

and inequities. Such films have also begun to circulate much more globally than in the past, as they have moved from greater festival exposure onto the world's rapidly expanding digital streaming networks. Indonesia has emerged in the last few years as the strongest presence on services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney Hotstar (among many other locally and regionally based streamers). But the increased global presence of Southeast Asian films in both art-independent and commercial platforms, and the various archipelagic models, symbols, and invectives they deploy in the name of reclaiming (or simply activating or elongating) affect, is a demonstrably regional phenomenon.

REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE EXPANSION OF ARCHIPELAGIC IMAGINATIONS

Outside of Thailand and Indonesia, Gaik Cheng Khoo (2006) sees middle-class independent filmmakers in 1990s and early 2000s Kuala Lumpur using cinema to negotiate problems that are basically similar. Instead of national-patriarchal interpretations of Buddhism, new wave Malaysian cineastes face rigid, top-down interpretations of Islam, often even more so than their Indonesian counterparts. In ways that roughly reflect official Theravada values in Thailand, these Muslim ideals are positioned as the basis for a rationalist-modernist and, especially in Malaysia, ethnonationalist ideology—one that arose in the 1950s and has been increasingly enforced by the government and Malay elites since the 1970s and 1980s. As in Indonesia, “spiritual economies” in Malaysia have become a much more visible force since the early 2000s, but they are more conspicuously driven by religious conservatism, with far fewer prominent movements deploying spiritual inclusivity or localized versions of Islam to balance it out.

As Khoo argues, however, young Malaysian filmmakers in the postreform period have used their work to imagine and push for a more visible presence of local and regional syncretisms. In their films, “modernity facilitates the conscious and unconscious recuperation of *adat*” (Khoo 2006:4), a set of hybrid, often animist-derived, Malay values and customs that predate the arrival of both Islam and Western colonialism in the region. In spite of the fact that conservative nationalists inaccurately tar them as Westernized liberals, Malaysian new wave filmmakers like Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Mohammad, Tan Chui Mui, James Lee, U-Wei Haji Saari, and others strove to avoid a simple recourse to typically empty, postmodern image economies or to neoliberal, globalizing discourses of repression vs. activism. Their approaches reflect thematic and stylistic patterns that are well established in Malaysian history and that I suggest are similar to forms of representation recouped by young regional filmmakers elsewhere in the region around the same time. For Khoo, emergent Malaysian cineastes’ strategy of looking backward and “reclaiming *adat*” after the Asian Financial Crisis was similarly accomplished “through a focus on sexuality or a return to forms of the archaic such as magic

or traditional healing” (2006:5). As Galt (2021) and others have shown, this also prominently included the return of previously banned female ghosts like the *pon-tianak* to Malaysian screens.

As we have seen in Thailand and Indonesia, these ostensibly archaic ideas and practices are deployed to produce and reengage certain kinds of politically charged emotions, insisting on their contemporaneity with local modernity and democratic reform. More so than the globalized processes of reform, these historically and culturally infused images of *adat* are primed to disrupt the rigid, racialized, patriarchal, and heteronormative interpretations of Islam that characterize contemporary Malaysian nationalist political landscapes. Patrick Campos looks at the rise in independent filmmaking in the Philippines around the beginning of the twenty-first century in a related way, arguing that this was when a longer yet historically less-valorized history of regionality would finally come to fruition. For Campos, the post-1998 era thus spelled the “end” of national cinema amidst the increasingly palpable “condition of not being confined within national space” (2016:2–3). As I have argued throughout this book, aesthetic, philosophical, spiritual, or economic confinement to the terms of a single, national identity or territory has been a relative rarity through the history of cinemas in the region. But what I position here as the return of regionalism in the Southeast Asian twenty-first century can arguably be seen, as Campos asserts in the Philippines, as having recently become even more visible—especially in terms of gaining more acceptance from middle classes and certain groups of elites (not to mention viewers outside the region)—via access to more viable modes of local film production and the growth of subnational screen cultures.

The gradual disappearance of different “grades” of movie theaters (A-B and C-D) that once profoundly shaped the economics, aesthetics, and class associations of national-cum-regional cinemas has undoubtedly had a further impact on how regionalism is experienced and expressed. In many areas, locally made films now compete fairly successfully, albeit at times with the help of imposed quotas, for the same multiplex screens through which Hollywood and other imports (increasingly Korean and Japanese, among others) circulate. As the number of malls has drastically increased, so have screens, along with the companies—now also frequently foreign or partly so—that own them. Throughout the 2010s, the combination of an increase in the percentage of local populations who identify as middle class and the ubiquitous mall-ization of commerce and social life in much of urban Southeast Asia has also had indelible effects on filmmaking. These changes, for example, helped bring new and more socioeconomically diverse audiences to local and international films alike. For better or for worse, this has also raised ticket prices while reducing the sense of a specific, regional circuit of popular films that mainly compete with, and are influenced by, each other.

Where regionality and regional-archipelagic aesthetic strategies have arguably reasserted themselves most clearly is in the emergence of an influential circuit

of local film festivals. As brought to light by my frequent festival attendance and participation in various capacities over the last fifteen years and the many resultant conversations, such events have been crucial in exposing regional independent filmmakers to each other's work. This in turn drives new approaches to cinema that often proudly announce themselves as Southeast Asian, or a times also Asian, expanding the sense and potential geographic size of regionality. Festivals have also helped create and secure new sources of funding that have allowed many regional cineastes to produce a first or second film in styles that might present a risk in terms of a theatrical release and potential returns on producers' or investors' funds. Yearly fetes such as the Singapore and Jogja-Netpac international festivals have been especially important in opening roads for emerging talents. The latter, for example, has served as the main platform for launching and sustaining a robust, subnational film-producing center in the city of Yogyakarta, roughly a ten-hour drive from the capital, Jakarta. These developments have not occurred in isolation, of course, and as industry informants have revealed, over the last three decades, regional filmmakers have also turned to European, Korean, and Japanese festivals (and increasingly Chinese ones) and funds to help realize ever-more ambitious and expensive independent productions.

Older, more experienced, and established independent filmmakers who started in the 1990s or early 2000s have also begun opening production and postproduction houses and foundations that help younger filmmakers with funding and critical feedback. Thailand's Purin Pictures, for example, founded by new wave filmmaker Aditya Assarat, holds annual calls for proposals to fund writing, production, or postproduction that are open exclusively to Southeast Asian applicants. Purin's postproduction grants are supported in part by White Light Post in Bangkok, founded by Lee Chatametikool, who has served as editor on many of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's best-known films, as well as numerous other Thai and regional productions. White Light and other Bangkok post facilities also provide paying customers in the region with affordable color grading and other services that are reachable via a short flight from most local filmmaking hubs. Malaysia's Astro conglomerate, a satellite and streaming television company that also co-produces films, has been another key player in funding and finding audiences for work produced and set in Indonesia and Thailand, as well as in Malaysia.

As this suggests, what began in the early 2000s with low-budget independent productions that struggled to find and make money has gradually shifted to become a more economically fluid and "mainstream" segment of local industries—one that is also regionally embedded. As I, Patrick Campos, and others have recently argued (see Lovatt and Trice 2021b), while independents based in recognized centers like Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila have become more established, other loci have quickly emerged along the "margins" of different areas. As Jasmine Nadua Trice argues, "It is possible to trace a map of recent Southeast Asian filmmaking that would lead in and out of film practitioners' homes" (2024:425),

microarchipelagic spaces that increasingly double as locations for production, discussion, or screenings of films. In some cases, as Khoo has more recently noted about Malaysian new wave filmmakers, the unique “systemic and structural challenges” and comparatively “weak internal ecosystem” they have faced since their beginnings around the Asian Financial Crisis have in some cases (along with some very notable successes) driven them back to producing via informal, friend-based networks (Khoo 2024:382–83).

In addition to urban iterations, these various loci and the smaller, group-oriented approaches to filmmaking they foster are increasingly based on separate islands altogether from national capitals and their mainstream industries. As such, they constitute a region-wide “assemblage of film communities” driven by technology, savvy political negotiation, and “a particular mindset of collectivity” (Engchuan 2021:225). Cinematic communities have also been facilitated through regional and international festival-funding circuits along with government grants and other private sources. Aside from Yogyakarta, numerous other subnational regions in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and elsewhere in the region have emerged, many producing films in local, rather than official or national, languages, with subtitles added for national and international audiences who do not speak or necessarily understand the dialogue. Following this trend, in Indonesia over the last decade, increasing numbers of successful mainstream films have used localized variations and dialects of Javanese and other languages (Yngvesson 2021).

Along with the continual adaptation of conventions and styles that I identify with a set of basic regional cinematic features, the emergence of so many new filmmaking “islands” along regional circuits further embeds the sense of a specific, archipelagic aura linking mainstream and smaller-scale contemporary Southeast Asian moviemaking. But perhaps the most crucial, ongoing development in the region, as in the world around it, is the rise of the multinational and local-regional streaming services with their insatiable need for ever-greater amounts of “content.” It is too early to say what the broader outcome of this may be, and reports of big streamers underpaying for content, especially in certain Southeast Asian countries, are becoming increasingly common. But the interest taken by transnational producer-streamers like Netflix, Amazon, Disney Hotstar, and HBO in global cinemas, including Southeast Asian ones, has, at least for the moment, served to bolster and consolidate many of the moving parts of contemporary regional filmmaking. While films on Netflix or Amazon are often simply labeled Indonesian, Thai, or Filipino and are not grouped as a region for most international viewers, in my experience, algorithms and suggestions of titles often select across Southeast Asia and can contribute to a sense of an archipelagic group of styles.

Somewhat like a horizontally constructed database, the result also mixes together independent “festival” films with less theatrical traction and popular, higher-budget movies while at times providing funding that has blurred the boundaries between the two. This has worked, I suggest, to reimagine and repopulate the

regional cinematic mainstream and the diffuse national ones within it. One key outcome of this digital, semiautomatized reshuffling is that numerous older films, and especially older supernatural horror films like the 1981 *Sundelbolong*, are now vying, in pristine, restored colors, resolution, and original widescreen format, with newer takes on the genre for the eyes and ears of regional, as well as transnational, viewers. Especially given the lesser content restrictions and censorship generally applied to streaming moves in the region—again, at least for the moment—I argue that this has been instrumental in creating a platform for the resurgence of remakes and films set in the past but addressing the present. It has also helped open a space for the return of iconic ghosts and figures such as Suzzanna in the 2016 *Warkop DKI Reborn*.

SETANISM, THE ARCHAIC MOTHER, AND THE LIVING FEMALE “GHOST”

Now that Indonesian and Southeast Asian supernatural films are exposed to a much broader international streaming market (a sphere that less often traffics in ideas like the postmodern waning of affect or categorizes popular regional horror as niche-based “cult” fare), they have become one of the most visible and promoted genres in the new regional cinematic mainstream. In the context of this book, this has allowed for a broader circulation and visibility of films, ghosts, and icons that I associate with the idea of a plural symbolic order. As I have mentioned, the reclaiming of affect and of local approaches to gender politics have, not coincidentally it seems, occurred in parallel with a significant rise in the number of women and openly queer filmmakers working across the region. Over the two decades since the Asian Financial Crisis and various political-economic reforms that followed, Intan Paramaditha also sees the emergence of a more concerted and self-conscious “transnational women’s cinema” (2024:79)—one that responds, critically and often with typically searing onscreen violence, to the assumptions of global feminisms premised on a Western point of view.¹² In this, the problem of interpretation more readily continues to rear its head.

Although I am not focusing on films made by women per se, I suggest that the emergent patterns identified by Paramaditha also build on collective local and regional ideas of women’s symbolic and actual empowerment—and the need, at times, for women to physically fight with or kill men who have adopted more radical or Western forms of patriarchy. As I have argued, the actress and producer Suzzanna can be understood as both an icon and an active part of the historical processes and infrastructures that contributed to the platform on which this attitude is sustained in the present. In this vein, Paramaditha calls contemporary Indonesian female writer-director Mouly Surya’s *Marlina si Pembunuh Dalam Empat Babak* (*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, 2017) a localized “feminist western”—one that also includes many regional horror elements (fig. 37).