

media by going even further back to their origins in live performance. The process of return, however, was indirect and often driven by exasperation or even disgust.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO VERNACULAR THEATERS

In my own experiences talking to both critics and filmmakers in Jakarta a decade after the onset of reformasi, the unending glut of cheaply made horror films often led to a sense of discouragement with the possibilities that the new, “mainstream” industry was capable of generating in the early 2000s. Despite the tantalizing success and smooth, global-cinematic style of films like *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, the market outside of horror was also beset by quirky, raucous comedies shot on emergent high-definition video formats such as the prosumer Panasonic HVX200 camera. Young critics, film scholars, and many filmmakers I spoke with still felt these works failed to live up to the expectations built around processes of national and regional reforms and democratization.

In 2012 and 2013, I conducted several months of research at Sinematek, the privately funded national film archive located in Kuningan, Jakarta. During the 1990s and early 2000s, its employees had endeavored to make their significant collection of historical films more accessible to the public by transferring them to video. But owing to a broad lack of interest and funding at the time, the transfers were mainly done by projecting old movies on a white wall or small, collapsible screen and recording them with an analog video camera. The result was major cropping—often to the point that, when actors were positioned on either side of an original widescreen frame, the square ratio of the transfer imposed in the middle would only reveal the tips of their noses. The prints themselves were frequently not in the best condition, giving an impression that was starkly different from what past viewers experienced watching prints of the films in theaters. Worse still were the pirated videos of classic movies sold in low-resolution VCD (video compact disc) format in shops around Jakarta and other major cities. For contemporary audiences, shifting media formats made older Indonesian films appear cheap and lacking in technical standards instead of them being a rich source of history, entertainment, and potential aesthetic inspiration for aspiring filmmakers. Lack of funding and of better, more affordable means of storage and display meant that Indonesian cinematic history was trapped in a “past” defined by new technologies that were unable to fully contain or express it.

Like elite critics before them, young cineastes now sought to distance themselves from the abject, “low” aesthetics associated with local and regional film histories. After a series of conversations I had in 2012 and 2013 with Sinar Ayu Massie, a thirty-something Jakarta screenwriter, she tellingly handed me a copy of senior film critic J. B. Kristanto’s *Nonton Film, Nonton Indonesia* (*Watching Films, Watching Indonesia*, 2004), a compilation of his reviews from the previous thirty years. Within the first few pages, Kristanto repeats a claim he made in the 1980s

that “almost ninety-five percent of our films are bad” (2004:4). While in the past such an attitude could be chalked up to the broad, class-based split between elite viewers and critics and the mainly working-class audiences for locally produced films around the region, it was jarring to see how little seemed to have changed so many decades later.

But the early 2000s were also a time of rapid technological change, and outside of film archives (and at times surreptitiously within them), celluloid copies of older films were beginning to be transferred to high-definition video formats at their original aspect ratios. Soon, television stations began playing these better copies of older films to a slowly increasing viewership. At the same time, as mentioned above, the rapid construction of new malls in urban areas increased the number of multiplex screens. A melodramatic, Islam-themed genre that soon became known as *film Islami* began attracting larger numbers of middle-class youth to theaters around 2008. The emergent category and its overt religious and underlying economic themes connected especially well with the steady rise in outward displays of piety among such youth (Weng 2017). The result was at least thirty, usually very successful, religion-centered films over the next decade (Barker 2019:111). By 2016, the film Islami genre and its corresponding youth trends had become well-established, bankable patterns with easily discernible effects on the landscapes of leisure time and what were now becoming more recognizably smooth, glitzy “mainstream” film aesthetics, especially in Indonesia. Developing alongside film Islami in the early years were self-consciously lowbrow, niche viewers who sought out illicit, pirated VCD copies of the mystical horror films of the 1980s and early 1990s. These also began to be shown on television, at first in similarly degraded form.

Combined with the nascent appearance of higher-quality, older films on television, these shifts collectively created a perfect storm that by 2016 had opened a “hole” wide enough for *Warkop DKI Reborn* to stage a proper return to an older set of values, aesthetic forms, and techniques. Doing so, I argue, constituted both a calculated, nostalgic repackaging of a past cinematic success and, more important for my analysis, a disruptive response to what local popular cinema had become—especially in the popularity of film Islami. *Warkop DKI Reborn* was a hit, breaking all previous records (including those of film Islami) by envisioning a more diverse audience that engulfed the heavily middle-class, postreformasi cinematic mainstream and hipster cultists alike in a flood of “bad” old aesthetics. When rendered in high definition, as it turned out, these conventions and tricks appealed to young, outwardly more pious teens in search of something new and perhaps more fun and subversive. Mirroring the golden ages of the 1970s and 1980s, the rebirth of these aesthetics again functioned to touch off what I suggest will be seen in retrospect as a postreformasi golden age.

To do so, *Warkop DKI Reborn* looked backward in time toward a particular target: the common set of theatrical, interactive aesthetic tendencies most deeply embedded in the history of Indonesia’s and the region’s mass media.

“Warkop DKI” is the name of a theatrical comedy troupe that began performing on radio in the 1970s, quickly moving to sold-out, touring stage shows and then to movies and later television in the 1980s and 1990s. Their path from stages to screens at the time, while especially celebrated, was far from unique. It reflected what I argue was a second wave of entanglement between filmmaking and interactive, deconstructive, and improvisational theatrical forms, beginning in the 1970s. As we saw in chapter 2, the popularity of unscripted regional vernacular theaters like stambul and bangsawan left indelible marks on the audiences, producers, and economies of local films, creating aesthetic circuits that formally, spatially, and economically separated local movies from major global players like Hollywood.

Even as the popularity of these older theaters waned in the 1950s, many troupes continued to tour, and new variations began to emerge, driving the second wave of improvisational, audience-interactive groups in the 1970s. Among the leaders of this movement was the Surakarta-based Srimulat (named after one of the founding actresses, Raden Ayu Srimulat), which began performing in the early 1950s and continued touring, appearing on radio and then television, and selling cassettes of their routines throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and then again on television from 1995 to 2003. At the height of their popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, instead of just touring, Srimulat opened franchise troupes that performed similar material under the same name in other cities (Siegel 1986:90–92). For senior Indonesian critic J. B. Kristanto, popular movies of the time were pushed to become a “continuation” and intermedial translation of the tropes and approaches of Srimulat and other related live forms, as filmmakers deployed “the [theatrically based] idioms that most speak to our society and are alive in it” (Kristanto 2004:6). Like spectators of older vernacular theaters, viewers of Srimulat did not seek to distance themselves from the stories and acts unfolding onstage in the way that audiences for classical Western theater expected. As James Siegel puts it, “the spectator of Sri Mulat feels that he must answer what he hears, that the language of the performance is not [formally] closed off from his own language; he does not have *immunity*” (1986:111, emphasis added).

Perhaps because they performed almost exclusively in Javanese, Srimulat did not branch out into films, which at the time were generally in Indonesian, the national language.¹ Yet several other stage-based troupes began to combine similar styles (drawing, like Srimulat, on enduring Java-based vernacular theaters like *ketoprak*, *ludruk*, or *lenong*) with dialogue in Indonesian, opening the door for them to redefine cinematic comedy in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. One such troupe was the Surabaya-based Surya Group (fig. 34), which collaborated with director Nya Abbas Akup (see chapter 1), often called the “father of Indonesian comedy,” on some of his most iconic films.² Among numerous others, these included the *Inem Pelayan Sexy* trilogy (*Inem, the Sexy Maid*, 1976–78), a riotous send-up of New Order ideals and discourses of gender, class, and power. It was



FIGURE 34. Promotional still for the live comedy troupe Surya Group, who also played in many of writer-director Nya Abbas Akup's subversive comedy films. Photo taken in the 1970s and gifted to the author by the family of Pak Herry Koko.

into this aesthetic-economic atmosphere that the original Warkop DKI (sometimes known as Warkop Prambors) emerged in the late 1970s. After building a significant following on radio and stages, the three-man troupe produced and starred in an impressive thirty-five feature films between 1980 and 1995.³ These were most often made up of separate comedic vignettes like the ones performed onstage but tied together with a loose narrative structure. This formula made most of their films into major hits, positioning Warkop among the most influential cinematic stage troupes of all time.

Like regional vernacular theaters and films in the 1950s and 1960s before them, Warkop, Surya Group, and other stage-comedy players such as Benjamin Sueb, who came to cinema in the 1970s, were always already engaged with global and regional circulations. Audiences expected them to humorously puncture the sanctity of the national with the foreign, the emergent, the regional, and the subnational. In the last instance, the Javanese origins of most troupes implicitly underscored the prominence of Java and Javanese people and styles in Indonesia. Yet the mission of such troupes was to satirize and deconstruct everything, including themselves, so at the same time that they traded on and spread Javanese

hegemony, they worked to bring out the absurdity of everything Javanese, hence deflating, to some extent, Java's position in Indonesia.

GHOSTS, HOLES, AND *SOTO* REBORN

By explicitly resurrecting the Warkop troupe in 2016, *Warkop DKI Reborn* returns to the regional history of intermedial, stage-screen convergence and to the deconstructive, self-reflexive approaches to cinema and globalization it popularized from the 1950s to the 1990s. In doing so, *Warkop DKI Reborn* refers especially to the earlier Warkop movie *CHIPS* (dir. Iksan Lahardi, 1983), which satirizes the hit U.S. motorcycle-cop TV series *CHiPs* (NBC, 1978–83), poking fun at the absurdly gleaming, heroic masculinity of the American show. At the same time, *CHIPS* characteristically lampoons itself while suggestively highlighting the foibles of the less-polished and often equally bumbling actual Indonesian police (fig. 35). In both the “original” *CHIPS* and in *Warkop DKI Reborn*, however, the characters are presented as a private security force that only look like police, avoiding the perception of directly targeting actual officials. Doing so would almost certainly result in heavy censorship or bans.

As I will show, the explicit return of vernacular theaters with the rebirth of Warkop in 2016 was important not only because it followed earlier patterns of “backward” convergences between older and newer media. The film’s fragmented, archipelagic style was premised on literally opening a hole in its onscreen diegetic world—one that would symbolically (and actually) usher other, even more impactful, elements of the past into the postreformasi present. It was not simply the Warkop characters who emerged as if reborn through this temporal portal; a number of other screen icons from the 1970s and 1980s made hilarious and haunting returns. Most crucial, I argue, was the reappearance of one particular *sundel bolong*, the female ghost with the bloody hole in her back discussed in chapter 5. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the one played by the actress Suzzanna in the 1981 hit *Sundelbolong*.

The way she is introduced into *Warkop DKI Reborn*’s modern, postreformasi, comedy-drama diegesis is also telling. Her entrance occurs in part 2, which was released the following year in 2017 and continues the narrative of the first installment. Dono, Kasino, and Indro Warkop, now played by established contemporary stars Abimana Aryasatya, Vito J. Bastian, and Tora Sudiro respectively, have been falsely accused of destroying and burning a fancy Jakarta gallery and the expensive artworks within. Following a series of strange occurrences as they scramble to try to clear their names, the troop finds themselves in Malaysia, where they team up with a woman named Nadia (Nur Fazura).

Chased and caught by a strange transnational criminal gang led by a flying man in a dragonfly (or perhaps a cricket) costume (Babe Cabiita), the reborn Warkop team is told they will be frozen with a special machine that turns people