for reasons to be elaborated below, such efforts constitute a minority. From an outside perspective, and at times even a local one, Southeast Asian cinemas can take on the appearance of having been stricken by a regionally bound "syndrome"—one that can appear lacking to some or "wrong" in its contravention of mainstream global patterns. As I will show, however, this ostensible affliction offers its own often enjoyably unruly brand of creative expression.

THE AFFLICTED APPARATUS

The idea of Southeast Asian cinemas as afflicted by a syndrome is borne out well by an early scene in the 1957 comedy-action-satire *Tiga Buronan* (*The Three Fugitives*), the third film and first major hit for director Nya Abbas Akup, an East Javanese of Sumatran parentage who would later be called the "father of Indonesian comedy."[4] A young man named Maman has just returned to a small West Javanese village after a decade of seeking his fortune and fighting in the war of independence from the Dutch (1945–49). Like *Lewat Djam Malam, Tiga Buronan* focuses on the aftermath of revolution, but it does so in a rural setting and with a deceptively lighthearted air. Entering his childhood home, Maman spies an elderly auntie squatting in front of a fire with her back to him. As if struck by a sudden impulse, instead of calling out a greeting, he sneaks up and taps the old woman from behind, startling her. This produces a reaction that viewers outside of Southeast Asia may find strange. Turning around to face Maman in an agitated state, the woman blurts out a meaningless string of curses ("*mati mati mati!*" [die die die]) and then appears helpless to do anything but mimic the words and gestures of her nephew. Her complete surprise overrides any ability she may have to formulate a more coherent response (fig. 2). As she begins to come to her senses, it also becomes clear that the woman no longer recognizes Maman. The curses, abetted by aggressive swipes of a wooden spoon, begin to suggest acts aimed at fending off an alien intruder.

What has in fact occurred is neither a random anomaly nor a simple instance of self-defense. The auntie's reaction would be familiar to most local and regional viewers as *latah*, a pattern of behavior mainly associated with the rural lower classes. Often, as in the scene described above, it is purposely triggered as a source of cheap entertainment for those in the vicinity of the victim. In urban upper-class contexts, people often attempt to suppress latah's potentially embarrassing outbursts. In medical and anthropological literature, *latah* is defined as a hyperstartle response that, as Akup's scene shows, consists of a short, involuntary burst of cursing or obscene gestures. This is often combined with uncontrolled mimicry of the words or movements of those surrounding the person in whom latah has been triggered. Many researchers refer to latah as a "culture bound syndrome"—a pattern of behavior that occurs only in a certain area, in this case in Southeast Asia.[5]

In the context of *Tiga Buronan*, the early entrance of latah, with its connotations of lowbrow village humor, serves as a comedic signifier for the film's rural locale.

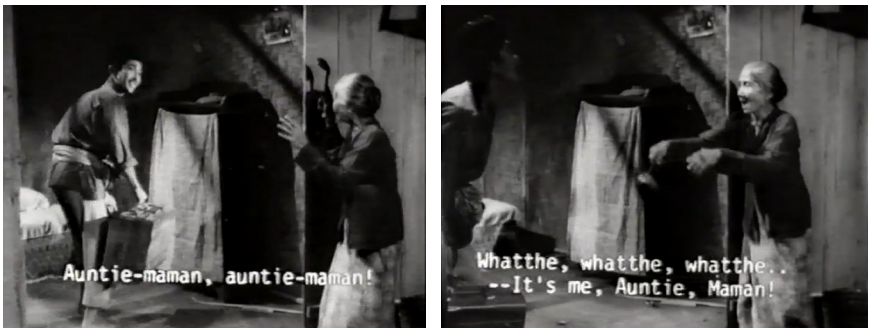

FIGURE 2. As Maman (Bambang Irawan), the film's erstwhile hero, returns home after the revolution, writer-director Akup introduces the theme and trope of "culture bound" repetition, here in the form of *latah*. The uncontrolled reaction Maman provokes in his aunt at first appears to represent the epitome of rural (and, until recently, colonized) backwardness. Later in the film, however, it takes on the appearance of a prescient, if involuntary, "reading," signaling an upcoming threat. As viewers are gradually given to understand, Maman, the former country boy, is now in fact a military spy whose arrival will actualize a bloody conflict that has been brewing since long before independence from the Dutch.

Akup, however, rarely deploys jokes in a simple or cheap manner and generally uses physical comedy or stereotypes as an entrance to something more complex. Here, the latah scene sets the tone for a weightier theme running through much of the film: an escalating series of surprise entrances and attacks that implicate the rural in the national, the regional, and the geopolitical (and vice versa), suggesting rural isolation to be a deceptive ruse. Attempts to restore calm and order after each disruption are, as in the auntie's case, beset by pauses, stutters, and seeming compulsions. These occur as characters, and at times the film itself, encounter a variety of foreign "intruders." This includes not only villains but also incongruous cinematic conventions that are inserted into scenes, linguistic neologisms that are suddenly blurted out by characters, or other seemingly incompatible elements imposed on the narrative context.

In the crowded, often chaotic story-world that results, latah is positioned as both a particular, local habit and an allegory for a problem faced by myriad "developing" locales. It signals the ever-present threat of losing control and defaulting to base imitation when facing a new or alien presence, whether in the form of persons, ideas, or images. In this sense, Akup's deployment of latah in a film is perhaps less idiosyncratic than it seems. As I have indicated, the term, and the habit it depicts, are well known throughout the region (although it has different names in Thailand and the Philippines), and latah is in fact frequently used as a metaphor outside of the rural or lowly contexts where it is mainly thought to occur. It has been applied by Jakartan film critics in *Tempo*, a national news magazine, for example, to mock what was seen as a knee-jerk tendency among Indonesian filmmakers to mimic

FIGURE 3. Two stills from the early scene in *Tiga Buronan* that momentarily appears to identify the film as a musical.

popular local and regional trends (*Tempo* 1974:45).[6] In a related way, the use of latah in *Tiga Buronan* reflects ironically on challenges shared by Southeast Asian and other Global South filmmakers who face a constant flow of allegedly higher quality transnational products; this includes Hollywood imports, although here, as we will see, the filmic competitors of greatest concern do not necessarily come from the West.

Appropriate to its various metaphorical applications, "lowly" latah is also a more complex phenomenon than it might at first appear. As the auntie's outburst begins to demonstrate, despite the inevitable ridicule latah's victims are subjected to, its furious mimicry can imbue it with the sense of a strong and potentially subversive reaction. For Hildred Geertz, latah's "compulsive obedience of commands" in fact constitutes "acts which are at base unconscious parodies of the social relationship between inferior and superior" (1968:99). The *Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology* similarly calls latah "a mechanism by which lower-status individuals can demonstrate socially inappropriate behavior in a culturally acceptable manner" (Jackson 2006:140). In the case of *Tiga Buronan*, once latah is introduced into the film's narrative world, its signature blend of compulsive mimicry and passive-cum-active aggression quickly spreads, infecting characters and even seeming to embed itself in the film at the level of form and style—especially in Akup's deployment of references to globally popular genres and tropes.

Almost immediately following the initial latah scene, for example, we are treated to a more overtly pleasant and, for those from outside the region, likely more familiar introduction to life in an agrarian village in Southeast Asia. Contrasting with a previous scene announcing the impending arrival of a murderous gang of fugitives, a gleaming paddy-full of conical-hatted rice farmers spontaneously break into a song-and-dance routine about the joys of rural life (fig. 3). At first, the abrupt stylistic and tonal shift appears to transport onscreen villagers and viewers alike to an ideal transnational intersection where the globe-trotting paths

of Fred Astaire, prancing Soviet collective farmers, and their equally exuberant Indian (and in fact Malayan)[7] counterparts have collided, as if discovering a mutually intelligible, "traditional" modernity.

From one angle, the scene's broad familiarity could be read as Akup's own latah-like reaction to the transpacific export and circulation of Hollywood products and tropes and especially to a growing global pile of impressions thereof. In this view, dancing farmers in Southeast Asia could be a result of the "shock" of pressure put on local filmmakers by the popularity and established legitimacy of tropes like song and dance, pushing them toward base mimicry in order to succeed in a local marketplace saturated with foreign imports.

Here, however, considering the stylistic deviation of the scene from the segments surrounding it, the effect is also to produce a sense of incompatibility or absurdity, calling attention to the strangeness of the shift. In Akup's and his collaborators' hands, the abrupt, unprecedented appearance of song and dance functions in a way that is not unlike the sudden exclamation or repetition of something otherwise "random" in latah. Further mirroring the auntie's latah outburst, the film also appears to quickly recover from its entrancement with song and dance, after which the scene's distinctive style and break into fantasy are not repeated or echoed elsewhere in the narrative (although other kinds of outbursts continue). With the interlude left as a glaring anomaly, a sly metacommentary begins to emerge from the stylistic incongruence of the scene. Even while momentarily looking silly and easily seduced by the transnational, the film's mimicry positions the typical tropes of song and dance as if *they* were the silly ones: "low" filmic impulses similar to rude gestures or curses that would normally be suppressed. As the song-and-dance scene is thus implied not to be of a piece with the local puzzle on the screen,[8] its ostensibly clear, universal readability is interrogated.

As this begins to show, *Tiga Buronan*'s engagements with the transnational can also be read as a more formalized version of the strategy deployed in *Lewat Djam Malam* three years earlier. Similar to how the prostitute Laila compulsively yet creatively clips and processes the imagery of *Life* magazine in Usmar Ismail's film, in *Tiga Buronan* (also produced by Usmar Ismail and Perfini), Nya Abbas Akup "cuts and pastes" popular tropes from globally circulating films traveling around the Pacific and beyond, positioning them as part of a heterogeneous patchwork. As in *Lewat Djam Malam*, this stylistic appropriation implicitly lowers the status of such tropes, modifying their form and diminishing their potential dominance by comparison to the local and regional images and concepts with which they are surrounded. If the song-and-dance scene is nonetheless still a geopolitical, market-compelled form of cinematic latah, its controlled, subtly ironic mimicry is also differentiated from the auntie's knee-jerk, spoon-waving curses.

While latah is framed in scholarly and medical literature as a "syndrome" or neuropsychiatric disorder, I follow James Siegel (1986), Hildred Geertz (1968), and others, interpreting it as a facet of local and regional symbolic processes that, while

often looked down on, is generally not seen as an illness. Clearly, Akup understood it as a phenomenon both highly localized and connected to fundamental problems of representation and expression manifesting in Indonesia and throughout the region in the mid-twentieth century. At stake in Akup's cinematic latah is something closer to the shock typically attributed to the experience of rapid modernization following the imposition of Western industrial paradigms of development. The conventional language used to describe encounters with new and foreign technologies, techniques, or agents—"an overwhelming sense of grandeur and awe . . . in which the immaterial workings of God and his spirits were subordinate" (Larkin 2008:7), for example—is in fact quite similar to the discourse around latah in which a victim is temporarily "possessed" by startlement. While Akup's use of latah aims to engage with this type of experience, as I will elaborate further below, the intimate locality of his metaphor radically reframes the shock of the foreign and the modern as something familiar and almost expected.

For Siegel as well, latah constitutes one of the most visible parts of an important complex of behaviors, habits, and strategies that mediate shock and generally aim to avert full-blown, involuntary mimicry. Their function, he argues, is to prevent those confronted by something new or unexpected from falling into an unthinking, imitative posture that reads as possession by an intruder. The most common defense against such base imitation "without the pretense of reply" (1986:124) is the deployment of an easily discernible artificiality in the reaction triggered by an encounter with the foreign—even, or especially, if it involves mimicry. An example of this is the engagements observed by Siegel with actual foreigners on the streets of Surakarta, Central Java, in the 1980s. The presence of tourists, expats, or European businessmen was of course not so unique as to be actually shocking to most. Yet locals, especially youth, seemed to feel compelled to act out when they encountered foreigners (in my own experience in villages, and sometimes also cities, this is still the case, and is not limited to young people). Often, the youth would blurt strange words or phrases taken from obscure English-language media or slang, such as "Hallo, Mac!," inevitably confusing their targets. While precluding an actual conversation and potentially making themselves look foolish, Central Javanese hecklers are, for Siegel, effectively issuing a preemptive linguistic strike. The underlying aim is to label strangers as strange from a local perspective (even as much of the world considers them uniquely powerful), confirming that "such foreigners are outside the discourse of Javanese; there is no way to speak to them properly" (125).

As I read Siegel, in the impulse to draw language borders around them, foreigners are not banished but rather "cut out" and embedded as strange in the picture of the local that emerges. The foreigners' ability to thoroughly shock is thus purloined, even if they are still capable of triggering a disturbance such as the interaction described above. In the process, a deft, if somewhat blunt, geopolitical intuition is revealed on the part of the Javanese youth. Their knowingly "broken"

English adds something to the encounter with the foreign, imbuing the stranger's language with an absurd or false air and banishing the specter of base imitation (in a similar way, I've been greeted with a rousing "Good morning!" in late afternoon, followed by uproarious laughter). While perhaps outside the targets' awareness, an implicit reading of the "original" foreign trigger for the interaction is also produced: it must be hiding some inherent lack or falsity that the process of mimicry brings out and highlights.

COLLIDING REGIONS, JUMPY COWBOYS, FOREIGN NATIONS

The above interactions and semiformalized responses could be seen as a kind of impromptu "street theater" that recalls other, more formalized but also improvisational practices elsewhere in the region. Vicente Rafael, for example, sees Filipino appropriation and vernacularization of colonial Spanish *comedia* theater as similarly offering "venues for expressing and conventionalizing fantastic identifications with alien places and alien sources of power that lay at the basis of colonial-Christian authority" (2005:117–18). At the same time, Filipino *comedias*' "citation and . . . circulation of foreign images" functioned to give European conventions and references the appearance of "stereotypes," which also came to seem "vaguely absurd" (2005:119–20). In my analysis, repurposing foreign conventions in ways that deconstruct and alter their meaning or status is part of an important region-wide trend in vernacular theaters, something I discuss at greater length in chapter 2. As this suggests, the reception and strategic fragmentation of imported genres and modes of representation links the regional practice of cinema—understood as a new and foreign technology—with that of other arts, deflating and placing motion pictures on the same level as older, traditional forms.

In the realm of visual art, for example, Siegel also sees a strategic repositioning or "breaking" in Indonesian historical encounters with foreign aesthetics, as when Western landscape paintings were popularized in nineteenth-century Java and as a result began to take on new, localized "spatial arrangements" (1986:127). For Siegel, such altered compositions continued to influence artistic trends well into the twentieth century, including an approach to pastoral scenes that by the 1980s had become what he calls "the most common picture in Java today" (126). In the endless iterations of the same basic scene and style that crowded local art markets and adorned the walls of village farmers and wealthy urbanites alike, thickets of trees were generally depicted framing rice fields or water with a mountain in the background (fig. 4). The arrangement evokes a ubiquitous rural scene that can still be found outside of city centers almost anywhere in Java or much of Indonesia. In Siegel's reading, the painting employs typically naturalist elements but arranges them in ways that seem at odds with the goal of creating realistic dimensionality, shifting and deforming the basic premises of popular Western conventions. While