soehadi, 2020).

The adaptation of *Atheis* (1949) into *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) was not just a cinematic transformation but a political act embedded within New Order's broader anti-communist agenda. The alteration of Rusli's fate is a critical narrative shift that aligns film with regime's moral framework (Wahid, 1982), which sought to demonize atheism and equate it with communism. This research will show that the censorship process was not merely about removal of subversive content, but about reshaping public morality and guiding interpretation of atheism in a manner that conformed to state orthodoxy. Through cinematic technique and narrative reconfiguration, this film reinforced regime's ideological project, positioning atheism as an existential threat to national unity and moral integrity.

The primary aim of this study is to understand ideological power of cinema under authoritarian regimes, where *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) became tools of political control. Through a close examination of adaptation, censorship, and governance of atheism, this research highlights how New Order regime manipulated cultural production to align public ideology with state interests. The reworking of Achdiat's novel into Sjuman's film serves as a case study of how cinema can be mobilized for propaganda purposes, and how narrative changes serve moral and ideological goals of the state. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how censorship and cultural governance shape national identity and public morality in politically controlled environments.

This study argues that *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) did more than translate *Atheis* (1949) into film. It made adaptation a political operation. Under Soeharto, the film entered a regime that treated cinema as pedagogy, censorship as discipline, and atheism as a sign to be governed. The crucial shift lies in Rusli's fate. His death redirects revolutionary charisma away from ethical ambiguity and toward ideological containment. Hasan's doubt, once interior and philosophical, becomes a public symptom of danger. Anwar's anarchic unbelief, less a private stance than a disorderly force, helps stabilize the film's moral map. The result: belief as order, unbelief as deviance, communism as threat. Censorship therefore does not merely cut subversive material. It reorganizes narrative meaning, guides spectatorship, and secures anti-communist orthodoxy. Through altered closure, character alignment, and moral framing, Sjuman's adaptation converts literary ambivalence into New Order legibility. This film becomes a case of cultural governance, showing how authoritarian cinema could shape national identity, regulate public morality, and align cultural production with state ideology while still carrying traces of Sjuman's auteurist negotiation with religion, modernity, and social critique.

Theoretical background

The adaptation of *Atheis* (1949) into *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) does not mark a simple shift from page to screen. It marks a shift in political readability. Under Suharto's regime, stories of unbelief, leftist desire, and social rebellion moved through a dense field of censorship, anti-communist memory, and moral instruction (Heeren, 2007; McGregor, 2009; Parahita & Yulianto, 2020). Rusli's death is therefore crucial. In novel, his survival keeps atheism within hesitation: a philosophical position tested by faith, friendship, and ethical doubt. In film, his death changes the terms. Atheism becomes less an intellectual problem than a visible danger. More public. More punishable. Hasan's inward crisis is redirected toward moral warning, while Rusli's revolutionary charisma is contained by narrative closure. The altered ending thus turns character fate into ideological evidence for spectators across modern Indonesia. This shift also reflects Sjuman Djaya's position as an auteur working inside regulation, not outside it. His film carries critique and complexity, but also bends

toward the New Order's demand for ideological legibility itself (Hanan & Soehadi, 2020; Paramaditha, 2011).

Adaptation mapping process is critical for understanding ideological role of ecranization. Hutcheon (2006) treats adaptation as repetition with change: a deliberate re-making shaped by medium, context, and address. Riffaterre's (1990) hypogram clarifies the deeper inversion: film keeps novel's problem of unbelief, yet redirects its force. What was rational critique becomes didactic warning. What was inner conflict becomes public evidence. The Japanese-occupation frame intensifies this movement by placing atheism near political disorder, national vulnerability, and communist danger in public memory. They are regulatory. Censorship produces the field in which signs can be seen, named, circulated, and judged by audiences. Thus ecranization becomes governance: Hasan, Rusli, and Anwar are reorganized into a cinematic grammar of faith, deviance, and moral punishment under New Order anti-communism and orthodoxy.

Censorship of *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) did not merely restrict representation. It produced ideological meaning. Under Suharto, Directorate of Film first banned the script because atheism was feared as a route to communist revival and religious disorder. Foucault's (1977) clarifies this logic: censorship does not only exclude; it organizes visibility, speech, and judgment. Dialogue removal and scene revision therefore made film compatible with state orthodoxy. This mechanism resonates with Indonesian screen culture, where censorship, moral authority, and anti-communist memory shaped what could circulate publicly after 1965. Genette's (1997) paratexts help explain how that regulation moved beyond the film text. Festival catalogues, press reviews, publicity materials, and censorship-board decisions pre-installed preferred readings: atheism as subversion, communism as danger, religion as national order.

Atheism in Sjunan's film is governed as communism's proxy-sign rather than treated as private disbelief. Film turns unbelief into public deviance through narrative structure, visual symbolism, and melodramatic closure. Rusli's death after his return to religious faith condenses this logic. It marks atheism as moral error, political failure, and danger to national unity. Hasan's doubt becomes a symptom to be disciplined; Anwar's anarchic unbelief, a contagion to be contained. Althusser's (1971) Ideological State Apparatuses clarify how film hails viewers into New Order subjectivity, making state morality appear natural. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) chain of equivalence explains how atheism, socialism, and communism are bound together until disbelief signifies betrayal. Gramsci's (1971) hegemony illuminates the affective work of uniforms, military imagery, close-ups, tears, confession, and moral resolution. Not doctrine alone. Feeling too. The spectator is guided to see purification as necessary, not excessive. The result is cinema as governance, not simple adaptation or neutral representation. Through these devices, *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) converts Achdiat's ambiguity into legible danger: belief as order, unbelief as threat, and purification as national security within New Order political morality and ideology.

The censorship process surrounding *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) shows how art and culture were folded into New Order governance. The script's initial ban exposed the regime's fear that representation itself could revive communist ideology. Rusli's altered fate follows this logic. His death makes the film conform to anti-communist orthodoxy and religious morality. State intervention therefore turns adaptation into ideological discipline. Cinema does not merely narrate. It instructs. It molds public morality and makes *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) part of the regime's ideological apparatus. Through *mise-en-scène*, montage, and melodrama, atheism becomes visible as political danger. Rusli's death at the hands of Japanese soldiers is not only plot resolution. It is moral punishment, a cinematic sign of the regime's victory over communism. Bordwell's (1985) account of narrative devices clarifies

how such scenes guide spectators toward authorized judgment. Semiotic codes sharpen the message: uniforms, flags, rituals, military presence. In Gramsci's (1971) terms, these signs build hegemony by turning anti-atheist and anti-communist feeling into common sense. The result is clear: atheism becomes betrayal, communism becomes national threat, and discipline becomes security.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative intermedial design to examine Sjuman Djaya's *Atheis/Kafir* (1974), adapted from Achdiat K. Mihadja's *Atheis* (1949). Sjuman's work is the primary unit of analysis; Achdiat's text functions as the comparative baseline. This pairing is crucial because each text belongs to a different ideological moment. The novel emerged from post-independence literary field and *Angkatan '45* climate of philosophical tension. The film appeared under Suharto's New Order, when censorship, religious morality, and anti-communist pedagogy shaped public culture. The analysis therefore treats adaptation not as transfer, but as governance. It tracks macro shifts, especially Rusli's death, and micro narratological changes, including focalization, sequence, duration, characterization, and moral closure. Adaptation (or ecranization) frames the movement from novel to film (Hutcheon, 2006; Riffaterre, 1990). Censorship and paratextual analysis explain how regulation shapes reception (Foucault, 1977; Genette, 1997). Governance theory then clarifies how atheism becomes readable as communism's proxy-sign and as a lesson in state loyalty, religious faith, and ideological conformity (Gramsci, 1971; Althusser, 1971). Thus, this design defends case as a historically situated comparison between literary interiority and cinematic regulation.

Information sources consist of three connected data sets: *Atheis/Kafir* (1974), *Atheis* (1949), and paratextual materials such as censorship records, press reviews, synopses, and festival catalogues. Each source serves a distinct methodological function. This film provides visual and narrative field where atheism, communism, faith, and punishment are arranged. Novel provides the baseline for identifying what is retained, displaced, condensed, or reversed. Paratexts clarify how institutional framing prepared audiences to read film within New Order orthodoxy. Data collection proceeds through desk review and scene-by-scene concordance. This film is segmented into scenes, then compared with corresponding narrative units in novel. Attention falls on Rusli's fate, Hasan's religious doubt, Anwar's unbelief, narrative sequence, focalization, symbolic imagery, and melodramatic closure. Paratextual documents are collected and grouped according to source type and function: censorship decision, promotional framing, critical reception, and festival positioning. The collection strategy is therefore selective but systematic. Together, these materials show how adaptation, censorship, and public interpretation work as one interpretive field, not as separate archives or unrelated evidence.

Data analysis follows three linked stages. First, adaptation mapping identifies narrative and cinematic shifts between novel and film. This stage isolates macro changes, such as Rusli's death, and micro changes, such as altered order, focalization, duration, characterization, and closure. Second, censorship and paratextual analysis examine how external materials guide reception. Using Genette's (1997) paratexts, censorship records, press texts, and festival framings are read as thresholds that filter interpretation before and after viewing. Third, semiotic and ideological analysis explains how atheism is governed through signs. Visual cues, military imagery, ritual scenes, and melodramatic tropes are examined to show how film links unbelief with political deviance. Gramsci's (1971) hegemony clarifies how this linkage becomes common sense, while Althusser's (1971) ideological apparatus explains how spectators are hailed into state-approved

morality. This procedure moves from reduction to display and verification: selecting key scenes, organizing them in comparative matrices, and validating interpretations across film, novel, and paratexts. In this way, interpretation remains textual, traceable, and triangulated rather than impressionistic, with each claim anchored in comparable textual evidence.

Result and discussion

Atheis/Kafir (1974) did not simply bring *Atheis* (1949) to the screen. This film moved a difficult story of faith, doubt, and political desire into guarded cultural space of post-1965 Indonesia. Under Soeharto's regime, film was never only art; it was also an object of supervision, moral instruction, and national discipline (Heeren, 2007; Heryanto, 1999). Hasan's religious uncertainty, Anwar's anarchic provocations, and Rusli's revolutionary commitment remain interconnected, but Rusli occupies a distinctive position within this constellation. Neither a doctrinaire atheist nor the simple cause of Hasan's crisis, he embodies an attractive secular modernity: intellectually confident, socially generous, politically experienced, and able to translate private dissatisfaction into collective argument. The adaptation preserves this appeal while making it more publicly exposed. What the novel often filters through memory, narration, and Hasan's troubled consciousness becomes audible and visible through Rusli's speech, bodily presence, political meetings, and encounters with others. This change matters because cinematic representation does not merely reproduce a character; it situates that character within new social relations and historically available structures of interpretation (Hughes-Freeland, 2011; Paramaditha, 2011)..

Achdiat grounds Rusli's authority in a political biography rather than abstract doctrine. He appears as "*seorang pemuda yang berkobar-kobar semangat kebangsaannya*" (a young man aflame with nationalist conviction). After leaving commercial school, he enters political organisations, joins a party, and retreats to Singapore when colonial authorities outlaw the movement and arrest its leaders. There he works among port labourers, drivers, and political activists while studying different revolutionary traditions, especially Marxism (Mihardja, 1949). These details make his politics biographical and material. Rusli becomes radical through colonial repression, displacement, precarious work, and transnational encounters, not through an inexplicable rejection of religion. His revolutionary charisma therefore carries the credibility of experience. By allowing readers to encounter the social formation of his ideas, this novel resists reducing political belief to a fixed moral defect.

This background also explains why Hasan finds him difficult to dismiss. Rusli speaks with the assurance of someone who has lived beyond religious and provincial world that formed Hasan. Yet his intellectual attraction rests less on dogmatic Marxism than on an ethical demand for openness. During Hasan's prayer, Rusli's earlier words return insistently to him: people must examine life "*dengan pikiran yang bebas lepas*" and with a vision that "*tidak boleh dibikin kabur oleh fanatisme dan dogma*" (with an unfettered mind, with thought and vision that must not be clouded by fanaticism and dogma) (Mihardja, 1949). The remembered voice unsettles Hasan because it identifies a moral weakness within his certainty: the possibility that devotion may harden into exclusion. Rusli's influence therefore works internally. He need not command Hasan to abandon religion. His questions remain present within Hasan's acts of worship, making the boundaries between faith, fear, and inherited obedience increasingly unstable.

Achdiat's narration also refuses to confine Rusli within the image of cold rationalist. Political conviction coexists with humour, friendship, hospitality, and care. After Hasan's death, Rusli stays beside Kartini and redirects grief toward an obligation to others: "*Ya, Tin,*

umur manusia singkat, tapi kemanusiaan lama ... Bekerja untuk kemanusiaan” (Yes, Tin, human life is brief, but humanity endures ... Work for humanity) (Mihardja, 1949). Survival is crucial to the ethical meaning of this scene. Rusli need not renounce his beliefs before he may comfort another person, mourn his friend, or affirm human responsibility. Achdiat leaves his position open to judgment but does not deprive it of an ethical future. The ending therefore complicates any simple opposition between religion and morality. Secular conviction may remain fallible, yet still capable of care, solidarity, and continued self-examination.

Sjuman’s adaptation preserves this revolutionary and humanistic appeal, but gives it a more performative form. The film introduces Rusli through political networks, newspaper activity, clandestine meetings, and anti-colonial discussion. His declaration “*Imperialisme dan kolonialisme tidak bisa dilawan secara koperatif, secara basa-basi, senyum-senyum, cuma dengan revolusi*” (Imperialism and colonialism cannot be opposed through cooperation, polite gestures, or smiles, only through revolution) converts political conviction into public speech (Djaya, 1974). In prose, Rusli’s history and influence unfold through narration and Hasan’s recollection. On screen, his charisma becomes audible and collective. People gather around him; international events enter the room; his voice converts analysis into collective urgency. The adaptation thus moves Rusli’s influence from remembered conversation to embodied political performance. This shift exemplifies how cinema transforms social reach of a literary character: the spectator encounters not only an idea, but also the gestures, rhythms, and communal responses through which that idea acquires authority.

The film further sharpens Rusli’s authority by associating him with modern knowledge and a critical reading of capitalism. After watching an American film, he is less interested in its glamour than in the society disclosed by its images: “*Aku lebih mengagumi khayal pembuatnya, seolah terbuka seluruh kehidupan Amerika yang sebenarnya, kehidupan masyarakat borjuis kapitalis yang sedang menuju kebangkrutannya*” (I am more impressed by the filmmaker’s imagination, as though it exposed the real life of America, a bourgeois-capitalist society moving toward collapse) (Djaya, 1974). Cinema becomes an object of ideological interpretation within the film itself. Rusli reads images against their surface appeal, teaching Hasan (and indirectly the spectator) to look for the social order concealed by spectacle. His response also distinguishes him from Anwar. Anwar’s disbelief tends toward provocation and self-dramatisation; Rusli connects critique to history, class, colonialism, and organised political change.

Rusli’s relation to religion is equally resistant to fixed classification. Sjuman’s work gives Rusli a position that moves uneasily between Islamic language and revolutionary politics. He maintains that religion acquires historical force when it becomes “*alat revolusi*” (an instrument of revolution), while elsewhere invoking *sunatullah* and the Prophet’s tradition as points of Muslim orientation. He also declares himself inclined toward “*kodrat ilmu pengetahuan yang selalu berkembang*” (the laws of an ever-developing science) (Djaya, 1974). These statements produce a more ambivalent figure than the category “atheist” suggests. Rusli disputes traditional religious authority without simply abandoning the language of Islam. Instead, he translates it into an anti-colonial and emancipatory vocabulary. His charisma emerges from this movement across intellectual worlds: faith and science, nationalism and Marxism, Muslim identity and revolutionary universalism. This film therefore retains a contradiction that official categories of “believer”, “atheist”, or “communist” cannot fully contain.

Modification is best understood as a change in narrative exposure. In novel, readers encounter Rusli through several mediating layers: the frame narrator, Hasan’s manuscript,

remembered conversations, and Hasan's troubled perception. His influence is powerful precisely because it enters Hasan's consciousness and remains there. The film reduces some of this narrative distance. Voice, gesture, editing, and collective mise-en-scène place Rusli directly before the spectator. His ideas are no longer only remembered as the source of another character's inward crisis; they become events in their own right. Hutcheon's (2006) "repetition with difference" is useful here because the adaptation repeats Rusli's political function while changing its sensory and social reach. Sjuman does not simply reproduce Achdiat's dialogue. He converts narrated influence into cinematic presence.

This visibility acquired a second political meaning after 1965. Rusli's revolutionary rhetoric belongs diegetically to the late-colonial struggle, when opposition to Dutch rule and rise of Japanese power structured political debate. Yet this film appeared after 1965: For viewers in 1970s, however, terms such as Marxism, revolution, class struggle, and organised leftist politics had been recoded by New Order anti-communism. Heryanto (1999) argues that the regime maintained its authority through the continuous cultural reproduction of communist danger, embedding political trauma within everyday identity and conduct. McGregor (2009) similarly identifies anti-communism as a cornerstone of New Order ideology rather than a temporary reaction to the events of 1965-1966. Rusli's rhetoric could therefore carry two histories at once: anti-imperial resistance within the diegesis and suspected ideological deviance within the film's contemporary reception. Post-1965 anti-communism did not need to erase his charisma. It could preserve that attraction while surrounding it with suspicion, allowing viewers to recognise both the historical appeal of revolution and the danger that official memory attached to its later forms (McGregor, 2009; Heryanto, 2012).

The Japanese-occupation frame intensifies this temporal doubleness. It gives Rusli's militancy a defensible historical object: colonial domination. At the same time, the distance of the past does not neutralise his political language. The film's contemporary audience had been trained to hear revolutionary claims through a regime that treated communism as an enduring threat to religion and national integrity. Heryanto (1999) shows that official anti-communism operated through repetition across films, textbooks, museums, state histories, and other cultural forms, allowing old signs to acquire new accusatory meanings. Rusli consequently stands between two temporal orders. In one, revolution signifies national liberation. In other, the same vocabulary may evoke disorder, atheism, and communist betrayal. Adaptation makes that tension visible without necessarily resolving it. The historical setting protects Rusli's nationalism, while the political present renders his Marxist and secular vocabulary suspect.

This distinction matters because textual alteration alone cannot prove that every cinematic choice resulted from direct state command. Adaptation and censorship are related but analytically different processes. This comparison shows that Sjuman selected, condensed, embodied, and publicly staged Rusli's ideas; only screenplay drafts, censorship correspondence, and production records can determine which decisions were officially demanded, informally anticipated, or artistically chosen. Bunn (2015) cautions against defining censorship solely as visible state prohibition, since cultural regulation also works through internalised expectations, structural pressures, and self-limiting practices. Fang's (2024) study of global film production develops this insight further: censorship enters creative work through multistage gatekeeping, intermediaries, concession, and narrative reconfiguration, often making the boundary between command and accommodation difficult to trace. These arguments support a more precise reading of *Atheis/Kafir* (1974): difference from the novel is evidence of adaptation, while claims about censorship require corroborating institutional traces.

Such precision also protects Sjuman's authorship from two opposing reductions. To treat every change as direct state intervention would erase his artistic agency; to treat the film as fully autonomous would ignore the regulatory field in which he worked. Hanan and Soehadi (2020) position Sjuman as an auteur who brought social criticism, historical consciousness, popular humour, and intellectual ambition into Indonesian cinema while negotiating New Order precensorship. Hughes-Freeland's (2011) account of creativity clarifies this relationship: creativity is not an isolated expression of individual freedom, but a socially situated process shaped by institutions, collaborators, conventions, and recognition. Fang's (2024) concept of "complicit creativity" should therefore be used cautiously but productively. It does not imply ideological agreement. Rather, it identifies the compromises through which filmmakers preserve some artistic aims while adjusting others to remain producible and publicly circulable.

Read through this institutional tension, Rusli is not transformed from a philosophical atheist into a simple communist villain. Sjuman's film retains too much of his intelligence, hospitality, political experience, and anti-colonial commitment for such a reduction (Wahid, 1982). What changes is the cultural readability of those qualities. Achdiat permits free thought and secular humanism to remain ethically open after Hasan's death. Sjuman gives Rusli's revolutionary charisma a more immediate public body, but places that body within a cinematic culture where speech about class, science, Islam, and revolution could be treated as ideological evidence. Studies of Indonesian cinema show that censorship often operated through expectations of recognisable moral authority and acceptable resolution rather than through deletion alone (Heeren, 2007). At the same time, New Order filmmakers could expose social contradictions that exceeded the regime's idealised national image (Paramaditha, 2011). Rusli embodies both tendencies: politically containable, yet never entirely emptied of critical force.

Focusing on Rusli also clarifies the larger configuration of the three principal figures. Hasan's doubt measures the intimate effect of Rusli's arguments, while Anwar's anarchic unbelief marks a more destructive edge of secular rebellion. Rusli occupies the unstable space between them: disciplined where Anwar is erratic, politically outward where Hasan is introspective, and socially committed where both can become absorbed by personal crisis. His revolutionary charisma gives the film its most difficult ideological problem. He cannot be dismissed without weakening its anti-colonial history, yet he cannot circulate innocently within New Order political culture. Sjuman's achievement lies in preserving this contradiction. Through Rusli, *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) turns literary interiority into public performance, but it also shows how quickly a persuasive language of liberation can become an object of surveillance, moral classification, and political suspicion.

The censorship of *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) should not be reduced to a single prohibition imposed on an obedient filmmaker. It belonged to a longer process in which scripts were assessed, risks anticipated, revisions negotiated, and public meanings gradually narrowed. Directorate of Film initially rejected Sjuman's screenplay because officials interpreted its treatment of atheism through fears of communist revival and religious disorder (Pribadi, 2021). Regulation entered production before a film acquired its final form, shaping what could be stated directly, which political vocabularies required historical distance, and how morally ambiguous characters might remain publicly acceptable. Sjuman nevertheless continued to pursue social conflict, religious inquiry, and historical critique within this restricted field (Hanan & Soehadi, 2020). Such negotiation resembles Fang's (2024) concept of multistage gatekeeping: censorship enters cultural production through consultation, concession, and narrative reconfiguration, not only through visible cuts after filming.

Rusli's revised ending belongs to this negotiated field. His death does not simply "cleanse" the film of an unacceptable idea. More intimately, it closes the future that novel grants him: possibility of mourning, reconsidering faith, and continuing to live with contradiction. Achdiat gives Rusli a history shaped by colonial repression, political organisation, migration, labour, and Marxist reading. His revolutionary convictions therefore arise from experience, not from a sudden moral collapse. More importantly, novel grants those convictions an ethical life. After Hasan's death, Rusli remains beside Kartini and urges her to carry personal loss into a broader commitment: "*Ya, Tin, umur manusia singkat, tapi kemanusiaan lama ... Bekerja untuk kemanusiaan*" (Yes, Tin, human life is brief, but humanity endures ... Work for humanity) (Mihardja, 1949). Here, secular humanism is neither endorsed as final truth nor exposed as moral fraud. It survives as care, responsibility, and unfinished reflection. Rusli is politically radical, yet still capable of tenderness. This ethical openness makes him more difficult to govern than a plainly destructive unbeliever.

Sjuman's film preserves his humanity, but places that humanity within a resolution that restores religious certainty. New Order censorship often worked through precisely such narrative expectations, requiring disruption to be contained by recognizable moral authority (Heeren, 2007). This film did not reach audiences as an isolated text. Censorship records, festival notes, publicity, and reviews surrounded it with an institutional frame that narrowed the meanings available before and after viewing. Within this paratextual environment, Rusli was not merely represented but carefully repositioned: his doubt lost much of its philosophical openness and entered public memory as a story of error, repentance, and restored moral order. Read through these traces, Sjuman's work appears neither as untouched auteur cinema nor as transparent propaganda. It is a layered work shaped by artistic purpose, institutional anxiety, and a public morality formed through anti-communism.

The film retains Rusli's attractiveness but makes his politics more exposed. His revolutionary conviction is no longer mediated mainly through Hasan's memory and inward anxiety. It becomes public speech, delivered before listeners and tied to organised political activity. Rusli insists that "*Imperialisme dan kolonialisme tidak bisa dilawan secara kooperatif ... cuma dengan revolusi*" (Imperialism and colonialism cannot be resisted through cooperation ... only through revolution) (Djaya, 1974). He also argues that Islam acquires historical force when it becomes an "*alat revolusi*" (instrument of revolution). These statements preserve his anti-colonial legitimacy while placing class struggle, mass mobilisation, and revolutionary transformation directly within the film's audible political vocabulary. In the New Order context, such visibility was inherently unstable. The words refer diegetically to Dutch imperialism, yet post-1965 spectators had been taught to hear "revolution," Marxism, and leftist organisation through the regime's continuing narrative of communist danger (Heryanto, 1999; McGregor, 2009).

Censorship could manage that instability without entirely silencing Rusli. One strategy was historical containment. By situating his militancy within the colonial and Japanese-occupation period, the film gives revolutionary struggle a legitimate nationalist object. Rusli opposes foreign domination, not the New Order state. Yet this temporal displacement produces a double reading. Within the story, his politics belong to anti-colonial liberation; within the film's moment of release, the same vocabulary remains vulnerable to association with the defeated Left. Heryanto (1999) shows that New Order anti-communism endured through repeated cultural narration, allowing political signs from different periods to be absorbed into a familiar grammar of threat. The past therefore does

not neutralise Rusli. It permits him to appear while limiting how readily his revolutionary language can be transferred to the political present.

A second strategy lies in the distribution of unbelief among the characters. The film assigns the most explicit atheistic provocation: “*Tuhan itu madat bagi manusia*” (God is an opiate for humankind) and claim that the self is God, to Anwar. Likewise, the concluding invocation “*Allahu akbar, lā ilāha illā Allāh*” belongs to Hasan’s crisis and return to faith (Djaya, 1974). Rusli carries revolutionary politics, scientific confidence, and religious heterodoxy; Anwar absorbs the most anarchic and blasphemous language. The film thereby separates disciplined radicalism from nihilistic unbelief. Rusli may challenge inherited religion, but he does so through social analysis and political purpose. Anwar’s disbelief, by contrast, appears egotistical, provocative, and destructive. Such redistribution makes the ideological field easier to classify: Rusli can remain historically compelling, while Anwar supplies the clearer image of deviance against which revolutionary thought may be morally judged.

Rusli’s own language is also moderated by an unresolved relation to Islam. He expresses confidence in “*kodrat ilmu pengetahuan yang selalu berkembang*” (the laws of an ever-developing science), yet also invokes *sunatullah* and the Prophet’s tradition as grounds for Muslim life (Djaya, 1974). He does not occupy a stable position outside religion. Instead, he contests conventional authority while attempting to translate Islam into an anti-colonial and socially transformative ethic. This ambivalence may preserve Achdiat’s intellectual complexity, but it also serves a regulatory function. Rusli is less readily legible as an absolute atheist when revolutionary aspiration remains partly articulated through Islamic history and vocabulary. Censorship here need not erase heterodoxy. It can make heterodoxy conditional, politically intelligible only when attached to nationalism, historical struggle, or a residual religious language (Wahid, 1982).

This reading requires a distinction between textual change and demonstrable censorship. Difference between novel and film establishes adaptation; it does not automatically prove which alteration was ordered by the state. Bunn (2015) argues that modern censorship often exceeds visible acts of prohibition, operating through institutional expectation and internalised limits. Fang (2024) likewise shows how filmmakers anticipate objections and revise material before a censor issues a final command. These approaches illuminate *Atheis/Kafir* (1974), but they also demand evidentiary caution. Rusli’s historical repositioning and ideological moderation are compatible with New Order censorship; the precise route by which each choice entered the film must still be reconstructed from archival traces.

The surviving film nevertheless reveals what regulation made publicly possible. Rusli remains charismatic because Sjunan does not empty him of intelligence, hospitality, or political commitment. His reading of American cinema, for example, looks beyond glamour toward “*kehidupan masyarakat borjuis kapitalis yang sedang menuju kebangkrutannya*” (the life of a bourgeois-capitalist society moving toward collapse) (Djaya, 1974). Such criticism is neither trivial nor entirely neutralised. It grants Rusli a capacity to interpret images, expose class relations, and resist colonial common sense. Yet the historical setting and the division of ideological functions among the characters place boundaries around that critical authority. The spectator may admire his anti-imperial intelligence without being invited to accept revolutionary politics as an unrestricted contemporary possibility.

Censorship thus operated through political legibility rather than simple disappearance. Rusli could speak of revolution, science, class, and religious reform, but those ideas reached audiences within an institutional environment already structured by anti-communist memory. Ratings, official synopses, festival descriptions, publicity, and press

reviews could further stabilise this environment by classifying film as a moral engagement with atheism rather than an invitation to reconsider leftist politics. These materials did not predetermine every response, but they influenced questions through which Rusli became discussable. Althusser's (1971) account of ideological apparatuses is helpful here: institutions sustain political order by circulating familiar categories through which individuals recognise themselves and others. Rusli's revolutionary charisma could consequently be acknowledged while being placed at a safe historical and moral distance.

This process also clarifies why *Sjuman* should not be treated as either a free auteur untouched by power or a compliant instrument of the regime. Hughes-Freeland (2011) locates creativity within social relations, conventions, and institutions that make cultural work possible. Hanan and Soehadi (2020) similarly show that *Sjuman* negotiated regulatory pressure while maintaining a recognisable concern with intellectual conflict and social suffering. In *Atheis/Kafir* (1974), negotiation appears in Rusli's continued complexity. This character is not converted into a hollow communist stereotype. His politics remain eloquent; his friendship, credible; his humanism, visible. What contracts is the political horizon surrounding those qualities. Revolutionary thought may be represented as part of Indonesia's anti-colonial past, but its relevance to New Order present remains carefully contained.

Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony explains the subtlety of this containment. Ideological authority becomes persuasive when limits appear as historical necessity or moral common sense rather than external coercion. Rusli need not be loudly condemned. His political speech can remain attractive so long as film's historical organisation prevents that attraction from becoming an uncomplicated contemporary identification. Regulation therefore works through a calibrated mixture of recognition and distance: viewers may understand why Rusli became a revolutionary, admire his opposition to colonialism, and value his loyalty to friends, while still encountering his Marxist vocabulary within a culture of post-1965 suspicion. New Order censorship was powerful precisely because it could preserve part of a character's humanity while narrowing the political futures that humanity was allowed to imagine. Read through *Rusli*, *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) emerges neither as transparent propaganda nor as uncensored intellectual cinema. *Sjuman's* film is a negotiated film in which revolutionary charisma survives by becoming historically bounded, ideologically differentiated, and institutionally framed. The censorship governed Rusli by regulating the terms of his visibility. It allowed him to remain persuasive, but made that persuasiveness answerable to anti-colonial history, religious vocabulary, and the New Order's post-1965 boundaries of political legitimacy.

The governance of communism in *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) does not depend on an explicit declaration that Rusli is a communist enemy who must be punished. Its operation is quieter. This film places his revolutionary vocabulary within a political culture already trained to associate Marxism, atheism, and organised dissent with threats to religion and national survival. After 1965, anti-communism became a foundation of New Order legitimacy and a durable means of distinguishing acceptable citizens from suspected ideological outsiders (Heryanto, 1999; McGregor, 2009). Rusli's importance therefore lies not in any simple conversion from philosophical atheist to political villain. He reveals how a persuasive anti-colonial radical could be made publicly visible while the contemporary meanings of his politics were carefully bounded. The regime governed communism not only by suppressing leftist organisations, but also by regulating how revolutionary language could be remembered, represented, and emotionally received.

Achdiat's novel makes Rusli difficult to contain within a single ideological category. His political formation grows from colonial repression, migration, labour, international

contact, and sustained engagement with Marxism. He is presented as a nationalist whose revolutionary commitment is rooted in material experience rather than abstract hostility toward religion. His authority also rests on personal qualities: hospitality, intellectual confidence, humour, and loyalty to others. Most significantly, the novel does not withdraw his ethical future. After Hasan's death, Rusli remains with Kartini and reminds her that human life is brief while humanity endures, urging her to "work for humanity" (Mihardja, 1949). This closing gesture refuses assumption that secular conviction necessarily produces moral emptiness. Rusli's politics remain debatable, yet his capacity for care survives intact.

His influence on others likewise emerges through argument rather than coercion. Rusli insists that life should be approached with an unfettered mind, unclouded by fanaticism and dogma (Mihardja, 1949). The novel filters this challenge through memory and introspection, allowing his voice to continue troubling inherited certainties even when he is absent. Political thought consequently retains an inward and relational dimension. Rusli does not merely transmit doctrine; he alters terms through which faith, freedom, and ethical responsibility can be considered. This is precisely what made such a character politically sensitive under New Order. His charisma shows that radical ideas can attract not through violence or deception, but through friendship, historical experience, and a recognisable concern for human dignity.

Sjuman's film preserves that charisma but changes its mode of appearance. Rusli's politics become more audible, embodied, and collective. He participates in meetings, circulates political information, and speaks before others with the authority of an organiser. His assertion that imperialism and colonialism cannot be resisted through cooperation or polite compromise, "*cuma dengan revolusi*" (only through revolution), brings political militancy into public space of the screen (Djaya, 1974). The shift from narrated reflection to performed speech matters. Viewers do not encounter revolution solely as an idea remembered by Hasan; they hear it articulated as a response to domination. Rusli's body, voice, and audience give his politics social force. At the same time, this heightened visibility makes his language more available to surveillance and classification.

This film produced a historical doubleness that governs this visibility. Within the story, Rusli's revolutionary commitments respond to Dutch colonialism and the expanding Japanese threat. His militancy therefore belongs to a legitimate history of national liberation. For New Order audiences, however, terms such as revolution, Marxism, class struggle, and organised political action had acquired another resonance. The regime's post-1965 narratives repeatedly represented communism as an enduring danger to religion, morality, and nation (Heryanto, 1999; McGregor, 2009). Rusli's words could thus be heard across two political moments. They recalled anti-colonial courage while also echoing a revolutionary vocabulary that New Order had rendered suspect.

The Japanese-occupation setting assists this ideological management. It permits radical politics to appear because the object of resistance is foreign rule rather than the contemporary state. Revolution becomes historically necessary but temporally contained. The past validates Rusli's nationalism while limiting the transferability of his politics to the present. This strategy does not erase communism; it governs its proximity. Revolutionary language may circulate as part of national history, but it cannot easily become a legitimate vocabulary for interpreting New Order society. In *Atheis/Kafir*, history performs similar work: it accommodates Rusli's militancy while keeping its contemporary implications at a cautious distance.

Rusli's reading of capitalism deepens this tension. After watching an American film, he looks beyond spectacle to what he describes as a bourgeois-capitalist society approaching

collapse (Djaya, 1974). The scene allows him to expose the social relations hidden beneath glamorous images. His critique is intellectually coherent and connected to a broader analysis of class and imperialism. Yet, in post-1965 Indonesia, such language could not remain an innocent exercise in film criticism. Its Marxist vocabulary made Rusli politically legible within the same structure of suspicion that governed representations of communism. The film does not silence this critique. Instead, it places it in a narrative and historical environment that makes admiration possible without granting it unrestricted contemporary authority.

His relation to Islam further complicates any direct equivalence among atheism, Marxism, and communism. Rusli argues that Islam must become an “instrument of revolution” if it is to realise its historical greatness. He also expresses trust in the continuing development of scientific knowledge while invoking sunatullah and the Prophet’s tradition as reference points for Muslim life (Djaya, 1974). These statements do not amount to a stable atheistic doctrine. Rusli moves across religious, scientific, nationalist, and Marxist idioms. He challenges conventional piety but does not abandon Islamic history as a source of political meaning. The film therefore presents a hybrid revolutionary subject whose convictions exceed the categories through which the New Order sought to distinguish faithful nationalism from communist subversion.

That ambiguity is central to governance of communism. Sjuman’s film does not need to prove that Rusli is both atheist and communist. It only needs to position his heterodox religion, scientific confidence, class analysis, and revolutionary activism close enough that each may cast suspicion upon the others. Political governance operates through association rather than doctrinal precision. McGregor (2009) shows how New Order anti-communism became a broad moral language through which political reliability could be judged. Rusli’s revolutionary charisma enters that language as an unstable sign: historically admirable, intellectually attractive, yet potentially dangerous when detached from its anti-colonial setting. New Order cinema did not always need to destroy a dissident figure in order to control the meaning of dissent. It could preserve Rusli’s humanity, intelligence, and anti-colonial legitimacy while organising the conditions under which viewers encountered them. His compassion prevents him from becoming a flat ideological enemy; his political language prevents him from becoming an uncomplicated moral hero. The result is calibrated sympathy. Audiences may recognise why revolution attracted him and why Hasan found him persuasive, but they meet that attraction within a culture where the political Left had already been marked as a permanent source of danger.

Foucault’s (1977) concept of *dispositif* illuminates this organisation of political legibility. Governance works through relation among narrative form, censorship, historical memory, institutional approval, publicity, and accepted categories of citizenship. Communism is governed not only when it is prohibited, but also when conditions of its appearance are arranged in advance. Rusli may speak, yet his speech is historically enclosed. He may criticise capitalism, yet that criticism enters a public culture structured by anti-Marxist suspicion. He may invoke Islam as revolutionary, yet the film’s wider religious framework establishes limits around how far such reinterpretation can travel. Power does not simply remove his ideas; it determines the political environment in which they become meaningful.

Gramsci’s (1971) hegemony clarifies affective side of this process. Anti-communist judgment becomes durable when it no longer appears as a specialised state doctrine but as familiar moral common sense. *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) contributes to that familiarity by placing revolution near questions of religious loyalty, social order, and national vulnerability. It does not force spectators to reject Rusli outright. A more persuasive

operation is at work: viewers may value his opposition to colonialism while learning to separate legitimate nationalism from the revolutionary politics that New Order claimed to have defeated. Consent arises through this distinction. The state's political categories become credible because they appear to preserve both national history and moral stability.

This ideological work should not reduce Sjunan to a passive transmitter of official doctrine. Script-stage precensorship formed part of New Order filmmaking, but directors continued to negotiate aesthetic, historical, and social concerns within that system (Hanan & Soehadi, 2020). Sjunan's authorship remains visible in Rusli's complexity. This character retains intellectual seriousness and emotional credibility even as political horizon surrounding his ideas contracts. The governance of communism in *Atheis/Kafir* (1974) therefore lies less in overt accusation than in careful management of revolutionary possibility. Rusli is allowed to remain persuasive because his politics are attached to anti-colonial history, moderated through religious language, distinguished from anarchic unbelief, and received within a post-1965 atmosphere of suspicion. His revolutionary charisma is neither eliminated nor fully liberated. It is made visible, classified, and historically contained. Through this calibrated treatment, Sjunan's work converts a complex political subject into a state-legible figure: admirable as an opponent of colonialism, unsettling as a critic of religion and capitalism, and politically precarious wherever his language appears to exceed the boundaries of New Order nationalism.

Conclusion

Atheis/Kafir (1974), demonstrates that adaptation under New Order was never a neutral passage from page to screen. It reorganised the political meaning of doubt. Achdiat's novel sustains atheism as an unsettled encounter with faith, grief, and modernity; Sjunan's film relocates that encounter within a public language of repentance, loyalty, and ideological danger. The decisive issue is therefore not merely what changed in Rusli's story, but what those changes made thinkable. His revised trajectory restricts the possibility that unbelief might endure as a legitimate form of reflection. Censorship intensified this contraction. Directorate of Film's intervention entered production through script assessment, revision, and anticipated institutional judgment, confirming that regulation shaped creative decisions before the completed film reached its audience. This pattern accords with Fang's (2024) account of censorship as multistage gatekeeping, in which creators negotiate state power through concession and narrative reconfiguration rather than responding only to final cuts. Under a regime whose legitimacy rested substantially on anti-communism, atheism became politically useful as a proxy through which heterodoxy could be associated with subversion (McGregor, 2009). This film's central lesson is therefore sharper than claim that cinema simply transmitted propaganda: adaptation and censorship transformed an interior crisis of belief into publicly governable evidence of moral and political allegiance.

This study lies in bringing adaptation, censorship, and anti-communist governance into one analytical field. Adaptation studies often privilege intertextual change, while censorship research may treat state intervention as external to artwork. This case shows that two processes were mutually constitutive. Plot, character, performance, historical setting, institutional approval, publicity, and reception together determined how atheism acquired political meaning. This study combines intermedial comparison with censorship and paratextual analysis, moving beyond fidelity-based judgments to ask who benefits when ambiguity is reduced, which interpretations gain institutional legitimacy, and what kinds of subject become culturally intelligible. It also revises assumption that state control necessarily extinguishes authorship. Sjunan worked under obligatory script-stage pre-

censorship, yet continued to engage religion, social conflict, history, and lives of marginalised people through a distinctive cinematic practice (Hanan & Soehadi, 2020). This film should thus be read neither as untouched auteur cinema nor as a transparent state command. Its critical value lies in tension between them: emotional complexity remains, but political future of that complexity is curtailed. By reconstructing atheism-communism nexus as an institutional and cinematic achievement rather than a natural equivalence, this study connects adaptation theory to political memory, authoritarian cultural production, and formation of religious citizenship.

This argument nevertheless remains limited by the scale and condition of its archive. One novel-film comparison cannot establish whether the same mechanisms operated uniformly across New Order cinema, literature, theatre, and television. This film reveals displacement and closure, but cannot by itself identify every rejected dialogue, demanded revision, compromise, or act of self-censorship. Surviving institutional materials may also preserve the censor's perspective more clearly than the filmmaker's negotiations, while textual analysis cannot determine whether audiences accepted, resisted, or reinterpreted preferred moral frame. Further research should therefore compare screenplay drafts, censorship correspondence, production records, festival catalogues, advertisements, reviews, and oral histories across a wider corpus of literary adaptations. Reception studies could examine how religious, generational, regional, and political communities understood such films differently. Comparative work should also investigate representations of ethnicity, gender, religious minorities, sexuality, and other identities marked as socially disruptive. Research on other national cinemas suggests that censorship continues beyond formal prohibition, shaping production, festival circulation, and exhibition through several institutional layers (Ban, 2023). Extending inquiry would reveal whether *Sjuman's* film was exceptional or part of a broader cultural grammar through which Indonesian state rendered complex convictions visible, classifiable, and politically manageable.

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