

I position a regionally circulating brand of live vernacular *theaters* as the most salient force shaping a nascent, modern visuality that included cinemas in its purview. I position these particular structural-economic and aesthetic conditions as facilitating a low-modernist aesthetics that was still more volatile and heterogeneous than those of Hollywood or the East Asian mainstream at the time. Not only were films fundamentally open to interpretation, but their formal and temporal structures performatively mimicked their fragmenting ways of addressing region, nations, and world, as well as past, present, and future simultaneously. As such, the region's strong aesthetic currents caught and spun otherwise predictable transpacific and global flows off course, landing them in a realm where live performance and media interactivity were still (or, depending on how we look at it, *already*) queen.

VERNACULAR MODERNIST THEATERS

Malay-, Tagalog-, and Thai-language vernacular theaters like *bangsawan*, *stambul*, *sarsuela*, and *likay* emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, making an immense impact on the region's popular mediascapes in parallel with the birth and global spread of motion pictures.² Similar to early cinema, these theaters combined local aesthetic trends and technologies—some emergent, some more established—with those circulating around the world with increasing speed and frequency. Unlike Western cinema's general pattern of homogenization and classicization over the second decade of the twentieth century, however, Southeast Asian vernacular theaters continued to shift and adapt their forms in conversation with the gradual emergence of local film industries. As Dafna Ruppín shows, for example, early touring film exhibitors in the Dutch East Indies (mainly run by Europeans and Indians and mostly showing nonlocal imagery while at times combining film screenings with theater performances) generally used the routes established by vernacular theater companies and circuses (2016:7).

Nadi Tofighian argues that these pathways were also based on the networks of "imperial trade, shipping, and communication" crisscrossing and leading into and out of the region (2013:61). Tofighian sees a flowering of entertainment culture in the late 1800s in Southeast Asia that mirrors similar developments in the West, blending together emergent filmmaking with various other media (2013:46). While in the U.S. and Europe this blending of older and new media would soon be dominated by the emergent mechanics and narratives of Western classical cinema, following Tofighian and Ruppín, I contend that intermedial modes of expression remained a much stronger, more viable force in Southeast Asian entertainment, one that continued into independence and the formation of national cinemas and, in many ways, until the present. From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, vernacular theaters were generally positioned at the center of these developments and the mixtures of various media they invented and exhibited. To provide a sense of consistency across the otherwise diverse and shifting nature of

the aesthetics and styles across numerous troupes' performance locales, common regional techniques such as improvisational *pantun* verse, particular patterns of music and dance vs. narrative, and direct audience address were deployed.

The label of vernacular, a retrospective term used by scholars (like Hansen's application of it to cinemas), relates to these emergent theaters' innovative use of common regional languages such as Malay. Over the previous several centuries, Malay had grown into a widespread lingua franca through its role in facilitating trade between various port cities and economic hubs throughout much of the region. Malay also became a key vehicle for emergent literatures and other forms of communication and exchange, including those used by colonial administration. Like most other aspects of the region, however, Malay was far from homogeneous, with numerous dialects and versions mixing in bits and pieces of other languages circulating in the region such as Hokkien, Javanese, Mandarin, English, Dutch, Thai, Tagalog, and others. Yet most variants were mutually intelligible on a basic level. As Tofighian also notes, new media that adopted regional lingua franca were quickly drawn into the circulatory and trade routes these languages described and arose from, benefiting from the economic opportunities they offered. As Tan Sooi Beng shows, bangsawan, a constantly touring Malay-language vernacular theater that originated in Penang, Malaya, soon established itself as the first popular commercial theater in the Malay Peninsula. Despite drawing on tropes of older, traditional and ritual-based forms, bangsawan was distinguished from them by the need to be economically viable in order to continue. Its often frenzied, heterogeneous development was driven by this need (Tan 1995:602).

Like an actual vernacular tongue that "constructs itself by appropriation" (Sheldon Pollock qtd. in Hansen 2012:609), early iterations of touring theaters like bangsawan drew together an eclectic assembly of transnational and local trends, narratives, and high and low genres and traditions. These were variously braided together to address differences in taste and influences associated with diverse Malay-speaking locales. Continually moving around and between these locales, bangsawan circulated through the region for more than six decades. Its name announced a connection to Malay aristocrats (the meaning of the word *bangsawan* in Malay), who at times served as subject matter for its narratives. Its approaches to style, globalization, and audience address, however, were decidedly populist and greatly influenced P. Ramlee and other Malay filmmakers during Singapore's cinematic golden age in the 1950s and 1960s. Their films, in turn, were some of the most successful in regional markets at the time, pushing others to adopt similar approaches. This is an important reason that I position live, vernacular theaters as crucial forces shaping what I argue to be Southeast Asia's distinct brand of vernacular modernism. But bangsawan was one among many.

As bangsawan was beginning to come into its own as a commercial and aesthetic force in the late nineteenth century, a rival, Malay-language form soon arose under the name *stambul* in Surabaya, East Java. Often called *opera* or *komedie*,³

stambul (or *stamboel* in the old Malay spelling system) the title—foregrounding the form's roots in transnational appropriation—was derived from *Istanbul*, referring to the exotic, loosely Turkish costumes often worn by performers. As in bangsawan, however, the name mainly functioned as an attraction in its own right and often had little or no connection to narrative content. Taking its cue from bangsawan, the first recorded performance of *stambul* was an improvisational, Malay adaptation of *1001 Nights* in 1891. After a few false starts, *stambul* quickly became the main regional source of competition for bangsawan troupes (Cohen 2006:49). Working to continually attract audiences, *stambul* performers began rapidly expanding their repertoires, devouring and combining new “tricks” and established transnational techniques to come up with an adaptable set of attractions. With these, they began touring the Malay-speaking areas of the region, challenging and feeding off of bangsawan.

While what constituted a typical bangsawan performance was equally varied, as Tan explains, an evening's ostensible main attraction would normally be either a long narrative play or several shorter narratives performed one after the other. In between the acts of the longer play or in the time used to reset the stage and costumes after a shorter one ended, “extra turns,” sometimes also referred to as “vaudeville turns,” were offered. These drew on the influence of touring Western vaudeville groups in the region (Tan 1993:35, 44) and adapted the vaudevillian tactic of presenting a rapid-fire variety of different attractions. In bangsawan these consisted of an almost unlimited variety of other types and forms of entertainment, from music to dance to comedy or at times even circus clowns or a short boxing match (Tan 1993:39–41).

Tan shows that these “turns” often became a greater audience draw than the performed narratives, and troupes went out of their way to provide new and exciting attractions between acts. While drawing on elements of vaudeville, this became a distinctly Southeast Asian style, especially for the time. On the other side of the Pacific, Hollywood studios were redefining American vernacular modernism by eliminating the “anarchic” influence of vaudeville and its former players on films in favor of clearer narratives (Jenkins 1992). Yet even while Hollywood films flooded the region, bangsawan troupes responded to audience tastes as late as the 1930s by featuring special nights where narratives were excised completely in favor of an expanded collection of “turns.” It was these fragmented collections that most powerfully resonated as new and contemporary with regional audiences. Singaporean newspapers saw the localized turns as “modelled to suit the modern taste” and appropriate for “all nationalities” (Tan 1993:45). The latter claim reflected the diverse mix of races and places of origin in the region's cosmopolitan port cities where vernacular theaters and Malay *lingua francas* were most firmly established.

As bangsawan grew in popularity, its far-flung artistic sources and adaptations came to include transnational standards such as Shakespeare, which troupes combined with Arab, Indian, and local Malay and Chinese fare. Tan describes typical

bangsawan performers in the 1920s as “constantly [exposing] themselves to new dances and songs of various ethnic origins, learning [them] quickly, developing their stage roles, improvising dialogues, and introducing novelty acts and tricks into their performances. . . . [They] also watched foreign films and theatrical performances constantly, so that they could learn and adapt their dances, songs, novelty acts, and tricks” (1995:611). A newspaper advertisement from the 1920s cited by Tan gives a more specific sense of just how transnational bangsawan was, promoting a show with the “latest English songs and dances,” “Grand Russian,” Spanish, Hawaiian “Hulla-Hullah,” “Oriental,” “Genuine Egyptian,” “Enchanting Hindustani,” “Varied Malayan,” Javanese, “Paris Underworld—‘The Apache’” among other kinds of music and performance (1989:236).

In the race for the perfect mix to accommodate and inspire local modern sensibilities, Matthew Cohen (2006) shows that stambul was the first major regional form to adapt European proscenium staging, costume styles, painted backdrops, and other emergent aesthetic technologies and special effects. These were then also deployed by bangsawan troupes. But neither form drew on any particular imported style, country, or region (such as Europe or the U.S.) as its main reference or root source. The appeal of both relied on how they translated and re-presented a shifting combination of local, regional, and global elements, throwing homogeneous conceptions of artistic or cultural authenticity out the window, or at least far from the stage. The appropriation of styles, formal elements, and terms like “vaudeville turn” was hence not seen as imitative or derivative in a negative sense. When bangsawan was first performed in the 1870s in Penang, British Malaya, it was even promoted as “tiruan wayang Parsi” (imitation Parsi theater) because it adapted a style performed by Indian migrants, replacing its dialogue and lyrics with Malay *pantun* verse (Tan 1989:231–32). The use of various foreign words and concepts simply added to the attraction of a diverse form of entertainment produced with a geographically, socially, and racially fragmented and cosmopolitan audience in mind.

As “modern” as this was in the regional context in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is important to note, especially in Southeast Asia, how these emergent cosmopolitan forms were also marked with strong signs of the past—symbolic and actual elements that rooted them in histories of the *tanah air* (land-water) where they were invented and performed. For example, the use of the name *wayang Parsi* already signaled an adaptation by applying the Malay term for theater: *wayang*. This reflected the deep and continuing influence of regional art forms like shadow play, or *wayang kulit* (as it is called in Malay, Indonesian, and Javanese), as well as the historically embedded narratives and various other theater forms associated with it. These would continue to profoundly inflect the development of modern aesthetics in the region, including those of cinema.

Vernacular theater troupes in Indonesia also often referred to what they did as a form of wayang, while the director would be called a *dalang*, taken from the term

for the puppet master in Javanese shadow play (Biran 2008). Even as the localized Parsi roots of bangsawan were gradually overwritten and covered by further layers of appropriated practices, genres, and conventions, many Malayan troupes continued to use names like “Wayang Kassim,” or “Kassim’s Theater” after the name of the director. The term *wayang*, with its flexible meanings and attachment to screens via shadow play, was also applied to Malaysian cinema. *Nonton wayang* (watching wayang) is still used today as the Malay term for going to the movies.

As bangsawan and stambul expanded into regionally focused Malay-language forms, touring port cities like Surabaya, Batavia (now Jakarta), Medan, and Makassar, they thrived along these bustling trade routes, becoming a vital medium of cultural exchange in the region. As they did so, they changed constantly, but they also held fast to certain, regionally familiar ideas and practices like wayang and also Malay *pantun* verse. The latter was used as a basis for impromptu adaptation and translation of narratives, dialogue, and song. Using this local and regionally grounded approach to globalization and modernity, vernacular theaters developed in parallel with emergent print media like newspapers and regional literatures but exceeded the audience bases of these media. Written materials were also profoundly shaped by the region’s networked, transnational-archipelagic imaginaries (Bernards 2015) but were consumed more exclusively by educated elites.

The growth and success of bangsawan and stambul were further buttressed by the near-simultaneous emergence of similar but more geographically and linguistically localized forms such as *ketoprak* (Central Java), *ludruk* (East Java), *lenong* (West Java), *drama gong* (Bali), *likay* (Thailand), *comedia* and *sarsuela* (Philippines), and many others. With slightly more discernible nods to various local and regional traditions, these emergent theatrical styles took up a similarly acquisitive and transnationalized approach to form, genre, and narrative. Indonesian variants such as *ketoprak* and *ludruk* offered lower-cost alternatives to touring stambul or bangsawan shows, bringing local adaptations and combinations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wonders of the Deep*, or the regional-legend-based *Djula-Djuli Bintang Tiga* (*Three Star Djula-Djuli*) to appreciative audiences potentially priced out of touring stambul or bangsawan shows.⁴ In the Philippines, *comedias* “rehearsed what we might think of as the colonial uncanny” inevitably associated with the trade routes, narratives, and some of the conventions deployed by vernacular theaters. But at the same time, the theaters “furnished a context for domesticating” these new and overdetermined elements as they became “lodged in the vernacular” (Rafael 2005:117).

Among the Javanese subregional variants, *ludruk* and especially *ketoprak* followed the paths of Malay-language “operas” in establishing strong reputations that transcended provincial origins. As a result, well-known troupes from Solo, Surabaya, and elsewhere in Java began making frequent tours of other islands, further expanding and diversifying the regional aesthetic circulation established by bangsawan and stambul. From this now multipronged conglomeration grew still more

Malay- and Indonesian-language variants like *sandiwara* and *tonil* (about which more below), producing a distinctive field of emergent vernacular aesthetics that was unstoppable in its circulation around the region from the 1920s to the 1950s and beyond.

As noted above, these developments in Southeast Asia occurred at the same time that classical Hollywood films were establishing themselves elsewhere in the world as “the first global vernacular” and an “incarnation of *the modern*” (Hansen 2000:11–12, emphasis in original). Because of the theaters’ popularity and other economic, social, and political factors, the golden age of cinema in Southeast Asia would come a little later. Upstarts like the Filipino Malayan Movies, the region’s first native-owned film company founded in 1917 (Tofighian 2013:41), reiterated the salience of linguistic (and variably ethnically conceived) Malayness in much of Southeast Asia. But aside from a handful of films produced in the 1910s and 1920s in Singapore, Bangkok, Manila, and Jakarta (then Batavia), local filmmaking was sparse in most of the region until the 1930s and 1940s. With few movie screens overall and Hollywood films relegated to expensive, elite venues, live, vernacular theaters, not local or foreign films, first came to define an expansive regional aesthetic sphere and network—one that worked precisely to bridge “distinct, highly uneven and unequal formations of modernity” (Hansen 2012:613).

Stambul, bangsawan, ketoprak, and other variants did so by leveling and “lowering” various global and local genres and styles for mass consumption and regional circulation at a time when national borders were still largely in the making. Vernacular theaters also openly reflected and commented on their own processes of appropriation, adaptation, and reconstruction, integrating these elements into narratives and signature styles. As such, they resonate strongly with Hansen’s idea of a “sensory-reflexive horizon for the contradictory experience of modernity” (Hansen 2000:13). Yet their almost absurdly dense, globally curated repertoires took things a step further, while catering to and bridging the eclectic tastes of urban, and at times rural, audiences. In many ways, regional vernacular theaters exceeded both the cosmopolitanism and the stark contradictions that Hollywood or other film-centered modernist conglomerations in East Asia and elsewhere injected into the “optical consciousness” (Hansen 2000:12) of their viewers. With the rise and spread of American and Indian cinemas around the same time, narrative and generic tropes exported by film industries in Hollywood, Bombay, Calcutta, and elsewhere were soon included in the expansive purview of Southeast Asian vernacular theaters, where they were brought “back to life” in a way specific to the region.

At a time when local film industries were nascent, subject to heavier colonial regulation, or even nonexistent in much of the region, these emergent commercial theaters occupied a similar function to that expressed by films in much of the West and in South and East Asia. As an added boon, performing arts in many places were of less concern to European authorities than moving pictures, especially

because of movies' perceived ability to lend the appearance of objective reality to constructed scenarios (Tan 1989:251). Alternatively, foreign-made films could be seen as overly forthright in revealing the darker sides of Europeans, as if highlighting "the progress of thieves" (Ruppin 2016:22) in ways that might negatively influence perceptions of Westerners' local roles and authority. With less censorship (aside from isolated cases) and little need for expensive imported equipment, vernacular theaters flourished. The potential for transmedial and interclass "promiscuousness" that Hansen sees driving the circulation of vernacular modernist films elsewhere was also amplified in Southeast Asia by the malleability of live performances, which could be adapted and changed on the fly, including by adding short films at intermission, while actors explicitly responded to and "flirted" with viewers.

The broader, more permanent shift from live performance to film happened mainly in the mid-twentieth century, although theater retained a strong influence on film thereafter as well. As much of the region underwent parallel, uniquely rapid timelines of decolonization and nation-formation around the Second World War (see chapter 1), local film production expanded and began to take on more regular industrial structures. In the process, basic sets of conventions and assumptions about what constitutes a proper filmic "world" emerged. As I show in the next section, these regional conceptions of what cinema is and does were generated through the "lowbrow," archipelagic cosmopolitanism produced by the circulation of bangsawan, stambul, and other vernacular theaters. I position the theaters' historically grounded yet globalized interactive live engagements with spectators as a key—perhaps, indeed, *the* key—influence on the development of regional film styles.

PROMISCUOUS VERNACULAR THEATERS, INTERACTIVE MODERNIST FILMS

The enduring social and economic sustainability of the field inscribed by regional vernacular theaters was among the keys to its influence on local-cum-national cinemas. So, too, was the large, multiethnic pool of skilled creative labor that was assembled and trained around it.⁵ A majority of the producers, crew, and actors in early Malayan, East Indies, Thai, and Filipino film productions began their careers in vernacular theaters. Foundational 1930s and 1940s Filipino director and actor Gerardo de Leon, for example, came from a family of *sarsuelitas* (performers of *sarsuela* Tagalog theater). De Leon grew up between his family's performances and movie theaters, where he earned extra money playing piano for silent films in the 1920s (*Film in the Philippines*, 1983). The first Filipino feature film, *Dalagang Bukid* (*Country Maiden*, dir. Jose Nepomuceno, 1919), was also based on a popular *sarsuela* play and used *sarsuela* performers to sing and play its musical numbers live behind the screen during showings (Lumbera 2011:6). Following the precedent