

BOOK REVIEW

Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era, by Adil Johan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018, 416 pp.

Ahmad Fuad Rahmat

School of Media, Languages and Cultures, University of Nottingham Malaysia
Campus, Selangor, MALAYSIA
Email: fuadrahmat@gmail.com

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The ambitious richness of Adil Johan's *Cosmopolitan Intimacies* will see it become an influential text for various disciplines. Interdisciplinary in approach, drawing from history, sociology and ethnomusicology, while masterfully narrating a historical big picture with careful attention to detail, it will undoubtedly serve as an indispensable resource for further inquiries into modernity and the future of Malaysian identity and cosmopolitanism more broadly.

The book is richest in how it offers a compelling story of how modernity is grappled with, where music is a platform and mirror for a newly independent nation that is attempting to form its own identity as it deals with pressures from global and regional unpredictability. The 1960s was a particularly dynamic period as it revealed an attitude of openness and creativity that has not been paralleled since. Films then "intimated the ethical aspirations of a modern Malay nation-in-the-making and the musical technologies, discourses, and aesthetics in these films mediated and reconciled an acceptable modernity for Malay society" (p. 277). This is not a simple matter of music "bringing people together" but how it embodied the anxieties of cultural negotiations where the loss and uncertainties of historical transformation were pictured, confronted and enjoyed. His reading of *Ibu Mertuaku* for example is particularly illuminating for revealing the politics of modernisation in what for long is taken for granted as a family drama. Concerns over old money lineage and inheritance are set amidst a thriving music industry where the emergent technologies of the time were featured to render a "look" for the "contemporary." Thus rather than a critique of modernity *Ibu Mertuaku* positions its breadth and emotional demands, which probably explains why it remains one of the most repeated films to date.

The film of the 1960s showed this in very obvious terms but the embrace then would decrease, as modernity became less celebrated to and more contested over time. The section on *Pop Yeh-Yeh*, amidst a chapter that discusses youth culture more generally, is perhaps the most refreshing part of Adil's project as it combs through a period that has received little to no scholarly attention. This explores how youth took on the process of "reclaiming modernity," unsettling "the Singaporean and Malaysian nation-building projects of cultivating a culturally refined and obedient citizenry" (p. 226). But perhaps more interestingly is how Adil situates "youth" as a historical marker, a threshold where past and future are confronted. Thus generational tensions are situated within a tussle over the authorship of a new national imaginary personified by "youth" as inheritors of the nation-building project. The inter-generational conversations reveal how "agency exists in both views and their arguments were articulated in cosmopolitan mediums that provide a new space for these oppositional ideas to interact" (p. 209).

Adil Johan weaves a masterful picture of how music and film form a synergy as a space where new discoveries of identities and possibilities were expressed. The big picture it provides reveals a modernity that is constantly negotiated in creative ways for a dialogue with power and history to reveal collective agency. One wonders, however, if more could have been done with the term cosmopolitan. For one, how might have the inquiry turned out if Adil operated with a more robust notion of cosmopolitanism. He says "a cosmopolitan cultural practice is one that can be distinguished as articulating two or more contrasting identities simultaneously" (p. 9) though one wonders if there is any culture in the world that would not count as "cosmopolitan" by that definition. To be fair this definition is extended and tested via a deeper exposition into his discourse although it doesn't quite get to the heart of the matter, namely that the world appears to be turning cosmopolitan with little fuss. Western pop music has seen an increasing incorporation of Latin and Middle-Eastern sounds over the past ten years, ensuring that hybridity would be the irreversible norm for mainstream music to come. Even country music is becoming a more regular resource for hip-hop and R&B, if the success of Justin Timberlake's *Say Something* is anything to go by. To this we could also add the strange mainstream purchase, by way of ironic-hipster meme culture, of *Like a Farmer* by Tracy and Lil Uzi Vert. We'll find more evidence of such mixtures if we look to cinema especially of the increasing popular border films (which even the Coen Brothers latched on) which seem to be proliferating as the world grapples with an expanding refugee and migration crisis.

All this should give us some pause for concern: If everything is going to become cosmopolitan, if it hasn't already, then what isn't? Or put in more political terms, should we not differentiate between a cosmopolitanism that is transgressive, that has an inability to upset and stretch the boundaries of hegemonic tastes, than one that is just profitable? Without this distinction Adil's argument is vulnerable to

straightforward market solutions: Let everyone trade and get the most of what the other is selling and entertainment will just follow suit. Cultural paradoxes are not just fun they also keep us asking for more.

Adil's project started out by pointing out that a certain proto-cosmopolitanism in the Malay world was already flourishing well before colonial modernity. The brilliant scholarship that ensued notwithstanding, the reader is left wondering, what has happened to *that* cosmopolitanism? We see more of how the modern was internalised and recoded but not how past articulations of hybridity remain alive despite how Western pop has thrived in accordance with local tastes.