

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 *Praedum* (*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



FIGURE 9. A still from Rattana Pestonji's 35 mm classic *Santi-Vina*. Courtesy of the Thai Film Archive.

surrounded by seeming paradoxes that stem from localized reinterpretations of the geopolitics of movies.

Despite the more authentic American scents emanating from his work, for example, Siagian was championed by the staunchly anti-Western Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which also led the charge to ban Hollywood imports in the early 1960s.¹⁴ In a 1957 essay in the magazine *Purnama*, Siagian, who first encountered film theory in a translated copy of Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Film Art* (Siagian and Yusuf 2013), further displayed his leftist credentials: he used the Marxist principles of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis associated with Soviet montage figures like Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein to explain how cinema functions at a basic level (Siagian 1957:9–10). On one hand, such notable exceptions to the forces that I have shown to govern most Southeast Asian cinemas are tempting to frame as mere anomalies. But on the other hand, they constitute further evidence of the transnational nature of regional and national filmmaking and the fact that, in line with the tastes of upper-class critics and audiences, there were and are spaces for expression of more Western and globally inflected aesthetics alongside localized ones.

During Singapore's golden age in the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, big studios like Cathay Keris also often had "sister" operations locally and in Hong Kong that produced a separate set of films in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Hokkien for the large subsection of local Chinese-speaking audiences. The same producers responsible for the typically fragmented interactive regional vernacular modernist Malay films thus also produced works like the Cantonese-language *Ye Lin Ye* (*Moon over Malaya*, dir. Kim Chun and Yuen Chor, 1957), which appear to more closely follow the protonaturalist patterns of East Asian vernacular modernisms

as Hansen formulates them. This explicit splitting of form and content along ethnic lines also stands as a regional anomaly that reflects the policies and planning specific to British colonialism in Malaya and Singapore. But it can also be read as constituting a variation in local responses to the same fragmented cosmopolitan tastes and diverse, multiracial, and polylingual populations that have defined the region for hundreds of years, and not solely owing to the influence of Western imperialism. The split in this case also builds on the specific patterns defining vernacular theaters in Singapore and elsewhere in Malaya, where popular Chinese operas competed with Malay forms like *bangsawan*, with each at times also borrowing conventions and stories from each other (Tan 1993).

For Rosalind Galt, the ethnic divisions specific to Malayan Singapore also created potentially productive combinations: a “polyglot mix” that was “one of the few places where Indian, Chinese, and Malay people worked together” so closely in the region (2021:42). This is quite similar to what Jakarta-based novelist and filmmaker Armijn Pané saw as a key basis of the ideal “heterogeneous psyches” that he sought to further develop as an ideal foundation for nationalism (Pané 1953:87). Reflecting on the inspirations for his film *Antara Bumi dan Langit* (*Between the Earth and the Sky*, 1950), Pané wrote that he combined American and British approaches to cinema; Russian literary flourishes; and German and Indonesian musical styles, including ones typical of regional vernacular theaters. Yet for Pané, the diversity of his film was not simply a matter of aesthetic fragmentation. He also explicitly promoted his film as a “collaboration among many different nationalities” (1953:87) with roles both behind and in front of the camera.

Along with local Chinese and Dutch workers, this interethnic collaboration included a codirector and cinematographer known as Dr. Huyung. Originally a Korean citizen, Huyung was inducted into the Japanese army during World War II; he deployed to Indonesia, where he chose to stay after the war, becoming known as a founding national filmmaker and film educator. In front of the camera, Pané also prominently positioned Grace, an “Indo” or mixed Indonesian and European woman, as lead actress. As with other elements of the nation, he saw calling attention to the plight of mixed-race citizens as promoting a healthy “dualism” (Pané 1953:87). Pané also hoped that the open display of difference and formalized incongruity in *Antara Bumi dan Langit* would garner the film’s appreciation beyond the borders of Indonesia. Yet rather than sending films to America or Europe, he envisioned an alternative circulation that expanded on the regional market for most Southeast Asian films, including “India, the Philippines, Malaya and Egypt”—countries he perceived as having “already introduced their own films to Indonesia” in a way that would potentially facilitate mutual exchange (Pané 1953:88–89).

I position racial diversity as both an especially important and a historically volatile aspect of the region’s specific brand of vernacular modernism. From a much earlier time, before the advent of local productions, cinema exhibition

is argued by Tofghian as an emergent site of mixing among different groups, one with the potential to “disrupt . . . [colonial] racial divisions and creat[e] . . . more inclusive social spaces” (2013:61). But as we have seen, related spaces such as those created by vernacular theaters were eventually stratified and turned into bastions of supposed aesthetic and cultural backwardness. Similar conflicts arose around the region’s cinemas in the era of decolonization. Like the real tensions driving the different ingredients in the fragmentary, globally heterogeneous combinations of style and references in *Tiga Dara*, the ethnically diverse makeup of films behind and on the screen at times caused bitter conflicts. As Pané found out soon after the release of *Antara Bumi dan Langit*, for example, its inclusion of Indonesia’s first onscreen kiss, highlighting what he called the “foreign customs” (85) of the film’s mixed-race female protagonist, did not go over well. As a result, the film had to be recut, excising the kiss, and was rereleased under the title *Frieda*, the main character’s name.

Despite Pané’s well-meaning, if perhaps poorly calculated, idealism, tensions over racial difference and colonial legacies seen as advantaging certain “foreign” groups over others were common in Indonesia as elsewhere in the region. Thomas Barker points out that in a 1951 newspaper article, writer-director, poet, and essayist Asrul Sani, a close collaborator and friend of Usmar Ismail’s, specifically singled out ethnically Chinese producers for attack over perceptions that they favored “entertainment” over “nationalist” films (Barker 2019:31; Sani 1997:302). But in this case, the problem aired by Sani and others at the time was arguably more about the nature of national cinema and its economic support systems and did not question the fact of Chinese-Indonesians in the film industry itself; along with Indonesians of Indian descent, they have continued to play an important role in local filmmaking and exhibition.

In Malaysian Singapore, however, the foundational racial divisions, and associated tensions, led to a disastrous impasse. The increasingly ethnonationalist stance of Malay intellectuals and politicians led to the broad replacement of Indian and Chinese filmmakers with Malay ones and to gradual trends toward more homogeneous, “realist” films. Furthermore, racial divisions also caused the permanent splitting of Malaysia and Singapore into separate nations defined along explicitly ethnic lines in 1965.¹⁵ As I take up in more detail in the next chapter, the unprecedented postcolonial national split caused Singapore’s once regionally dominant film industry to suddenly go “blind,” as production came to a near standstill in both nations for the next fifteen years.

In my analysis, the rapid dissolution of Malaysia and Singapore after only eight years of independence from British rule highlights both the strength and the fragility that coexist in the extreme fragmentation and theatrical self-reflexivity that define regional vernacular modernisms. In some sense, the sudden demise of Singapore-Malayan cinema that brought its golden age to an end can be related to the growing ethnonationalist repression of the typically diverse, archipelagic

forms, approaches, and narratives that local and regional audiences demanded. In chapter 3, I explore the ways in which the conventions of regional films constitute a particular kind of force—one that, like the ideals and challenges of racial diversity, is imbued with the potential to unify but also to break apart or destroy another crucial aspect of a region's collective national modernities: the politics of gender. More specifically, I closely read the cinematic representation of gender and power via what I term the “matrifocal gaze.”