

This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

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Publisher: *Routledge*

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and Alex Marlow-Mann

The Routledge Companion to World Cinema

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Southeast Asian independent cinema

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch2>

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Published online on: 27 Sep 2017

How to cite :- Jonathan Driskell. 27 Sep 2017, *Southeast Asian independent cinema from: The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch2>

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

A World Cinema movement

Jonathan Driskell

Introduction

As a number of writers have commented (Hanan 2001; Baumgärtel 2012a), there has been something of a mismatch between the healthy cinematic output of Southeast Asia and how little international recognition these cinemas have achieved. Although the cinematic histories of the eleven countries that make up Southeast Asia—Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam—have been varied, from nation to nation and at different points in time, the region has much to boast about. Philippine cinema, for instance, has been the third largest in the world at many points in its history, in terms of the number of films released per year, coming only after Hollywood and “Bollywood”. During the golden age of Malay cinema, British Malaya had some of the most impressive cinema attendance figures in the world: “It is [. . .] said that the film-going public in British Malaya was the highest per head in the world at that time [the 1950s], which also explains why Hollywood was eager to cultivate the Malayan film market” (Kahn 2006: 129). Even Cambodia, which is rarely considered to be a major filmmaking nation, produced over 400 films during its golden age, which lasted from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, though most of these were destroyed after the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975.

The region has produced a wealth of popular genres and a host of stars who in the domestic market have rivalled those coming from Hollywood: in Thailand Mittr Chaibancha dominated the box office in the 1950s and 1960s until his untimely death in 1970, when he fell out of a helicopter while filming a stunt; the multi-talented P. Ramlee, a star-director-writer-musician-composer from the 1950s–1970s is still a national icon in Malaysia; the Philippines has produced countless “love teams” (star pairings who appear together in film after film) and truly stellar stars, such as Nora Aunor, whose phenomenal appeal is narrativised in Ishmael Bernal’s *Himala* (Miracle, 1982, Philippines). The region has also produced critically acclaimed cinema, some of which has gone on to receive international recognition at major film festivals. The “New Philippine Cinema” directors, such as Lino Brocka, Mike de Leon and Ishmael Bernal, achieved success during the 1970s and 1980s, with Brocka being nominated for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1980 for *Jaguar* (1979, Philippines) and again in 1984 for *Bayan Ko: Kapit Sa Patalim* (Bayan Ko, 1984, Philippines/France). From Thailand Euthana Mukdasanit won the best film award at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 1985 for *Peesua*

lae dokmai (Butterfly and Flower, 1985, Thailand). Rithy Panh has also been gaining recognition since the mid-1990s for his films about the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, such as *Neak Sre* (Rice People, 1995, Cambodia/France/Switzerland/Germany), *S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* (S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine, 2003, Cambodia/France) and *L'image Manquante* (The Missing Picture, Cambodia/France, 2013), which won the Un Certain Regard prize at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival.

In spite of this, there was, until quite recently, relatively little academic interest in Southeast Asian cinema, either from academics working in the region or from film scholars in the West—there are some exceptions, including early pieces by scholars such as Annette Hamilton (1992; 1992a), amongst a few others. This marginal place is evident from books on World Cinema and film history. For instance, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Hill and Church-Gibson 1998) includes a section on World Cinema that has chapters on Indian, Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Japanese, African and South American cinemas, but nothing specifically on any Southeast Asian cinemas. Similarly, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (1996) includes a short section on Indonesian cinema, but no other cinemas from the region. However, in the last decade or so this has been changing, with a wealth of work emerging, including no fewer than five books, two of which focus on independent cinema, the main topic of this chapter: *Film in South East Asia: Views From the Region* (Hanan 2001), *Le Cinéma d'Asie du Sud-Est (Southeast Asian Cinema)*, Margirier and Gimenez 2012), *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention* (Lim and Yamamoto 2012), *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (Ingawanij and McKay 2012) and *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (Baumgärtel 2012). There has also been the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference (ASEACC) and an online film journal devoted to Southeast Asian cinema, *Criticine* (though this has ceased publishing new material, in large part owing to the death of its founder, Alex Tioseco, in 2009). There are many reasons for this increased interest in Southeast Asia, including developments in Film Studies, such as the turn to World Cinema, peripheral cinemas and film history, as well as broader developments in academia, such as the rise of “area studies” and postcolonial studies.

The region has also witnessed a new independent cinema, occurring most strongly in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia, though Vietnam, Laos and East Timor have all also been included in discussions, albeit to a lesser extent (Lam 2012; Norindr 2012; Bexley 2012). Emerging across the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of the earliest films were *Everything Will Flow* (Punlop Horharin, 2000) and *Dokfa nai meuman* (Mysterious Object at Noon, 2000, Thailand/Netherlands, Apichatpong Weerasethakul) from Thailand, *Lips to Lips* (2000, Malaysia, Amir Muhammad) from Malaysia, *Still Lives* (1999, Philippines, Jon Red) from the Philippines, and *Stories About Love* (2000, Singapore, Chee Kong Cheah, James Toh and Abdul Nizam) from Singapore – though even earlier than that Eric Khoo was pioneering Singaporean independent cinema with such films as *Mee Pok Man* (Singapore 1995) and *Shier Lou* (12 Storeys, Singapore, 1997). Owing to the accomplishments of independent cinema, the region's cinematic output is beginning to gain more international recognition. The Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul has had considerable success at Cannes: *Sud sanaeha* (Blissfully Yours, 2002, Thailand/France) won the Un Certain Regard prize in 2002, *Sud Pralad* (Tropical Malady, 2004, Thailand/France/Germany/Italy) (Figure 2.1) won the Prix du Jury in 2004 and *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* (Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, 2010, Thailand/UK/France/Germany/Spain/Netherlands) won the Palme d'Or in 2010. Similarly, Filipino director Brillante Mendoza won the best director prize at Cannes in 2009 for *Kinatay* (Butchered, 2009, France/Philippines). More recently, Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013, Singapore/Japan/Thailand/France) won the Camera



Figure 2.1 One of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Cannes successes: *Sud Pralad* (Tropical Malady, 2004, Thailand/France/Germany/Italy), which won the Prix du Jury in 2004. ©Downtown Pictures/ TIFA.

d'Or at Cannes in 2013. These are just some of the Southeast Asian films that have performed well at film festivals in recent years—there are many others.

This new, critically acclaimed mode of filmmaking suggests that the region's independent cinema is a film movement of sorts. Since the earliest years of cinema, many movements have emerged: German Expressionism, Soviet Montage, Poetic Realism, Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, New German Cinema, Cinema Novo, and Dogme 95, to name just some. While the whole idea of the film movement could be viewed as a highly Westernised construct, borrowing as it does from European art history, movements continue to be a dominant way of understanding the history of cinema as well as national cinemas and, indeed, World Cinema. Lúcia Nagib (2011), for instance, structures her book *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* around world cinema movements.

This chapter will give an overview of the Southeast Asian independent cinema and will address a number of core questions: In what ways is this cinema independent? What is the cinematic and social significance of these films? How have they been discussed in the literature on Southeast Asian cinema? To what extent can these films be seen as part of a pan-Southeast Asian film movement? In exploring this, I mainly draw on the canon of early independent films that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in order to offer a general introduction to the subject, though I also use some more recent examples and refer to some of the region's newer, emerging filmmakers.

A new cinema

At the centre of film movements is the idea that they represent something new, a break with previous ways of making films, usually through challenging established approaches to film production and form, but also often through their encapsulation of an emerging zeitgeist—in the way that the French New Wave formed part of the period's new youth culture, for example. As a new type of independent filmmaking that emerged suddenly and rapidly gained success,

Southeast Asian independent cinema would appear to conform to this idea. It should be noted, however, that the presence of independent cinema in the region is not entirely new. There were previous waves of independent cinema in a number of countries, such as in the Philippines where the collapse of the studio system in the 1960s and 1970s saw a huge rise in independent film productions.

We should begin, then, by exploring the specifics of this new type of cinema, which we can start to do by examining what exactly this independent cinema is independent *from* (see also Lent 2012). A key issue to consider here is how independent cinema must negotiate two main forces: the state and the existing market, or, more broadly, global capitalism.

On the one hand, in countries across Southeast Asia, the state supports the domestic industry through quotas and protectionism, ensuring that local films are screened, and that they are funded. This also means that the national film product is state controlled, to varying degrees, which naturally impacts upon the nature of the films made. As Hernandez points out, government funding often comes with “strings attached” (2012: 230). Governments also exercise control of the cinema through censorship. This has brought about some revealing censorship stories—*Babe* (1995, Australia/USA, Chris Noonan), for example, was banned for a while in Malaysia, a Muslim country, owing to its non-halal protagonist (it does not help that the word *babe* is coincidentally quite close to the Malay word for pig, *babi*). Censorship regulations have been a particular obstacle for Independent filmmakers in the region, many of whom have had their films banned or heavily censored. Singaporean director Royston Tan made *Cut* (2004, Singapore), a short satirical film about censorship in the country, as a response to the heavy censorship of his debut feature *15* (2003).

At the same time, independent cinema must negotiate the existing structures of the market, which creates a dominant, profit-driven or “mainstream” cinema. In Southeast Asia this is partly made up of Hollywood, which, like elsewhere, invariably secures a large portion of the market; other “international” cinemas, including Bollywood, which is particularly popular in Malaysia; as well as the domestic mainstream cinemas of each country. These cinemas can have something of a strangle-hold on domestic markets. The Indonesian filmmaker Nia Dinata has commented that the Group21 cinema chain has a monopoly on exhibition in Indonesia, making it difficult for alternative films to reach a large audience (Baumgärtel 2012d: 206). Both the state and the existing industrial structures, then, embody ways in which cinema is controlled and contained.

How, then, do the independent cinemas of Southeast Asia exist independently of this? This is not always clear-cut as some films and filmmakers will work partially, though not fully, within these established systems. Miriam Lam (2012) gives an example of this, explaining how Vietnamese independent films are better termed semi-independent because of how they tend to involve collaboration between transnational/diasporic groups and the Vietnamese state. In other contexts, independent filmmakers have found ways of circumventing some of these established sources of power, mainly through what Khoo Gaik Cheng refers to, in her discussion of the Malaysian independent cinema, as a “do-it-yourself” philosophy (2007). Central to this is the rise of digital filmmaking, which is seen by many (e.g. Hernandez 2012) as being one of the key catalysts for the emergence of this cinema as it enables filmmakers to work with much smaller budgets—not just because digital video is cheaper than film stock, but also because they can use smaller crews and can film more easily on location. Indeed, such technology also affords greater freedom, with some filmmakers adopting “guerrilla filmmaking” strategies, such as shooting without permits (sometimes at prohibited locations). It should be noted that while this do-it-yourself approach is potentially liberating, enabling a whole new generation of filmmakers who

may otherwise have been excluded from making films, some have also expressed concerns that such a situation has in some cases brought about a lowering of quality (Baumgärtel 2012f).

The do-it-yourself philosophy also extends to distribution and exhibition, with independent filmmakers finding alternative avenues for the screening of their work. While some manage to secure limited screening runs in mainstream multiplexes, many films are considered to have too narrow an appeal. Other screening opportunities include film clubs and private screenings, as well as national and international film festivals, and online exhibition—many Southeast Asian independent films can be viewed on sites such as YouTube or Vimeo.

These production, distribution and exhibition methods are linked to differences in the kinds of films that are made. Independent cinema in Southeast Asia is, like independent cinemas elsewhere, largely an “auteur” cinema, in which the director is central. As Baumgärtel comments:

The flexibility and autonomy that digital video afforded these filmmakers calls to mind Alexandre Astruc’s notion of the *camera-stylo* (the camera pen), where filmic images become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language and where the director is the sole author of the film.

(2012a: 7)

As a consequence, independent cinema exhibits formal and thematic variety, with these directors making films according to their own personal visions. There are significant differences, for example, between the films of Amir Muhammad, whose documentary *Lelaki komunis terakhir* (The Last Communist, 2006, Malaysia/Netherlands), about Chin Peng, the leader of the Malayan Communist Party, includes humorous musical numbers, and those of Apichatpong Weerasethekul, whose films offer slower, more abstract reflections on everyday life. The independent cinema of the region also uses a diverse range of forms, such as the short film, the documentary and the feature-length narrative film, while also drawing on a host of genres such as comedy, melodrama and the historical film.

While this variety makes it difficult to establish a clear list of features belonging to independent cinema, there are common aesthetic tendencies. For instance, there is an emphasis on realism, owing to the emphasis on cheaper shooting methods, including the use of location shooting and non-professional actors rather than established stars (though some actors have gone on to become stars, such as Coco Martin in the Philippines, where he is known as the “king of the indies”). The use of digital video enables multiple takes, creating a greater emphasis on improvisation, long-takes, spontaneity and chance, again common features of a realist aesthetic. Even directors who do not use digital video, such as Yasmin Ahmad in Malaysia or Nia Dinata in Indonesia, often work within the conventions of realism through their use of everyday spaces and stories. This emphasis on realism is a common feature of World Cinemas (Nagib 2011), which are often seeking to define themselves in opposition to the seemingly fantastical and “escapist” genres often found in Hollywood. Beyond the conventions of realism, many independent films engage in formal play and experimentation. Perhaps most famously Lav Diaz has pushed the boundaries of cinematic expression through his creation of monumentally long films. His most recent work, *Hele sa hiwagang hapis* (A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery, 2016, Philippines/Singapore), which won the Alfred Bauer Prize at the 2016 Berlin International Film Festival, is eight hours long.

Many Southeast Asian independent films are also distinct from the mainstream through their social, political and ideological outlook. Again, we must take care not to sum up the politics of these films as a whole, as the output is diverse and many independent films retain regressive

features, in terms of gender, sexuality and class politics, while others push established boundaries of representation. For instance, while many independent films in the Philippines shine light on the problem of poverty in the country, making these films distinct from some of the country's romantic comedies featuring popular "love teams", there have been accusations that some of these involve a somewhat exploitative relationship with such subject matter. Brillante Mendoza's films, for example, have been labelled by some as "poverty porn" for the way in which they take Western, middle-class film festival audiences on exhilarating and sensationalist journeys into the slums and underworld of the Philippines, such as in *Butchered*, a film about a gang murder of a prostitute (Baumgärtel 2012e).

And yet, independent films frequently broaden the range of representations offered in the countries they come from. This often involves focusing on groups of people who are neglected in the mainstream. For instance, we see working class lives in *Punggok rindukan bulan* (This Longing, 2008, Malaysia, Azharr Rudin), marginalised ethnic groups such as the Igorots in *Batad sa paang palay* (Batad, 2006, Philippines, Benji Garcia) and queer sexualities in films such as *Arisan!* (The Gathering, 2003, Indonesia, Nia Dinata). In Malaysia independent cinema has also done much to challenge the nation's ethnic politics. Whereas mainstream films have for decades focused almost exclusively on Malay stories and characters (Malays are the politically dominant ethnic group, making up around 60 per cent of the nation), independent cinema includes films focusing on other Malaysian ethnic groups such as the Indians and Chinese, as well as work that deals with interethnic stories, such as *Sepet* (Chinese Eye, 2004, Malaysia, Yasmin Ahmad) – a love story about a Malay girl and a Chinese boy. It is of note that *Sepet*, like many other independent films from the region, also features a strong female character and offers a more female-centred point of view.

Independent cinema also often deals more overtly with political issues. While the region has a range of political systems, it suffers from a number of common recurring problems, such as corruption, authoritarianism and political repression. Many independent filmmakers have seized on the opportunity to challenge this, such as Amir Muhammad who has made a number of political documentaries, including *Malaysian Gods* (2009, Malaysia), *The Last Communist* and *The Big Durian* (2003, Malaysia). In Singapore, Martyn See has risked being put in jail for making films about the difficulties faced by Singapore's opposition politicians, such as *Singapore Rebel* (2005), about Dr Chee Soon Juan, leader of the Singapore Democratic Party.

Since its emergence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, independent cinema has served as a valuable new type of filmmaking. However, while we can see many points of similarity from across the region, are these sufficient for us to characterise independent cinema as a pan-Southeast Asian film movement? In order to explore this more fully, it is necessary to examine Southeast Asian independent cinema's regional identity.

A regional cinema

Most writers on the Southeast Asian independent cinema will at some point consider the question of whether these films can be taken together as a pan-regional cinema, which also impacts upon the extent to which we can view them as part of a discrete "movement", in so far as movements must possess a certain amount of unity. Southeast Asia is a contentious and much debated term in a range of disciplines, including politics, anthropology, and Southeast Asian studies. On the one hand, there are clear ways in which these countries have a shared heritage. For instance, most of the countries were colonised by Western powers: Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore by the UK; Indonesia by the Dutch; East Timor by the Portuguese;

Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by the French; the Philippines by the Spanish and then the USA. The only country that was not colonised was Thailand, though even it became heavily Westernised during the colonial period. Nowadays the region is brought together in some respects through the existence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the regional political organisation that brings about cooperation between its eleven member states, while also forging cultural links through events such as the ASEAN Football Championship.

At the same time, as Adam Knee (2011: 357) discusses, some question the validity of the term Southeast Asia, arguing that it is “loaded with ideological baggage and is removed from the actual people and experiences (and in some case scholars) of the countries in question, the product of Western thinking and Cold War priorities, which it still residually supports”. In addition, for some people Southeast Asia is an arbitrary marker that fails to carve out a coherent and discrete territory encompassing a shared identity for the people who live there. This stems from the fact that Southeast Asia is a richly diverse region, containing a wealth of religions (including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity), ethnic groups (too many to mention, though in addition to “indigenous” groups there are strong Indian and Chinese populations), cultural influences from the former colonisers, the Arabic World, India and China, and many languages (most countries in the region have several widely spoken languages). There are also huge economic differences between the countries, with Singapore at one extreme, as a fully developed nation, and countries such as the Philippines at the other, where large portions of the population live in poverty.

With these issues in mind, to what extent can we speak of an independent pan-Southeast Asian cinema? On the level of production some initiatives have been set up to foster connections between filmmakers from across the region, such as the S-Express Short Film Festival, which brought together Yuni Hadi (from Singapore), Amir Muhammad (Malaysia) and Chalida Uabumrungjit (Thailand), representing, as Knee discusses, “a particularly exemplary instance of a festival self-consciously working to foster a regional filmmaking community” (2011: 361). More recently, the Malaysian director Tan Chui Mui has set up the New Next Wave filmmaking workshops, which involve film personnel from across Southeast Asia mentoring young Malaysian filmmakers. At the same time, such linkages are sparse and sporadic. Pen-ek Ratanaruang has stated that while he has met and is familiar with the work of Amir Muhammad, along with some other filmmakers from the region, he does not often watch their films (Baumgärtel 2012b: 200). In a similar vein, the Singaporean director Eric Khoo has rather bluntly said “In terms of Malaysian films, I am not too keen on them. I like the recent horror films. The Philippine films—I have not watched that many recent ones” (Baumgärtel 2012c: 226). Moreover, while we can see some similarities in many (though far from all) of the region’s independent cinemas in terms of production methods and a realist sensibility, aimed at presenting an “authentic” picture of the world, there is little reflection on a specifically Southeast Asian identity within this work, aside from perhaps in narratives that explore Southeast Asia’s tropical spaces, particularly its jungles (Knee 2011: 358), or “border films” such as *This Longing*, which is set in Johor Bahru at the border of Malaysia and Singapore and deals with the relationship between these two countries, though this is a special case as Malaysia and Singapore have historically been close and were even part of the same country between 1963 and 1965.

Instead, many of the region’s independent films turn their lens towards an examination of the nations they come from. Indeed, while the two books on Southeast Asian independent cinema to some extent offer a regional overview, most of the chapters focus on specific nations—exceptions include Hernandez’s piece on the origins of Southeast Asian independent cinema (2012). This is also replicated on the level of production. While filmmakers in the Philippines

and Indonesia produced “manifestos” for their independent cinemas, there is not a broader manifesto for the region as a whole (unsurprisingly). This is symptomatic of a larger level of collaboration on the national level: in Thailand there is Thaiindie, a group of Thai independent filmmakers; in the Philippines there is IFC (Philippine Independent Filmmakers’ Multi-Purpose Cooperative); Malaysia has a couple of independent film companies, Doghouse73 Pictures and Da Huang Pictures. Indeed, the collaboration between filmmakers on a national level is often overt. Ratanaruang comments on how Thai filmmakers often help each other out (Baumgärtel 2012b: 200) and this is something we can also see in individual films. *Todo Todo Teros* (2006, Philippines, John Torres) includes cameos by a host of individuals associated with Filipino independent cinema, such as the critic Alex Tioseco and the filmmakers Khavn de la Cruz, Regiben Romana and Lav Diaz.

In addition, these films often deal with nationally specific issues, using realism in order to provide “truer” visions of the nation and challenge the exclusions and omissions of the mainstream. For instance, independent cinema in Malaysia has provided a more realistic vision of the country’s linguistic identity. Reflecting its multiculturalism, Malaysia is a multilingual nation in which people may speak Malay, English, “Manglish” (English combined with words, and sometimes grammar, taken from other Malaysian languages, especially Malay), various Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka), Tamil, and indigenous languages, among others. However, until recently, the government defined Malaysian cinema as films that are in at least 90 per cent Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. With the advent of independent cinema, there has been a fuller exploration of the nation’s linguistic reality, with films featuring a range of languages, as well as—importantly—a mixture of languages, in keeping with the nation’s *rojak* (Malay for mixed) culture. As we have seen, the region’s independent cinemas often share a concern for representing a broader range of people and places, and for interrogating social and political issues. While this unites these cinemas, it also potentially divides them, in so far as each nation explores its own nationally specific issues. Indeed, these films will often only truly make sense to an audience that is familiar with the intricacies of the country they come from. For example, in order to fully understand Malaysian films such as *Chemman chaalai mal* (The Gravel Road, 2005, Malaysia, Deepak Kumaran Menon) and *Jagat* (2015, Malaysia, Shanjhey Kumar Perumal), which deal with problems facing the Malaysian–Indian community, one would benefit from an understanding of how the films draw on—and challenge—local stereotypes about Malaysian–Indians. To take things to an even more local level, Benedict Anderson has argued that while “Cannes juror Quentin Tarantino can admire *Sat Pralaat*’s ambiguities and highly sophisticated narrative technique”, the film is in many respects addressing a rural audience of *chao baan* (villagers) familiar with the characters and atmospheres of the countryside environments he depicts (2012: 159).

It is true that the Southeast Asian independent cinema also reaches beyond the nation, but this is often done by also reaching beyond Southeast Asia. First, funding for these films will sometimes come from international bodies, such as the Hubert Bals Fund as part of the Rotterdam Film Festival and the Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowship of the Nippon Foundation, which have funded the work of a number of independent filmmakers, such as Amir Muhammad, Lav Diaz and Anocha Suwichakornpong, among others (Hernandez 2012: 231). Collaborations and subject matter may also go beyond the nation, too. For instance, Ratanaruang has made films with Japanese elements, such as *Ruang rak noi nid mahasan* (Last Life in the Universe, 2003, Thailand/Japan/Netherlands), for which Christopher Doyle was his cinematographer. As Khoo has argued, some scholars are too eager to pigeonhole the Malaysian independent filmmakers as being solely concerned with representing their nation (and in particular its ethnic politics). She argues that James Lee’s films are “less interested in capturing the racial alienation of the Chinese

minority in Malaysia” and are more concerned with “universal themes confronting the modern subject living in an urban, global, capitalist society” (2012: 122). Moreover, Southeast Asian independent films also find a large part of their audience overseas at international film festivals, evident from the major festival successes listed above.

Conclusion

The problems involved in discerning a set of clear, pan-regional qualities within Southeast Asian independent cinema makes it difficult for us to view it as a fully homogenous film movement. These films are in many respects part of a global trend in digital independent filmmaking, which connects them with the Danish film movement Dogme 95, for example, as much as it does with each other. Of course, the film movements of World Cinema have rarely been entirely homogenous. As Lúcia Nagib has commented, when we use World Cinema as a method it becomes a way of “cutting across film history according to waves of relevant films and movements, thus creating flexible geographies” (2006: 31). Southeast Asian independent cinema as a film movement marks out one such flexible geography. Although far from being homogenous, films from across the region share production, distribution and exhibition methods, formal features, and thematic and ideological concerns.

Moreover, Southeast Asian independent cinema has had a significant impact on the development of indigenous film cultures. It has created new approaches to filmmaking and storytelling that have challenged the dominance of Hollywood as well as the respective nations’ mainstream cinemas. In a number of respects, independent cinema has also been a source of influence for the mainstream cinemas. In the Philippines, for example, the studio ABS-CBN has created a company called Cinema One that now produces independent films so as to capture this market, and in Malaysia there is evidence of an opening up of representations. For decades the nation’s mainstream “national” cinema consisted of mono-ethnic Malay movies—one of the reasons why Khoo (2006) has termed it a “cinema of denial”, for denying the nation’s multiculturalism. However, there is evidence that this is changing—2016 saw the release of *Ola Bola* (2016, Malaysia, Chiu Keng Guan), a multi-ethnic film about the Malaysian national football team’s campaign to qualify for the 1980 Olympics, which has already become the nation’s highest grossing film of all time. Moreover, one of the main contributions that independent cinema has made is that it has explored issues often ignored or avoided in the mainstream, including under-represented people and groups, as well as taking on major political issues in what are in many respects still quite repressive societies.

Although academic work on the cinemas of the region was being produced before the emergence of the independent films, there has been a recent increase in such scholarly activity. Independent cinema was one of the catalysts for the creation of ASEACC, as is acknowledged in the call for papers for the Fifth Conference, held in Manila in 2008, which focused specifically on the region’s independent filmmaking:

The first decade of the 2000s has seen a stunning upsurge of independent cinema in a number of Southeast Asian countries. This development has been one of the motivations of the Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference (ASEACC), and this year we want to focus completely on the issue of identity.

Not only has this resulted in independent cinema receiving more attention, as is evident from the wealth of books and papers that have been published on this subject in recent years; it has also meant that other aspects of the region’s cinema have been brought to the fore.

Among many other topics, the region's popular film history is also starting to receive more attention, evident, for example, from a recently published special issue of *Plaridel*, the journal of the University of the Philippines' School of Mass Communication, which focuses on Southeast Asian horror cinema (Ancuta and Campos 2015). One of the independent cinema's many important contributions and accomplishments, then, is that it has played a role in pushing the development of Southeast Asian cinema studies, a discipline that in turn promises to cast even more light on the region's rich cinema history and culture.

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