

As the questioners' laughter abruptly stops, Suzzanna's *sundel bolong* helps herself to a huge pot of boiling *soto*, which she easily lifts and drains, this time casting a sinister glance in the men's direction in answer to their calls for her to leave some for them. The scene then cuts to the original *Sundelbolong*'s reveal of the *soto*'s broth pouring out from the bloody, maggot-filled hole in the ghost's back as she drinks. Among the TV's spectral movie-residents, it is only Suzzanna's *sundel bolong* who appears to be able to break out of the looping, diegetic-historical confines of her New Order golden age hit. Like the Warkop characters, she has come to life again in the digital present. But unlike them, she has done so without changing her iconic appearance: she returns, I suggest, not as *sundel bolong* per se but also as a manifestation of Suzzanna, the queen of supernatural horror, who died in 2008.

Always already an agent of convergence and heterogeneous time, Suzzanna's posthumous reentrance led (or perhaps possessed) *Warkop DKI Reborn*'s director, Anggy Umbara, to create a series of films in which a ghostly, reanimated version of "Suzzanna" is the central figure. I argue that Suzzanna's rebirth, and the trend of higher-budget 1980s-style supernatural horror that it contributed to, was a key, if largely unacknowledged, turning point in Indonesia cinema—one that mirrored similar shifts around the region in the years after the Asian Financial Crisis but, in this case, eventually led to a Guinness world record for the "most horror-focused film industry" in 2023 (Guinness World Records 2023). As I will show, Suzzanna's reentrance coincided with the emergence of a new, but typically backward-looking, approach to the alienating political economic and aesthetic regimes of neoliberal democratization and digital postmodernity.

THE NEOLIBERAL POWER COUPLE

The flood of remakes of 1980s horror that followed Suzzanna's return in *Warkop DKI Reborn*, continuing until the present, made room for further experimentation with theatrical-interactive and mediatized spiritual pasts, transforming *sundel bolong*, *phi krasue*, *manananggal*, and other regional phantoms into a deceptively new kind of transnational representative. Because of their increasing presence on mainstream global streaming services like Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar, and Netflix, these spirits would become far more difficult for international audiences and critics to dismiss as "cult" fare with supposedly small (albeit global) niche audiences as they had in the past.⁴

If the post-New Order reawakenings and the digital spread of *sundel bolong* and other female spirits could at some level have been predicted or "expected" owing to the endurance of structural-ideological mechanisms like syncretic, animist-inspired rituals that support them, the same could be said for the shadowy owner of PT Indomarco Prismaatama and dozens of other influential companies shaping contemporary life in Indonesia in countless areas. The huge, related increases in homogeneous, corporate mini-markets can be seen as a symptom of

contemporary global patterns—patterns with which I argue rituals and supernatural horror engage in particular ways. Like films and rituals, however, the roots of PT Indomarko's "globalization" of Indonesian business landscapes connect to a much deeper and more localized history and rebirth: that of the Salim Group.

The umbrella for these ventures, known as the Salim Group, was founded in 1972 by Liem Sioe Liong, a Chinese-Indonesian businessman who changed his name to Sudono Salim, and who has been called "Suharto's most important business pillar" (Borsuk and Chng 2014:xii). The post-New Order rebirth of both the Salim Group and *sundel bolong* signals the strength and adaptability of deeply embedded structures of feeling and of economic, political, and symbolic modes of power, the origins of which precede modernity as such but have come to define it in important ways throughout the region. Owing to the lengthy reign of the New Order, it is perhaps especially inevitable that many of the key players and figures, both onscreen and behind the scenes of governance, would resurface following the fall of the ostensible center, Soeharto.

Recalling how successive rulers of the Javanese Mataram dynasty are framed as part of an enduring "power couple" with the enabling (and potentially disabling) figure of Ratu Kidul, the spirit queen of the South Sea, historians Richard Borsuk and Nancy Chng refer to President Soeharto's relationship with Liem Sioe Liong as that of "a Javanese 'king' and his *cukong*" (2014:1).⁵ The latter term typically refers to a wealthy patron (more recently specifying an "outsider" of Chinese descent) who sees benefit in funding the political or creative activities of someone with potential to succeed in order to extend the influence of the *cukong* beyond the realm of finance. The term is frequently applied to wealthy patrons of the arts, including those who provided funding for films in the 1950s and beyond (Biran 2008). When Soeharto forcibly inserted himself in the center of Indonesian politics in 1965–66, he, too, needed a "cukong." He became president of a "country that was both broken and broke" (Borsuk and Chng 2014:xii), having been torn by two major conflicts: the war for independence against the Dutch (1945–49) and the then-recent execution of up to a million Indonesians by the military under Soeharto's own command. Money was needed to sustain and expand both the government's and Soeharto's personal power, and Liem, who had first befriended Soeharto two decades earlier during the nationalist revolution, "stepped up to the plate whenever he was called on, and was able to deliver" (Borsuk and Chng 2014:xii).

Despite Soeharto's cozy relationship with the U.S., and despite the Americans' knowledge of his role in the mass killings and coup against Soekarno, Indonesia's second president was described by the U.S. embassy as a "devious, slow-moving, mystical Javanese" (Borsuk and Chng 2014:7). To become the more dynamic figure later known as "a contradictory mixture of modernizer, single-minded military officer" (Borsuk and Chng 2014:7) and Javanese neomonarch, Soeharto needed a partner who understood his self-positioning better than foreigners, and whose

networks of influence extended far beyond the seats of Indonesian political power, snaking around and beneath them. He needed an almost spectral figure who could surreptitiously engage and manipulate the “invisible” hands of the economy to the advantage of the government. The critical role ascribed to the queen of the South Sea of controlling nature and the unseen forces of “spirits” can be read, among other things, as a metaphor for just such a partner, one from whose enabling embrace a leader may never fully extricate him- or herself.

While no spiritual marriage was to occur between Soeharto and Liem, their intimate collaborations and political economic codependency made them “like brothers” (Borsuk and Chng 2014:xiii). This cleared the path for Liem’s Salim Group to quickly grow into an early Southeast Asian multinational conglomerate, spreading its tentacles and roots elsewhere in the region and beyond. By the mid 1980s, the Salim Group had influential members such as Soeharto’s cousin Sudwikatmono, a film importer-exporter who also founded the dominant Cinema 21 chain of theaters in the 1980s. The group also had at least fifty-four companies under its umbrella, doing business in a number of different areas (Dieleman, 2007:51). Indosiar, one of the first private television networks in Indonesia, was also launched under the Salim Group in 1995 (Sen and Hill 2000:113). As he expanded his businesses, Liem shrewdly lessened the group’s direct dependence on the government, while remaining in the inner circle of Soeharto and his powerful family. When Soeharto stepped down in 1998 during the Asian Financial Crisis, the Salim Group similarly experienced a fall, incurring huge debts due to the unexpected currency devaluation caused by the Crisis. With their Jakarta homes under attack during violent clashes between antigovernment demonstrators and police, Liem and his family fled to Singapore to ensure their own safety.

When the dust of regime change cleared, the new democratic government “came under enormous public pressure to dismantle the companies that were previously cronies of Suharto” (Dieleman 2011:213). Shrewdly, Liem’s son Anthony, who had been given charge of Indonesian operations, quickly arranged for the effective nationalization of 107 Salim companies, earning praise from former critics. While this also meant additional massive losses for the group, as Marleen Dieleman argues, with two hundred thousand employees, it was simply “too large to fall” (2011:214). Certain other crony businesses of the New Order were decimated during the onset of reformasi. But along with many of Soeharto’s children (none of whom he had allowed to directly enter politics), the Salim Group and some of their allies were able to quietly return to their seats of economic power. Because of the crisis and nationalizations, but also because of its successful strategizing and managing of the political economic transition, the group emerged a leaner entity that, according to Dieleman, was “on its way to fully implement[ing] a more market-oriented and less relationship-focused corporate strategy” (2011:214).

Because of its enduring strength and resources—and its ability to restructure itself “democratically”—successive presidents have remained intimately, if

somewhat differently, connected to the Salim Group. Its corporate tentacles have continued to stretch across and beyond the seas that connect and surround Indonesia's archipelagic *tanah air* (land water). This kind of relationship is in line with global patterns of neoliberalization that, as a combination of discourse and practice, made especially rapid gains in the region after the "creative destruction" of the Asian Financial Crisis. As David Harvey puts it, "the role of the state" would now be "to create and preserve an institutional framework . . . to guarantee . . . the quality and integrity of money" (2007:2). The ability to do so is linked to the institution of democracy, through which the Indonesian government would now prepare the playing field for private entities like the Salim Group (including newer ones) to take a greater role in national development, while making a show, at least, of less direct interference than in the past. Yet given the Salim Group's and other corporate interests' hand in helping to fund and run the country during the New Order and before, this process would provide a sense of continuity under the surface of reform and change—an endurance of certain historical patterns that would become definitive of Indonesian and regional development in the twenty-first century.

The Salim Group itself has, since its inception in the early 1970s, perhaps wisely remained reticent about speaking to the media or otherwise placing itself in the public eye. Yet the logos of its various businesses, such as the ubiquitous Maspion factories or Indomaret mini-markets, of which there are now around twenty thousand outlets, are literally impossible to miss. Read in connection to the Salim Group rather than as individual entities, these ubiquitous visuals signal rapid shifts in the nation's symbolic and physical landscapes. Yet they testify to the endurance of an understanding of political economic control as divided across a network of visible and concealed actors, even if the latter are hidden in plain sight. The equally rapid spread of Islamic conservatism in the post-Soeharto era appears to reestablish, along religious lines, the New Order principle of singular patriarchal authority. But as during the New Order, this view also ignores or pointedly obscures what is plainly visible if one cares to look: the repeated inability of masculine, Islamic leaders to fully take the reins of the nation or stamp out the myriad, thriving beliefs and practices that for religious conservatives are blasphemous or worse.⁶

In this context, I contend that the rapid return and digital spread of New Order-style supernatural horror in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century makes sense as aesthetic, narrative iterations of the political and structural similarities (and embedded structures of feeling) that connect dictatorial regimes to democratic ones. In familiar and at times critical ways, the return of classic, iconic female ghosts restates the fact of an underlying dualistic symbolic order—one ideally composed of a "power couple" that divides authority among visible, material mortals and shadowy, shifting spiritual-economic actors that not everyone can, or wants to, see. In light of her reanimation and penetrating entrance into the present mediascape via *Warkop DKI Reborn*, I argue that Suzzanna

was then positioned to symbolize an “authentic” regional strategy of engagement with the contemporary aesthetic, economic, and religious flows that intersect with Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations. Having now seemingly inherited the status of supranational icon from the ghostly characters she portrayed, Suzzanna embodies the specific, symbolic continuities that connect the region and its nations to their collective pasts. Such links reveal particular modes of engagement with local democratizations in the context of global neoliberalism and, as we will see below, with the postmodern “waning of affect.”

Because she was an actress who wielded significant creative influence and who was also a production company owner in the 1970s, at a time when far fewer women made behind-the-scenes decisions, Suzzanna’s life and career helped to pioneer important aspects of the cinematic present—particularly the steady increase in women producers, directors, and writers. These aspects imbue her current status as an icon with a more complex aura. As I will show, Suzzanna’s ghostly return resonates emotionally, politically, and economically and “clicks” not only with viewers facing local theatrical screens but also, as discussed in a recent documentary about her, as a particular kind of representative of Indonesia’s varied and archipelagic aesthetic history.⁷ This function extends to the transnational streaming networks to which many of the old and new films centering on her iconic status have been added and to which diverse local and global media are ever more connected.

As I noted above, the success of *Warkop DKI Reborn* was closely followed by a spate of remakes of New Order horror films, which included director Umbara’s theatrical and streaming hits in which an actress effectively plays Suzzanna playing the sundel bolong. The first one, *Suzzanna: Bernafas Dalam Kubur* (*Suzzanna: Buried Alive*, dir. Rocky Suraya and Anggy Umbara, 2018) confronts contemporary, mainstream audiences with a transdiegetic hall of mirrors that, like *Warkop DKI Reborn* before it, brings a historically lowbrow genre to more diverse groups of viewers. In challenging or disregarding the borders between diegetic and actual worlds, *Bernafas Dalam Kubur* also works to provoke and strip audiences of any “immunity”—to use Siegel’s term for the interactivity common to local comedy theaters—vis-à-vis the fictional and real political and symbolic orders reaching out at spectators from the screen.

Beginning from its title (which directly translates to “Breathing in the Grave”), the film combines ideas and words from two of Suzzanna’s best-known films: *Beranak Dalam Kubur*, one of the earliest New Order “horror” films that is also a gruesome thriller, and the smash *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur*, in which she played a politically marginalized woman who falls into prostitution (see chapter 4). The narrative of the 2018 *Bernafas Dalam Kubur* loosely follows the 1981 *Sundelbolong*, the first film in which Suzzanna played the eponymous female ghost with the hole in her back. To further blur past and present and fiction and reality, the name of the central female in Umbara’s version is Suzzanna. She is played by Luna Maya,



FIGURE 36. Luna Maya as the “new” Suzzanna, positioned in front of paintings of herself and also of the deceased actress Suzzanna, whom she is effectively playing.

an actress, singer, and public figure who, like Suzzanna Martha Frederika van Osch (Suzzanna’s full name, sometimes also spelled with only one *z*), is of mixed European and Javanese descent.

On the fateful night when Luna Maya’s Suzzanna, who has recently found out she is pregnant, will be killed and turned into a *sundel bolong*, she is shown attending a *layar tancep* (mobile cinema) screening in the commons of the village where she and her husband, Satria (Herjunot Ali), live. The movie being projected at the diegetic screening is *Telaga Angker* (*Haunted Lake*, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1984), the second film in which Suzzanna van Osch played a *sundel bolong*. In other scenes, paintings of both Suzzannas are displayed prominently on the walls of the main characters’ house, positioned as if looking at each other or at times staring out at viewers. Building on this ghostly iconic-mimetic play of gazes, during the mobile cinema screening of *Telaga Angker*, audiences are confronted with the “new” Suzzanna fearfully watching her doppelganger turned into a *sundel bolong* on a movie screen, just before she herself is killed during an attempted robbery and likewise becomes one. It really begins to seem that, as I contended above, *Warkop DKI Reborn* has “released” Suzzanna back into the contemporary, porous cinematic atmosphere where she now runs *amok* in the visually and corporeally transformed figure of another actress (fig. 36).

As this also shows, in the onscreen world where a woman attacked by men turns into a powerful, vengeful ghost, people also watch “fictional” accounts of the same thing. Implicitly, then, the audience watching the 2018 film is likewise not immune from such terror (or the potential for justice it represents). They

are part of a reality where hauntings are seen to take place—like the characters in front of them, viewers also watch “fictional” female spirits onscreen yet live in a contemporary world where the same spirits actually exist, are claimed by political figures, and are regularly engaged with and honored through rituals. *Bernafas Dalam Kubur* is set in 1989, the year after Suzzanna van Osch’s final *sundel bolong* film, *Malam Satu Suro* (*Javanese/Islamic New Year’s Eve*, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra) and not in the present. Yet while it brings back numerous narrative, formal, and stylistic flourishes typical of 1980s supernatural fare, I argue that it is also a response to the conditions under which Indonesian audiences found themselves living in 2018.

Gone, for example, are the typical male representatives of ideal New Order authority like police or *kiai* (Islamic leaders). At the same time, however, there are many more scenes of people praying together in mosques, including a long sequence of Suzzanna and her husband, Satria, completing their *shalat subuh* (dawn prayers) toward the beginning of the film. In my reading, these images reflect the far greater emphasis on public displays of piety in post-Soeharto Indonesia, where such displays are no longer officially frowned on. This includes an exponential rise in Muslim women of all generations choosing to wear *hijabs*. While the film does not reimagine the 1980s as characterized by such clear, outward displays of piety, it appears to try to “make up for” this with its frequent scenes in the mosque. Perhaps producers were also reluctant to feature a typical 1980s setup where a *kiai* faces off with a powerful ghost in the current religious climate (as I show below, a similar scene in a 2017 remake of another classic horror film created a controversy). In this case, *Suzzanna: Bernafas Dalam Kubur* only shows that chanting prayers and verses from the Qur’an bothers the *sundel bolong*, causing her to cover her ears and scream. Most of her actual battles, however, take place with ordinary people wielding ineffective physical weapons. She is also, mirroring a trope in 1980s horror, faced with a *dukun* (shaman), who deploys spells and incantations in Javanese to at least slightly better effect.

Despite these gestures to the shifts in contemporary religious expression, however, *Suzzanna: Bernafas Dalam Kubur* strategically opens up perceptions of the present, revealing its continuing cross-pollination with older beliefs, ideas, and practices. In doing so, the film implicitly questions the authenticity of contemporary forms and increasingly vivid expressions of piety, perhaps especially targeting trends of demonstrating that one is limiting one’s beliefs to a single group, discourse, or source of power. The film does so, in my analysis, using the “good old” tactics of elongating desire, melancholically yet pleasurably stretching romantic longing into a bridge between the spheres of humans and spirits (and audiences and films and nation and region; see chapter 5 for historical variants). The present context of the film’s release also offers more fertile ground than in the past for undermining a stable, collectively verifiable sense of good and evil, especially in the construction of character identities.

The original *Sundelbolong*'s basic plot of a newly pregnant woman being killed while her husband is away for several days for work is repeated here, although Satria is in this case the manager of a small factory in a rural area and not a ship's captain. He is in some sense a protagonist, yet this role is destabilized by the fact of the film's formative conflict, which arises from the resentment of poor workers to whom Satria denies a raise. Sympathy is frequently implied for the struggles of such laborers, reflecting poorly on the lavish lifestyle of the boss and his wife. At the same time, the workers' turn to robbery owing to Satria's lack of empathy—resulting in Suzzanna's accidental killing—is presented in negative terms. The conflict with ostensibly clearer sources of evil (and with the presence of clearer, if often ineffective, representatives of state authority) that characterized supernatural films produced under Soeharto's dictatorship is thus shifted. I propose that this shift reflects changes in the postreformasi era in which presidents and other officials are chosen in un- or less-rigged elections. Yet the same politicians abdicate more power to vast, supranational financial networks run by unelected heads of corporations. Causality is therefore muddled to some extent.

As an elite factory employee, but not an untouchable owner, Satria is less of a wealthy agent than a stand-in for members of the growing, more visibly pious, post-Soeharto middle class. As such, he is in some ways treated as an "object" that has uncritically internalized a certain kind of economic thinking and morality that especially benefits those above him. This implies he is in need of true enlightenment, which, of course, will not occur through prayer, religious study, or labor protest but rather at the hands of his wife, the new Suzzanna, once she becomes a *sundel bolong*. At first, however, the nice, but hardheaded, and deeply religiously and economically indoctrinated, Satria is a difficult and unwilling pupil. Once he realizes he has been tricked—Suzzanna, who has in fact been killed, is now a ghost who is only posing as his mortal wife—he becomes angry, accusing her of dishonesty and violating religious principles. Gesturing furiously at Luna Maya's *sundel bolong* while repeatedly screaming "you are not Suzzanna," he produces a moment of high drama and, perhaps in this instance at least, unintentional metahumor. Yet by the end, circumstances have turned the tables, and the rebellious workers who killed his wife have used his rigid convictions to trick and manipulate him. He sits blindfolded, metaphorically and actually, in front of the *sundel bolong*, who has been subdued, *pontianak*-like, with a spike (in this case a ceremonial *keris* [dagger]) inserted into her head.

It therefore falls on Suzzanna to use the emotional connection he still clearly feels with her to lift Satria's "veil" and open his eyes to the tangled reality at the root of their problems. His unsympathetic treatment of those under his command has caused them to attack and ruin his family and home. The only thing that can possibly save him now is a power and love that has been cast out from his religion and is contained in the blasphemous *sundel bolong*, who has become the vessel for

his murdered wife's soul. It is to her, and no longer to his shadowy, unseen boss—the owner of Satria's and likely numerous other factories—that he must shift his allegiances. At the last minute, Satria follows his heart, although this will not offer him a shining path of redemption. Joining his former wife in battle, he ends up killing one of the workers as the *sundel bolong* takes on the remaining two and the shaman, after which Satria declares his undying love for the ghost of Suzzanna—indicating he has been indoctrinated into her heterodox, undead spirituality.

Now that her revenge and ideological “work” is done, however, some things must still follow the rules of 1980s horror, and Luna Maya's Suzzanna dutifully utters lines mirroring those of the ghosts played by her doppelganger in the past: “I love you. Our worlds are different. I have to go.” As she disappears, he clutches her white robe with the hole in its back, now empty and spattered with the bodily fluids of many victims. Their blood and hers, the film implies, are ultimately on the hands of the old, simplistic, pious Satria: a protagonist who is not a hero, whose unthinking exploitation has driven workers to violence. Appropriately, as he touches his own back, he finds a matching hole, inflicted by the knife of the worker he fought and killed. He sinks to the ground beside the robe, after which we are shown a funeral where two fresh graves are being covered with flowers while neighbors tearfully pray, chanting in Arabic. In a strangely happy, melancholic, and romantic ending sequence, the ghosts of Satria and Suzzanna are shown wandering the village together at night, holding hands and enjoying each other's company. Presumably, with their murderers also dead, they will now guard their neighbors against the various complex contemporary forms of evil instead of sowing chaos or taking further revenge.

The film's implicit juxtapositions of the slippery, democratized present with the authoritarian past underscore that even though things have changed and perhaps taken a step “forward,” an older understanding of the nature of power is more crucial than ever. This is especially the case in light of the fragmentation of life and agency following *reformasi* and the institution of neoliberal democracy, where the market, with its ethereal “invisible hands,” “serves as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action” (Paul Treanor, quoted in Harvey 2007:3). Yet in Indonesia, where neoliberalism, like previous global ideas and practices, is also often understood to have been hybridized, we see a continuation of familiar patronage networks such as those established during the New Order and before. Rather than functioning in opposition to market forces and the ethics they produce, however, they are “mutually reinforcing,” according to Edward Aspinall, “at least in the effects that they generate for Indonesian political life” (2013:29). For Aspinall, following the fall of Soeharto, the established webs of patronage have themselves fragmented, yet also expanded, as a result of the exit of the “supreme patriarch” (31). Along with the emphasis on “pure” economics and at least the “performance of competition” (30), culturally and historically determined partnerships between patrons and their “clients”

have defined the political economic landscape of the early twenty-first century. These clients sell political allegiance in exchange for the funds to carry out lucrative *proyek* (projects) of various sorts.

As Aspinall shows, such patronage, expanded through atomization, effectively “enables oligarchy” but, at the same time, potentiates a “greater scope for individual agency” (2013:51, emphasis in original). Patrons, he argues, and especially their “clients,” who are now often actors at much lower, more informal levels of society than in the past, have more choices in front of them, as long as they can see and calculate the continuing importance of these political economic “power couples” (my term). *Bernafas Dalam Kubur* appears to concur. In a similar vein, it asserts that both “good” and “bad” mortals act with the help of murky partners who emerge from the networks that envelop and drive the machinations of society and its political economies. Like ghosts, entities such as the Salim Group have consistently sought to remain in the shadows even while successive Indonesian presidents are “married” to their influence and bound by allegedly democratic oaths to support them. But anyone who cares to look knows that they exist. In this context, the reemergence of iconic spirits like Suzzanna’s *sundel bolong* across the screens of multiplexes and phones and televisions signals the divided, heterogeneous nature of both modern democratic time and of the “old” dualistic symbolic order—of “patronage” defined as a partnership between disparate actors who are often human and spectral, or both—that I argue continues to influence Indonesia and the region.

It is necessary, these specters imply, to consciously engage with forces outside of and surrounding the chimeras of modern religious beliefs and simplified concepts of individual agency as accomplished mainly through the performance of democratic elections. History constantly changes but often does so in regionally specific loops: iconic, archipelagic spirit-partners whose appearances also sold movie tickets and helped drive a golden age of local cinema in the 1970s and 1980s (and elsewhere in the region at different times) began returning in huge numbers because they made a new but related kind of sense in the mid-2010s. In the post-Soeharto era, they also sold tickets and collected views and likes while carrying on their mission as unseen political advisers—figures that imply the pervasive presence of others like them who may be far less well-intentioned. As they continue to do so in 2024, the previously ultraclean, democratic outsider president Joko Widodo—once thought of as the humble “hero” that would finally realize the ideals of Indonesia’s *reformasi*—appears to have been the latest recipient of whispers from an unseen source or sources. He has taken a sudden, dynastic turn and now gives the impression that he is using the considerable influence he amassed during his years in public service—and various other questionable means—to ensure his young, inexperienced son will be the next to enter Indonesia’s highest office. The onscreen ghosts appearing in ever greater, world-record-breaking numbers thus

appear to have an important message and mission regarding the potential return of a “supreme patriarch.”

THE THAI NEW WAVE, THE POSTMODERN, AND THE RECLAMATION OF AFFECT

While the particular political restructurings assembled around the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998 differ throughout the region, the “networked” rise of democratic reform and powerful transnational corporations (and increasingly neoliberal understandings of political economic power) was a key issue taken up across many of the emergent, Southeast Asian cinematic “new waves.” In Thailand, for example, a 1997 Crisis-related reworking of the national constitution was heralded as the most democratic version yet. IMF and World Bank strategies appeared poised to allow international investors and guarantors to take control of national finance via restructuring plans aimed at combating what was labeled, in familiar terms, a problem of “crony capitalism” that had led to the crash. The gist of the reforms and liberalization strategies was that “Thai capitalism was to be made more like Western capitalism” (Hewison 2005:311). The changes were largely approved by neoliberal, Western-aligned Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, who came to power the same year as the crisis in 1997. A “short political honeymoon” (Hewison 2005:315) resulted, with initial support from the local business community.

But domestic financial leaders increasingly felt excluded from the deal, and as the economy continued its downward slide despite reforms, anger spread in Thailand against the new government, which was seen as complicit with Western financiers. The latter were perceived (mainly correctly) as seeking to create opportunities for themselves while ineffectively “saving” Thailand. As Rachel Harrison argues, the “distinct shift in Thai opinion vis-à-vis the West” quickly became inspiration for an emergent “new wave” of Thai filmmakers who addressed the shifts “with a certain humour, irony and rich social comment . . . open to the cultural complexities of the moment” (2006:328). Most of these emergent directors who began turning out feature films in 1997 had come from advertising, where they had honed their skills to an extent that separated them from new wave filmmakers elsewhere in the region.

Both technical-aesthetic prowess and humorous social commentary are demonstrated in a commercial directed in 1998 by Wisit Sasanatieng, one of the emergent commercial directors-cum-new wave filmmakers (Thevoideck 2010). Sasanatieng was also the screenwriter for *Antapan Krong Muang* (*Daeng Birley and the Young Gangsters*, dir. Nonzee Nimbutr, 1997).⁸ Along with *Fun Bar Karaoke* (dir. Pen Ek Ratanaruang, 1997), *Antapan Krong Muang* is considered one of the first offerings of the Thai new wave. In Sasanatieng’s advertisement, a Thai