

**In (Qualified) Defense of “Southeast Asian Cinema”:
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I paradoxically need to start in my “defense” of Southeast Asian cinema by indicating what it needs to be defended against that is to say, by describing what is seen as the problem with it to begin with. I think it would be fair to say that the two key concerns generally raised about the use of the term Southeast Asian cinema are, 1. that it is loaded with ideological baggage and is removed from the actual peoples and experiences (and in some cases the scholars) of the countries in question, the product of Western thinking and Cold War priorities, which it still residually supports, and 2. that as an artificial construct, moreover, “Southeast Asian cinema” inhibits more appropriate extra-regional linkages between films, industries, etc. from being apprehended and studied. Such concerns follow on from directly interrelated concerns in corollary fields such as Southeast Asian studies, which has naturally also struggled with various definitional problems regarding “Southeast Asia,” a term which, aside from being ideologically suspect (as noted), has also proven difficult to demarcate precisely (where does one draw the line?).

I would like to respond to the two above-mentioned key concerns about “Southeast Asian cinema” by arguing that while they may indeed have some merit, they are both surmountable, can both be mitigated and that they do not constitute sufficient cause not to use the category. Simply because a construct can and has been used in a deleterious fashion, for colonialist or imperialist ends, does not mean it cannot also be used for very different ends, as long as we remain self-aware about the aims of our projects, about the reasons for choosing the parameters we do, and explicitly engage with these issues where appropriate. Indeed, such concerns about the terminology suggest a not fully rational fear of taint, an assumption that terms cannot be reworked and put to different uses and if such alternate uses are available (as I shall argue that they are), disallowing the concept on these grounds would seem most counterproductive. The root term “Southeast Asia” indeed had a history before the Cold War (and was predated by another significant term: Nanyang) and has had many different uses subsequent, including by the people of the region itself, perhaps most notably in relation to the operations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Certainly “Southeast Asia” can be seen as an artificial and potentially loaded construct, as can be said of much regional nomenclature but it is an artificial construct with a real history and real use by the stakeholders. Again, the answer for the use of “Southeast Asian cinema,”

I would maintain, is not to jettison the term, but to be aware of its range of implications, present and past, of how and why we are employing it. One of our areas of exploration, indeed, should be what properly constitutes and/or characterizes the regional cinema and why. For example, are we justified in including Singapore and in what ways, to what extent? For that matter, what about Hong Kong, with its own geographical proximity (or overlap?) and deeply intertwined history?

As for the second set of concerns, that the use of the framework might displace or disguise other, more fruitful or appropriate linkages, this again is to some extent logically fallacious, because it is not a necessary outcome of the use of the term. There is nothing to prohibit one from examining a film or a film industry in relation to more than one relevant set of regional or national or other kinds of linkages, and indeed, in many cases it makes perfect sense to do so, to get a fuller picture of layerings of meanings and/or influences by reference to the entire complex fabric of interrelationships within which a text or phenomenon operates. We could take the case of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* as a particularly current example, though I have not yet had the opportunity to see it. Certainly on some levels, we could discuss this Thai-directed, Thai-filmed, Thai-co-production as a Thai film, although it, like all of Apichatpong's work, is very different from other Thai films; we might, for example, discuss the themes of Buddhism, reincarnation, the supernatural in relation to other Thai films that feature such themes, while the need for international funding (and the engagement of international art film tropes) could be compared with that in Pen-Ek's later work. But at the same time, the film's extensive figuration of the Southeast Asian jungle as a space imbued with a range of mysteries related to identity, sexuality, and the supernatural nearly screams out Southeast Asian cinema and invites linkages with numerous other Southeast Asian films (both popular and arthouse) that figure related spaces with similar thematic overtones; Apichatpong's work could also perhaps be approached, in a Southeast Asian framework, in comparison to that of Southeast Asia's other radically innovative trans-media-inclined feature filmmaker, Garin Nugroho. It is also possible (though in this case I don't think as fruitful) to discuss *Uncle Boonmee* as an Asian film, as did most of the news reports lauding it as the first Asian winner from Cannes since 1997. But one would in some sense be missing the point if one did not also discuss the film in terms of still larger supra-national categories for example art film or modernist film or avant-garde film or multimedia art projects. My point though is not that any one piece of analysis needs to encompass multiple frameworks, but merely that the engagement of one given framework say "Southeast Asian cinema" does not necessarily foreclose others, especially given the fact that any text is multiply situated.

Assuming, then, that one is able to accept my argument that concerns

about the framework forcing constraints in film analysis are overblown, and that the potentially problematic aspects of the use of the Southeast Asian film rubric can be bracketed or avoided, the logical and practical question which arises and which I would now like to turn my attention to is: Why bother to use the framework? What is to be gained from it?

The central reason it is worth our bother is that it can considerably help illuminate our understanding of various films and film industries owing to the fact that the countries within this designated region have so many substantive interconnections in geographical, historical, political, economic, and social terms, interconnections self-consciously reinforced through the policies of ASEAN; and that, in turn, the film industries of the region have not only numerous parallels but also genuine linkages and overlaps, operating within circuits of exchange that are in many cases regionally based. Such a regionalism, moreover, is not merely the construction of (largely non-Southeast Asian) academics with too much time on their hands, but something self-consciously perceived and actively engaged with by the media-makers of the region who, in an age of easy electronic cross-border communication, regularly network, interact, and collaborate with one another, and also participate in various Southeast Asia-specific forums at festivals and cultural and educational centers both within the region and outside of it. Thailand, moreover, through the development of its own production industry, has emerged as an important regional hub for various industrial services, in particular post-production and processing of prints at such companies as Oriental Post and Technicolor Thailand. And, in turn, another regional production services industry, that of Singapore, is being developed with government monies, in part to compete directly with Thailand's. As abstractly-conceived phenomena go, "Southeast Asian cinema" exists in very concrete form.

By way of an acknowledgment, at the start of this conference, of two very important people from the Southeast Asian film community who tragically passed away within the past year, I could point to Yasmin Ahmad and Alexis Tioseco who in their lives much embodied this Southeast Asian cinema idea, while also being singularly passionate about their own respective national cinemas. Yasmin, of course, was very connected to the film community throughout the region and had worked on critically acclaimed public service announcements in Singapore and was in pre-production on a Singaporean feature film at the time of her death. And Alexis, while a committed champion of alternative Filipino production, made one of his most important contributions through the founding of a website, *Criticine*, aiming to "raise the awareness and profile about Southeast Asian cinema in a global context by providing an avenue for serious discourse on film and its developments in the region."

As for specific topics which can gain from examination through the lens of Southeast Asian cinema, a quick glance at the program for this conference (or should I say "meeting") indeed reveals many of these, although national

cinema paradigms are also clearly important for the work to be presented here. This is not in any way to prescriptively suggest that everyone necessarily should be focusing on the Southeast Asian framework, but simply, again, that reference to regional positioning (alongside whatever other kind of analysis is being carried out) can add to our understanding of a range of texts and phenomena. Indeed, this became particularly clear to me when teaching Thai cinema, from a largely national framework, and finding on more than one occasion, that phenomena I was describing to my class as Thai really needed to be simultaneously discussed as Southeast Asian. In order to concretize this notion and support it a bit further, I would like to at this point enumerate a few areas of such study that might in particular benefit from the Southeast Asian rubric.

Firstly, and most broadly, there is the study of regional film history. For example, the marked shifts in film history in various countries in Southeast Asia from around the time of the 1997 economic crisis clearly have numerous parallels and interrelations and could readily be considered on a regional basis, though a cohesive account of this most recent history has yet to be written. There are historical interrelations that could be discussed for earlier periods as well (though perhaps not as strongly) the importance of Hong Kong-related companies to film production and exhibition, however, would be one key topic of regional historical significance.

A second key topic, one that is in fact an important factor in the region's contemporary history, is the significance of changing moving image technologies to the robustness of production in the region. The availability of low-cost digital equipment was decisive in allowing the comeback of filmmaking in a majority of countries in the region, and new technologies are also relevant to the shifting aesthetics and shifting modes of distribution and consumption of films in the region. Other related issues that could be discussed include how vcd and dvd (and now blue-ray) consumer formats have been adopted in different ways and at different times than outside the immediate region and, most recently, how the wide utilization of RED brand digital cameras has yielded an improvement in the visual quality of regional low-budget production (an issue which, by the way, also problematizes the "cinema" part of the "Southeast Asian cinema" rubric, though I will not be focusing on that point here).

Another key topic, with direct parallels across the region, is the ways the various local production sectors have worked to respond to an ever more globalized media industry through a range of strategies such as attempting to emulate the dominant global production modes, attempting to infuse local content into internationally distributable packages, or choosing to focus instead primarily on the national market and/or on diasporic audiences abroad. Connected to this is the topic of the ways regional (and often underfunded) industries have attempted to secure capital for their productions for example,

through seeking regional co-production or corporate sponsorship, or mobilizing to attempt to increase (or at least initiate) government support for local production.

Circulation to international film festivals has emerged as another particularly important means of securing funding and/or distribution for productions from the region, while festivals within Southeast Asia have emerged as a significant phenomenon simultaneously with the resurgence of local filmmaking. These festivals have run the gamut of modes of production and niche interests, from typical international feature film exhibitions, to specific popular genre and national film festivals, to a range of experimental, short, and student showcases; and, germane to our interest here, quite a few of these have by design and intent taken on a Southeast Asian focus and have served as meeting points for media makers and scholars and critics with an investment in the region, and have ultimately served as drivers for production in the region; the traveling S-Express short film festival founded by Yuni Hadi (representing Singapore), Chalida Uabumrungjit (from Thailand), and Amir Muhammad (from Malaysia), with subsequent collaboration from Alexis Tioseco, is a particularly exemplary instance of a festival self-consciously working to foster a regional filmmaking community. Even the country where we presently find ourselves [Vietnam] has announced a major new international film festival for this coming October, which is supposed to include a particular focus on Southeast Asia (and our conference packet even includes an announcement about a festival in Laos). The Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore have had a particularly broad range of festivals, even if they have not always been so successful and indeed the troubling decline of a number of the major festivals of the region in the past year or two could itself be discussed in regional terms.

In relation to the issue of government support, a problematic can be seen across the region in terms of the relationship between the State and media production, in a period marked by intermittent political and social liberalization tempered by episodes of political instability and the rise or resurgence of activist religious fundamentalism. This contemporary stress between progressive and conservative, and secular and religious, impulses which again, I would suggest, has emerged as a regional phenomenon has been perhaps most concretely evidenced in the past two to three years in renewed attention to and closely related debates over censorship regulation and enforcement in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

An area in which government attention has been distinctly lacking across much of the region and which provides another topic appropriate for regional focus is that of tertiary and graduate film production and film studies education, which has had some evolution, but very slowly (perhaps with the exception of the Philippines).

The Southeast Asian context is also germane to the study of issues of film

archiving and preservation areas which have suffered in the region owing to, 1. a climate that hastens the deterioration of films and related artifacts and 2. a lack of government funding.

Moving from such issues of production and reception environments to the films themselves, one could, at the broadest level, discuss the particular genre ecology of the region, the distinctive properties and importance of, for example, the horror, action, comedy, and melodrama genres, as well as the distinctive dialectic between popular films and art films, which have borne a much closer relationship here than in many other parts of the world. Southeast Asian horror films indeed seem to lend themselves very strongly to a regional perspective with their cast of local supernatural characters who have substantial overlap from country to country. Historical dramas, too, have had a strong regional import, the issue of the representation of problematic or traumatic local pasts being one which again links various Southeast Asian films and in fact transcends genre. One could also, in relation to genre, discuss the rise of a very active region-wide independent and experimental film community, the members of which often have stronger links to one another than to commercial filmmakers in their home countries.

A regionally-inflected and prevalent thematic in many of the films which, again, can benefit from analysis in a Southeast Asian context is that of the local experience of and response to modernity and globalization. This theme is often related, in turn, to an articulated narrative and/or visual tension between the urban and the rural, as well as tensions between old values and new (and/or foreign) ones. To mention just a handful of examples of the scores of Southeast Asian films which evidence such thematics: From Vietnam, one could cite *Long-Legged Girls*, *Bar Girls*, *The Little Heart*, or *Clash*; from Thailand, *Ong Bak*, *The Letter*, or most any film directed by Pen-Ek; from Malaysia, *Spinning Gasing* or *Evolusi KL Drift*; and from the Philippines, any of the myriad films about overseas Filipino workers (such as *Dubai*).

Drawing right from this, one could also discuss the distinctive spatial realms or geographies of Southeast Asian cinema, something I alluded to in talking about *Uncle Boonmee* (but which is also relevant to most of Apichatpong's feature work) the particular ways of figuring and the specific resonances of jungle, city, ocean.

Directly related to the tension between traditional and modern is a prevalent set of themes and issues in Southeast Asian films regarding the status of religion (and to some extent the interaction of differing religious beliefs) in modern life. While the religions focused upon of course vary by country, the prevalence of the concerns and the particular kinds of issues raised can again, I would argue, be seen as a regionally specific phenomenon.

Issues of gender and representation naturally also relate to the aforementioned issue of themes of modernity and of the status of religion and can also be examined in a Southeast Asian context one in which, it could be

argued, women have historically had more kinds of social power and authority than in other Asian nations, but in which, at the same time, many traditional values regarding gender still prevail. The social status of women, the nature of changing sexual mores, and controversies over gay and transgender identities have all been significant foci of the region's cinema. The regional analysis of issues of gender could extend back out to the level of production context as well, for example in an examination of the status of women in various Southeast Asian film industries (some of which, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, interestingly have quite a number of particularly influential women directors and producers). To mention just a few of numerous examples again: from Indonesia there are the films of Nia Dinata, and from Thailand the popular international hits *Iron Ladies* and *Beautiful Boxer* as well as a range of teen sex comedies aimed largely for a local market.

Issues of class have not previously received a lot of attention in Southeast Asian cinema, but certainly could be discussed fruitfully in a regional context especially given the rise of (and cinematic representation of) a new dominant moneyed Southeast Asian urban elite quite removed from the large numbers of urban and rural poor. (Again, to cite some pertinent films and directors: *Anak* from the Philippines; *Flower in the Pocket* and the films of Yasmin Ahmad from Malaysia; *Berbagi Suami*, *Rindu Kami Padamu*, and the films of Joko Anwar from Indonesia; *The Maid* and the features of Royston Tan from Singapore; *Tears of the Black Tiger*, *Mon Rak Transistor*, and *October Sonata* from Thailand; *Snaker* from Cambodia.)

And lastly, somewhat overlapping with the issues of religious and class difference, issues of ethnic difference have been making their way more into the public consciousness (and slowly into the cinemas) of the countries in question and would also be a logical area for future Southeast Asian-framed analysis; of particular note here, as it is a shared point of reference across the region, is the representation of Chinese ethnic characters and communities within these films, a topic that has already begun to be discussed with respect to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand for example, and is certainly also pertinent to the cinema of the Philippines, Singapore, and Cambodia. And one could also again step back to the production context to look at the historical role of ethnic Chinese in the film industries of these countries.

Now this laundry list of possible topics is not meant to be fully comprehensive, but rather to begin to more concretely suggest *some* of the many arenas in which an awareness of the regional context could be useful for the fullest analysis and to insist that there *are* many such arenas, that this is not an endeavor of only peripheral interest.

Having made a brief case for the utility of "Southeast Asian cinema" in the analysis of films and film industries, I would like to move on to another argument for the use of the term. Not only can the framework be potentially illuminating for our understanding, but also, I would submit, its employment

can have a strategic importance for those of us interested in this topic. Because the unfortunate fact of the matter is that, despite the substantial rise of Southeast Asian cinema in the past 15 years, its presence barely registers in either the global pop-cultural or academic consciousnesses. Although, for example, Thai action and horror and Indonesian horror have developed certain niche fan bases, the average moviegoer has little sense of Southeast Asian cinema as a whole or of the cinema of any of its component nations—that is, it has not been effectively “branded” and as a result, its producers have a considerable difficulty in getting it distributed outside of the region.

In terms of academia, Southeast Asian topics are often subsumed under the rubric of Asian studies, a fact which often does not serve the smaller subfield especially well. The Association for Asian Studies at the very least has a regional council devoted to Southeast Asia and offers a range of Southeast Asian-specific panels (sometimes with some film-related papers) at its annual conference. But on the other hand, the Modern Language Association of America, one of the largest and most important of professional organizations in the humanities, has no discussion or interest groups related to Southeast Asian languages or literatures, although there are a number related to East Asian and South Asian topics, a fact which naturally does not encourage Southeast Asian film-related presentations at its conference.

Perhaps more disheartening is the fact that while the Asian media studies field has been redefining itself, actively involved in debates about “de-Westernizing” and indigenizing its assumptions and methods, discussion of the media of Southeast Asian nations is hardly anywhere to be seen. To put this another way: while casting off the remnants of a former imperialist yoke, Asian media studies (and Asian studies more broadly) remains less cognizant of its own internal imperialism, the effacement of the concerns of Southeast Asian nations in favor of those pertaining to, typically, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and sometimes Taiwan. Those of us who are living or have lived in the region know that this imperialism I allude to is not merely academic, that in many ways Southeast Asia has been positioned as an economic and cultural underling to more economically developed nations of East and North Asia—but it of course seems particularly hypocritical for a movement concerned with revealing and deconstructing old power relations to then replicate them at another level.

My position, then, is that rather than downplaying or eschewing the Southeast Asian designation, we ought to be embracing and promoting it, not only because it does significantly correlate with the media and people and media industries we are concerned with, but also because it can provide us with a presence and visibility which has been lacking in present debates over global media flows and power, a way to allow us to assert ourselves within that discussion which other designations might not. My caveat, the qualification I allude to in the title, is that we also need to avoid a monolithic

conceptualization of the term or of the way it is applied to texts and industrial phenomena, need to always remember that such texts are multiply positioned, that it is in reality not an “either-or” proposition. We need to remain self-conscious both of what we are taking the term to mean, and of the possible implications of the particular uses we are making of it, in order to avoid some of the pitfalls mentioned earlier.

Now I have thus far commented on some of the “why” we ought to be utilizing the designation Southeast Asian cinema and “what” some of the topics are that this might encompass, but I think it also appropriate to make a few comments as well about the “how.”

An obvious but crucial first step for us as scholars, programmers, curators, and media-makers is simply to remain aware of the term and its relevance, to keep the framework in mind for when it makes sense to use it, to bring it to bear where it has formerly been omitted. For a university teacher, this can mean trying to get your department to agree to a Southeast Asian film class or, at the very least, keeping an eye out for ways to introduce the concept of filmmaking in the region within a broader-themed class. For a media-programmer, it plainly might mean giving consideration to regional-related programs, while for a filmmaker who feels it relevant, it could bear upon the ways chosen to position his or her works. On first hearing, this group of suggestions may seem rather negligible, but I would insist these kinds of efforts can have an important cumulative and knock-on effect. In a very different context, I can recall, some 20 years ago, introducing a course on race in American film, focusing in particular on African-American film, into the curriculum at Penn State University, and finding that there were as yet surprisingly few teaching resources on the topics, and that students remained fairly uneasy at first about discussing a relatively novel and controversial set of issues. But bit by bit interest was developing – soon enough rapidly developing – on both the academic side and the production side, so that within a few years there were many texts on these topics, much interest in the rising work of young Black filmmakers (and in the neglected works of some filmmaking pioneers), a wealth of teaching materials, and, eventually, a marked ease among American students in examining what were once highly uncomfortable issues.

But while initial efforts akin to these have, I believe, helped and will continue to help the cause of Southeast Asian cinema, it is unlikely they could in themselves be sufficient, given the relatively intransigent and powerful nature of the institutional status quo (both in the academy and in various filmmaking arenas), the potential tenacity of older and outmoded approaches to conceptualizing Southeast Asia and thinking about Asian media – concerns which I alluded to at the start of this discussion. In relation to this, it would indeed make sense to take a cue from debates within Asian media studies which have called for the critical de-construction of Western critical frameworks and for new thinking about what might constitute an indigenous critical framework.

We need to be aware of potential pitfalls in not only our critical methods but our institutional frameworks as well, and to think rigorously about possible adjustments or alternatives to both to make them germane to the subject at hand.

Along these lines, one of the key efforts that needs to be made is ensuring that Southeast Asian film studies has the integrity of being *of* Southeast Asia, not only informed by ideas from and relevant to the region, but indeed substantially constituted by and speaking to people of the region. This point might highlight the irony of my own subject position, if I could point out the elephant, the white elephant, in the room. It might be seen as a dubious enterprise for me, a Western-born, Western-educated academic not of Asian ethnicity, to be making observations and suggestions about the field of Southeast Asian film studies. But my point is not by any means that Southeast Asian film studies needs to make itself over as insular and exclusive (which would be counter-productive for a range of reasons, not least because it would be re-instituting the kind of either-or, West-the rest thinking we have been criticizing), but rather that there needs to be a critical awareness and privileging of Southeast Asian perspectives and a direct involvement of Southeast Asian people (and there's another term we'd need to define) for the discourse to have integrity. This means, in part, that we need to make sure what we do remains accessible, open, relevant on a variety of levels. And that we need to explore not only modes of thinking but also modes of dissemination of ideas that are most appropriate to our aims.

I do beg your forbearance if I close with what might seem an opportunistic or self-congratulatory observation, because I think it will very well help illustrate the kind of effort I'm describing: That is that the present forum (which I was *not* involved in organizing) in a way embodies the kinds of rethinking and adjustment and access I've been referring to. It has been mounted within Southeast Asia itself (and outside or alongside the usual university frameworks), it has been designed for maximum interactivity (with no simultaneous panels and plenty of time for discussion), and it includes participants running the gamut from scholars to curators to filmmakers, students to professors, Western-residing Asians to Asian-residing Westerners. This marks a modest but potentially significant kind of institutional revision providing a context where a range of voices can ideally intermingle. The rest, as they say, is up to you as well it ought to be.