4

Signatures of the Invisible

Southeast Asian Patriarchs and the Feminization of Resistance

THE MATRIFOCAL, THE *BOMBA*, AND THEIR URBAN AFTERLIVES

Serbis (*Service*, dir. Brilliante Mendoza, 2008): In 2008, a mother in her late thirties ceaselessly walks up and down sets of stairs that connect screens, seats, and projection booths in what was once a majestic, A-class movie theater in Angeles City, the Philippines. Its walls are now full of graffiti, and its art-deco flourishes are dirty and in need of repair. The woman's entire extended family lives in converted offices inside the building, under the watchful eye of her own mother, the matriarch and big boss of a dwindling business that once included three bustling movie houses owned and managed by their group of relatives. But now, as digital technologies and mall-based multiplexes shift screen cultures and economies the world over, they barely scrape by with the semi-illicit profits from a single dilapidated venue. As a teenaged niece gets ready to accompany the matriarch to court for her divorce from the movie house's philandering former patriarch, the camera catches the niece naked, drying herself with a towel and preening in front of a mirror. As she applies copious amounts of lipstick, she strikes stereotypically sexualized poses and whispers "I love you" to her own image, seeming to imagine herself facing the eyes of a lover. The shot travels from her face to her midsection and breasts, where it repeatedly, exploitatively returns and hovers, raising questions about whether a Western-style male gaze has finally invaded Southeast Asian, or at least Filipino, cinema.

That the shots of the niece look sharply up at her, however, begins to suggest a possible ruse, which is confirmed when the scene cuts to reveal the source of the camera's look: a boy of around eight years old, who is quickly outed and chased

off by the object of his snooping regard. Frequently featured throughout the film, the boy's curious, bespectacled peeking is directed at everyone and everything in the theater, including the seventy-something matriarch as she, too, towels off after a bath. At one point the boy shows up wearing garish lipstick that he seems to have applied himself, suggesting an engagement with the space and its inhabitants that is not controlling or strictly masculine but based on appropriating and trying out what it sees. As we soon realize, this is what the niece was also practicing in front of the mirror—positioning herself in the kinds of poses and states of undress that are regularly presented in the mix of local, East Asian, and Western softcore pornographic fare that has become the theater's specialty. Further complicating the gender politics of the theater, the mainly heterosexually oriented fare on its screens is consumed almost exclusively by homosexual male spectators who "imitate" but likewise transform the acts onscreen. They do so together with male and transgender companions who offer an intimate corporeal *serbis* (service) in the darkened seating areas for a relatively small fee.

Although fictionalized, *Serbis* is driven by an impulse to document aesthetic practices that emerged in the dark corners of aging Southeast Asian movie palaces following the region-wide economic collapses and reforms of the 1990s. Elmo Gonzaga sees this and other Mendoza films as also engaged in selling "slum voyeurism," an aspect he argues to overshadow "the libidinal experiences that transpire in the movie theater" (2017:119). Images of the goings on in the seating areas in front of the screen are nonetheless striking and plentiful. Perhaps these especially stood out to me given the nature of my own investigations of historical patterns involving interactions between regional viewers and films. In 2012 and 2013, I conducted ethnographic research on similar procedures at the once majestic Rex Theater, built to serve Dutch colonial patrons in Pasar Senen, Jakarta (then Batavia) in the 1920s. Following independence, the Rex was among the capital's elite venues exclusively presenting Hollywood fare and shunning locally produced works. Likely also due to competition from mall-based multiplexes beginning in the late 1980s, the Rex was subsequently split into two interconnecting venues with multiple screens. By the time of my research in 2012, it closely mirrored the venue in *Serbis*: a dusty, rundown shadow of its former self relegated to attracting patrons through allowing companions (in this case both male and female) to wait outside the ticket booth and offer extra services inside the theater for an additional fee.

What especially interested me in both *Serbis* and the Senen Grand and Mulia Agung theaters, as the Jakarta venues were called in 2012, was how they allowed viewers and would-be ethnographers to engage with more or less functional remnants of otherwise-vanished cinematic histories—physical traces that might soon be lost to urban renewal campaigns that see them as embarrassing blight. Entering a space like the Grand, if one looks past the tabloid aspects of semi-illicit sex acts, the ritualistic acts of spectators responding to and reshaping the movements of

figures and events on the screen before them exude an uncanny resonance with my own and others' research. I see in them echoes of the interactive attitudes and forms of regional cinemas discussed in the previous chapters. Filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s adapted the open, improvisatory, onstage worlds of vernacular theaters, using formal techniques to reach out "through" the screen, as if eliciting actual exchanges from spectators. As their live performing antecedents had also done, local cineastes expanded these approaches, opening diegetic spaces—the story worlds of their films—to engage, engulf, and comment on the globalization of modernity happening on both sides of the screen. In concert with audiences, films also appropriated and ironically deformed the transnational genres and trends that markets imposed on nascent national aesthetics, displaying and consuming them as localized modern attractions. In this chapter, I refer to filmic elements that appear to reach out through the screen toward spectators as "transdiegetic."

Documented in *Serbis* and revealed by my observations of the Grand are more recent exchanges between working-class spectators and transnationally circulating images that suggest some of the same basic assumptions about cinema. Diegetic spaces are understood as always already open to live interactions or formal approximations of these. This is especially the case in the reflexive, ritualistic queering of the conventions of various sex-saturated, transnational B movies through the performance of "service." I position the cinematic habits of these spectators as tenuous and potentially generative bridges to the region's vanished cinematic pasts, when such open, exuberant engagements with films, while not involving audience sex acts, were likewise regarded by elites as primitive, lowbrow aesthetic blight (this general elite aversion was briefly complicated by attraction to sex-oriented local films in the 1970s, as I show below). Most important for the purposes of this chapter, the combination of "degenerate" aesthetic innovation and economic survivalism via prostitution forms an even stronger link with one of the region's most legendary cinematic golden ages: the early 1970s, a period when sharp increases in film production and unprecedented expansion of audience bases occurred in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.[1] As I will show, sex, and particularly sex workers onscreen, were positioned as both populist attractions and as an emergent, transdiegetic and transgender system of spectator identification. This altered formal arrangement became a signature trope of many of the highest grossing and most discussed works of the era—one that crucially also functioned as a "safe" method of delivery for urgent political messages to large, diverse groups of citizens.

Films deploying this system in Indonesia later came to be identified as a distinct genre defined by its central focus on characters who fall into prostitution. I argue that this "prostitution genre" was in fact a regional phenomenon triggered by seemingly coincidental political developments across Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, and especially by the worsening conditions this caused for poor and politically marginalized citizens. Beginning in the mid-1960s (soon after

the 1959 onset of Lee Kuan Yew's thirty-one-year grip on power in Singapore), all three nations were beset by the rise of hypermasculine, U.S.-aligned dictators who came to power, or held on to it for decades, through violence, intimidation, and obsessive censorship of counternarratives or direct critiques of the state. Films foregrounding sex were hence ironically able to get into theaters with minimal cuts.[2] This opened the doors for what, following Ernesto Laclau (2005), I call a gray area of contamination—in this case, an ethically complex situation in which the convergence of prostitution and the political onscreen positioned sex workers as ideologically unveiled seers. This builds on, but also departs from, the more strictly negative aspects of mass politics in Laclau's view. As I show, these "unlikely" emergent female figures were invested with the potential to regain a modicum of the ability to act that was purloined by the rise of dictatorial authority. In the same symbolic stroke, the new, exclusively masculine agency promoted by the three emergent states was implied to be dysfunctional and false.

On the screen, men with increasingly rigid, singular visions of how to look and act—evoking the tragic cinematic "modern boys" of the 1950s and 1960s but with even less ability to self-reflect—were shown to be outclassed by the agency of fallen women whose fates they inevitably fail to alter. As these women move from traditional bases of female authority like village markets and matrifocal homes, I show how feminine symbolic power "follows" them as they resettle in urban locales such as brothels, slums, or, in some cases, prisons. These onscreen shifts point to actual crises of agency and moral and political identities triggered by dictatorial rule. The result of filmmakers' interventions was movies that were populist, sex-saturated, and unclear in their alignment with any particular party or oppositional group. At the same time, however, I argue that the prostitution genre produced powerful, inverted reflections of the absurd, mass-media-saturated symbols, tactics, and campaigns of the three dictators, especially Soeharto (Indonesia) and Marcos (the Philippines). Spectators of all genders were formally aligned against these leaders' authority and with the genre's signature figures: politically and economically marginalized women who have been forced to sell their ideals and bodies to survive the rise of a new national Father.

Combining local and transnational perspectives, I position films like the Indonesian *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* (*Breathing in Mud*, dir. Tourino Djunaidy, 1970), the Philippine *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Light*, dir. Lino Brocka, 1975), and the Thai *Theptida Rong Ram* (*Hotel Angel*, dir. Chatrichalerm Yukol, 1974) as beacons of the ambiguous, paradoxical geopolitical alignments that brought Southeast Asian dictators to power and kept them in office, often, as I have mentioned, for several decades. In particular, the rise of these super-patriarchs ironically reflects the efforts of the U.S. and other Western nations to spread democratic values, aiming to block a leftward fall of Southeast Asian "dominoes" into the hands of Soviet or Chinese communism. Following these currents, I extend the aesthetic and political gray areas of the prostitution

genre to the larger, constantly swirling zone of blue-gray defined by the Pacific Ocean—among the most crucial theaters through which the Cold War and its global contradictions were played out and amplified. In this context, I position films as regional responses to (and localized scrambling of) West-to-East geopolitical messages that often begin as seemingly altruistic, symbolically ambiguous cultural imperatives ostensibly selling democracy and free trade. The transpacific journeys of these imperatives raise the specters of violence and exploitation that such Cold War interventions inevitably beget, revealing the horrific realities of corruption, intimidation, and wanton killing directly or indirectly sponsored by Western powers—as documented by and through the lives of the region's onscreen prostitutes.

NEW DICTATORS, YOUNG ACTIVISTS, AND SEX ON THE SCREEN

To better explain the gritty populism inflecting (and, for some, infecting) the genre I position as the most politicized mode of regional 1970s cinema, it is necessary to backtrack briefly to the 1960s and the rise of the Filipino *bomba* and what became known as "pocket bedroom literature" in Indonesia. Most crucially, both genres contributed to a supranational cinematic trend that, for the first time, began to attract elite viewers to the work of Filipino, Indonesian, and Thai cineastes in significant numbers. On the surface, the shift may appear unlikely because it was triggered by a further "lowering" of what elites already derided as lowbrow form and content in locally produced movies. But as filmmakers began adding more sex to their list of attractions, many elites seemed to forget their snobbery, fixing their collective gazes at increasingly steamy regional fare. Looking a bit further into the phenomenon in the Philippines, where it first appeared, many of the politically active "elites" of the mid-1960s and early 1970s were also curious young students seeking new ideas and experiences on movie screens, some of which they began to mimic and internalize. Their shifting viewing habits were among the earliest signs of a regional trend where audiences of diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds were drawn (although not always to the same screens at the same time) to populist fare that used explicit sex and violence as base attractions. At the same time, such imagery and themes were increasingly politicized by filmmakers and through popular and critical reception.

Numerous historical factors were involved. The Filipino studio system that thrived in the 1940s and 1950s began to decline in the 1960s amid labor-management issues and increased competition from foreign films. Since many of the exports from East Asia and the West also now came in the form of "B movies" flaunting action, spies, guns, and sex, independent local producers quickly began exploiting a change in the censorship policy that allowed for an "adults only" rating. Under the new law, filmmakers churned out "such curiosities as