

Philippa Lovatt and Jasmine Nadua Trice

# Theorizing Region: Film and Video Cultures in Southeast Asia

A construct that works both above and below the nation, *region* is often an implied rather than explicit critical framework in cinema and media studies. This In Focus dossier mobilizes post-millennial Southeast Asian film and video cultures to conceptualize the place of region in the field. Across five essays, contributors theorize region as both a supranational space of collectivity and a subnational sphere of minoritarian and indigenous film practices.<sup>1</sup> What kinds of networks can regional thinking engender? What histories does it unearth, and which might it obscure? How have states, industries, and institutions enabled or obstructed these exchanges? In what ways might parallel themes, aesthetics, and modes of production and circulation constitute a regional cinema? With these questions as a starting point, the essays cover a wide range of topics and approaches: filmmaking within contexts of authoritarianism, trans-regionalist aesthetics, industry studies, and ecocinema studies.<sup>2</sup>

It has now been two decades since the 1997 IMF Financial Crisis swept through Southeast Asia, spreading economic upheaval. Diverse film and

1 For issues around capitalization and indigeneity in a Southeast Asian context, see Juno Salazar Parrenas, "From Decolonial Indigenous Knowledges to Vernacular Ideas in Southeast Asia," *History and Theory* 59, no. 3 (2020): 413-420.

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video scenes emerged in its wake. The proliferation of low-cost digital video for production and dissemination, the expansion of local and international film festival circuits, and the normalization of video piracy gave rise to alternative production cultures in metros and provincial capitals, against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism and censorship. Across the region, new film cultures took shape. Over the past two decades, a wave of film scholarship and criticism approached these cinemas from regional perspectives. In English-language academic writing, three anthologies and two special journal issues have traced its formation.<sup>3</sup> Two more anthologies are forthcoming.<sup>4</sup> The research on Southeast Asian cinema overlaps with much of the work in East and South Asian cinema and media studies, but because its focus is so often based on independent film industries and semi-formalized art scenes, it also fits with scholarship that addresses the spatialities of filmmaking contexts that are in various ways “smaller-scale,” though not necessarily non-dominant within their domestic settings, such as cinemas of small nations, cinema at the periphery, and screen media in the “penumbra of the global.”<sup>5</sup> The following essays reflect English-language cinema and media scholars’ moves toward decentered cartographies of cultural production.

Scholarship on Southeast Asian film and video has also traced the shared and interrelated histories of colonialism and the Cold War, particularly through close textual attention to the influential work of global auteurs such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lav Diaz, Rithy Panh, and Garin Nugroho.<sup>6</sup> These filmmakers have often been seen as narrators of counter-histories, sometimes using indirect means to tell stories of their nations’ violent pasts. Film scholars including May Adadol Ingawanij, Arnika Fuhrmann, and Bliss Cua Lim have considered some of these regional histories through cinema’s

- 3 Tilman Baumgärtel, ed., *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Essays, Documents, Interviews* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012); May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay, eds., *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2012); David C. L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto, eds., *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention* (London: Routledge, 2012); Rachel Harrison, “Introduction: Cinema as an Emerging Field in South East Asian Studies,” *South East Asia Research* 14, no. 2 (2006): 133–146; and Khoo Gaik Cheng, ed., *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 179–326.
- 4 Khoo Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie, eds., *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020); and Jonathan Driskell, ed., *Film Stardom in Southeast Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).
- 5 Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, eds., *The Cinema of Small Nations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, and Belén Vidal, eds., *Cinema at the Periphery* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010); and Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar, eds., *Asian Video Cultures: In the Penumbra of the Global* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 6 See Gridthiya Gaweewong, “Making Do: The Making of the Art and Digital Media in Southeast Asia,” in *Art in the Asia-Pacific: Intimate Publics*, ed. Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King, and Mami Kataoka (New York: Routledge, 2014), 59–71; Deirdre Boyle, “Trauma, Memory, Documentary: Re-enactment in Two Films by Rithy Panh (Cambodia) and Garin Nugroho (Indonesia),” in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker (New York: Routledge, 2009), 155–172; Nadin Mai, “Trauma’s Slow Onslaught: Sound and Silence in Lav Diaz’s *Florentina Hubaldo*, CTE,” in *Scars and Wounds: Film and Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Nick Hodgkin and Amit Thakkar (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 195–216; and Leshu Torchin, “Mediation and Remediation: *La parole filmée* in Rithy Panh’s *The Missing Picture* (*L’image manquante*),” *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2014): 32–41.

narrative and aesthetic entanglements with locally grounded cosmologies and belief systems such as Animism, Buddhism, and spectrality.<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by this work, the essays collected here seek to broaden this frame of reference through the inclusion of less well-known filmmakers and by considering aspects of the region's recent human and ecological histories that have received less critical attention. To do this, we engage with ideas from a range of perspectives, aiming to collectively generate new ways to conceive of a regional cinema that acknowledge and move beyond national histories of trauma and state violence.

The essays share a resistance to territorial conceptualizations of region and take spatiality as their primary mode of inquiry. This allows them to ask how the specific topology and hydrography of Southeast Asia open up other possible ways of imagining and theorizing a regional cinema. Analyzing film cultures in Mindanao and Yogyakarta, both Patrick F. Campos and Dag Yngvesson explore the limits of national frameworks. Campos examines how filmmakers from the militarized, southern area of Mindanao question official, Philippine histories. Meanwhile, Yngvesson's essay tracks the long history of regional representation in Indonesian filmmaking, examining how current Javanese film practice mediates national, global, and Southeast Asian dynamics in a predominantly Islamic, Indonesian-speaking country. Both Campos and Yngvesson construct their respective cinemas through movement and flow between sub- and supranational networks rather than as fixed entities bounded by national borders. Similarly, Philippa Lovatt's essay conceives of region as movement, proposing that sound studies approaches are particularly suited to illuminating this dynamic framework. Listening out for "transcolonial" resonances across the region in films by Shireen Seno and Nguyễn Trinh Thi, her essay asserts that the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination allow for a consideration of Southeast Asia as a spatial imaginary shaped affectively through processes of contact, heterogeneity, and lateral exchange that operate at sub- and supranational levels.

Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn's essay takes up another alternative form of "mapping," in the Zomia, a highland area of deep forest that covers the peripheral borders of eight different nation-states in Asia.<sup>8</sup> Graiwoot invites film scholars to consider this spatial construct from the perspective of the forest itself. Highlighting its significance for both ecological and political histories of the region, he considers how the cinematic forest in Southeast Asian films provides an alternative cartography that decenters national as well as anthropocentric perspectives. Similar ideas of regional invention come into

7 Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); May Adadol Ingwanij, "Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," in *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, ed. Anat Pick and Guinevere Naraway (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 91–109; and Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Wikanda Promkhuntong's recent digital scholarly project tracks fan pilgrimages around Southeast Asia; see "Creative Spaces, Affective Responses and Visual Methods: New Approaches to Film Fan Tourism," accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.filmfantourism.org/map>.

8 See Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 647–668.

play in Jasmine Nadua Trice's essay, which discusses recent industrial initiatives to support Southeast Asian production cultures. The essay looks at Purin Pictures, a recent Bangkok-based funding initiative targeting Southeast Asian filmmakers to compensate for the region's lack of state funding, as well as regional streaming services' moves toward original content. Combining industry studies perspectives with performance studies theory, Trice argues that filmmakers' tactical deployment of regional identities becomes a contingent, reterritorializing performance that emerges amid a confluence of specific cultural and economic circumstances.

This dossier itself is an archipelago of a sort, its pieces emerging from diverse disciplinary and methodological approaches, loosely cohered through a dynamic spatial imaginary. Its authors are based in Manila, Philippines; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Bangkok, Thailand; on the Pacific Rim of the United States; and on Scotland's North Sea coast. We share not solid, critical lineages but rather an openness to the undulations of contingency and flow. Our dynamic, critical exchange was enabled through forms of film organizing that broached the borders between theory and practice. In 2004, Gaik Cheng Khoo co-founded the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas (ASEAC), a collective of academics, filmmakers, programmers, critics, archivists, and students based in the region.<sup>9</sup> The first ASEAC meeting was held at the National University of Singapore, and meetings migrated to various Southeast Asian capitals before moving to "regional" centers like Yogyakarta and Cebu City. Every two years, the ASEAC conference becomes a space where ideas of region take shape through both formal and informal practices: formal panel presentations as well as informal conversations and excursions to sites in the city. These informal spaces lay the foundations for the personal relationships that help sustain this kind of shared, collective labor, creating a structure that is grounded in both intellectual and affective commitments. The essays collected in this dossier are thus informed by what curator Zoe Butt has described in a different, but parallel, Southeast Asian context as "the spirit of friendship," sustained and nurtured by ASEAC, stretching back over the last sixteen years.<sup>10</sup>

In light of ASEAC's itinerant nature, it is significant that Campos's essay begins at a screening at Cinema Rehiyon, a roving film festival held annually in different provinces beyond the capital city of Manila and that he co-organized between 2013 and 2020. Several of the essays in this dossier are also informed by collaborations with film festivals including the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, Hanoi DocFest, Glasgow Short Film Festival, Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, and the Asian Film Archive in Singapore.<sup>11</sup> While some of the audiovisual works discussed in this dossier may be unfam-

9 Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://aseacofficial.wordpress.com/>.

10 Zoe Butt, "Practicing Friendship: Respecting Time as a Curator," *Asia Art Archive*, November 22, 2015, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/practicing-friendship-respecting-time-as-a-curator>.

11 See "SEACRN satellite events," accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.seacrn.org/>; Hanoi DocFest 2017, <http://www.hanoidoclab.org/en/hanoi-docfest-2017/>; Glasgow Short Film Festival 2018, <https://www.cca-glasgow.com/programme/glasgow-short-film-festival-2018/>; and "Screening the Forest," accessed June 30, 2020, <https://www.asianfilmarchive.org/event-calendar/screening-the-forest/>.

miliar to some *JCMS* readers, at the core of our method has been an interest in screening these (and other works) to a wide audience to generate dialogue across critical and creative practice that extends beyond the academy.

As editors and organizers of this dossier, we see our role as facilitators—participating, momentarily, in a much larger, ongoing process of regional invention. We do not claim to speak from a position of authority on Southeast Asia as a region or indeed on its many diverse fields of cultural production. Rather, we see the writing collected here as an extension of the collective work undertaken by ASEAC. We propose that this kind of collective film organizing and its reflexive narration constitute a feminist research methodology. Feminist research practice is grounded in reflexivity, upending the universality of voice and point of view, in order to pull back the curtain on knowledge production as a process. Thus, the essays in this dossier are a product of a collective enterprise, one that was founded before our participation began and one that will endure, regardless of whether our particular participation continues.

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