

Jasmine Nadua Trice

Performing Region in Southeast Asian Film Industries

What does it mean to invent a regional cinema? Film and media scholars have long troubled the conventional cartographies used to map cinemas by nation-states, turning to models based on global flows and deterritorialization or local sites of production and reception.¹ How does region become a spatial logic for film production, distribution, and reception? Inspired by work in critical border studies, I would like to propose a shift from the concept of region as a fixed, geographic area to the idea of region as a historically contingent practice, a reterritorializing performance that emerges amid a confluence of specific cultural and economic circumstances. Such conditions lead to organizing practices and institutional networks that work above and below the nation-state, that seek new scales for collaboration and exchange. I find performance theory especially valuable for considering regional film organizing because it emphasizes the projected, fictional dimensions of cultural forms. As Diana Taylor argues, “Performance moves between the AS IF and the IS, between pretend and new constructions of the ‘real’”; it “can be understood as *process*—as enactment, exertion, interven-

1 Mariam B. Lam, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, Lan Duong, and Kathy L. Nguyen, introduction to *Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 3–20. See also Arjun Appadurai’s work on “process” geographies as alternatives to “traits” geographies: Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–21.

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tion, and expenditure.”² Scholars in production studies have made use of performance theory to describe the complex dynamics of industrial practices.³ What if we also use performance to understand region as a verb, to see regioning practices as processes of film-industrial world-making? How might this disrupt the fixity of spatial categories and help us to understand the material conditions in which such performances become necessary, even desired, within particular industrial and institutional filmmaking contexts?

Region is always, to some extent, fictional. In the case of Southeast Asia, debates around regional borders often turn to proto- or anti-statist spatial formations. For example, much scholarship discusses the lowland political structure of the mandala, which had no fixed territorial boundaries, its influence fading with distance from a central core.⁴ In another alternative mapping, James Scott offers an anarchist history of the highlands region known as the Zomia, stretching from Vietnam to India, that focuses on a diverse range of indigenous communities that choose to remain stateless.⁵ The area that would later become Southeast Asia has also been seen by its larger neighbors as *Suwarnadwipa* or Goldland (from the perspective of India) and *Nanyang* or South Seas (in China). Region, here, is porous and dispersed, less a territory than a concept. Such relational cartography grafts onto more contemporary maps of global film production that privilege larger, globalized industries.⁶

What is interesting about Southeast Asian cinema is the way that film organizations and practitioners have taken on *region* as an externally imposed, scalar category, a relic of the so-called Cold War, and reshaped it into a desired fiction. This in itself is not unusual, necessarily. Regional co-productions have been a means of consolidating technological and financial resources, often for big-budget, blockbuster movies.⁷ But in Southeast Asia, the notion of a regional, filmmaking identity is not rooted in state or commercial imperatives. Rather, film practitioners draw regional boundaries through affective affinities and performative identities, staged for international and regional networks. Loosely cohered filmmaking scenes and entangled networks of film festivals, arts funders, and state cultural bodies become staging grounds for tactical performances of what a regional cinema might look like. In their most utopic iterations, such regioning practices

2 Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 6, 8.

3 John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 393. Also, Intan Paramaditha draws from Taylor's idea of "scenario" in "The Wild Child's Desire: Cinema, Sexual Politics, and the Experimental Nation." PhD diss. New York University, 2011.

4 Deborah E. Tooker, "Putting the Mandala in Its Place: A Practice-Based Approach to the Spatialization of Power on the Southeast Asian 'Periphery'—the Case of the Akha," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 2 (1996): 323–358.

5 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

6 Andrew McGregor, Lisa Law, and Fiona Miller, "Approaching Southeast Asian Development," in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Development*, ed. Andrew McGregor, Lisa Law, and Fiona Miller (London: Routledge, 2018), 5; and Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).

7 See Stephanie DeBoer, *Coproducing Asia: Locating Japanese-Chinese Regional Film and Media*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

promise cosmopolitanism without globalism, locality without parochialism; they recenter those areas often pushed to the peripheries of global film culture. Regioning practices are often complex, reflexive, and provisional, as the following accounts suggest.

Founded in 2017, Purin Pictures is a private fund dedicated to supporting “independent cinema in Southeast Asia.”⁸ It began as a project of the Thailand-based Purin Foundation, led by filmmaker Visra Vichit-Vadakan.⁹ While the foundation initially focused on social development projects, its emphasis eventually shifted toward filmmaking. Four Thai filmmakers now manage the fund, which supports grants for production and postproduction. They aim to highlight “underrepresented voices in SEA cinema,” offering at least one grant each session to first- or second-time women filmmakers. The organization explicitly sees its mission as compensating for state failings: “[W]e look for artists and organizations that are doing unique and essential work in a region that lacks adequate governmental support.”¹⁰

Alongside this mission, Purin also cultivates tactical partnerships with regional state bodies. Its initial aim as a funder has recently expanded to educational initiatives. The most prominent of these initiatives is Roundtable, an annual ten-day educational event that brings filmmakers from around Southeast Asia to Bangkok for panels and workshops. As the co-director Aditya Assarat explains, they see the conference as a means of “strengthening ties within the region.”¹¹ In 2019, Roundtable was held in partnership with a diplomatic event sponsored by the regional, intergovernmental Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), namely the Bangkok ASEAN Film Festival. Promoting free trade and “cultural and economic collaboration,” the ASEAN Film Festival describes a very different kind of regional, utopian enterprise: “The co-operation among 10 Southeast Asian countries, namely Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, and Thailand has for many years yielded economic prosperity and facilitated regional trade and cultural enrichment.”¹² This performative, regioning practice offers a vision of interstate parity as enabled through intraregional economic flows.

Purin’s own vision offers a different view, in which hierarchies persist despite efforts toward regional consolidation. This was not the perspective that the organization had initially, but they soon noticed that applications from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia usually didn’t receive funding, due to the relative lack of sustained training and support in those countries. When members of Purin approached those applicants about better ways to collaborate with them, the filmmakers asked for a short film option; features were not as feasible for them. So Purin developed a Short Film Camp to take place during Roundtable’s ten-day series of events. As Aditya described, the

8 Purin Pictures, <https://www.purinpictures.org>.

9 Liz Shackleton, “How Independent Filmmakers in Southeast Asia Are on the Rise,” *Screen Daily*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.screendaily.com/features/how-independent-filmmakers-in-southeast-asia-are-on-the-rise/5142223.article>.

10 “About Us,” Purin Pictures, <https://www.purinpictures.org/aboutus>.

11 Aditya Assarat (co-director, Purin Pictures), discussion with author, February 22, 2020.

12 “Overview: Bangkok ASEAN Film Festival 2019,” <https://www.baff.go.th/overview>.

concept of the camp is a result of Purin's desire to put their research into practice: "So if you look at Southeast Asia as a whole, we have a lot of similarities. . . . But if you start to really look at the details, it's clear that some countries are stronger than others."¹³ Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia produce the most features in the region. The hope is that Roundtable's Short Film Camp will provide a space for collaboration on other countries' terms, offering more viable means of participation.

Purin Pictures maps a future-oriented cartography of Southeast Asian film, one whose regional interconnections are more lateral than they are presently. Venues for education, discussion, and training become gestures toward a regional cinema yet to come, one that includes a range of films, from fiction to documentary and experimental works. In Victor Turner's oft-quoted analysis, performance "aims at poiesis, rather than mimesis: making not faking."¹⁴ "Southeast Asia" may be a fiction, but this kind of performative film practice is an effort toward "making"; it does not so much mimic existing regional frameworks as it attempts to bring new ones into being. Through these initiatives, Purin tries to refigure what Ravi Vasudevan characterizes as the "territorial fatalism" of state-building, which "puts together diverse cultural and linguistic formations within a somewhat forced political and administrative integrity."¹⁵ Vasudevan is interested in the complexity of regional cinema as a subnational category, but this territorial fatalism is also at work in other, supranational scales that promote the evenness and uniformity of internal networks. In grappling with intraregional inequities, Purin Pictures offers a prospective, alternative geography.

While Purin's production support has been very successful, distribution and exhibition remain more difficult issues, in part because the kinds of art house films that interest the organization have little market value in domestic circuits. As Aditya has noted, the idea of regional cinema excludes larger film publics. The films he describes as "mass cinema" largely remain confined within borders of language and culture.¹⁶ As he relates, "For us [independent] filmmakers in Thailand, a theatrical release is more for the heart than for revenue—our market is Europe with other bits here and there."¹⁷ His comment points to the tensions between the affective value of domestic audiences versus the material conditions of domestic distribution and exhibition.

Some see regional streaming services as another possibility, one that offers the promise of access to wider, regional audiences.¹⁸ Purin has surpris-

13 Aditya, discussion.

14 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 93.

15 Ravi Vasudevan, "Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema," *Journal of the Moving Image* 9 (2010): 95–117.

16 Aditya, discussion.

17 Shackleton, "Independent Filmmakers."

18 Some independent film-focused, online distribution channels have emerged. Singapore-based Viddsee has become a well-known outlet for Southeast Asian short films (<https://www.viddsee.com>). Singaporean organization Objectifs has created a Southeast Asian Film Library (<https://objectifsfilmlibrary.uscreen.io>). In a more activist vein, filmmakers in the Philippines started the Lockdown Cinema Club in response to COVID-19, featuring films from the Philippines and around Southeast Asia (<https://www.facebook.com/lockdowncinemaclub/>). Organizers asked viewers

ing counterparts in the world of regional over-the-top (OTT) media service start-ups that also endeavor to build a Southeast Asian cinema—in this case, following a reversed course from distribution to production. I will focus on the Singapore-based OTT video platform HOOQ below, due to its connection to Purin and its film training initiatives. Before filing for liquidation in March 2020, HOOQ co-produced the film *Marlina si pembunuh dalam empat babak* (*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, Mouly Surya, 2017) alongside Purin and the Malaysian studio Astro Shaw.¹⁹ (Purin had awarded the neo-Western a 2017 production grant.) *Marlina si pembunuh dalam empat babak* became HOOQ's first Indonesian original production, premiering at the Cannes Film Festival Directors' Fortnight in 2017 before becoming available to HOOQ users in the Philippines, Thailand, India, Indonesia, and Singapore.²⁰

This co-production model seemed promising in the first few years of the rise of regional OTT video platforms, as it led to innovative, original content, screening in both international festival circuits and on the platforms easily available to wider, regional audiences. Players like HOOQ targeted Southeast Asian audiences through moves such as tiered pricing structures that could appeal to lower-income consumers.²¹ After beginning with more Western content in 2015, HOOQ turned to local acquisition and co-productions in 2017. The company established partnerships with known filmmakers from the region, such as Singapore's Anthony Chen.²² To augment its supply of original content, HOOQ also launched a Filmmaker's Guild at the beginning of 2019 that offered "veteran Southeast Asian industry talents" as mentors, including Mouly Surya, the director of *Marlina si pembunuh dalam empat babak*.²³ As Surya described, "Southeast Asia is booming with creative flair, and I am truly proud to be part of a process that gives aspiring filmmakers the opportunity to showcase their incredible talents and original work."²⁴ Like Purin's educational initiatives, HOOQ's initiative was, in part, a move to educate younger, aspiring filmmakers, thereby projecting Southeast Asian cinema's regional futures. For HOOQ and other OTT outfits in Southeast

to donate money for unemployed film workers, and Vidsee created a page for the initiative on its site.

- 19 The company was circumspect about the reasons for its closure, but analysts suspected that it was undercapitalized. Patrick Frater, "Hooq May Have Fallen but a Business Case for Southeast Asian Streamers Endures," *Variety*, March 31, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/biz/asia/hooq-collapse-singtel-southeast-asia-streaming-1203550122/>.
- 20 Rebecca Hawkes, "HOOQ Original *Marlina the Murderer* Selected for Indonesia's Oscar Entry," *Rapid TV News*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.rapidtvnews.com/2018092153569/hooq-original-marlina-the-murderer-selected-for-indonesia-s-oscar-entry.html#axzz6N6s1FRRY>.
- 21 Phoebe Magdirila, "Analysts: Regional OTT Players Eclipse Netflix, Amazon in Southeast Asia," *S&P Global*, November 27, 2017, https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/trending/43_uleib2f5l3mv5-rce5w2.
- 22 Naman Ramachandran, "Asian Streamer Hooq Signs First Look Deal with Singapore's Anthony Chen," *Variety*, September 7, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/tiff-toronto-asian-streamer-hooq-signs-first-look-deal-with-singapores-anthony-chen-exclusive>.
- 23 Patrick Brzeski, "Southeast Asian Streamer HOOQ Unveils Filmmakers Guild Contenders," *Hollywood Reporter*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/southeast-asian-streamer-hooq-unveils-filmmakers-guild-contenders-1188633>.
- 24 Quoted in Brzeski.

Asia, region became a fundamental spatial category, constructed as both a market and a scale for collaboration.

These accounts of Purin Pictures and HOOQ offer narratives of region as a practice. In the invention of Southeast Asian cinema, region becomes a process, feeding collective imaginaries of film production, circulation, and reception. These industrial formations are often performative, created not only as functional mechanisms for production and dissemination but also as a projected scale of potential connection, combining affective and economic concerns. Such performances are not a process of enclosure, tidily wrapping borders around shared, endemic characteristics. Rather, they are an ongoing process of gathering, dissolution, and projection across multiple scales. Film practitioners meet in neighboring countries or international festivals, they discuss commonalities and differences, they make films, and they begin the slow process of building audiences and new generations of makers. As a process, region is a temporal category as much as a spatial one. In the case of Southeast Asian film, it is less about demarcating what is now than about considering what might be.

Jasmine Nadua Trice is an associate professor of cinema and media studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her book on exhibition spaces in early 2000s Manila film culture was published by Duke University Press in March 2021.