

Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinemas in Southeast Asia. Edited by May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay. New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012. 239 pp.

This edited volume addresses the simultaneous emergence in the late 1990s of independent cinema both as a practice and as a discourse in the countries of the Southeast Asian region. Whilst taking into account the complications of doing so, most of these chapters adopt national starting points in their analysis of independent cinema. They consider Indonesia (Chris Chong Chan Fui), Malaysia (chapters by Hassan Abdul Muthalib, Benjamin McKay, and Gaik Cheng Khoo), the Philippines (chapters by John Torres and Alexis A. Tioseco), Singapore (chapters by Vinita Ramani Mohan, and Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde), Thailand (chapters by Chalida Uabumrungjit, Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, and May Adadol Ingawanij), Timor-Leste (Angie Bexley), and Vietnam (Mariam B. Lam).

In the same year that saw the appearance of this book, David C.L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto’s *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention* was also published. That volume’s central concern was to explore the ways in which social practices and ideologies have been represented, promoted, challenged, opposed, or erased in Southeast Asian films. With respect to the close attention given to the social and political contexts of these films, and their implication in the global flows of culture and capital, the two books are broadly similar. Each book, in fact, has a chapter on Martyn See’s political documentaries on Singapore. However, much of the volumes’ coverage is also different. Lim’s and Yamamoto’s book presents chapters that discuss both independent and mainstream films, across several genres. The cinema of Burma/Myanmar (Jane M. Ferguson), Cambodia (Boreth Ly), and Laos (Panivong Norindr) — not treated in Ingawanij’s and McKay’s book — are discussed in Lim and Yamamoto. For those countries covered in both books,

the chapters in Lim and Yamamoto discuss different issues and concerns, including for instance the Chinese in Indonesia (Abidin Kusno); patriotism and race in Malaysia (chapters by David C.L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto); film collectives in the Philippines (Rolando B. Tolentino); memories, activism, and new media in Singapore (chapters by Kenneth Paul Tan and Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi); migrants and nostalgic parodies in Thailand (Pattana Kitiarsa); and diaspora and war in Vietnam (Vo Hong Chuong-Dai).

The fifteen substantive chapters of Ingawanij's and McKay's book are framed by three separate but related overarching concerns. Some highlight the film-maker's place within relations of production shaped by the state, global capital, transnational cultural networks, and media-technological changes. Others focus on the diffusion and circulation of films and their discourses in contexts that include the national and the transnational, as well as alternatives to mainstream distributors and exhibitors such as niche festivals and piracy circuits. The rest deal mainly with the relationships between cinematic experience and national(ist) formations.

The chapters are organized into three sections. The first, under the heading "Action", features five chapters that attempt to document the pioneering efforts of individuals and collectives that produced, distributed, or curated independent films and videos in circumstances that were not often hospitable. These include chapters on Martyn See, whose low-budget short films on political dissidents and dissent in Singapore have met with investigation and censorship on the part of the authorities (Mohan); John Badalu, who organizes a queer film festival in a largely conservative country with a huge Muslim population (Chong); Malaysian-Indian film-makers who, because they produce Tamil-language rather than Malay-language films, are officially excluded from the category of Malaysian film-makers and from access to the benefits that it entails (Muthalib); Thai independent film-makers — supported by the film schools, festival mechanism, and film archive — who struggle to create a viable space that is independent of the mainstream

industry (Chalida); and John Torres, who attempts to distribute his independent film through the deeply entrenched institution of film piracy in the Philippines (Torres).

The second section of the book, “Reflection”, features six chapters that aim to analyse the meaning of independent cinema, its specific manifestations, struggles, and transformations, through close — mainly “auteurist” — readings of particular films in the critical light of the political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances in which they are implicated. For instance, McKay’s chapter is a very thoughtful analysis of Yasmin Ahmad’s films as works that attempt to reconcile dreamed and contemporary realities in Malaysia. Khoo’s detailed chapter identifies, among other things, a stark contrast between the apparent “optimism” in Yasmin’s films and the theme of alienation that sits at the heart of James Lee’s films, which the chapter closely analyses. Of particular note is Benedict Anderson’s chapter, an insightful analysis of Apichatpong Wirasetthakun’s *Sat Pralat (Tropical Malady)* as a film made from the inside of the world of the Thai village rather than about it. By making it difficult for and incomprehensible to the city-dwellers of Bangkok (some of whom problematically desire world-class-ness and Thai-ness at the same time), and by introducing the theme of male-to-male courtship, the film-maker seems to be able to retain the film’s independence by resisting banalization and “Bangkokization”.

Two chapters in Part Two of the book do not specifically feature auteurs. Bexley’s chapter on Timor-Leste explicitly analyses the complex relationships between the country’s independence and its indigenous film-making through a close analysis of the film *Rock ‘n’ Roll with Jakarta*, which serves as a window into the struggles of a younger generation of East Timorese. Ingawani’s chapter discusses the Thai Short Film and Video Festival in terms of larger critiques against and opposition to neo-liberal capitalist globalization. It highlights tensions between resistance to globalization and crony capitalism on the one hand and the risk of the rise in Thai society of a royalist, anti-globalization, neo-rightist tendency.

The third section of the volume, entitled “Advocacy”, is rather more difficult to characterize. The editors describe its chapters as demonstrations of how crucial it is for writings about independent films in Southeast Asia to endorse not only the films themselves but also this “young field” of study. Yet one gets the sense that these chapters, as broadly informative and richly insightful as they are, could have easily been included in the book’s earlier two sections, in ways that might have yielded many more interesting comparative observations. For instance, Baumgartel’s chapter on media piracy resonates strongly with Torres’s chapter in Part One. The chapter by Uhde and Uhde on the Substation as an alternative film venue in Singapore resonates strongly with Chalida’s and Chong’s chapters in Part One and Ingawanij’s chapter in Part Two. Separating them this way is to miss an opportunity for drawing connections, parallels, and differences that would make the notion of a Southeast Asian cinema more dynamic.

This book is certainly valuable for the richness and diversity of perspectives that it presents on the emergence of independent films in Southeast Asia. The chapters enjoy a light touch, editorially speaking. Some chapters are written as traditional academic essays, others more in the style of film criticism. Some are written dispassionately, others with the self-conscious presence of the author (including verbatim reproduction of interview transcripts). The variety of styles and formats makes reading the book a delight. The book also illustrates in itself the prismatic nature of independent cinema in Southeast Asia.

However, in the midst of this diversity (and the not very obvious rationale for segmenting the chapters into these three sections), one might wish for a chapter attempting to draw these themes, perspectives, experiences, and readings together in ways that address more deliberately the question of significance. The “so what?” question need not be answered — probably cannot be answered — but it would still be worth the effort to help the reader engage with the task of figuring out what kinds of questions could be

framed for the practice and discourse of Asian cinema as it moves forward.

REFERENCE

Lim, David C.L. and Hiroyuki Yamamoto, eds. *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention*. London: Routledge, 2012.

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