

vitality based on the elaboration of spaces and practices able to make the most of the differences and resources with which they have contact.’ (p. 267)

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*The komedi bioscoop: Early cinema in colonial Indonesia*

By DAFNA RUPPIN

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‘New cinema history’ was an approach developed in the 1990s by scholars wishing to move beyond analysing just the content of movies to exploring the social phenomenon of movie-going. In *Komedi bioscoop* Ruppin refines this method and makes the persuasive argument that film-going at the turn of the twentieth century in the Netherlands East Indies began a historical trend ‘in which technology, race and colonialism converged’ (p. 3).

The monograph has two parts of about equal length. Part one — ‘Emerging networks of entertainment’ — discusses the period from 1896 to about 1910. During these years entrepreneurs from Britain, France, The Netherlands, India, Armenia, and the United States arrived in the Archipelago and set up temporary establishments or ‘tents’ to screen films. Ruppin describes savvy, bold merchants of precious new celluloid, with their many contraptions — kinoscope, scenimatograph, ripograph cinematographe, etc. — new devices that were adjusted to local conditions to show shaky, flickering motion pictures. Showing film, we find out, was no easy feat. What with torrential rains, unstable electricity, and outbreaks of cholera (there was a graveyard in Batavia for artists and performers who succumbed), these operators faced extreme challenges. Ruppin sees them as more heroic than money-minded.

The screenings were often ancillary to other more established venues of entertainment such as the circus, the theatre, or magic shows. How the different sections of society were arranged in these viewing spaces in keeping with the colonial obsession with race — first class, second class, third class, ‘natives’ (who were sometimes sent *behind* the screen) — is repeatedly emphasised. While ethnicity was a useful guide, it was, however, affordability that truly determined the compartmentalisation. Wealthy Indonesians often sat in the best booths and the Chinese seemed to have a fluid place in the hierarchy. Paradoxically, it appears that greater effort was made to restrict the entry of Europeans into the poorer sections, than for natives to sit at more premium ones. But for all the policing, the commonality of the viewing experience bonded viewers. Ruppin observes, ‘despite the fact that they could not see each other, they could presumably still hear and smell each other’ (p. 321).

One of the original peddlers of movies, a Frenchman named Louis Talbot, screened his own locally filmed material as early as 1896. But such productions

were rare. Moviegoers or *nontonners* in Batavia, Surabaya, Medan and many townships accessible by train, typically watched a variety of films from catalogues of silent movies being screened in Europe and America at a comparable time. While the Netherlands East Indies swiftly developed as an international cinema hub, Ruppin points out that specific types of films were soon demanded locally and accordingly curated. Scenes depicting the movements of Queen Wilhelmina and footage from the Russo–Japanese war (some re-enacted) were clear favourites, as was coverage of current events such as the Boxer Rebellion and the Second Boer War. In addition to literature and the indigenous, very popular *Stambul* theatre, film became identifiable as a third form of artistic reflection of *Indische* life. Ruppin points out that filmed versions of plays and books familiar to local audiences started to emerge. Notably, a British-Indian maverick named Abdulally Esoofally (who had six different stage names) seems to have filmed a local production of Batavia’s classic *Nyai Dasima* in 1906. A form of entertainment intended primarily for Europeans in the colony had been co-opted by native audiences.

Part two — ‘Local cinema cultures’ — deals with the cultural and spatial history of four cities: Surabaya, Batavia, Semarang and Medan. Each has its own emphases in Ruppin’s retelling. While the vibrant cinema scene in Surabaya is championed by Dutchman Charles Jacob Umbgrove, swiftly making it the ‘queen city’ of film, Batavia is described as being dotted with cinema houses developed mostly by Chinese businessmen. New mobility within the city allowed avid *nontonners* to visit other areas, often outside their usual locus, just to view films. Semarang had more trouble establishing itself as a city for cinema, due to a conservative municipal board that decreed that a pernicious ‘cinema fever’ had afflicted its residents. Despite some screenings held at the 1914 Colonial Exhibition in that city, it did not develop a movie-going culture at a comparable time. For Medan in Sumatra, however, being somewhat cut off from Java was an advantage for cinema operators. As it was difficult for theatre troops and other stage entertainers to travel there, the relatively minimal setup of the cinema gave film peddlers an advantage. By the 1910s, cinema had become a fixture in urban Indonesia. With permanent ‘cinema houses’ — theatres dedicated to screening films — issues such as taxation, censorship and zoning laws emerged. Ruppin delves into details of these new overlapping areas of entertainment and ordinance.

The off-screen tragedy running through this painstaking reconstruction of the earliest years of cinema in colonial Indonesia is that these films are mostly lost. Ruppin, with Rankean rigour in her footnoting of what must have been miles of newspapers on microfilm, excavates the printed word and remnants of playbills. Almost encyclopedic, the book sorely misses an alphabetised index. While Ruppin’s attention to sources is commendable, the monograph at times becomes excessively detailed. Fortunately, each of the seven chapters concludes with a section that brings back to sharp focus their main observations. By examining the phenomenon of movie-going, delving deep into the history and ethnography of how the *bioscoop* permeated and affected colonial Indonesia, Ruppin gives us a rare book that crosses over from Cinema Studies on to the shelves of Asian Studies collections.

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