

# Beneath Still Waters: Brian Yuzna's Ritual Return in Indonesian Cinema

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This article offers the first academic consideration of Brian Yuzna's recent films created in Indonesia. Since the mid 1980s, Yuzna has worked extensively across the USA, Europe and the Far East (both as a director and producer), pioneering a distinctive international brand of horror cinema that combines social critique with explicit splatter. Despite his transnational credentials, Yuzna's work in Indonesia has largely been ignored by those critics interested in reclaiming 1970s/80s genre entries as more 'legitimate' symbols of Indonesian cult cinema.

However, by considering Yuzna's 2010 title *Amphibious*, I shall argue that the film contains the elements of hybridity and generic impurity that critics such as Karl G. Heider have long attributed to Indonesian pulp traditions. Specifically, it shall be argued that the film's emphasis on performativity, trickery and spectacle are used to evoke Indonesian myths rather than Americanised tropes of genre cinema. As well as considering the transnational elements to *Amphibious*, the article will also explore possible connections between abject constructions of the transformative female body in both Indonesian film and Brian Yuzna's wider cinema. The article also features exclusive new interviews with Brian Yuzna and *Amphibious* screenwriter John Penney discussing the making and meaning of the film.

**Keywords:** Brian Yuzna, Indonesian horror, *Amphibious*, transnational cinema

. . . a cinema can be defined as transnational in the sense that it brings into question how fixed ideas of a national film culture are constantly being transformed by the presence of protagonists (and indeed film-makers) who have a presence within the nation, even if they exist on the margins, but find their origins quite clearly beyond it.

Will Higbee & Song Hwee Lim, *Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies*

Indonesian films certainly do not reflect Indonesian life—or, better, one should say that the bulk of films show only the narrowest slice of urban middle-class wealthy Indonesian life and manage to distort even that.

Karl G. Heider, *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen*

## Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, there has been an increased theoretical interest in mapping out the various traditions and themes in the range of films that could be termed as Indonesian “cult” cinema. The basis of these studies was Tombs’ (1998) detailed account of “weird world cinema” trends which included the key period from 1965 to 1988 in Indonesia when General Suharto’s pro-commerce but hard-line military regime supported the large-scale financing and distribution of Indonesian films, resulting in the creation of a wide range of pulp and populist cycles.

The more theoretically inclined studies that followed the publication of Tomb’s *Mondo Macabro* further isolated the importance of the Suharto regime alongside other key social, cultural, and historical determinants that have moulded the Indonesian cult image. For instance, Imanjaya (2009) linked the explosion of certain storylines within 1970s and 1980s Indonesian exploitation cinema to a form of subversion of the regime’s restrictive social and moral codes while also considering the exportability of these “trash” genres through new outlets such as domestic VHS tape systems (pp. 133-159). For theorists such as Siddique (2004), it was gender rather than genre that was the key focus of inquiry. In “Haunting Visions of the Sundelbolong,” Siddique analyzed why the figure of the supernatural female remained “a truly abject figure that destabilizes both New Order gender and state ideologies” (p. 32), while also linking these gender tensions to characters that remain taboo because of their capacity to subvert long-standing fears surrounding fecundity and threat within Indonesian culture.

For Sen (2010), given the nation’s frequent recourse to state-sponsored aggression, it was not only representations of violence in Indonesian cinema that were significant but also the reasons why these displays of aggression remained limited to horror and fantastical arts. She noted that despite the fact that an estimated one million people perished in anti-communist purges during the 1960s while another 200,000 Indonesians were killed in East Timor between 1975 and 1980, “the shockingly violent context does not, however, appear to produce violent reflections in Indonesian cinema. Other than the . . . spate of horror films in the late 1970s to early 1980s, violence in Indonesian cinema throughout the period of the New Order (1965-1988) was significantly muted” (p. 205).

Imanjaya, Siddique, Sen, and other recent writers continue to unpack the contradictory nature of Indonesian cinema and Indonesian society since the birth of the New Order regime, and the issues they have raised are situated alongside the persistent problem of how national and “legitimate” modes of cinema might reside within the hybridized and cross-cultural cult

formats that this system has created. The complex definitions of celluloid identity (which have been taken up in a more reflexive manner by critics such as Higbee and Hwee Lim [2010, pp. 7-21]), have already been dissected by genre critics and transnational scholars alike who all point to Indonesia's turbulent historical past (as both a former Dutch colony and an outpost during Japan's wartime occupation), as well as to its vibrant modes of racial and religious mixing, as mechanisms that have ensured the country's unique capacity for combining international and regional cinema trends for local audience appeal. Indeed, even though Suharto's drive to expand cinema exhibition was meant to kick-start the kinds of production that would showcase a "quality" Indonesian national cinema to the wider world, the state's intervention largely led instead to a rush of hastily constructed hybrid horror and extreme action flicks that fused local traditions, anxieties, and anti-colonial sentiments, with references to pre-existing international hits such as Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982) or James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984).

It is the continuation of these transnational strategies—including the wider attendant problems they entail—that underpins the subject of this study: the 2010 underwater monster movie *Amphibious* (a.k.a. *Amphibious 3D*), which was released in Indonesia under the title *Angkara Murka* (a.k.a. *Wrath/Run Amok*) before it was circulated in international territories as *Amphibious Creature of the Deep*. With the iconic American auteur Brian Yuzna as its director and producer, *Amphibious* promised to usher in a new wave of high-concept Indonesian horror cinema titles that drew on international directorial and film management talents. Not only was the film pre-marketed as Indonesia's first 3D release, but funding from the domestic distribution chain Jive Entertainment also promised widespread domestic distribution for the project via its Blitz Megaplex cinema chain (Imanjaya, 2014). As one of the front runners of the body horror and neo-Gothic splatter phenomenon of the 1980s, Yuzna seemed a perfect match for the project which featured a prehistoric creature attacking both scientists and subaltern child workers on an Indonesian fishing rig. Before the *Amphibious* project, Yuzna had already produced, with director Stuart Gordon, the body horror classic *Re-Animator* (1985), after which he helmed its sequel *Bride of Re-Animator* (1990) to international acclaim. Moreover, his directorial debut *Society* (1989), with its unsettling scenes of incest and body horror transformation, highlighted the class-based consumerist excesses of the Reagan years, thus offering the scope for interesting political and gender-based subtexts to the projects he completed in Indonesia.

Yuzna also drew on his profile as the co-creator of Europe's Fantastic Factory in the execution of his Indonesian endeavour. This Spanish-based filmmaking initiative produced nine internationally-oriented genre productions from 2000-2005 which expanded existing horror franchises such as *Beyond Re-Animator* (2003), as well as released new titles developed by local Spanish talent. The last film from the Fantastic Factory label entitled *Beneath Still Waters* (2006) was directed by Yuzna, and it shared similar themes with *Amphibious* which also focused on a primeval force that would rise up from the ocean to wreck social order and wreak sexual havoc. Yuzna also employed the screenwriting talents of John Penney for *Amphibious*. Penney was an established writer of fantastical/supernatural horror projects (such as *The Power* [1984] and *The Kindred* [1987]), and the two had already collaborated on the influential zombie hit *Return of the Living Dead III* (1993), which further cemented Yuzna's politics-meets-pulp horror credentials.

Despite the calibre of international talents attached to *Amphibious*, as well as Yuzna's reputation for successfully crafting multinational-themed genre products, *Amphibious* received a thwarted domestic release, and the subsequent lukewarm reception it garnered gave the perception that it largely failed to be seen either as a "legitimate" extension of Indonesian cinema or as a successful expansion of Yuzna's previous filmmaking concerns. However, adopting Higbee and Hwee Lim's view of "the national model as limiting" (2010, p. 9), it could be argued that *Amphibious* remains interesting for the "transnational flows" that it established between an already hybridized Indonesian filmmaking culture and the cultural practices of a cinema creative who has chosen to operate in both European and non-Western production environments for much of his career.

The Indonesian incarnation of Yuzna's *oeuvre* provided an interesting alternative to established ideas on "cross-border cinematic connections" dominating the three interrelated conceptions of the transnational that Higbee and Hwee Lim critically discussed (2010, p. 9). These two critics emphasized the diasporic influences that non-Western directors have made on pre-existing European national film cultures. However, with his status as an American *émigré* working in the Eastern territories, Yuzna's work has complicated these current constructions of the diasporic dialogue, while his status as a prominent genre creative also has shifted these debates away from the limiting "margins of dominant film cultures" (p. 10) towards more mainstream monster movie trends. The purpose of this article is therefore to offer the first critical analysis of Yuzna's *Amphibious*, pointing out the potential transnational synergies between the film and existing Indonesian

horror film traditions, while also situating the title against the other works that Yuzna has created. As part of this examination, both Brian Yuzna and screenwriter John Penney have kindly provided interviews on the making, critical reception and Indonesian underpinnings of *Amphibious*, which appear as separate entries at the end of this article.

### **Horrific and Hybrid: Transnational Influences in the Indonesian “Cult” Text**

*Amphibious* begins by linking a primitive/primordial event—the existence of an ancient sea creature evoked by chaos—to the contemporary discord created by the inner rage of the sexually androgynous youngster Tamal (Monica Sayangbati), who, along with her brother, is sold into brutal serfdom on a fishing rig. The fate of these two characters intersect with two Western protagonists, Dr Skylar Shane (Janna Fassaert) and Captain Jack Bowman (Michael Paré), who visit the rig as part of Shane’s research field trip into uncharted underwater life.

Having previously dismissed an online video footage from the region claiming to show a couple being slaughtered by the amphibian creature, Shane attempts to collate new scientific data in order to salvage a career that has been wrecked, following the death of her young daughter Becca during a previous research trip. Meantime, Bowman is also fighting his own demons, as he uses his charter trips to smuggle in contraband for the thuggish rig hand Jimmy Kudrow (Francis Magee) and the equally sinister platform owner Boss Harris (Francis Bosco). When Shane sees the abuse of the youngsters under Harris’s charge, it evokes her own maternal mourning, and she convinces Bowman to return to the fishing platform to help free Tamal and her sibling. However, after her brother dies during one of Harris’s ritualistic beatings, Tamal draws on her feelings of rage and isolation to summon the creature to dispatch their oppressors. Shane and Bowman arrive at the point where the underwater monster has begun to mutilate one by one the characters that have previously spurned Tamal. Meanwhile, Harris discovers that Tamal is in fact a young woman whose gender identity has been concealed in order to aid her sale into forced labour, and he becomes convinced that the sea monster’s return is connected to the presence of females on the fishing platform. Although he attempts to feed Tamal to the underwater aggressor to appease it, he suffers the same fate that befell the other antagonists.

The film’s finale finds the Western couple attempting to shield the youngster from the amphibian—and this leads to Bowman’s death—but it is Tamal who eventually destroys this monstrous embodiment of her inner rage by sinking a magical dagger into its body before it slips into the dark

waters below. Now haunted by the death of both Bowman and her own child, Shane manages to track down Tamal to her ancestral village where she is horrified to find the young girl, who has now fully accepted her female status proudly, giving birth to a series of small amphibian creatures through a stomach wound. It is the image of Shane fleeing from the “babies” that Tamal’s diseased body has produced which closes the film *Amphibious*.

With a multi-layered narrative that promotes both Western and Indonesian characters while attempting to unite the distinct mythologies from these competing cultures, *Amphibious* at first appears as an overambitious project that fails to fully embody the “nationalistic” elements that its Eastern setting implied. This disjuncture seems to be confirmed by the differences between the international and domestic marketing produced to promote the film. For instance, its international release trailer (under the title *Amphibious 3D*), emphasized its connection to established American underwater monster movie traditions such as *Jaws* (1975), by referencing the plight of a skinny-dipping teenage girl being attacked by an unknown and underwater presence, in a manner similar to the infamous opening attack of a female bather in Spielberg’s film.



Figure 1. International allusion: marketing “Indonesian” myths under the title *Amphibious 3D* (photo courtesy of Brian Yuzna).

This connection to horror “surfacing” in the same vein as that of the American blockbuster traditions is also confirmed in the trailer by Shane and Bowman’s discussion of a dismembered member of Harris’s crew being the potential victim of a shark attack. As well as asserting a potential American frame of reference over the fiction, the international trailer for *Amphibious* also emphasizes the centrality of Shane’s individual quest for scientific knowledge over the unknown creature, with the presence of the monster being evidenced by inserts of attacks on various members of the sea rig. Although the trailer makes clear the mythological basis for the creature’s revival (with a brief insert showing a ritualistic water dance



routine performed by Indonesian locals), the nationalistic genesis of the intruder remains ambivalent, with Kudrow even linking “Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>” to the bad events that have befallen the fishing platform.

Interestingly, the domestic trailer prepared by Jive Entertainment for the film (under the title *Angkara Murka*) during its brief run at the Blitz Megaplex screening circuit differs in a number of important ways. Firstly, although shorter in running time, the promo reel uses a rapid montage sequence to emphasize the impact of the underwater beast on the community of Indonesian sea rig dwellers as a whole, rather than emphasizing the primacy of the two Western characters foregrounded in the international variant. Secondly, while the domestic trailer does employ the same tagline as the international promo’s (“A Creature has been woken . . . by an ancient ritual . . . The curse must be broken”), it uses this caption at the very beginning instead of in the middle, and runs the logo over the extended imagery of the ritual water dance sequence while splicing footage from this scene with imagery of Tamal praying and meditating over her brother’s corpse. These alterations in both imagery and tagline placement indicate the domestic advert’s attempts to situate *Amphibious* within the established “traditional”/“ritualistic” boundaries of Indonesian horror film associated with the Suharto era.

While it could be argued that various cross-cultural tensions marked both the production and reception of *Amphibious*, this should in no way preclude it from being defined as an ‘Indonesian’ horror film. For Tombs (1998), Indonesian cinema has always been a complex, cross-cultural endeavour that has struggled to situate popular international trends within more localized traditions. As a result, Indonesian cinema has always wrestled with its own problematic nationalistic definitions, with the first films completed in the region being Dutch documentaries seeking to exploit the colony’s supposed exotic and mythical qualities. When film production began to become more fully established in the area, it was once again as a transcultural activity, fusing Dutch influences over the colony with the demands of Chinese producers and distributors eager to exploit the locale’s proximity to Mandarin and Cantonese cinemagoers. Even early international co-productions such as *Terang Boelan* (or *Full Moon*, 1938) combined elements of Hollywood glamour and romance with established tropes in Indonesian popular theater, which Tombs saw as a consistent influence over the later patterns of Indonesian horror and cult cinema:

The theatre performances that inspired Indonesian film-makers were very different from the kind of drawing room

dramas popular in Europe. Indonesian theatre was an epic musical form, often performed outdoors, and full of dances, rituals, and mythical plots. Outrageous special effects were employed to have actors flying through the air and gods and devils appearing in a puff of smoke. Horror would collide with humour and romance would always triumph in the end. (Tombs, 1998, p. 65)

This mode of “cultural mixing” further expanded with the inclusion of Indonesian martial arts in various film genres, resulting in a mode of cinema that was “action packed, filled with song and dance and one-dimensional characters, and totally escapist” (p. 65).

Arguably, these cross-cultural and fantastical Indonesian film narratives came to the fore under Suharto’s New Order regime. The 1970s, the country’s peak period of film production, was a “*melange* of already familiar elements” (Tombs, 1989, p. 66), which fused international film templates with existing Indonesian themes and political/historical concerns that spanned a range of mythological adventure yarns, supernatural horror cycles, vigilante narratives and grisly wartime/occupation re-enactment dramas. Far from proclaiming their nationalistic status, these texts often conveyed muffled or mixed messages about their regional roots which extended to as far as casting and the localized star system that emerged from this expanded field of cinema production. “Stars” were developed not only because of their domestic appeal, but because they matched the requirements of the international video market. The export potential of these films increased by having “Western-looking, mixed race or ‘Indo’ actors in the lead roles. The more obviously ‘foreign’ faces were kept to the background” (p. 71). It is interesting to note that Tombs referred to actor Barry Prima, who starred as the mythical hero Jaka Sembung in *The Warrior* series (1981-1985), as a “handsome Eurasian” performer, while Sen described sultry Indonesian actress Suzanna as a “beautiful Bollywood emulating star” (p. 205).

Aside from erasing the Indonesian roots from their key exportable talents, filmmakers also imported foreign frontline performers into the region to give action and horror titles more international appeal. For instance, the New Zealand-born actor Peter O’ Brien appeared in a number of Indonesian titles during the New Order period, with his star appeal being premised on the passing resemblance he bore to Sylvester Stallone (hence him being referred to as “Rambu” in the 1986 film *Pembalasan rambu*, a.k.a. *The Intruder*). Given this history of fluid interchange between domestic and foreign actors, it could be argued that the key roles given to non-nationals



such as Janna Fassaert and Michael Paré did not invalidate *Amphibious* from being viewed as an Indonesian horror text, but rather pointed to the continuation of complex casting strategies very much established in the region.

Indeed, the hybrid nature of Indonesian cinema and its casting system have been a subject of contemplation for non-genre scholars in the area, most notably Heider (1991), whose anthropologically-oriented study of Indonesian cinema is considered one of the wider studies of film patterns in this region. For Heider, the varied intercultural references that dominate Indonesian cinema render it a complex, intercultural and hybridized form, which would at one level fit well with Yuzna's past experiments in transnational terror techniques. However, there were also some key features that Heider has identified which upon first appearance complicated the clear nationalistic associations for a title like *Amphibious*. The first of these was language, which this author sees as the most "obvious" feature of Indonesian cinema:

All Indonesian films use the Indonesian language almost exclusively. The exceptions are occasional words in a local language thrown in for atmospheric effect. But in the world of movies, even long discussions in isolated Javanese villages, or around Batak dinner tables, are all carried out in Indonesian. (p. 26)

While it was not uncommon for a multinational cast to appear in "classic" Indonesian horror and exploitation films of the 1970s and 1980s, the performances were normally overdubbed from the original Indonesian dialogue into a more acceptable Anglo-American vernacular, in order to maximize their transnational potential in the burgeoning international VHS market. However, with *Amphibious*, Yuzna departed from this method by shooting the film in English, thus accentuating, rather than minimizing the regional and transnational accents among the key players in the fiction. While the "stock" American orientation of dialogue delivery expected from earlier Indonesian titles was provided by Michael Paré's characterization of the world-weary seaman Captain Bowman, the film extended its range of verbal distinctions to include the Dutch actress Janna Fassaert, whose noticeable national inflection dominated the delivery of her role as the marine biologist Skylar Shane. This performative style was itself replicated by the more sinister Gaelic inferences provided by Francis Magee as the ruthless Irish rig master Jimmy Kudrow, who was responsible for the persecution of

Tamal and her brother. The proliferation of these multinational accents was further complicated by the input of actress Monica Sayangbati, who, along with the other Indonesian cast members, delivered her lines in English. While on first appearance this strategy of diverse verbal delivery strained Heider's (1991) discussion on the role of dialogue in relation to national cinema, this author does concede that Indonesian film rarely replicates the continued use of Javanese, Batak, and other regional languages which continue to underpin these "official" modes of communication.

While issues of accent and verbal delivery foreground the degree of artificiality implicit within Indonesian cinema, Heider (1991) did highlight the role of ceremonies and specific modes of physical display as points where more genuine conceptions of the 'national' could be identified. He noted that "ethnic ceremonies—which usually means regional ceremonies—occur with great frequency" (p. 59). In terms of Indonesian cult cinema, the role of ceremonies and ritualistic displays serves a further function by connecting contemporary Indonesia to a more religious and rural past. The scenes become visual spectacles in their own right that halt narrative progression in a manner that confirms the "jarring aspect" that the author attributes to their use in Indonesian film. To illustrate, Heider noted that:

In the middle of a film we are suddenly set down in a full-scale wedding ceremony or funeral or circumcision or seventh month of pregnancy rite or harvest ceremony where the extras seem to be genuine villagers wearing their own clothes and going through their accustomed rituals while the movie stars look like movie stars quite out of place. (p. 59)

Despite its ambivalent status as an Indonesian text, *Amphibious* foregrounded the centrality of its rituals, traditions and culturally defined superstitions in a number of its pivotal scenes. One key segment included Shane's attendance at a traditional water dance ritual, which charted rebirth and resurrection via the intersection of wild water animals (such as alligators) with decorated human dancers whose performance accelerated to a frenzied display.

Here, Yuzna fused the communal and ritualistic displays associated with Indonesian culture with the more individualized concerns of the Western characters in the narrative. This was seen when Shane imagined seeing her dead daughter Becca reincarnated during the dance routine before the youngster had been enveloped by the frenzied group display. By having



**Figure 2.** Ritual routines: the “Indonesian” segment of *Amphibious* (photo courtesy of Brian Yuzna)..

Shane’s daughter transform into a distorted and hairless native boy when she re-emerged from the makeshift coffin that was the centrepiece of the dance troupe, the film thus emphasized the transgressive and transcultural interchange between Western and Indonesian bodies. In so doing, the sequence also fulfilled another of Heider’s (1991) key criterion for the Indonesian film text: a recourse to exaggerated bodily contortion and facial distortion used to show a range of wild and unnatural emotions. While these physiognomic displays may be linked to the overblown traditions of Indonesian popular theater, they also intersected globally defined gestures of unease (what Heider terms “the anger face”), with culturally-specific signs of aggression: “That is to say there is a facial expression which is recognizable as “anger” but in which the eyebrows are raised high—not lowered as they should be in the pan-cultural anger expression” (p. 65).



**Figure 3.** Fright and faith systems: *Amphibious* uses a cross-cultural cast to highlight differing belief patterns (photo courtesy of Brian Yuzna).

Beyond this scene, *Amphibious* complemented this recourse to ritual and traditional modes of performance with a number of scenes trading off competing conceptions of superstition and fate between the Western and Indonesian characters it depicts. In so doing, the film sought to explore the connections between the “global and local, national and transnational” that Higbee and Hwee Lim (2010, p. 10) have identified as central to such cross-cultural cinema collaborations. The resultant trans-ritual scenes not only drew out differing cross-cultural definitions of belief but also offered a critical *distanciation* between individuality and group dynamics that Heider saw as governing Hollywood and Indonesian cinema, respectively. The difference between belief systems was first raised in Kudrow’s introduction to the narrative, when he bleakly awakened on the shipping rig to lament, “Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is fuckin’ bad luck.” Importantly, when his Indonesian ship hand retorted that the date did not hold the same negative connotations in the region, Kudrow responded that it remained “bad luck in the civilized world.” This brief exchange established the idea of conflicting mythological belief systems between the Western and Indonesian characters, which Yuzna usefully exploited in other key scenes. Thus, when Harris discovered Shane on the rig attempting to free Tamal, he commented that a woman’s presence on the fishing rig was “very bad luck” from an Indonesian perspective, while one of his teenage assistant’s further chastised the scientist for being “a bad luck bitch.”

The conflation of Western and Indonesian superstitious notions further circulated around the female body following the revelation of Tamal’s sexual identity, with Kudrow commenting that “There’s a jinx do you know that? We should never have taken Tamal in the first place—she’s a witch just like her uncle.” Indeed, the character’s conflicting status of “vulnerable rescue object” from the Western characters’ perspective versus “cursed object that requires sacrifice to restore communal order” on the part of the Indonesian rig crew also highlighted the division between individuality and collective will separating these two cultural belief systems. As Heider (1991) noted, “the dominant Indonesian pattern, which shapes most Indonesian film plots, emphasises the group at the expense of the individual” (p. 30). Although *Amphibious* appeared to privilege the individualistic desires and ambitions of its Western characters (Shane’s quest for scientific knowledge/maternal redemption and Bowman’s ambitions of financial/romantic security), “for Indonesians, who place more value on the health of a group, this blatant individualism seems particularly selfish” (Heider, 1991, p. 30). Moreover, the ambivalent nature of these Western individual quests were also exposed in one of the film’s final scenes—when Shane and Bowman were distracted

from their objective of rescuing Tamal by their own discussions on how to best exploit the potential capture of the amphibian to advance their respective careers. The inclusion of this scene, which prefigured Bowman's sudden death in the hands of the slumbering creature, underscored the film's essential critique of these individualized Western ambitions and introduced a detached sense of "critical transnationalism" that Higbee and Hwee Lim have argued as necessary when considering the potential ideologies which often accompany the hybrid dynamics of cross cultural cinema activity (2010, p. 10).

### **Narratives, Knowledge and the "Curse" of the Female Body**

It could be argued that *Amphibious* attempted to address some key Indonesian mythologies and ritual practices, the film's local orientation is further ensured via its emulating some of the key narrative features of the cult productions which emerged during the New Order regime. Central to these narrative devices was the use of quasi-documentary footage, which has long been used to 'authenticate' some of the exotic spectacles represented in various Indonesian cult cycles. In *Mondo Macabre*, Tombs (1998) noted a pseudo-realist tradition of depicting the ritualistic and "primitive" elements of Indonesian culture for either the colonial or foreign gaze:

The first films made in Indonesia were shot by Dutch documentary makers in the 1910s. These *mondo*-style travelogues full of the islands' exotic folk culture, were intended for showing in Holland, where it was hoped they would raise the population's awareness of their remote colonial possession. (p. 65)

Despite the drive towards nationally-oriented and realistic representations of Indonesian culture that accompanied the New Order, *mondo* (or sensational documentary style inserts) remained a key staple in a number of Indonesian horror and exploitation cycles, regardless of their fantastical components. For instance, Tombs (1998) found numerous evidence of a pseudo-realist orientation in a sub-cycle of savage backwoods horror films whereby Indonesian scientists confronted their primal backwoods countrymen. As he stated, "the seventies and eighties saw a steady trickle of titles...where anthropologists from the city confront savage jungle tribes" (p. 69). These productions not only provided salacious content for home-grown consumers but also kept an eye out for external audiences familiar with established colonial concepts of the "exotic" and unfamiliar. Tombs noted that titles such as Sisworo Gautama Putra's *Primitif* (a.k.a. *Primitives*,

1980), which began with documentary-like inter-titles proclaiming “This is a true story. Filmed on location in the jungle where the events really happened . . .”; integrated actual footages of animal slaughter with a fictional narrative “exposing” cannibalistic practices in rural Indonesia.

Although more theatrical in orientation than the rural horror film cycle, a realist coda also remained central to many supernatural horror films produced under the New Order. For instance, the 1981 film *Leák* (a.k.a. *Mystics in Bali*) began with the actual footage of a traditional Balinese dance ritual performed in front of an assembled audience which was then integrated into the wider fictional narrative of a Black Queen’s attempts to regain power through the body of a naïve visiting female anthropologist.

Given his knowledge of these pre-existing horror traditions, it seemed appropriate that Yuzna also include a *mondo*-style insert as a post-credit sequence of *Amphibious*. This took the form of a filmed record conducted by a Dutch couple documenting their expedition of local Indonesian customs before a skinny-dipping expedition led to their fatal encounter with the amphibian. This insert (filmed as a handy-cam horror component familiar with current horror trends), featured the pair marvelling at the strange and unfamiliar Indonesian environment they were recording. From the exotic cuisine—“I like fruits, I have forgotten their name”—to a crowded market where the couple donned traditional masks to impress one another, the scenes acted as an index of Eastern otherness to the Western observer. The locale was further established as a site for potential contamination and taboo (with the male becoming intoxicated and ill from the local liquor) as well as fatal sexual liberation (with the female stripping in the water to entice her partner before the amphibian creature penetrated her body around the breast area). All these scenes, later revealed as a previewed clip on a “freak or fake” website, playfully indicated the director’s awareness of the largely fictional nature of documentary inserts popularized by previous Indonesian horror titles.

As well as emulating the stylistic and narrative tactics used by key Indonesian titles, *Amphibious* also used the figure of Skylar Shane to draw out the established trope of “the outsider who brings knowledge to the local populace.” Returning to the backwoods horror cycle that Tombs (1998) has discussed, the author notes “In Indonesian horror films and jungle movies it’s always an outsider, usually someone from the big city who comes to the bewitched village to save it, or to the jungle to educate the primitive natives” (p. 69). But while it has often been the case that “wisdom and progress are things that the city creates and nurtures” (p. 69), some important reservations around the notions of female sexuality and gender propriety



has remained. As a result, characters associated with the city space could also come to represent the corruption and perversion of Indonesian female sexuality. Not only were outsiders a central antagonist in a female sex slavery sub-cycle which was also popular during the Indonesian boom period but their status as external Other was also confirmed by the negative colonial connotations they often convey.

Although often not as explicitly evil as their male counterparts, female outsiders also had a significant role in disrupting social order and sexual mores in the “classic” Indonesian films produced during the 1970s and 1980s. In those films, a female scientist or anthropologist privileged her own selfish quest for knowledge or career advancement over the Indonesian landscape she sought to comprehend, often with chaotic results. Indicative examples of this pattern included *Mystics in Bali* (Djalil, 1981) and the later 1988 production *Pembalasan Ratu Pantai Selatan* (a.k.a. *The Revenge of the South Sea Queen*/a.k.a. *Lady Terminator* [Djalil, 1988]). Both films used existing Indonesian myths surrounding demonic women to explore wider themes related to the female outsider’s ignorance or lack of cultural awareness, resulting in an explosion of uncontrollable sexuality. Both titles were also directed by noted Indonesian exploitation auteur H. Tjut Djalil, and featured remarkably similar storylines of ill-fated Western female anthropologists drawn to the Indonesian culture in an attempt to study its exotic rituals and customs.

In *Mystics in Bali* (Djalil, 1981), the central female character, anthropologist Cathy Dean (Ilona Agathe Bastian), persuaded a local suitor, Mahendra (Yos Santo), to aid her induction into a powerful form of Balinese black magic overseen by the sinister and decaying Leák high priestess known as the Black Queen. From the outset, Cathy’s agenda is linked to a misguided perception that she will be able to circumvent the dangers associated with studying such alchemy, using her position of privileged colonial observer as a means of protection. The black magic training sessions revealed not a position of analytical isolation but rather a startling degree of intercultural and physiological fusion between the evil Indonesian host and the ill-informed tourist. The camera repeatedly focused on Cathy’s attempts to mimic the jerky gestures of her decomposing mentor, providing an variant of transgressive interchange between dominant and subaltern cultures. Beyond confirming Cathy’s misguided and external status, the formative encounters between Cathy and the Black Queen also came to convey a range of sexual incongruities between Indonesian and foreign mores. The supernatural agent asked the heroine to partly disrobe so that the former could imprint a tattoo of internship on the latter’s thigh, close to the genital

region. Cathy's repeated requests that Mahendra then inspect and interpret the emblem while she wears a range of revealing bikinis linked colonial ignorance to sexual preciousness (in marked distinction to Mahendra's fully clothed and communally-oriented former Indonesian girlfriend).

When Cathy attempted to relinquish this supernatural knowledge exchange, the demonic mentor severed her head and internal organs in order for these bodily parts to independently do her murderous bidding. For Siddique (2002), the use of this imagery evoked the transgressive female figure of the Penanggalan who has remained:

perhaps the most horrifying of vampire ghost . . . .During her flight, her head and neck separate from her body, such that her head and neck are attached only to her entrails, which she uses to suck the blood of babies and women during childbirth." (p. 26)

The narrative soon revealed that in order for the Black Queen to retain her youth and desirability, she must constantly feast on a diet of blood, which Cathy's disembodied organs were now compelled to seek out. The gore inserts that followed focused on evocative scenes of the floating colonial head organs devouring the new born fetuses from the stomachs and bloodied thighs of pregnant Indonesian women and evoked fears of both communal regeneration and wider Indonesian taboos surrounding the potentially abject nature of the female body. As Heider (1991) commented:

in those films were sex may fairly be considered as an act of love and tenderness . . . . Even the conventional depiction of childbirth stages it as rape. Indeed, the camera takes the point of view of the male violator: The woman is on her back, moaning and writhing in agony, the camera on a tripod between her legs and shooting down on her face (p. 67).

Such films confirmed Heider's view that "sexuality is one of the most sensitive subjects of Indonesian life" (1991, p. 66), these tensions were also conflated with a set of socially constructed fears that provide "a space in which the gender ideologies of the New Order Indonesian government and the gender fantasies of the vampire ghost are confronted with each other" (Siddique, 2002, p. 24).

If the supernatural heroines of the New Order's cult canon remain disruptive bodies as Siddique (2002) suggested, then their influence could be seen in Jalil's later title *Revenge of the South Sea Queen* (known widely under the export title *Lady Terminator*). As with *Mystics in Bali*, this film evoked a similar pattern of intercultural ignorance paired with disruptive female sexuality in order to make bold and controversial statements about the monstrous nature of the female sex drive. The film focused on another ill-fated anthropology student named Tania (Barbara Anne Constable), who defied local advice against seeking out the mythical origins of the sexually voracious South Seas Queen. This mythical figure was first seen in the erotically charged pre-credit sex scene, where multiple local suitors were castrated at the point of orgasm in her bedroom chamber, as if to symbolize their failed attempts of sexual mastery over an unruly woman. These scenes, which provoked official condemnation at the time of the film's release, confirmed Heider's point that "sexual intercourse is...suggested fairly explicitly in Horror genre films" (1991, p. 67), while also enforcing taboos around the unrepressed female sexual urge. Indeed, the South Seas Queen's rapacious carnality was only curbed by a distinctly European-looking suitor who entered her boudoir and tricked her into conceding her erotic potency by pulling a serpentine dagger from her vagina during the female's orgasmic slumber. As a result, the film's pre-credit scene ended with the South Seas Queen, before being banished to her dormant underwater kingdom, vowing revenge on the female descendant of the man who deceived her.

It was the lair of this vengeful female that was disturbed by Tania in the present tense narrative that took up the remainder of *Revenge of the South Sea Queen's* running time. Tania had discovered the South Seas Queen's underwater lair before she found herself forcibly impregnated by the witch's spirit after a serpent penetrated her vagina. This scene, which once again conflated bodily abjection with uncontrollable female sexuality, confirmed Heider's view of the "sadistic/erotic displays of bodies" (1991, p. 69) in Indonesian horror which also functioned to polarize Western from more localized versions of female sensuality. Thus, having been rendered infected and indestructible by the South Sea Queen's curse, Tania set about tracking down the last female descendant of the man who manipulated her as well as castrating every Indonesian male she encountered in order to maintain her sexual prowess.

Although her past maternal status slightly differentiated her from the ill-fated and easily sexualized female scientists in H. Tjut Jalil's two films, Skylar Shane from *Amphibious* essentially replicated their status as Western outsiders who fail to acknowledge a degree of cursed female sexuality in the

Indonesian landscapes they come to study. Indeed, *Amphibious* repeatedly equated the emergence of the underwater beast to Tamal's ambiguous sexual rage, thus rendering her a far more complex creation than the simplistic tag of "victim" Shane applied to her. For instance, following the death of her brother at the hands of sadistic rig head Jimmy Kudrow, Tamal used her father's "magical knife" to hail the beast from the sea, using the blood from a slit in her abdomen to further tempt the creature to her aid. The images of slits, gashes, and wounds provoking a monstrous manifestation clearly echoed Siddique's (2002) study of the Indonesian *Sundelbolong* or vampire ghost tradition, which in various manifestations conflated aggressive female agency with abject associations to childbirth, procreation, and contaminated body fluids.

Indeed, this highly evocative scene, which featured the dark heroine lying passively and panting heavily on the bamboo deck of the fishing rig while the creature inspected and then caressed her body, conflated the imagery of coitus with fears of bodily transformation that has been found in both Indonesian cult cinema and Yuzna's wider output. From the earlier Yuzna productions such as *Society* (1989) which playfully tied Freudian notions of repressed infantile desire to grotesque transformations of the female body) to his more recent works such as *Beyond Re-Animator* (2003) and *Rotweiller* (2004), which linked female "possession" to the necromantically inspired libido, there seem to be a number of connections between the director's interests and Indonesian horror traditions.

While recent theorists have noted the recurrent emphasis on bodily possession with abject female sexuality in Indonesian horror, Sen (2010) has warned against an over-generalized psychosexual interpretation as a way of annexing American to Eastern film, as it "would not explain anything specific about either Indonesia or Indonesian cinema" (p. 205). However, in response to Sen's analysis, Siddique (2002) has concluded that "horror draws upon universal myths yet is punctuated with cultural specificities" (p. 25), which would allow for a shared consideration of the abject imagery across both Indonesian cult film and Yuzna's wider cinema.

Going back to the beginning of *Amphibious*, it was noticeable that the film started in a similar manner as Jalil's works—via a prologue which situated its present-tense action against a more traditional set of mythical concerns. While titles such as *Revenge of the South Sea Queen* (Djalil, 1988) began with a specific reference to a past historical event, Yuzna's film began with a more eternal reference to impending gender and generational conflict. His shots of a swirling ocean scape were accompanied by an unidentified voice that stated, "There is the sea, limitless, deep. There's power in the sea, ultimate

power, and everyone wants power, right?” The screen then faded into a shot of Tamal, while the voiceover was revealed to be that of her elderly uncle, a fading magician who had dispatched the youngster to the sea to bring transformative powers back to his feeble body. Alongside qualifying this lust for power that the elder equated to the eternal power of the sea, an equally universal reference to intergenerational lust and ambition was referenced when the aged magician stated that “Even . . . the child wants power . . . ;” thus establishing themes of infantile desire and bodily disruption shared by both Indonesian horror and other Yuzna productions.



**Figure 5.** Abject attacks: the amphibian’s assault as an expression of Tamal’s sexual rage (photo courtesy of Brian Yuzna).

These infantile and abject associations continued throughout the film via the repeated equation of the underwater beast to Tamal’s inner rage and ambiguous sense of sexuality. It is noticeable that the monster first threatened the rig when Tamal’s co-workers started taunting her androgynous sexuality with statements such as “Little baby Tamal, sucking on a tit” and “Little baby Tamal, sucking on my dick.” These offensive comments, along with other similar ones, attempted to attribute a “degraded” and feminized status upon Tamal, which was continually defied by the amphibian’s attacks. Indeed, the point where Tamal was finally revealed as a woman (with both concealed breasts and ‘gash’ to her abdomen) was the point where the amphibian creature suddenly bisected the body one of Tamal’s long-time oppressors, accentuating the castrative imagery running throughout the narrative. In this respect, the symbolism contained in *Amphibious* replicated the conflation of cross-gender body tropes that Siddique (2002) has identified in her study of Indonesian spectres, which often revealed the



woman's disruptive potential by conjoining phallic and reproductive traits. In the case of the ill-fated heroine of Siddique's case study, "She reveals her awesome reproductive powers not by creating a baby, but in replicating her arms into dismembered rotting phallic weapons with which she kills men" (p. 31).



**Figure 6.** Accepting the 'female' curse: Tamal's birthing scene in *Amphibious* (photo courtesy of Brian Yuzna).

Although Tamal did conceive and birth an infant in the finale of *Amphibious*, the abject and disruptive notions of maternal female sexuality found in both Indonesian cult cinema and Yuzna's wider output remain. Shane discovered that Tamal, now back in her uncle's village, had been fully transformed into a "traditional" female. Her monstrously reproductive status was confirmed when she revealed her "babies" to the horrified scientist, who then recoiled at the site of a batch of scorpion's being expelled from the wound in the girl's stomach. Such images confirmed what Siddique saw as the Indonesian cinematic link between disgust and "feminine procreativity and fertility" (2002, p. 26), while also providing an unsettling final image which prevented true closure in the narrative. However, the use of this imagery also extended beyond nationalistic anchors, confirming Creed's view that across cultural fears and taboos, it has been "generally believed that monstrous offspring were created by the maternal imagination" (1993, p. 45). Thus, both the imagery and the intent of Yuzna's *Amphibious* have retained a transnational emphasis that requires further investigation. If "the horror films that... began to appear in Indonesia in the early seventies were a hybrid of Western techniques and Eastern ideas" (Tombs, p. 72), then *Amphibious* remains an extension, rather than an aberration, of that tradition of Indonesian cult cinema.



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## Notes

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