

SOUTHEAST ASIAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

ESSAYS · DOCUMENTS · INTERVIEWS

Edited by Tilman Baumgärtel



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Introduction

Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia

Tilman Baumgärtel

In May 2010, a beaming Apichatpong Weerasethakul received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his movie *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Loong Boonmee raleuk chat, 2010), one of the most prestigious awards that the international film world has to offer. On pictures from the festival that went around the globe, we see him accepting the award from Charlotte Gainsbourg with a big grin, exchanging kisses with “Best Actress” winner Juliette Binoche, posing for the photographers on the red carpet with leading actress Wallapa Mongkolprasert.

Apichatpong is no stranger to the Cannes Film Festival. In 2002, he had won the top prize in the “Un Certain Regard” program of the festival for *Blissfully Yours* (Sud Sanaeha, 2002); two years later, he received a jury prize for *Tropical Malady* (Sud Pralad, 2004) and headed the jury in the following year. Yet, there is something particular about the pictures of Apichatpong in his white suit, complete with white bow tie, from the 2010 festival. They seem to show a director, who has arrived in the international film world and is completely at ease with its rituals, even though he is from a country that only a decade ago was *terra incognita* on the map of international cinema. No Thai filmmaker had ever been invited to the festival before Wisit Sasanatieng's *Tears of the Black Tiger* (Fah talai jone, 2000), a highly stylized, candy-colored homage to the Thai action films of the 1960s and 1970s, was included in the program in 2001.

And it is not just Thailand. The cinema of Southeast Asia has been a *quantité négligeable* internationally until very recently, despite the fact that this part of the world has been positively cinema-crazy for decades. The region has a number of countries that rank among those with the highest cinema attendance per capita in the world. The Philippines, for instance, rivaled both the US and India for decades in terms of filmic output,¹ and even a nation like Myanmar (also known as Burma) used to produce up to 100 films a year in the heydays of its film industry around 1960.²

Yet it was only the recent New Wave of art-house films, often shot on digital video, that has put Southeast Asian cinema on the map internationally. The first decade of the 2000s has seen a rise of independent cinema in a number of Southeast

Asian countries that is nothing short of spectacular. A region where for a long time commercial productions and genre movies were made by big studios or low budget film producers to appeal to the local market only, has recently made itself heard on the international art house and festival circuit. Of all the countries of Southeast Asia, only the Philippines had a tradition of independent filmmaking before 2000. Kidlat Tahimik is revered by contemporary indie filmmakers of the country as the director who made the first independent art-house film in the Philippines, *The Perfumed Nightmare* (Mababangong bangungot, 1977). In the 1980s, young filmmakers such as Nick Deocampo and Raymond Red used Super-8 film as a relatively inexpensive tool to create films that otherwise would not have been possible. Their works were shown at international film festivals, and can be considered as forerunners of the contemporary indie filmmakers of Southeast Asia.

More recently, directors such as Apichatpong, Wisit, Nonzee Nimibutr, and Pen-ek Ratanaruang from Thailand; Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, and Ho Yuhang from Malaysia; Lav Diaz, Khavn de la Cruz, Raya Martin or Brillante Mendoza from the Philippines; Royston Tan or Tan Pin Pin from Singapore; and Riri Riza, Nia Dinata or Edwin from Indonesia have drawn attention to a part of the world whose rich and diverse film culture and history are so far not part of the Grand Narrative of World Cinema.

As different and distinct as the works of these filmmakers are, more often than not this new generation of filmmakers has been empowered by the easy and cheap access to digital video. The arrival of relatively affordable video cameras that allow for shooting broadcast quality; editing software, that runs on off-the-shelf home computers; cheap DVD burners that allow filmmakers to create their own DVDs; and the Internet as a medium to either promote or even distribute one's works are the most important tools that have made possible this democratic cinema revolution in a part of the world that is otherwise not known for its democratic disposition. Most of these filmmakers would never have had a chance in the commercial cinema of their respective countries. Due to digital cinema technology, they now have the opportunity to produce their alternative and often very personal works. Interestingly, the consumption of these digital films has become something akin to a lifestyle statement among middle-class youth in all of these countries, and the festivals and competitions that screen those films—such as the annual Cinemalaya Festival in Manila—are often overcrowded.

I count myself extremely lucky that I happened to be in this part of the world—teaching first at the University of the Philippines in Manila, then at the Royal University of Phnom Penh in Cambodia—when this revolution began, and that I was able to observe it from a very privileged position: attending festivals and conferences in the region, meeting filmmakers on an informal level, often before they became successful, and seeing films before they were finished or had entered the international film circuit.

In Europe and in North America, filmmakers started in the late 1990s to experiment with the possibilities of digital video. Among the first movies shot on digital home consumer cameras that were released theatrically and brought the blurry, pixilated look of digital video to actual movie theater screens, were the early Dogma 95 movies *The Celebration* (Vesten, 1998) and *The Idiots* (Idioterne, 1998) and the independent horror movie *Blair Witch Project* (1999). With a slight delay, the kind of equipment that was used to shoot these films became available in Southeast Asia, and this was the beginning of the Indie Revolution that we are witnessing today.

A new kind of microcinema has emerged in Southeast Asia in the ten years since. This development has had a tremendous impact on local film production: In the Philippines, statistics from the Film Academy of the Philippines show that 45 digital films had been exhibited in 2010, while there were 28 movies that were shot on conventional celluloid. This was the second consecutive year that digital movies outnumbered films shot on regular film stock since 2005, when the first digital film was screened in Philippine cinemas.³

In the countries of Southeast Asia, most of them “emerging economies” that are more often than not devoid of any film subsidy system to speak of, this development has allowed small production teams, often working with absurdly low budgets, to produce films that are shown around the world at festivals and have garnered positive reviews and awards internationally. It has brought a new generation of filmmakers and new voices from a part of the world to the international film scene that previously were not heard. This book aims to document this new development that is a genuine outcome of the democratization and liberalization of film production brought about by digital technologies.

The independent films from Southeast Asia are typically low budget productions, and the budgets are much lower than filmmakers from other parts of the world might be able to fathom. Let’s look at some numbers: The films of Thai director like Pen-ek Ratanaruang, for instance, are shot on an average budget of US\$500,000—already a relatively low sum in comparison to independent films from Europe or the US—that Ratanaruang raises from different international distributors, including the Dutch production company Fortissimo, one of the leading financiers of Asian and Southeast Asian art-house films. His movies, which are shot on regular 35mm, typically get a limited theatrical release in Thailand as well as in a number of other territories, such as the US or a handful of European countries. They might also be shown on television in various countries and released on internationally-available DVDs.

However, the majority of independent films from Southeast Asia are never released theatrically at all, either in their own countries or anywhere else, but are only shown at international film festivals and are only occasionally released on DVD. Therefore the directors have to work with budgets that are much lower

than regular film productions in their respective countries. For example, the latest films of the Philippine director Lav Diaz, such as *Death in the Land of Encantos* (Kagadanan sa banwaan ning mga Engkanto, 2007), that were shown only at international festivals or in Cinémathèque-type of cinemas and so far have not been released on DVD, are typically shot on budgets that are significantly lower than US\$10,000—despite a running time between eight and twelve hours! Brillante Mendoza reports in the interview in this book that his debut film *The Masseur* (Massahista, 2005) was produced on a budget of half a million pesos (slightly more than US\$10,000 or slightly less than €10,000), and that it was much more expensive to blow the film up to 35mm for the theatrical release than to shoot it.⁴

Many of these films are possible only because all of the collaborators, from the actors to the cinematographer, work for little or no compensation. They forgo all set design, costumes or special effects and are shot at easily available locations, with actors dressed in their own clothes, while the post-production is done on the computer of the director, who often serves as scriptwriter, editor or—as in the case of Khavn de la Cruz from the Philippines—even as the composer of the score of his films. Film production used to involve teamwork that took place in expensive studios and cutting rooms. Now, the revolution in film production brought about by digital technology allows anyone to become a film director: all they need is access to a digital camera and a computer. (For a hilarious account of how to make movies under such conditions, skip ahead to the production notes of Malaysian director Khairil M. Bahar on his feature-length digital film *Ciplak* (2006) that was made for less than US\$3,000, most of which was spent on the purchase of a digital video camera.)

The independent revolution started in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the 21st Century with films like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (Dokfa nai meuman, 2000) in Thailand, Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* (2000) in Malaysia or events like a festival of digital shorts at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in November 2000 that included works by directors like Khavn de la Cruz, Chris Pablo, Ed Lejano and Jon Red, who went on to be among the principal independent filmmakers in the country. In Singapore, where independent director Eric Khoo jump-started the local film scene in the mid-1990s after over a decade without any local movie production to speak of, the advent of digital film equipment around 2000 started the career of filmmakers such as Royston Tan. And in Indonesia, the omnibus film *Kuldesak* (1999) with episodes by the young directors Nan Triveni Achnas, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani and Riri Riza (who all went on to become name directors in their own right) served as the nucleus of a small but active independent film scene.

While not all of the films mentioned here were shot digitally, the scope of independent movies that are currently coming out of Southeast Asia would be impossible without the technological progress in digital video. Unlike the

technical experiments of the European Dogma 95 filmmakers, who often dwelled on the visual flaws of digital video, the directors discussed in this book use the new medium pragmatically, as a substitute for traditional film, which most of them simply cannot afford. It allows them to take on subject matters neglected or ignored by commercial cinema makers in their home countries.

Often, these are stories from the dark underbelly of society, like Jim Libiran's ghetto gang movie *Tribu* (2007), Tan Chui Mui's *Love Conquers All* (2006) about the relationship between a Chinese girl and a Malay pimp, Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (Kwaile gongchang, 2007) about the red light district Geylang in Singapore, Jeffrey Jeturian's *The Bet Collector* (Kubrador, 2006) on illegal betting, or Brillante Mendoza's *Kinatay* (2009) on a contract killing. They take on subject matters that are politically taboo in the often rather authoritarian countries of Southeast Asia, such as Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* (Lelaki komunis terakhir, 2006) on the Communist revolt in the 1950s Malaysia, Yasmin Ahmad's interracial love story *Sepet* (2004), or Martyn See's *Singapore Rebel* (2005) on the leader of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party that were either shown only after "offensive" scenes were cut or were banned outright in their respective countries. In Cambodia, Chhay Bora with his debut *Lost Loves* (2011) tells the sage of a family under the Khmer Rouge dictatorship that the current government is trying to relegate to oblivion.

But they also show mundane and unspectacular everyday life, like Woo Ming Jin's *Days of the Turquoise Sky* (Kurus, 2008) or Liew Seng Tat's *Flower in the Pocket* (2007), or address the anxieties of the newly emerging middle class in the countries of Southeast Asia, like James Lee's *My Beautiful Washing Machine* (Mei li de xi yi ji, 2004), Chris Martinez's *100* (2008), or Ken Lume's *Dreams from the Third World* (2008).

They also try to revive traditional ways of story-telling through the means of cinema, as in the case of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (Dokfa nai meuman, 2000) or Mingmongkol Sonakul's *Isarn Special* (2002), or develop an experimental language very much their own, as in John Torres' *Todo todo teros* (2006), Lav Diaz in all of his epic productions, or Raya Martin's pseudo-silent movie *A Short Film About the Indio Nacional (Or The Prolonged Sorrow of the Filipinos)* (Mailing pelicula nañg ysañg Indio Nacional (O ang mahabang kalungkutan ng katagalugan), 2005). Their themes include sexual mores: The onslaught of independent gay films from the Philippines, from Brillante Mendoza's *Masahista* (2004) to the complete Œuvre of Chris Pablo, is a point in case. They deal with racial problems—a reoccurring topic in most indie films from Malaysia. And they include the often disturbing consequences of modernization or "Westernization" in the countries of Southeast Asia, be it the bourgeois alienation in many films from Singapore or the gloom of globalization's losers in the Philippines.

However, these films should not exclusively be judged by their political relevance or the issues they address, as they are first and foremost movies with an aesthetic and artistic agenda. And it is on the aesthetic level where the indie films of Southeast Asia really shine, especially when they are trying to find a filmic language of their own that is not derivative of Hollywood or other international cinemas. Movies such as Amir Muhamad's *Malaysian Gods* (2009) that was recorded in one long take; or Mez de Guzman's sparse, quiet *Road to Kalimugtong* (Ang daan patungong kalimugtong, 2005); Raja Martin's *Independencia* (2009), a modern take on Philippine studio filmmaking; or Apichatpong Weerasethakul's improvised and elliptical *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) might be about one issue or another. However, what really sets them apart is their uniquely formal approach towards their stories. They are by all means serious and determined attempts to develop a new filmic vocabulary.

The rise of an independent cinema in Southeast Asia is one of the most significant developments in World Cinema right now, and the film community has taken notice. International film festivals have invited record numbers of films from the region or organized special retrospectives dedicated to certain filmmakers or Southeast Asian countries. Consider the vivacious comments by Canadian film critic Cameron Bailey on the website of the Toronto Film Festival 2007. What he writes about the independent cinema of the Philippines applies to some extent to the other countries of Southeast Asia, as well:

Consciously or not, these Filipino directors have revitalized the long-dormant notion of Third Cinema, first deployed by radical Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in the late sixties. But where Third Cinema rejected on political grounds both the Hollywood model and its counterpoint in European art cinema, the practice in Manila is not nearly so doctrinaire. There, if it works, if it gets you closer to the world you want to put on screen, you use it. The Manila model needs to be exported. In Sri Lanka, in India, in Kenya and in South Africa, to take only a few examples, filmmakers face the same circumstances they do in the Philippines. Harsh social conditions, institutionalized inequity and limited resources stop many artists in these countries from picking up cameras in the first place. But by refining the practice of naturalism and exploiting the accessibility of new technology, Manila's best young filmmakers have turned disadvantages into useful tools.⁵

While there is something bewildering about a film critic from the First World telling filmmakers from the Third World what they just *need* to do, this kind of appraisal which has gained currency in the writing on Southeast Asian film is of importance, as it stresses the possibility of a technologically augmented equal status between films from the global South and the rest of the world. The recent

onslaught of digital films from Southeast Asia is then, not just another “New Wave,” but points to a fundamental power shift in regards to films from the “developing countries” of the world.

Similar claims have been made before in the history of cinema, when new technologies such as 16mm, Super 8 or analog video came along. All these media, however, never leveled the playing field the way digital cinema does now. It has become a commonplace to state that in a near future, all films will be digital, and on one level or another they all are already anyway. But with the dramatic progress in digital film technology, it seems a given that the filmmakers from the less affluent parts of the world will soon have access to cameras and means of post-production that are in the same league as their counterparts in the First World. This development is being played out almost as in a petri dish in Southeast Asia right now.

The new digital equipment is not only relatively affordable, but also light-weight and easy to use, the tapes are cheap and the post-production can be done on regular off-the-shelf PCs. It allows one to work on a film by oneself. Many of the filmmakers in Southeast Asia labor in relative isolation, and if they use crews, they are as small as possible, often just a cameraman or a sound man. Filipino director John Torres co-wrote, directed and edited his debut *Todo todo teros* (2006) and also shot most of the footage for the film. “Fortunately, with the digital cameras of today, you can just shoot and shoot and play around with the images,” he says about his way of working. “You do not have to set up anything. You do not have to talk to people . . . [T]he possibility just freed my mind! I did not have to start with a script or with a dialogue, I just shot whenever I felt the need to and then started to edit small things together without really knowing where I was going or what I was doing.”⁶

The flexibility and autonomy that digital video afforded these filmmakers calls to mind Alexandre Astruc’s notion of the *caméra-stylo* (the camera pen),⁷ where filmic images become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language and where the director is the sole author of the film—an idea that was the nucleus of the French *auteur* theory. In the case of *Todo todo teros*, the final film was put together in a process very similar to solitary writing. Torres says about the editing process of *Todo todo teros*: “Eighty percent of the time when I edit my films, I sit in front of the computer and stare at the screen, not knowing what to do. Then again, you can just leave a shot on the desktop for weeks, and you can think about it and where you want your story to go. It is also very easy to manipulate colors with one click of a button, or to rearrange all your shots, play stuff backwards, play around with the sound.”⁸ Digital video, therefore, has not only made it much easier to shoot films, but it has also brought the production process of films in close proximity to the process of writing, as Astruc had hoped for. Without rental fees for studios, editing equipment or the need to pay editors and other collaborators it enables the filmmakers to create their films with almost complete autonomy.

While some directors might find such conditions abrasive, as it puts all the burdens of the production on the filmmaker alone, it does have the advantage of allowing for a great deal of freedom and flexibility. At the Cinemanila Film Festival in Manila in 2007, I ran into a Philippine director who used his laptop in the breaks between film screenings, interviews and meetings to put the finishing touches on his latest work that was to premiere the next day at the same event. (Unfortunately, the “flexibility” of working with digital can also backfire as in the case of the disastrous post-production of Lav Diaz’ *Evolution of a Philippine Family* (Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang pilipino, 2004), where the computer with the almost finished film crashed a week before its official premiere at the Toronto Film Festival, forcing the director to start the post-production from scratch.)

This book wants to contribute to the budding discourse on these developments. While there is a growing interest in Asian cinema lately, the focus so far typically has been on the cinemas of Japan, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan or more recently South Korea. However, the cinemas of the countries of Southeast Asia have on the whole been underappreciated or almost entirely overlooked—despite the vibrant and diverse film cultures that these nations had in the past—and despite their considerable output today.

There has been an ongoing debate about the thorny question whether the very diverse cinema of the region needs to be shuffled together under the moniker “Southeast Asian Independent Cinema.” I see the validity of this kind of argument, and this important issue is discussed in greater detail in some of the essays in this book. After all, there aren’t many books on European or North American cinema, but rather books on Italian, French, German, Danish, US-American, or Canadian cinema, are there? And aren’t studies of national cinema passé anyway in the age of cultural globalization? A statement by Chris Berry about the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien applies to the cinema of Southeast Asia at least the same extent: The “national cinema’ approach is too invested in territorial nationalism to adequately account for films such as these.”⁹ And finally, it needs to be pointed out that a number of countries that are considered to be part of Southeast Asia have so far had no or only a very small part in the recent digital film revolution: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, East Timor and Brunei have for a number of different reasons (state censorship, lack of film culture, extreme poverty) not participated in the recent upsurge of filmmaking that can be observed in their neighboring countries.

So, why construct a phenomenon like “Southeast Asian Independent Film”? Despite their many differences, the films discussed in this volume seem to share common traits. First of all, this type of film—whether radical experimental works, gay love films or digital art-house movies that address the ills of contemporary society—did not exist in the region even ten years ago, when the privilege to produce films was limited to a small group of commercial studios (often subsidiaries of powerful television stations) that had the means to produce films in safe genres

such as melodrama or (teen) comedy and another small group of independent outfits that typically churned out B-to Z-grade productions in genres such as soft sex, action and horror. Secondly, digital video simply has not had a similar impact in other parts of the world.¹⁰ And finally, all of these films touch in one way or another on subjects that are problematic or unresolved in their respective societies.

Many independent films of the region speak about issues that earlier generations of filmmakers did not dare to touch or were prohibited from addressing because the means of productions were in the hand of commercial film studios that had no interest in those topics. That is not to say that there weren't neorealist or socially critical films before. Most of them, however, were made in the framework of the mainstream film industry, and typically had to conform to some extent to the conventions of this industry. What sets the contemporary independent films apart from the films of a Lino Brocka in the Philippines or the early Chatrichalerm Yukol in Thailand is the degree of independence that the new digital tools allow filmmakers—both in terms of what stories they tell and how they approach their themes formally.

Western viewers who grew up in relatively open and liberal societies will often have a hard time understanding how radical and subversive some of the films discussed in this volume are in their respective countries. (It would be an interesting experiment to show a movie like Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* to a Western audience, and then let the viewers guess why this film was banned in the country of its making.) Southeast Asia is a region where most countries have a troubled history of wars, *coups d'état* and periods of dictatorships after the end of the colonial period, where democracy so far has not taken hold and where civil society is little developed. Therefore, many controversial topics have been swept under the rug for a very long time. What all of the films discussed in this volume have in common is that they dig deep into these contradictions and troubles—sometimes in an in-your-face kind of way, sometimes in a rather restrained, subtle or cryptic fashion.

At the same time, the independent films that have come out of Southeast Asia in the last decade are by no means a homogenous lot. They include films that are relatively conventional art-house movies, which are often produced by quite established production companies—such as the films by Yasmin Ahmad, who was a TV commercial director in her day job—and radical experiments such as the films by John Torres. They contain the grim neo-realist movies of directors like Brillante Mendoza as well as the sophisticated essay films by Amir Muhammad. And they include films from Third World countries like the Philippines and Indonesia as well as from Singapore, which is the only country in the region that has managed to close ranks with the First World and has a standard of living that rivals that of the countries in the “Global North.”

Finally, to some extent the decision to cover not just the indie cinema of one country of Southeast Asia, but rather the whole region, was due to sheer

pragmatism. I would not have found a publisher for a book on the contemporary cinema of just one country, as, for instance, the incredibly productive Philippines. I also simply did not see the possibility to gather enough worthwhile material on just one of the countries covered in this book, as film criticism in many countries of the region has yet to catch up with the output of their filmmakers. At the same time, I felt it was a valid approach to try and document the revolution that has happened in the various countries of Southeast Asia at the same time.

In order to do the conditions of film production and reception in the region justice and to paint an objective picture of the debate on films in Southeast Asia, I felt it was important to include a wide variety of voices, not just essays from the relatively homogeneous crowd of university-affiliated film critics who dominate the academic discourse on Asian cinema. Therefore, this book contains contributions from a motley crew of film bloggers and tenured university professors, of Ph.D. students, film critics, and even a published novelist, poet and playwright. I also wanted to include the perspective of the very subjects of this book, the filmmakers themselves, and therefore included a good number of interviews and other personal accounts and primary sources by important directors and screen writers. I hope this not only adds to the usefulness of this book for those teaching Southeast Asian cinemas in colleges and universities, but makes the book accessible to a wide-ranging group of readers.

Notes

Introduction: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia

1. For a comprehensive list of film releases during the “Golden Age” of Philippine cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, see Momblanco 1979, Junio 1995.
2. According to an unpublished interview that I conducted with veteran producer and actor Htayaung and scriptwriter U Aye Kyu Lay in the film museum of the Myanmar Motion Picture Association in Yangon in January 2010, the Burmese film industry produced a total of 92 pictures at its peak in 1962.
3. Carreon, 2010.
4. All this information stems from the interviews with the filmmakers in this book.
5. The essay has since disappeared from the website of the Toronto Film Festival together with the rest of the material on the 2007 edition of the event.
6. Baumgärtel, 2007, 86.
7. Astruc, 1968.
8. Baumgärtel, 2007, 91.
9. Berry, 2006, 148.
10. However, there are indications that South American countries like Colombia are about to see a similar renaissance of their national cinema very similar to what is happening in Southeast Asia right now.

Chapter 1: Southeast Asian Independent Cinema

1. Ciecko, 2006, 104.
2. Lent, 1990, 167.
3. Lent, 1990, 166.
4. Paramaditha, 2007, 50.
5. Fuziah/Alauddin, 1995, 65.
6. Khoo, 2004, 172.
7. Khoo, 2004, 174.
8. Knee, 2007, 125.
9. Chaiworaporn, 2007, 9.
10. Khoo, 2004, 169.
11. Fuziah, 1995, 62.
12. Tan, 2007, 149.
13. Lent, 1990, 156.
14. Lent, 1990, 156. del Mundo, 2003, 169. del Mundo, 2003, 171.

15. Lent, 1990, 165.
16. Cieccko, 2006, 92.
17. Cieccko, 2006, 94.
18. Cieccko, 2006, 104.
19. Chaiworaporn, 2007, 9.
20. Sen, 2006, 102.
21. Jayasrana, 2007, 112–118 van der Heide, 2007, 85.
22. Khoo, 2004, 171. van der Heide, 2007, 85.
23. Tan, 2007, 148.

Chapter 2: Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds

1. Anderson, 2003, 6.
2. Khoo, 2007, 227.
3. Raju, 2008, 74.
4. Appadurai, 1996, 27–47.
5. See for example the interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul in this volume, where he talks about the production of his first feature length film *Mysterious Object at Noon*.
6. For historic overviews on the film history of these countries, see the resoeective chapters in Hanan 2001, Lacaba 2000 and Lent 1990. Cieccko 2006 has chapters on the contemporary film scene in the major Southeast Asian countries. For insightful essays on Thai and Malaysian cinema, respectively see Chaiworaporn 2002 and Muthalib 2002.
7. Appadurai, 1996, 32.
8. Appadurai, 1996, 34.
9. Appadurai, 1996, 32.
10. For more on Singaporean cinema, see Chea 2006, Millet 2006, and Uhde 2000.
11. Appadurai, 1996, 34.
12. Appadurai, 1996, 34.
13. He maintains a photo diary on the website of his production company, Kick the Machine, that nicely demonstrates this life style, showing pictures of dinners in Europe next to snapshots of shootings in the Thai jungle.
14. Conversation with the filmmaker on November 19, 2008.
15. Appadurai, 1996, 34.
16. Khoo, 2008, 25.
17. According to an email correspondence with Amir Muhammad in April 2009, from which all this information stems, less than one hundred copies were sold this way.
18. Appadurai, 1996, 35.
19. For an account of the role of the Goethe-Institute in developing the Philippine experimental film scene in the 1980s, see Baumgärtel 2007.
20. See Baumgärtel 2009. For more material on piracy in the region see the website of the conference “Asian Edition. A Conference on Media Piracy and Intellectual Property in South East Asia” that I organized in 2006 at the University of the Philippines: www.asian-edition.org.

21. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of pirated films on the works of independent filmmakers in Southeast Asia, see Baumgärtel 2010.
22. Muhammad, 2009.
23. Tioseco, 2005.
24. Manirajan, 2007.
25. Appadurai, 1996, 36. This passage is an indicator of the period in which Appadurai wrote this text. Almost twenty years later, the enlightened “Euro-American master-narrative” might not be so dominant anymore, while “keywords” in the global ideospheres might include Jihad, anti-Zionism, tribalism, genocide or creationism.
26. Appadurai, 1996, 33.
27. Appadurai, 1996, 33.

Chapter 3: Hinterland, Heartland, Home

1. Uhde/Uhde 2000, 12.
2. Amin, 1998; Jamil, 1990; Mohd Zamberi/Aimi, 2005; Hamzah, 1997.
3. Uhde, 2000; van der Heide, 2002; Millet, 2005.
4. Regular retrospectives are conducted by FINAS, the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia. Various studio era artists have also been conferred with titles and honors, among them Dato’ Jins Shamsuddin and Dato’ S. Shamsuddin, for their contributions towards “national culture.”
5. Apcar/Arnold/Mydans 2007, n.p.
6. Hooker, 2003, 174.
7. Van der Heide, 2000, 176.
8. In both *The Trishaw Man* and *My Mother-in-Law*, the *kampung* as represented on screen are surrogates: a shantytown in the former, and Penang in the latter. The relatively more obscure films that I cite, however, portray actual *kampungs* shot on location.
9. The archetypal film of this nature is P. Ramlee’s classic *My Mother-in-Law*. The mother-in-law’s class-conscious harangue of P. Ramlee’s character, Kassim Selamat, in the film is one of the most oft-quoted lines in Malay cinema: “Kassim Selamat? Who is Kassim Selamat? Lawyer? Magistrate?...A musician? My ancestors are turning in their graves! A musician! You ungrateful daughter!”
10. Jamil, 1998, 62.
11. Translation mine.
12. Sweeney, 1988, 110.
13. As documented in Chua, 1997.
14. Chua, 1997.
15. This occurred after Operation Coldstore, a nation-wide sweep which resulted in the arrest of suspected Communists and their subsequent detention under the Internal Security Act. The PAP was able to eliminate its main opposition, the left-wing Barisan Sosialis, from the political arena.
16. Gamer, 1972.
17. Lindquist, 2000.
18. Tan/Yeoh, 2006, 147.
19. Ibid.

20. Wong, 2005, 68.
21. This title bears a resemblance to P. Ramlee's *The Trishaw Man* made forty years earlier. In both films, the title suggests a character defined by his occupation, whose individual subjectivity is subsumed under his role in the economy. In both films, the occupation is a working-class prototype, announcing the filmmakers' sympathy or solidarity with the less-privileged.
22. Chua/Yeo, 2003, 119.
23. Wee, 2007, n.p.
24. Chua/Yeo, 2003, 119.
25. Ho, 2007, 310–326.
26. Anonymous: We're going to get better men and we'll fight, *Straits Times*, May 9, 2006.
27. Goh, 2003, 96.
28. Rachel's violation of the heartland space is underlined by the fact that she audaciously parks her Mercedes-Benz on a lot reserved for the handicapped. While this might suggest a critique on Rachel herself being either socially or emotionally handicapped, a more obvious reading would be of the "city girl" who is oblivious to local norms of expected behavior.
29. Goh, 2005, 95.
30. Guneneratne, 2003, 175–176.
31. Wee, 2007, 6.
32. Ho, 2007, 310.
33. This particular location, a sand stockpile in Singapore which is used for construction projects and land reclamation, is a favorite spot for Tan, who has used it before in his short film *Sons* (2000). It is interesting how in both these films, the sand stockpile is never referred to as what it actually is, but is employed as a signifier for limbo and indeterminacy.
34. Lui, K. n.d.
35. Punggol, in the Northeastern part of Singapore, used to be one of Singapore's last surviving areas which still consisted of farmland. In 1996, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the Punggol 21 plan, where the government intended to develop "21st century model housing" in Punggol, a mix of private houses, executive condominiums and high-grade HDB flats.
36. The annual Orchard Road Christmas Light-Up is a typically consumerist Singaporean event that spruces up the downtown shopping district to encourage greater spending. Notably, the light-up often starts a full month before the advent of Christmas.
37. Goh, 2005, 101.
38. Goh, 2003, 101.
39. Chua, 1994, 5–6

Chapter 4: Stealing Moments

1. The term "reforgotten," may have been first publicly coined in the title of the poetry event *Return of the Reforgotten*, organized by Sinclair's early publisher Mike Goldmark at the Albert Hall, London, in October, 1995. Later it would be used and more clearly defined in Sinclair 1997.

2. Baratham, 2001.
3. Sa'at, 2001.
4. In the Singapore context, the term “heartland” and its occupants, the “heartlanders,” signifies ordinary, working class people, usually of Chinese ethnicity. Government rhetoric often makes the distinction between the conservative, family values of the majority “heartlanders” versus the more progressive, liberally inclined, city-center “cosmopolitans,” a highly reductive construction of national identity and geography.
5. For more information about the film’s distribution, see Tan Pin Pin’s essay in this book.
6. HDB is an acronym for Housing Development Board, but is commonly used as a noun to refer to high-rise public housing that the HDB are responsible for building and maintaining, in which the vast majority of Singapore’s population dwell.
7. “On the whole, I think a lot of people have become immune to the Ugly Singaporean. You require a certain sensitivity to detect this behavioral pattern. I think once you’re used to such face-to-face encounters on a daily basis, you come to accept it, and you also tend to get infected by it, to take on The Scowl.” From Sa’at 2002.
8. A government campaign strongly encouraging Chinese of different dialect groups to speak Mandarin was initiated in 1979, after that dialect was phased out from television, radio, and cinema. Today, Cantonese TV drama and films from Hong Kong will routinely be dubbed into Mandarin for Singapore. The majority-dialect of many Chinese Singaporeans, Hokkien, is partly permitted in theatrically released films from Singapore, but there are no official guidelines permitted as to how much is acceptable. See Slater 2007.
9. The song of that title was written in 1959 by Freddy Fender, an American country musician. It’s worth quoting from the second verse: “Why should I keep loving you / when I know that you’re not true? / and why should I call your name / when you’re to blame/for making me Blue?”
10. This film was commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore as part of their (re) opening festival in 2006, it was screened on December 17 of that year, and after that has never been publicly screened in Singapore again. It is entirely in Hokkien.

Chapter 5: Fiction, Interrupted

1. Chetana Nagavajara: *Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective. Collected Articles 1978–1992* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996): 98, 108, and 120. For detailed information on Thai drama forms and their historical development, see Mattani Moj dara Rutnin: *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand. The Process of Development and Modernization* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996).
2. Chetana 1996, 239ff.
3. This might call to mind the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. As Chetana 1996 points out, Brecht’s alienation effect bears similarities to the aesthetic effect of traditional Thai drama (98). However, the background of this illusion differs greatly from that of Brecht’s theory, especially with regard to the explicitly political dimension of the latter. It is doubtful whether the parallels extend far beyond the level of appearance and effect.
4. Jackson, 2004.

5. White 2002 describes the Southeast Asian conception of cinematic realism and its connection with inconsistent *mise-en-scène* in Singaporean horror films of the 1950s and 1960s based on Malay mythology. On the topic of modernity and cinematic realism in Thailand, see also Hamilton 1992.
6. In an e-mail to the author (March 14, 2009).
7. The links between the films are indicative of the ties between the filmmakers who are acquaintances and have worked together earlier. As Mingmongkol's production homepage (that is not available on the internet anymore) stated, *Isarn Special* was inspired by an idea by Apichatpong.
8. In an e-mail to the author (March 14, 2009).
9. By the term semi-independent, I mean independent productions that rely on distribution by majors, as described in: Musikawong 2007. For a descriptive overview of Thai independent film, see Chaiworaporn 1997.
10. See Sudarat 2007 (as cited above).

Chapter 6: Cinema, Sexuality and Censorship in Post-Soeharto Indonesia

1. For MFI's statements and media coverage about MFI, see the MFI website.
2. For an overview of the debates, see *Jurnal Perempuan*, vol. 47, 2006.
3. I am indebted to Tilman Baumgärtel and Anna McCarthy for their suggestions in the process of revising this essay.
4. Anderson, 1991, 6.
5. *Ibid*, 134–135.
6. Film Law no. 8/1992
7. For an in-depth analysis of New Order film censorship, see Sen 1994.
8. Film Law no. 8/1992, explanation of Article 3, 18.
9. Spyer, 2004.
10. Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, 1987, 46.
11. Suryakusuman, 1996.
12. Brenner, 1999, 14.
13. Wieringa, 2002, 1.
14. Mayer, 2000, 5.
15. Mosse, 1985.
16. This regulation was supposed to strengthen the position of wives of civil servants in the Dharma Wanita organization because it made practices of divorce and polygamy more complicated. Yet the deeply-entrenched patriarchal values resulted in unintended consequences with men taking mistresses secretly or abandoning their wives without giving financial support. See Suryakusuma 1996.
17. Dwyer, 2000, 26.
18. *Ibid*, 29.
19. *Ibid*, 38.
20. Constitutional Court verdict No. 29/PUU-V/2007, 88.
21. Tedjasukmana, 2006.
22. Constitutional Court verdict No. 29/PUU-V/2007, 92.
23. *Ibid*, 99.

24. Ibid.
25. Constitutional Court verdict No. 29/PUU-V/2007, 88.
26. Ibid, 92.
27. Ibid, 157.
28. Constitutional Court verdict No. 29/PUU-V/2007, 98.
29. Ibid, 125.
30. Ibid, 173.
31. Allen, 2007, 104.
32. Constitutional Court verdict No. 29/PUU-V/2007, 125.
33. Ibid, 117.
34. Ibid, 118.
35. Ibid.
36. Sen, 1994, 63–64.
37. Salim, 1991.
38. Constitutional Court verdict No. 29/PUU-V/2007, 29.
39. Ibid, 42.
40. Ibid, 54.
41. Ibid, 80.
42. Van Wichelen, 2007, 104.
43. Perempuan Punya Cerita, 2008.
44. Ibid.
45. Nia Dinata, interview by author, April 24, 2008.
46. Ibid.
47. Mohanty, 1991.

Chapter 7: Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia

1. Black, 1998.
2. Kusuma/Haryanto 2007, 105, 125, 130, 132.
3. Wright, 2007, 2–4.
4. Haryadi, 2008, viii.
5. Ibid, 38.
6. Ricklefs, 2001, 151–153, 183.
7. Ibid, 213.
8. *Widodo, 2008.*
9. Both presentations took place in September, 2008. See Imanjaya 2008, while Sasono has not published his paper.
10. Imanjaya based prophetic cinema on the concept of prophetic literature movement of the Muslim author Kuntowijoyo. Nevertheless, I find Imanjaya's concept of the "prophetic film" a little problematic for my purpose, since being "prophetic" does not necessarily mean "Islamic." See Imanjaya 2008.
11. Ibid.
12. Wright, 2007.
13. Quoted in Salim, 2008.
14. Sen, 1994, 43.

15. JB. Kristanto, *Katalog Film Indonesia* (Jakarta: Nalar, 2005), 67.
16. Chisaan, 2008.
17. Sen, 1994, 122–123.
18. Ibid, 75.
19. Ibid, 79–81.
20. A common metaphor in the Koran to describe how hard it is to get to heaven.
21. Kristanto, 2008, 133, 145, 235.
22. However, some of the conversations in the movie are on the correct interpretation of the Koran.
23. Vickers, 2005, 200–201.
24. Kristanto, 2008, 364–365.
25. Ibid, 251, 280, 281, 398.
26. Ibid.
27. Wijaya, 2008, 137.
28. Andan, 2008, 11.
29. Wijaya, 2008.
30. The original movie tells the story about a pickpocket turning a nationalist fighters' leader in the 1947 Indonesian war of Independence. The sequel, *Nagabonar Becomes 2* (*Nagabonar Jadi 2*), is about the same protagonist, who—now old, rich, and religious—cannot accept the way his son as well as the new generation deal with social and nationalist issues. Mizwar played as Nagabonar in both movies.
31. Translated from Haryadi, ibid, 7.
32. This reaction includes attacks from the opposition: the former head of *Muhammadiyah* and Congress, Amien Rais, cynically said that he does not want to see the movie to avoid crying about a movie, while there are many real miseries in Indonesia to cry about.
33. Ibid, 14.
34. Ibid, 12.
35. Ibid, 129, 131.
36. Ibid, 30–32.
37. Ibid, 52.
38. Ibid, 53–54.
39. October 15, 2008, at the South Jakarta Youth Center.

Chapter 8: Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia

1. Danusiri, 2005, 9.
2. Aftab/Weltz, 2000.
3. Prakosa, 2008, 172–199.
4. Abdullah/Biran/Arday, 1993, 295.
5. Ishizaka, 1999. This view of the majority of documentaries produced in the New Order period, particularly those shown on television, being mainly propaganda, is supported by Prakosa, 2008, 187.
6. Nichols, 1991, 34–38.
7. Hanan, 2008.

8. See Melalatoa 2001 and Bowen 1991.
9. Hanan, 2005, 5.
10. Danusiri, 2005, 5–6.
11. Aftab/Weltz, 2000.
12. For more information on *Two Laws*, see Williams and Grace 2008.
13. For a discussion of political murder in West Papua, see Ipenburg 2002.
14. For an account of the early years of Indonesian rule in West Papua, see Osborne 1985 and Budiardjo/Liem 1988. For an account of the reaction of Indonesian authorities to the May–June 2000 West Papuan Congress (where a preference for full independence from Indonesia was expressed), see Chauvel 2001. For an account of the reduced role of a Papuan central indigenous provincial assembly, see Chauvel 2008.

Chapter 10: Why *Ciplak* ended up being made

1. Bernard Chauvel's romantic comedy from 2005, that was reasonably successful among young Malaysians.
2. VCD is a digital format for storing video on a compact disc that is still very popular in many countries in Asia.

Chapter 20: The Page and the (Video) Camera

1. For a more in-depth look at Amir's persona and a systematic approach to his films, see McKay 2005, McKay 2010.
2. See <http://amirmu.blogspot.com> [accessed February 22, 2009].
3. The essay can be found in Lopate 1998.
4. Respectively, Lim 2008, 32, and McKay 2006. The official website of *The Big Durian* contains further material on and around the project. The production notes are of particular interest.
5. For details and comments on the making, the attempted release, the subsequent domestic banning, and the participation at international film festivals of both films, see the blog created by Amir himself and regularly updated between 2006 and 2007.
6. Tamil is the most common language spoken by ethnic Indians, who are the smallest of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia.
7. The controversial premiership of Mahathir Mohamad lasted for twenty-two years (1981–2003).
8. In the magic practice of *Susuk*, small objects such as gold, silver, and diamonds are embedded in a person's skin in order to increase his or her allure.

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In this index, the title of a film is its English translation. To learn the original title, go to the first reference of the respective film.

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