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Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia

MAY ADADOL INGAWANIJ and BENJAMIN MCKAY, eds.

Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012, viii + 246 p.

The thrill of going over a volume on contemporary popular culture is compounded when the activity betokens a celebrity system whose members may be already enjoying a measure of popularity, and whose fame has the potential of reaching a wider public. The reader could casually drop a statement like “Oh, I knew that artist before she became a global household name” to admiring colleagues, and in effect replicate the outward spread of stardom whose processes new media have enabled and fast-tracked.

The original proponents of film auteurism, however, had more urgent concerns in mind, notably the dismantling of Classical Hollywood influence in the prestige productions of post-WWII pre-New Wave France (Truffaut 1976 [1954], 233–235).¹⁾ No one begrudges these critics for achieving fame and fortune as filmmakers (and occasional performers), in light of the fact that the larger film movement that their aesthetic activism occasioned resulted in the demise of the Classical Hollywood system as well as the emergence of cinemas not just from Europe, but also from non-Western countries.

Glimpses of Freedom, a recent volume from Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Program, attempts to provide an impression—a snapshot, as it were—of how a New Wave-inspired mode of practice has been reshaping film activity in the region. Fifteen articles from a mix of scholars and

1) Mistranslated as the “auteur theory” by the recently deceased American critic Andrew Sarris (1982 [1968]), the *politique des auteurs* (author policy) was the means by which a select circle of critics-turned-filmmakers, originally based at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, proposed to reevaluate Classical Hollywood, by looking at movies in terms of directorial credit; the true auteurs, per their assertion, would exhibit certain stylistic markers that would serve as their “signatures.” See Monaco (1976).

practitioners demonstrate a wide array of stylistic presentations—from autobiographical accounts to interviews to close textual analyses to empirical studies of such current hot-button topics as piracy, queer politics, and non-mainstream (independent, per the book's subtitle) production, with only a necessarily open-ended introduction providing an overview of the book's contents.

Certain problems can be predicted from this type of catch-as-catch-can approach. The most significant one would be the absence of contextualization—a more serious problem for this material, considering that any discussion of independent cinema would be twice removed, at the very least: from any country's mainstream film production, as well as from its audience's preferences (noting here, as Andrew Higson had reasonably prescribed, that any national cinema behooves its evaluators to take into account the presence of global film distribution [1989, 36–46]). The effect in this instance of isolating a phenomenon, no matter how laudatory its political intentions are, is to restore a great-man humanist system where the players may be less insidiously patriarchal, or even openly anti-patriarchal, but still hopeful of attaining a status of “greatness” nevertheless.

One's response to this self-congratulatory package will depend on one's tolerance for displays of performances calculated to maximize potential readers' admiration for individual cleverness and proximity to mainstream stardom (hidden from view, as already noted). Since my persuasion admittedly falls far outside the net of uncritical acceptance that would allow followers to be swept up in what we may term the indie-film crusade, the anthology's articles that have engaged me might be precisely the ones that indie-film fans might find lacking in terms of the auteurist “signatures” that the New Wave's proponents and followers upheld (Monaco 1976, 5–8). Benedict R. O'G. Anderson's “The Strange Story of a Strange Beast,” as an example, makes no pretense of laying claim to possessing an analysis of and prescription for Thai cinema, but instead narrates its author's journey toward understanding local reception to an internationally celebrated release, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Sud pralad* [Tropical Malady] (2004).

More productive for a community of practitioners (although not necessarily for any specific filmmaker), the article by one of the editors, May Adadol Ingawanij, problematizes a non-mainstream showcase, the Thai Short Film and Video Festival, in relation to the issues of autonomy and containment. With a modicum of historical cues—the coup d'état and the censorship of another Weerasethakul film, both occurring in the same year (2006)—the author succeeds in assessing the challenge posed by the festival to a mainstream presumably being endorsed and maintained by conservative social forces. Another article (“Independence and Indigenous Film”), by Angie Bexley, is even more impressive in articulating and explaining the urgency that film as modernizing force plays in a nation, Timor-Leste, recently making the painful transition to postcolonial independence while still reeling from the tragic upheavals wrought by European colonization and, even worse, by neighboring Indonesia's occupation.

What distinguishes these few essays is their avoidance of a disturbing trope that marks the rest (from my admittedly single reading of the entire volume). That trope, or more accurately

tendency, is manifested in the form of a championing of a player, whether an individual or an institution, subtly or openly, in the purported interest of upholding independent practice vis-à-vis mainstream lack or excess.²⁾ Although the larger dualities (of indie being preferable to mainstream as well as Euro-art films and events being superior to anything American) characterize the volume as a whole, and are probably inevitable given the scope of the project, the personality-based thinking that grips the region's critics and practitioners weakens, and sometimes completely hinders, the possibility of turning toward creative subversions from, say, the appropriation of mainstream prerogatives to the consideration of the potentials of regional cooperation.

In fact, the latter issue, which would require an actionable formulation of the qualities that constitute "Southeast Asian cinema," recalls an earlier historical project: that of the politicization of Latin American cinema, which had productive consequences for then-emergent Third Cinema theorizing. Whatever else one might think of the star potentials of the practitioners brought together by *Glimpses of Freedom*, a contribution on the order of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's "Towards a Third Cinema" (1983 [1969], 17–27), much less the New Latin American Cinema's conceptualizations of hunger aesthetics and cannibalist production,³⁾ might as well belong on a different continent—which in fact is literally the case.

It may be argued that the moment for ground-breaking political activism has been superseded by technological transformation and convergence, with Asia now poised to wrest the lead from the West. Yet the Asian centers involved in technological innovation all lie (so far) not far from, but

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- 2) The individuals and/or institutions can already be gleaned from portions of some of the articles' titles: "Fourth Generation of Malaysian-Indian Filmmakers"; "Martyn See"; "Yasmin Ahmad"; "James Lee"; etc. Some of the collection's authors are themselves filmmakers, purportedly setting out to conduct well-meaning projects—John Torres using the film piracy "distribution" network to circulate his films, Chris Chong Chan Fui interviewing the organizer of a Muslim country's queer film festival (titled Q!FF). The fact that such attempts are destined either to fail in the first case or to partially succeed in the second provides a noteworthy record of struggle, yet also results in self-lionization—a replication of the heroic-individualist trope that marks Western media history, and that might have been tempered if a higher ideal (akin to the Third Cinema discourse to be presently brought up) had been articulated.
- 3) Third Cinema (cf. Pines and Willemen 1989) was meant to be distinct from (though derivative of and overlapping with) Third World Cinema; it stemmed from the observation that certain modes of Third World film production actually sought to replicate Hollywood themes and standards, as well as from the acknowledgment that even in the First World, certain forms of Third World-like or -inspired production could be found. Hunger aesthetics and cannibal production were prescriptions in Brazilian Third-Cinema practice: in hunger aesthetics (Rocha 1979, 9), low-budget and low-end productions (resulting in an impoverished look that implicitly critiqued the "developed" origin of the technology) were to be embraced as a means of countering the audience's tendency to be alienated from the medium's biases; cannibal (or anthropophagic) cinema (Stam and Xavier 1990, 281) was a response to the inevitable commercial prevalence of Hollywood, which tended to contain foreign film trends that it could not suppress—and which thereby justified the appropriation by local practitioners of the same strategies that Hollywood releases deployed.

definitely outside, the Southeast region. And more unnervingly, some of the most articulate contributors—partly owing to the official stature of English as one of their country’s national languages—come from the Philippines, which, if Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman is to be believed, shares more in common with Latin America’s banana-republic economies than with the rest of Asia (Krugman *et al.* 1992, 1–78). Yet an earlier generation of local indie practitioners, names such as Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal (both deceased) now being constantly acknowledged by current film artists, behaved then as if they were aware of these contradictions, and took pains to ensure that they were consistently resolved in favor of the mass audience: foreign festivals provided them a means not of self-sufficiency but toward a way of legitimizing their film output prior to their final confrontations with censors, critics, and distributors.

While the argument that the current terms of film production and consumption have changed too radically to necessitate this requisite is inarguably valid, the assumption that mass responses are secondary at best is problematic and, in blunt terms, hypocritical for people who ride on the qualified stardom proffered by auteurist status. *Glimpses of Freedom* unwittingly illustrates this predicament in the prominence it gives to the late Filipino critic Alexis Tioseco (the entire volume is dedicated to him as well as to its co-editor, Benjamin McKay; another book, by renowned American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum [2010, v], had preceded the present tribute in being dedicated to Tioseco and his Slovenian girlfriend, Nika Bohinc). Administrator of a website popular among local indie practitioners and followers, Tioseco (having grown up in Canada) was a relatively recent returnee to the Philippines, and attained a higher level of recognition after he and his foreigner girlfriend were brutally murdered by people directly in his employ (“Fil-Canadian Film Critic” 2009, n.p.).

Tioseco’s written output was largely in foreign outlets, and non-Filipino critics (as well as a small circle of Filipino netizens) hail him mostly for his championing of a select group of non-mainstream film personalities. Lost in the entire romanticization are certain realities that qualify his victimhood, of which two would be instructive: he had returned to handle the family business but was more distracted by his support for indie-film activities, including trips to foreign events (taken by his admirers as evidence of his dedication to their cause); and he had operated in serious negligence of personal security, despite the fact that the Philippines, like many developing countries, is rife with stories of violent class conflicts. The dialogical implication of his death—that the type of people who killed him were the ones that his type of people had been overlooking—could serve as an unnecessarily and excessively tragic illustration of what lies in store for popular-culture practitioners who prefer to defer the implications of what exactly “popular” means.

Joel David

Inha University, College of Social Science

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Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea: Overseas Chinese Merchants in the Fujian-Singapore Trade, 1920–1960

JASON LIM

Leiden: Brill NV, 2010, 252 p.

This book is a product of Jason Lim's research into Chinese newspapers in Singapore from 1880 to 1930, where he first learned of Anxi migrants' involvement in the tea trade between Fujian and