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IN FOCUS

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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.¹ 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.²

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.

2 We wish to acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) (AHRC) through the network grant Southeast Asian Cinemas Research Network: Promoting Dialogue across Critical and Creative Practice (2016-2018).

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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.³ Two more anthologies are forthcoming.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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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Patrick F. Campos

Topos, Historia, Islas: Film Islands and Regional Cinemas

TOPOS

A line cuts across the screen between the green earthy mountains and the gray overcast skies. Three figures wearing ornate bright red garments—those of the lumad father Dawin and his children—dot the landscape. They are accosted on their way home from gathering food by camouflaged military men carrying firearms. One of the soldiers snatches Dawin’s cannikin, scatters his mung beans, and taunts him, saying, “Do you know how to pray the rosary? Pick them up one by one!”

The implication of this scene from *Tu pug imatuy* (*The Right to Kill*, Arbi Barbarona, 2017) is far-reaching if one recognizes it as a film from Mindanao, a regional island cluster in the Philippines inhabited by indigenous peoples, Moros, and Christian settlers. I watched it in horror not only because it foreshadowed the worst that was yet to come in the story but also because of where and when I saw it: in an auditorium of a private Catholic college in Compostela Valley (now Davao de Oro) in Mindanao in August 2017. Outside the auditorium, armed military men not unlike the ones in the film were on patrol, and I was anxious that at any moment, one of them would enter and watch with us a film that depicted the brutality of the military toward the lumadnon.

Mindanao, the southernmost part of the Philippines, had been placed under martial law months earlier amid widespread protests by activists who resisted any governmental move that resembled Marcosian rule.¹ Martial law

1 Antonio J. Montalvan II, “What Did Duterte’s Martial Law Achieve in Mindanao?,” *Al Jazeera*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/duterte-martial-law-achieve-mindanao-191230054020719.html>. Ferdinand Marcos was the tenth president of the Philippines (1965–1986) who ruled as a dictator and kleptocrat; he put the nation under martial law from 1972 to 1981.

Patrick F. Campos, “Topos, Historia, Islas: Film Islands and Regional Cinemas,” *JCMS* 60, no. 3 (Spring 2021): 163–168.

was declared following sustained urban gunfights between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and radical Islamist groups, Maute and Abu Sayyaf, in the Islamic city of Marawi. This conflict went on for months, affecting the entire Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

When the soldier snatched Dawin's cannikin, the college students in the auditorium laughed nervously, not knowing how to react to a kind of film they have never seen before, a film about familiar indigenous peoples living in the Pantaron Mountain Range surrounding their own homeplace and oftentimes forced to evacuate to the lowlands due to escalating militarization. I presumed that the film resonated with them. *Tu pug imatuy*, which is based on real events that occurred in 2014, fictionalizes how the military abducted unarmed lumadnon, tortured and humiliated them, and then used them as guides through rugged terrains to locate rebels and further the government's counter-insurgency campaign. I was watching Barbarona's film with local students and visiting delegates as part of the ninth edition of Cinema Rehiyon, a roving film festival held annually in different provinces beyond the national capital city of Manila.²

Just the day before, on the festival delegates' journey to Compostela Valley from Davao City, our bus was halted at several checkpoints and boarded once by a suspicious soldier. He let us pass when he learned that we represented the film sector because, he said, he was a movie fan. Over seven thousand soldiers have been deployed in Mindanao since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office in 2016, further militarizing the cities, towns, and indigenous ancestral domains, which are sought after by mining and logging corporations.³

The tense three-hour drive contrasted with the languid environment of the festival site in the municipality of Nabunturan (which translates as "surrounded by mountains"). At the time, Nabunturan boasted of a thriving filmmaking community despite the absence of movie theaters. Local residents watched films in the evenings with over one hundred filmmakers and cinephiles from different parts of the Philippines, alfresco-style in the plaza, with a setup akin to homey screenings held in Bali, Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, Yangon, and other places in Southeast Asia.

At that point, I had been serving as co-organizer of Cinema Rehiyon for five years and had been observing the remarkable growth of regional cinemas for over a decade. This essay, based on my field notes, looks into the emergence of regional filmmaking in the Philippines, taking Mindanao cinema as its paradigmatic example. Drawing upon concepts from nissology and geography and illustrating my arguments with brief discussions of Mindanao films, I reflect on the possibilities of remapping Philippine cinema with Mindanao as its center.

Being *in* Mindanao for Cinema Rehiyon while remaining acutely aware of not being *from* there, I had a keen sense of observing Philippine national

2 The festival was established in 2009 by the cinema committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, which continues to fund it and other regional film festivals.

3 Segundo J. E. Romero Jr., "Duterte's Rise to Power in the Philippines," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.boell.de/en/2016/09/26/dutertes-rise-power-philippines-domestic-and-regional-implications>.

cinema at a remove, recognizing how it is neither homogeneous nor singular. Watching *Tu pug imatuy* and apprehending the many layers of Mindanao's history on- and off-screen imbricated in one instance, I hit a moment of clarity: Philippine cinema is not a unitary and inert object but a complex subject composed of filmmakers and stakeholders who act with intentionality, imagined by other subjects—movers of other regional cinemas, including the one based in Manila—at particular points in history and geography.

In that room, I grasped quite viscerally what I had known intellectually: that Manila, my own location, was exceedingly “provincial,” where the norm had been to capture Philippine cinema as an object beheld from an aerial view, obscuring the details of its coordinates.⁴ For over one hundred years, cinema in the Philippines was centered and defined in the capital city. Consequently, filmmaking in the subnational regions tended to fall epistemologically and materially in the margins of an undifferentiated national cinema imaginary.

As an observer and participant in Cinema Rehiyon, I was afforded a vantage point from which to see how the emergence of cinematic subjects in regional digital media demands that we conceive of national cinemas *within* the nation-state as localized, polycentric, and networked.⁵ This way of thinking has at least two important consequences. First, the long-held view of a singular and self-referential Philippine cinema can now give way to perspectival counter-mapping efforts from the margins. Second, understanding regional cinematic formations through their historical and geographical experiences helps us interrogate states of exception and shed light on injustices that have produced and sustained “the national.”⁶

HISTORIA

There is no more illuminating place to begin decentering, reorienting, and interrogating Philippine (film) history than Mindanao. Because the stories of Mindanao subjects, especially those of the lumadnon and the Moros, have been marginalized in the larger drama of Philippine history, their narration in cinema, especially as it relates to the cultural, political, and economic struggles of various people groups beyond the screen, carries a burden of representation, to use the influential analytic by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam.⁷ Their historic disenfranchisement has rendered them ill-equipped to represent themselves not only in cinema but also in broader democratic processes for much of history. Contemporary Mindanao films thus signify the capacity of Mindanaons to articulate their subjectivities.

4 I owe this insight to Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

5 I adapt this notion of shifting geographical analysis from an aerial to a networked view from Kevin R. Cox, “Spaces of Dependence, Spaces of Engagement and the Politics of Scale, or: Looking for Local Politics,” *Political Geography* 17, no. 1 (1998): 1–23.

6 Achille Mbembe engages with this concept, which is akin to states of emergency that serve as pretext to declare martial law, in an essay that explores the state's wielding of the right to kill; see Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

7 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Arriving in number and force only in the twenty-first century with the emergence of digital filmmaking, films by Mindanaons occupy a unique location in Philippine cinema. Because relatively few Mindanao films enjoy wide distribution, in key instances, they function as primary historical artifacts when they open up spaces for grassroots accounts of historical events.⁸ This was demonstrated with immediacy when the documentary *Forbidden Memory* (Gutierrez Mangansakan II, 2016) was released in Manila on the day of the burial of Ferdinand Marcos's remains in Hero's Cemetery on November 18, 2016. In a public speech, Duterte uttered a barefaced lie, saying, "Whether or not [Marcos] performed worse or better, there's no study, no movie about it, just the challenges and allegations of the other side."⁹

Forbidden Memory exposes Duterte's preposterous claims. The film contains firsthand accounts of Mindanaons who survived the horrors of any of a number of brutal "pacification" operations by military and paramilitary forces against Muslims during the Marcos years.¹⁰ Notably, the interviewees repeatedly address the filmmaker, claiming, "If it were not for you, I would not speak of this." In other words, the position of Mangansakan as a Moro Mindanaon is crucial in enabling the subjects to tell their own stories.

In this way, *Forbidden Memory* serves as a memorial for obscured events and facilitates the reorientation of the nation's collective and intergenerational memory. So do other Mindanao films that traffic in the past and its relationship with the troubled present, such as *Ang mga tigmo sa akong pagpauli* (*Riddles of My Homecoming*, Arnel Mardoquio, 2013), *War Is a Tender Thing* (Adjani Arumpac, 2013), and *Women of the Weeping River* (Sheron Dayoc, 2016), to name a few. Remapping Philippine cinema with Mindanao as its figural center foregrounds historical wrongs committed against marginalized subjects. Recognizing them, one can only hope, could lead to cultural literacy and a film practice that is sensitive to identity claims and, ultimately, oriented toward achieving social justice.

ISLAS

We can theorize a decentered Philippine cinema further if we take the islands of Mindanao as "a model, rather than simply a site" of cinema formations.¹¹ In this project of counter-mapping, we can re-present Mindanao's archipelagic identity and interaction with other islands in time and space.¹² By doing so, we can imagine them not as fixed territories but as a topolog-

8 The *Report of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission* (Makati, Philippines: Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission, 2016) mentions how the Moros and lumadnon have always felt that their stories are misrepresented and undermined in history books and the media (27–28).

9 Manuel Mogato and Karen Lema, "Philippine Dictator Marcos Buried at Heroes' Cemetery amid Protests," Reuters, November 17, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-marcos/philippine-dictator-marcos-buried-at-heroes-cemetery-amid-protests-idUSKBN13D0DQ>.

10 Cf. *Report of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission*, 30–43.

11 The quoted phrase is from Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, introduction to *Islands in History and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

12 The project of archipelagraphy, or counter-mapping archipelagos, was developed by Elizabeth DeLoughrey in *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

ically contracting and dilating region with shifting boundaries, heterogeneous time frames, and lines of connection beyond absolute spaces like the nation-state's. For instance, the themes, narratives, and images in Sheron Dayoc's *The Crescent Rising* (2015) and *Ways of the Sea* (2010), particular as they may be topically and aesthetically, can arguably be more productively clustered with seemingly unrelated films about multiethnic disharmony, religious intolerance, and human trafficking—such as the religious romance *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*, Hanung Bramantyo, 2008) from Indonesia and the action film *One Two Jaga* (Nam Ron, 2018) from Malaysia—than with movies from closed-in Manila.

The Crescent Rising, for instance, is a documentary on three Moros. Its contemporary stories of violence alert us to the long-active borders of Mindanao that result from historically rooted secessionist movements dating back to the Spanish and American colonization of the Philippine Islands (1565–1946) as well as from the radicalization of rebels oriented toward al-Qaeda. *Ways of the Sea*, however, alludes to how Sabahans and Mindanaons so easily awaken their affinities with each other on the ground level of community life. The film recalls how both islands were once part of a regional slave-raiding route animated by the tides of imperialism and the formation of a world economy until Mindanao was Filipinized by the north, its ties severed from its neighbors, and its economy subsumed under far-off Manila.¹³ At the center of *Ways of the Sea* are the Badjaos (orthography varies) that belong to the regional tribes of sea nomads whose lifeways are premised on archipelagic unboundedness but have long been threatened by environmental degradation and the geopolitical limitations of closed territories.

Where *Ways of the Sea* concerns itself with the question of human security, it is deeply connected to the ecological questions raised by *Laut Bercermin* (*The Mirror Never Lies*, Kamila Andini, 2011), an Indonesian film that exhibits the integrity of the Badjaos' oceanic sense-making. These and similar works in the region help us conceive of cinema formations with open borders and *film islands* existing alongside other film islands. And instead of the bounded territory pictured by national cinema, we conjure spaces of shared dwelling and are reminded that the “political responsibility for the pursuit of a ‘decent life’ [extends] beyond the borders of any particular state.”¹⁴

This logic of connection spans the gap not only between seafarers and coastal communities but also between lowlanders and highlanders, who have in many instances been pushed upward because of conflicts and resettlements. Today, the lumadnon, who have lived in mountains and forests and kept the integrity of their sustainable lifeways, are constantly under attack. Just as chains of islands and open seas are territorially disputed for the economic gains and military advantages they can yield, so have the ancestral lands of the first peoples become the last frontier of global capital everywhere. Their struggles are represented in Mindanao films like *Tu pug imatuy*,

13 James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State, 1768–1898* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981).

14 John Agnew, “Borders on the Mind: Re-Framing Border Thinking,” *Ethics and Global Politics* 1, no. 4 (2008): 176.

Huling balyan ng buhi (*The Woven Stories of the Other*, Sherad Anthony Sanchez, 2006), *Hunghong sa yuta* (*Earth's Whisper*, Arnel Mardoquio, 2008), and *Baboy halas* (*Wailing in the Forest*, Bagane Fiola, 2016).

Films about indigenous peoples provide viewers with entrance to zones of temporality that do not abide by the clocks of labor productivity and offer parables of sustained resistance to encroachers. Thus, while Mindanao filmmakers have been immersing in lumad cultures, learning from their ecological worldviews, and collaborating with them to co-create films that carry the burden of representation, they have also been contributing toward the formation of indigenous cinemas worldwide that advocate native self-determination.¹⁵

The goal of theorizing Mindanao cinema, as I have essayed here, is not to reproduce existing regional configurations. It is to offer an archipelagic model for pursuing emergent lines of solidarity across boundaries and educating latent transformative cinematic cartographies, whether on the national, subnational, or supranational level. Imagining Mindanao at the center of Philippine cinema reminds us that film islands, like consciousness, are neither insular nor enclosed and can therefore be realigned to form new subjectivities, explore alternative vistas, and pursue new horizons.

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15 I pursue this line of argument in "Small Film, Global Connections," in *Art Archive 02* (Manila: Japan Foundation, 2019), 28–35, <https://jfmo.org.ph/events-and-courses/art-archive-02/>.

Dag Yngvesson

Centering Peripheries: The Return of Regionalism in Indonesian Independent Cinema

If the idea of the nation as a “dispersed, archipelagic” assembly rather than a clearly defined, homogenous image is taken as an enduring historical fact in Southeast Asia, what are the consequences for the region’s cinemas?¹ Engaging an oceanic history, this essay proposes that in Southeast Asia, filmmakers have always been at work taking apart, recentering, and constructing formative regions within and around the national. Their visions frequently position sub- and supranational areas as constitutive of the national cinematic imaginary. If “national” films are constantly shuttling between regions as both centers and formative peripheries, can the nation be made visible, and to whom does it most matter?

To address these questions, I will contextualize the recent work of independent filmmakers from Yogyakarta, a small yet artistically active city and region in Java, within national and regional cinematic histories. Their efforts to negotiate a position simultaneously central and peripheral to the nation will be compared with the regional-archipelagic focus of Indonesian filmmakers under President Soekarno (1949–1966). Through conversations with Yogyakarta-based filmmakers and close readings of writer-director Yosep Anggi Noen’s *Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya* (*Peculiar Vacation and*

1 Jung-Bong Choi, “National Cinema: An Anachronistic Delirium?,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 188.

Dag Yngvesson, “Centering Peripheries: The Return of Regionalism in Indonesian Independent Cinema,” *JCMS* 60, no. 3 (Spring 2021): 169–175.

Other Illnesses, 2012) and *Hiruk-Pikuk Si Al-Kisah (The Science of Fictions*, 2019), I reveal the ways in which contemporary Indonesian cinema draws on regional and subnational perspectives, positioning these regional “peripheries” as key processors of globalized histories and aesthetic forms.

From its origins in the early 1950s, Indonesian cinema has functioned as a self-conscious paradox. During the Soekarno era (1945–1967), filmmakers like Usmar Ismail, Asrul Sani, and Nya Abbas Akup worked to build critical national consciousness by deconstructing the sanctity of both the nation and the darker aspects of its anti-colonial struggle of becoming. A large percentage of Indonesia’s early cineastes, artists, and intellectuals (including Ismail and Sani) came from West Sumatra. Although a relatively small region, it has had an outsized historical influence as a cosmopolitan center for the exchange of ideas and political paradigms with Egypt and other areas throughout the modern Islamic world. (It was also the center of PRRI, Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia, or the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia, a well-armed separatist movement that was finally put down by a massive strike from the national army in 1961.) Many West Sumatran filmmakers and artists became “national” figures after migrating to another influential hub, Jakarta, the nation’s capital but also officially a “special region” with a unique system of administration and its own funding for the arts.

Cineastes from West Sumatra and elsewhere who lived and worked in Jakarta resisted the imposition of a homogenizing view that positioned the capital as the nation’s true locus. The fragmented and often decentered views of the nation they put on its screens frequently highlight the perspectives of subnational regions like Bandung, rural East Java, or North and West Sumatra. The critical consciousness of the nation these filmmakers sought to build can thus be seen in light of their experience of the geographically and epistemically fragmented, archipelagic nature of Indonesia, of having lived, learned, and thought in and from a number of different regional and island centers. In films such as Ismail’s *Tamu Agung (Exalted Guest*, 1955) or Djadoeg Djajakusuma’s *Harimau Tjampa (The Tiger from Tjampa*, 1953), the subnational regions that serve as settings are positioned as if at the center of a series of surrounding “peripheries,” formative loops that encompass the national, supranational, regional, and transnational.² Influences from these “foreign” areas, while inevitable, are rearranged and translated by filmmakers into a particular pattern largely determined by the subnational locality that is positioned as the locus of both screen and diegesis.

The idea that many of the trans/national elements made peripheral in these films are actually “supposed” to be more central was often exploited for satirical humor. Take, for example, Nya Abbas Akup’s *Tiga Buronan (Three Fugitives*, 1957), which is set in rural West Java. Toward the film’s beginning,

2 Dag Yngvesson and Adrian Alarilla, “A Nation Imagined Differently: The Critical Impulse of 1950s Indonesian Cinema,” in *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)*, ed. Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 37–59.

it features an absurdly happy musical scene with prancing, singing rice farmers; the scene at first appears to be trans/nationally recognizable as a way to show an idyllic village as the heart, but seemingly not the mind, of a developing nation. When this particular village turns out to be riddled with greed, mistrust, and political conflict, however, the generic signifiers of this scene are revealed as misleading and are never repeated; the scene becomes a glaring anomaly within the more regular patterns and repetitions of the film's structure. The transnational trope of song and dance musical scenes was hence effectively "auditioned" (and rejected) via the agency of an otherwise peripheral, rural region that is positioned as if it were a hub of national aesthetic and political exchange.

As this suggests, Indonesian cineastes essentially mined the trends, genres, and techniques of globalized cinema, including Hollywood's hermetically sealed, homogenous diegetic worlds, for parts that could be placed into a visibly porous patchwork. Viewed through this patchwork, the nation itself is imagined as a collection of regional parts, each operating as a semi-autonomous "center" that de/constructs nationality by continually receiving and combining local, regional, and global elements in a particular pattern. Not unlike the regional aural flows that Philippa Lovatt (this volume) argues foster a border-bending "archipelagic imagination," here the ostensibly borderless quality of transnational cinematic tropes is appropriated to critically destabilize the diegetic and real boundaries implicitly and explicitly applied to Indonesian movies. Seen in this way, the heterogeneous, gap-filled formal structure of many national films evokes the cartography of an archipelago.

As a supranational region of nation-states with a particular geopolitical form, Southeast Asia has also been thought of as an archipelago.³ It is connected and pierced by land and sea as well as by many shared cultural-political traits and approaches to art and representation that preceded and often still supersede national borders. In this sense Southeast Asia provides the most crucial sphere—or formative periphery—within which various nations and subnational regions can position themselves as loci while simultaneously circumventing the logic of a single political or aesthetic center. If the region functions as a key "inner" periphery for such loci, from a broader view, it is also a hub around which the loci are constellated and through which local and transnational products and ideas can be received, adapted, and exchanged among them. In the 1950s and 1960s, Indonesian films were generally shown in theaters frequented by lower-class audiences, where their main competition, and thus source of formal "parts" to borrow and adapt, was from the tropes circulated by the Malayan, Philippine, and Indian movies then-popular throughout Southeast Asia.⁴ The above song and dance scene in *Tiga Buronan* is an apt example of this: although its form is eminently transnational, at the time, such scenes were especially prevalent in Southeast

3 Elmo Gonzaga, "Strange Convergences: Intermedial Encounters in Southeast Asia," *Kritika Kultura* 27 (2016): 92–102.

4 By contrast, Hollywood and European films played to more affluent viewers in upscale venues. Tanete Pong Masak, *Sinema pada Masa Soekarno (Cinema in the Soekarno Era)* (Jakarta, Indonesia: FFTV-IKJ, 2016), 169–198.

Asia via the regional box office dynamism of the Malayan actor-director P. Ramlee. The theatrical rejection of song and dance in *Tiga Buronan* is hence indicative of the atmosphere of competition and contestation that also characterizes Southeast Asia's archipelagic-cinematic imagination.

For this and other reasons, films across the region often differed widely in narrative and style. Yet they shared an approach to formal borrowing and a deconstructive attitude toward cinema in general. For example, Indonesia's acquisitive, deconstructive cinematic tendencies are especially resonant with the Thai exhibition practice, popular from the 1930s to 1970s, of semi-improvisational voice-over dubbing. This practice did not simply borrow and insert forms into extant films; it took films to be heterogeneous collections of elements that can be taken apart and modified during projection. In both mobile rural cinemas as well as urban movie theaters, voice actors re-created and replaced the soundtracks of entire films.⁵ Often, these "versionists" also reformulated dialogue to address audiences in subnational regions, thus repositioning Thai and foreign films by making them sound as if they were speaking to, and often from, these otherwise peripheral areas.

The technique effectively turns cinema back into shadow play, an important historical screen practice shared throughout Southeast Asia that can be seen as an enduring model for the acquisitive, deconstructive regional approach to film highlighted above. In shadow play, language and narratives are similarly embellished to fit the context of exhibition by a puppet master who, like the cinematic versionist, sits in view of the audience on one side of the screen, calling attention to appropriation and rearrangement of a far-flung collection of forms and styles.⁶

In Indonesia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the heterogeneous, paradoxical nation-as-archipelago constructed on screens was hence increasingly derided as "counter-revolutionary" by voices on the political left. Following the bloody rise of the dictator Suharto (1967–1998), right-wing conservatives took over the call for filmmakers to reveal a more homogeneous and wholesome "face of Indonesia."⁷ Yet despite numerous conservative and government-sponsored efforts to this end, the basic approach to representing the nation outlined above has endured through various shifts in policy, genre, and style. It is readable in a particularly striking way in contemporary independent cinema from Yogyakarta.

Beginning in earnest after the 2012 release of *Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya*, a cinematic movement with a distinctly subnational locus began to assert an especially strong presence in Asian and European festival circuits. This locus was Yogyakarta and its surrounding areas, which are a

5 May Adadol Ingawanij, "Itinerant Cinematic Practices in and around Thailand during the Cold War," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 2, no. 1 (2018): 9–41.

6 Jan Mrázek, *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre: Contemplations on the Art of Javanese wayang kulit* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005), 374.

7 Salim Said, *Shadows on the Silver Screen: A Social History of Indonesian Film* (Jakarta: Lontar Foundation, 1991), 59–95.

day's drive from Jakarta. Since the 1990s, such festivals have been an influential proving ground for independent cinema with aspirations to reach a broad local audience.

The importance of these festivals comes into sharper focus in conversations with Yosep Anggi Noen, the young director of *Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya*. Noen locates a primary sphere of influence for his films in contemporary Asian cinema. However, the director's formal allusions in *Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya* centralize Southeast Asia within a broader Asian sphere. The "illnesses" in the film's title are a playful reference to Thai auteur Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2004 festival hit *Sud pralad* (*Tropical Malady*). While aspects of *Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya's* form evoke Weerasethakul's work, the film departs from this influence with its consistently shallow-focus *mise-en-scène*. These images obscure identifiable landmarks in and around Yogyakarta, filling the background with a blurred tangle of two-lane roads clogged with scooters and trucks, a scene that recalls myriad Southeast Asian locales. This lack of visual specificity is pushed further still by characters whose backs are often turned to the camera when they speak.

Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya's visual blurring of the lines between Southeast Asian nations and their auteurs is nonetheless made more distinct by the linguistic focus of its soundtrack. In a move largely unprecedented in the history of Indonesian features, the film's dialogue, like the majority of the Yogyakarta area-produced features that followed it, is in Javanese. Javanese is one of over seven hundred regional languages in use in Indonesia. While Javanese boasts the most speakers, its unprecedented deployment throughout a film's entire soundtrack unsettles the established position of Indonesian, the official *lingua franca*, as the standard for national cinema. (The film is shown domestically with Indonesian subtitles.) Here one might draw a further comparison to Weerasethakul, whose frequent use of the Northeastern Thai province of Isan as both setting and source of characters' dialect arguably addresses the nation (and beyond) through a region "long under-represented in national historiography and politics."⁸

Such parallels should be drawn with caution, however, as the still-extant courts of Yogyakarta and neighboring Surakarta have held a ubiquitous, and in many ways hegemonic, position in the archipelago from the colonial to the nationalist era and into the present. Nonetheless, the focus of *Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya* and other recent Yogyakarta films on the habits and speech of the region's lower classes distances the exalted official culture of the courts.⁹ Their connections to both Southeast Asia and "Java" (as Yogyakarta and Central Java are normally called) cause these films to fluctuate between sub- and supranational regions in a way that destabilizes their attachment to the national.

8 David Teh, "Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," *Third Text* 25, no. 5 (2011): 600.

9 See, for example, *Siti* (Eddie Cahyono, 2014) and *Ziarah* (Purba Negara, 2016).

With consistent, if often limited, forays into national multiplexes, Noen and his contemporaries challenge the increasing homogenization of form (most often toward the styles of local *sinetron*, or televised soap operas) and the normalization of ever more conservative, Islam-infused politics associated with the contemporary “mainstreaming” of Indonesian cinema in Jakarta.¹⁰ The international acclaim Noen and others have received in regional and international festivals opens doors to domestic theaters and other venues. Their efforts anticipated other experiments with dialogue in regional languages, including recent films from Makassar, on Sulawesi, and the hit *Yowes Ben* (*Yowis Band*, Fajar Nugros and Bayu Skak, 2018), which deploys the “coarser” dialect of Javanese from East Java. As Yogyakarta producer Arya Sweta told me, a primary goal is to help facilitate the cultivation and “training” of a domestic audience with a certain range of tastes and references.¹¹

By building on the archipelagic methods of early national cineastes, Noen and others invite viewers of contemporary Yogyakarta films to imagine Indonesia through a scattered circuit of regional centers and peripheries. As a vast and fragmented, yet epistemically intimate archipelago, Southeast Asia provides fluid buffers (and continuing competition and contestation) among its diverse locales and between these locales and the transnational. As such, it plays a crucial role in the formulation of local cinematic responses to the inexorable incursions of both the national and the global.

Noen’s 2019 feature, *Hiruk-Pikuk Si Al-Kisah*, expands this engagement with the transnational, in this case in its most imperial form. From its particular-yet-diffused, archipelagic Javanese outlook, the film reimagines the development of Western science, altering its space and time through positioning a major event in world history on Indonesian, and indeed Javanese, soil: the 1969 Apollo 11 lunar landing. The central premise is that the landing was not only faked but filmed in the sand dunes along the South Coast of Java, where it is witnessed by both Soekarno and Siman, a villager hidden in the bushes. National center and periphery are thus entangled in the film’s response to a global event that is made contingent on the local. What the United States may have gained from its ruse is barely considered, as Noen focuses on how the effects of this American “movie” are processed through regional-archipelagic circuits of imagination. President Soekarno, the nation’s founding pillar, is tellingly still alive in Noen’s diegetic present. Not unlike the peripheral Siman, however, his fate is tied to the counterfeit lunar landing, and he spends his days attempting to convey a global truth whose local relevance the film puts in question. Siman, mute but corporeally loquacious, in turn obsessively mimics the slow, floating movements of the fake astronauts. Both are misunderstood but are gradually reincorporated into the local mediascape as minor online celebrities hired to appear at weddings. Archetypally central and peripheral elements of Indonesia and its national history are thus in the final instance made interchangeable. Each ultimately functions as an unwitting processor of the transnational, contributing novel-

10 Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

11 Arya Sweta (producer), interview with author, September 9, 2018.

yet-familiarized pieces to the unfinished puzzle of a nation composed of, and floating within, a vast region of islands.

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The Acoustics of the Archipelagic Imagination in Southeast Asian Artists' Film

How do we conceptualize films in relation? As we seek to trace the connections and affinities we see, hear, and feel across a regional cinema, what kinds of alternative cartographies (affective, aesthetic, cultural, or industrial) emerge? How do we think through and with the aesthetic practices of artists and filmmakers in a way that enables us to avoid both reinscribing arbitrary lines across territories and disavowing the specific historic and lived conditions of the nation?¹

Recent scholarship by Gayatri Gopinath and Brian Bernards has proposed a reconceptualization of region as a spatial imaginary that is not “territorial” but rather shaped by questions of relationality and flow.² As a scholar of film sound, what strikes me about these associations is how powerfully they resonate with the political and material qualities of sound.³ In this essay, I build on my previous writing on sound, history, and memory in Asian cinema, and the important work of scholars such as Hsu Fang-Tze,

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the support of the AHRC through the network grant Southeast Asian Cinemas Research Network: Promoting Dialogue across Critical and Creative Practice (2016-2018) out of which this research emerged.
- 2 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).
- 3 See François J. Bonnet, *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago* (Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2016) and Jessica Swanston Baker, “Small Islands, Large Radio: Archipelagic Listening in the Caribbean,” in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, ed. Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 383-402.

Philippa Lovatt, “The Acoustics of the Archipelagic Imagination in Southeast Asian Artists' Film,” *JCMS* 60, no. 3 (Spring 2021): 176–181.

meLê yamomo, and Tao Leigh Goffe⁴, on “transcolonial” soundscapes and the affective resonances of audio technologies, both within and outside of the region, to suggest listening as a useful theory and method for tracing the vicissitudes of the regional, “archipelagic imagination.”⁵ In what follows, I suggest that attending to the auditory reveals how under-the-radar frequencies disrupt regimes of listening associated with empire and the nation-state. I assert that the depiction of and engagement with auditory experience thus invites a consideration of acoustic spatiality that is informed by historical studies of colonial media technologies and practices as well as writing on the acoustic experience of diaspora.⁶ Several film and media works from or about Southeast Asia exemplify these dynamics in different ways, such as *Droga!* (*Drug!*, Miko Revereza, 2014), *No Gods, No Masters* (Sung Tieu, 2017), *Nhà Cây* (*The Tree House*, Truong Minh Quỳ, 2019), and *Expedition Content* (Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati, 2020).

Focusing on two artists’ films from Southeast Asia, Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s *Everyday’s the Seventies* (2018) and Shireen Seno’s *Nervous Translation* (2017), I conceptualize regionality through the acoustic, affective, and emotional cartographies depicted in these works, both of which explore experiences of migration in and out of the region during the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ During this era, across many parts of Asia, vinyl and particularly the cassette tape could travel across borders with relative ease by both legitimate and illegitimate means. The motility of these formats enabled the formation of listening communities that flourished across and above the official borders of the state.⁸ In Nguyễn’s and Seno’s works, lo-fi analogue practices of sound production and reception work to evoke small-scale haptic and sonic intimacies that seem to lessen the protagonists’ perceived distance from home.

I propose that due to the itinerant and diffuse nature of sound, the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination allow for a consideration of Southeast Asia not as a fixed category or static entity but as a spatial imaginary shaped

4 See for example, Philippa Lovatt, “Cinema’s Spectral Sounds: Memory, History, Politics” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011); Hsu Fang-Tze, “Cold War Acoustmètre: Artists’ Film and the First Island Chain” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Singapore, 2018); meLê yamomo, “Sonic Entanglements: Listening to Modernities in Sound Recordings of Southeast Asia, 1890–1950,” accessed June 30, 2020, <https://sonic-entanglements.com>; Tao Leigh Goffe, “Unmapping the Caribbean: Toward a Digital Praxis of Archipelagic Sounding,” *archipelagos*, Issue 5, December 2020, pp. 6–23; See especially Hsu (2018) who similarly maps out an auditory geography through her analysis of acoustmètre in artists’ film from the First Island Chain.

5 Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 13.

6 See Peter J. Bloom, “The Language of Counterinsurgency in Malaya: Dialectical Soundscapes of Salvage and Warfare,” in *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia*, ed. Ian Aitken and Camille Deprez (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 63–78; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and Trinh T. Minh-ha, “An Acoustic Journey,” in *Rethinking Borders*, ed. John C. Welchman (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 1–17.

7 For a detailed discussion of Nguyễn’s and Seno’s earlier works in relation to region, see Jasmine Nadua Trice, “Gendering National Histories and Regional Imaginaries: Three Southeast Asian Women Filmmakers,” *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 1 (2019): 11–38.

8 See Alex Sayf Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

affectively through relationality. Listening out for “transcolonial” resonances across the region, I draw from the work of Édouard Glissant and the scholars mentioned above in order to attend to the processes of contact, heterogeneity, and lateral exchange that operate at sub- and supranational levels.⁹ Against the background of larger-scale aural histories of the region, the sound design in both Nguyễn’s and Seno’s works attunes the listener to a vernacular experience of sound that is juxtaposed against larger-scale dominant and colonial modes of broadcasting.¹⁰ These dynamics are mapped out in both *Everyday’s the Seventies* and *Nervous Translation* as they foreground economic and affective labor, including the transnational flows of people and capital, alongside the networks enabled through the circulation of audio media and sonic artifacts.

Everyday’s the Seventies is an installation composed of three video and four audio channels each depicting a different form of regionalized, acoustic affect through the layering of colonial, cinematic, and personal narratives.¹¹ Through this sometimes dissonant layering of audio channels through which we encounter a multitude of voices, diegetic sound effects, music, and ambient noise, the work emphasizes the processes of contact and heterogeneity inherent in the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination. Nguyễn repurposes found footage in order to draw connections between audiovisual accounts of the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and earlier moments in the colonial histories of Vietnam and Hong Kong. One channel shows archival wire service footage of Saigon in the 1960s and 1970s and television news broadcasts of Hong Kong during the refugee crisis that followed in the 1980s and 1990s. Another plays short fragmentary bursts of footage from genre films featuring the Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Ka-fai that use exoticism or stereotyping as they mediate Vietnam’s recent history of colonialism (e.g., *Lamant, The Lover*, Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1992) and diaspora, with the latter category of films reflecting anti-Vietnamese and anti-refugee sentiment (e.g., *Huang jia nu jiang, She Shoots Straight*, Corey Yuen, 1990).

The third channel shows video recorded by Nguyễn in Hong Kong of Paul, a Chinese-Vietnamese record store owner who narrates his memories of growing up in Saigon’s Chinatown during the war and how he fled to Hong Kong at seventeen to avoid conscription just before the war ended. The record store where the recording takes place is itself an archive, housing thousands of imported and locally produced LPs, many of which bear traces of their former owners in the handwritten notes and track listings kept inside the sleeve.¹² Over these sounds and images we also hear *gangtai*, Vietnamese, and American pop music from this period. Like the archival footage that Nguyễn draws from, these sounds are also documents of cultural history that circulate across borders and extend beyond individual, personal memories of particular places and times.¹³

9 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997).

10 Regarding aural histories of Southeast Asia, see Yamomo (2020) and Hsu (2018).

11 *Everyday’s the Seventies* was first shown in this configuration at the Glasgow Short Film Festival in March 2018 with audio mixed by Ernst Karel.

12 Andrew S. Guthrie, *Paul’s Records: How a Refugee from the Vietnam War Found Success Selling Vinyl on the Streets of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2015), 110.

13 John Davis, “Going Analog: Vinylphiles and the Consumption of the ‘Obsolete’ Vinyl

As Glissant asserts, fluidity of language—and in particular what he terms its “creolization”—plays a crucial role in the postcolonial archipelagic imagination.¹⁴ In *Everyday's the Seventies*, we hear this fluidity as each of the audio channels foregrounds the politics of voice through the presence of multilingualism: plurality, accent, translation, and subtitling are all part of the work's sonic and visual texture that connects the postcolonial present of Hong Kong and Vietnam with their past. As Peter Bloom has described, English, spoken with the accent of “received pronunciation” (RP), was a key instrument of British governmentality deployed through broadcasting in the colonial era.¹⁵ In *Everyday's the Seventies*, the echoes of that colonial past still reverberate through the sounds of the RP English spoken in the archival wire service footage and in Paul's monologue, which is also spoken in English. Meanwhile, the sounds of the many languages and accents voiced in the movies in the second channel—Cantonese, Vietnamese, English, French, and Mandarin—similarly echo and historicize the movements of capital and labor through the former colonial spaces of Hong Kong and Vietnam.¹⁶ While some dialogue is subtitled, no particular language is privileged within the overall mix. Nguyễn's practice thus destabilizes hierarchies of sounding, voicing, and listening associated with dominant histories and colonial media technologies in favor of lateral connections that emphasize relationality, heterogeneity, and flow across the region.

The acoustics of relationality and postcolonial fragmentation, described above with regard to *Everyday's the Seventies*, can also be heard in Mikko Quizon's sound design for *Nervous Translation*. *Nervous Translation* is a semiautobiographical feature about Yael, an eight-year-old girl who lives alone with her mother in Manila. Her father, like thousands of other “Overseas Filipino Workers” (OFW), is employed abroad in the construction industry in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Yael's only contact with her father is through listening to his voice on the cassette tapes he sends to her mother, a practice of oral letter writing that was common among OFWs and their loved ones in the 1980s.¹⁷ The story takes place in 1987, a year after the People Power Revolution that led to the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, and the film ends with the arrival of Typhoon Unsang in 1988. As with *Everyday's the Seventies*, the sound design of *Nervous Translation* juxtaposes personal accounts of memory, acousticity, and migration with audio from dominant media forms. For instance, we learn of the wider historical and environmental events mentioned above through brief snatches of television.

Record,” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 229.

14 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

15 Peter J. Bloom, “Elocution, Englishness, and Empire: Film and Radio in Late Colonial Ghana,” in *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa*, ed. Peter J. Bloom, Stephan F. Miescher, and Takiyawa Manuh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 137.

16 See Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and Pooja Rangan, “The Skin of the Voice: Acoustic Illusions, Ventriloquial Listening,” in *Sound Objects*, ed. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 130–148.

17 Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, “Crafting Love: Letters and Cassette Tapes in Transnational Filipino Communication,” in “Mediated Diasporas: Material Translations of the Philippines in a Globalized World,” ed. Mark Johnson and Deirdre McKay, special issue, *Southeast Asia Research* 19, no. 2 (2011): 249–272.

Short bursts of audio—of news reports, Yael’s father’s voice, television shows, and indie music—all evoke a soundscape of fragmentation and dispersal as if replicating the lived experience of OFW families of this time. Like the fragments of dialogue and music in *Everyday’s the Seventies*, this soundscape speaks broadly to the archipelagic imagination and the wider experience of migration and diaspora across the region.

While most of *Nervous Translation*’s dialogue is in Tagalog, Yael’s mother prioritizes her learning English, which is the language associated with elevated social and economic status in the film—and is another auditory reference to Southeast Asia’s colonial past that connects Seno’s and Nguyễn’s works. As Seno explains, “This mind-set is a direct result of our colonial past. After all, how can you unite an archipelago of some 7,000 islands, where there are 12 major languages?”¹⁸ As its title denotes, the act of translation is a central motif in the film. However, although the dialogue switches between Tagalog and English at certain points, rather than focusing on the act of translation itself, Seno uses the term metaphorically to address connections she sees between the experience of the Filipino diaspora and commodity culture under capitalism. “Nervous Translation” refers to a magic pen that Yael sees advertised on Japanese television that promises to bring her a “beautiful human life.”¹⁹ Here translation is not literal, but the pen is a commodity that is marketed through its ability to “translate nervous thoughts.” A reference to Seno’s own autobiographical experiences of being a child growing up in the diaspora, through the logic of capitalism, the pen promises to “translate” the anxiety of “not belonging” that manifests itself in different ways throughout the film as objects take the place of absent people.

Similarly, in rendering the phenomenology of the home, as Hannah Paveck has observed, the sound design places emphasis on the sonic textures of isolated objects and surfaces that resonate within in it, such as the monotonous tick-tock of the clock in the living room, Yael’s echoing footsteps across the tiled floor, or the latch on the door of her miniature toy stove.²⁰ The sonic metaphor of surface plays out in the film when Yael verbally lists the sounds that she can hear: the ring of the telephone, the ceiling fan, the air conditioner. Through the layering and looping of each vocalization in the aural mix, her voice resonates and harmonizes with itself as she transcribes each sonic detail in her notebook. In this way, the sound design of *Nervous Translation* similarly plays with spatial, affective, and emotional constructs of proximity and distance as it amplifies a sense of fragmentation—depicting the acoustic space of the home as one of isolation rather than community and comfort.

In their emphasis on the oral and acoustic—categories at the heart of Glissant’s poetics of relation—both *Everyday’s the Seventies* and *Nervous*

18 Andrew Northrop, “The Spaces That Inhabit Us: Shireen Seno on *Nervous Translation*,” Kinoscope, December 7, 2018, <https://read.kinoscope.org/2018/12/07/the-spaces-that-inhabit-us-shireen-seno-on-nervous-translation/>.

19 Japan occupied the Philippines between 1942 and 1945.

20 Hannah Paveck, “Wonder in Miniature: Shireen Seno’s *Nervous Translation*,” *Another Gaze*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.anothergaze.com/wonder-miniature-shireen-senos-nervous-translation-feminist-review/>.

Translation share some characteristics with what Hamid Naficy describes as “epistolary films,” about which he writes, “Electronic epistolary media, such as the telephone, answering machine . . . audiocassette, and video cassette, are widely employed, resulting in fragmented, multifocal, multivocal, and emotional narratives.”²¹ Like the films Naficy writes about, both Nguyễn’s and Seno’s works address the physical and haptic nature of the audio technology: the grooves on the vinyl, the magnetic tape of the cassette, and the satisfying “clunk” of the play button that Yael repeatedly presses on the boom box in order to access her father’s voice on the cassette tape love letters he has recorded for her mother. These devices suggest a lessening of physical distance—an imagined proximity to that which the protagonists long for, a sense of home that is as much sensory and emotional as literal.²²

Listening enables a way of conceptualizing region not as a static entity but as a spatial imaginary shaped by affect, relationality, flow—and even perhaps an imagined proximity—as the expansiveness of the sonic allows for a perception of embodied space that works outside of frameworks of territories and borders. As Nguyễn and Seno’s works show, attending to the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination allows us to trace processes of contact, heterogeneity, and lateral exchange that are informed by transcolonial histories and by shared experiences of diaspora and migration, across and beyond Southeast Asia.

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21 Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 104.

22 See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 12.

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.¹ 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 Ratanaruang, 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 1876.² 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.³ By 2100, without protection, more than 40 percent of the region’s biodiversity will be disappeared completely.⁴

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.⁵ The forest continues to be embedded within national discourses and is managed as a part of national projects.⁶ It can also be viewed as a site for national religious practices.⁷ 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.”⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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*

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.¹¹ These stories play out against a soundscape of bird-song and insect and animal calls from species threatened by deforestation.¹²

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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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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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.

Jasmine Nadua Trice, “Performing Region in Southeast Asian Film Industries,” *JCMS* 60, no. 3 (Spring 2021): 188–193.

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.
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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.

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