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Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization

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Abstract

This is a book review of Rosalind Galt, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

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Author Notes

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Galt, Rosalind, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

In Rosalind Galt's remarkable monograph, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization*, the pontianak emerges and congeals as a complex entity: a figure of enormous importance in Malay popular cinema and culture, a site where a number of knotty discourses about race/ethnicity, national identity, gender/sexuality, and religion come to jostle against each other, and finally, as a method for analyzing world cinema from a non-western perspective. The book is in conversation with a burgeoning body of scholarship that take female entities in Asian horror films seriously—such as Bliss Cua Lim's *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* and Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema*—but it also deviates in important ways. Galt persuasively argues that “the pontianak forms a dense site of meaning in Malay cultures, and that her spectral presence through the histories of colonial and postcolonial cinemas in Singapore and Malaysia speaks vividly about the pleasures and politics of decolonization...The pontianak registers a series of intersecting anxieties: about femininity and modernity; about local and transnational cultural influence; about the relationship of Islam to indigenous beliefs; and about globalization and environmental destruction” (5).

Because she traces the pontianak as a “figure of disturbance” (23) from the Cathay Keris and Shaw Studios' productions in the 1950s and 1960s to the present, and across an array of media texts—including film and television, popular fiction, contemporary installation art, etc.—Galt's introduction provides a useful point of entry into the specifics of this ghostly-vampiric female figure. The pontianak is a special kind of entity (a *hantu* or supernatural creature among many others in Malay culture), who may be unfamiliar to western readers and cinephiles, despite her

prominence in the cultures of the erstwhile Malay archipelago. While providing a roadmap for the rest of the book and its structure, the introduction also teases out the many layers of meaning that gather around the pontianak, including, for example, her alliance with—and distinction from—iconic vampires such as Stoker’s *Dracula*, and her enduring presence in Malay popular culture.

Chapter 1 of *Alluring Monsters* is the most densely historical analysis in the book, which combines rigorous archival research—in the form of popular magazines and newspaper articles—with oral histories and a rich body of anecdotal evidence. The earliest pontianak films from the late colonial period in Singapore remain in focus, alongside the impressively transnational and multi-ethnic ethos of the studio system, which included Indian, Chinese, and Malay labor/talent in this period. In tracing the histories of the pontianak film in the 1950s and 60s—the critical period when anticolonial affect was at its peak, but also the decades in which Singapore and Malaysia’s destinies get tangled and then diverge dramatically—Galt convincingly shows how the pontianak film, in particular, participated in generating “cultures of decolonization” (41). Although the very specific geopolitical currents of South East Asia textures this narrative (such as in the fraught but fascinating stardom of Maria Menado), the pontianak film’s role in public debates surrounding the concretization of a specifically “Malay” national identity will be familiar to scholars of anticolonialism and postcoloniality everywhere: modernization and a reliance on “western” discourses of rationality, suspicion of “low” cultural products such as the popular film, and a consolidation of an ethnonationalist vision of the postcolonial nation-state. In a fascinating analysis of these films, Galt shows how the pontianak film both participated in and sporadically challenged the most “conservative visions of Malay ethnonationalism” (71) by insisting on the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual character of Malaysia. Finally, this chapter also traces the transformation of the pontianak figure through these complex pathways of identity formation: in the late 1950s the

pontianak transforms into a figure devoid of supernatural import; she is defanged, as it were, to inhabit the modern, postcolonial Malaysian nation.

Chapter 2, however, restores the pontianak's status as an especially troubling, disruptive force, as Galt turns her attention to complex questions surrounding gender and sexuality: "What do we do with a genre in which most of the female protagonists die horribly, yet in which they also inhabit cinematic effects of resistance, power, and desire?... Should we read female monsters and killers as projections of a misogynist culture or as sites of feminist refusal?" (81). In answering these key questions Galt deploys, but also extends, the contours of western film theory to understand the pontianak film as the textual space within which a number of key struggles come to be elaborated in Malay and Singaporean cultures. Through granular readings of several more recent films—such as *Paku Pontianak* (2013) and *Pontianak Sesat dalam Kampung* (2016), among several others—Galt demonstrates that generalizations about the genre are difficult to defend; that the pontianak's ambivalent status as a good/bad object for feminist film analysis makes her a particularly alluring and urgent object of study. The iconography of the "nail-in-the-head" as a violent penetrative weapon that can subdue the pontianak, for example, enfolds fascinatingly complicated anxieties: misogyny undoubtedly, but also desire and choice for the pontianak to reveal her true self, were the nail to be removed. Most damningly for patriarchal postcolonial cultures, the nail-as-disguise suggests that potentially, *all* women could be pontianaks—masquerading as real women—until she is unveiled (un-nailed in this case) as a grotesque and terrifying monster! In embodying these and other patriarchal fears, the pontianak shares the filmic stage with a number of other female figures—from the Mexican *la Llorona* to the ominous *onyryu* of Japanese film, to the *chudail* who strides through a number of popular and folk traditions in South Asia, among many others. It is precisely the ambivalence of these figures—the density and

contradictory discourses they represent—that make them endure in popular cinemas across the globe, but especially in erstwhile colonies still bristling with the conflicts that accompany processes of decolonization. In this chapter, Galt also recuperates the pontianak by including both frankly feminist and queer re-tellings of her story in contemporary media, including short films, horror comedies, and art installations.

Chapter 3 traces the different registers on which the pontianak film destabilizes unitary notions of race and religion in the area. Galt poses some urgent questions regarding racial and national identities here: “is the pontianak Malaysian or Singaporean? What if she were both? The pontianak thus makes impossible any neat separation of the two countries’ cultures of decolonization...” (122). While the first part of this chapter shows how the figure brings to light the tangled histories of Malaysia and Singapore and how these multiethnic societies negotiate the slippery and contested slopes of postcolonial identity formation, it is the latter half in which Galt argues that the pontianak rests uneasily alongside Malaysia’s recent turn towards a hardline, conservative Islam. As a figure who carries within her potent meanings aligned with pre-colonial animist belief and in a society that has recently veered away from inclusive syncretism as official policy, the pontianak chafes against the uniformity that this version of Islamization proposes: “In Malaysia, the pontianak disrupts the neat official discourse in which race, culture, and religion perfectly align” (143). The schisms and contradictions she embodies—perversely—bring the region’s rich and deep-rooted hybridities into focus, but they also make visible the irreconcilable tensions between Islam and animisms, and the state’s agenda to purge the latter altogether. Galt’s detailed analysis of films show that the genre performs a great deal of textual labor, and diegetic and non-diegetic forms of censorship to (unsuccessfully) corral the unruly energies of the pontianak within the restrictive contours of Malay-Muslim discourses.

The last two chapters of *Alluring Monsters* focus on space: the *kampung* (Malay village) and the jungle, respectively. In analyzing the built environment of the village, Galt shows how the *kampung* is an overdetermined motif in Malaysian culture, “a locus of nostalgia, ideological production, and fantasy,” shot through with “traditional” time and embedded within the framework of a heritage-cinema imaginary (160). While architectural features of local houses account for the visual beauty in many of the films she analyzes, Galt resists the easy classification of the heritage film as necessarily conservative. In situating the pontianak genre as it moves in and out of the *kampung*, Chapter 4 demonstrates that complex notions of history, anticolonial sentiment, postcolonial desire for modernization, ownership of land, etc., enable a certain kind of village community to be envisaged on screen. As always, the pontianak as a figure is tasked with multiple roles: troubling the wholesomeness of *kampung* domesticity, but also contesting patrilinear arrangements of land/property ownership and inheritance by animating what Galt evocatively calls “feminist postcolonial hauntology,” whereby generational solidarities between mothers and daughters finally restores justice to women past and present, living and dead, human and pontianak (188).

The fifth and last chapter takes us away from the *kampung* to the jungle that surrounds it: the natural environment of the pontianak and other *hantu*, and one that remains stubbornly tethered to pre-modern, animist belief-systems which jostle uneasily against postcolonial discourses in Malaysia. Galt radically proposes that instead of reading Malay animism as some relic of an outdated, superstitious, pre-colonial and pre-Islamic past, “theorizing animism enables a reframing of how aesthetics and politics might intersect in postcolonial cinemas,” that is, animism-as-method may give us another way of *understanding* world cinema, with the pontianak film providing a template for alternate ways of reading images (199). Reiterating the fundamental syncretism of

Malay animisms, Galt suggests that animism's deep respect for all living beings, human and nonhuman, aligns it with the pontianak film in a specific way. The fact that human existence is not privileged over other life forms, including the vegetational, enables the films to present the cinematic jungle as excessively dense and abundant: "the absence of negative space in a frame filled with tangled layers of vegetation creates an animist field of immanent life, in which the clear separation of human figures from their environment is undermined by the profusion and visual overload of the plant elements" (218-9). In this extraordinarily rich final chapter, Galt traces the visual vitality of the pontianak film via its relationship with the jungle as an especially fecund and sensate entity, one that is granted an optical point-of-view "implying that the forest, like the pontianak might be watching the humans within its space" (225). In subjecting the films to an ecocritical reading that focuses on the conscious jungle, or "plant thinking," Galt addresses a concept of space that remains underutilized in cinema studies, emphasizing the vitality of nonhuman life forms in their abundance, trees, plants, and foliage, but also magical inhabitants such as spirits and were-tigers. This chapter also situates the pontianak film's imagination of the verdant jungle against the real-world destruction of the rainforests in Malaysia, and the history of extractive capital in the era of globalization. The jungle in the pontianak film, therefore, also excavates sublimated histories of loss, violence, and environmental devastation in the region.

Alluring Monsters is an impressive book that looks at the pontianak as a prismatic entity: singularly enfolding a plethora of meanings in Malaysia and Singapore, but also a figure through whom a whole host of histories—colonial, postcolonial, racial/ethnic, and religious—come to be visible. A formidable *bette noire*, the pontianak generatively destabilizes a range of identities both public and private. National but also transnational, feminist but not necessarily so, Malay but not Muslim, harnessed in a range of hetero-patriarchal stories but amenable to queer readings, she

emerges in this book as the region's most enduring and storied cultural icon. The pontianak crystalizes as a productive portal through whom the tangled histories of Malaysia and Singapore continue to come into view in unexpected ways. Galt's analyses elegantly balance careful readings of the films and texts in question, while keeping the larger frameworks of national-cultural narratives firmly in place. Trenchantly argued and eminently readable, *Alluring Monsters* will be of interest to anyone interested in feminist film criticism, the horror film, histories of world cinemas, and indeed, history as such.