

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

in Jakarta. Two of the most influential films of the early Soeharto years, Usmar Ismail's *Ananda* (1971) and Tourino Djunaedy's *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* (*Breathing in Mud*, 1970), built on Sani's combination of titillating imagery with a pervasive, underlying air of prostitution, literalizing the latter while restrategizing the former. Palupi's fall from privilege is reimagined by Ismail and Djunaedy through the experiences of lower-class women whose star-crossed fates bring them to sex work or other, related fields. Both *Ananda* and *Bernafas* also featured numerous scenes in which women are scantily clad but not nude, thus minimizing what would be excised by the censorship board.

For Ismail, *Ananda* represented a departure from his depictions of women in the 1950s and early 1960s in films like *Enam Djam di Djodja* (*Six Hours in Yogya*, 1951) and the aforementioned *Tiga Dara* and *Asrama Dara*. In those films, women were positioned as important sources of revolutionary fervor or as key actors and sources of historical grounding during difficult processes of postindependence development and modernization. *Ananda*, by contrast, can be seen as building on certain elements of the noirish 1954 *Lewat Djam Malam*, which had also been penned by Sani. Although *Ananda* is female-centered, as in *Lewat Djam Malam*, the sense of hope, tempered idealism, or humor infusing many of Ismail's other earlier works takes a darker turn.

Perhaps not coincidentally, this plunge into darkness follows Ismail's personal downfalls during the extreme political and economic shifts of the 1960s. Although like Sani, Ismail came through the killings and arrests of 1965–66 politically unscathed, the film market tanked, and Perfini, Ismail's production company, was in and out of bankruptcy throughout the 1960s. Ismail took a four-year hiatus from production (1965–69), trying his hand in the fields of banking and finance, embedding himself ever more deeply in structures of capital and state authority that he had long endeavored to criticize. Although reportedly in good health, in early 1971, shortly after completing postproduction on *Ananda*, Ismail unexpectedly died at age forty-nine.

Along a similarly downward path, *Ananda* follows its eponymous central character (Lenny Marlina) through a lengthy cycle of losses and negative realizations about the changed world in which she exists. As in Sani's *Palupi*, these events are triggered by Ananda's continual exploitation at the hands of others. As Krishna Sen (1993) points out, however, the fact that *Ananda* is from a lower-class background further emphasizes the sense of her victimization. Indeed, unlike *Palupi*, Ananda's fall does not merely lead to the realization that the new regime's patriarchal ideals are false. Without money or a group of wealthy men who take interest in her career, Ananda's tumble places her in constant danger. For Ekky Imanjaya, "Usmar's critical attitude toward the (supposedly) modern New Order, which was still very young and defined by materialistic values can be felt throughout" the film (Imanjaya 2021:36). Abandoned by an uncaring family and preyed on sexually by men, Ananda soon takes up with a gang of criminals who introduce her to the

degenerate worlds of nightclub singing and actual prostitution—political-economic spheres into which Ismail, who also tried his hand as a club owner when times were tough in the late 1960s (2021:29), had himself fallen, albeit in a different way.

Drawing on feminist film theory as an analytical lens, Sen is generally critical of the representation of women tendered by the flood of early 1970s prostitution-centered films, including *Ananda* and *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*. “The prostitution films,” she argues, “directly use the female body to sell the product (the film), while at the same time condemning that body” (1994:145). Yet, as one of the few critics to have taken the genre seriously, Sen recognizes a glimmer of radical potential in its unwavering focus on marginalized women. A woman, she writes, whose “sexuality is aroused outside of the sphere of monogamy . . . signifies a crisis for the symbolic world,” potentially “transform[ing] her body into a weapon against which men have no defense” (1994:144–45). But like Miriam Hansen’s (2000, 2012) argument that norm-challenging “modern girls” in interwar Chinese and Japanese cinemas are destined to tragically fail, here, Sen argues, “death is inevitable in a moral order which cannot tolerate an unattached woman who is sexually active” (145). For Sen, the potentially weaponizable flame of sexuality outside monogamy in New Order Jakarta is snuffed before it can burn anything of consequence.

While this would seem to foreclose on the genre’s radical potential, others, like Alicia Izharuddin (2017) and Soh Byungkuk (2007), have argued that Sen’s findings are “too simplistic and narrow” (Byungkuk 2007:77) in their assessment of sexualized women on 1970s Indonesian screens. On closer inspection, in fact, Sen’s argument, like Hansen’s, unfolds over multiple engagements with the same material. Taken together, her readings allow for more of a “gray area” of symbolic flexibility to emerge, mirroring the political and moral ambiguity I see as carefully built into the films. It is precisely this sense of complexity, and at times slipperiness, that most interests me about the prostitution genre as a response to the New Order’s sudden, forced installation of Soeharto as an omnipresent national “father.” In this vein, an earlier (1993) essay by Sen on melodrama in Indonesian cinema anticipates the overall conclusion of her classic *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order*. Yet at the same time, the essay identifies a further space of radical potential, focusing on a pattern of gazing and audience identification that complicates the symbolic function of the central figure of the falling/fallen woman. This forms a bridge to my reading of *Palupi*, while underscoring a similar, morally ambiguous capacity for political critique in prostitution films like *Ananda*.

In both cases, as David Hanan (2017:246) also notes, Sen’s analysis evokes Laura Mulvey’s classic (1975) identification of a controlling male gaze operative in Hollywood films. The gazes of male viewers, as Mulvey argues, align with the active, masculine looks of men onscreen. Camera angles, editing, and overdetermined acting function as formal prompts for spectators to identify with these powerful male characters, while the looks and agency of onscreen women are suppressed.

For Mulvey, the classical Hollywood system therefore imbues female figures with a passive, “to-be-looked-at-ness”—a complex state of being that encourages audiences to look at women on the screen, aligning their view with male characters in a controlling, “masculine” way while discouraging spectators’ imaginary association with screen-women ([1975] 1999:837). In Sen’s reading of *Ananda*, she applies a similar understanding of how cinema can assign or deny power along gendered lines, arguing that Ananda, the central female figure, is “*acted upon . . . to be the way she is, rather than acting, to create herself and her circumstances*” (Sen 1993:208, emphasis in original).

While this assessment of Ananda’s role in the film rings true, Sen also makes an important, if unacknowledged, departure from Mulvey’s theory. On the surface, Ananda is certainly passive and eminently “to-be-looked-at.” But as in my reading of Palupi, her positioning vis-à-vis the gazes of spectators—what one might call her *to-be-identified-with-ness* (my term)—complicates and calls attention to the limitations in Mulvey’s exclusive focus on how films objectify women. Among other things, even in the context of America, Mulvey avoids grappling with numerous Hollywood “women’s films” in which female characters have been argued to “appropriate the gaze” (Doane 1987:5). Despite registering a certain level of “strain, if not caricature” (Doane 1987:37) in doing so, women are positioned as protagonists or as subjects driving a film’s narrative. Mary Anne Doane sees the tension readable in such films as signaling their own status as “pathologies”—albeit extremely common ones—in an otherwise conventionally masculine system of representation (36). A certain connection can therefore be made with the female-centered, Indonesian prostitution genre and its laser focus on sex work and sex workers as “pathologies” triggered by the installation of a new, hyperpatriarchal system of order. As I will show, however, the differences in what this means both politically and in relation to mainstream regional cinematic conventions is quite stark.

As Sen acknowledges, the central gaze around which the prostitution genre is structured—the look with which viewers are formally aligned—is, in fact, that of the *prostitute*. The effect is anything but heroic or typically masculine. Instead, for male and female audience members, “the world is seen from the point of view of the victim. The pleasure of this perspective is one of passive individual identification with the victim, in the recognition of one’s own circumstantial inability to act” (Sen 1993:208). The abject status of the prostitute thus symbolically mirrors the experiences of *all* viewers living with the pervasive effects of Soeharto’s rule, regardless of their gender. No one onscreen is presented as active in the classical sense. As I established in the previous chapters, regional films are embedded in a system of representation in which women are often positioned as powerfully wielding a matrifocal cinematic gaze. While ideal heroic agency à la Hollywood is much rarer overall, women are presented as active, narrative-driving figures at

least as frequently as men, and men are often also presented as stuck or unable to negotiate the emergent conditions of local modernity. In some ways, the prostitution genre departs from this and can be seen as evoking a masculine discourse of power—one of fallen women and individualist male saviors—closer to that of Western classical traditions. But this is mainly a ruse; in doing so, the genre also takes pains to show that such “new” discourses of authority are also difficult or impossible to implement in the context of Indonesia under Soeharto. Even the ostensible agents of evil driving the victimization of others are unclear as to their power to act as individuals: “villainy is not . . . concentrated in any character or any institution but rather dispersed though everyone, including the victim herself and every social institution” (Sen 1993:209).

Reading across the productive ambiguities in Sen’s analysis, I suggest that the power of marginalized, sexually active women to trigger a crisis of moral and symbolic orders in 1970s Jakarta is hardly diminished if one such figure happens to die (in fact, many did not, nor were most co-opted or “saved” through marriage). Rather, I argue that the emergent focus on prostitutes ultimately circles back to the idea of the matrifocal gaze, even if such a structure may have been temporarily dismantled in the early years of the New Order. This works to challenge the perception of both men as ideal actors and of fallen women as simple victims. The dynamic and vital perspectives with which many screen prostitutes become imbued are linked to their falls into the depths of Soehartoist exploitation and depend on what is revealed to them in the process. Like Palupi, for example, as Ananda appears to plunge further and further from the fleeting possibilities of agency and unrealistic ideals of womanhood surrounding her, her perspective—what, where, and how she sees—is opened in both terrifying and potentially empowering ways. In the context of the film, her “defiled” yet profoundly expanded vision functions as a tool or instrument facilitating her own, and by extension Ismail’s, engagement with the new and often seemingly insurmountable challenges of the times.

The embeddedness of this fallen/expanded vision as a repeated, generic convention that audiences are aligned with points to the broader emergence of a transdiegetic—and transgender—system of audiovisual attachment.⁸ Responding to the rise of Soeharto and various associated political economic shifts, the system reshapes the relationship between audiences and figures on the screen. Reaching “behind” the screen as well, such transdiegetic looks entangle filmmakers in their relay of gazes and imaginary identifications. The seamy, populist figure of the prostitute offers cineastes the chance to connect with broader audiences on a wider variety of screens, challenging the historical, class-based limitations of regional cinematic apparatuses and reimagining public spheres of the 1970s. Removed from what regime change signaled as the only “respectable” location for agency—active men—filmmakers’ aesthetics of protest are hidden in a seemingly unlikely vehicle: a deceptively passive subversive who smuggles

critique past censors while simultaneously using her “cheap” wiles to attract variously gendered and classed recipients of the message she carries.

THE PROSTITUTE AS SEER AND MELODRAMATIC AMPLIFIER

As in many of the early 1970s prostitute films, in Tourino Djunaedy's *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* (*Breathing in Mud*, 1970), a complex series of negative sociopolitical effects is impressed upon and conveyed by the gaze and body of Mila (Suzanna), the central female character. At first, these effects are framed as seeming coincidences, but they soon reveal the sketchy outlines of a hidden, yet pervasive system of exploitation, dehumanization, and masculinization—the machine set to work beneath the otherwise bustling, rapidly developing surface of Jakarta. Many of the key points and moments that lead to this sensory-political mapping are compiled in a long flashback sequence around the film's midpoint. In a tearful hotel-bed confession, Mila explains to Budi (Rachmat Kartolo), the film's deceptively virtuous, powerful man and Mila's wealthy client, how she was transformed from rural farmer's wife to urban prostitute in a matter of days. The sequence consists of Mila remembering and interpreting a series of events that cause radical shifts in her life and worldview. Since arriving in Jakarta, she has been wantonly, and at first seemingly randomly, victimized by men, including multiple rapes occurring in the space of twenty-four hours. The acts are so ubiquitous, their perpetrators—from a variety of different socioeconomic backgrounds—so unrelenting, that hearing Mila's explanation (while being shown renderings of her memories as extended flashbacks), one is indeed left with a collective or systemic, rather than an individualized, sense of their cause.

The problem, rooted in class differences and shifting perceptions of political status after the recent historical violence in Indonesia, is clearly amplified by gender. A poor village woman who enters the city looking for her missing husband—an extremely common tale after the mass killings and arrests of suspected communists in 1965–66—signals a figure that has fallen outside the rigid norms set by the newly arisen state. As was the case with thousands of other women who suddenly found themselves identified with the “wrong” (i.e., left) side of the political spectrum, Mila is instantly categorized by the men and women she encounters in the city as a *lonte* (whore) who must be dealt with severely. Doing so invokes a shift in public attitudes in line with the government's fabricated media reports of communist women castrating and killing army generals, while purportedly singing and dancing naked around their bodies. In their extensive efforts to “prove” these accusations, the military disproportionately targeted women, including numerous sex workers who were imprisoned and tortured, then forced to sign statements claiming they were leaders of Gerwani, a progressive, PKI-linked women's organization that most of them had never heard of. The statements also claimed Gerwani