

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

had planned and carried out the sexualized killings of the generals (Wieringa 2002:291, 296–98; Roosa 2020:71–77).

As Saskia Wieringa shows, the targeting of women who seemed to fit, however vaguely, the emergent profile of a depraved “communist whore” was thereafter both practiced by the military and justified for the public using blatantly false yet widely accepted media reports that conflated progressive gender politics with prostitution: “instead of being loyal wives and good mothers . . . [politically progressive women] were becoming politically active and morally loose, unleashing their frightful sexual powers in indecent ways and committing unspeakable atrocities. Therefore, the public was made to understand, it was justifiable to erase communism and especially Gerwani and so cleanse society and restore order” (Wieringa 2002:301). John Roosa also shows that newspapers, following the military’s lead, not only sexualized and demonized the left but implicitly and explicitly justified attacks on and murders of those accused of supporting the PKI. Statements were printed to the effect that communists no longer “had the right to live in Indonesia” (Roosa 2020:71).

On the one hand, *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* plays it safe by not mentioning communism or making any other direct references to state or military policies and practices. On the other hand, what happens to Mila is eerily similar to the treatment of actual, marginalized women who were ubiquitously portrayed in media and society as “loose,” “suspicious,” or worse following the rise of Soeharto. In this context, what happens in the film is clearly a political pattern and not an accident or mere case of bad luck experienced by Mila. Strategically engaging with the politics of the time, *Bernafas* highlights the grave injustices caused by the state’s violence and gendered, self-legitimizing discourse, while building a sense of Mila’s strength of character and initially unshakable moral compass when facing such attacks. Whatever abject new category her attackers may have placed her in, she is not easily subjugated or acted on, and she fights rapists and accusers tooth, nail, and discourse, returning their looks and harsh, stereotyping words in kind.

When Mila finally bumps into her husband, she discovers he has left her to join the darkly advancing world of the city, at the side of another woman who owns a busy food stall and will support him. After this most life-shattering shock, she appears at last to give in to the overwhelming nature of the situation in which she finds herself. Taking in what is happening to her, a look of distanced realization spreads over Mila’s countenance, betraying a need to separate the shredded remains of her former self—the farmer’s wife who was grounded and empowered by home and socioeconomic standing—from the Soehartoist scene at hand. The camera, lingering as the subjectivity drains from her expression, begins to waver and sway, as if appropriating Mila’s altered perception and transferring it to the viewer. As she starts to wander randomly, the image aligns itself with her gaze, offering a lengthy opportunity for viewers to inhabit her perspective (fig. 19). Here, however, the resulting “POV” shot



FIGURE 19. *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*. As the awareness appears to drain from Mila's face (top), the camera begins to sway, as if approximating her "unconscious" view (bottom), floating off-kilter down the middle of Jakarta's busy streets. Like most of the films of its era, *Bernafas* was shot and exhibited in the cinemascope widescreen format. To my knowledge, no film prints remain, although there are numerous cropped and poorly transferred video copies available online.

expresses something closer to the lack of a defined, subjective point of view. What is conveyed is the cumulative shock of Mila's first close encounters with the toxic combination of policies and attitudes introduced by the New Order—something likely to be most powerfully experienced in the nation's capital and by a woman.

Her view seems to unmoor itself from the ground as the camera drifts impassively through the chaotic midst of the city's heavily trafficked streets, accompanied only by the nondiegetic sounds of the meandering, looping, synthesized soul jazz score—a common ingredient, along with heavy rock, of popular aural modernisms throughout the region in the 1970s. Finally, as the camera switches back to a view of Mila, she collapses in a pile of garbage beside a litter-strewn canal, recalling the fate of Palupi after being chewed up and spit out by the same capital city the year before. But Mila's fall occurs much earlier in the course of *Bernafas's* narrative—rather than a final blow, it is implied to be something closer to a beginning.

One way to understand the rapid transition through which Mila at first appears to surrender control of her body and mind to the circumstances around her is what Gilles Deleuze (1989) calls the “crisis of the action image”—a convention that he also sees as a break from the typical functions associated with Western classical films.⁹ For Deleuze, this crisis frequently occurs when a character's discovery of some unbearable truth forecloses the character's ability to formulate an effective response or choose an action that will bring about change. As the term suggests, the result is not just characterological but involves structural/ideological shifts in the film or films built around the figures in crisis. Changes in visuality, especially in relation to what characters see, are crucial. For example, Deleuze positions long, plodding shots or sequences tracking characters through the minutiae of their daily routines as clues that the hegemony of the action image (which he associates with classical Hollywood) is waning and that we are entering the “cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent” (1989:2).

Characters whom circumstances have made into seers effectively lose much of their conscious motor control and are relegated to long moments of contemplation. Often, like Mila, they simply wander off while mutely yet intensely looking around. As Deleuze puts it, they “cannot or will not react, so great is their need to ‘see’ properly what there is in the situation” (128). However, for Deleuze, the trauma and loss of agency that becoming a seer entails also offer a strange sort of compensation, however delimited—one that opens a more conscious link between characters onscreen and spectators watching them. In being stripped of whatever agency they may have once imagined they had, the seer has “gained in an ability to see what he has lost in action or reaction: he SEES so that the viewer's problem becomes ‘What is there to see in the image?’ (and not now ‘What are we going to see in the next image?’)” (272, capitalization in original). Stuck scanning the situation around them and unable to advance, the seer may feel as if the flow of time has slowed or come to a stop—a further, potentially traumatic, experience that also offers an opportunity to take a deeper, critical look at their surrounds.

In *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*, the process of Mila's shift from potential agent to “seer” likewise imbues her with a new perspective and awareness of what recent political shifts have wrought on society. The thing she sees most clearly, and this is

arguably what *Bernafas* poses as a problem for viewers to see along with her, is that the initially shocking indictments constantly thrown at her in Jakarta are in fact new “truths” that have become unavoidable. As the film also implies, this is especially the case for poor women like Mila who can become socially and politically marginalized, literally in the blink of an eye. What her accusers say about her has thus begun to reveal the weight of her own future. Yet I argue there is an important distinction, or caveat, in the way Mila is positioned as a seer in *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* and Deleuze’s analysis of wandering characters who “see differently” in new waves of mostly Western films beginning in the 1940s with Italian neorealism.

For Jacques Lacan, an important influence on Deleuze’s writing, the kinds of social, physical, and especially symbolic traumas experienced by seers would normally lead to a “dissociation of the subject’s personality” (Lacan [1966] 2002:66)—hence a period of mute inactivity. Indeed, after her “encounter with the real”—in this case with the actual conditions determining citizens’ lives under the New Order—Mila undergoes numerous dissociations and splits in her identity and sense of self. But as we see over the months of her life presented in *Bernafas*, the break with a coherent, singular, subjective point of view that defines the seer, while clearly a great psychological burden, is positioned far closer to normative planes of experience for Mila and others like her. Historically, this “super” capacity to process stress and trauma is especially present in female characters, whose ability to keep their heads across radical cultural and political shifts is well-established in previous generations of films in the region, as well as in academic literature. Indeed, unlike the cinematic seers highlighted by Deleuze, and despite the disproportionate targeting of Mila because of her gender, she is relegated to wander mutely for only a short while following the moment she and the film around her begin to see differently.

At the end of the walking sequence, another fateful “coincidence” occurs, as Mila collapses at the feet of Rais (Farouk Afero), a sharply dressed pimp who has just finished relieving himself in a polluted urban canal. He tries unsuccessfully to revive her but then, taking a closer look, exclaims: “Cantik Juga, Perempuan Nih!” (Hey, we’ve got a pretty one, here!). As Mila later recounts, it was Rais who “saved me from dying of hunger. It was also he who pressed me into the mud,” offering, as the film’s title suggests, a way to continue to breathe and move and see by becoming precisely what Mila’s accusers claimed she was: a prostitute. Now showing a gradual acceptance of her fate by “choosing” it and asserting a modicum of symbolic control over the process, Mila changes her name from Soepinah to the more urbanized Soemila (Mila for short)—perhaps more fitting for a Jakartan sex worker. Later, at the behest of Budi, her wealthy client and would-be savior, she adopts yet another moniker: the more bourgeois sounding Yanti. Instead of sticking to one, new identity as if erasing the past, however, she uses different names depending on context. In doing so, she acknowledges the splits and dissociations she has been forced to undergo, rather than suppressing them. Her multiple

names insist on the importance of remembering what has happened and on Mila's ability to adapt to and express these experiences with her wits still about her.¹⁰

As indicated above, the off-kilter visuals that are triggered by Mila's sudden realization and transition are part of a flashback. Following her acceptance of Rais's offer to become a sex worker, Mila sees ever more clearly what is happening in New Order Jakarta. But she is no longer frozen by shock and is now able to describe what she has seen and what has happened to her. As she relates to Budi the string of seemingly random experiences that brought her to where she is now, she is composed but allows her tears to flow, the feeling of which is abetted by nondiegetic violins. Here, film and seer conspire to show something to, and elicit emotional reactions from, characters and spectators simultaneously. Mila's "to-be-looked-at-ness" certainly contributes to the effect. But while Mila's looks attract attention from those on- and offscreen—she is young and quite pretty, also making her a top earner for Rais—I propose their primary function is to funnel others' gazes into *her* look, constructing her more politically oriented "to-be-identified-with-ness." In this sense, Mila's gaze builds on the function of Palupi's to align viewers with her fall into abjection but further debases and literalizes what viewers are positioned to experience or vicariously become.

As a specific visual "package," I argue that Mila's looks and gaze are positioned as a cinematic instrument that pierces diegetic space, reaching out and fusing the onscreen with the historical and the real. As I will explain below, her gaze also functions to align other characters with her plight and to transfer what she has seen into their bodies and minds, mirroring the way she is formally positioned to offer her views and experiences to the audience. The continuing horrors Mila sees are not fictive allusions but are linked, albeit without naming names, to the workings of the actual current regime. "For the eye of the seer as of the soothsayer," Deleuze writes, "it is the 'literalness' of the perceptible world which constitutes it like a book" (1989:22). Indeed, at this early stage (*Bernafas* is among the first entries in the emergent regional prostitution genre), what Mila sees and conveys is a black and tragic truth about a collective future that radiates from her own. Produced as she is by a particular convergence of cinematic and actual histories, Mila is positioned to highlight and further this information in specific ways. As the film suggests or implies at numerous junctures, Mila's status is no longer mutable, and she can therefore not hope to be rescued in any traditional or modern/positivist sense.

As this understanding gradually soaks in, a further, constitutive-gendered split emerges in the two main views conveyed and offered by the film to spectators: those of Mila and Budi. On hearing Mila's pitiful tale, Budi's eyes are opened to the injustice of her situation but not yet to their structural causes. In response, he can only vow to marry her and become a surrogate father for her child. From Mila's perspective, everything she has seen so far has convinced her that an outcome like this is impossible; the current political system is effectively designed to prevent its citizens from helping or changing the fates of those whom it has positioned as

enemy or dehumanized other. Yet part of Mila still harbors romantic ideological fantasies—that a privileged man like Budi could use the masculine power promised to him by the New Order to pull her out of the “mud” where she is stuck. For this reason, Budi’s good intentions paradoxically present the biggest challenge to Mila’s ability to keep herself together, to keep breathing, and to keep thinking of ways, however limited, in which she might act to help herself and others. Mila the vulnerable, displaced villager is irresistibly drawn to Budi’s seemingly sensible reassurances, while the emergent seer and soothsayer she has become is terrified of what might actually happen if an “agent” like Budi should try to intervene.

This tension between a hope that springs eternal and an absolutely hopeless political reality lends an especially poignant, melodramatic force to Mila’s death at the end of the film (the result of a fateful combination of the stress of Budi’s interventions and drugs, alcohol, and violence at the hands of Rais). In the final scene, as Budi, Mila’s mother (Sofia W. D.), Mila’s daughter (Kiki Maria), and a fellow prostitute (Sri Harto) hold vigil over her now-unconscious form, a doctor pronounces her dead, confirming everyone’s worst fears. On the surface, Mila’s demise would seem to justify Sen’s argument that prostitutes, as a “crisis for the symbolic world” of New Order ideology (and Western classical action images), must ultimately be eliminated. But in my reading, if Mila is to function as a new critical “instrument” and source of audience identification, then death, however inevitable, cannot simply silence or make her disappear without a trace.

The film, I argue, therefore innovates a method of embedding what Mila has seen and felt into the conscious bodies and minds of those who remain behind. It does so in this case by translating her split, dissociated-yet-coherent identity and history into a profoundly moving sound: at the moment Mila’s death is announced, it is as if something invisible emerges from her body and makes itself felt throughout the room. What emerges is amplified and translated by her grief-stricken mother, who utters Mila’s original name uncontrollably: “Soepinahhhhh!” As if altered to accommodate Mila’s multiple transformations, the appellation becomes a bloodcurdling scream that somehow encapsulates both the strength and the injustice of Mila’s life and death. Melding melodrama with horror in its unbearably raw, tear-filled timbre, the vocalizations continue unabated for an unusually long time—around a minute and fifteen seconds.

As they do, Mila’s mother joins her on the bed, continuing to shriek and sob while clutching her daughter’s lifeless body. The reactions of the others, relegated to stand, watch, and listen, are then shown, one by one, in close-up. Observing them absorb the sight of Mila’s body and sound of her mother’s scream as it fills the room, viewers are formally aligned with the perspectives of each character, pushed into the same process of engagement with injustice, exploitation, and co-optation running especially rampant since the rise of the New Order. Through the combination of visuals and sound, a parallel process is set up between what is happening to characters and what potentially occurs in spectators’ bodies when

they are exposed to emotional, melodramatic moments or scenes in movies. As Linda Williams argues, in such instances, viewers become “caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (Williams 1991:4)—not wholly unlike the discussion of *latah*, the supposedly Southeast Asia-specific “culture bound syndrome” we encountered in chapter 1. While Williams’s analysis is based on the context of Western melodramas as “weepies” catering primarily to female spectators, films like *Bernafas* aimed their conglomerations of sex, violence, and extreme politicized weepiness at spectators of all genders and with an array of different class associations. Building on strategies innovated by *Palupi*, the mimicry elicited here further thickens the connection between diegesis and reality, leaving audiences with an emotional message that is unambiguous in how it encapsulates contemporary experience but that in its translated form—as a scream—is unlikely to be censored.

The sequence ends with a close-up of Mila facing straight into the camera, as seen from the perspective of Budi leaning over her. Her eyes, previously the source of her powers as a seer and of her identification with viewers, are closed for good. The shot ends with Budi’s hands placing a shroud over Mila’s face, which fills the frame and hence effectively veils his own look at her and that of viewers. With Mila’s death, the false patriarchal idealism of Budi’s male gaze—a smaller, but key part of the perspective given to the audience throughout the film in counterpoint to Mila’s perspective—has likewise been laid to rest. What is left for him is no longer visual but aural and embodied: the impression made by the sound that coalesces Mila’s altered gaze and the tragedy of its extinction. These are combined with the now undeniable realization that Budi’s own power to see and act were illusions that could only cause further destruction. As this all sinks in, the “cheap” melodramatic strings on the soundtrack unashamedly deploy another form of highly emotionalized audio aimed at further amplifying characters’ and viewers’ mimicry of Budi’s complex sensations in reaction to Mila’s death.

Along with diegetic women and men and female members of the audience, male spectators who may well have come to the theater to see scantily clad sex workers are invited to divide their looks and imagine their alliances expanding beyond those authorized by the new regime. Although they may choose to do something else, the film has forcefully directed its diverse spectators to gaze upon, identify with, and finally *mimic* the politicized melodramatic acts and heightened emotions on the screen. Through these emotions, the audience is linked to a marginalized, unattached woman who is unsilenceable, even in death. And this is not the end: as Linda Williams also argues, the power of cinematic melodrama as a “utopian component . . . of cultural problem solving” (1991:12) comes not only from its solicitation of audience members’ mimicry of characters’ bodily and emotional states but from its related function as a catalyst for introspection. If millions of viewers are moved to cry, she writes, it is “not just because the characters do, but at the precise moment when desire is finally recognized as futile” (11). In this case,

I argue that the sense of futility around a certain formulation of desire further signals the dysfunction of the newly installed, “classical” patriarchal political system in which it has been embedded. Viewers are thus urged to closely scrutinize the ways in which the New Order state has restructured and narrowed their ability to understand agency, desire, and modern identity.

Unlike *Palupi*’s headier, stranger mix of intellectualism and populist tropes, the more openly lowbrow approach of *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* made it a huge hit and financial success. This set a precedent for further efforts in the emergent genre that I position as sparked by the rise of the New Order. If *Bernafas* also succeeded as a political instrument aimed at a specific historical context, I would argue it did so precisely because of the “gray areas” it opens between gendered objectification, exploitation, and the emergent and paradoxically empowering modes of visibility it associates with them. Add to this the film’s implicit politicization of prostitution and its push for audiences to identify with sex workers—figures at the top of the state’s expansive list of enemies of the people. While the number of female directors overall decreased in Indonesia between the 1950s and the 1970s (Anggraini, Harjanthi, and Imanda 2021), actresses like Suzzanna, who was also a producer and production company owner, also actively contributed not only to their roles but to the subject matter and political aspects of films they starred in. Two years after *Bernafas*, Suzzanna’s company, Tidar Jaya, produced the hit *Bumi Makin Panas* (*The Earth Is Getting Hotter*, dir. Ali Shahab, 1973), in which she also starred as a central prostitute figure. Director Shahab credits Suzzanna with developing the character and pushing for more and more extreme, shocking, and consciously politicized scenarios for her to inhabit, beyond what Shahab himself had imagined (Yngvesson 2014:70).

In *Bernafas*, Sofia W. D., who plays Mila’s mother and was also a director at the time, offers a particularly indelible political, melodramatic contribution in her final vocal performance. Suzzanna’s iconic and subtly “gray” interpretation of Mila, a character notably different from the novel the film is based on (by Zainal Abdi, released around the same time), was arguably the key to both the film’s popularity and its ability to communicate a subversive feeling-message to a wide variety of viewers. Like Mila (and Usmar Ismail, Asrul Sani, and most other artists and intellectuals), very few Indonesians could claim to have come through the political transition of the mid-1960s both alive and mud-free. In *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*, Mila’s transdiegetic and transgender symbolization of an entire society that has become “dirty” nudges audiences to acknowledge the complex, thorny nature of their own positionalities. On one level, as a victim who exudes to-be-identified-with-ness, Mila works to unify the expanded groups of spectators assembled by the prostitution genre. Following Ernesto Laclau’s analysis of populist politics and aesthetics, I propose that the specter of a common political enemy, in the form of a looming, amorphous “institutionalized ‘other’” (2005:117), is sketched, however roughly, in the visuals and screams that collect and disseminate Mila’s

experiences. But at the same time, Mila's inexorable fall into the mud of Jakarta's red-light districts has led her to *become one with* the institutionalized villainy that is also, as Sen reminds us, "dispersed through everyone . . . and every social institution" (1993:209). *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* encapsulates this sense of inexorability and suppressed political and moral heterogeneity in Mila's mother's scream, which then refuses to be suppressed, making itself "*present as that which is absent*" (Laclau 2005:117, emphasis in original).

Yet in a society that has lived closer to certain inherent schisms than Lacanians such as Laclau might believe possible without dissociation or psychosis, the scream can also be read as a call to remember what has been *made* absent in front of the eyes of millions. In this case, I propose that *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*'s portrayal of the life and struggles of a woman who is more or less forced into prostitution by the rise of the New Order begins the crucial work of identifying and reconstructing the collective archipelagic imagination and political subjectivities that were smothered and co-opted through mass violence and military-authoritarian terror. The film's popularity and financial success helped to embed its emergent instruments of critique, laying the ground for the rise of the prostitution genre. As we will see, filmmakers elsewhere in the region often found themselves, at least at first, with a greater variety of potential avenues of protest to choose from. Yet perhaps because the basic conditions of authority grew much more similar around the region (especially in Thailand and the Philippines), the terms of engagement for an emergent set of popular yet deeply politicized films were conceived along lines analogous to those in Indonesia.

DICTATORS, POLITICIZED PROSTITUTES, AND URBAN MUD IN THE PHILIPPINES

Around the same time that audiences in Indonesia were aligned with Mila's abject-yet-magnetic gaze in *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*, another hypermasculine, U.S.-aligned dictator was asserting control in another Southeast Asian metropolis: Manila. Ferdinand Marcos did not come to power in a drawn-out coup d'état as Soeharto did, but his election in 1965 and reelection in 1969 were similarly characterized by the standardization of "gold, goons and guns" as tools of political dominance and by huge upticks in political violence and murder (Espiritu 2017:90). Unlike Indonesia, where hundreds of thousands of would-be activists were killed or jailed indefinitely during the mass killings of 1965 and 1966, in the Philippines, many young students became increasingly radicalized, emboldened by a democratic system that ostensibly allowed for direct opposition to elected leaders. But as public disenchantment with Marcos grew, student political activism culminated in the First Quarter Storm, a series of large-scale demonstrations and uprisings against the president in Manila in early 1970. This development tipped the already volatile mixture of violence, underhanded political tactics, and ostensible