

# The Cinematic Forest and Southeast Asian Cinema

As a cinephile and a film scholar, when I think of Southeast Asian Cinema, I think of the forest. I think of a mysterious jungle where humans encounter animistic animals, spirits, and forces in the cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul; a vast forested landscape, shot in black-and-white long takes in the films of Lav Diaz; a deep, dense, precolonial jungle in the work of Filipino auteur Raya Martin; a haunted rainforest on the Malaysian-Singaporean border in a film installation by Boo Junfeng; the woods, as a transitional space between realistic and speculative worlds in the work of Pimpaka Towira.<sup>1</sup> In this contemporary art cinema, the forest is not simply a mere background for human stories. Instead, through specific aesthetic choices, the forest in these films becomes a powerful and complex cinematic assemblage. As a recurring presence, or representative space, within Southeast Asian cinema, the forest has received far less scholarly attention than studies of film form, auteurism, political histories, and transnational reception. While discussions of regional cinemas often draw from these kinds of national cinema frameworks, what these studies can miss is an attention to the specific, material, and topological nature of the region. In what follows, I propose an alternative cartography or framework shaped by the cinematic forests of Southeast Asia.

1 Examples of Southeast Asian films set in the forest include *Sud sanaeha* (*Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2002), *Melancholia* (Lav Diaz, 2008), *Autohystoria* (Raya Martin, 2007), *Independencia* (Raya Martin, 2009), *Nang mai* (*Nymph*, Pen-Ek Ratanarung, 2009), *Captive* (Brillante Mendoza, 2012), *Mirror* (Boo Junfeng, 2013), *Lelaki harapan dunia* (*Men Who Save the World*, Liew Seng Tat, 2014), *Matangtubig* (*Town in a Lake*, Jet Leyco, 2015), *Baboy halas* (*Wailing in the Forest*, Bagane Fiola, 2016), *Birdshot* (Mikhail Red, 2016), *The Purple Kingdom* (Pimpaka Towira, 2016), *Malila: The Farewell Flower* (Anucha Boonyawatana, 2017), *Balangia: Howling Wilderness* (Khavn De La Cruz, 2017), and *Kraben rahu* (*Manta Ray*, Phuttiphong Aroonpheng, 2018).

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“It was the most beautiful tropical landscape unfolding before my eyes with a rich variety of fine undergrowth palms of different sizes, some as thin as sticks,” wrote an Austrian painter, Eugen von Ransonnet, the first time he saw Singapore in 1876.<sup>2</sup> This description evokes a striking image of the rich ecosystem of the forest, which covered the majority of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. The present state of the forest, however, offers a stark contrast. In 2019, the journal *Nature Communications* indicated that while Southeast Asian forests “are home to nearly 15% of the world’s tropical forest” and are habitats for “nearly two-thirds of the world’s floral and faunal diversity,” they are also a “hotspot” for deforestation.<sup>3</sup> By 2100, without protection, more than 40 percent of the region’s biodiversity will be disappeared completely.<sup>4</sup>

Between the colonial era and the current ecological crisis, histories of the region’s forests consist of multilayered and entangled narratives of conflict and exploitation. During the colonial period, the forests of Southeast Asia were perceived by the Imperial imagination as a bountiful resource, resulting in conflict between the colonizers and the nationalists. The Cold War era saw widespread exploitation and commercialization under the dictatorial regimes of many Southeast Asian countries.<sup>5</sup> The forest continues to be embedded within national discourses and is managed as a part of national projects.<sup>6</sup> It can also be viewed as a site for national religious practices.<sup>7</sup> Beyond processes of modernization and nation-building, however, the forest is also a space where premodern cosmologies and beliefs still exist and is thus a place that carries “different notions of boundaries to those formalized in the colonial period.”<sup>8</sup>

One important theoretical framework we can draw from to understand the forest in Southeast Asian film is the Zomia. First coined by historian Willem van Schendel to describe a vast area of forested land that stretches across parts of South, Southeast, and East Asia, the designation Zomia was popularized by James C. Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009), where he uses it to map a geographical area that resists state borders.<sup>9</sup> The Zomia, as imagined by Scott, emphasizes narratives

2 Eugen von Ransonnet (1876), cited in Wong Hong Suen and Roxana Waterson, *Singapore through 19th Century Prints and Paintings* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2010), 141.

3 Ronald C. Estoque et al., “The Future of Southeast Asia’s Forests,” *Nature Communications* 10 (2019): 1829.

4 Estoque et al.

5 For the case of the Philippines, see Greg Bankoff, “‘Deep Forestry’: Shapers of the Philippines Forests,” *Environmental History* 18, no. 3 (2013): 523–556.

6 Timothy P. Barnard, ed., *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2014).

7 Martin Seeger, “Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism: Continuity and Change,” in *Environmental and Climate Change in South and Southeast Asia: How Are Local Cultures Coping?*, ed. Barbara Schuler (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 43–74.

8 Penny Edwards, “Between a Song and a *Prei*: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest,” in *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, ed. Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2008), 137–162.

9 See Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance:

of the forests that are excluded from national histories of the region. In what follows, I will show how Southeast Asian cinema responds to these historically and ecologically entwined narratives through its depiction of the forest in the Zomia region. However, instead of adopting already-established regional theoretical frameworks to understand the Southeast Asian cinematic forest, I propose that we need to think in reverse by *starting* with the forest and letting it guide us to imagine the possibilities of what “Southeast Asian cinema” might mean.

What is a cinematic forest? As an ecocinema scholar, I propose that instead of defining the forest in cinema as a background or a cinematic landscape, we should perceive it as a network, a web of relations between humans, nonhumans, and other forces. The forest is not a thing or a character but an assemblage of lives and non-lives, of humans, animals, plants, minerals, and filmic devices. It is also a relationship between the fictional and nonfictional, the cultural and the material, the mythic past embedded in the site and the narratives produced by the filmmaker. To think of the cinematic forest as a web of relationships—and to understand that it is these relationships that actively shape the cinematic forest—allows us to shift away from anthropocentric versions of history. Film studies, and Southeast Asian film studies in particular, has always had an anthropocentric bias, in which human histories are prioritized and nonhuman histories are relegated to the background. Yet, while film studies scholarship has embraced an ecological turn in the last few decades thanks to the established subfields of ecocinema, critical animal studies, more-than-human ethnographies, and the recent Anthropocene studies, the ecological turn in Southeast Asian film scholarship is only just beginning.<sup>10</sup>

What if we consider the idea of a regional cinema from nonhuman and ecological perspectives? The cinematic jungles in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul are good case studies, not only because his works are well known but also because there are many forests in his catalogue. Each one is different from another, which allows us to see many versions of the relationships that arise from them. *Sud pralad* (*Tropical Malady*, 2004), for example, depicts the jungle where the transmigration of humans-animals-ghosts-souls operates and references the premodern cosmologies of the region. Meanwhile, the green forest of *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* (*Uncle Boonmee Who Can*

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Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 647–668; and James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

10 Although East Asian ecocinema scholarship was established in 2009 with Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayan Mi’s groundbreaking edited collection *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), the ecological turn in Southeast Asian film studies is just taking shape. For example, see Philippa Lovatt, “(Im)material Histories and Aesthetics of Extractivism in Vietnamese Artists’ Moving Image,” *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 4, no. 1 (2020): 221–236; Jason Paolo Telles, “Through Indigenous Lenses: Ecotopia According to Vernacular Music Videos from Benguet, Philippines,” *Utopian Studies* 30, no. 1 (2019): 45–66; and John Charles Ryan, ed., *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

*Recall His Past Lives*, 2010) is haunted by its political indexicality; it is a historically resonant site that was once a battlefield between the Thai state and anti-government students.<sup>11</sup> These stories play out against a soundscape of bird-song and insect and animal calls from species threatened by deforestation.<sup>12</sup>

The entangled nature of the ecological and political histories of the region that these films show invites us to think of the notion of trauma from an ecological perspective. Collective trauma from political histories is a familiar theme in Southeast Asian scholarship, but I strongly believe that it is time to think of trauma beyond the human perspective. In what ways do plants, animals, and lands witness and record histories? In what ways are human histories entwined with nonhuman ones? The cinematic forest could be the space where these questions are investigated. Trương Minh Quý's short film *Vườn Bầu Xanh Trôi* (*How Green the Calabash Garden Was*, 2017) juxtaposes three versions of nonhuman histories. The first is a forested land ravaged by the Khmer Rouge war. The second is a calabash farm where a surviving war veteran grows food. The third is a volcanic area not far from these two places. The juxtaposition of these three sites suggests how the land records the stories of the earth, presenting the narrative according to a planetary time scale.<sup>13</sup>

As the major environment of the Zomia, the forest is home to stories beyond the familiar national and regional narratives of Southeast Asia. Zomia thus allows for the creation of new connections between cultures, highlighting indigenous, stateless, and pre- and post-national stories as well as the stories of their resistance. However, just as I assert that trauma should be considered from an ecological perspective, I propose that we should also consider the narratives of both the human and the nonhuman inhabitants in the Zomia, as they face a double threat of both political oppression and ecological crisis.

In Trương's second feature film, *Nhà Cây* (*The Tree House*, 2019), the director plays with layers of aesthetic registers. The film is partly a documentary about the Zomia people. Working on 16 mm, Trương films two protagonists who are from the Cor and the Ruc ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The film meditates on the notion of home, as the two characters were born in the forest and in the cave, respectively. Trương brings them to their first homes and asks them to tell the stories of how they were forced out during the Cold War. The film records their soon-to-be-lost languages and considers the significance of memory for members of these displaced highland communities. The two central protagonists recall their homes vividly, through their

11 May Adadol Ingwanij, "Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," in *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, ed. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 91–109.

12 For further discussion of the acoustic ecologies of Apichatpong's forests, see Philippa Lovatt, "Every Drop of My Blood Sings Our Song. There Can You Hear It?": Haptic Sound and Embodied Memory in the Films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," *The New Soundtrack* 3, no. 1 (2013): 72.

13 See my interview with Trương Minh Quý: "Trương Minh Quý: A Vietnamese on Mars," in "Uncontainable Natures: Southeast Asian Ecologies and Visual Culture," ed. Kevin Chua, Nora Annesley Taylor, and Lucy Davis, special issue, *Antennae: Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* (forthcoming), Issue 54 (Summer) 2021.

verbal languages and tales that they pass on from one generation to another. This oral mode of remembrance is very different from the one operative in contemporary society, Truong argues, since our modes of remembering rely so much on images. Truong interjects a parallel speculative narrative about a Vietnamese man on Mars, a narrative he revisits from his earlier shorts and feature film, each time exploring a different facet of the same narrative. The speculative scenario is ecologically apocalyptic: in the near future, Vietnam is submerged under water. Many Vietnamese move up to live on a higher land (thus, they become the new people of the Zomia), yet only some Vietnamese are selected to live on Mars. Whereas the first layer of *Nhà Cây* is about the past and the ways in which the memories of Zomia people connect with jungles and caves, the second layer brings other ecological facets to the Zomia story, foreshadowing the environmental nightmare the Zomia people, like so many across Southeast Asia, will soon face due to rising sea levels.

While Zomia is an intriguing concept as it cuts across national lines and allows us to perceive regional cinema from a new perspective, it is just one example among other attempts at remapping the region. There are other possibilities, for example, practiced by artists in the region who are similarly participating in this process of regional invention. For example, the Jogja Biennale, a showcase of contemporary art practice in Indonesia, intervenes in the concept of Southeast Asia as a regional art scene by deploying the idea of the tropics as an organizing category. Instead of organizing their biennial by inviting artists from eleven sovereign states in Southeast Asia, in every edition, the organizers of the Jogja Biennale choose to work with particular art scenes from countries located in the geographical areas of earth between the latitudes 23.27° N and 23.27° S. This concept allows the Jogja Biennale to bring about conversations between artists from India, Nigeria, and the Arab region.

The question for me is, Can we adopt the cinematic forest as a mode of mapping and imagining a new regional cinema beyond Southeast Asia? In films about forests, though they come from different parts of the world, these works share aesthetic parallels and thematic similarities that can link them together. I have attempted to do this in my curatorial work for a project titled “Screening the Forest,” in which I showed films alongside one another that are set in the forest and that share a particular sensorial quality and “slow cinema” aesthetic, including works from Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Western Asia.<sup>14</sup> I propose that these modes of alternative cinematic and ecological cartographies have the potential to liberate regional cinema from the strict national-oriented mapping that has thus far dominated film studies. Apichatpong’s next film, *Memoria* (2021), is set in Colombia. It is the first of his feature films to be made outside of Thailand, but it continues the explorations of forests and the natural environment that we see in his earlier

14 “Screening the Forest” was exhibited at the National Museum of Singapore and the Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival in 2018. For further discussion of the relationship between slow cinema and the environment, see May Adadol Ingawanij, “Long Walk to Life: The Films of Lav Diaz,” *Afterall* 40 (Autumn/Winter 2015): 105–115; and Tiago de Luca, “Natural Views: Animals, Contingency and Death in Carlos Reygadas’s *Japón* and Lisandro Alonso’s *Los muertos*,” in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 219–230.

Thailand-set films and as such provides us with an interesting case to test this theory. What region should the film belong to: Southeast Asia, South America, or the forest?

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