

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



FIGURE 29. The poster for *Beranak Dalam Kubur* (*Giving Birth in the Grave*), the first horror film starring “Suzzana” (i.e., Suzzanna). Courtesy of KAFEIN.

such concerns, filmmakers often inserted a character who represented a religious authority, usually an Islamic *kiai* (cleric), who “would step in and restore order at the end of the film.” It was mainly due to these sorts of conventional capitulations, van Heeren argues, that political sensitivity generated by the presence of “the supernatural was tolerated” in Indonesian popular cinema (143; see also Sen 1994:144).

This was especially the case, I suggest, in the majority of such films that feature “lower”-level spirits lacking the state-recognized status of someone like Ratu Kidul. A pattern does emerge in numerous Soeharto-era horror movies where a *kiai* or other male religious figure will appear and intervene in the disruptions caused by spirits, resulting in a trope that is often taken in retrospect as an unwritten (and largely self-imposed) rule of New Order cinema. This is in line with the broad perception among scholars and much of the Indonesian public that Soeharto’s rule was characterized by a deep and rigidly patriarchal conservatism. It was, but this chapter’s use of a supernatural cinematic lens to view the New Order points to other layers that are often obscured by the modernist-developmental surface attached to the regime.

As Dhanurendra Pandji (2021) and others point out, for example, many of the military leaders of the New Order, including Soeharto himself, had strong backgrounds in Javanese mysticism. On an official level, *kejawen*, or Javanese spiritual beliefs (often combined with Islam), and other localized belief systems were marginalized by a law that required Indonesian citizens to follow one of five state-recognized religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, or Buddhism,

the last two reformulated with a “One God” figure at their center). But these gestures toward nationalized monotheism also concealed the deeper, enduring affiliation of Java-based authorities like the New Order with typically syncretic local and regional belief systems that alter and undermine the sanctity of purist understandings of Islam, Christianity, and other world religions. As Pandji shows, a key New Order minister, Inspector General of Development Sudjono Hoemardani, was responsible not only for urbanization and modernization but for a massive and expensive reconstruction of a late Majapahit-era (1293–1527) Hindu-Javanese temple, *candi* Cetho, in the mountains above Surakarta in Central Java. Pandji argues that the temple’s reconstruction symbolically asserted a cyclical (and typically *kejawen*) rather than a chronological-developmental view of history underpinning Soeharto’s power (2021:26–27).

In 1983, the New Order government also took over Gunung Kemukus, one of the legend-based ritual sex sites mentioned above, converting it into an official tourist destination. According to interviews I conducted with officials and participants there in 2008, 2009, and 2017, the intent was not to align the site with more clearly monotheist or developmentalist principles but to amplify its original function.⁹ The number of pilgrims thus greatly expanded owing to the state’s promotion of the site, causing an attendant increase in not only *kejawen*-infused ritual sex but prostitution. These and other examples above reveal a regime that is far more heterogeneous and politically inscrutable (and hence often also more insidious) than it appears on the surface. Underneath its signature promotions of a rigidly singular, masculine view, the New Order state shows a canny facility for keeping various distinct and potentially conflicting groups and discourses in line by carefully balancing and playing them against each other; but in doing so, I argue, it also opens itself to attacks such as those staged by supernatural horror films.

In line with this argument, I contend that the phenomenon of inserting kiai figures in New Order supernatural films as *deus ex machina* tasked with putting spiritual-political matters back in order is also a more complicated and less decisive convention than it might at first appear. Even in what to my mind is one of the purest examples, the 1980 film *Pengabdi Setan* (*Satan’s Slaves*, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra), the success of the kiai is ultimately undermined by a final twist that strongly hints his order-restoring work may have been reversed. Just as the disruptive spirit seems to have been banished for good, the film’s spooky, ghost-attack soundtrack suddenly returns. It is then made to look as if the Javanese, black magic-wielding woman who appeared to have been easily killed by the kiai in the film’s penultimate conflict may in fact be alive and well. If the kiai rule is slyly undercut by filmmakers in one of the main examples that demonstrates its validity, what, then, actually transpires in the numerous, less conventionally faithful approaches, and what does this tell us about the politics of the genre as a whole?

In *Sundelbolong* (*Devil Woman*, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981), another megahit supernatural horror film, the presence of the male religious figure

functions—in typically archipelagic fashion—to call attention to local/regional/transnational conventions like the *kiai ex machina* in order to poke fun at them. By initially making a comedic show of acquiescence, the film implicitly contests the legitimacy of the onscreen *kiai* and also the police. A closer look at the film's exploitation of the complexities, paradoxes, and resultant holes in the surface of New Order authority complicates the ways that gender politics have been understood to be negotiated between male authorities and female ghosts on the screen. The conventional theme of female victimization by the darker aspects of New Order patriarchy, however, is quite clear.

The film's central character, Alisa, again played by Suzzanna, has died under complicated, violent circumstances: she was raped by several men while her newlywed husband (Barry Prima), a ship's captain, was away at sea. After discovering she is pregnant, Alisa despairs that her husband will no longer accept her or the child. Some later assume that she committed suicide, but it is shown fairly directly (although not stated) that she, in fact, dies while trying to give herself an abortion. After her death, Alisa turns into a *sundel bolong*, a legendary female ghost with a bloody hole in its back. Normally, the hole is covered by waist-length hair and is then suddenly displayed as a tactic to shock victims, who at first take her for a beautiful woman and not a vengeful ghost (fig. 30).

As with many other types of Southeast Asian female ghosts, women generally become a *sundel bolong* if they die from complications with childbirth, often also involving violence at the hands of men. Particularly in the latter case (and here it is both), a *sundel bolong* will use her supernatural powers to take revenge on her attackers. Accordingly, when the men who raped Alisa start turning up dead, the police appear to suspect that the causes are supernatural. That this conclusion is at odds with the official, rational perspective of Indonesian police is played up by the film for humor, while also mocking the conventional role of the *kiai*. After one of the men's deaths, which happens to have taken place in a graveyard, Alisa's husband, Hendarto, meets up with the police chief, the local village headman, and a *kiai*. The policeman—in spotless uniform, hat, and aviator glasses—approaches the village head with purposeful, official-looking strides:

Policeman: Do you believe that a person's soul can arise from the dead and take revenge?

Hendarto (interrupting): Is that what happened to Alisa?

Policeman: Sorry, I didn't mean to talk about your wife like that.

Village head: This incident is very confusing.

Kiai: Unnatural deaths always bring mystery. Especially if they commit suicide. God hates people who commit suicide. We seek refuge with Allah from that.

Hendarto: What do you mean?

Kiai: We can't be upset. Only in Allah do we take refuge.



FIGURE 30. In *Sundelbolong*, Suzanna's direct look pierces the screen (*top*), connecting the diegesis to the world of spectators, while the hole in her back (*middle*) solicits and engulfs the modern within an "ancient" but expansive diegetic spiritual politics that is always playing underneath the visible and the national.

What is indeed mysterious is whose death they are even talking about: the clearly “unnatural” death of the man whose bloody corpse has just been carted off from the cemetery with a headstone piercing his torso or that of Alisa, whose ghost the policeman seems to suspect is the killer. The *kiai* might be suggesting that the man has committed suicide and that we should not mourn his death. He could also be hinting that he believes Alisa’s death is a suicide and that this may have contributed to her becoming a *sundel bolong*. While the film performatively gives the appearance of doing its “duty” to insert not one but three official male perspectives on the matter (four if you count the husband), their conversation seems intended to confuse matters rather than to clarify, undermining the authority of the speakers. Part of the problem (and this is where it starts to become funny) is that the officials seem to be “aware” of their roles as authority figures caught between duty and the need to keep up appearances in front of the viewing public on the other side of the screen. They give the impression that they realize the diegetic scenario they are presenting to audiences is far from conforming to an idealized image of an ordered society and that they are using misdirection and their official status as “trustworthy men” to cover it up.

These self-aware attempts to misdirect are emphasized by the scene’s formal structure: when the police chief apologizes to Alisa’s husband for suggesting his wife is a ghost, he turns and looks directly into the camera, smiling, as if talking to the audience in the role of a friendly officer (fig. 31). Because his first statement to the village head seems much more direct and purposeful, it’s almost as if he realizes he is being “watched” and then abruptly changes tack, obfuscating and hiding the supernatural reality from the public (and from Alisa’s widower, who might be shocked or offended). Then, when the *kiai* gives his minispeech about Islam and suicide, during the last line, he, too, turns directly to the camera, while visually separated from the others in a medium close-up. At the end he pauses and smiles, again in a way that suggests he is addressing someone not in the present scene: viewers.¹⁰ The scene then cuts to an informal discussion among a group of women familiar with the case, contrasting official with private speech. The women, facing each other instead of viewers, state very clearly: “Poor Alisa. Why did she become a *sundel bolong*?”

In the end, it becomes clear to everyone that Alisa has in fact become a *sundel bolong*. Like Ratu Kidul dealing with patriarchal thugs and government officials (although in that case notably without a *kiai* present whatsoever), she flies, shoots lasers from her eyes, and throws trees, making relatively quick work of the entire criminal gang who ruined her life. Hendarto, the police, and the *kiai* arrive just as she is finishing off the gang’s leader, strangling him with a metal pipe she has bent with her bare hands. They plead with her to stop, and she loosens her grasp just long enough for the man to admit to his crimes against her in front of everyone and state that he was wrong (cut to reverse shot of police chief nodding



FIGURE 31. A friendly neighborhood policeman and *kiai* give official-sounding (but purposely confusing) “statements” looking directly into the camera, adding a layer of self-reflexive satire in *Sundelbolong*.

to *kiai*—okay, case closed). But when the man asks for her forgiveness, Alisa the *sundel bolong* tightens the pipe again and he falls dead. She then apologizes to Hendarto for killing everyone who “ruined our happiness.”

He, in turn, pleads with her to go back to the spirit world where she will be at peace. With all the bad guys deceased and their guilt established, Alisa does not need to be forced to leave, something that appears in any case impossible. As she looks at her husband silently, the sounds of a woman crying are heard, although her mouth and face do not move. As if on cue, the *kiai*, police, and Hendarto raise their arms in prayer. The *sundel bolong* disappears and Alisa briefly materializes, floating in the air, before turning back into the ghost and then vanishing again. The prayers continue to be audible until the soundtrack brings back the adventure-esque orchestral score used for scenes where the ghost attacks, seeming to imply she could return at some point in the future—something that Hendarto,

despite keeping up appearances for the authorities surrounding him, would seemingly enjoy. The familiar word *Sekian* appears on the screen.

THE DIVISIBLE FEMININE SIGNIFIER

As I read the film's ending, the kiai and police in this case did not need to set things back in order because Alisa, with her powers as a *sundel bolong*, has already done so. Rather than using Islam or the law as a force to control or expel her, the men simply follow her lead, praying for Alisa's safe return to the realm of the dead. The film's gender politics are thus not in line with the trope of a female supernatural disturbance controlled and brought to order by masculine authority, religious or otherwise. More important still, in contradistinction to masculinity, which appears mainly homogeneous in the film (although it can be "good" or "bad"), feminine power is divided into two parts, the active, vengeful, justice-doing *sundel bolong* and the amorous deceased wife who looks like her old self and rekindles her relationship with her husband (consummated in a love scene), cementing his partnership in her revenge plans. Even before she becomes a ghost, Alisa displays active and passive sides: when first cornered by her attackers, she shows strength and skill in martial arts, fighting off many of them successfully before being outnumbered. Like *Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul*, *Sundelbolong* implies that women need to be strong, since the police and court systems are ineffective in stopping or solving rampant crimes, especially by men against women. Indeed, after Alisa's rape, she takes the perpetrators to court, but things go awry when it comes to light that she is a former prostitute, a narrative twist that further implies a conservative, masculine bias in the expression of the law.

Alisa's background in sex work constitutes a further split in her otherwise upstanding character. The film does not present this in a negative light, however, displaying an attitude that I position as a further bridge between the outsider politics of ghosts and sex workers on screen, which together constitute "the most frequent construction[s] of the adult female protagonist outside the scope of monogamy and motherhood" (Sen 1994:144).¹¹ *Sundelbolong's* formulation of the "double" identity and authority of its female principal also builds on the earlier work of prostitution films—further clarifying, I propose, what those films were "really" getting at. Like them, *Sundelbolong* makes initial gestures in the direction of masculine sovereignty and dominance—a move that is soon outed as a narrative/stylistic feint that purposely misleads. In the end, solving the problems raised in the film will require not only direct "masculine" struggle but feminine interventions from the netherworld of spirits and the undead—acts that take things further in the direction of asserting a dualistic, plurally gendered symbolic order than was possible when prostitutes, with their more limited, mortal powers, were the central figures. Like the spaces of criminals and prostitutes, the sphere of spirits lies officially outside the boundaries of polite, modern society yet in reality is shown to interpenetrate and