

adaptations of his own novels. By the early 1970s, he had established himself as a writer-director and explained that he frequently used prurient topics as a “layer of sugar for the bitter pill” of political realism and critique that he aimed to deliver to the broadest possible audiences (quoted in Yngvesson 2014:56).

Often centering on the lives of bar hostesses and prostitutes, these novels-cum-movies echoed developments in the Philippines, while also building on the work of earlier nationalist artists in the 1940s and 1950s. During and after World War II and the struggle for Indonesian independence that followed it (1945–49), many painters, poets, and novelists in the capital focused on the lives and experiences of prostitutes as symbolic stand-ins for “the masses” (Yngvesson 2014; Yngvesson 2016). In some sense, this anticipated Filipino students’ attraction to bomba films as tokens of the culture of “the people” a few decades later. Like the bomba, prostitution films in Indonesia helped create a positive shift in the economics of cinema at the time. Among the various categories of films produced in the early Soeharto years, the attention-grabbing posters, imagery, and themes of the prostitution genre had an especially outsized effect on the market, helping trigger a golden age of increased production in the 1970s and 1980s similar to those in Thailand and the Philippines.

Along with other populist fare such as family melodramas, narratives focused on the lives of sex workers began to shift the position of historically themed films as the most frequent recipients of awards at the Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) and praise from critics more broadly. At the same time, the local market’s preference for comedies was expanded as more diverse groups of spectators gravitated toward the new attractions and perspectives proffered by Indonesian movies (Sen 1993:207). If curious young intellectuals (or curious older critics) were drawn to the prurient “layer of sugar” with which many films were laced, they were also inevitably faced with the corresponding “pills.” As I explain further in the next section, popular films in Indonesia, like those in Thailand and the Philippines, quickly began pointing out emergent realities filled with bitterness and suffering, especially for women. Their fictionalized narratives, while avoiding direct critiques of those in office, documented a steep rise in moral degradation and dehumanization following the forced installation of a new and hypermasculine form of authoritarianism—in this case under Soeharto as national dictator-cum-father.

NEW ORDER, NEW INSTRUMENTS

As debates and splits between leftist and other parties heated up along Cold War–defined lines in the early 1960s in Indonesia, artists, especially filmmakers, became increasingly polarized. In many cases, growing ideological divides forced avowedly nonaligned, politically “independent” cineastes to join with a particular party or camp in order to defend themselves from the attacks of another party or camp, which often played out in the press. Usmar Ismail, Asrul Sani, and other

core members of his production house, Perfini, often expressed political views that did not easily align with those of any one party, especially in their films. Instead of keeping them “safe,” however, their nonaligned stances increasingly exposed them to scathing and very public attacks from the left (including the Communist Party, or PKI), which accused them of proffering “counter-revolutionary” aesthetics. The debates over what constituted a proper nationalist political perspective came to an abrupt and terrifying stop in 1965–66, however, as the rise of Soeharto decimated and silenced the left on a massive scale: five hundred thousand to one million were killed and tens of thousands more imprisoned for the next fifteen years. The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), then the largest in the world after Russia and China and often the loudest voice in local disputes, was suddenly outlawed. Anyone believed to be directly or indirectly associated with the PKI was targeted for prosecution or far worse. As military and paramilitary forces scoured and terrorized the nation from capital city to remote villages on outlying islands in search of the new “enemy,” no one, from party leaders to rank and file to friends and family, was spared.⁴

Due to their rocky relationship with the left in the early 1960s, one might assume, as many have,⁵ that Ismail, Sani, and their closest collaborators supported Soeharto’s violent coup d’état, if not necessarily the extrajudicial killings. In the late 1960s, Ismail indeed wrote bitterly of the left’s attacks on himself and others in the media. But other writings and the few additional films he produced before his untimely death in 1970 show that his attitude toward the rise of the New Order itself was typically critical. His perspective on Soeharto in many ways mirrored his habit of highlighting corruption, collusion, and political infighting in films made under Soekarno (Ismail 1983). Asrul Sani, an accomplished essayist and poet as well as director and script writer for screen and stage, was more critical still. Reading across the articles and statements he composed in 1966 and 1967 reveals a profoundly negative view of Indonesia’s sudden lurch to the right at the hands of military factions that were cozy with the United States. To blame the “black years” of the early to mid-1960s on the influence of the PKI, the left, or any one group, he wrote, is to “scratch one’s head, even while one knows very well that the itch is coming from one’s knee” (1997:672).⁶

In Sani’s view, the rise of the PKI and its subsequent decimation by Soeharto were symptoms of a broader problem, one that paralleled but exceeded the effects of the Cold War: a global trend of “extreme secularization that simultaneously assigns a religious value to democracy, nationalism, or socialism as replacements for religion” (Sani 1997:6). With the rise of an emboldened religion of the state under Soeharto (a problem Sani also associated with Soekarno), Sani argued Indonesia had for the first time become truly saturated with “humanity’s first-ever universal culture” (666)—one of Western-style consumerism and mass media, and of “tourism, vacations, empty time, the press, comic strips, film, radio, television, etc.” (665).⁷ As Indonesia became inundated with this broad cultural attitude under

Soeharto's leadership, Sani argued the new government had begun to conceive of the nation as something "fake" or entirely "without roots" that could potentially be reconstructed from the ground up. This would allow for the state to maximize broad political, cultural and economic control (665).

In light of these radical negative shifts, Sani argued that artists and intellectuals now lacked the proper "instruments" to "provide a clear picture of the state of affairs surrounding them" (665). Nonetheless, he concluded, it was all the more crucial for artists and critical thinkers to speak out, despite the greater dangers of doing so under a military dictatorship. As he noted, "we need to position ourselves within this new cultural milieu and to do so we must be brave and honest in order to project our thoughts into the future" (668). Many other filmmakers and artists appeared to agree. As soon as the dust of mass violence had cleared in the late 1960s, those left standing got down to business, probing the current state of affairs in hopes of acquiring the proper "instruments" to critically engage the shifts in Indonesia's cultural politics and symbolic order. A brief period of government film funding (1968–71) inadvertently emboldened their efforts, before being unceremoniously withdrawn.

Among the first of six projects selected to be produced was Nya Abbas Akup's *Matt Dower* (1969), which David Hanan calls "a bizarre and grotesque . . . allegory of the power struggle between Suharto and Sukarno . . . and in particular the increasing political repression and abuse of human rights" carried out by Soeharto (2009:14). When state censors saw the finished version of *Matt Dower* and seemed to finally understand its implications, the film's release was purposely delayed and curtailed. Despite being a showcase of arts funding from the new government and being among the first Indonesian films to be shot in color, the distribution of *Matt Dower* was limited to smaller cities where it was shown in grainy, black-and-white prints (Hanan 2009:27).

Released the same year and funded by the same government program, Asrul Sani's *Apa Jang Kau Tjari, Palupi?* (*What Are You Looking for, Palupi?*, 1969) shares *Matt Dower's* theme of Soekarnoist excesses that only increase after Soeharto's coup (fig. 16). But Sani's film was set in the present and was therefore perhaps more cautious about how its critiques were framed and expressed. On close reading of the film, what emerges is an unsparing deconstruction and rejection of the New Order. Yet *Palupi's* politics are mainly under the surface, and it appears to have so thoroughly confused Soeharto's newly anointed Department of Information that nothing was done to hamper its release. Building on the complex regional marketing strategies of the 1950s and early 1960s, in *Palupi* Sani worked to bring together a diverse array of views that were seemingly, as in Usmar Ismail's 1956 *Tiga Dara*, aimed at different classes of viewers (see chapters 2 and 3). Yet in this case, in a film paid for by the same government that he would use it to criticize, Sani was presented with an opportunity to minimize the market-influenced aesthetics and attractions of previous decades. With *Palupi*,



FIGURE 16. An image from the title sequence of *Apa Jang Kau Tjari, Palupi?*, now considered one of Asrul Sani's greatest works. The sequence is composed of a series of stills of Farida Faisol (then Farida Sjuman), the actress and Soviet-educated ballerina who played Palupi, set to an orchestral score with operatic female vocals. Palupi's frequent asides and looks into the camera are among the film's most striking techniques, expanding the conventions of local cinema from the 1950s and early 1960s in a way that aimed to address the drastic changes in Indonesian life, politics, and media following the rise of Soeharto. The feminine cinematic perspective that this began to more fully formulate builds on the "matrifocal gaze" and was followed by many of the popular Indonesian films of the early and mid-1970s.

Sani's first production under the New Order, he began the process of developing new modes of critique capable of addressing the radical shifts under way in Indonesia and elsewhere in the region.

In my analysis, the film therefore appears more carefully designed to deliver a coded message than to sell tickets. While reminiscent of some of his earlier efforts, Sani's experimentations in *Palupi* address elite viewers in a way that refuses to cater to their well-known attraction to Hollywood fare. In its attention-catching, if somewhat convoluted, manner, *Palupi* builds on Sani's warnings about the rise of the New Order in writing two years earlier. Like his written work, the film is brimming with intellectualized moments and references, such as when a character wanders through a park clutching a copy of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the famous French film journal. But these instances of apparent "high" modernism, the kind of lofty ideas and aesthetics that Andreas Huyssen and others position as typically "patriarchal . . . and masculinist" (Huyssen 1986:60), perhaps hewed too close to the cultural politics of Soeharto as self-proclaimed, dictatorial national *bapak* (father). In *Palupi*, such elite intellectual tactics are generally implied to be the detritus of a bygone era and are treated as problems rather than potential solutions. The film's modernist flourishes are hence countered with a flood of typically "low," populist-style attractions such as cheap jokes and unprecedented levels of nudity, the latter one of the few things that was, in fact, excised by censors in the end.

Palupi (Farida Faisol), the film's central figure, is a housewife unhappily married to Haidar (Ismed M. Noor), an idealistic artist—a politically progressive screenwriter

and director of experimental theater who struggles financially. Both appear to have lost their sense of self and direction in life, a psychic condition that is implicitly timed with the change in regimes. The difference in their responses also reflects the high/low, masculine/feminine contrasts of the film's aesthetics and themes. While Haidar buries himself ever more deeply in radical art, Palupi embarks on a mythical pursuit of the glamour and fulfillment she is certain awaits her in the sphere of mainstream movies. This sets her up for a fall into what is left of the 1950s "Djakartawood" dream factory, now presented as a dump decimated by years of neglect and political violence in the 1960s, crumbling anew under the false ideals of the current regime. The film's various quasi-explicit attractions and potential distractions notwithstanding, I propose that Sani's decision to focus on a woman's experience of the early Soeharto years innovated a potential way out of the trap of "masculine" high modernism (or perhaps reinvented it, updating it as a weapon against a dictator). It also anticipated one of the most widespread cinematic modes of critique under Soeharto—one that would soon be adapted and further developed by other, like-minded filmmakers. In *Palupi*, this instrument-in-process guides viewers not only to look *at* the women on the screen but to follow them in paying attention to the gendered nature of the ideological shifts instituted by the New Order, something that female characters are especially well positioned to discover.

If a new aesthetic instrument can be said to have arisen from the ashes of Djakartawood at the end of the film, I submit that it is not in the impotent, masculine-intellectual purview of Haidar. Nor is it in the sleazy, greedy looks of the men who exploit Palupi for pleasure and profit. The sexualized imagery that the film does provide is overtaken by an explicitly feminized view: what Palupi sees as she struggles to become a perfect symbol of New Order womanhood, a process that pulls her down through the filthy worlds of entertainment and business in the nation's capital. Unlike the clearer, satirical jabs of Nya Abbas Akup's *Matt Dower*, Sani's critique is hidden in the most "unlikely" of places, in the purview of a woman who does not identify as an intellectual and appears eminently uninterested in politics (this also distinguishes her from many of the central matrifocal characters in the films of the 1950s and 1960s). Through Palupi's eyes, audiences may experience the ruinous truths that finally rip her emergent, Soehartoist naivete to shreds. In line with the film's overall aesthetics, the spectacle of her fall at times waxes hyperbolic, as when Palupi, finally discarded by both the film industry and the wealthy lover her brief stardom afforded her, is hauled off from an elite nightclub in a garbage truck. The point, however, is clear enough: to attempt to embody or become an ideal image of the national/mass cultural character sold by the state as a new "religion" is to be made into a fungible, disposable product. In the end, Palupi's journey of self-realization as an elite, outwardly independent, new woman of the New Order has effectively transformed her into a prostitute.

Palupi's dizzying view is constructed across the gaps between the film we are watching and the various films within it (in which she stars and that we are often



FIGURE 17. Seated in a movie theater and bringing to mind Indonesia's monochrome cinematic past under Soekarno, Palupi stares intently in the direction of the camera (*top*), as if looking out at the audience. The reverse angle (*bottom*), however, shows what she is "really" looking at in the top still—an image of herself embedded in the diegetic version of New Order Jakarta, in what is implied to be a mainstream "commodity" movie of which she is the star. The latter film, however, is not finished, and in the discussions of the director, producer, and art director, one of whom is visible behind Palupi in the top still, it is suggested that they will either scrap the project or fix it by making it about Palupi's "real" life. The finished version of the "bad" film on the bottom, then, is implied to be the film that viewers of Palupi are watching: the story of Palupi's rise and fall.

also shown), signaling familiar local-cum-regional problems of visibility and fragmentation that the emergent regime and its cineastes imbue with new twists and turns. As we observe Palupi at the center of the screen in front of us, she is often shown intently staring at herself on another screen, as she struggles to embody some empty "Eastern" feminine ideal. Unmoored from material-historical sources of power like the matrifocal home and focused on the process of becoming something that is in fact nothing, Palupi's look and sense of self are increasingly alienated (fig. 17).



FIGURE 18. As the walls of a set come down, leaving only emptiness surrounding her, Palupi appears distressed. A hard cut then shows her at an elite party, which is at first implied to be another constructed scene in which Palupi is acting but is in fact full of “real” Jakartan movers and shakers who are just as fake.

While we watch her watching herself, she turns to look out at viewers, acknowledging their copresence in theaters and symbolically linking the spaces they inhabit to hers: a capital city largely depicted as a series of dispensable movie sets (fig. 18). Her look positions audiences to see New Order Jakarta—theirs and hers—as an approximation of how the city was characterized in Sani’s writing two years earlier: “as if they were now facing something that is made up and doesn’t have roots” (1997:665). This reading is underscored as the sets that constitute the city onscreen are continually torn down and replaced in front of our eyes. Sutured via Palupi’s “apolitical” perspective into a world of backdrops that keep crumbling into blackness, spectators are given no way out of Sani’s, in fact, deeply politicized (and feminized) view of Jakarta—a city he believes Soeharto’s New Order is turning into the setting of a tawdry movie. Cheap imagery hence constantly overlays and interrupts the “real” *Palupi*, threatening to overtake whatever substance or credibility the film may have left.

While it is clearly too late for Palupi to save herself, I argue that the point of the film is not to save Palupi but to *become* Palupi, as viewers are formally and emotionally invited to do. As they tumble into her stifling, constructed reality, one from which there is finally no escape, audiences are exposed to a view that reveals the new political and symbolic orders as false constructions. At the same time, they are all too real and mortally dangerous. Sidelining the more “legitimate” interventions of male characters, Palupi—a woman falling through the cracks of Soehartoist ideology—emerges as the new instrument deployed to undermine the regime of universalist patriarchy that has been unceremoniously imposed on Indonesia. Sani’s views are translated and safely harbored in Palupi’s feminized gaze—a secret weapon with the potential for critical realization and dissemination, if not yet for inspiring direct action. To support this new instrument, Sani and his film would need to fall from grace along with *Palupi*, sliding and leading viewers into the low-brow, red-tinted, corruption-fueled, rock-and-roll “hell” where she finally lands. Others would soon follow.

CINEMATIC CRITIQUE AND THE “PROSTITUTION GENRE”

If Sani had discovered a new screen-instrument to criticize the New Order, he had yet to perfect it as a weapon of mass ideological unveiling. Economically, *Palupi* stumbled on its release, its fate contributing to the canceling of the government program that funded it. Unlike Usmar Ismail’s winning combination of regional populism and faux-Hollywood glitter in *Tiga Dara*, Sani’s mix of lofty intellectualism and transnational B-movie tropes fared much poorer at the box office. It did win first prize at the 1970 Asian Film Festival, held in Taiwan, but audiences and critics back home were unusually unified in their lack of appreciation for *Palupi*, which seemed to go either over or under viewers’ heads. After “searching” throughout its 127-minute running time, one critic came to the conclusion that the film was “one quarter Jean-Luc Godard, one quarter Turino Djunaedy [an Indonesian director, actor, and producer known for combining action and sex], and the rest is I don’t know what” (*Pedoman* 1970). Despite the film’s one nude scene being censored, Sani was also criticized by some (and salaciously reported on by others) for deigning to add such potentially inflammatory imagery in the first place (Sjarief 1970; *Pedoman* 1970).

Hindsight has been kinder to *Palupi*, which was among twenty-nine films chosen for restoration in 2012 by Sinematek, the Indonesian film archive, and is remembered by many contemporary filmmakers as an inspirational classic (when I selected it to screen at the *Arkipel* festival in Jakarta in 2013, it attracted a full house at the local Goethe Institute and sparked a lively discussion). Even in the months directly following its disappointing commercial release, other filmmakers appeared to take careful note of Sani’s rendering of the seamier aspects of life