

theater. Yet unlike their internationally lauded, post-Third Worldist comrades in South America, the primary audiences for films like *Tiga Buronan*, *Tamu Agung* (*Honored Guest*, dir. Usmar Ismail, 1955), *Labu dan Labi*, the Filipino hit *Juan Tamad Goes to Congress* (dir. Manuel Conde, 1959), or the Thai *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* (*Mae Nak from Khanong*, dir. Rungsri Tasapayak, 1959) were understood to be much less engaged in high modernist or intellectual spheres. The implicitly elevated status of “garbage” films like *Bandito*, touted for their radical aesthetic “cannibalism” (as opposed to imitation) of mainstream cinema is largely absent from early Southeast Asian films. While regional movies, as I have begun to show, were equally engaged in the politics of globalism through “eating” and regurgitating popular genres and conventions in satirically modified forms, they traded on their potential to appeal to much larger, popular audiences (see chapter 2 for more details on the economics of Southeast Asian films).

This populist potential was both a blessing and curse, as locally made films were generally seen by critics and much of the educated elite as actual trash, blighting the ideals and pretensions that they—unlike typical audiences—attached to national cinema. Politicians and official custodians of national purity often derided Southeast Asian films as cheap, incoherent, or, in the films’ complex and darkly critical views, even “counterrevolutionary.”¹³ Ironically, had critics succeeded in pressuring regional producers to make their films more “properly” aligned with elite ideals of national representation, Southeast Asian cinemas might well have fallen into the same “fissured” relationships with audiences that plagued many other areas of the Global South in the 1950s and 1960s. In this context, the fate of makers of popular films in India in the 1950s and 1960s was perhaps most similar to those in Southeast Asia.

DISRUPTION VS. HAPPY ENDINGS IN INDIA AND HOLLYWOOD

Indian filmmakers, too, relied on the patronage of popular audiences mainly from the lower classes. Their works—with ubiquitous genre-bending, self-referentiality, and similarly excessive levels of humor and emotion to Indonesian, Malayan, Thai, or other regional fare—were likewise distinct from, and resistant toward, Western classical approaches. Steven Crofts, for example, sees the unique relationship Indian and Southeast Asian cinemas built with Hollywood as “an accomplishment managed by few” (1993:50). But Indian popular films, like their Southeast Asian counterparts, were generally dismissed by elite viewers and critics as “alarmingly noisy and nonsensical, if not dangerously seductive and utterly vulgar” (Sunya 2022:14). In some ways, as Samhita Sunya (2022) suggests, things were even harder for mainstream Indian filmmakers owing to the emergence of what became known as parallel cinema. This more independent, self-consciously experimental or intellectual wave of films was driven by a new crop of independent writer-directors

like the Bengali Satyajit Ray in the 1950s, the likes of which did not emerge in a concerted fashion in Southeast Asia until the late 1990s. Such parallel Indian films generally spurned popular conventions, instead relying heavily on acceptance from international festivals and hence winning elite approval by "put[ting] Indian cinema on the world map" (Sunya 2022:16).

The elite perception of popular filmmakers and their work suffered even more as they were increasingly compared to their less commercially oriented colleagues in the parallel movement. As if to muddy the field further, because of the self-referential, antinaturalist styles of most popular Indian films, early parallel cinema efforts like Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*, 1955) resisted these conventions by taking a realist approach heavily influenced by European films of the time (later parallel films employed a variety of different styles). Only more recently have studies such as Sunya's begun to broadly reappraise mainstream Indian cinema, citing the immense appreciation and love for such movies showed by nonelite audiences both locally and internationally. Sunya argues that mainstream Hindi films like *Awaara* (*The Vagabond*, dir. Raj Kapoor, 1951) helped to create extensive aesthetic and political economic networks based entirely outside the West, exceeding the films' oft-derided status as fungible products defined by market forces. She positions such works as part of an alternative global canon—one that made Bombay, in particular, an influential "nodal point" of 1960s world cinema (Sunya 2022:15), whether critics and intellectuals at the time liked it or not. In this vein, *Awaara* not only had long theatrical runs in India and numerous other countries but played to the "immeasurable delight" of officials and university students, for example, when it was sent with the first Indian film delegation to the Soviet Union in 1954 (Sunya 2022:11).

Sunya also notes that many popular Indian films were and are, in fact, very concerned with social and political issues, something that is often seen as the exclusive purview of alternative cinemas. In the 1950s and 1960s, Indian films brought perspectives that were often highly critical of national policies and their effects on commoners to immense numbers of working-class and peasant viewers, many of whom were illiterate. In line with Sunya's study, Rosie Thomas contends that despite the much-maligned status of this demographic and the films that cater to them, such audiences were and are "ruthlessly discriminating" about their cinema (1985:120)—a fact that, as in Southeast Asia, many Indian filmmakers and studios were made constantly and painfully aware. Catering to elites was effectively not an option, but a truly "bad" film would quickly be sniffed out and rejected by the so-called masses.

In this vein, Ashish Rajadhyaksha argues that despite the appreciation heaped on a lineage of self-consciously experimental films "from Eisenstein to Brakhage" (in which "parallel" Indian luminaries such as Mrinal Sen or Satyajit Ray are included), it was Indian popular films that more systematically developed and expanded "the ways by which the celluloid screen can, directly and unmediatedly,

conduct a transaction with the spectator to provide a ‘fourth look’ to the cinema” (2009:37). For Rajadhyaksha, the frequent scholarly use of terms like *primitive* to describe qualities in Indian popular cinema that were elsewhere lauded as oppositional vis-à-vis the global hegemony of Hollywood demonstrates a broad lack of understanding of the context and tastes of its audiences and of the corresponding set of conventions and styles standardized and deployed by filmmakers (15). Consistent economic troubles, despite demonstrable popularity, have also contributed to the labeling of Indian cinema as “pre-industrial” (Rajadhyaksha:15) and to its long-standing lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the state. This, in turn, has fostered an enduring animosity between film producers and government authorities. The result, among other things, is to undermine the identity of Bollywood, along with the linguistically and geographically fragmented field of Indian filmmaking as whole, as constituting a proper “national cinema” (Rajadhyaksha:16).

In some sense, then, Indian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s is like a bigger, more globally circulated, version of Southeast Asian filmmaking. Although landlocked, it shares an archipelagic configuration of many distinct loci and languages of production linked by a common set of “excessive” conventions and a strained relationship with elites and critics. Kapila Vatsyayan’s (1971) theory, discussed in the prologue, of a larger aesthetic region in which Indian approaches to representation have historically influenced and been adapted throughout much of Southeast Asia appears to resonate with this view. The conscious and circumstantial Indian resistance to the idea of a “pure” national cinema at the levels of form, narrative, and industrial-, audience-, and market-structures further mirrors aspects of Southeast Asian cinemas that I have taken up above and, especially in regard to market conditions, will explain further in the next chapter. But among all the similarities posed here, I contend that there is one key commonality among Southeast Asian films that is *not* shared with most South Asian ones. What distinguishes the overall effect of the similarities among Indonesian, Malaysian, Thai, and Filipino films from those of India is a *general lack of closure* in the Southeast Asian variants, while formal and narrative resolution is argued to be broadly enforced through various means in Indian popular cinemas.

As Ravi Vasudevan understands the exuberant, melodramatic and self-reflexive qualities of popular Indian social issue films in the 1950s, “the [film] text undertakes a narrative and performative operation which allows for forbidden, transgressive spaces to be opened up” (1989:38). But at the end of the narrative, as Vasudevan and many others have argued, the Indian social film “closes these spaces, re-instituting a moral order” (38). This provides something that more closely resembles a so-called Hollywood ending, and, although nationalists were still rarely satisfied, gestures toward the solidity of an Indian identity. In this combination of disruption and reintegration, I suggest, Indian social films are not so unlike the Hollywood genre of “comedian comedy” that emerged in the early sound era, building on the popularity of live comedy troupes such as the Marx Brothers. Referring to

how the genre's rampant "intertextuality and fragmentation . . . destroys the classical illusion of a unified, self-contained, and coherent text," Henry Jenkins categorizes comedian comedy as an oft-ignored, but surprisingly common "nonhermetic tradition" within classical Hollywood (1992:10, 12).

Long before the recent efforts to critically reappraise Indian popular films, as Jenkins shows, the purposeful disruptiveness of these tendencies vis-à-vis mainstream Hollywood convention was labeled a form of modernist cinema. Among others, in the late 1960s, actor-director Jerry Lewis's numerous forays into comedian comedy were hailed by critics in the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* as building on an alternative "tradition of subversion" (13) running through Hollywood's otherwise conservative and highly regulated filmmaking system. Yet as in the Indian films mentioned above, for Jenkins, the genre ultimately appears to reveal an inseverable attachment to just such a system. Despite catering to the "primitive" and potentially subversive tastes of their popular audiences, producers of comedian comedy still appear reticent to offer something more thoroughly destabilizing to mainstream conventions and the values associated with them, including national identity. Jenkins cautions that despite flaunting formal, narrative, and characterological wildness, comedian films are not able to completely free themselves from or negate classical Hollywood norms. As in Indian cinema, this is especially clear in the unspoken edict to resolve the seeming paradoxes and subversions posed by a film in its conclusion.

Take, for example, the 1952 comedian comedy *Son of Paleface*, written and directed by Frank Tashlin, one of the genre's most ubiquitous figures. Initially it might be seen as an apt, transpacific analogue of *Tiga Buronan* (or vice versa, since *Tiga Buronan* was released five years later). *Paleface* is wild, experimental, metacritical, and self-referential in its form. Like *Tiga Buronan*, it spoofs westerns, and it stars comedian Bob Hope as a "fake" cowboy dressed in loud pinstripe suits. It begins with a shot in which the image, a close-up of Hope's character with his back turned to the camera, is presented as a still, as if "paused" owing to a technical error. When the picture finally moves, it soon freezes again, then continues to start and stop at key moments, such as when Hope is about to kiss the woman in front of him. The result is a formal cat-and-mouse game that openly addresses the audience, toying with their expectations and desires. Not unlike a projectionist-cum-announcer from the early days of the Euro-American "cinema of attractions" (1895–1908; see Gunning 1986) (or from the classical days of Thai cinema, about which more below), Hope cracks jokes via voice-over underneath the jerky imagery, making light of various movie conventions while introducing the basic premises of the story. This multilayered, technologically reflexive approach sets the tone for the pranks, asides delivered directly into the camera, and other formal disruptions of classical norms that continue through most of the narrative. These are positioned as one of the film's main attractions for viewers, at times overtaking the importance of the narrative.

Despite its mocking manner, however, *Paleface* begins to diverge from the commitment of a film like *Tiga Buronan* to mocking and sending up globally and locally circulating conventions and sociopolitical values. It soon introduces the typically straight-and-narrow Roy Rogers, playing himself: a “real” cowboy, albeit a dandyish, singing one, against which Hope’s hopelessly absurd wrangler is positioned as a foil. This begins to hint at the film’s grounding in classical cinematic tropes and values, toward which it increasingly gravitates as the narrative unfolds. In the end, Hope’s character, whose loud pinstripes are red, white, and blue, stops bumbling so much and joins the cheery, wholesome Rogers in slaughtering hordes of movie Indians and bringing black-clad, horse-mounted villains to justice. Through the struggle, both Hope’s character and his brigand cowgirl love interest (Jane Russell) are reformed into “proper” people (and, perhaps more important, proper male and female movie characters), after which they marry. Before the credits roll, the new couple drives off into a sunset against which Rogers, atop his rearing steed, is prominently silhouetted. In the final tally, it is the jokes and disruptions that are mainly paused in favor of narrative and sociopolitical resolution: the West is won (again) and the nation, its white citizens and their patriarchal families, appear set to live happily ever after.

As I have noted elsewhere (see Yngvesson and Alarilla 2020), the ending of Akup’s *Tiga Buronan* flirts with, but then subverts, a similar brand of closure-effect. Its protagonist, Maman, turns out to be an army spy who returned to his rural home not for nostalgic reasons but to foil the mission of the black-clad Mat Codet and his gang to take control of the village and its profitable, rice-producing fields. In the end, not unlike the plot of *Paleface*, Codet and his men are captured or killed in a shoot-out with soldiers. But buildup to the final conflict and the presentation of its aftermath are quite distinct. For one, the victory is not presented as the direct result of Maman’s actions, which undermines the sense of him as classical, goal-oriented male protagonist. For most of the ending, Maman remains trapped by Mat Codet, and even his trusty, modern radio provided by the government refuses to work. Outside of his knowledge, his love interest, Ginah (Chitra Dewi), takes it on herself to outrun a henchman and call in the military, saving the day.

When the soldiers arrive, Maman, who is undercover and not in uniform, is at first assumed to be one of the bandits and held at gunpoint. Undaunted, he soon takes his place in a military jeep set to ride off into the sunset but then suddenly realizes he’s forgotten something, stopping the film again just as it seems poised for a triumphant finale. Running back into the village, Maman emerges together with Ginah and her father, the cowardly religious pillar Pak Haji. Maman then reclaims his place in the sunset-bound jeep, while Ginah holds up her finger, now adorned with a ring. Nothing is directly said about marriage, and because the custom of giving engagement rings was all but unknown at the time in Indonesian society, this appears to be yet another nod to global convention: Maman “forgot” one of

the key ingredients of a typically Holly- or Bollywood happily ever after: marriage (or at least a proposal). Having made a show of checking this box, Maman and his cronies can safely steer their jeep into the distance, where the sun is setting. While the resulting shot now does evoke a classical ending, the film isn't finished yet. It adds a further reverse angle that I argue undermines the formulaic sense of closure that Maman has worked so hard to ensure: as Ginah and her father stand and wave in an extreme long shot, the image around them is still filled with machine-gun toting soldiers who, unlike Maman, don't seem to be going anywhere soon. It almost looks as if they're "guarding" the film's optimistic conclusion.

The implication returns the film to what it *really* needed to remember before concluding matters onscreen: its engagement with the idea of the nation. The aggressive-looking, uniformed gunmen surrounding the better half of the film's now indefinitely deferred happy couple raise the question of whether the "West," or in this case the rural East, can in fact be won. If peace in Indonesia's dynamic, yet far from idyllic, villages cannot be sustained without the continual threat or active presence of centralized force, what of the even more complex and fragmented newly minted country around it? In this case the "bad guys," Mat Codet and his gang, have also been identified as former revolutionary fighters in the war to end Dutch colonialism a decade prior. Their guns, taken as spoils from that conflict, are further reminders of the pitfalls, paradoxes, and internal factions that emerged during nationalist struggle, however good or necessary the fight. Not coincidentally, 1957, the year of *Tiga Buronan*'s release, was also when Soekarno, Indonesia's first president, briefly declared martial law in order to institute his infamous "guided democracy" policy. The policy was a decidedly authoritarian response to Indonesia's extreme political fragmentation, and it effectively ended elections only two years after the first-ever opportunity for citizens to vote in 1955. As this and other Indonesian films at the time suggest, the problems of revolution embed themselves in the nation that follows, visibly cracking its grand hermetic facade of unity in diversity until it resembles an "archipelagic" region of disparate interests, factions, and locales.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN CINEMAS AND REVOLUTION

This context-based refusal of closure—one that could be termed "realist" but not naturalist or classical in a Hollywood sense—arguably puts popular Southeast Asian films on a formal/structural footing that is closer to independent or "parallel" offerings in South Asia (although, in fact, the more self-consciously experimental, radically fragmented Indian films like those of Mrinal Sen, Basu Chatterjee, or Ritwik Ghatak were made later, in the 1960s and 1970s). Among other factors, such as market conditions and audience taste, the anticlosure attitude of a film like *Tiga Buronan* also appears intimately tied to the experiences associated with the recent armed revolution against Indonesia's colonizers and with its complicated aftermath