



Report

Altered Landscapes and Filmic Environments

An Account from the 13th Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference

Tito R. Quiling, Jr.

It's just past 10:00 am on a humid Monday in Singapore, and the streets seemed to have settled after a workday rush.¹ My walk from Arab Street to McNally Street was rather placid, punctuated by moments at intersections, and surrounded by people heading somewhere. Minutes later, I was looking up at the postmodern buildings of LASALLE College of the Arts—a panorama of reinforced concrete, glass, tiles, and steel gleaming under the morning sun. In cinema, spaces and landscapes are primary features. At times, the setting goes beyond the overarching narrative, as it conveys its own story. Given their impact, Stephen Heath (2016) infers that a process occurs in identifying spatial connections to the characters, since “organizing, guiding, sustaining and reestablishing the space are the factors that reveal this process.” The audience absorbs the familiar images or experiences onscreen. However, embodied objects of varying iterations contribute to how environments in films are concretized. On this note, one can ask: in what ways do filmic environments thus project narratives and discourses?

Framing Issues and Artifacts

The 13th Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference centered on the theme “The Environments of Asian Cinemas,” and covered such timely subjects as the ecological ranges of Asian films, ecocriticism, and filmic environments, including “various material, cultural, and regulatory environments of production, distribution, execution, and reception” (13th Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference book). The conference was hosted by LASALLE College of the Arts in 2019. The Asian Cinema Studies Society (ACSS) intends to “promote the scholarly field of Asian Cinema Studies” through its biannual conferences and to amplify this academic venture through the circulation of its flagship journal, *Asian Cinema* (published by Intellect Books). At present, the journal is under the editorship of Gary Bettinson and current ACSS Chairman, Tan See Kam.

Following one morning session, a tour of the prize-winning city campus buildings was held alongside a walkthrough of Brother Joseph McNally Gallery at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. Assistant Curator Melanie Pocock introduced the exhibition “Object of Desire” (2019) to enthused participants. Curated by Dagrún Aðalsteindóttir, the works consist of prints, collages, installations, films, and performances by eight artists from Singapore and Iceland: Dagrún Aðalsteindóttir, Weixin Quek Chong, Guðlaug Mía Eypórsdóttir, Styrmir Örn Guðmundsson, Saemundur Thor Helgason, Daniel Hui, Luca Lum, and Guo-Liang Tan. Mounted throughout the spaces in the stark white gallery, these objects explore the affective agency of images and objects as “things” that are desired, distributed, and reproduced.² The exhibition suggests that our creation and reproduction of images leads to objects and subjects becoming indistinct, as they are affected by our subjectivity.

Objects, Bodies, and Movement

Professor Sheldon Lu of the University of California at Davis delivered the keynote address focusing on intermedia as a chronicler of transnational capitalism. Lu is the author or editor of several books, including *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (2007), *Essays on Chinese Ecocinema* (coedited with Haomin Gong, 2017), and *Chinese Ecocinema in the Age of Environmental Challenge* (coedited with Jiayan Mi, 2010). Intermedia are platforms like computers, smartphones, films, and poems that display the manipulative nature of global capitalism. Lu (2019) claims that “in a world of socio-ecological crises, many people have taken up the intermedia as a form to expose the horrors of the global chain of manufacture and consumption, the dehumanizing aspect of the assembly line, the brutality of animal products, and globally manufactured waste.” I took notes from Lu’s statements on how intermedia, like film and poetry, uncover stories and experiences as people untangle their meanings, where layers of truth are revealed and realities are questioned.

Given the existence of virtual pathways, sending and receiving information through numerous devices have become a necessary evil. Despite breaks for exposés, some practices remain unseen—hidden by corporations to protect public identities. From Lu’s presentation, two works that typify the conditions of labor and its effects on the environment are the documentary films *Manufactured Landscapes* (Jennifer Baichwal, 2006) and *Plastic China* (Wang Jiuliang, 2016). Baichwal’s film looks at manufacturing units and how products from mainland China are sent to the western side of the globe. This dependence on artificial output in many trades and products (such as plastic bodies for computers, clothing irons, tires, and metal sheets) serves as fodder to fill the larger sphere of landscapes altered by human activities. By contrast, Wang presents a more intimate insight into global flows of goods and refuse by portraying two disadvantaged families who make their living from salvaging plastic waste

brought in from “developed” countries. With the movement of disposed materials, Wang’s film seemingly offers a counterpoint to Baichwal’s illustration of products being exported to the West and then returning to the East as excess and debris. With reports on countries that are purportedly the largest producers of global plastic waste, these films offer important perspectives by tracing the origins of items through phases of consumption, usage, and disposal, perspectives that contribute to fostering consciousness and addressing this enduring environmental problem. Landscapes reveal how human movements, objects, and environments are integral components in the development and decline of societies.

Spaces and landscapes are an “expression of society.” With structural changes, Manuel Castells asserts that “it is a reasonable hypothesis to suggest that new spatial forms and processes are currently emerging” (1996: 440–441). Cities and towns shift as people move. In the documentaries, the filmmakers offer scant commentary as they focus on the movement of objects and human bodies, as seen from Baichwal’s crowd of workers and tenants in mass-produced spaces to Wang’s individual family members moving inside their homes. The cyclic movement of production and waste is inscribed onto landscapes as the setting benefits from, or is diminished by, the presence of human bodies shifting the use and physicality of landscapes.

Filmic Images and Intersections

Wang’s documentary was the first one I saw screened at the conference. It was followed by a documentary film by Valerie Soe, *Love Boat: Taiwan* (2019). Soe shares a sense of nostalgia in her film as she presents lighthearted reminiscences by participants from a bygone chapter in their youth. Wang’s documentary bears a sustained tone of solemnity, while Soe’s film oscillates between projecting seriousness in narrating political history and a cheerful atmosphere as people from different cohorts recall stories contrasting the nature of the program’s control. The title refers to a moniker for the “Overseas Compatriot Youth Formosa Study Tour to Taiwan,” a summer program for college-aged overseas Taiwanese, mostly from Canada and the United States. Soe’s film warmly captures their recollections and is filled in with photos and videos taken during their respective trips. While the primary aim of the program was to reinforce Taiwanese identity through language, politics, history classes, and exposure trips, the temporary relocation also cultivated long-standing, even intimate, ties between young adults.

The program also included a special presentation of a newly restored film from the Asian Film Archive: *Chinta Kaseh Sayang (My Darling Love)* (Hussein Haniff, 1965), a Malay-language film set in Singapore featuring a tension-filled marriage. Also screened was a collection of live-action and animated shorts produced by the students of LASALLE’s Puttnam School of Film and Anima-

tion. The various films provided alternative views as they ran along with the parallel sessions, with some of them overlapping with the presentations. Other than the ones I attended, some films complemented the panel presentations. *Plastic China* ran alongside the panel on ecocritical issues, while *Havana Divas* (Louisa Wei, 2019), which delves into cultural nostalgia, was screened in line with the panel on historical film productions. Multiculturalism and hyphenated identities as panel themes were likewise found in *Finding Kukan* (Robin Lung, 2016), where characters track a female producer's trail, and in a riveting game of pursuit in *Sea of Mirrors* (Thomas Lim, 2019).

Composed of scholars and practitioners, the panels and presentations touched on a variety of topics, which were organized into ten parallel sessions. As with most conferences, my attendance at several panels was based on research, writing interests, and attendance at previous presentations by colleagues. Selected panels recounted the intersections of ecocriticism, landscape analysis, body studies, and cross-cultural influences. Exploring selected panels and presentations led me to think about how filmic environments project narratives and discourse.

Cinema can be viewed and used as a form of influence. I sat through one panel evaluating film as "soft power" through histories and cultures.³ Opening this discussion, Anubha Sarkar viewed Bollywood as a global representation inherently promoting tourism, expanding economic traction, and cultural ties. Similarly reflected in literature and cinema is "inter-Asian tourism," which Brian Bernards explored through exchanges between Thai and Korean aesthetics in *Hello Stranger* (Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2010). Bernards further discussed idealized views of Korean culture from the lens of audiences in Thailand, where production values also affect the leisure industry. A discussion of film locations and Asian fan tourism uncovered pathways of nostalgia, where Wikanda Promkhuntong and Kate Taylor-Jones jointly detailed how representations by digital nomads and social media augment a rediscovery of cultural trails, and Natthanai Prasannam noted fan subcultures that create affective spaces by traveling to replicate filmic experiences. On the topic of the conveniences of modern travel, Pasoot Lasuka spoke about how iconic locations in Thailand are furnished in creating connections with people moving "elsewhere," while Veluree Metaveevinij discussed key images of Bangkok in cinema such as those pertaining to sex, adventure, modernity, capitalism, and alienation.

Given the movement of people, the passage of material goods and modernization can be traced in cities. Elmo Gonzaga highlighted Hollywood films that are characterized as "planetary network blockbusters," which generate images of capitalism in Asian cities, an economic system symbolized by merchandise and "hyperbuildings." At present, Asian cities serve as a backdrop for illustrating contrasting images of squalor and development. On a related note, the real estate construction booms and busts in superficially glossy urban areas were evaluated

by Nicholas de Villiers as part of his survey of the phenomenon of urban construction and his discussion on identifying flooding water as a common element in ecocritical disaster films by Tsai Ming-Liang. Conversely, the innocence of rural areas was explored by Song Myoung-Sun, who offered comparative views on relocation through *Sunset in My Hometown* (Lee Joon-ik, 2018), a film in which the main character struggles between immersing himself in the urban pulse and remaining faithful to the images from his hometown. Mark Plaice reconstructed the South Korean countryside in selected gangster films that showcase the rural area as an extension of the city, where illicit activities corrupt the setting and its people. With these depictions, I thought about the extent of our sensitivity to places that we visit and our tendency to recall images of our homes.

Film Images and Other Beings

In addition to humans, other sentient beings served as a critique of related environmental concerns within Asia. Regarding animals, Christian Jil Benitez showed the harrowing experience of a dog from *Oro (Gold)* (Alvin Yapan, 2016) to highlight animal cruelty. Benitez contends the actual practice of animal slaughter diverges from the advocacies and ecological concerns of the film. Similarly, Olivia Khoo features an elephant named *Pop Aye* (Kirsten Tan, 2017) to emphasize environmental issues such as water pollution, deforestation, and habitat loss. The narrative and the characters are framed within the contexts of journeying and homecoming, which are familiar experiences. A panel on women traversing lines of power, bodies, and spaces echoed the themes of voyage, where spaces become a way of negotiating constructions of power dynamics through the female subject. Phoebe Pua examined the woman navigating the rural world in selected Southeast Asian films, where violence is a pervasive subject as female characters take control of their bodies in an attempt to gain freedom. On a similar note, Anne Mallari used the female figure in *Ang Damgo in Eleuteria (The Dream of Eleuteria Kirschbaum)* (Remton Zuasola, 2010) to note how the body transforms into a transnational subject as an immigrant or migrant under the scrutiny of foreign powers.

I recall following this dialogue on neocolonial forces, as the papers on rural environments in Philippine cinema also expounded on places outside the capital city becoming a rich background for discourses on regional cinema. Rolando Tolentino highlighted how regional cinema showcases local colors and flavors, which move away from presenting abject conditions typified by Filipino films that garner international recognition. Extending this analysis, Katrina Ross Tan explored the notion of archipelagic realities that reconstruct the idea of “nation” through the marginalized experiences of Filipinos from the regions. Focusing on Lav Diaz’s films, Adrian Mendizabal proposed “spacetime environments” and “sense-identities” that aid in rendering cinematic representations of who and what are located on the fringes of society. However, these

boundaries imposed by politics and cultures, the lines of power and spaces may be blurred.

From these selected presentations on soft power, gender, fauna, viewpoints, and urban and rural sites, I could see how investigating these intersecting subjects leads to further inquiries about how to illustrate ecological concerns and how to present their critiques. With the debatable accuracy of experiences and images inciting more research, calls for action may be conveyed through films and studies that underline how humans and objects affect one another under different environmental circumstances. Reflecting these kinds of changes, the intermittent heat and downpour in Singapore during the conference days showed different sides of the city. I took one last view at the gleaming buildings of LASALLE after an early evening screening before tracing the indigo skyline back to the streets of Kampong Glam.

Given the discussions on realistic and cinematic depictions of the world and its inhabitants, we can see how bodies continue to move through spaces and landscapes. Filmic environments project narratives through characters that move accordingly within landscapes and spaces, interacting with other bodies and objects. In altering landscapes, environments, and practices, behaviors and movements are modified as well. With environmental situations as a common thread, the 13th Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference in Singapore was a fitting venue in which to engage in discourses on the timeliness of ecological and ecocritical issues in cinema, where exchanges were framed within discussions on the production and distribution of materials. Similarly, the exhibition and reception of films reinforced the meanings and messages forwarded by film artists and scholars, as omnipresent issues of climate and social crises remain a daunting topic in Asian cinemas under precarious global circumstances, which themselves are set in ever-shifting environments and changing landscapes.

Tito R. Quiling, Jr., has an MA in Media Studies (Film) from the University of the Philippines Diliman and is a member of the Film Desk of the Young Critics Circle (YCC Film Desk). His research and writing interests center on the intersections of cinema, literature, architecture, and the city.

Email: titoquiling.jr@gmail.com

Notes

¹Special thanks to the LASALLE Organizing Committee, Isabelle Lim, Tay Siew Choo, and Dean Adam Knee for the post-conference correspondence and the group photo, to Phoebe Pua and Adrian Mendizabal for the photos and video coverage of the keynote address, and to the named presentors.

²The title of the exhibition pays homage to an essay by German-Japanese artist Hito Steyerl titled "A Thing Like You and Me" (2010), which was written for the catalogue for her solo exhibition at the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo, Norway.

³See Daryl Copeland's (2010) differentiation of hard and soft power and their respective influences relating to foreign policies.

References

- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Copeland, Daryl. 2010. "Hard Power, Soft Power, and Talking to the Taliban." *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 30 January. www.guerrilladiplomacy.com/2010/01/hard-power-soft-power-and-talking-to-the-taliban/.
- Heath, Stephen. 2016. "Narrative Space, Screen Journal." University of Washington. <https://djaballahcomps.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/heath-stephen-e28093-narrative-space-1976.pdf> (accessed 25 September 2019).
- Lu, Sheldon. 2019. "Media, Environment, and Labor under Transnational Capitalism." Keynote address at the 13th Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference: The Environments of Asian Cinemas. LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, 24 June.

Filmography

- Baichwal, Jennifer. 2006. *Manufactured Landscapes*. Canada.
- Haniff, Hussein. 1965. *Chinta Kaseh Sayang*. Malaysia and Singapore.
- Lee, Joon-ik. 2018. *Sunset in My Hometown*. South Korea.
- Lim, Thomas. 2019. *Sea of Mirrors*. Macao and Japan.
- Lung, Robin. 2016. *Finding Kukan*. USA.
- Pisanthanakun, Banjong. 2010. *Hello Stranger*. Thailand.
- Soe, Valerie. 2019. *Love Boat: Taiwan*. USA.
- Tan, Kirsten. 2017. *Pop Aye*. Thailand and Singapore.
- Wang Jiuliang. 2016. *Plastic China*. China.
- Wei, Louisa. 2019. *Havana Divas*. Hong Kong.
- Yapan, Alvin. 2016. *Oro*. Philippines.
- Zuasola, Remton. 2010. *Ang Damgo in Eleuteria*. Philippines.
-