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.[11] 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

investigate the reasons these imported [Malayan] films are more interesting, and then follow their strategy, while improving on it" (1953:107).

Adding to the pressure on local producers, urban critics and nationalist intellectuals rarely praised their work, chiding filmmakers for doing what was needed to survive the difficult market conditions: adhering to particular regional aesthetic patterns heavily influenced by vernacular theaters. Producers and directors were often caught between economic pressures to make films a certain way and the opinions of reviewers, who most filmmakers otherwise saw as their intellectual peers. Usmar Ismail's *Lewat Djam Malam* (*After the Curfew*, 1954), for example, flirted more faithfully than most with Hollywood and European approaches. The result is often compared to film noir, and critics found in the film's unusual generic homogeneity the "seeds of development for real film art" (Situmorang 1955a:9–10). Based on its lauding by elite reviewers, *Lewat Djam Malam* took top honors at the first Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) in 1955. Afterward, it was one of the "lucky" few that found its way to screens amid an increasingly difficult box-office situation that included an unprecedented backlog of Indian movies. Yet once in theaters, the film's self-consciously global style trapped it in a small, upper-class niche of the lower-class market conditions it ultimately depended on as a regional production. Even with newly imposed limits on Malayan imports, *Lewat Djam Malam* performed poorly on C and D screens and began a slide toward bankruptcy for Ismail's production house, Perfini.[12]

Because of the failure of Ismail's "idealism" in his attempts to subvert, or at least stretch, the aesthetic standards shaped by the regional market, Jakarta critic Salim Said asserts that the success of *Tiga Dara* was imperative in order to save Perfini from closing its doors for good (1991:57). In 1953, Ismail's film *Krisis* (*Crisis*) had succeeded in exploiting a controversial rule instituted by Jakarta's mayor stipulating that all A and B cinemas in the capital would have to screen at least one Indonesian film every three months (Masak 2016:174). *Krisis* was one of the only local films to garner any interest from elite viewers, while most others fell flat. Even then, local representatives for American studios had fought bitterly to end *Krisis*'s A-screen run earlier than planned in order to make way for their own Hollywood products, at one point resulting in a physical confrontation with Ismail (Masak 2016:175). In light of the extremely limited appeal of local films in elite venues and the political economic forces that further limited their chances of success, trying to duplicate the rare, crossover success of *Krisis* represented a significant risk. For Ismail, however, market conditions in the mid-1950s left few options other than to stake the future of Perfini on *Tiga Dara* beating the odds once again and wooing both its core C and D viewers *and* local elites. Ismail had been proud of *Krisis*, but as his friend and fellow Perfini director D. Djajakusuma tells it, the higher levels of pressure and aesthetic calculation involved in *Tiga Dara* meant that "Usmar was quite ashamed of the movie. . . . How difficult it was for him to accept that he had been forced to make such a film" (quoted in Said 1991:57).

In the end, despite Ismail's disgust at what he considered a low-grade entertainment movie, the effort and stress paid off, and *Tiga Dara* duplicated or exceeded the success of *Krisis*, playing screens from A to D throughout Jakarta and in lower-class venues in other cities. Aside from the complaints of contemporary critics like Juniarto, both the market and history have been kind to the film, which is considered a classic and has been licensed by Netflix and Bioskop.com, an Indonesian streaming service. In hindsight, considerable thought and skill are evident in the picture, which gave upper-class viewers a Hollywood fix that rivaled the technical standards of Tinseltown or, at the very least, those of Singapore. At the same time, *Tiga Dara* comments on, and performatively mocks, itself for putting on Hollywood airs, giving regular viewers of regional films precisely the kind of self-referential satire they were accustomed to. In doing so, it brings to the fore the playful, self-reflexive structures of appropriation and display inherited from the emergent-cum-traditional-cum-cosmopolitan approaches of vernacular theaters, eclipsing the "clearly modern" odors of naturalism and rigid formal consistency most broadly associated with Hollywood's global influence.

This is the case even, and in fact especially, in *Tiga Dara*'s glamorous opening number. Hansen's vernacular modernist precept of watching while "participating" in the broader cultural patterns presented onscreen is amplified and literalized by the scene's regional emphasis on liveness and theatricality. This in turn inflects the sisters' abovementioned plan to *nonton*—or watch a movie on a fancy, Djakarta-wood screen—as part of the celebration of Nunung's twenty-ninth birthday. As the women form a Tinseltown dance-line and break into exuberant song, their male friend Herman (Bambang Hermanto) begins to move and shake along with them, acting as if he will follow the women out of the kitchen and into the private areas of the home. Here already, the specter of Western-style shifts in gender relations is called up only to be performatively exorcised. The exorcism is carried out through the agency of local values that seep in through intentional cracks in the film's formal bricolage of styles and references. Finding himself at the tradition-laden boundaries of the home's public spaces (its kitchen and parlor), Herman comes to his senses and stops abruptly, incurring stern glances from father and grandma for even entertaining thoughts of passing into the restricted, feminized sphere within. The gag is filled with winking, self-aware humor, but audiences are clearly expected to sympathize with the view that certain restraints on access to gendered spaces should remain in place.

Simultaneously, however, a measure of flexibility is shown toward the mechanics of emergent modes of viewing to which even the most persistent human taboos do not necessarily apply. Where Herman must stop, the softly clicking phantom in the room—the motion picture camera—continues unimpeded. Taking the viewing public into ostensibly uncharted territory, it implicitly offers up something "foreign": what one would expect to see on an elite urban movie screen, framed here as a special attraction within an Indonesian film. Flowing past the home's

FIGURE 8. Nenny pulls Nana out from behind a wooden divider as if reminding her she needs to undress in front of the camera (*left*). Nana unzips the back of her dress just before the camera "tastefully" pans away to a table where the dress will be placed (*right*).

various customary barriers, the camera follows the girls into the back, ogling obediently as they prepare to shed their house dresses for a trip to the city (fig. 8), a portrait of Marylin Monroe hung suggestively on the wall behind them. But instead of positioning the audience as voyeurs who can enjoy the illicit view without being called out for it, camera and actors collaborate to turn the scene into a spectacle that highlights the fact and the process of giving such emergent pleasures to viewers.

As Nana (Mieke Widjaja), the middle sister, is about to change her clothes behind a movable divider at the back of the room, she is stopped by Nenny (Indriati Iskak), the youngest sister. Gesturing theatrically in the direction of the lens, Nenny acknowledges the mechanical wraith capturing the scene, along with the audience and its presumed desire to see what is normally hidden. Not missing a beat, Nana advances toward the camera, flashing a practiced smile and catching the light perfectly as she unzips, while turning her back so as not to show *too* much. As if taking the hint, the camera tilts down to a table where Nana will place her clothes momentarily, avoiding the potential for any actually explicit imagery. Across a series of jump cuts, the table is filled, suggestively but tastefully, with the girls' discarded dresses and undergarments. What is "revealed" in the end is mainly that the work of cinema is premised on an intricate dance of hiding and showing, in this case driven by estimations of the shifting cultural, political traits and desires of the expanded group of regional viewers with whom *Tiga Dara* seeks to interact. The scene reads as a self-reflexive interaction between actors and camera—human and mechanistic elements of the cinematic apparatus—that acknowledges the presence of the audience, while gesturing toward its particular attributes. At the same time, those attributes are implicitly presented as subject to negotiation.

Engaging the broader contexts of Indonesian and regional cinemas at the time, the screen functions as a cracked mirror for audiences to see themselves in,

reflecting the actual splits that divide them: if the opening scene prepares us to go to the movies in grand, idealistic style, a later one takes us there in something closer to the reality faced by the majority of viewers. While Herman is a university student of above-average means, when he invites Nenny, the youngest sister, to watch a film at the same, A-class theater, he is shown carefully counting the money in his pocket before ferrying her to the venue on the back of his bicycle (the scene is filmed at the Metropole, an actual elite theater and the site of *Krisis*'s earlier success and Usmar Ismail's fistfight with a local Hollywood agent in defense of his film's right to continue screening there). When it turns out scalpers have raised prices even higher, Herman balks and is forced to settle for separate seats for Nenny and himself. *Tiga Dara*, while catering to the rich, "Djakartawood" crowd that it hopes to woo, simultaneously implies that A-list establishments like the Metropole are elitist and beyond the reach of most Indonesians, even upwardly mobile ones like Herman. While including American bits and flourishes as attractions to expand its audience, Hollywood's local positioning as the figurehead of an elite, *high*-modernist aesthetics is reflected on in a negative light by *Tiga Dara*. Ismail's "national" film is hence premised on a self-reflexive engagement with a region-wide problem.

Despite the bad taste it left in the writer-director's mouth, Hollywood makes impressive entrances throughout *Tiga Dara*. But as soon as it appears, it is, as in the scene of the girls' un/dressing above, doubled back on and translated in ways that privilege the vernacular habits and tastes of lower-class viewers. American flourishes are framed as foreign, high-modern aesthetics in a way that would allow elites to gloat while the masses in the movie theater across town could enjoy a good laugh at their expense. The film as a whole is also divided into different sections that appear specifically addressed to different audiences. The film's three glamorous opening numbers are followed by a further three in which national/regional modernity is given a different feel, produced by distinct sets of visual, aural, and cultural references.

The first of these numbers consists of a youthful *tamasya*, or outing (in this case to the countryside), made into a fantasy song-and-dance sequence for which the main reference appears to be Indian popular cinema. At the time of *Tiga Dara*'s release, aside from Malayan musicals, Indian song-and-dance films were the most pressing competition for local movies. As noted above, this was due especially to importers flooding local screens with hundreds of Indian titles they had stockpiled prior to the planned imposition of an annual limit (Masak 2016:197). While the *tamasya* scene clearly recalls the typical Hindi-language fare of the time, it also appears intentionally ludicrous and over-the-top, in line with the regional low-modernist practice of films reflecting and commenting on their own aesthetic borrowings.

Along with the visuals, the music captures the transnational *masala* or "mixed" spirit of much of Bollywood's signature music, but it distinguishes itself

by showcasing genres popular in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. Flute, Spanish-sounding acoustic guitar (played by Nana, the middle sister), and a hand drum are displayed as the diegetic sources of the scene's song, to which nondiegetic woodwinds and strings are added. For Andrew Weintraub, conglomerations of varied sounds and musical textures like this build on the region's historical position as a hub for global exchange, tying "together youth cultures in Asia and beyond" (including East Asian, Arabic, Portuguese, Hawaiian, and others in a mix rivaling vernacular theaters) while reveling in stylistic and cultural impurity (2022:2). *Tiga Dara*'s next two numbers take viewers deeper into this regional soundscape, featuring back-to-back house parties filled with similarly nonaligned, populist transnationalism. While the energy is equally exuberant, the style is less openly absurd in these more realistic scenes where the music is played within the film's diegetic world. Unlike the Bollywood picnic above, visuals, sound, and mise-en-scène mimic what one might see at an actual social gathering at the time.

One scene showcases rumba- and cha-cha-infused music and dancing typical of the 1950s global craze for Latin rhythms, which had been adapted by groups in Indonesia and regionally since the 1930s (Weintraub 2022:2). The other party features Sumatran and Malayan adaptations of Arab, Egyptian, and other Middle Eastern popular musics (this style is locally referred to as *gambus*—a genre that, along with *keroncong*, also led the way to regional Latinization in the 1930s). The musicians are surrounded by young men and women in Muslim-accented garb, adding religious overtones to the party, while the music and dancing highlight distinctions between Indonesian and Malayan adaptations of Islamic culture. In the typical Middle Eastern variants that regional films localize, popular music is generally kept separate from religion. Both scenes also evoke popular tropes from Malayan films like Ramlee's *Penarik Beca* (*Trishaw Puller*, 1956), *Semerah Padi* (*As Red as Rice*, 1956), or *Bujang Lapok* (*Overage Bachelors*, 1957).

The difference in formal structure and key references between *Tiga Dara*'s first three numbers and its second three blankets the film's initially expensive, Hollywood smell with a typically regional, archipelagic bouquet of borrowing, adaptation, and self-referentiality. If we include the music, the list of global and local sources is virtually countless. I argue, however, that the inclusion of clearly distinguished "high" and "local" sections (the latter of which are stylistically "low" despite featuring middle-class scenarios) in a single film reveals the particular structure of the regional market for cinema at the time. The structure further points to the unique role of Hollywood as a marker of rarefied elite, rather than base vernacular, culture. Even if Ismail had wanted to completely smooth over the film's many distinct stylistic approaches corresponding to the stark socioeconomic and aesthetic stratification of its target audiences, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to do so. Despite its perception in hindsight as a symptom of misguided Djakartawood idealism, *Tiga Dara* is a long stretch from the kind of "transparent," formally homogeneous narrative vehicle that became the hallmark

of other vernacular modernist traditions like Hollywood or the naturalist screen-modernisms of interwar Shanghai or Tokyo.

APPARENT ANOMALIES AND DUALIST COSMOPOLITANISM

It is important to note that although the above patterns are well-established and can be easily identified throughout much of the region, they are not absolute. In Thailand, for example, despite the dominance of 16 mm films shot without sound and hence reliant on dubbers or versionists for exhibition, a few filmmakers—following a more globally familiar cinematic path—pushed hard to make "quality," synch-sound cinema shot exclusively on 35 mm film. One such work, Rattana Pestonji's 1954 *Santi-Vina* (fig. 9), won awards at that year's Asia-Pacific Film Festival in Tokyo with its consistent, steady approach to genre and style and its more or less "sealed," noninteractive onscreen spaces. Mary Ainslie calls Pestonji the "sole Thai auteur" active during the Cold War (2020:172). The noirish crime drama *Prae dum* (*Black Silk*), another one of Pestonji's seven feature films (made between 1951 and 1964), also screened at the Berlin International festival in 1961.

The Philippines, with four established film studios in the 1950s, was perhaps most successful in producing cineastes whose work was recognized in regional festivals and markets and also in the West. Actor, director, and producer Manuel Conde, for example, screened his 1950 biopic *Genghis Khan* in competition at the 1952 Venice Film Festival. But even then, like the Indonesian company Perfini, Conde's Manuel Conde Pictures, founded in 1947, mainly turned out films that centered on a now-familiar "ingenious potpourri of Western and local mythologies and pop culture" (Francia 2002:347) preferred by local viewers. Conde is thus perhaps best remembered for his *Juan Tamad* series (1947–63) based on the eponymous legendary folk figure, who is famous for his laziness. Like other intergeneric action-comedy-dramas in the region, the series also succeeded in "giving birth to the popularity of political satire" in the Philippines by showcasing the "absurdity" seen as inherent in national politics at the time (Cruz 2011:385).

Prominent Indonesian writer-director Bachtiar Siagian can perhaps be seen as more thoroughly bucking regional vernacular modernist trends by making many of his films in a style that was much more self-consciously Hollywoodian.[13] Currently, the only complete copy of a Siagian film available—the 1962 romantic tragedy *Violetta*—is the Indonesian movie that, in my reading, most closely resembles the consistent, continuous form, narrative, and themes associated with classical Hollywood. *Violetta* and other Siagian films were also quite popular, resulting in a long-standing rivalry with Usmar Ismail. In light of this rivalry, Siagian appears as a rare example of American vernacular modernism exerting an influence in Southeast Asia that is closer to how Hansen (1999, 2000) sees it functioning elsewhere in the world. But even such unusual engagements with Western cinema are