

profoundly and repeatedly challenged by both historians and scientists. Importantly, concepts of biological inferiority and the racial hierarchies they produced are also closely implicated in the “troubling set of fantasy images of Papua New Guinea” that West rightly deplores (p.29). The book would have benefited from a clear explanation of the problematic nature of the concept of race and the complex and contradictory ways in which it has been and continues to be used.

This caveat aside, I found *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive* both engaging and thought-provoking. It will interest students of Papua New Guinea’s history, economy and culture, scholars of development, globalization and commodification, and all those who, like myself, had hoped that the extra dollars they spent on certified coffee might somehow trickle down to help its less privileged producers. Idealists: you have been warned.

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Southeast Asian Independent Cinema

TILMAN BAUMGÄRTEL, ed.

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The prolific production of independent films in one of the fastest growing economic regions of the world impels filmmakers, critics, and scholars to seriously study Southeast Asian (hereon referred as “SEA”) cinema as a distinct area of filmmaking within global cinema. *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, edited by the German scholar of Southeast Asian cinemas Tilman Baumgärtel, is a contribution to the growing discussion of SEA cinematic developments.

Essays that constitute the book’s first part identify the conceptual framework and themes in recent Southeast Asian indie films. John Lent’s definitions of “independence” in terms of governmental regulation, financing, and fresh styles and methods of filmmaking may serve as an index through which cinemas in the region are to be examined. The editor’s own essay extends Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” to film and television in the region but hesitates to argue that indie movies are not as popular as other media (such as television melodramas and mainstream films), thereby making contentious the idea that through independent cinema, the peoples of Southeast Asia imagine and construct their communal identities. If so, this is only at a very limited level. Indeed, there may be a “strategic essentialism” here in the sense that the national or cultural essences posited by non-Southeast Asians in the region’s indie productions are largely ignored by Southeast Asians themselves. What are the objectives of SEA filmmakers in portraying different realities—poverty, local traditions, etc.—in different lights, when these themes are largely not patronized by their fellow citizens presumably hooked on technologically superior Hollywood and

“escapist” local films?¹⁾ To these problems of relevance to a national audience, Baumgärtel offers the possibility of seeing such films in a “post-national” context. His application of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s dimensions of the global cultural economy raises important issues: the multi-national productions of SEA indie films, the immigrant nature of SEA indie filmmakers, international financing, government support, the utility of internet social networking programs, relations with local audience, ingenious distribution techniques, exposure to world/other cinemas that inspired SEA directors to make their own films, video piracy, and the socio-political subject matters in contemporary SEA indie cinema. In conceptualizing the region’s independent cinema, Baumgärtel pertinently points out the difference between the “imagined worlds” of SEA filmmakers and those of their fellow citizens and governments. It is this difference that plays out the multifarious contradictions that continually debate notions of independence in SEA cinema.

Alfia Bin Sa’at and Ben Slater analyze the fraught film histories and geographies of Singapore in light of its separation from Malaysia and its exceptional development in the last half century. Sa’at’s “Hinterland, Heartland, Home: Affective Topography in Singapore Films” explains the shared film histories of Malaysia and Singapore and looks at contemporary Singaporean films in light of the studio era (1950s and 1960s) the specific history of which the small country surrenders to Malaysia. The urban-rural dialectic in the “revival period” (1990s) of Singaporean cinema traces its origins to the post-war (note: Malaysian) studio era when the *kahwin lari* narrative (marriage of lovers from different class backgrounds) dominated. Films of the 1960s and 1990s have a striking similarity in that they create the hinterland or the rural area—now the “heartland” in highly urbanized Singapore—as “ideal and morally upright” while opposing this to the “developed but corrupting” topography of the city. Now, the *kampung* or village life is only inscribed in the autobiographical accounts of those who have lived in it, and hence, according to Sa’at, “the social trauma of hinterland-to-city dislocation becomes a kind of inherited post-memory” (p. 50). Slater offers several successful indie films made by Singapore’s most conscientious young directors as a counterpoint to the deracinating attitude of the island-city towards its past and some of its citizens. Natalie Böhler’s “Fiction Interrupted” talks about how independence from mainstream has allowed Thailand’s indie directors to experiment on filmic narrative forms of storytelling that develop from local sensibilities. Particularly, the aesthetics of cinematic discontinuity—exemplified “in editing as continuity errors, in the disruption of diegesis through metafictional elements, in the artificiality brought about by stylistic excess, as well as in the synchronization of image and sound” (p. 62)—in Mingmongkol Sonakul’s and Apitchatpong Weerasethakul’s works demonstrate a more creative performance and “truthful” representation of people’s realities. This is especially salient to a recent study (Lim 2011) arguing that the “fantastic” in Asian horror films provides a temporal critique

1) Yet journalistic and literary productions of the bygone days had very limited audience, as well, perhaps fewer than what indie films of today, reach, considering the literacy rate then.

through a representation of “immiscible realities” (“otherworldly” creatures making themselves felt—inflicting horror—in “modern-day” life) that reveal the inability to co-opt or insert supernatural agents into the “homogeneous empty time” of the present.

The most thought-provoking pieces in the collection are those tackling the variegated character of Indonesia’s post-*reformasi* independent cinematic production. Here, the possibilities arising from the radical convergence of independence in the fields of politics (post-dictatorship) and culture (the presumed freedom of expression seized by independent filmmaking) are too important to ignore. The “reform” period following the resignation of President Soeharto after three decades of the “New Order” (comparable to the Philippines’ New Society under Ferdinand Marcos and Malaysia’s Mahathir period) paved the way for, and was itself a product of, the intense democratization struggles of the Indonesian people. Tito Imanda looks at some “entertaining” mainstream movies that, while not “teach[ing] the new Muslim middle class anything new about Islam . . . give the constituent of this market . . . a chance to confirm their beliefs, values, and morals in the public sphere” (p. 103), and compares them to independent films that specifically cater to a politically religious audience. David Hanan’s discussion of the observational documentary in Indonesia probes the possibilities of agency for the nation’s ethnic minority within a genre that documents and therefore “objectifies” them, but also offers them an opportunity for participation in democratic life, as subjects in and of history.

Intan Paramaditha shows how censorship has become central to the government’s regulation of the depictions of sexuality in films. By “exclud[ing] what the nation is not” (p. 71), Indonesian censors regulate bodies and sexualities and their attendant filmic representations. The paternal state is at pains to contain the “excess of *Reformasi*’s euphoric freedom” (p. 79) and legitimizes strict control through the treatment of the citizens as “infantile” (p. 86) and “easily-influenced youth” (p. 79), thereby clashing against the youth’s significant role in *reformasi*. Paramaditha’s dense essay is attentive to fresh problems arising from women directors’ aggressive filmmaking and raises questions on the kind of people represented in films, how they are represented, the filmmaker’s distance from the subjects they represent, and the politics of representing others.

This section could have benefited from brief historical discussions of the advent and progress of independent filmmaking and the socio-political developments in the region, as had been done in a related work on non-Western cinemas (Armes 1987). Indeed, the general attention that SEA has been enjoying for some time now owes a lot to its stronger economic presence, more so now that other regions are experiencing economic downturns. Is the relative economic independence that SEA nations enjoy now conditioning independent filmmaking and independent “ways of seeing”? How does SEA indie cinema express the fraught connections between filmic expression and the intense and complicated nature of wider socio-cultural transformations happening in the region today?

Part Two offers primary sources, presenting important documents on the aesthetics and

politics of several SEA independent filmmakers. The section contains different manifestoes by a group of 12 Indonesian filmmakers and one Filipino director, delving mainly into questions of styles of filmmaking, logistics, freedom of expression, and originality. Khairil Bahar and Tan Pin Pin share how they were able to make and show their very popular productions to their respective audiences. People in indie productions can relate to Bahar's "begging, borrowing, and stealing" (p. 129) to make *Ciplak*, a reflexive film on how a Malaysian imports pirated discs from his native country to support himself in London. It is commendable how Tan inverted the process of distribution by going to the audiences themselves to exhibit *Singapore Gaga*, a movie on Singapore's rapidly disappearing sonic-aural memory. Gathering his article in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and some indie directors' responses to it, the essay by the editor in this section imparts the vigorous debate on the merits of digital films for Philippine cinema. Previously seen as God's gift to filmmaking, the digital camera also poses serious limitations on image clarity, filmmaker's training, and the audience's taste and their own cinematic standards. To these challenges, Filipino indie directors fittingly raised the need for an adequate infrastructure and the unremitting education of the directors themselves.

Interviews that comprise the anthology's third part present more spontaneous thoughts on filmmaking concepts and practices by SEA indie directors. Here, the reader learns about director Brillante Mendoza and screenwriter Bing Lao's deft "material aesthetics," which uses "found story," "found place," and "found noise" (p. 167) to make an inexpensive story. Nia Dianata heaves a sigh on how *reformasi* is "over-rated" (p. 205) because Indonesian cinema is still censored and the distribution process is monopolized. Eric Khoo's work of showing the disappearing aspects of Singapore society and the innovative molding of characters in light of the lack of professional actors is laudable. Filipino director Lav Diaz's take on digital as "liberation technology" (p. 177) may be an uncritical celebration of technological form which Malaysian director Amir Muhammad rightfully addresses by positing the "ontological relationship between the technology and the product" (p. 232) where the kind of stories and people using the camera are more important.

Thai director Pen-ek Ratanaruang agrees with Baumgärtel that his work is part of an evolving new cinema that is "not bound by national traditions anymore" but is "directed towards some transnational or cosmopolitan group of people that share certain traits, interests and attitudes" (p. 197). This echoes Weerasethakul's claim that he does "not represent any nation or any country" (p. 189). The auteurist turn this development implies has been aptly identified by Baumgärtel as relating to the "economic ascent" and "emergence of a new bourgeoisie" in Thailand (pp. 197–198). It is interesting to study whether and how indie cinema has become the entry point into the mainstream by many indie directors. Malaysian director Yasmin Ahmad's hatred of "arbitrary divisions of people" embodied in a filmmaking style focusing not on the nation but humanity, "character" and "daily interactions" (p. 249) is a broad, albeit abstract (because character is unmarked and undifferentiated), principle on filmmaking.

Perhaps Baumgärtel's most problematic limitation is that he still evaluates SEA cinema from the perspectives of a Western-dominated global filmmaking industry. The anthology begins with two Southeast Asians, the Thai Weerasethakul and the Filipino Mendoza, earning accolades at the Cannes Film Festival. It is as though SEA filmmakers remain in the dark until the light of Western recognition shines upon them. In his interview with Weerasethakul, Baumgärtel interprets the director's image diaries as works of a "totally globalized filmmaker" whereas Weerasethakul himself says that he makes those diaries "in order not to forget" his experiences (p. 188). What for one is a consumerist drive to collect images by a subject presumably transcending differences is for the other an active work of remembering, of inscribing the "local," the "native." Related to this is one critic's caution, in the project of finding new ways of seeing SEA cinema, against seeing the region's films as a "reaction" to, or "imitation" of, not only Hollywood but also "the film industries and cultures of Hong Kong, Japan and India" (McKay 2006).

While interviews with Ratanaruang and Ahmad may confirm this aspiration for globalism and transnationalism, it is necessary to analyze how SEA filmmakers struggle against the problems of limited budgets and technologies and the more-important challenge of addressing their compatriots in the process of reaching out to a "universal" audience. Baumgärtel himself touched upon this aspect in claiming that "access to digital video . . . made possible this democratic cinema revolution in a part of the world that is otherwise not known for its democratic disposition" (p. 2). What is interesting is how these filmmakers have surprisingly made and are continuing to make films *in spite of* the repressive politics of their governments and non-state groups hostile to their endeavor.²⁾ In a sense, independent cinema is "critical cinema," and "capable of surprising viewers and catalyzing critique" (MacDonald 1998, 1).

An image on the cover of the collection may be taken as a reflexive vision of SEA independent cinema itself. A young man working in a decrepit second-run movie house that has become residence of a poor family and service venue for prostitution abandons the place in search of change, looking for a glimpse of freedom.³⁾

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- 2) During the Marcos era in the Philippines, the dictatorship granted institutional support to independent filmmakers to make Philippine cinema "a showcase of cultural democracy" (David 2008, 232), by this means deflecting people's anger over severe economic crisis and a repressive socio-political situation away from organized protest and toward escapist and, in some cases, even prurient pastime. The presumed opposition between mainstream and independent cinema doesn't hold, in this case.
 - 3) Then again, the actor who portrayed that role, Coco Martin, has effectively moved from indie cinema into the mainstream. He is now one of the top-billed actors in the Philippine film and television industry.

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The “Other” Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms

ARDETH MAUNG THAWNGHMUNG

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012, xxxii+197p.

For decades, the face of the Karen people to the outside world has been rebels fighting the Government of the Union of Myanmar. The year after independence following an Arakanese rebellion and an insurrection by the Communist Party in 1948, different elements of Karen-led army units broke away from the government and eventually coalesced with yet other armed groups under the leadership of the Karen National Defense Organization.

In a country run by a military government and all but closed to international researchers from 1962 until recently, the Karen rebellion was viewed by many as a valiant (although increasingly futile) stand for minority autonomy against oppression. The largely Protestant leadership of the rebellion evoked sympathy from outside the country especially in North America so much so that the Karens were sometimes mistakenly seen as predominantly Christian.

What most observers did not realize, however, was that Karens involved in the rebellion constituted only a small minority of the Karen population in the country and that by far most Karens were not Christian.

These misunderstandings are not surprising. There is a lack of access to the country’s minority areas with travel restrictions impeding contacts even by the country’s citizens so that nobody, local or expatriate can do field research. With the main avenue of understanding ethnic relations coming from refugees on the Thai border, who often are sympathetic to the Karen National Union (KNU), it is clear how misunderstandings about Karens developed and grew.

Now a big step has been taken towards filling this gap with Ardeh Maung Thawngmung’s book, *The “Other” Karens*. Even before opening the book one gets positive feelings from favorable