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).

FIGURE 37. Marlina (Marsha Timothy, *far right*) traveling with the severed head of her rapist in the "feminist western" *Marlina si Pembunuh Dalam Empat Babak*.

Set on the Eastern Indonesian island of Sumba, but also reflecting basic regional patterns of matrifocality I have identified in Indonesian films of Javanese and Sumatranese origin, the film highlights that women's "strategies of resistance are not made outside but within the domestic space" (Paramaditha 2024:75). It is in "feminine spaces," like kitchens and bedrooms, that the female antihero (Marsha Timothy) "chooses her weapons" and concocts a plan to single-handedly kill a band of men who have come to rob and rape her. The film was celebrated at numerous festivals in Indonesia, regionally, and further abroad (including Cannes). Yet Paramaditha argues that in the more rarefied views of local and international critics, especially male ones, the idea of women's agency expressed through violence, functioned to "foreground their own concerns regarding the proper ways of expressing feminism" (77).

In my analysis, this problem resonates with Fuhrmann's (2016) exposition of recent Thai filmmakers' efforts to complicate globalized notions of policy-oriented activism as ideal responses to the repression of the rights of various minoritarians. The issue of "improper" feminism can also be related to the fact that films like *Marlina* have inherited modes of representing gender, power, and gender-based conflict that are specific to regional cinematic discourses—and to such films performing important updates and modifications to these modes that constitute localized feminist interventions. In *Marlina*, the basic theme of struggle for women's rights expressed through violence is not fundamentally distinct from classical works like *Sundelbolong*. In a familiar way, the eponymous heroine can also be said to act from a platform established in part by regional ideas of matrifocality (she is a mother who, for various reasons, is far more active than her husband) and in part by the trope of a "superpowered" feminine avenger. But whether it dovetails Western feminist-activist discourses or not, the film also makes a key change to the women's revenge convention: its feminine avenger completes her mission of

killing her male tormentors while she is still alive (and she does not die afterward; in fact, she helps another woman give birth).

Building on Paramaditha's analysis, I position this aspect of *Marlina*'s regional feminist sensibility in terms of a broader shift in the discourse of supernatural horror. The historically established convention in which a woman must die to unlock both connection to the supernatural and the expanded agency that comes with it appears to be slowly changing, for reasons that I will elaborate below. Looking further into the particulars of this modification of a classical theme, I close this chapter and the book with an analysis of two recent Indonesian supernatural films: Joko Anwar's 2017 "remake" of (in fact a sequel to) the classic 1980 *Pengabdi Setan* (*Satan's Slaves*, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra—see chapter 4 for an analysis of the original) and *KKN di Desa Penari* (*KKN in the Dancer's Village*, dir. Awi Suryadi, 2022).[13]

Both films, I argue, express a similar critical transformation to that of *Marlina*, colluding with Mouly Surya's regionally inflected feminist tactics. In so doing both films contribute to a shift in regional horror in which a mortal female protagonist does not need to be killed in order to act powerfully within the porous, transdiegetic onscreen spaces constructed by filmmakers. These central female characters, rather than men, come to form a new kind of "power couple" with spirits who are also generally female. While queerness is often not explicit (especially since the ghost and the young protagonist are sometimes related), the films in question point to new ways of deploying an empowering melancholic, affective link between the sphere of humans and the "archaic" one of spirits. In the context of such partnerships as engaged with economically robust regional variants of neoliberal practice that emphasize spirituality, it is notable that both *Pengabdi Setan* and *KKN* also broke domestic theatrical records while drawing significant crowds to Malaysian and Singaporean multiplexes and screening in North America.

The fact that this renewed spirit-human connection has begun to appear in ever-more mainstream contexts is also crucial, I propose, as a counterbalance to the homogenizing or rationalizing forces of religious conservatism and militarism that have grown in parallel to the institution of greater democratic and neoliberal "freedoms." In the 1980s, ghosts like sundel bolong appeared in response to Soeharto's attempts to display a new and unprecedented masculine Order, peeling back the temporal and epistemic layers of his authority to reveal the heterogeneous, dynamically gendered ground on which his regime stood. As I have suggested, these spirits' return on contemporary, mainstream screens (now public and private) appears to signal the need for a new cinematic "instrument," as cineaste Asrul Sani once termed it, in response to the rise of Soeharto in the 1960s (see chapter 4); such an instrument would now be aimed at the complex issues triggered by populist democratic reform and the more open operation of complex, diffuse political economic alliances after Soeharto's fall. In this case, the instrument or weapon would be especially geared to engage the spread of politicized Islamic

conservatism that has arisen in the wake of reformasi—another consequence of the rise of diverse, often opposing, spiritual economies during regional processes of reform and democratization. The success of *Warkop DKI Reborn*, which provided the initial platform for the return of Suzzanna—a trigger and initial harbinger of the changes I highlight below—was followed most closely by writer-director Anwar's version of *Pengabdi Setan*. As I have mentioned, the film quickly broke attendance records for Indonesian horror and played theatrically in the region and in the U.S. before finding a longer-term home on Netflix.

While unplanned during the film's production, the release of Anwar's *Pengabdi Setan* closely followed the infamous "212" demonstrations on December 2, 2016, when millions descended on Jakarta to protest then-governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's alleged insulting of the Qur'an. Purnama was targeted after publicly defending himself from claims by Islamic leaders that Muslims were forbidden to vote for his reelection on grounds that he is Christian. Although it was revealed that his supposedly blasphemous words were in fact reedited and taken out of context, the demonstrations made enough of an impression that judges and other authorities insisted the governor be jailed and stripped of his post. Not long afterward, and without outwardly disturbing the atmosphere of the conservative triumph, the 2017 *Pengabdi Setan* brought 4.2 million viewers to a narrative in which the strong position of conservative Islam in postreformasi Indonesia was continually challenged by what are presented as older and more powerful discourses and beliefs.

As a sequel to the 1980 version that is set in 1981, the 2017 film took a number of liberties with the original's concepts and themes, expanding its view of what constitutes Javanese/spiritual versus strictly "religious" power. Most controversially, the original's classic trope of a male Islamic leader (a kiai or, in this case, an *ustad*) as a ghost-banishing deus ex machina is turned on its head by Anwar's version. To do so, the thematic role of the *ustad* in the original is expanded, while his image as a pious, selfless, and powerful hero is thoroughly undermined. Similar to the 1980 version, in Anwar's contemporary one, the focus is on a family who is attacked by a "satanic" cult.[14] The fact that the family's members are Muslims who rarely, if ever, pray or go to the mosque is raised in both versions as a reason for their targeting. When the family in the 2017 iteration seeks help to fight the attacks by ghosts and zombies associated with the cult, a kindly ustad (Arswendi Beningswara Nasution) who lives nearby agrees but this time with an implicit caveat: "I can only pray and ask for God's help so that you won't be disturbed again." Despite advising the family to pray more themselves because "all beings are afraid of Allah," his wording foreshadows the fact that there are limits to the power of prayer and to what he can do for the family using his religious authority.

Indeed, when the main character, Rini (Tara Basro), the eldest child and only daughter of the family targeted by the cult, prays, it seems to *attract* malicious spirits rather than repel them as it did in the cinematic past. The ustad's son (Dimas

Aditya), who describes himself as more "open to other theories" than his strictly Islamic father, explains that "there are beings who are stronger than people or *jin* [genies]," as spirits are usually categorized in Islam. These beings' powers, he tells Rini and her brother, can be traced to groups that have been around "since before religion," presumably referring to the global rise of Abrahamic faiths. As the film has now implied, Islam, and presumably other world religions, have no way of meaningfully engaging these older powers. As if to reiterate and further drive home the same point, when the ustad sees ghosts attacking Rini, instead of trying to help, he closes the door to the room where he is standing, seemingly out of fear for his own life. His son, and then he himself, are later killed at the hands of the group who is behind the supernatural disturbances.

The closest thing to a hero in the film is thus Rini, the eldest sibling who fights to protect her family from the attacks alongside her father (Bront Palarae), a much weaker figure. The most influential character besides Rini is Budiman (Egy Fedly), an investigative reporter who has been studying the "cult" and understands the values and regulations that underpin and determine their powers. These customs are based on older Javanese spiritual practices such as *pesugihan*, where one can receive blessings and special powers by making ritual sacrifices to spirits—information that I position as a further intervention into the present-day politics of Islam versus syncretic local beliefs. Armed with this knowledge and led by Rini, most of the family members are able to escape the attacks on their home and flee to a shabby apartment building in Jakarta.

In the end, however, things are still not safe—the attackers and their group are alive (or in some cases undead) and well. As in the 1980 version, the group's local leader is female, and the ghosts and cult members have mainly targeted what the film shows to be the family's main support system: its women. Rini's mother, Mawarni (Ayu Laksmi), a singer and the family's main breadwinner, was for years unable to have children. Like other female victims, her one "weakness" was successfully targeted by the group's specialty—the use of magic to increase fertility. In exchange, however, the mother must give her youngest child to the group when he reaches age seven. Mawarni dies shortly before this happens, falling fully under the control of the group. Returning as a ghost, she endeavors to draw her son away from the other family members and toward the group. But the undead Mawarni must face other, stronger women in order to do so. This includes her own mother, Rini's grandmother (Elly D. Luthan), who was always suspicious of the group and now attempts to intervene but is killed in the process. Yet this is a supernatural film in which death can be empowering. The grandmother's ghost thus returns to fight even harder alongside Rini, the central female figure who does not die but is spiritually empowered through partnership with a female ghost. Together, they successfully defend the family against the ongoing attacks of zombies and other disturbances, keeping them safe at least until the next sequel.

Reactions to the film have been varied, with some claiming it as a further example of an emergent, postreform feminist sensibility. Jakarta-based filmmaker and critic Nosa Normanda argues that the women who become ghosts in *Pengabdi Setan* and other similar films are conceived along the lines of the "archaic mother" in psychoanalysis: the presymbolic, prephallic idea of the mother as all powerful and also (especially important for psychoanalysts) universally threatening. In a more typical global horror scenario, it would be the phallus-wielding man who finally banishes the abject archaic mother to her "properly" repressed place in the unconscious (or, in this case, the world of spirits conceived of as fundamentally separate from that of humans). Yet here, the father is "marginalized, while a sincere woman arises to fight the archaic mother with her intuition and ability to improvise" (Normanda 2021:n.p.). In Normanda's view, this kind of representation has only become possible following the fall of dictator and national patriarch Soeharto in 1998, after which many more women also became active as producers, directors, and writers in the Jakarta-based film industry. He argues that directors like Joko Anwar, who is openly gay, are a product of changes during and after reformasi that imbue their work with an awareness of "global trends in political correctness and women's movements" (Normanda:2021).

In this context, Normanda contends that frequent collaborations with like-minded female producers, crew, and actors have "shifted the landscape of Indonesian film to become more representative of women" (2021). In a similar vein, Anton Sutandio argues that in comparison to the 1980 film, "Anwar's version brings a more modern interpretation of Moslem women and equality for women in general," promoting "feminist values" (2019:27). For Sutandio, the film also uses the weak *ustad* figure to satirize the increasing political commodification of religion as a weapon of conservatism in the democratic era. I agree that the newer *Pengabdi Setan* is more direct than most New Order films in its critiques of mainstream, masculine religious authority. Yet I argue that in both this aspect and its foregrounding of dynamic feminine agencies with shifting moral allegiances, the film builds on, rather than distances, the work of its Soeharto-era predecessors, while adding a twist. If the mother's empowerment through the age-old but ongoing practice of *pesugihan* has also made her "archaic," I suggest that the goal of the film is not simply to repress this purported primordiality. In line with Paramaditha's analysis of *Marlina, Pengabdi Setan*'s localized feminist intervention does not consist in changing out the gender of the "hero," who in a typical Western scenario would banish the supposedly archaic mother. Instead, the film works to build "connections and solidarity" (Paramaditha 2024:75) between women, in this case including mortal and spectral ones.

This turns on the ability of female characters—especially Rini and her grandmother—to reconnect and continue working together after the latter has passed away and become a ghost. If that also means that the grandmother, like her spiritually empowered but co-opted daughter, is an "abject" threat to patriarchy, the

role of the protagonist and goal of the narrative is not to repress her. As a popular movie released in a heated political moment, connecting the "old" sphere of spirits to contemporary life is interpreted by many as a conscious effort to keep religious conservatives, among other forces, from taking absolute power. As in *Marlina*, and unlike the reborn Suzzanna in *Bernafas Dalam Kubur*, Anwar's innovative narrative trajectory keeps Rini alive. In doing so, it positions her struggles more solidly vis-à-vis the living spheres of real politics surrounding the film. She is not fighting conservative Islam in the film, of course, but her ability to exploit the continuation of pre-Abrahamic matrifocal and supernatural powers through partnership with her ghostly grandmother wages a transdiegetic battle. The overall symbolic role of women and spirits keeps her family mostly safe in the film, while openly undermining the masculine, phallic authority promoted by conservative Islam outside it. As Sutandio also points out, the once-crucial male figure of cinematic spirit-human power couples (here the family's father) leaves the family for an extended period during their time of crisis. When questioned by his daughter, he simply answers, "What do you need me for?" (Sutandio 2019:27).

The spate of high-production-value supernatural films that followed closely in the wake of *Pengabdi Setan*'s success continued its disruptive spiritual tactics, positioning *KKN di Desa Penari* to smash the overall box-office record set by *Warkop DKI Reborn*. *KKN* recorded over ten million theatrical viewers in Indonesia (exceeding *Warkop* by three million), while breaking records for Indonesian films in Malaysia and Singapore and also, like Anwar's *Pengabdi Setan*, screening in theaters in the U.S. In *KKN*, the landscape of power is likewise dominated by mortal and ghostly Javanese women, for whom Islam is shown to be one, often insufficiently powerful, tool among many with which to engage the forces of evil and feminine haunting. Also mirroring *Pengabdi Setan*, the young woman who emerges as the closest thing to a heroine figure, Nur (Tissa Biani), does so because of the help of a discolored and initially frightening, but in-fact kindhearted and powerful, grandmother spirit, *mbah* Dok (Dewi Sri).

Although *KKN* bridges humans and spirits and past and present in a familiar way, I argue that it also employs another innovative "old" tactic that distinguishes it from *Pengabdi Setan*. In line with the prominence of spiritual economies as conceptual and material bases for local and regional political development, it works to reconnect, rather than simply differentiate, Javanese spirituality with Islam—reclaiming the local Abrahamic sphere instead of rejecting it. At the end of the film, for example, it is revealed that Nur was educated through high school in a *pesantren*, or Muslim dormitory school. When she visits the kiai who is the head of her pesantren, she is informed that the elderly master has long known of her connection to mbah Dok. When he tried to get rid of Nur's ancient spirit companion in the past, the kiai explains, the spirit made a bargain with him, promising to guard and take care of Nur. This has now been proven by the fact that Nur has survived the deadly supernatural ordeals she and her

friends experienced in the haunted rural "Dancer's Village," where most of the film takes place.

Following their discussion and the kiai's confirmation and expression of approval of her attachment to this powerful spirit-partner, Nur bows and bids him farewell with the typical Muslim *assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh* (peace be upon you). As if the kiai's blessing were not sufficient on its own, as Nur exits the frame, mbah Dok appears behind her. The appearance is accompanied by typically spooky, nondiegetic music, a convention used since the 1970s to imply that disturbance-causing spirits are not actually banished. What is new about the use of the convention in *KKN* is that upon seeing the spirit, and in contradistinction to the established meaning of the soundtrack, the kiai simply smiles at mbah Dok gratefully. As the dissonant sounds get louder and she looks back at him, mbah Dok's otherwise scary countenance is broken by a knowing grin. Islam and Javanese spirits, the scene implies, are actually old friends that need not fight and can do more good in the world by working together.

Such a collaboration, of course, also relies on a particular symbolic foundation. As if to underscore this, the resulting two-shot of the old kiai standing across from Mbah Dok evokes the two pillars of power in which I argue the movie, like many before it, is grounded: a mortal, material masculine figure and a spiritual, yet also material, feminine one whose authority surrounds and envelops that of the kiai. Yet as the film shows, the two sides can also be embodied effectively by an active mortal woman and a dynamic feminine spirit that protects and empowers her. Mbah Dok, like sundel bolong and many other regional spirits, represents a sphere of power that will not be repressed or relegated to the past and that refuses to simply disappear from the religious and rational discourses that don't "believe" in it. The kiai is hence implied to have made a wise choice in opening himself to such a partnership. Doing so has saved the life of a girl he has also mentored in the ways of Islam, while broadening her horizons and empowering her to think and act in an expanded, more historically grounded, way. In this context, I suggest that the film represents an emergent variant of supernatural horror that implies, but does not directly announce, its feminist alliances. In doing so, it imbues the overtly pious, hijab-wearing Nur with the potential to become a dynamic, active figure embedded within regional political, economic, and spiritual spheres.

The portrayal of weak, or strong but "too open-minded," religious figures in films like the new *Pengabdi Setan* and *KKN* has at times raised the hackles of religious authorities. But contemporary filmmakers have generally shown themselves to be shrewd and well-versed in the political complexities of spiritual-religious representation, and very few recent films in the horror genre have been considered for an outright ban. When films break box-office records, furthermore, it becomes much more difficult for conservative forces to rally the masses to bring them down, especially after the movies themselves have brought many millions of viewers to multiplexes. Like the ongoing *kejawen* or syncretic Javanese-Islamic

rituals discussed in the previous chapter, these films are sustained by the strong economic base that they help to generate. Corruption, stagnation, and various forms of discrimination continue to afflict the region, often in extremely worrisome ways. But for the moment, these spectral economic tactics enable young filmmakers to keep disseminating ideological counterbalances to the spread of monotheistic patriarchies and the strictly financially based neoliberal ethics of modern power. These, like colonial and imperial forces before them, always arrive via the watery, transpacific pathways that are guarded by spirits like the queen of the South Sea.