

which features deities from many of the rituals at the center of screen-narratives. In Parangkusumo, when certain pilgrims embody fragments of the past by mimicking or venerating the legendary acts of the queen, for example, she connects them with feminine and nonbinary symbols and icons that came to the region before colonialism, before nationalism, and before monotheism, which Gottowik calls “tantric fragments” (2018:403). Similar to how films attract and communicate certain things to viewers, rituals offer a particular sense of agency to pilgrims who participate in them, while working in parallel with films and other media to normalize certain “ancient” ideas about gender in the present.

SUPRANATIONAL ICON

In 1950, just after Indonesia’s independence from Dutch rule, Basoeeki Abdullah, an internationally established Indonesian artist, produced one of the best-known portraits of Ratu Kidul. Imbued with an updated, “official” look, the queen’s image was transported into the presidential palace and mounted on the same walls as portraits Abdullah had done of Soekarno (he would go on to paint Soeharto and Imelda Marcos, among other regional luminaries). But even after entering the highest office in the land during a new and unprecedented phase in Indonesia’s history, the queen’s appearance was not fixed or contained as an attachment to that office or era; fluid, like the ocean, she would be painted, “photographed,” and novelized repeatedly over the next seven decades and beyond.

Since the late 1970s, Ratu Kidul has been the subject of numerous popular films and TV series, the market for which, like the queen herself, appears “eternal” (the latest film I am aware of is the 2019 *Lukisan Ratu Kidul* [*The Painting of Ratu Kidul*], dir. Ginanti Rona). More recently, the actress Cinta Laura, who attended the 2023 Cannes Festival as a L’Oréal brand representative, made much of the fact that her red-carpet gown was inspired by the queen. In concert with her media presence, Ratu Kidul’s political career has also continued since the 1950s. A particular highlight was when Soeharto’s first elected successor, Abdurrahman Wahid, made a widely publicized pilgrimage to Parangkusumo to ask for the queen’s blessing for his candidacy in 1998. In this context, she can be seen as having guided Java, and, by extension, the archipelago that would become Indonesia, from the arrival of European envoys and then colonizers in the sixteenth century through independence, dictatorship under Soeharto, and into the more overtly democratic era of *reformasi* that followed. Owing to events such as Wahid’s pilgrimage and to the queen’s enduring, ubiquitous media presence following independence, Karen Strassler refers to Ratu Kidul as a “national icon” (2014:100).

In line with the queen’s symbolically complicating influence on modern Indonesian society, I understand this iconicity as binding the nation to Ratu Kidul and the accumulations of times, regimes, features, and abilities she has absorbed and represents, more than the reverse. As a national, Javanese subnational, and,



FIGURE 27. The actress Suzzanna in 1963. Courtesy of KAFEIN/Chris Woodrich.

as I will show, supranational cinematic icon, the queen and other related female spirits can also be seen as further developing and transforming the medium of cinema in particular ways that are associated with both regional aesthetic histories and spiritual practices. For example, Ratu Kidul was most famously played by Suzzanna (fig. 27), the actress and production company owner who became

known as “Ratu Horror Indonesia” (Queen of Indonesian Horror) for her multiple portrayals of Ratu Kidul and other ubiquitous movie ghosts such as the *sundel bolong*. Typical of her deep, creative influence on the characters she played in the early 1970s, Suzzanna’s approach to preparation for these roles, especially that of Ratu Kidul, interpreted them not as anachronous legends or mere fiction. Instead, she acted as if she were portraying actual figures in a sort of biopic (albeit a highly dramatized one), while always asking “permission” from the figures themselves.

Suzzanna, who died in 2008, was known to conduct detailed ceremonies in preparation for her film roles portraying historically and culturally established spirits. Doing so articulated thick lines of connection among ritual, representation, and lived experience. Among other things, Suzzanna would conduct a *puasa mutih*, or traditional Javanese “white fast,” eating and drinking only rice and water for a few days. She would also make a pilgrimage to a room at an upscale hotel in West Java that since the 1950s has been set aside as a shrine to Ratu Kidul, asking for her blessing to portray either the queen herself or other spirits under her authority (Ariesti 2008).⁷ The result, I argue, was films that were imbued not only with a screen-transcending aura of the spiritual but also with the political power associated with figures like the queen of the South Sea. Especially via Suzzanna, whose career was launched by prostitution films like *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* and *Bumi Makin Panas* (see chapter 4), I propose that the rise of powerful female screen spirits in the late 1970s can be seen as an expansion of the subversive, transdiegetic movie roles of sex workers in the beginning and middle of the same decade. As noted above, the complex connection between sex work, legendary female spirits, and rituals in their honor is well established offscreen as well as on.

Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul (*The Awakening of Nyi Roro Kidul*, dir. Sisworo Gautama, 1985) is in my analysis one of the clearest examples of the political and gender-based interventions delivered via the cinematic manifestation of the queen, who serves as the film’s central character and ethical-ideological driving force. Like the films of the prostitution genre that preceded them, and reflecting the seedier, “low class” elements of rituals at Parangkusumo, supernatural horror films also deploy generous helpings of melodrama, action, sexual innuendo, and comedy to help ensure a broad viewer base and financial success. To give a detailed sense of how the film positions Ratu Kidul in the context of 1980s Indonesia (around the halfway mark of Soeharto’s thirty-year dictatorship), I will summarize various sections:

It is a Friday *Kliwon* in 1985. The woman (Suzzanna) lies in wait at the bottom of the sea, not far from the shore, clad in a *batik* sarong and bright green lace *kebaya*. After passing through a storm of bubbles and radio static, two scuba divers happen on her motionless form and take her for drowned. Earlier they had joked about meeting the legendary queen of these waters, whose submerged palace is believed to be nearby. One of the men quickly dismissed

her existence as *tahayul*, using the Arabic word to distinguish “superstitions” from beliefs sanctioned by religion, in this case Islam. But if they do find her, he brags, he will take her to bed. She allows herself to be carried from the water, draped across the arms of another man, as if going through the motions of a valiant rescue despite the fact that she appears to be dead. One of the men leaves to inform the police, while the other two wait at a cabin station in the woods nearby where the motionless woman has been placed on a mattress and partially shrouded with a blanket. Standing up to look around, the man who earlier cried *tahayul* glances down at the woman’s supine body, scanning from head to toe with growing interest. Suddenly, the blanket flies off, accompanied by a spooky, nondiegetic synth sound, revealing bare legs where the woman’s sarong has fallen open. When he bends to cover her, he peers closely at her face. She is made-up as if for a special occasion, her hair improbably adorned with a wreath of unwilted flowers. As if driven by an unseen force, the man leans in further and plants a kiss on her lips. As he does, her eyes fly open like shutters, meeting his gaze with an empty, robotic stare. He leaps backward, his face a mask of shock. Slowly, she sits up and turns toward him, but instead of running, he removes his shirt and sits beside her. As he stands and pulls her up with him, a familiar smugness replaces the terror in his eyes. But this, like the man himself, is short-lived. In a flash, he is blinded by bolts of yellowish-white light that issue from the woman’s eyes and mouth, striking his face and body and immobilizing him (fig. 28). He can only scream as he and his gaze are charred to a crisp. Leaving his smoking corpse, the woman wanders away through the trees until she comes to a road. Remaining silent, she waits for her real target to appear, her steady look warding off each gawking, goading passerby. Only when a Volvo 240 sedan pulls up with a black-sheathed sword affixed to its grill—signaling its passenger to be a government *pejabat* (civil servant)—does she accept the offer of a lift. As it happens, the bureaucrat is going exactly where she is headed: Jakarta, the capital. She introduces herself as Neneng, a traditional dancer coming from a performance (which explains her costume and makeup). Shortly afterward, the man pats her thigh and promises to help her find work in the capital if she can “help him out” now. Suddenly, the car begins to float, and the bureaucrat meets a fate similar to that of the *tahayul* man. Newspapers record the two mysterious deaths the next day.



FIGURE 28. The queen of the South Sea (Suzzanna) makes short work of the male gaze (*left*) and then does some undercover shopping at a trendy Jakarta mall (*right*).

Not simply a killer, the woman, as we learn, is on a mission.

She chooses one of the other divers as her assistant—a polite, handsome university student named Ario (George Rudy), whom she takes a liking to and does not fry. With his logistical help, “Neneng” makes short work of a gang of human traffickers linked to the bureaucrat she has already eliminated. As Ario discovers (and as the audience will have known from the beginning), Neneng is in fact Nyi Roro Kidul, alias Ratu Kidul, the South Sea queen of ancient legend who has awakened, seemingly as a result of steep increases in crimes against women, and is working undercover to fight the perpetrators.

For a spirit from the sixteenth century, Neneng/Ratu Kidul seems perfectly at ease in modern Jakarta. In one, comedically tinged scene, she pulls the stunned Ario onto the dance floor of a downtown club where they have arranged to meet, where she shows off all the latest moves. Predictably, after assisting her to defeat the gang, Ario declares his love but is again taken aback when the queen refuses his offer of matrimony. Despite her status as a spirit queen with superpowers, she explains, her feelings are similar to those of other women. But while she, too, has grown fond of Ario, the paths ordained for them do not lead to matrimony. “Love does not always end in marriage,” she assures him, returning his sad, puppy-dog gaze with an experienced, sympathetic look.

For weeks after she vanishes into the sea, he wallows in self-pity, sitting on the beach and staring into the waves. But his friends urge him to return to his studies. Indonesia needs people like him more than ever, they claim, teasing out a sense of nationalist duty from the emotional quandary caused by the sudden end to Ario’s

exhilarating ride with Neneng/Ratu Kidul. As if on que, the queen appears on a nearby rock with waves crashing around her and calls out to Ario, implying that their connection is not severed and that she'll be watching over the nation's transformation at his hands. Elated, the three friends sprint across the beach toward the queen, accompanied by a 1980s rock song on the soundtrack. The film freezes them in mid stride, superimposing the word *sekian* (that's all) over the still.

Given the fact that Ratu Kidul rubs elbows with kings and presidents and is known to appear when a major political shift or regime change is needed, her ultimate target was likely not the government-connected gang. If we follow the historical-political narratives associated with the queen, her actual goal would likely have been to meet and empower Ario, a young man in whom she saw the potential to carry out a broader, more important, mission: in this case, to fix, or perhaps overthrow, the government under which gangs of sexist men led by civil servants operate with impunity. While the name Soeharto is never mentioned, it is clear enough that the film is critical of his regime. In its version of Indonesia, Ario is implicitly positioned as the next in a long line of leaders, stretching back centuries, whose careers were jump-started or helped along by the queen. Furthermore, if Ario is an invented character who is contextualized historically, the queen appears as "herself": a figure who has granted permission for her portrayal (requested by Suzzanna, as indicated above) and who is not invented for the narrative of this or other films. The specifics of her dialogue and how she appears are variable between various media and times. But she is always identifiable as the same queen who grants the authority of ancient and contemporary kings and who, roughly thirteen years after the release of *Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul*, would play an important role in the process of Soeharto's actual fall and replacement by Abdurrahman Wahid (see above).

If the specifics of her storied past and many modern media appearances have made the queen a national icon, the layers of material history and representation that she carries along with her transcend the temporal and spatial borders of both nation and screen. Saturated with the historical attributes of archipelagic representation in Southeast Asia and with the importance of water in connecting diverse groups and places, I argue that the queen of the South Sea constitutes a transdiegetic and also transmedial force—one that interpenetrates and links distinct genres, styles, and modes of expression and the different places and eras associated with them. Her continual manifestations and reentrances serve to reconstruct a plural symbolic order around herself, while drawing in and positioning other, contemporary figures as her stand-ins or partners, doing so across the various technologies and formats of representation, places, and practices she inhabits. At the same time, what she enacts and represents is by design not "pure," symbolically or otherwise. She is neither a virgin nor even

necessarily male or female and can be national, local, regional, or transnational (in her capacity of localizing the global spread of both Hinduism and Islam, and her role in local responses to Dutch incursions along Java's southern coast). As in the film above, her awakenings, and those of other female spirits discussed in the following sections, generally occur at times in which particularly virulent strains of patriarchy have taken hold; this is one reason, I propose, for the popularity and constant production of supernatural horror films under Soeharto. Even if a film featured a less exalted spirit than the queen of the South Sea, the increasing number of roles played by Suzzanna leading to her status as the queen of Indonesian horror created a broader sense of supernatural movies as contests between the masculine agents of the New Order and an iconic feminine force that took different forms at different times.

FEMININE SPIRITS VS. KIAI EX MACHINA

Compared to elsewhere in the region, the emergence of supernatural horror as national cinematic staple in Indonesia happened relatively late, with *Beranak Dalam Kubur* (*Giving Birth in the Grave*, dir. Awaludin and Ali Shahab, 1971). A year after her rise to superstardom in the prostitution-themed *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*, Suzzanna's role as coproducer and star of *Beranak Dalam Kubur* positioned her as both an iconic and a strategic behind-the-scenes link between politically subversive sex workers and the female spirits that would appear in greater numbers toward the end of the decade. *Beranak Dalam Kubur* was the first of twenty or so supernatural films Suzzanna acted in (fig. 29), most of which were released between the late 1970s and the 1990s, when national horror fever was in full swing. Although her later hits were not produced by Suzzanna's company, she was known to use her star power as well as her experience in the business side of the industry to exert an unusual level of creative control.⁸

As in *Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul*, spirits and monsters played by Suzzanna and other actresses constituted female vigilantes who intervened on behalf of police, government, or religious authorities, the latter groups usually male and consistently shown to be ineffective. Owing to the movies' enduring popularity and their established connections to politically powerful, noncinematic spiritual discourses and practices, they were not always warmly embraced by those in power. While movie prostitutes initially went under the radars of hyperpolitically attuned censors, the screening of subversive female legends and spirits like Ratu Kidul became a concern of the state and other influential groups. As Katinka van Heeren shows, officials and religious authorities "saw mystical films as an obstacle to Indonesia becoming a modern, pious nation" (2012:142–43). Partly reflecting this concern, new censorship guidelines were created in 1981, and numerous special committees and commissions were convened, such as the commissions for "Film and National Morality," "Film and the Awareness of National Discipline," and "Film in Its Relation to Devotion towards the One and Only God" (van Heeren 2012:139). To address