

Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization by Rosalind Galt, Columbia University Press, 2021, 290pp.

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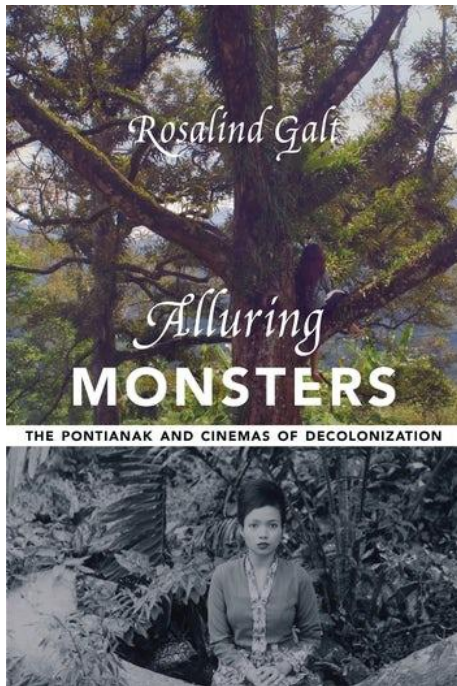
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BOOK REVIEW

Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization

By Rosalind Galt

Columbia University Press
2021

290pp.

In *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization*, Rosalind Galt poses the *pontianak*—a supernatural creature of Southeast Asian origins—as a paradoxical figure that defies

categorization. It is this very complexity, notes Galt, that enables the semiotic richness of the *pontianak*. Galt argues that the use of the *pontianak* in Malaysian and Singaporean postcolonial cinema provides a deeper understanding of the local and transnational dynamics in the region. Galt analyzes *pontianak* films from the 1950s to the present, tracing a history of their production and addressing their relationship to world cinema—i.e., non-Hollywood productions during “an era of Hollywood domination” (2021, 8). In doing so, Galt’s broader argument is that the *pontianak* is a “uniquely valuable cinematic figure” (Galt 2021, 5) that is significant beyond its geographic context. Although the *pontianak* film speaks to Malay cultures, Galt argues that the *pontianak* figure also provides a symbol through which feminist, postcolonial, and critical theory can be applied to an analysis of broader world cinema.

Since *Alluring Monsters* locates the *pontianak* within “cultures of decolonization” (Galt 2021, 21), Galt draws from scholarship on postcolonial cinema (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012), as well as the concepts of haunting and spectrality (Blanco and Peeren 2013; Gelder 2000), in order to further develop several discourses of decolonization that are relevant to the *pontianak*. Specifically, “the force of precolonial belief systems in the face of often violently produced modernities, the discontinuous temporalities of postcolonial experience, the significance of possession (understood as the ownership or usurpation of one’s subjectivity or land), the excessive and uncanny process of remaking identities, and the role of monstrosity in navigating cultural trauma and upheaval” (Galt 2021, 21).

Galt sets the stage in her introduction by pointing out the significant overlaps between postcolonial studies and film studies, citing Sandra Ponzanese and Marguerite Waller's 2012 *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, as well as Ken Gelder's "Global/Postcolonial Horror: An Introduction" in *Postcolonial Studies* (3, no. 1 [2000])—both of which place haunting and horror as central to theorizing postcoloniality. Galt writes that the pontianak is an especially intriguing figure in this study because while traditionally, the pontianak has a fixed nature and is of Malay origins, its representations on screen indicate a fluidity that defies categorization. In order to appreciate the semiotic richness of the pontianak on screen, it is necessary to understand the traditional pontianak figure and Galt provides a comprehensive overview of it.

Galt explains that the conventional pontianak is the ghost of a woman who died as a result of male violence or in childbirth. She is often referred to as a vampire in English—even though this translation is not entirely accurate—because typical representations of the pontianak show her consuming the blood and/or flesh of her victims. Galt highlights some common complaints from Southeast Asians about the pontianak film—namely, how its genre markers and the portrayal of the pontianak are influenced by the Western vampire (Lee 2016; Ng 2009; Yeo 2004, as cited in Galt, 2021). These critiques imply that screen representations of the pontianak are a result of cultural imperialism. Galt acknowledges that the influences exist, but argues that the flow of influence is not as simple as critics describe.

Continuing in the introduction, Galt cites scholarship on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to show that its Gothic qualities emerged from a fascination for "folkloric figures of Britain's colonies" (Galt 2021, 6), as well as noting that Isabella Bird's travel memoir *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883), based upon her travels to the Malaysian peninsula, was one of Stoker's sources for the idea of the vampire. The Chersonese, notes Galt, is an old term for Malaya and it is explicitly mentioned in Stoker's book as a place where vampires can be found. Galt concludes that the Malay pontianak is "at the source and foundation of modern vampire mythology" (Galt 2021, 8). What Galt successfully shows is that before European vampire tropes became an influence in Malay cinema, the European vampire had already appropriated Malay indigenous narratives. What this means for Galt is that the concept of the postcolonial does not only apply to studies of cinema in formerly colonized countries but is also a way to examine "circulatory systems of world cinema" (Galt 2021, 8). Thus, *Alluring Monsters* is a compelling work for film studies and genre studies, but also provides valuable insights for scholars looking into postcolonialism, Southeast Asian and/or Malay cultures, as well as critical theory.

Each of the chapters in the book focuses on a specific aspect of the pontianak and addresses an area in contemporary film studies. Chapter 1 examines the production histories of the pontianak film—highlighting the multiracial makeup of cast, crew and audiences in the late-colonial Singapore—in order to elucidate the role of the pontianak in “creating cultures of decolonization” (Galt 2021, 41). Galt concludes that the pontianak—who is Malay but does not conform to conservative Malay ethnonationalism—disturbed the dominant vision of Malay identity that arose as a form of anticolonialism during the 1950s.

Chapter 2 focuses on feminist and queer film theory, and, here, Galt argues that understanding “historical forms and meanings of gender” (Galt 2021, 83) are necessary for studying Malay postcoloniality—and, synchronously, that a feminist reading of the pontianak film allows for a better understanding of Malay postcolonial histories. Galt notes that the pontianak is female but does not conform to conventional gender roles. Thus, the pontianak in Malay film “embodies patriarchal anxieties around femininity” (Galt 2021, 83) and “forms a key site of contestation in postcolonial Malay societies” (Galt 2021, 100). In the same vein, Chapter 3 argues that the figure of the pontianak enables contestation of national, racial, and religious identities in postcolonial Singaporean and Malaysian cinemas. Galt does this by reading pontianak films through the lens of race, analyzing how race and religious identities are represented in various cinematic forms.

Chapter 4 explores the concept of cinematic space, looking at the typical setting of the pontianak film i.e., the *kampung* (village). Galt uses the kampung as an organizing principle to examine histories of postcolonial land ownership, as well as concepts of heritage and historicity in film theory. In addition to making a case that folkloric horror and the heritage film have commonalities, Galt also uses the pontianak film to question the idea of heritage in Malay postcoloniality. As Galt explains, in the pontianak film, the kampung is surrounded by the jungle, which both sustains and endangers the villagers. The pontianak is shown as entering and sometimes inhabiting the kampung, but she is just as much a part of the jungle. Thus, this chapter probes the question of who owns the kampung and the land it was built on.

This consideration of the jungle segues perfectly into Chapter 5, which considers a “pontianak theory of the forest” (Galt 2021, 197). In this chapter, Galt turns to animism as method for theorizing world cinema. Instead of positioning animism as a foil for modernity-derived problems—which is the typical stance—Galt traces how Malay animistic beliefs can be used to better understand postcolonial visual cultures. Of particular interest is Galt’s analysis of optical point-of-view shots in pontianak films. These are “unclaimed, never connected to any character’s vision or knowledge” (Galt

2021, 225). Instead, Galt says, the shots are framed so as to imply that the point of view originates from nature i.e., the forest is doing the watching. For Galt, this framing allows a further examination of the history and politics of the forest.

The pontianak film genre has been largely overlooked because like the pontianak, it cannot be neatly categorized as political cinema or popular cinema. However, Galt in *Alluring Monsters* has shown that the pontianak reveals cultural anxieties and issues that are still relevant in Southeast Asia today. Thus, analyzing these pontianak films opens up new insights for how these cultural phenomena can be understood. At the same time, this deeper understanding of Malay postcolonial cultures opens up new avenues for discussing cinema produced in other postcolonies around the world.

— Jeannette Goon

Jeannette Goon is a Master of Research (MRes) candidate researching pornography and sex media in Malaysia. Her dissertation explores a range of Internet platforms to look at how the Malay/sian female body is deployed and manifests in the registers of Lacanian psychoanalysis. She is currently developing a PhD proposal to consider how the monstrous-feminine disturbs scientific and medical understandings of the female body in a modern postcolony.

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