

Dafna Ruppin. *The Komedi Bioscoop: Early Cinema in Colonial Indonesia*. New  
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“Movie-mad Malays.” That’s what the American anthropologist Raymond Kennedy called the people who flocked to cinemas in 1930s’ Indonesia “whenever they have the price,” shouting in glee during cartoons, re-enacting westerns in play, and pestering Americans to tell them all about “the wonderful country of the cowboys.”<sup>1</sup> Dafna Ruppin’s detailed and evocative study of the arrival of cinema in Indonesia ably describes the emergence of this vital cultural industry, the place of motion pictures in commercial entertainment and urban culture, and cinema’s role in the formation of what Ruppin calls (after Henk Schulte Nordholt) “cultural citizens.” Drawing primarily on reports, advertisements, and shipping information in the Dutch and Malay press, and a sophisticated command of comparative literature on early cinema in the United States and Europe, Ruppin traces the development of cinema from the first traveling exhibitors to the first grand movie palaces. Earlier studies of Indonesian cinema have neglected this period entirely, typically starting either in 1912 with the first colonial propaganda films, or in 1926 with the first feature-length fictional film, *Loetoeng Kasaroeng*. Previous studies of early cinema have supposed colonial Indonesia to be a “junk market for dumping films that have finished their runs in the Netherlands” (320 n. 1722). Ruppin demolishes such misperceptions, demonstrating that Indonesian exhibitors often received films directly from Paris and London, and that audiences in many Indonesian cities and towns had a wider range of cinema on offer than did places of comparable size in Holland. She shows also that Indonesia was not only receiving films from overseas during this period, but was also producing its own films on a variety of subjects: a useful appendix lists seventy titles produced by twenty-three different firms between 1897 and 1913. Few of these locally made films appear to have been projected outside of Indonesia, and all, as might be expected, are now lost.

The commercial photographer Louis Talbot, who ran a photography studio in Batavia in the 1890s, was the showman behind the projector at Indonesia’s first film showing in Batavia’s elite European theater (*schouwburg*) on October 11, 1896. The device used, a *scénimatographe* (also known as a *cinématographe*), had been invented in France by the brothers August and Louis Lumière and received its first public demonstration in Paris less than ten months previously. Batavia audiences were treated to “scenes at the photographer, a quarrel between a French cabdriver and his passenger, views of squares in Paris and Vienna, and a serpentine dance” (53). The last of these was a solo dance made popular by the American art nouveau dancer Loïe

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Kennedy, *The Ageless Indies* (New York: John Day, 1942), 84ff.

Fuller, involving the manipulation of swirling fabric saturated by changing colored lights. Each film shown on the hand-cranked machine ran for under a minute. Retrospective accounts, including one by “Boong Indri” published in the Dutch magazine *Tong-Tong* in 1958 and translated as the book’s prologue, relate that panicked novice audiences ran away in early film showings out of fear of ghosts. Such tales, like the story about Parisian audiences stampeding at the sight of the Lumières’ film “Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station” (1895), are demonstrably apocryphal. In fact, audiences in Batavia, and those in other towns and cities introduced to cinema in the months ahead, were already sophisticated consumers of visual culture by the 1890s. These were the same spectators accustomed to attending magic shows, panoramas, waxworks, balloon shows, magic lantern exhibitions, fireworks demonstrations, circus events, acrobatic productions, trompe-l’œil displays, and spectacular theater performances, including *komedi stambul* and *bangsawan*. The peripatetic exhibitors who brought cinema to Indonesia followed the same routes as these other commercial enterprises, used the same means of promotion (handbills, posters, advertisements in newspapers), appeared in the same sorts of venues, and were discussed and critiqued in very similar terms.

Moving picture exhibitions before 1899, in fact, tended to be incorporated into other entertainments. Audiences in Java of Harmston’s Circus saw motion pictures of the Chinese diplomat Li Hongzhang in Paris and charging Austrian lancers projected on a machine called the Ripograph or Giant Cinematograph. A certain “Miss Meranda” led a tour through Sulawesi and Java of a variety troupe featuring xylophone, bicycle stunts, gymnastics, and films projected on a Kinematograph with sound played on a gramophone. Spectators were scandalized by her selection of risqué boudoir films, which were not always advertised in advance. Victoria Parsi Theatrical Company, a company from Bombay that was one of the largest and most spectacular theater companies to tour nineteenth-century Indonesia, showed films on a Cinematograph between acts of plays and as part of *soirée variée* evenings in 1898. When touring Java in 1898, the American magician Carl Hertz projected films on a Cinematographe machine purchased in London in 1896 from inventor Robert W. Paul. One of the films Hertz projected in 1898 was “a trick scene of a magician and a creepy ghost” (70). Film exhibitors who followed were more specialized. Armenian photographers were particularly prominent among the traveling exhibitors of the first decade of the twentieth century, capitalizing on the reputation of the Yerevan-born photographer Ohannes Kurdjian, who established a well-known photographic studio in Surabaya in 1888 that continued to operate for more than three decades after his death in 1903.

During the first decade of Indonesian cinema, showings took place largely under canvas tents pitched in town squares and in the municipal theaters, clubhouses, and Chinese-owned theaters that also hosted touring troupes of Chinese opera, *komedi stambul*, and variety performers. Musical accompaniment was provided by a local pianist or small band. Performance permits lasted a maximum of three months, but generally audiences grew bored of an exhibitor’s stock of films within a couple of weeks. Around 1907, local entrepreneurs began to construct semi-permanent sheds made from bamboo, pinang wood, palm leaves, and zinc for the rental of touring exhibitors. Some of these were massive—reportedly seating four thousand patrons or more—and well-furnished. It was at this point (if not earlier) that it became

customary to offer cheap seats to “native” spectators seated on bamboo mats or on the ground behind the screen, while Europeans, Chinese, and others with thicker wallets sat more comfortably on chairs and benches. This situation, famously depicted in the Dutch film *Oeroeg* (1993), was obviously derived from a traditional set-up for *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theater), in which VIPs are segregated from the riff-raff by the screen, with honored guests watching the shadows and everyone else watching the puppets. Grand movie palaces constructed from brick and stone were built in major cities starting in the early 1910s. Foremost among them was Surabaya’s East Java Bioscope (opened 1913), with its lofty two-story Moorish façade, stained glass, monumental staircase, *balcon de luxe*, cinema seats imported from Vienna, up-to-date equipment, and unique film archive containing more than 100,000 meters of film—sadly, all lost when the theater burnt down in 1918.

The arrival of cinema in Indonesia coincided with a period of heightened awareness and pride in local culture and customs among both European settlers and Asian populations. This was the height of the *Indische Roman*, a literary genre that romanced the geography and peoples of the colony, which found expression in Dutch novels, Malay-language newspaper serials, and *komedi stambul* stage adaptations. Talbot’s machine, and the equipment used by many early exhibitors, functioned as both projectors and cameras, and so it was possible for Talbot and exhibitors that followed to respond to audience requests for local content. The earlier films of the Indies by Talbot showed a band of Acehnese attacking a Dutch sergeant, a tram in Batavia, a mail boat sailing out of Tanjung Priok, “Malays” bathing and washing clothes in a river, and a “Javanese dancing girl” (339). Subsequent films made by other firms represented other performing arts, public events, natural scenery, industry, urban views, and animal hunts. There was even a film titled *Njai Dasima* (1906), exhibited exclusively by the Royal Bioscope Company, an itinerant tent cinema owned by the Gujarati showman Abdulally Esoofally, who later became a movie magnate in Bombay. *Njai Dasima* was an *Indische Roman* and a staple of the *komedi stambul* stage, and while Ruppín did not manage to uncover any descriptions of the film, she suggests rightly that the film was likely a recording of a stambul troupe’s enactment, thus preceding the first phonographic recordings of stambul drama by a number of years.

Cinema’s accessibility to a broad public and its potential to stir feelings and change minds made it a site for much controversy. One of the most controversial early films to be made in Indonesia concerned the 1904 peasant uprising in Gedangan, East Java. When screened in Surabaya, only seventeen kilometers to the north of the uprising’s location, it was banned by the city’s police, a move applauded by the Dutch daily *Soerabaija-Courant*: “The less these scenes are recalled in memory, the better” (qtd. 150). Civil authorities also expressed consternation with “native” responses to films of the Russo-Japanese War that were screened the same year: “with every new Japanese victory came a loud applause” (qtd. 112). There was moral panic over films depicting the “progress” (*kemajuan*) of thieves (22) and grave concerns about the corrosiveness of “blue” films on children and public morality generally. Films showing Europeans being “abused, injured, or killed by Natives, Foreign Orientals, or Indians” were understood by Surabaya’s Resident to encourage insurrection, resulting in an effective local ban on “detective, cowboy, and war films” in 1914 (211). Christians were outraged when an organist at a 1901 screening in Surakarta of a film dramatizing

the Passion played the popular song “Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay” as background music to the crucifixion. In 1914, Batavia’s police banned *L’Agonie de Byzance* (directed by Louis Feuillade, 1913), a film dramatizing the 1451 fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. This ban responded to the Malay press’s sensational promotion of this film—which depicts the selling off of female captives in Ottoman slave markets—as showing “Christians stripped naked and raped by Turks” (*orang christen di telandjangan dan dipantatin oleh orang Turkij*, qtd. 259). There were calls for setting up a censorship board for the colony.

Advocates of cinema, however, defended its role in public education. “The little man [...] can obtain a lot of knowledge which, under his circumstances, he would not be able to get in any other way. He sees other countries, others’ customs and traditions. He is taken out of the small world of his *kampong* and a large, new, never-thought of world is opened up to him,” opined a correspondent to the Dutch daily *De Locomotief* in 1912 (qtd. 233). For a Bandung correspondent to the same paper, films are “a living newspaper [...] which bring forth all the news and modern things in the fields of industry, art, and ethnography. People of this land who may never witness Western conditions, are imparted here with an idea of European and American life [...] and they are granted a pleasant distraction from the monotonous life in the Indies” (qtd. 317). Such views reverberate with Rappin’s own appreciation of cinema as open to all segments of colonial society as a gateway to modernity “whether in the content of films representing modernization, progress, industry, and urbanisation, or in the form of encountering the technology itself and of patronizing the increasingly modern venues that housed them” (21).

Rappin’s study ends in 1914, which marks not only World War One and consequent changes in the international production and distribution of films, but also the rise of Hollywood and the multiple-reel film (the so-called “feature film”) and decline of mixed programs of shorts. In her concluding remarks, she discusses the Cinema Ordinance of 1917, an attempt to create colony-wide standards for copyrighting, taxing, and censoring films. This proved difficult to implement due to a lack of resources and legal loopholes. But it signaled recognition that film was no passing fad, but a powerful and enduring medium to shape sentiments, impart information, and fashion colonial subjects.

This book is without a doubt a major contribution to the history of Indonesian popular culture, though it is not without its shortcomings. It is at its strongest when it brings together the newspaper sources with other contemporary documents—such as an article in a cinema trade journal or the memoir of a traveling showman. The trials and tribulations of itinerant showmen and local cinema entrepreneurs, the changing tastes of audiences, the growing importance of cinema in relation to other forms of art and entertainment, and cinema’s significance as an often fractious site for interaction between different parts of colonial society all make for fascinating reading. In contrast, local polemics about zoning, permits, taxation, and health and safety regulations detailed in four individual chapters on cinema in Surabaya, Batavia, Semarang, and Medan is a much dryer read. There are times also when I wish Rappin could have zoomed in and described more closely how films were represented in the media and responded to by diverse audiences, with close readings of some of the fascinating films cited. I found myself at many moments turning to YouTube to watch

(or re-watch) films to understand the particulars of audience reactions. In her conclusion, Ruppin effectively admits that further research in the National Archives, careful reading of Chinese-Malay literature, and more extensive integration of Indonesia in the “networks of entertainment and film distribution in the rest of Asia, Australia, and the Pacific” (325) would have strengthened her enquiry. But early cinema is an unruly field of study, replete with outlandish characters, tall tales, and aesthetic sensibilities that are both intimately familiar and absolutely alien. Ruppin has performed a major service in bringing the story of early cinema into sharp relief, furthering our understanding of how Indonesia became the cosmopolitan colony it once was.

