

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

set by *Dalagang Bukid*, numerous Filipino musical films referenced and deployed the tropes of sarsuela from the 1920s until at least the 1960s. Bienvenido Lumbera argues that *komedya* (also spelled *comedia*), another emergent form of vernacular theater in the Philippines, was the source from which “the typical Filipino action film was to develop” (2011:7).

In Malaya, the Indies, and Thailand, when local film production began to ramp up in the 1920s and 1930s, performers and crew likewise shuttled back and forth between live theater and cinema until filmmaking became a more reliable source of income in the 1940s and 1950s. The result was further cross-pollination between local and regional artistic traditions, emergent vernacular performance styles that built on and further developed those traditions, and discourses and practices of cinema that grew more or less directly out of the theaters.<sup>6</sup> The interspersal of films between different scenes or narratives performed by vernacular theater troupes in Indonesia and elsewhere positioned movies as a part of a popular entertainment package still based in live performance.<sup>7</sup> In Thailand, May Ingawanij similarly sees cinema as “a kind of *horizontal* extension—in other words, as the adoption of another ‘genre’ in a series of proximate entertainment modes whose constituting paradigm they were . . . steeped in” (2012:112, emphasis added). In this sense, like the “birth” of bangsawan as an adapted form of Parsi theater performed in Malaya, the emergence of Thai cinema was positioned not as a broad, aesthetic-epistemic shift. Instead, it was understood as another version of embedded, traditional yet increasingly cosmopolitan forms such as *khon* (mask dance/drama) and vernacular theaters like *likay*. These were modified and combined in various ways as styles and talent migrated “horizontally” from live performance to the emergent local sphere of motion pictures, while theatrical forms continued in parallel, largely unimpeded for several decades.

Echoing this development, lines of influence and exchange between cinemas and vernacular theaters in Malaya can be characterized as horizontal and mutually constitutive, suggesting the region-wide, circulatory nature of what I am calling Southeast Asia’s archipelagic and interactive vernacular modernism. As Hassan Muthalib argues, early Malayan films approached their narratives, genre references, and modes of audience address in a purposely disjointed manner that drew explicitly on the kinds of global and local borrowing, adaptation, and combination that vernacular theaters like bangsawan had made into a hallmark of regional modernity. What Muthalib terms “classical” in the context of Malay-language media in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is hence “a motley collection of tear-jerkers, melodrama, horror, comedy and romance” that became “exceedingly popular with the locals” (2013:3).<sup>8</sup> Relations between crews of various nationalities were also, at least ideally and initially, readable in similar horizontal terms: by 1950, as Muthalib shows, locally based “Chinese, Malays, Indians, Filipinos and Indonesians all came together . . . to produce films in the Malay language and targeted at a Malay audience within the Nusantara region” (3). The emergent film industry in Singapore

(prior to Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965) was thus positioned as the locus of a particular yet constantly traveling "Malay cinema" that brought together not only aesthetics but also people from across the region and far beyond.<sup>9</sup>

Elmo Gonzaga explores the connections between geographic and media-based archipelagoes in Southeast Asia in a related way. He sees the horizontality of various archipelagic modes of exchange as anticipating the emergence of similar patterns in contemporary structures of new media around the world. Drawing on Lev Manovich and others, Gonzaga argues that databases and related "media infrastructures should be seen as having flat surfaces in their inclusion and combination of different modalities without any definitive linear arrangement." Accordingly, this "shapes how knowledge is shared, collaboration is fostered, and difference is managed" (2016:95). As I noted above, Hansen's (1999) view of classical Hollywood as a border-blurring, antihierarchical, low-modernist aesthetic field also positions cinema in terms that prefigure some of the ideals attached to new media and, in Southeast Asia, to old media. But amid the realities of colonialism, nationalism, and the inevitable effects of global economic forces, otherwise horizontally oriented regional, political-, social-, and media-conglomerations were also frequently subjected to vertical stratification, especially around issues of class and ethnicity. As I will show, this led, among other things, to the repositioning of classical Hollywood in a way that is fundamentally at odds with Hansen's view of its function elsewhere.

Especially in Malay-speaking parts of the region (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and parts of Southern Thailand and the Philippines), as the cross-pollination between vernacular theaters and filmmaking intensified, the sphere of live performance went through formative shifts of its own—changes that I argue have left a further, and for this study especially important, mark on regional cinemas. Beginning in the 1920s and increasing in the 1930s and 1940s, a class-based split in audience tastes and, in the references and forms employed by troupes, asserted itself. Popular vernacular theater groups like Orion and Dardanella, for example, began labeling themselves *tonil* (often spelled *tooneel*) to highlight these changes in their approach. This included relying on fixed scripts; drawing more heavily on European forms and international cinema than on local, Asian, or Middle Eastern sources; emphasizing "psychological realism"; and decoupling songs from narratives by positioning the former as filler relegated to breaks between dramatic scenes, while treating such "turns" as less important (Cohen 2006:338). Increasingly, conventions encouraging audience interactivity and the use of temporary stages and impermanent structures (signatures of most vernacular theaters until the 1920s) were seen "as marking a low level of theatrical evolution" (Cohen 2006:375). Along these lines, *tonil* (adopting the Dutch *toneel* or theater) and other emergent, scripted forms like *sandiwara* were progressively distinguished from the spontaneity and potential chaos of *stambul* and *bangsawan*, where stories were adapted on the fly by actors with highly developed skills in improvisation.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that with most vernacular theaters, “the public had a direct hand in things,” as an Indonesian theater critic put it (quoted in Cohen 2006:375), was becoming a problem for elite intellectuals, politicians, and audiences alike. Indeed, without formalized scripts or written dialogue, lines were often different across various performances of the same show and were frequently changed in response to audience reactions. As an aesthetic schism opened around this approach, it was not only theater critics who sided against it. In the 1930s and 1940s, many Western-educated Malay nationalists joined the chorus of those taking issue with the variability and unpredictability of forms like *bangsawan*, which strayed from the more “refined” cultural ideals they sought to promote, embed in society, and politicize (Tan 1989:252). In Indonesia, Pané argues that audiences at the time were similarly “split in two, between a small group that lived in a Westernized world” and preferred the new styles of *tonil*, and a much larger, less elite faction that did not (1953:30). As this suggests, despite shifting tastes among the upper classes, and even as nationalist movements gained force around the Second World War, *bangsawan*, *stambul*, and localized forms like *ketoprak* and *ludruk* retained significant audience bases among the lower classes. These forms thus continued to be performed regularly over the next several decades. In this sense, these vernacular theaters can also be said to have fallen into their own as low-modernist forms that would continue to grow by embedding themselves in regional cinemas.

I propose that these class- and audience-based splits in live performance produced two crucial effects on the film industries establishing themselves in Malaya and Indonesia in the 1940s and 1950s. As crews, actors, and producers migrated from stages to cameras and screens, local films inherited not only the formal approaches and air of direct spectator-interactivity long associated with vernacular theaters. They were also heir to the large, lower-class audiences who had stayed loyal to the wilder, spontaneous forms of *stambul*, *bangsawan*, and other vernacular variants. These spectators became the main source of income for Malayan and Indonesian cinemas, while crews adapted and employed the experiences and formal habits associated with vernacular theaters to please them (for this reason, actors and crews who migrated to film from elite *tonil* or *sandiwara* troupes were also brought back “down to earth” to some extent in their conventions and style). The established popularity of many stage actors and actresses also helped production houses and studios to quickly gain access to a larger fan base and served as a platform to launch film careers and build local industries. In this context, the success of a film came to depend on filling the seats in front of the limited number of “C” and “D” screens (some in temporary, theater-like venues without permanent walls or roofs) being constructed for mostly native, nonelite audiences.

This points to a further, still more important, difference from vernacular modernist aesthetics associated with other countries or regions: the stark economic and aesthetic separation of regionally produced films (and their audiences) from Hollywood and other imports. The latter dominated expensive, urban “A” and “B”

screens throughout Southeast Asia. Instead of becoming a source of low-modernist aesthetics as it does in Hansen's analysis, then, classical Hollywood is repositioned in Southeast Asia as an elite form of entertainment mainly consumed by a wealthy, literate, and well-educated minority. As Hansen (2000, 2012) shows, beginning in the 1930s, the mainstream films of Hollywood, Shanghai, and Tokyo became more naturalist in their form and approach, mirroring the attraction to scripted, more narrative-driven forms of theater among upper-class viewers in places like Java, Sumatra, and peninsular Malaya.

At the same time, as Jason McGrath argues, a smaller group of leftist filmmakers in prewar Shanghai were making Soviet-influenced films that explicitly mocked classical Hollywood in ways that might be compared to Southeast Asian tactics. These Chinese works, however, were much more focused on attacking the local hegemony of American films specifically. They did so via rapid, potentially disorienting combinations of diverse genres and the purposeful "irresolution" of plots and romantic arcs. In such films, "the spectator is expected to be agitated by unresolved contradictions and nudged . . . to take action in some way or another" (McGrath 2023:110). While these approaches to cinema also reflected the lasting popularity of Chinese theaters and literatures with similarly "jumpy" structures (105), they still largely catered to literate urban spectators who consumed Hollywood and mainstream Chinese films. Owing to the differing preferences of lower-class viewers in Southeast Asia, mainstream shifts toward naturalism, or the specific politicization of typically fragmented regional cinemas as a leftist tactic (about which more below), were effectively prevented from happening on a large scale or, often, at all. In the context of the region's particular vernacular modernism, the idea that "the public had a direct hand in things" and that films were "interactive" and jolting in their form and narrative was still the majority rule, even as stages were overtaken by screens.

Beyond audience preferences, forces of habit made this the case: in the 1950s and early 1960s, Malayan and Indonesian (and as we will see, Thai and Filipino) films were filled with players and crews who had trained, often for decades, to hone their skills at improvisation, formal appropriation, adaptation, and audience provocation. Building on these skills and preferences, Malayan filmmakers frequently attempted to allude to the presence of viewers, even though the "interaction" this produced was not actually live. In director/star P. Ramlee's hit *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (*The Three Bachelor Warriors*, 1959), for example, "the actors would turn to look at the camera and address the audience," an oft-repeated cinematic flourish with which "Ramlee delighted audiences and brought them into his storytelling" (Muthalib 2013:23–24). According to Hassan Muthalib, Ramlee was also one of the first in Malaya to create a truly successful cinematic adaptation of bangsawan in which "dialogue, mannerism and movements" reflected the influence of vernacular theaters. It was also crucial, however, to do so without the film simply coming across as a recording of a theater performance. Armijn Pané saw a similar,

rigid theatricality plaguing Indonesian productions in the 1940s and early 1950s (Muthalib 2013:23; Pané 1953:107). It is the resulting “live,” but also palpably cinematic, approach that Muthalib calls the classical style of Malay-language cinema (2013:3). I position this brand of cinematic classicism as another important element in the region’s vernacular modernism.

Both within and outside of Malay-speaking areas of Southeast Asia, self-reflexivity, cinematized theatricality, and formalized allusions to audience engagement were standardized throughout the mid-twentieth century as attractions that viewers came to expect. Thai popular films from the 1940s to the 1970s offer the most direct and unique examples of this. As I mentioned in chapter 1, the majority of Thai films at the time were produced on 16 mm film without synchronous sound or intertitles. Sound effects, music, and dialogue were added live during film screenings by teams of “versionists” who adapted vocal techniques from Thai vernacular theaters like *likay* and traditional forms such as *khon* (Ingawanij 2012:109). Building on the approaches of these traditional and vernacular theaters, cinematic dubbers often improvised and directly called out to audiences, going beyond mere formal approximations and making cinema into a live medium with which viewers could *actually* interact. Like others in the region, but even more explicitly, Thai vernacular modernism expressed a dynamic temporality that challenged the idea of cinema (and with it nationhood) as exclusively “modern” and forward-looking. Cameras and projectors were made to function in ways that more closely approximated (or were on a level with) popular theaters and enduring ritual/entertainment forms like traditional dance and shadow play. As elite tastes established their own, more exclusive, aesthetic spheres, it was these “low” and “old” media that cinema needed to level with and become more like in order to attract large local audiences.

Working in concert with dubbers to gauge and engage with spectators, Thai projectionists also frequently “lifted” or removed reels from the middle sections of films if they felt the audience was becoming bored. Narratives were hence pulled apart and reedited on the fly, while the gaps this created were bridged by dubbers’ improvised dialogue (Ingawanij 2018:25). Mirroring Malaysia and Indonesia, the Thai approach and its stark difference from Western classical cinemas resulted in a class-based split in Thai viewership. Popular, vernacular theater-derived 16 mm cinema emerged from and was sustained by “the communal viewing conventions of the lower-class and rural upcountry audiences” who were outpriced by, and generally uninterested in, the Hollywood and Chinese films shown in luxuriant Bangkok movie houses (Ainslie 2018:304). With their own brand of low, vernacular cosmopolitanism, 16 mm films were “particularly opposed to the modernity and ‘progress’” (314) conveyed by high-budget American films shown in urban venues with which local productions “largely did not compete for revenue or overlap in any way” (Ainslie 2020:178). The feeling was mutual: for Thai and foreign elites, popular 16 mm films and the intermedial, theatrical, and lower-class media

ecosystem supporting them were generally dismissed as an embarrassing blight on emergent national aesthetics.

In the Philippines, wealthier viewers with higher levels of formal education similarly cited the theatrical, “backward” nature of popular local films to suggest that their lower-class audiences were culturally and intellectually lacking. For example, Filipino critic Bienvenido Lumbera argues that Tagalog movies influenced by sarsuela theater in the inter- and postwar periods were supported by “a special market consisting mainly of viewers whose low socio-economic status had impaired their ability to fully comprehend the language and the content of Hollywood cinema” (1984:196). These audiences were disparaged by urban elites as *bakya* (clogs), or clog-wearing peasants. In a similar vein, in 1953, Usmar Ismail wondered in writing if “*Bang Amat* and *Mbok Minah*,” an imagined Indonesian lower-class husband and wife, “are going to understand me if I create a scene in . . . [a typically American] way” (1983:181). Yet these were the viewers that filmmakers in both places most needed to impress. For Lumbera, this ostensibly embarrassing condition also offered Filipino cineastes a built-in audience base. Although markets remained more challenging in Indonesia, like their Malayan-Singaporean and Thai counterparts at the time, Filipino producers were able to “not only survive . . . [but] flourish . . . with great vitality” (2011:8). I position the “backward” yet economically and aesthetically enabling tendencies of regional movies to formally interact with and “talk back” to their faithful, lower-class viewers as a key element distinguishing the nature of Southeast Asian vernacular modernisms from those developing elsewhere.

In one sense, this sociocultural bifurcation made Southeast Asian films appear regressive vis-à-vis popular cinematic trends in much of the rest of the world. Elsewhere, films were becoming less overtly intermedial while presenting formally “sealed” onscreen spaces that appeared self-functioning and fundamentally separate from those watching them. But from another perspective, regional producers’ close attention to audiences’ tastes and constant, almost on-the-fly, adjustments to content and style look forward to what was then the distant, unknowable future of global mass media. Building on the work of Gonzaga (2016) and others, I propose that regional film industries and the screen cultures around them in the mid-twentieth century anticipate not only the horizontality and fluidity of digital infrastructures; they also resemble a protomodel for the obsessive attention to algorithms and instantaneous digital feedback that currently drives the approaches of content creators, from independent YouTubers to hegemonic global streaming platforms. The fragmented mixtures of elements and styles on 1950s and 1960s Southeast Asian screens might additionally be seen as approximating the vast searchable “interactive” databases of films and series provided by services like Netflix, Amazon, or Mubi. Comparing these temporally disparate practices and media ecologies showcases a continuity in broad, global thinking and selectivity, as well as in producers’ and directors’ attempts to placate the varied,

“low”-yet-cosmopolitan tastes of the majority of viewers—tastes that are still, and perhaps more than ever, potentially at odds with those of (mainly elite, well-educated) filmmakers themselves.

The influence of vernacular theaters and other determining factors such as the limited numbers of screens for locally made films effectively compelled filmmakers and nascent studios to take a dynamic, populist approach to their work in the 1950s and early 1960s. Just over a decade later, Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino, and other founders of explicitly oppositional cinema movements in South America would insist that films should be conceived to facilitate a profound connection to mass audiences (Gabriel 1982; Shohat and Stam 2014). While the results in Southeast Asia were often quite distinct from the loftier ideals of Third Cinema, I suggest that regional movies were, from their inception, eminently “by and for the people” (so perhaps Solanas and Getino should have been careful what they wished for). Yet despite the deep entanglement of economic factors with style in the region, there was still a palpably political, “oppositional” effect to film aesthetics and film markets there.

The live theater-derived market conditions and audience makeup in Southeast Asia marginalized Hollywood movies and other Western products, reducing their influence on films consumed by the biggest national and regional audiences. At the same time, unlike many other cinemas in the world, the particularities of the regionally focused market and vernacular aesthetics in Southeast Asia shaped local cinemas in ways that challenged emergent ideas of films as necessarily representative of the national. Like vernacular theaters, films in Southeast Asia presented highly “impure” outlooks that constructed, deconstructed, and then rebuilt emergent nations in particular ways, while embedding regional and transnational fragments and reflecting on doing so. This process anticipated both the formal structures and collectivist political stances later (at times far later) employed by South American and other variants of Third Cinemas.

In the next section, my close reading of *Tiga Dara* provides a case in point that demonstrates what I term the productive “undecidedness” of Southeast Asian vernacular modernisms vis-à-vis the ideals of elite national, regional, and global aesthetic regimes (including explicitly oppositional ones). But this was not necessarily an ideal situation for all parties. As I show, *Tiga Dara* is emblematic of the fact that stylistic choices were in many cases forced on filmmakers by a combination of economic conditions and official political apathy toward local film output. Yet despite the market orientation and ostensible Hollywood “smell” that were lamented by *Tiga Dara*’s own (elite) director, I propose that the film’s *de rigueur* use of stylistic bricolage and formal interactivity align with regional cinematic approaches that reflect on and contest the dominance of transnational movie trends, and of the importation of rigidly “modern,” national identity along with them. The film’s challenges to how modernity should be shown, experienced, or framed draw on the force of certain regional traditions that, as we have seen, are

themselves always in the process of change. I begin with an analysis of the specific market forces pushing and pulling *Tiga Dara*, especially its form and narrative, highlighting the ways in which both Hollywood and other regional movies were included or excluded from the social, economic, and aesthetic calculations of such a film.

#### THE REGIONAL FILM MARKET AS MODERN PRESSURE COOKER

Engagement with Hollywood and other foreign players was one of the main themes taken up in the first book-length study of Indonesian cinema, published in 1953 by Jakarta-based poet, playwright, filmmaker, and scholar Armijn Pané. According to Pané's figures, more than eight hundred Hollywood films were screened annually in Indonesia between 1950 and 1952 (1953:76), making up the majority of foreign-film imports (one thousand to thirteen hundred per year altogether). The total number of cinemas (650 at the time, including open air venues) was tiny for a population of seventy million, and with the influence of American studio representatives posted in most major cities in the region, the hold of Hollywood films on urban, class A and B theaters was virtually absolute. The C and D theaters to which regionally produced films were relegated constituted only 15 percent of the already small total number of screens. This made things difficult and frustrating for local producers, who, despite having the largest potential audiences, had very limited venues through which to attract and exploit them. At the same time, however, the class/screen split enforced a sort of financial and stylistic "freedom" from Hollywood: Indonesian films competed for their tiny market share not with high-budget Western imports but mostly with the Philippine, Indian, and Malayan movies preferred by the lower-class audiences who patronized, and were carefully targeted by, local productions (Pané 1953:75–77; Masak 2016:165–67).

These conditions made indelible marks on films like *Tiga Dara*, which was released at the height of the "Golden Age" of Malay cinema, consisting of films produced in relatively opulent and well-funded studios in Singapore, before its split from Malaysia in 1965. *Tiga Dara* included numerous song-and-dance numbers that evoked not only Hollywood but even more so the work of top-selling Malaysian cineastes like Malay actor-director P. Ramlee or Indian and Filipino expat directors such as S. Ramanathan or Eddy Infante.<sup>11</sup> During this period, Singapore-based Shaw Brothers' and Cathay Keris studios (the former produced Ramlee's films) effectively ruled regional screens, turning out between ten and twenty Malay-language films per year. Owing to the status of Malay as an established regional lingua franca, Malay-language films produced in Singapore could be easily understood by Indonesian audiences. By 1954, a number of Indonesian filmmakers, including Usmar Ismail, were increasingly feeling the effects of such stiff competition on their bottom lines. Armijn Pané went as far as calling for "a way to