

Firpo investigates illicit sex work in Western ballrooms. The female ballroom dancers attracted male clients by selling the alluring image of the ‘modern girl’. Adhering to the latest Western-style fashions and lifestyles, the ‘modern girl’ symbolized the idea of independence and sexual liberation. The majority, however, were migrants who worked as dancers to escape rural poverty.

Black Market Business is an absorbing historical study of clandestine female sex work, a poorly understood topic of late colonial Vietnam. While the inherently hidden nature of such work renders the topic challenging to investigate, this rigorously researched study testifies to Firpo’s high scholarly calibre. Accessibly and lucidly written, the book will be of interest to general readers, students and scholars alike from many disciplines, including anthropology, criminology, law, literature and cultural studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies.

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Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization. By Rosalind Galt. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. xii+290 pp.

The pontianak, a mythic ghostly figure in the form of an undead stillborn child, has long informed and shaped the Malaysian and Singaporean popular imagination to the extent that she has invariably become a popular subject of the silver screen. This book by Rosalind Galt is the first comprehensive study of the pontianak film subgenre, which has become part of popular culture in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore.

Galt argues that the pontianak’s ubiquitous presence across the history of Singaporean and Malaysian cinemas offers rich and

multiple site(s) of meaning pertaining to identity politics within the discourses and historical processes of decolonization while embodying intersecting anxieties: tradition and modernity; national and transnational cultures; indigenous animism and Islam; femininity and patriarchy; and heritage and environmental destruction. For Galt, the pontianak ushers in a new way of thinking about cinema that “mediates the transnational, the postcolonial, and the worldly” (p. 5).

In terms of scope and depth, the book, which is organized into five chapters, certainly outstrips previous scholarship on pontianak films, almost all of which focused on gender representation. It also adds to an ongoing exploration of Southeast Asian horror cinema that follows the work of Bliss Cua Lim (2009) and Arnika Fuhrmann (2016), who examine Philippine and Thai horror films, respectively. The first chapter provides a historical account of pontianak films, while the next two deal with how pontianak films contest and destabilize the politics of gender, race, religion and nationalism, all gearing towards questioning and unsettling mainstream discourses of patriarchal bias, racialization and ethnonationalism.

The book’s most significant contribution lies in chapters 4 and 5, where the author focuses on the *kampung* (village) and animism. Such discussion offers a shift away from the psychoanalytic framework that has predominantly informed scholarship on horror cinema, particularly in the Anglo-American film studies tradition. By highlighting the *kampung* as a site of nostalgia, heritage and cultural essentialism, chapter 4 demonstrates how pontianak films address and discuss such issues as “injustices of land ownership, development, and environmental politics” (p. 37).

The close affinity between the *kampung* and the forest informs the emphasis in chapter 5 on animism, not only as a worldview of a pre-modern and pre-Islamic Malay archipelago, but also as a cinematic form replete with specific iconographies such as the jungle, trees, leaves and animals to understand the ways in which “the pontianak film imagines itself as an animate world” (p. 37). For Galt, the pontianak is not a mere animist figure but an animist space or field by virtue of the entire *mise en scène* of pontianak

films. Hence, the pontianak is a cinematic form that obscures the boundary between notions of figure and space, human and non-human, and the visible and invisible world.

In discussing animism, the book appropriately analyses “*semangat*”—a concept that refers to a life force that animates the Malay world as a disposition that distinguishes the pontianak from her Western/European counterparts (p. 212). However, the book could have further explored how a person’s “*semangat*” does not vanish upon death, but may become potent if she transforms into a *hantu* (ghost) or pontianak. This exposition could have illustrated the creature’s empowerment or ambivalent gendered subjectivities while affirming the postcolonial politics of pontianak feminism, as discussed in chapter 2. “*Semangat*” and other culturally specific concepts are intertwined with the overarching framework of postcolonial cinema theories, alluding to the book’s other contribution in terms of how postcolonial cinema can be understood in a global context.

In the book, Galt examines discourses surrounding pontianak films in historically specific moments, thus further contextualizing its cinematic practices, including production, exhibition and reception, that circulate around and through the texts. Adopting such a discursive approach transcends the usual limits of cinema textual study as the book highlights how pontianak films evolve from and shape the specific cultural practices of the industry and audience.

The book considers a wide variety of cinematic works that feature the pontianak, including telemovies, short films, experimental videos and installation artworks. However, it fails to include Aziz Satar’s 1988 iconic Malaysian horror-comedy *Perawan Malam*, the film that resurrected the pontianak during the 1980s and 1990s, a period which saw a decline in the number of Malaysian horror film productions. The absence of the film is more pronounced as it deals similarly with the tropes of animism, ecology, the forest and the nail (used to subdue a pontianak), which underpin this book’s main thrust.

Nevertheless, *Alluring Monsters* is an insightful and sophisticated piece of work that illuminates how a popular film subgenre that features the most iconic *hantu* in the region facilitates a theoretical

debate about world cinema. In addition, it serves as a conduit for multiple meanings and discourses that reflect colonial legacies and ideologies that continue to haunt postcolonial Malaysian and Singaporean societies.

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Empire of Convicts: Indian Penal Labor in Colonial Southeast Asia. By Anand A. Yang. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. vii+292 pp.

Penal transportation was a key facet of British Imperial rule. Beginning with the earliest deportations to America and Australia, the policy was subsequently replicated in other British colonies. In *Empire of Convicts*, Anand Yang focuses on the exile of Indian prisoners and their detention in British colonial outposts across Southeast Asia over the course of the ‘long’ nineteenth century—a trajectory of penal transportation that has received scant scholarly attention. In addressing this lacuna, Yang provides fascinating insights into the experience of the Indian convicts in these colonies with a masterful exposition of the circumstances that led to their deportation and the faculty with which the prisoners navigated life over the course of their imprisonment overseas.

Yang posits that penal transportation, which initially involved European convicts in North America, was extended to Indian prisoners to facilitate “the consolidation of Empire across land and water” (p. 11). Penal transportation was not only an important element of the “metropole-colony” (p. 12) relationship between India and the other settlements but it also provided the British with the labour required to develop fledgling outposts across the Indian Ocean (p. 12). This