“That there is a vibrant independent cinema in Southeast Asia is now known thanks to the awards won by Brillante Mendoza, Apichatpong and others. But what is the socio-politico-cultural context within which they are working? How do these iconoclastic, cutting-edge, independent filmmakers view the cinema and how are they forging their own highly original paths? This book provides revealing glimpses into their worlds through insightful essays and lively interviews with the directors. It must be read to gain an understanding of the quite remarkable films coming from this so far little-known part of the world.”

— Aruna Vasudev, Indian film critic, the Founder-President of Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC), Founder-Director of Cinefan, Festival of Asian Cinema, and Founder-Editor of Cinemaya, The Asian Film Quarterly

“Southeast Asian Independent Cinema is chockfull of vibrantly insightful essays, manifestos, and interviews. It is an invaluable resource for those interested in the region—and in a wildly creative generation of filmmakers that deserves to be in the global spotlight.”

— Anne Ciecko, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

The rise of independent cinema in Southeast Asia, following the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers there, is among the most significant recent developments in global cinema. The advent of affordable and easy access to digital technology has empowered startling new voices from a part of the world rarely heard or seen in international film circles. The appearance of fresh, sharply alternative, and often very personal voices has had a tremendous impact on local film production. This book documents these developments as a genuine outcome of the democratization and liberalization of film production. Contributions from respected scholars, interviews with filmmakers, personal accounts and primary sources by important directors and screenwriters collectively provide readers with a lively account of dynamic film developments in Southeast Asia.

Interviewees include Lav Diaz, Amir Muhammad, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Eric Khoo, Garin Nugroho, Nia Dinata and others.
SOUTHEAST ASIAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA
TransAsia: Screen Cultures
Edited by Koichi IWABUCHI and Chris BERRY

What is Asia? What does it mean to be Asian? Who thinks they are Asian? How is “Asian-ness” produced? In Asia’s transnational public space, many kinds of crossborder connections proliferate, from corporate activities to citizen-to-citizen linkages, all shaped by media—from television series to action films, video piracy, and a variety of subcultures facilitated by internet sites and other computer-based cultures. Films are packaged at international film festivals and marketed by DVD companies as “Asian,” while the descendants of migrants increasingly identify themselves as “Asian,” then turn to “Asian” screen cultures to find themselves and their roots. As reliance on national frameworks becomes obsolete in many traditional disciplines, this series spotlights groundbreaking research on trans-border, screen-based cultures in Asia.

Other titles in the series:
The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity, by Olivia Khoo
East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave, edited by Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi
TV Drama in China, edited by Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai
Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia: What a Difference a Region Makes, edited by Chris Berry, Nicola Liscutin, and Jonathan D. Mackintosh
Cinema at the City’s Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia, edited by Yomi Braester and James Tweedie
Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols, by Sun Jung
The Pusan International Film Festival, South Korean Cinema and Globalization, by SooJeong Ahn
Japanese Cinema Goes Global: Filmworkers’ Journeys, by Yoshiharu Tezuka

Series International Advisory Board
Ackbar ABBAS (University of Hong Kong)
Ien ANG (University of Western Sydney)
Yomi BRAESTER (Washington University)
Stephen CHAN (Lingnan University)
CHUA Beng-Huat (National University of Singapore)
Ian CONDRY (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
DAI Jinhuai (Peking University)
John Nguyet ERNI (Lingnan University)
Annette HAMILTON (University of New South Wales)
Rachel HARRISON (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)
Gaik Cheng KHOO (Australian National University)
KIM Kyung-Hyun (University of California, Irvine)
KIM Soyoung (Korean National University of Arts)
Helen Hok-Sze LEUNG (Simon Fraser University)
Akira Mizuta LIPPIT (University of Southern California)
Feii LU (National Chengchi University)
LÜ Xinyu (Fudan University)
Eric MÁ (Chinese University of Hong Kong)
Fran MARTIN (Melbourne University)
MOURI Yoshitaka (Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music)
Meaghan MORRIS (Lingnan University)
NAM Inyoung (Dongeou University)
PANG Lai-Kei (Chinese University of Hong Kong)
Michael RAINER (University of Chicago)
Bérénice REYNAUD (California Institute of the Arts)
Lisa ROFEL (University of California, Santa Cruz)
Krishna SEN (Curtin University of Technology)
Ubonrat SIRIYUVASAK (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok)
Eva TSAI (National Taiwan Normal University)
Paola VOCI (University of Otago)
YOSHIMI Shunya (Tokyo University)
ZHANG Zhen (New York University)
SOUTHEAST ASIAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

ESSAYS · DOCUMENTS · INTERVIEWS

Edited by Tilman Baumgärtel
For Alice and Christina
## Contents

Notes on Contributors xi  
List of Figures xv  
Acknowledgements xix  
Introduction: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia  
*Tilman Baumgärtel*  

### I Essays

1. Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Independent of What?  
   *John A. Lent*  
   13  
2. Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds: Independent Film from Southeast Asia in the Global Mediascape  
   *Tilman Baumgärtel*  
   21  
3. Hinterland, Heartland, Home: Affective Topography in Singapore Films  
   *Alfi an Bin Sa’at*  
   33  
4. Stealing Moments: A History of the Forgotten in Recent Singaporean Film  
   *Ben Slater*  
   51  
5. Fiction, Interrupted: Discontinuous Illusion and Regional Performance Traditions in Contemporary Thai Independent Film  
   *Natalie Böhler*  
   59  
6. Cinema, Sexuality and Censorship in Post-Soeharto Indonesia  
   *Intan Paramaditha*  
   69  
7. Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia: Religion Using the Market or Vice Versa?  
   *Tito Imanda*  
   89
8. Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia: Aryo Danusiri's *Lukas' Moment*
   David Hanan

II Documents

9. Four Manifestos
   Khavn de la Cruz

10. Why *Ciplak* ended up being made
    Kha'iril M. Babar

11. *Singapore GaGa* Tours Singapore
    Tan Pin Pin

12. The Downside of Digital: A German media critic plays devil’s advocate
    Tilman Baumgärtel et al.

13. I Sinema Manifesto

III Interviews

14. “An inexpensive film should start with an inexpensive story”
    Interview with Brillante Mendoza and Armando Bing Lao
    Tilman Baumgärtel

15. “Digital is liberation theology”
    Interview with Lav Diaz
    Tilman Baumgärtel

16. “I make films for myself”
    Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul
    Tilman Baumgärtel

17. “I love making films, but not getting films made”
    Interview with Pen-ek Ratanaruang
    Tilman Baumgärtel

18. “I want the people of Indonesia to see a different point of view, whether they agree with it or not”
    Interview with Nia Dinata
    Tilman Baumgärtel

19. “I do not have anything against commercial films”
    Interview with Eric Khoo
    Tilman Baumgärtel
20. *The Page and the (Video) Camera*
   Conversation with Amir Muhammad
   Davide Cazzaro

21. “I want you to forget about the race of the protagonists half an hour into the film”
   Interview with Yasmin Ahamad
   Tilman Baumgärtel

Notes

Bibliography

Index
Tilman Baumgärtel has taught at the Universität Paderborn, Technische Universität Berlin, Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, and for four years at the University of the Philippines in Manila, before he joined the Department of Media and Communication at the Royal University of Phnom Penh in 2009. He has published both in German and in English. His publications include books on independent cinema in the Philippines, Internet Art, Computer Games and the German director Harun Farocki. He has also curated international art exhibitions and film series. At present, he is doing research on the cinema of his current host country Cambodia. His blog "The Institute of Southeast Asian Film Studies" can be found at http://southeastasiancinema.wordpress.com

Khairil M. Bahar made low-budget short films before making his first feature film, Ciplak. Despite its modest budget, the film was released by Golden Screen Cinemas in Kuala Lumpur and won the Best Alternative Film Award at the Anugerah Skrin 2006. He has since written and directed many episodes of TV staples such as Ampang Medikal, Ghost and Dark City, as well as made numerous music videos for Malaysian independent bands such as Y2K, One Buck Short, Dragon Red, Azizi and Soft Touch. Khairil is currently putting finishing touches to his second feature film London Calling. He also writes for magazines and plays the guitar in his rock band Rollin Sixers.

Natalie Böhler is currently working on her Ph.D. on narrative and aesthetic characteristics of contemporary Thai film at Zurich University, Switzerland. Besides this, she was co-editor of CINEMA, the Swiss film yearbook, and works as an independent curator for film festivals and art-house cinemas. She also teaches film studies at Zurich University. Her research interest includes narratology, experimental and documentary film, co-productions, and transnational cultural flows.

Davide Cazzaro studied Performing Arts and Media Studies at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, and Screen Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is currently undertaking a Ph.D. program in Media and Communications at the same college. For a number of years now, he has been specializing in East and...
Southeast Asian cinemas. He works as film critic for various printed and online journals and as program consultant for the Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema di Pesaro (Pesaro International Film Festival). He is the co-editor of *Il cinema sudcoreano contemporaneo e l’opera di Jang Sun-woo* (*Contemporary South Korean Cinema and the Oeuvre of Jang Sun-woo*, 2005).

Khavn de la Cruz is an experimental filmmaker from the Philippines. He has made twenty-three features and more than seventy short films, most of which have received prizes, been given retrospectives, and presented in international film festivals. He is the president of the independent film company Filmless Films and the festival director of .MOV, the first digital film festival in the Philippines. Khavn has won awards for his poetry and fiction in the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards. He is an acclaimed composer, songwriter, singer, and pianist who has performed all over the world and has made several albums. He is the bandleader of The Brockas.

David Hanan teaches Film and Television Studies in the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He has undertaken research on film in Indonesia since the mid-1980s and was Southeast Asian consultant for the Melbourne International Film Festival for nearly twenty years. He is the editor of *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region* (Hanoi: SEAPAVAA and the Vietnam Film Institute, 2001). He has subtitled more than a dozen Indonesian films, many at the request of the National Film Council of Indonesia, and organized half a dozen Indonesian film preservation projects. He is the curator of Between Three Worlds DVD (a division of the Monash Asia Institute Press), which distributes Indonesian and Thai films internationally. He is currently completing a book on innovation, cultural difference and political resistance in Indonesian cinema since 1950.

Tito Imanda completed his Master’s degree in Media, Culture and Communication from New York University funded by a Fulbright scholarship. His Master’s thesis was on the Indonesian film industry. With his undergraduate degree in anthropology from the University of Indonesia, Jakarta, his interest in culture and mass media showed in several qualitative researches and ethnographic films he produced. Today, he is involved in the Indonesian film policies reform movement, MFI (Masyarakat Film Indonesia—Indonesian Film Society), and is currently setting up a new film school for Binus University International, Jakarta.

John A. Lent is the publisher/editor-in-chief of *Asian Cinema* and *International Journal of Comic Art* and long-time chair of Asian Cinema Studies Society. He has been researching Asian media, including cinema, since 1964. Among his seventy authored and edited books is *The Asian Film Industry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), the first volume to treat the topic. He has been teaching at the university level in the US, the Philippines, Malaysia, and China since 1960.

Alfian Bin Sa’at is a Singaporean writer, poet, and playwright, who is known for his provocative works and is often referred to as his country’s *enfant terrible*. He has published two volumes of poetry, including *One Fierce Hour*, which was voted by *Life!* (*Straits Times*) as one of the top ten books of 1998. In the same year, he received the Singapore Literature Prize Commendation Award for his collection of short stories: *Corridor and Other Stories*. His poems have been published in indie rock magazine *BigO* and other publications. Alfian is currently the resident playwright of theater group W!ld Rice.

Ben Slater’s writings on film have appeared in *Vertigo*, *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Screen International*, *Criticine*, *Greencine Daily*, *Indiewire*, and others. He is the author of *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack in Singapore* (Marshall Cavendish, 2006) and was a script consultant on the 2009 feature film *Here* directed by Ho Tzu Nyen.

Pin Pin Tan is a filmmaker from Singapore. Her work includes essay films, programs for TV and experimental video installations, including *Moving House* (2002), *80kmh* (2003), *Singapore GaGa* (2006), and *Invisible City* (2007). She has an MFA from Northwestern University and was an Artist in Residence at University of Technology Sydney; at Singapore’s Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Institute of Policy Studies; and at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore.
### List of Figures

1.1 Royston Tan, seen on the set of his movie *4:30* (2005), was one of the young directors who spawned the recent revival of Singapore cinema. *Source: Zhao Wei Films*

2.1 Chhay Bora’s *Lost Loves* (2011) tells the story of a family under the Khmer Rouge, still a taboo subject in Cambodia.

2.2 Malay indie directors Amir Muhammad, Woo Ming Jin, James Lee, and Tan Chui Mui on the set of Muhammad’s *The Big Durian* (2003). *Photo: Azrul Kevin Abdullah*

3.1 “Urinators will be prosecuted” in the “heartland” of Singapore, as depicted in Colin Goh’s and Yen Yen Woo’s *Singapore Dreaming*. *Source: 5C Films*

4.1 Tan Pin Pin’s *Singapore GaGa* (2005) features Ying, one of the dying breed of street buskers in Singapore. *Source: Tan Pin Pin*

5.1 The bus in Mingmongkol Sonakul’s *Isarn Special* (2002) might very well be the leading actor. *Source: objectifs films, Singapore*

6.1 Safina (Kirana Larasati) and Jay Anwar (Fauzi Baadila) are about to make love in *Chants of Lotus* (2007). The film was cut severely before its release in Indonesia. *Source: Kalyana Shira Films*

6.2 Filmmaker Riri Riza holds up a badge with a slogan against film censorship. *Source: Masyarakat Film Indonesia*

6.3 Members of the Indonesian Film Society at a hearing on film censorship at the Constitutional Court in Jakarta. *Source: Masyarakat Film Indonesia*

7.1 DVD cover of *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* (2003)*

7.2 DVD cover of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008)*

7.3 DVD cover of *Kun Fayakuun* (2008)*

7.4 VCD cover of *Sang Murrabi* (2008)*

8.1 Poster of Aryo Danusiri’s *Village Goat Takes the Beating* (1999)
List of Figures

8.2 Poster of Aryo Danusiri’s *The Poet of Linge Homeland* (2000) 110
8.3 Scene from *Lukas’ Moment* (2005) 112
9.1 Khavn de la Cruz’ *Squatterpunk* (2007) was shot in one day. *Source: Khavn de la Cruz* 121
10.1 Khairil M. Bahar, director and leading man, on the set of his debut film *Ciplak*. *Source: Khairil M. Bahar* 128
10.2 *Ciplak* was shot for a budget of less than US $3,000, most of which was spent for the purchase of a digital camera. *Source: Khairil M. Bahar* 129
12.1 Auraeus Solito’s *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros* (2005), the coming-of-age story of a young gay teen in the slums of Manila, was the first digital independent movie that played in the mall cinemas of the Philippines. *Source: UFO Pictures* 146
14.1 Brillante Mendoza (left) and Bing Lao. *Source: Bing Lao* 155
14.2 Alan (Coco Martin) leaves the Family cinema for good in *Mendoza’s Serbis* (2008). *Source: Swift Productions* 160
14.3 Bing Lao on the set of *Biyaheng Lupa* (2009). *Source: Bing Lao* 166
15.1 Lav Diaz directs Yul Servo and Priscilla Almeda on the set of *Batang Westside* (2001). *Photo: Cesar Hernando* 171
15.2 The late cinematographer Miguel Fabic III shooting a dream sequence with Yul Servo for *Batang Westside* (2001). *Photo: Cesar Hernando* 172
15.3 *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007) takes place after the devastating eruption of Philippine volcano Mount Mayon. *Photo: Laurel Penaranda* 176
15.4 Lav Diaz during the shooting of *Batang Westside* (2001). *Photo: Cesar Hernando* 177
16.1 Apichatpong Weerasethakul on the set of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). *Photo: Nontawat Numbenchapol* 179
16.3 * Syndromes and a Century* (2006) was shown in Thailand in a censored version. *Source: Kick the Machine Films* 187
17.2 Apinya Sakuljaroensuk and Pornwut Sarasin in *Ploy* (2007). *Source: Cinemasia* 194
17.3 Tadanobu Asano in *Last Life in the Universe* (2004). *Source: Fortissimo Films*

18.1 Nia Dinata (right) with crew during the shooting of *Arisan!* (2003). *Source: Kalyana Shira Films*

18.2 Driver Pak Lik (Lukman Sardi) with first wife Sri (Ria Irawan, right) and second wife Siti (VJ and pop singer Shanty) in Nia Dinata's *Love for Share* (2006). *Source: Kalyana Shira Films*

19.1 Eric Khoo (left) directing blind actress Theresa Poh Lin Chan in *Be with Me* (2005). *Source: Zhao Wei Films*

19.2 Chiew Sung Ching in *Be with Me* (2005). *Source: Zhao Wei Films*

19.3 Bosco Francis, the protagonist of *My Magic* (2008), is a real-life magician whom director Eric Khoo has known for more than a decade. *Source: Zhao Wei Films*

20.1 Amir Muhammad (left) on the set of *The Big Durian* (2003) with lighting technician Ee Chee Wei. *Photo: Danny Lim*

20.2 Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* (2006) looks at what has been edited out of Malaysia's official history. *Source: Red Films*

20.3 Amir Muhammad's lesbian vampire film *Susuk* (2008) was his only genre movie so far. *Source: Grand Brilliance*

21.1 Yasmin Ahmad. *Photo: James Lee*
A book like this is a collaborative effort, and there are many more collaborators than the people who actually contributed essays. Yet, first and foremost I would like to thank the people who agreed to have texts and statements reprinted in this volume, who granted interviews and especially those who wrote original essays for this book, put up with deadlines and grappled with my last-minute suggestions and requests for amendments and revisions. Without you, this book would not exist.

Then there are the many people who worked hard to establish the context that made this type of critical and academic discourse on Southeast Asian cinema possible. I am greatly obligated to Gaik Cheng Khoo, who started the Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference (ASEACC) in 2004 as a research fellow at the National University of Singapore. The ASEACC has become one of the major platforms for discourse on cinema in the region when it turned into an annual event that took place in different cities through the region: in Bangkok in 2005, in Kuala Lumpur in 2006, in Jakarta in 2007, in Manila in 2008, and in Saigon in 2010.

I attended my first ASEACC in 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, and that’s where I met many of the key people in this scene for the first time. Without this conference series, this book would have never come into being. In that sense, it is a sister volume to similar publications that came out of earlier ASEACC meetings, such as a special issue of *Asian Cinema* (Vol. 18, No. 2), edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo and Sophia Siddique Harvey, and another special issue of *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* (Vol. 8, No. 2), edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo. Another collection of essays, edited by Benjamin McKay and May Adadol Ingawanj, entitled *Independent Cinemas in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, is also in preparation.

This volume draws to some extent on material that came together during the conferences in Jakarta in 2007 and in Manila 2008, even though the large majority of the contributions for this volume were written specifically for it. But more important than the concrete contributions that ended up in this volume was the network that developed in the eight years of the conference and, even more importantly, the very spirit of ASEACC that was never merely an academic conference, but a lively meeting of kindred spirits with a shared enthusiasm for the cinema of the region. The ASEACC meetings are gathering points of an international group
Acknowledgements

of film scholars, critics and buffs, media activists, anthropologists, sociologists, programmers, archivists and filmmakers, who show and discuss their works in panels and open forums. Consequently, this volume tries to reflect this vibrant diversity.

As some of the material came from the ASEACC meetings in Jakarta and Manila, I am very much indebted to the organizers of as well as to the participants in these conferences. In Jakarta, the organizers were Veronika Kusuma, Tito Imanda, Intan Paramaditha, Dimas Jayasrana, and John Badalu. In Manila, where I was a member of the organizing committee myself, I have to thank my co-organizers, Kiri Dalena, Mervin Espina, Bono Olgado, Alexis Tiosuco (†) and Rolando Tolentino. Without the organizational skills of the members of the student organization Loyola Film Circle, the conference would not have been the worthwhile experience as it was. We are also deeply indebted to the School of Humanities of the Ateneo de Manila University, where the conference took place, for logistical and moral support. And of course, thanks to our sponsors that included the National Commission of Culture of the Arts (NCCA) of the Philippines, the Society of Filipino Archivists of Film (SOFIA), the student organization Silip from the University of the Philippines, Mogwai Film Bar and the galleries Magnet Katinunan and Green Papaya Art Projects, where the film screenings and the après-conference events took place. And last, by no means least, I have to thank Sophia Harvey, Katinka van Heeren, May Adadol Ingawanij and, again, Rolando Tolentino and Gaik Khoo, the program committee of the ASEACC 2007 and 2008, for guidance in regards to content and form of the conference.

A book like this would simply not be possible without the support of a large group of supporters, who provided the editor with email addresses, contacts, titbits of information, critical judgments, gossip, and moral support. In the case of this book, this type of assistance came from some of the following individuals: Benedict Anderson, Timothy P. Barnard, Teddy Beh Chun Chee, Vicky D. Belarmino, Kishore Budha, Ed Cabagnot, Patrick Campos, Davy Chou, Teddy Co, Joel David, Nick Deocampo, Arnika Fuhrmann, Jean Pierre Gimenez, Jonathan M. Hall, Eloisa May P. Hernandez, Budi Irawanto, Dimas Jayasrana, Shing Dong Kim, Adam Knee, Veronica Kusuma, Mariam B. Lam, Ed Lejano, Dino Manrique, Bastian Meiresonne, Nico Mesterharm, Raphael Millet, Hassan Muthalib, Laikwan Pang, Gopalan Ravindran, Martyn See, Kidlat Tahimik, Stephen Teo Kian Teck, David Teh, Nicanor Tiongson, John Torres, Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, Violet Valdez, and Wong Tuck Cheong.

Finally, my sincere thanks go to Chris Berry and Koichi Iwabuchi, the series editors of the TransAsia: Screen Cultures series of Hong Kong University Press, for their spontaneous interest in this book idea, Michael Duckworth for his support, and copy editors Joanne Hughes, Jessica Wang and Dennis Cheung for their work
on the manuscript. Thank you, salamt po, terima kasih, makasih, kopp hun kapp, xie xie, arigato and danke to everybody involved.

In closing, I should point out that while I was working on this book, five people that were very important to the study of Southeast Asian cinema and to me personally passed away much too early: Johven Velasco, a dear colleague at the University of the Philippines (UP). Yasmin Ahmad, whose films were among the first to get me interested in the cinema of the region, even though I got to talk to her only once, when I did the interview that is published in this volume. Film critics Nika Bohinc and Alexis Tioseco, who both in their own ways worked to put cinema from the region on the international map, Nika as editor of the Slovenian film journal *Ekran* and Alexis with his website *Criticine* and many other activities, some of which we undertook together. And Benjamin McKay, an Australian film critic, who has written on Malaysian independent cinema and taught film in Kuala Lumpur. If they, wherever they may be now, get some sort of enjoyment out of this book, I should be content.

Tilman Baumgärtel
Phnom Penh, September 2011
Introduction

Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia

Tilman Baumgärtel

In May 2010, a beaming Apichatpong Weerasethakul received the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his movie *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, 2010), one of the most prestigious awards that the international film world has to offer. On pictures from the festival that went around the globe, we see him accepting the award from Charlotte Gainsbourg with a big grin, exchanging kisses with “Best Actress” winner Juliette Binoche, posing for the photographers on the red carpet with leading actress Wallapa Mongkolprasert.

Apichatpong is no stranger to the Cannes Film Festival. In 2002, he had won the top prize in the “Un Certain Regard” program of the festival for *Blissfully Yours* (*Sud Sanaeha*, 2002); two years later, he received a jury prize for *Tropical Malady* (*Sud Pralad*, 2004) and headed the jury in the following year. Yet, there is something particular about the pictures of Apichatpong in his white suit, complete with white bow tie, from the 2010 festival. They seem to show a director, who has arrived in the international film world and is completely at ease with its rituals, even though he is from a country that only a decade ago was *terra incognita* on the map of international cinema. No Thai filmmaker had ever been invited to the festival before Wisit Sasanatieng’s *Tears of the Black Tiger* (*Fah talai jone*, 2000), a highly stylized, candy-colored homage to the Thai action films of the 1960s and 1970s, was included in the program in 2001.

And it is not just Thailand. The cinema of Southeast Asia has been a *quantité négligeable* internationally until very recently, despite the fact that this part of the world has been positively cinema-crazy for decades. The region has a number of countries that rank among those with the highest cinema attendance per capita in the world. The Philippines, for instance, rivaled both the US and India for decades in terms of filmic output,¹ and even a nation like Myanmar (also known as Burma) used to produce up to 100 films a year in the heydays of its film industry around 1960.²

Yet it was only the recent New Wave of art-house films, often shot on digital video, that has put Southeast Asian cinema on the map internationally. The first decade of the 2000s has seen a rise of independent cinema in a number of Southeast
Asian countries that is nothing short of spectacular. A region where for a long time commercial productions and genre movies were made by big studios or low budget film producers to appeal to the local market only, has recently made itself heard on the international art house and festival circuit. Of all the countries of Southeast Asia, only the Philippines had a tradition of independent filmmaking before 2000. Kidlat Tahimik is revered by contemporary indie filmmakers of the country as the director who made the first independent art-house film in the Philippines, *The Perfumed Nightmare* (Mababangong bangungot, 1977). In the 1980s, young filmmakers such as Nick Deocampo and Raymond Red used Super-8 film as a relatively inexpensive tool to create films that otherwise would not have been possible. Their works were shown at international film festivals, and can be considered as forerunners of the contemporary indie filmmakers of Southeast Asia.

More recently, directors such as Apichatpong, Wisit, Nonzee Nimibutr, and Pen-ek Ratanaruang from Thailand; Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, and Ho Yuhang from Malaysia; Lav Diaz, Khavn de la Cruz, Raya Martin or Brillante Mendoza from the Philippines; Royston Tan or Tan Pin Pin from Singapore; and Riri Riza, Nia Dinata or Edwin from Indonesia have drawn attention to a part of the world whose rich and diverse film culture and history are so far not part of the Grand Narrative of World Cinema.

As different and distinct as the works of these filmmakers are, more often than not this new generation of filmmakers has been empowered by the easy and cheap access to digital video. The arrival of relatively affordable video cameras that allow for shooting broadcast quality; editing software, that runs on off-the-shelf home computers; cheap DVD burners that allow filmmakers to create their own DVDs; and the Internet as a medium to either promote or even distribute one’s works are the most important tools that have made possible this democratic cinema revolution in a part of the world that is otherwise not known for its democratic disposition. Most of these filmmakers would never have had a chance in the commercial cinema of their respective countries. Due to digital cinema technology, they now have the opportunity to produce their alternative and often very personal works. Interestingly, the consumption of these digital films has become something akin to a lifestyle statement among middle-class youth in all of these countries, and the festivals and competitions that screen those films—such as the annual Cinemalaya Festival in Manila—are often overcrowded.

I count myself extremely lucky that I happened to be in this part of the world—teaching first at the University of the Philippines in Manila, then at the Royal University of Phnom Penh in Cambodia—when this revolution began, and that I was able to observe it from a very privileged position: attending festivals and conferences in the region, meeting filmmakers on an informal level, often before they became successful, and seeing films before they were finished or had entered the international film circuit.
In Europe and in North America, filmmakers started in the late 1990s to experiment with the possibilities of digital video. Among the first movies shot on digital home consumer cameras that were released theatrically and brought the blurry, pixilated look of digital video to actual movie theater screens, were the early Dogma 95 movies *The Celebration* (Vesten, 1998) and *The Idiots* (Idioterne, 1998) and the independent horror movie *Blair Witch Project* (1999). With a slight delay, the kind of equipment that was used to shoot these films became available in Southeast Asia, and this was the beginning of the Indie Revolution that we are witnessing today.

A new kind of microcinema has emerged in Southeast Asia in the ten years since. This development has had a tremendous impact on local film production: In the Philippines, statistics from the Film Academy of the Philippines show that 45 digital films had been exhibited in 2010, while there were 28 movies that were shot on conventional celluloid. This was the second consecutive year that digital movies outnumbered films shot on regular film stock since 2005, when the first digital film was screened in Philippine cinemas.

In the countries of Southeast Asia, most of them “emerging economies” that are more often than not devoid of any film subsidy system to speak of, this development has allowed small production teams, often working with absurdly low budgets, to produce films that are shown around the world at festivals and have garnered positive reviews and awards internationally. It has brought a new generation of filmmakers and new voices from a part of the world to the international film scene that previously were not heard. This book aims to document this new development that is a genuine outcome of the democratization and liberalization of film production brought about by digital technologies.

The independent films from Southeast Asia are typically low budget productions, and the budgets are much lower than filmmakers from other parts of the world might be able to fathom. Let’s look at some numbers: The films of Thai director like Pen-ek Ratanaruang, for instance, are shot on an average budget of US$500,000—already a relatively low sum in comparison to independent films from Europe or the US—that Ratanaruang raises from different international distributors, including the Dutch production company Fortissimo, one of the leading financiers of Asian and Southeast Asian art-house films. His movies, which are shot on regular 35mm, typically get a limited theatrical release in Thailand as well as in a number of other territories, such as the US or a handful of European countries. They might also be shown on television in various countries and released on internationally-available DVDs.

However, the majority of independent films from Southeast Asia are never released theatrically at all, either in their own countries or anywhere else, but are only shown at international film festivals and are only occasionally released on DVD. Therefore the directors have to work with budgets that are much lower
than regular film productions in their respective countries. For example, the latest films of the Philippine director Lav Diaz, such as *Death in the Land of Encantos* (Kagadanan sa banwaan ning mga Engkanto, 2007), that were shown only at international festivals or in Cinémateque-type of cinemas and so far have not been released on DVD, are typically shot on budgets that are significantly lower than US$10,000—despite a running time between eight and twelve hours! Brillante Mendoza reports in the interview in this book that his debut film *The Masseur* (Massahista, 2005) was produced on a budget of half a million pesos (slightly more than US$10,000 or slightly less than €10,000), and that it was much more expensive to blow the film up to 35mm for the theatrical release than to shoot it.

Many of these films are possible only because all of the collaborators, from the actors to the cinematographer, work for little or no compensation. They forgo all set design, costumes or special effects and are shot at easily available locations, with actors dressed in their own clothes, while the post-production is done on the computer of the director, who often serves as scriptwriter, editor or—as in the case of Khavn de la Cruz from the Philippines—even as the composer of the score of his films. Film production used to involve teamwork that took place in expensive studios and cutting rooms. Now, the revolution in film production brought about by digital technology allows anyone to become a film director: all they need is access to a digital camera and a computer. (For a hilarious account of how to make movies under such conditions, skip ahead to the production notes of Malaysian director Khairil M. Bahar on his feature-length digital film *Ciplak* (2006) that was made for less than US$3,000, most of which was spent on the purchase of a digital video camera.)

The independent revolution started in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the 21st Century with films like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (Dokfa nai meuman, 2000) in Thailand, Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* (2000) in Malaysia or events like a festival of digital shorts at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in November 2000 that included works by directors like Khavn de la Cruz, Chris Pablo, Ed Lejano and Jon Red, who went on to be among the principal independent filmmakers in the country. In Singapore, where independent director Eric Khoo jump-started the local film scene in the mid-1990s after over a decade without any local movie production to speak of, the advent of digital film equipment around 2000 started the career of filmmakers such as Royston Tan. And in Indonesia, the omnibus film *Kuldesak* (1999) with episodes by the young directors Nan Triveni Achnas, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani and Riri Riza (who all went on to become name directors in their own right) served as the nucleus of a small but active independent film scene.

While not all of the films mentioned here were shot digitally, the scope of independent movies that are currently coming out of Southeast Asia would be impossible without the technological progress in digital video. Unlike the
technical experiments of the European Dogma 95 filmmakers, who often dwelled
on the visual flaws of digital video, the directors discussed in this book use the
new medium pragmatically, as a substitute for traditional film, which most of
them simply cannot afford. It allows them to take on subject matters neglected or
ignored by commercial cinema makers in their home countries.

Often, these are stories from the dark underbelly of society, like Jim Libiran’s
ghetto gang movie Tribu (2007), Tan Chui Mui’s Love Conquers All (2006) about
the relationship between a Chinese girl and a Malay pimp, Ekachai Uekrongtham’s
Pleasure Factory (Kwaile gongchang, 2007) about the red light district Geylang in
Singapore, Jeffrey Jeturian’s The Bet Collector (Kubrador, 2006) on illegal betting,
or Brillante Mendoza’s Kinatay (2009) on a contract killing. They take on subject
matters that are politically taboo in the often rather authoritarian countries of
Southeast Asia, such as Amir Muhammad’s The Last Communist (Lelaki komunis
terakhir, 2006) on the Communist revolt in the 1950s Malaysia, Yasmin Ahmad’s
interracial love story Sepet (2004), or Martyn See’s Singapore Rebel (2005) on the
leader of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party that were either shown only
after “offensive” scenes were cut or were banned outright in their respective
countries. In Cambodia, Chhay Bora with his debut Lost Loves (2011) tells the sage of a
family under the Khmer Rouge dictatorship that the current government is trying
to relegate to oblivion.

But they also show mundane and unspectacular everyday life, like Woo Ming
Jin’s Days of the Turquoise Sky (Kurus, 2008) or Liew Seng Tat’s Flower in the Pocket
(2007), or address the anxieties of the newly emerging middle class in the countries
of Southeast Asia, like James Lee’s My Beautiful Washing Machine (Medi li de xi yi ji,
2004), Chris Martinez’s 100 (2008), or Ken Lume’s Dreams from the Third World
(2008).

They also try to revive traditional ways of story-telling through the means of
cinema, as in the case of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Mysterious Object at Noon
(Dokfa nai meuman, 2000) or Mingmongkol Sonakul’s Isarn Special (2002), or
develop an experimental language very much their own, as in John Torres’ Todo
todo teros (2006), Lav Diaz in all of his epic productions, or Raya Martin’s pseudo-
silent movie A Short Film About the Indio Nacional (Or The Prolonged Sorrow of the
Filipinos) (Maicling pelikula nañg ysañg Indio Nacional (O ang mahabang kalung-
kutan ng katagalugan), 2005). Their themes include sexual mores: The onslaught
of independent gay films from the Philippines, from Brillante Mendoza’s Masahista
(2004) to the complete Œuvre of Chris Pablo, is a point in case. They deal with
racial problems—a reoccurring topic in most indie films from Malaysia. And they
include the often disturbing consequences of modernization or “Westernization” in
the countries of Southeast Asia, be it the bourgeois alienation in many films from
Singapore or the gloom of globalization’s losers in the Philippines.
However, these films should not exclusively be judged by their political relevance or the issues they address, as they are first and foremost movies with an aesthetic and artistic agenda. And it is on the aesthetic level where the indie films of Southeast Asia really shine, especially when they are trying to find a filmic language of their own that is not derivative of Hollywood or other international cinemas. Movies such as Amir Muhamad’s *Malaysian Gods* (2009) that was recorded in one long take; or Mez de Guzman’s sparse, quiet *Road to Kalimugtong* (Ang daan patungong kalimugtong, 2005); Raja Martin’s *Independencia* (2009), a modern take on Philippine studio filmmaking; or Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s improvised and elliptical *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) might be about one issue or another. However, what really sets them apart is their uniquely formal approach towards their stories. They are by all means serious and determined attempts to develop a new filmic vocabulary.

The rise of an independent cinema in Southeast Asia is one of the most significant developments in World Cinema right now, and the film community has taken notice. International film festivals have invited record numbers of films from the region or organized special retrospectives dedicated to certain filmmakers or Southeast Asian countries. Consider the vivid comments by Canadian film critic Cameron Bailey on the website of the Toronto Film Festival 2007. What he writes about the independent cinema of the Philippines applies to some extent to the other countries of Southeast Asia, as well:

Consciously or not, these Filipino directors have revitalized the long-dormant notion of Third Cinema, first deployed by radical Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in the late sixties. But where Third Cinema rejected on political grounds both the Hollywood model and its counterpoint in European art cinema, the practice in Manila is not nearly so doctrinaire. There, if it works, if it gets you closer to the world you want to put on screen, you use it. The Manila model needs to be exported. In Sri Lanka, in India, in Kenya and in South Africa, to take only a few examples, filmmakers face the same circumstances they do in the Philippines. Harsh social conditions, institutionalized inequity and limited resources stop many artists in these countries from picking up cameras in the first place. But by refining the practice of naturalism and exploiting the accessibility of new technology, Manila’s best young filmmakers have turned disadvantages into useful tools.5

While there is something bewildering about a film critic from the First World telling filmmakers from the Third World what they just need to do, this kind of appraisal which has gained currency in the writing on Southeast Asian film is of importance, as it stresses the possibility of a technologically augmented equal status between films from the global South and the rest of the world. The recent
onslaught of digital films from Southeast Asia is then, not just another “New Wave,” but points to a fundamental power shift in regards to films from the “developing countries” of the world.

Similar claims have been made before in the history of cinema, when new technologies such as 16mm, Super 8 or analog video came along. All these media, however, never leveled the playing field the way digital cinema does now. It has become a commonplace to state that in a near future, all films will be digital, and on one level or another they all are already anyway. But with the dramatic progress in digital film technology, it seems a given that the filmmakers from the less affluent parts of the world will soon have access to cameras and means of post-production that are in the same league as their counterparts in the First World. This development is being played out almost as in a petri dish in Southeast Asia right now.

The new digital equipment is not only relatively affordable, but also lightweight and easy to use, the tapes are cheap and the post-production can be done on regular off-the-shelf PCs. It allows one to work on a film by oneself. Many of the filmmakers in Southeast Asia labor in relative isolation, and if they use crews, they are as small as possible, often just a cameraman or a sound man. Filipino director John Torres co-wrote, directed and edited his debut *Todo todo teros* (2006) and also shot most of the footage for the film. “Fortunately, with the digital cameras of today, you can just shoot and shoot and play around with the images,” he says about his way of working. “You do not have to set up anything. You do not have to talk to people . . . [T]he possibility just freed my mind! I did not have to start with a script or with a dialogue, I just shot whenever I felt the need to and then started to edit small things together without really knowing where I was going or what I was doing.”

The flexibility and autonomy that digital video afforded these filmmakers calls to mind Alexandre Astruc’s notion of the caméra-stylo (the camera pen),7 where filmic images become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language and where the director is the sole author of the film—an idea that was the nucleus of the French *auteur* theory. In the case of *Todo todo teros*, the final film was put together in a process very similar to solitary writing. Torres says about the editing process of *Todo todo teros*: “Eighty percent of the time when I edit my films, I sit in front of the computer and stare at the screen, not knowing what to do. Then again, you can just leave a shot on the desktop for weeks, and you can think about it and where you want your story to go. It is also very easy to manipulate colors with one click of a button, or to rearrange all your shots, play stuff backwards, play around with the sound.”8 Digital video, therefore, has not only made it much easier to shoot films, but it has also brought the production process of films in close proximity to the process of writing, as Astruc had hoped for. Without rental fees for studios, editing equipment or the need to pay editors and other collaborators it enables the filmmakers to create their films with almost complete autonomy.
While some directors might find such conditions abrasive, as it puts all the burdens of the production on the filmmaker alone, it does have the advantage of allowing for a great deal of freedom and flexibility. At the Cinemanila Film Festival in Manila in 2007, I ran into a Philippine director who used his laptop in the breaks between film screenings, interviews and meetings to put the finishing touches on his latest work that was to premiere the next day at the same event. (Unfortunately, the “flexibility” of working with digital can also backfire as in the case of the disastrous post-production of Lav Diaz’ Evolution of a Philippine Family (Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang pilipino, 2004), where the computer with the almost finished film crashed a week before its official premiere at the Toronto Film Festival, forcing the director to start the post-production from scratch.)

This book wants to contribute to the budding discourse on these developments. While there is a growing interest in Asian cinema lately, the focus so far typically has been on the cinemas of Japan, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan or more recently South Korea. However, the cinemas of the countries of Southeast Asia have on the whole been underappreciated or almost entirely overlooked—despite the vibrant and diverse film cultures that these nations had in the past—and despite their considerable output today.

There has been an ongoing debate about the thorny question whether the very diverse cinema of the region needs to be shuffled together under the moniker “Southeast Asian Independent Cinema.” I see the validity of this kind of argument, and this important issue is discussed in greater detail in some of the essays in this book. After all, there aren’t many books on European or North American cinema, but rather books on Italian, French, German, Danish, US-American, or Canadian cinema, are there? And aren’t studies of national cinema passé anyway in the age of cultural globalization? A statement by Chris Berry about the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien applies to the cinema of Southeast Asia at least the same extent: The “national cinema’ approach is too invested in territorial nationalism to adequately account for films such as these.” And finally, it needs to be pointed out that a number of countries that are considered to be part of Southeast Asia have so far had no or only a very small part in the recent digital film revolution: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, East Timor and Brunei have for a number of different reasons (state censorship, lack of film culture, extreme poverty) not participated in the recent upsurge of filmmaking that can be observed in their neighboring countries.

So, why construct a phenomenon like “Southeast Asian Independent Film”? Despite their many differences, the films discussed in this volume seem to share common traits. First of all, this type of film—whether radical experimental works, gay love films or digital art-house movies that address the ills of contemporary society—did not exist in the region even ten years ago, when the privilege to produce films was limited to a small group of commercial studios (often subsidiaries of powerful television stations) that had the means to produce films in safe genres
such as melodrama or (teen) comedy and another small group of independent outfits that typically churned out B-to Z-grade productions in genres such as soft sex, action and horror. Secondly, digital video simply has not had a similar impact in other parts of the world. And finally, all of these films touch in one way or another on subjects that are problematic or unresolved in their respective societies.

Many independent films of the region speak about issues that earlier generations of filmmakers did not dare to touch or were prohibited from addressing because the means of productions were in the hand of commercial film studios that had no interest in those topics. That is not to say that there weren’t neorealist or socially critical films before. Most of them, however, were made in the framework of the mainstream film industry, and typically had to conform to some extent to the conventions of this industry. What sets the contemporary independent films apart from the films of a Lino Brocka in the Philippines or the early Chatrichalerm Yukol in Thailand is the degree of independence that the new digital tools allow filmmakers—both in terms of what stories they tell and how they approach their themes formally.

Western viewers who grew up in relatively open and liberal societies will often have a hard time understanding how radical and subversive some of the films discussed in this volume are in their respective countries. (It would be an interesting experiment to show a movie like Amir Muhammad’s *The Last Communist* to a Western audience, and then let the viewers guess why this film was banned in the country of its making.) Southeast Asia is a region where most countries have a troubled history of wars, coups d’état and periods of dictatorships after the end of the colonial period, where democracy so far has not taken hold and where civil society is little developed. Therefore, many controversial topics have been swept under the rug for a very long time. What all of the films discussed in this volume have in common is that they dig deep into these contradictions and troubles—sometimes in an in-your-face kind of way, sometimes in a rather restrained, subtle or cryptic fashion.

At the same time, the independent films that have come out of Southeast Asia in the last decade are by no means a homogenous lot. They include films that are relatively conventional art-house movies, which are often produced by quite established production companies—such as the films by Yasmin Ahmad, who was a TV commercial director in her day job—and radical experiments such as the films by John Torres. They contain the grim neo-realist movies of directors like Brillante Mendoza as well as the sophisticated essay films by Amir Muhammad. And they include films from Third World countries like the Philippines and Indonesia as well as from Singapore, which is the only country in the region that has managed to close ranks with the First World and has a standard of living that rivals that of the countries in the “Global North.”

Finally, to some extent the decision to cover not just the indie cinema of one country of Southeast Asia, but rather the whole region, was due to sheer
pragmatism. I would not have found a publisher for a book on the contemporary cinema of just one country, as, for instance, the incredibly productive Philippines. I also simply did not see the possibility to gather enough worthwhile material on just one of the countries covered in this book, as film criticism in many countries of the region has yet to catch up with the output of their filmmakers. At the same time, I felt it was a valid approach to try and document the revolution that has happened in the various countries of Southeast Asia at the same time.

In order to do the conditions of film production and reception in the region justice and to paint an objective picture of the debate on films in Southeast Asia, I felt it was important to include a wide variety of voices, not just essays from the relatively homogeneous crowd of university-affiliated film critics who dominate the academic discourse on Asian cinema. Therefore, this book contains contributions from a motley crew of film bloggers and tenured university professors, of Ph.D. students, film critics, and even a published novelist, poet and playwright. I also wanted to include the perspective of the very subjects of this book, the filmmakers themselves, and therefore included a good number of interviews and other personal accounts and primary sources by important directors and screen writers. I hope this not only adds to the usefulness of this book for those teaching Southeast Asian cinemas in colleges and universities, but makes the book accessible to a wide-ranging group of readers.
I

Essays
Southeast Asian Independent Cinema
Independent of What?

John A. Lent

To discuss Southeast Asian Independent Cinema is to encounter problems of definition, first, in trying to delineate the region itself, and second, in setting the parameters of independent film. Southeast Asia is a diverse mixture of many languages, cultures, and beliefs pulled together for political convenience; it is a colonial, and later, Cold War construct of Western origins. The region and in turn, its film, are not entities unto themselves; they are inseparable from their Indian, Malay, Chinese, and other roots.

Similarly, a sole definition of independent cinema is not justified, with filmmakers and cinema scholars using the term in different contexts, varying from place to place and time to time. Some, such as Indonesian Rudy Soedjarwo, director of What’s Up with Love? (Ada Apa Dengan Cinta, 2002), define independent film by what it is not: “In Indonesia, the term independent has been bad, because its meaning [is] you have to make a ‘weird’ film, film that you cannot understand, and that’s wrong, because independent means you’re independent. It’s not about the film, and the more people don’t understand, the more it’s cool.”

Perhaps one way to try to understand independent film is to ask, independent of what? Three answers come to mind here: government regulation and censorship, big mainstream studios and traditional methods/styles of filmmaking.

Independent of Government Regulation/Censorship

For decades, countries of the region operated under strong one-man rule (Marcos in the Philippines, Soeharto in Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Mahathir in Malaysia), periods of martial law and military rule as in the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam, and the guided democracy concept, prevalent especially in the 1970s. Before that, all of these countries, with the exception of Thailand, had been colonized by European powers. As a result, many legislative acts and other forms of regulation were levied against mass media, including film, and these regulations often go back to the colonial period of the respective countries. In the past decade, there has been a loosening of some of this control, with significant changes
of government in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Though many restrictions still apply, the overall atmosphere appears to be more open, which some filmmakers have dared to test.

Even when Ferdinand Marcos ruled the Philippines, there were filmmakers such as Lino Brocka, Behn Cervantes, Ishmael Bernal, and others who featured subject matter considered out-of-bounds by the authorities. Brocka and Bernal attempted to survive within and at the same time against the system. As Brocka told me in 1986, “When I made five [films] a year, four would be commercial and one that Marcos would not like, that would enrage Imelda.” He and others were often vocal against censorship and other restrictions. In 1983, Brocka and screenwriter Jose Lacaba formed Concerned Artists of the Philippines as a forum for these objections. Because of their social activism, including participating in demonstrations, the police detained Brocka and Cervantes.

Particularly in Indonesia, after the end of thirty years of Soeharto’s New Order, filmmakers have enjoyed more freedom, no longer heeding requirements to obtain production or location permits and freer to use social criticism content that would have been censored before. The group of independent directors spawned by reformasi (reform) challenged New Order constructs, and in 2000, thirteen of them created I sinema, a manifesto included in this volume, declaring that within the freedom of expression spiral, they would find alternative ways to produce and distribute film in an effort to end the stagnation of the industry.

Malaysian independent filmmakers also have pushed the boundaries of freedom of expression in recent years. Prominent among them have been U-Wei bin Haji Saari and Shuhaimi Baba, both of whom indulge in social commentary and intellectualize issues they expose. U-Wei’s Woman, Wife & . . . (Perempuan, Isteri & . . ., 1993) had its title modified when censors removed the word “whore.” Likewise, Amir Muhammad’s 6horts (2001) and The Big Durian (2003) pushed “the boundaries of Malaysian socio-political, critical, and creative expression.” Because most independent films are not exhibited in theaters, they bypass National Censorship Board approval and take on political themes. One area where independents have had an impact is in subverting government policy that favored Malays (bumiputra, or sons of the soil) over other ethnic groups as owners of film companies. Bumiputraism came on strong in the 1970s with the dismantling of the multiracial studio system, replaced mainly by independent companies financed by Malays. Khoo Gaik Cheng predicts that the new independents will change the bumiputra nature of the industry with more use of personnel of other ethnicities.

Despite the general euphoria, there are plenty of independent directors, such as Martyn See of Singapore, who remain pragmatic and cautious. See said, “I’m independent as far as I do my own stuff, but I’m totally dependent upon the authorities and exhibitors. There’s no way you can be completely independent.”
Independent of Big Mainstream Studios

A break-up of the big studio system has occurred in most parts of the region, brought on at different paces and for varied reasons. The collapse of the mainstream film industry of Indonesia in the 1980s and 1990s has been attributed to the monopoly practice of the Subentra Group, a theater chain owned by a President Soeharto-crony, which showed only Hollywood films, and the national economic crisis which forced hard-pressed filmmakers to move into television production. Independent filmmakers quickly filled the void, first with *Kuldesak* (1998), produced without funding assistance, which inspired other young people to enter the field. Since the demise of mainstream film, all filmmakers have been independent, and furthermore, most of the leading producers, directors, and scriptwriters are women.

In Malaysia and Singapore, the big studios closed in the mid-1970s. As already indicated, when Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris moved out of Malaysia, room was made for the *bumiputra* entrepreneurs, causing what Khoo Gaik Cheng has labeled a “precarious” situation for about 30 years. For example, by 1995, 627 independent film companies were registered with the National Film Board (FINAS), but only ten were active. Shaw Brothers’ Malay Film Production and Cathay Organization’s Cathay-Keris suffered in Singapore as well, because of the lack of sustained private investments, the creation of protectionist trade barriers by neighboring countries, the popularity of television, video, and other home entertainment, and indifference to the arts and culture by the Lee Kuan Yew government. Thailand’s mainstream film culture also broke up, especially after the 1997 Asian economic crisis.

The Philippines, which has the longest tradition of independent filmmaking in the region, saw the closure of its Big Four studios for reasons similar to those of elsewhere in the region, a strike at Sampaguita Studio, and possibly the establishment of Deegar in 1953. Deegar’s mission was to encourage independent producers to borrow money from its production fund, with which they could make movies that were released through Deegar’s extensive booking organization. Using Deegar as financier, top artists and technicians bailed out of the Big Four, started their own companies and attracted the top stars, having the advantage of being able to offer bigger salaries, since they did not have the high operating costs of maintaining studios. In 1958, about one hundred companies existed, most producing low quality, imitative films in an attempt to recoup investments quickly.

In all these instances, the closure of the big studios led to the development of independent film cultures.
Independent of Traditional Methods and Styles of Filmmaking

The foregoing (independence of government control and the big studio structure) played vital roles in the approaches to filmmaking that independents have taken and the tactics they have employed to produce and exhibit their films.

It is worthwhile to reiterate here the way famous scriptwriter and film historian Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr. categorized filmmaking in his native Philippines to better understand the purpose, thinking, and practice of independents. Del Mundo gave the types of filmmaking as “center of mainstream,” “outskirts (or periphery) of mainstream,” and “outside mainstream.” “Center of mainstream” treats film as a commodity used to make money, following certain conventions tested in the market. Filmmakers working on the outskirts aim to create “something greater than making movies that would make money;” they use the mainstream structure but give themselves leeway in choice of subjects and budget allocation. Del Mundo said these films “radiate the aura of art or, at least, of serious work, but they do not necessarily negate the attraction of commerce.”

Del Mundo’s description of those working outside the mainstream is particularly instructive relative to independents. He said these filmmakers consider film as art; making money is not their aim, nor is designing a work for a certain audience, the expectation being the film will find its audience. Del Mundo felt the development of a truly Philippine national cinema lies outside the mainstream, in what he called an “open space” where he saw increasing numbers of independent films and videos being made.

In the Philippines, the 1970s saw the emergence of filmmakers working at all three levels—Brocka alternatively within, on the periphery, and outside the mainstream, the latter when he started his short-lived company, CineManila, supported by like-minded financiers. Also on the outside, Bernal was helped by a group of friends to finance his first feature, *At the Top* (Pagdating sa Dulo, 1972). Others have worked completely outside the mainstream, some for as long as more than three decades. For example, Kidlat Tahimik (Eric de Guia), with his silent Bolex 16mm camera, made *Perfumed Nightmare* (Mababangong Bangungot) in 1976 and other works since then. Tahimik described his experimental filmmaking as the cup of gasoline approach, explaining to Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.: “I compare myself to someone driving a car, and I have a cup of gasoline. Then I scrounge around for the next cup of gasoline, and on and on until I get it all together.” Other Filipinos defying mainstream practices have been Raymond Red, with his Super-8 shorts and his feature length movies *Bayani* (1992) and *Sakay* (1993) that were shot on 16mm and became popular at international festivals; Mike de Leon’s *Third World Hero* (Bayaning 3rd World, 2000); Lav Diaz with his five-hour *Batang Westside* (2001), Manny Reyes, Nick Deocampo, and others. These artists used alternative storytelling techniques, dealt with subjects the mainstream avoided,
sometimes relied on outdated technology such as Super-8 and experimented freely in all areas of the film process.

The new generation of independents in Indonesia after the omnibus film *Kuldesak* (1999) had their own ideas on how films needed to be made, distributed and exhibited. Nia Dinata, Mira Lesmana and Riri Riza simply said they make their own kind of film, “from our hearts,” and not just for entertainment. Some independents set up multi-tasked companies, while others worked on an individual basis or as members of communities. As Riri Riza explained, “And we work in a community; we always communicate with each other. We go to the festivals together. We arrange our films together. Everything for the good of Indonesian cinema.” The aforementioned group *Isinema* is an example of one such productive community; until 2006, the thirteen members made four films.

Indonesian independents learned to make do with what was available. Riri Riza said none of the cast or crew of *Kuldesak* was paid—“everything was for free”—and overstocks from previous productions were used. Director Rudy Sodjarwo defined independent film, as “about borrowing your family’s handicam and shooting, that’s it and, well, if you don’t have lighting, shoot it when it’s light.” Funding for independent films came from diverse sources—private investment, family and friends, and pre-sales rights. Increasingly, the films are shot in digital formats. Distribution and exhibition are also within the purview of the independents who often “rent a projector and a small theater, and sell tickets.” Exhibition has been helped by the wealth of film cultural activity in metropolitan areas, particularly those with major universities. Scores of short films and documentaries are shown in alternative theaters, cafes, at independent film and video clubs, and festivals that mushroomed around university towns. Exemplary in the areas of film appreciation and exhibition is the work of Dimas Jayasrana, who at the grassroots level has started a film festival, film communities, and film screening projects such as Kultur Visual.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, independents operated contrary to normal filmmaking practice. In Malaysia, independent cinema has meant making very low budget, digital, video productions (under RM$100,000 or around US$ 25,000) that reject mainstream genres and the Malay ethnic/cultural focus (including the use of Bahasa Malaysia, the official language of Malaysia) of the dominant sector. The new wave of 1990s’ filmmakers, such as U-Wei, Shuhaimi Baba, Adman Salleh, and Mahadi J. Murat, were uniquely Malay in issues and themes; others followed them, such as James Lee, Amir Muhammad, and Yasmin Ahmad who delinked the ideology of race from film. Amir Muhammad’s *Lips to Lips* (2000) showed the multi-racial nature of Malaysia, while Yasmin Ahmad’s controversial *Sepet* bravely tackled the subject of inter-racial romance between a Malay Muslim girl and a Chinese boy. *Spinning Gasing* (2000) by Teck Tan, for which he raised the big budget privately, was initially banned in Malaysia because of its portrayal of sex, race and religion. In most cases, Malaysian independents make movies out
of their own pockets or by funding from small production companies, friends and family members. The works are not made for exhibition in local theaters; the alternative and arts-oriented films have their own channels and distribution network, playing on university campuses, and at private institutions, clubs, and art galleries to small middle class audiences and international film festivals abroad.26

Eric Khoo, Royston Tan, Kelvin Tong, and a few others spawned a revival of Singapore cinema mainly through self-initiative. Khoo drew on family money to launch the independent movement with Mee Pok Man in 1995, followed two years later by 12 Storeys (Shier lou, 1997). After forming his own company, Zhao Wei, he produced the first Singaporean DV film, Stories about Love (2000). Tan, a protégé of Khoo, used his S$15,000 (or about US $10,000) savings to make the twelve-minute docudrama 15: The Movie (2002).27 In Thailand, new companies have been started recently by independents such as Nonzee Nimibutr or those directors supporting the work of the new filmmakers, including Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Wisit Sasanateng. A few directors entered the profession through experimental film and video, including Pimpaka Towira and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. As elsewhere in the region, independent film has benefited from direct-to-video technology and the upswing in film festivals, such as the Thai Short Film and Video Festival, where works can be shown.

Figure 1.1 Royston Tan, seen on the set of his movie 4:30 (2005), was one of the young directors who spawned the recent revival of Singapore cinema. Source: Zhao Wei Films

As said at the outset, defining independent film can be elusive. Simply stating that independent filmmaking is oppositionist to government policy and to mainstream commercial is not enough, for, as we have seen, filmmakers sometimes work
within the system (and even with government funds as in the case of the Marcos-supported Experimental Cinema of the Philippines in the early 1980s) to create a new cinema, or they start out as independents but eventually enter the mainstream. For these reasons, a volume such as this is important, drawing together numerous diverse examples of independent filmmaking in Southeast Asia.
In trying to understand what national cinema is, a great number of film critics have turned to Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities.” Famously, Anderson, in his book of the same title, claims that nations as such are always imagined communities which give their members/citizens a sense of identity and belonging. A nation, writes Anderson, is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”\(^1\)

Anderson singles out the importance of the early modern print media, especially newspapers and novels, in the emergence of such imagined communities. By providing their readers with narratives that unfold in specific places they give them a sense of community as well as a sense of shared history and identity. Anderson does not mention cinema in his description of the construction of nationhood, as his focus is the rise of nationalism in early modernity. However, it is obvious to argue that today cinema and television have taken on the role that novels and newspapers had in the period that Anderson talks about in his book. (The fact that Anderson takes a lot of his historic examples in *Imagined Communities* from countries in Southeast Asia—especially from Indonesia and the Philippines, where he lived for some time—makes his argument even dearer to intellectuals and film critics of the region.)

Where does that leave the independent filmmakers of Southeast Asia? Their works do not enjoy the same popularity as the mainstream movies, telenovelas or newscasts in their respective countries that might be construed as the contemporary counterparts of the print media that for Anderson provided the glue that keeps the imaginary communities in the new nations of Asia together. Many of the films from Southeast Asia that are screened at international film festivals and even receive awards there, are not particularly successful in their respective countries, if they are released theatrically at all. Often they are shown only in film clubs, bars, galleries or other informal screening places or “microcinemas.” Or even worse, some films that garner international praise are censored in their countries of origin.
Prominent examples include The Last Communist (Lelaki komunis terakhir, 2006) and Village People Radio Show (Apa khabar orang kampung, 2007) by Amir Muhammad that were both banned from public exhibition in Malaysia. Other films that were victims of censorship were Death in the Land of Encantos (Kagadanan sa banwaan ning mga Engkanto, 2007) by Lav Diaz, that got a special mention at the Venice Film Festival, only to be slapped with an X-Rating in the Philippines that makes its public exhibition more or less impossible, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat, 2006) that was nominated for a Golden Lion Award in Venice, but was shown only in an edited version in Thailand. What makes the discrepancy between the international status of the films by Muhammad, Diaz, Weerasethakul et al., and their reception in their own countries even more striking is that these works are often perceived by an international audience as the very essence of the specific culture of the very countries that show little or no interest in these films.

Gaik Cheng Khoo—a Malaysian critic who has written extensively and favorably about the independent films of her country—calls for a “cosmopolitical” understanding of Malaysian indie films. Zakir Hossain Raju pursues a similar “cosmopolitical” line of thought, when he writes about “transnational” Malaysian indie cinema that “this cinema, being produced in the pseudo-democratic, developmentalist and multiracial but ethnocentric national conditions of Malaysia, but circulated in the global world for consumption by a cosmopolitan civil society, functions as a transnational public sphere. These films, produced at the margin of [a] national film industry and circulated mostly outside national borders to a non-Malaysian audience, address the global citizens of today’s world as if they create a shared communicative space for both their Malaysian producers and transnational consumers.”

While I do not disagree with the idea that the contemporary independent cinema of Southeast Asia is either “cosmopolitical” or “transnational”, I would like to ask some more questions regarding their particular position in a world where media distribution and consumption is taking on an increasingly transnational character. Does the fact that these films do not enjoy wide distribution in their own countries make them any less relevant or representative of the national cinema? Or are they symptoms of the withering of the nation state that provides new opportunities for identification in a post-national period, no longer restricted by citizenship and nationality? Do these post-national conditions allow directors (and their audience) new ways of belonging that are not bound by one’s citizenship, ethnicity or passport anymore?

In trying to answer these questions, I will use the idea of the mediascape that Arjun Appadurai developed in his seminal essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the
Global Cultural Economy” published in the book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, because I feel that this approach can help in understanding the irritating lopsidedness in the international and the national discourse on independent cinema from Southeast Asia. I will use this essay both as a theoretical backbone for my analysis of the structure of the independent film scene in Southeast Asia as well as a thread to keep together some of my observations of this scene. In doing so, I will argue, that these films are not the works of an uprooted jet set of directors, who produce their films for a global audience, while purposefully ignoring the audience of their respective countries.

In this context, it is worth pointing out, that while many of the filmmakers discussed in this volume have been “foreign trained” (a fact frequently stressed in accounts of their works), a relevant number of them worked in advertising in their home countries before they started to make their own films. Nia Dinata, Dante Mendoza, Yasmin Ahmad, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Wisit Sasanatieng and Nonzee Nimibutr all worked quite successfully as directors of television commercials or pop videos before they started to make their own films as directors. (In Thailand, it has even been claimed, that the Thai New Wave of the last decade began because the Asian crisis of 1997 left many people in the advertising industry jobless, and therefore gave them the opportunity to pursue more artistic goals.) As a result these directors have shown an understanding of “what the people want to see” and have proven that they are able to deliver to the expectations of the mass market. (The often sleek or edgy look of their films—that frequently set new standards in their respective countries—is also attributable to this *éducation sentimentale*.) Therefore, if they decided to make films that did not cater to a mass audience of their countries, it was a conscious decision, not lack of ability to do otherwise.

If (mainstream) cinema has in the past played his part in shaping nations into “imagined communities” in Benedict Anderson’s sense by focusing on shared spaces and times, the contemporary independent films of Southeast Asia do the same *ex negativo* by illuminating what is unresolved, proscribed, or taboo in their countries. All of the nations of Southeast Asia have issues in terms of democracy, political freedom, distribution of wealth, the coming-to-terms with the colonial past and the forging of a stable national identity, gender issues and the rights of minorities. In countries like Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, the emergence of an independent cinema in the last ten years corresponds roughly with a growing political discontent with how these countries is run (even though dissatisfaction with the political situation has rarely translated into support for local indie films). By addressing these problematic issues, the independent films might be among the first instances of a civil society that is able to approach those questions in a more mature fashion than is currently the order of the day.
In “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” Appadurai takes to task some longstanding perceptions of world culture:

The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries). Nor is it susceptible to simple models of push and pull (in terms of migration theory) or of surpluses and deficits (as in traditional models of balance of trade), or of consumers and producers (as in most neo-Marxist theories of development) . . . The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics which we have barely begun to theorize.7

It is these disjunctures that I want to focus on in my discussion of the specific position of Southeast Asian indie films vis-à-vis the mainstream cinema of their countries.

Appadurai identifies five dimensions of the contemporary global cultural flows, that he calls the “scapes”: the ethnoscapes, the mediascapes, the technoscapes, the finanscapes, and the ideoscapes. Appadurai explains:

I use terms with the common suffix-scape to indicate first of all that these are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors . . . These landscapes thus, are the building blocks of what, extending Benedict Anderson, I would like
to call *imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined ‘worlds’ (and not just in imagined communities), and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the ‘imagined worlds’ of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them . . .

I would argue that the independent filmmakers of Southeast Asia are actively involved in the construction of such “imagined worlds.” As they circulate their works in the international “-scape” of global film culture rather than in the cinemas of their home countries—whether by choice or by the lack of opportunity to do otherwise—they withdraw to a sphere where they are not bound by the regulations of their respective nation states (their “official mind”) anymore. Appadurai quips that “one man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison,” and in fact the concerted efforts at nation building in the countries of Southeast Asia has often lead to highly oppressive political situations that one can only avoid by leaving them behind.

One particularly instructive example of the “dissynchronity” between local laws and international reception is the Singaporean documentary filmmaker Martyn See, whose film *Singapore Rebel* (2005) about the leader of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) was banned for public screening in the city state by the local censors (which in Singapore ironically are called the Media Development Authority, MDA). See was put under police investigation, threatened with up to two years in jail or a high fine, and asked to surrender his video camera to the police. The filmmaker reacted by uploading the film (and his subsequent works on equally sensitive political issues) to a number of video streaming sites such as YouTube. And he has since maintained an extensive blog about his case, his films and on the restrictive film policies of the Singaporean government.

I will return to the special significance that new technologies like the Internet (or the technoscape) have for the independent film directors of Southeast Asia later. For the moment, it is worth pointing out that the Internet enabled See to leave behind the confinements of Singaporean censorship that serve to safeguard the imagined community of Singapore (as defined by the government) while physically staying in the city. At the time of this writing, more than 239,000 viewers have watched the film on YouTube, affording See an “imagined world” where films that are critical of the People’s Action Party (PAP), that has ruled Singapore by fiat for half a century, are actually possible.

Let us now look at the way the independent films of Southeast Asia perform in the various “-scapes” that Appadurai has defined. I will begin my discussion with the ethnoscape, that he describes as “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and
other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. The stable, local communities in which many people of course still live are “shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move, or the fantasies of wanting to move . . . And as international capital shifts its needs, as production and technology generate different needs, as nation-states shift their policies on refugee populations, these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wished to.”

While Appadurai clearly has guest workers and refugees in mind here, his observations apply to some extent to the indie filmmakers of Southeast Asia. In a way, they are work immigrants who have to be flexible enough to go to the places where their work is in demand, in their case the festivals and cinemathèques of Western countries where there is an audience for their films. They are a highly mobile and widely traveled bunch (and in that sense many of them have become cosmopolitans). Apichatpong Weerasethakul mentions in the interview in this book that he is abroad half of the year. Other successful directors from the region are also avid collectors of frequent flier miles, as most of their invitations involve long-distance flights to Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, and Korea, and have to carefully schedule their trips in a fashion that still leaves them time to work on their films. And they have learned to live with the draining consequences of this kind of lifestyle. When Philippine director Khavn de la Cruz had to appear at the Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference in Manila in 2008 just hours after he arrived from a trip to Germany and was pitted because of his demanding schedule, he wisecracked: “Jet lag is like free drugs,” before detailing his extensive travel arrangements for the next couple of weeks.

Another keyword in Appadurai’s terminology is the finanscape. While the independent films of Southeast Asia are not involved in the global flow of the “mega monies” that Appadurai talks about in his definition of the finanscape, they have become—however tiny—players in the global entertainment market. It is worth noting here that in the age of PayPal the financing of these films from international funding bodies and production companies is possible (and can be profitable) despite their very limited audience. The possibility to do this kind of international co-production has trickled down from international media conglomerates to small funding bodies and filmmakers that are often essentially bedroom producers with a camera, a computer and not much else. This is an amazing symptom of the globalization of the media market that is now within the reach of filmmakers with very limited means.

All this is of course mainly due to the breathtaking advancements in modern telecommunications and digital media that Appadurai addresses when he talks about the technoscape: “By technoscape, I mean the global configuration, also ever
so fluid, of technology, and of the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries.” It is arguably in this sphere that the Southeast Asian directors have made the most impressive inroads. And it is not just the fact that they boldly make use of the new relatively cheap digital video cameras and use them to make films that would never had been made any other way.

These video cameras became available in Southeast Asia around 2000. At the same time, “new media,” “interactive media,” “digital media,” and “multimedia” were buzzwords, and many colleges and universities added courses and programs in this field to their portfolio. Especially in Malaysia, the support of ventures in the field of information and communications technologies became a state policy, part of the so-called Vision 2020, a long-term program to transform the country from a supplier of raw materials and cheap labor into a post-industrial economy with a standard of living akin to that of the First World. Gaik Khoo has pointed out the significance of these projects for the emergence of digital independent cinema in Malaysia: “The advent of new Malaysian cinema may be attributed to several factors that involved the pro-high technology government policies of the 1990s under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad such as the establishment of the Multimedia SuperCorridor, the Multimedia University, and other neo-liberal development policies that encouraged Malaysians to become more integrated into globalization.” Malaysian indie filmmakers such as Tan Chui Mui, Liew Seng Tat and Deepak Kumaran Menon are all alumni of the Multimedia University.

For these filmmakers, the computer as primary workspace serves not just in the production of their works, but also as a tool to market, distribute and promote them. Even tiny production companies like Da Huang Pictures (that was founded by the Malaysian directors Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, and Liew Seng Tat), Nia Dinata’s Kalyana Shira Films or Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Kick the Machine as well as individual filmmakers (like Khavn de la Cruz) have professional and comprehensive websites to promote their films and inform the public about their activities. They typically include movie trailers, downloadable shorts and essays, statements and interviews with and by the director. Other filmmakers (such as Khairil M. Bahar or Ed Lejano) have presences on social networks like Facebook, Friendster or MySpace, either for themselves or for individual films.

While a website or a Facebook page might be a prerequisite not just for film directors today, but for everybody who wants to get some sort of visibility, some indie filmmakers have made even more elaborate use of the Internet. Amir Muhammad, a prolific and elegant writer, is one of the directors who has made good use of the possibilities of the Internet to distribute information internationally—and for free—by using blogs to publicize his activities. He documented the international reception of *The Last Communist* on his site on blogspot.com, used another blog to collect information for his film *Malaysian Gods* (2009), and
is currently keeping yet another blog, *Writing by Amir*, with entries on his latest films, his book projects and his publishing activities. He has also produced a series of shorts, *Amir’s Alphabet* (2009), exclusively for the web.

His Malaysian colleague Yasmin Ahmad before her untimely death in 2009, also had a frequently updated blog. Blogs like these are not just vast resources of information on the directors as they provide links to reviews, dates of screenings, archived videos of television appearances and interviews, thereby painting a much more comprehensive picture of the directors than a static entry in a film encyclopedia. They are also a means to stay in touch with the audience: some of Ahmad’s entries have gathered over 400 comments! In that way, Muhammad and Ahmad maintain a direct connection with their viewers that bypasses traditional film criticism.

The need to establish a direct rapport with the audience might be crucial for directors whose works have a relatively small audience, often dispersed around the world, and these blogs can therefore be seen as a kind of niche marketing for films to a highly specialized target group. At the same time, many of the Southeast Asian indie directors are highly accessible via the net, a fact that was of tremendous help in the preparation of this book. I never had to make contact via press agents, managers or other middle men. Most of the interviews I did for this publication were arranged with a few emails (and even the email address of a highly acclaimed director like Apichatpong Weerasethakul was easily obtained), and conducted either via telephone, the Internet telephony service Skype or by email, for instance with Pen-ek Ratanaruang, who dutifully answered all of my emails within 24 hours despite working on the post-production on his film *Nymph* (Nang Mai 2009). Try that with Lars von Trier!

![Figure 2.2 Malys indie directors Amir Muhammad, Woo Ming Jin, James Lee, and Tan Chui Mui on the set of Muhammad’s *The Big Durian* (2003)](image)
In fact, many of the filmmakers that are the subjects of this book are not only relatively autonomous producers of their films, who often work from tiny offices or even from their “SoHo” (small office/home office). At the same time they have to handle other aspects of their work that used to be the task of press agents, secretaries, production assistants and distributors. (In that sense the indie filmmakers of Southeast Asia are distant, audiovisual relatives of the “bedroom producers” of the 1990s who began to produce techno or house music not in the studio, but in their homes, and were therein enabled by new digital technologies.)

Especially on the level of distribution, which used to be the bottleneck between independent filmmakers and their audience, Southeast Asian filmmakers have experimented with new innovative approaches. This began with the straightforward methods of filmmakers such as John Torres from the Philippines, who always used to have some DVDs of his films in his backpack that he freely handed out to friends and enthusiasts. The idea is carried on by production companies like Da Huang Pictures, who distribute their films worldwide via their own web shops—really a quantum jump compared to the problems that indie filmmakers faced only ten years ago when they tried to sell their films internationally.

Then there is the case of Amir Muhammad’s *The Last Communist* that distributor Red Films sells on the American market via Customfl icks, an online scheme that allows artists to self-publish and distribute books, DVDs, CDs, video downloads and MP3s on-demand via Amazon.com and other online merchants. The creator or his distributor has to upload his digitized work to the server of the company, and is paid a fee whenever his work is sold on a custom-made DVD. While *The Last Communist* has not exactly been a bestseller, the film is available in North America. Other directors, who have given up hope of financial compensation for their works, simply make their films available for download on the Internet or feed them into P2P networks or video hosting sites like YouTube. After the horror film *Three Days of Darkness* (*Tatlong Araw Ng Kadiliman*, 2007), Khavn de la Cruz’s first attempt at a commercial movie, flopped in the mall cinemas in the Philippines during its brief theatrical run, he simply put the film on the Internet for download.

The relative ease with which one can send DVDs or Digital Beta tapes abroad has greatly contributed to the international visibility of independent films from Southeast Asia. While it is prohibitively expensive to send film reels around the globe, the digital media of today can be shipped via express mail services for a reasonable amount to festivals around the world. New festivals for Asian cinema, such as the Berlin Asian Hot Shots Festival, that have a very tight budget, would most likely not be able to exist at all, if they could not show their films from DVDs or Digital Beta tapes that can be delivered via courier or regular postal mail.

In all these ways, the Independent Films from Southeast Asia have become a—however minute—part of what Appadurai calls the global *mediascape*: “*Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce
and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, film production studios, etc.), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world; and to the images of the world created by these media . . . These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live . . . as they help to constitute narratives of the ‘other’ and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement.”

The filmmakers in this book have successfully fed their works and their “imagined worlds” in this global flow of images. At the same time, they are also subject to these global flows of images in the mediascape. Almost every filmmaker that I interviewed for this book, had his eureka moment that made him want to become a filmmaker, when watching a foreign/Non-Hollywood film. Nia Dinata mentions Red Sorghum (Hong gao liang, 1987) and Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong deng long gao gao gua, 1991), Apichatpong Weerasethakul cites the films of the Taiwanese New Wave as central influence. (Ironically, both had to go to study in the US to see films from other Asian countries.) Erik Khoo, Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Amir Muhammad all credit their studies abroad (and the opportunity to see films that were not Hollywood mainstream or local commercial productions) as important inspirations. In the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, the screenings at the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française and other foreign cultural institutions and embassies provided alternatives to the run-of-the-mill programming at the local cinemas and inspired local indie filmmakers.

It might be hard for readers from North America and Europe to envisage the cinematic monoculture that dominated the cinemas (and later video rental shops) of Southeast Asia at the time when the filmmakers featured in this volume grew up. Only in the last decade or so, has Southeast Asia been truly hooked up to the flow of images from the global mediascape, again due to new digital media, in particular the Internet. However, access to fast net connections is still the privilege of only a few in this part of the world, locally released DVDs are often expensive and, just like the offerings of the cinemas, limited to local mainstream films, Hollywood fare and the occasional horror or action movie from Japan, Hong Kong, or South Korea. Art-house movies or other off-beat films are generally not available (affluent Singapore being the sole exception in the region), and have to be ordered from international mail order companies like Amazon.

Therefore, video piracy that is rampant in most countries in the region was instrumental in bringing international art-house and world cinema into the countries of Southeast Asia. The importance of piracy (that of course is illegal in all the countries of the region) in developing film appreciation and media literacy in Southeast Asia cannot be overstated, and many filmmakers have openly acknowledged their indebtedness to pirated films in their development. While Amir Muhammad has quipped that “piracy has been such a valuable teacher to us,”
Khavn de la Cruz, whose own work is full of references to international horror and trash cinema, says: “Thanks to piracy, local movie-lovers have more options, thus broadening their taste. Some even say that video piracy is creating a cultural revolution in film-viewing in the Philippines.” Therefore, independent filmmaking in Southeast Asia is taking place in a reciprocal (but at the same time asymmetrical) relationship with the global mediascape. These films probably would not exist without this new flow of images into the countries of the region. Simultaneously it has allowed the filmmakers of the region to feed their films back into the global flow of images.

One central argument that Appadurai keeps coming back to in his essay is the fact that the different -scapes that he has established are zones of territorial and cultural disjuncture that he calls “diasporic public spheres.” The fact that the independent films of Southeast Asia emerge in these new cultural and social spaces explains the limited reception that these films find in their respective countries. The makers of these films are members of a relatively new and very small middle class, well-educated, cosmopolitan and liberal, in societies that are not. Therefore their works, and the intellectual framework from which they originate, is out of step not only with the social mainstream of their countries, where the majority is poor, often very traditional, conservative and poorly educated, but also with their governments, which try to uphold a social and political status quo that is increasingly put into question by the forces of globalization.

The independent filmmakers of Southeast Asia, therefore, live in “imagined worlds” that are very different both from the “imagined worlds” of their fellow citizens as well as from the “imagined communities” that their rulers are promoting. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Malaysia (and to a lesser extent in Singapore), where the government tries to turn the country into a First World country without wanting to pay the political price for this type of modernization: an opening-up of the country and a democracy that does not arbitrarily privilege the Malay ethnic majority over others and that allows for freedom of expression and other civil rights. Malaysia seems to be very far from anything remotely like that, as the following comments by Abdullah Badawi, then prime minister of Malaysia, should make clear. When discussing the necessity of media control laws (at a mass media conference, of all places!) in 2007, he had this to say: “When naughty children are no longer unruly, the cane should not be thrown away. Just hang it on a nail on the wall.”

While Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines might be behind Malaysia and Singapore in terms of economic development, similar problems persist there. While governments might pay lip service to democracy and human rights, their societies are characterized by social imbalances and a political system that does not guarantee universal human rights such as freedom of expression. Therefore it seems natural that the filmmakers of Southeast Asia look for an audience elsewhere, where their values and their aesthetics find a more like-minded and more receptive
audience: the developed countries in Europe, North America and Asia. It is there that they enter shared ideoscapes that are different from the oppressive political and cultural environment in their own countries.

Ideoscapes, the last of Appadurai’s scapes, concerns the linkage of terms, concepts and pictures with political or ideological content. These ideoscapes, once dominated by elements of the Western Enlightenment worldview, have lost their internal coherence, and provide “instead a loosely structured synopticon of politics, in which different nation-states, as part of their evolution, have organized their political cultures around different ‘keywords’.”

While “keywords” such as democracy, freedom, rights, etc., are often invoked by the governments of the region, they lack the coherence that the Enlightenment envisioned in the political practice of governments—which is basically to say, that there is no real democracy in any country of Southeast Asia, as political censorship and other restrictions that affect the local film industry persist. The filmmakers of the region have therefore frequently opted to enter their works into ideoscapes that are more compatible with the “imagined world” they live in. Their films are therefore—in Appadurai’s occasionally flowery terminology—signs of an “altogether new condition of neighborliness” starting to emerge.

If the independent movies of Southeast Asia are “able to contest and sometimes even subvert the ‘imagined worlds’ of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them,” (as Appadurai argues for his speculative Weltbürger) it is because they come out of these zones of cultural and political disjuncture that emerged because of globalization, but also because of the specific political and economical dynamics of the countries of Southeast Asia. The relationship between the officially sanctioned imagined communities and the individual imagined worlds of the filmmakers (and other artists and intellectuals) seem at this point less fluid and permeable than Appadurai described it. But the films discussed in this volume prove that there are pockets of resistance to the officially prescribed status quo in those countries. They are “transnational cinema” only for the lack of alternative. But at the same time they point to the possibility of becoming their own kind of national cinema, once the nations where they were both created and rejected are able to bridge the disjunctures that are currently keeping them hamstrung.

The independent filmmakers in Southeast Asia are negotiating these disjunctures. Thanks to digital video, they for once, have the license to do it on their own terms. And it looks as if the independent cinemas of Southeast Asia—a part of the world, that has been colonized so brutally, that has been modified so thoroughly by foreign influences and that was able to indigenize these influences so successfully—might just be the place to express—and maybe at one point suture—those ostensibly incommensurate disjunctures.
Hinterland, Heartland, Home
Affective Topography in Singapore Films

Alfi an Bin Sa’at

So many are seduced
The modern times are here
Following the call of their heart’s desire
Almost forgetting families at home
Oh Singapore
Oh Singapore City!

Late 1950s pop song recorded in Malaya by Julia

What do you expect when people no longer live in kampungs and are locked up in tiny cages called HDB flats?

Letter to the Straits Times on rising stress levels, February 15, 1993

Once he had bathed and swam and played on the sandy banks of the river. Inland the greeny-blue mountain range encircles the fertile valley. The next glance takes in the rice fields, where the paddy plants are rippled by the wind. It is the rice season, which exacts gallon after gallon of sweat from the farmers.

— Wijaya Mala, describing the thoughts of Zawawi, a character in his novel Mata Intan (1951), as the latter watches the scenery on a train ride from Singapore back to his village

Sanjeev Sanyal, regional chief economist, Deutsche Bank, at a conference on the future of Singapore, 2008

Singapore’s hinterland lies in other countries.

Introduction

The history of cinema in Singapore is often discussed as not only discontinuous, but radically disjunctive. A comparison between the studio films that were produced in the 1950s and 1960s and the films produced in the 1990s and thereafter (after a period of almost two decades during the 1970s and 1980s, where there
were no feature films produced in Singapore at all), would reveal texts so divergent as to suggest that they were products of two different countries.

The most glaring difference between these films is demographic. The studio films of the 1950s and 1960s were dominated by Malay actors who spoke in Malay, whereas in contemporary films, the actors are predominantly Chinese, speaking in a range of languages, from Mandarin, to English, to Hokkien and other Chinese dialects. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that these films are reflective of actual transformations in Singapore’s racial distribution. A nuanced analysis will locate the origin of this anomaly in the shared film history of Singapore and Malaysia.

This shared film history has inevitably resulted in political wrangling between the two countries for ownership of these studio era films. As Jan Uhde and Yvonne Uhde have observed, “the 1965 Separation of Singapore from Malaysia is a political issue that has yet to be fully digested in both countries. The differing perspectives of historical events occasionally spill over to the domain of culture and even the movies. For example, are the Malay-language films made in Singapore studios in the 1950s and early 1960s Singaporean or Malaysian?”

While Malaysian scholars and writers have claimed entitlement to these early films by including them in their official film histories, there are a few factors which legitimize Singapore’s own claims. The first involves the political economy of production: legally, the rights to these films belong to both Shaw Organisation and Cathay Organisation, companies that are based in Singapore. The second is textual and the subject of this paper: many of the scenes in these films, especially those in the social dramas (as opposed to the period films), are set in distinctly Singaporean locations.

In seeking resonances between the studio era films and contemporary Singapore films, physical settings provide a useful point of entry. They reveal how different filmmakers from different periods have attempted to represent Singapore on screen, with references to its scenic cityscapes, iconic landmarks, aspects of its local architecture, and its various zones and quarters, organized according to class (villages, squatter settlements, public housing, the central business district, the shopping ‘downtown’), race/religion (places of worship, heritage and tourist spaces), and gender (male-dominated public and civil arenas, feminized domestic spheres, red-light districts).

This paper, however, will focus on the representations of an urban-rural dialectic in contemporary Singapore cinema, particularly in the films of Eric Khoo, Royston Tan’s *15* (2002), Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng’s *Eating Air* (1999) and Djinn’s *Perth* (2004), which negotiates the definition of a city vis-à-vis its antithesis: the country, or hinterland. It will explore how independent Singapore, devoid of a national hinterland, constructed a surrogate in the form of a “heartland,” a largely discursive incarnation which is interrogated in many contemporary Singaporean films. Most of the time, this form of questioning is of an affective nature, where
the failure of the heartland to replace a bucolic utopia is internalized through characters’ alienation from their environment. These films thus offer a critique of the various transformations of landscape and identity undertaken by the state since independence: forced resettlement, atomization of traditional communities, the transition to intensive industrialization, and the attenuation of autonomous spaces once-exempt from the ruthless logic of capitalism.

Rupture in Singapore, Continuity in Malaysia

The 1950s and 1960s, also known as the studio era of filmmaking in Singapore, were dominated by two studios, namely the Shaw Studios’ Malay Film Productions and the Cathay-Keris Studios. The former was owned by the Shaw Brothers, Run Run and Run Me, whereas the latter was run by Loke Wan Tho and Ho Ah Loke. Their respective organizations were also vertically integrated; in addition to the production of films, Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris were also involved in film distribution and exhibition.

In 1961, producer Ho Ah Loke from Cathay-Keris, along with H. M. Shah and director L. Krishnan, launched Merdeka Studio in Hulu Kelang at the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The acquisition of Merdeka Studio by the Shaw Brothers in 1966 effectively relocated their production base from Singapore to the Peninsula, and was a deciding factor in the closure of their Malay Film Productions studio in Singapore. In 1973, Cathay-Keris folded, thus ending a period of studio-based film production in Singapore nostalgically referred to as the “golden era.”

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 eventually resulted in an exodus of talent from Singapore to the Merdeka Studios. P. Ramlee himself migrated to Kuala Lumpur in 1964. After Shaw bought over the studio, it began to dispatch its top directors, such as Omar Rojik and S. Kadarisman to make films there. Actors from Singapore followed suit; among them were Jins Shamsudin, Sarimah and Latifah Omar.

As such, it is not surprising that films produced in Malaysia after the collapse of the studio system in Singapore have more in common with the “golden era” films than those that were later produced in Singapore in the 1970s (a period of B-movies capitalizing on the popularity of spy and martial arts genres) and the 1990s (what has been known as the “revival period”). Many of the actors who were nurtured by Singapore’s studio system, like Mahmood June and Sarimah, continued acting in Malaysia well into the 1970s and even 1980s, thus ensuring an unbroken lineage with the “golden era.” Directors from the studio era also continued to produce commercial hits (Jins Shamsuddin’s teen comedy Ali the Devil (Ali Setan, 1983) and critical successes (Jamil Sulong’s literary adaptation Triaps Along the Journey (Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan, 1985)), securing their relevance for a new generation of film-goers.
In addition, there is a strong awareness among Malaysian audiences and filmmakers of the works from the studio era. Other than being distributed on VCD (by distribution companies such as Music Valley), these films are played on Malaysian television on heavy rotation. Some contemporary Malaysian films have even paid their own homage to the studio era, such as Shuhaimi Baba’s *Screen of Sorrow* (Layar Lara, 1997), about an aging studio diva who imparts valuable life lessons to an aspiring actress, and Mamat Khalid’s *When It Is Night The Moon Waxes Kala* (Malam Bulan Mengambang, 2008), an affectionate black-and-white parody blending golden era melodrama with *film noir*.

In contrast, the studio era remains peripheral to the consciousness of not only Singaporean audiences, but filmmakers as well. The Singapore Malay community, however, is an exception, laying claim to these golden era films as part of their cultural heritage. For example, Taman Warisan, the Malay Heritage Centre in Singapore, showcases paraphernalia from the 1950s and 1960s film industry as part of their permanent collection, and Suria television station, the Malay-language channel, has commissioned documentaries on the period, such as *Jalan Buloh Perindu* (the address of the Cathay-Keris studios), a series on the Cathay-Keris films.

One of the reasons for this neglect in Singapore is the fact that these studio era films are poorly distributed. Cathay-Keris’ Malay Film Classics Library has released only 10 films on VCD from a collection that boasts over 120 titles. The only other sources of these films are either through Malaysian distributors or even poor-quality pirated bootleg copies which were recorded from television. Unfortunately, many of these films are not subtitled and are thus unintelligible to non-Malay-speaking viewers.

The outline above strongly suggests that while Malaysia has assumed possession over the studio era films, by recognizing the talents the studio system has nurtured and organizing various retrospective exhibitions (even while it is unable to claim legal rights to these films), Singapore, on the other hand, has almost surrendered this particular aspect of its film history up north. The collapse of the studio system, its revival at Hulu Kelang, and the migration of talent to the Peninsula, have all contributed to the sense that as part of the divorce settlement between Singapore and Malaysia, custody of the studio era films was awarded to the latter.

However, this cleavage in Singapore’s film history does not mean that a comparative study of the studio era films and contemporary Singapore films is irrelevant. Though one can argue that the true inheritors of the studio era films are Malaysian films (because of the continuity in both production and reception practices in the Peninsula), a close examination will reveal traces of these early films in contemporary Singapore cinema. This is not to suggest that recent Singapore films are aesthetically indebted to the studio era films, or that they self-consciously recognize the latter as their cultural predecessors. The “traces” that I have mentioned...
exist in the order of the palimpsest, where one history is written over another. A Malayan history, one often disavowed in official narratives of the Singapore Story, lies latent under the surface of contemporary Singapore films. It is a history that once promised wholeness, security, stability and the developmentalist potential of abundant land.

The Affective Hinterland

The notion of a hinterland can be articulated in several ways. A geographic definition would refer to a region remote from urban areas or metropolitan centers. A political one comes into effect in the concept of the “doctrine of the hinterland.” This term, asserting territorial sovereignty, would apply the term “hinterland” to the inland region lying behind a port, claimed by the state that owns the coast. A hinterland can also be expressed in economic terms, as a source of raw materials and labor. As a matter of fact, the economic definition is one that is most often mobilized in government speeches. Lee Kuan Yew himself, in an interview, mentioned a hinterland in the same breath as Singapore’s post-Separation economy: “But what is absolutely essential is to survive, never mind the military and security side. More important is the economic prospects. We have to be very different from our neighbors. That was the first shock we had. Because we thought by joining Malaysia, we’d go back to the old Singapore. We would have a hinterland, a common market, and can develop import substitution industries like other countries. Now, we’re off on our own with not the most sympathetic of neighbors. How do we live?”

A lesser-discussed articulation of the hinterland is the idea of a countryside that acts as a repository of certain conservative cultural and moral values, in contradistinction to the chaotic liberal relativism of the city. This was a common trope for Malay literature in the 1950s and 1960s, where kampung (village) values were valorized as the corrective for the “Western” evils associated with the city: materialism, decadence and impiety. This was a dichotomy that was developed out of necessity: Malay nationalism recognized the value of modernity as represented by the city, but was anxious about its damaging effects, in particular the erosion of Malay culture. The hinterland thus represented a site where traditions could be preserved and maintained, geographically located at a remote distance from the city and thus isolated from its influence.

In her study of Malay novels set in the 1950s and 1960s Virginia Matheson Hooker has noted: “In both Jewel Eye (Mata Intan, 1951) and The Inheritance of Kampung Gergasi (Saka Kampung Gergasi, 1950), Wijaya Mala writes of the inspiring power of Malaya’s natural beauty and the benefits which can result when the beauty of the homeland is developed. Yet Zawawi’s reflections in Singapore sound a warning that in an urban context development can bring hardship and suffering and create oppressed people (orang-orang yang tertindas). Wijaya Mala’s
narratives are among the first in Malay fiction to show the implications of development: how to balance the benefits of modernity with the suffering and displacement which urbanization can cause.6

Van der Heide in his discussion of P. Ramlee’s *My Mother-in-Law* (*Ibu Mertuaku, 1962*) similarly notes how “Penang is the *kampung* component of the archetypal *kampung*/city dichotomy, one of the most significant and recurrent themes of Malaysian cinema.” He observes this theme again in P. Ramlee’s *The Trishaw Man* (*Penarek Becha, 1955*): “The rich/poor dichotomy is also grafted onto a westernization/traditional differentiation. Marzuki’s family is conspicuously shown eating the western way (bread and butter on plates eaten with knives and forks; tea poured from a teapot). These indicators of westernization combined with Marzuki’s greed and ruthlessness signify the dangerous consequences of increasing industrialization and wealth acquisition in urban Malayan centers like Singapore in the 1950s.7

I will cite two studio era films that exemplify this particular city-hinterland dichotomy.8 Both are melodramas which utilize the *kahwin lari* narrative, in which a pair of lovers, often from different class backgrounds, marry despite the objections of their parents.9 In some cases, this involves actual elopement or banishment from their parents’ houses. The first is *A Mother’s Love* (*Kaseh Ibu, 1964*) by Cathay-Keris director Nordin Ahmad, and the second is *Eclipse* (*Gerhana, 1962*) by Malay Film Productions’ Jamil Sulong.

**Where City Meets Hinterland: Singapore Films of the 1960s**

*A Mother’s Love*, seen through contemporary lenses, appears to be an excessive, almost camp rendition of a woman’s suffering. The film, the actor-turned-director Nordin Ahmad’s third, is executed with such broad strokes that it elicits sympathy for its protagonist and indulges in sadistic glee over her fate in equal measure. Hasnah (Latifah Omar), a girl from a humble *kampung* background, marries Dahlan (Ahmad Osman) despite the objections of his parents. In fact, Dahlan’s father, a rubber estate owner, remarks unambiguously that “neither her purity nor her race is an issue, but her poverty . . . our relatives will distance themselves from us.” They have a child, Hassan (Bat Latiff’), who is doted on by both his maternal and paternal grandparents. One day, while driving, the family is involved in an accident. Dahlan is fatally injured, leaving behind the widowed Hasnah and their eight-year-old son. Dahlan’s house is later unexpectedly repossessed by creditors and Hasnah returns to her family’s house in the *kampung*.

Hassan’s paternal grandparents then seize this opportunity to become his guardians. They advise Hasnah to leave him at their bungalow, reasoning that her parents’ “old hut” is not the proper place to raise their grandson. They lavish the boy with gifts, and treat him as a kind of substitute for the son that they have
lost. Hasnah then remarries the charming, in-law-ingratiating Jaffar (Mustapha Maarof), who she finds out too late is an inveterate gambler and womanizer.

*A Mother’s Love* establishes a rural-urban dichotomy in very stark terms. Hassan’s paternal grandparents both wear spectacles and are portrayed as status-conscious, materialistic and conniving. On the other hand, his uneducated maternal grandparents are often seen sitting in front of their hut, engaged in honest, manual labor: the wife cooks while the husband packs her home-made fish crackers into biscuit tins for sale. Early in the film, when Hassan celebrates his eighth birthday, he is visited by his maternal grandparents, whereas his paternal ones renge on their promise to do so.

Hasnah often visits her son, both at his school and her in-laws’ bungalow, effectively performing border-crossings between her village and the urban areas. However, there are two particular instances where this geographical transition assumes an affective dimension, the change in environment exerting its influence not only on Hasnah’s emotional state but marking itself on her body.

After Dahlan’s death, Hasnah supports herself by selling food at her village *warung* (a makeshift coffee shop). In one sequence, we see Hasnah preparing the food at home over a wood stove. The scene is then intercut with that of Jaffar, her second husband, flirting with a woman in front of the National Theatre, and then subsequently dancing with her. As the sequence progresses, the montage shows divergent lives: Hasnah’s industry and her husband’s hedonism.

Hasnah later peddles her food in the *kampung*, and then strays beyond its confines to a block of high-rise flats. When she approaches a teenage boy along a corridor, he rudely tells her that “your food is not nice.” Another teenage boy rejects her, and we see Hasnah guardedly knocking at door after door and wearily climbing staircases. Finally, on the ground floor, she coincidentally stumbles upon her husband, who then asks her for money. The themes of the film coalesce around this moment: an encounter between an exploitative urban character and a victimized rural subject. Passively, Hasnah surrenders her takings to him, and the exchange exemplifies the city’s insatiable greed as contrasted against the hinterland’s self-sacrifice and nobility.

Another scene, at the end of the film, demonstrates Hasnah’s proprioceptive disorientation as she navigates through the city. Hassan had been sent by his grandparents to a boarding school in Tanjung Malim, but he somehow makes his way back to Singapore by hitching a ride. He tries to look for Hasnah and eventually faints from exhaustion. Upon hearing that her son is in hospital, Hasnah rushes from the *kampung* barefooted, screaming out his name. We see an aerial shot of her surrounded by traffic, and later, medium shots of her in front of the Victoria Theatre and sprinting across Anderson Bridge.

When Hasnah finally spots the city hospital, she is hunched over, sweat dripping from her face. At the hospital, she knocks down a nurse, passes by a few extras
unbelievably oblivious to her manic distress, and then performs a few expressionist spins in a hospital room (the camera spins too). Her body is in a state of entropy: her fingers dig into her hair (which by now seem to possess extensions, all the more to swish around in clinical environs), and her hands clutch her head on both sides—the overheated sign of a woman about to lose her mind.

The highly-emotional reunion between Hassan and Hasnah is witnessed by both sets of grandparents. Hasnah’s in-laws realize their error in trying to separate mother and son: the material well-being that the city offers is no substitute for “a mother’s love.” The raising of the child has to be a co-operative effort, combining both the economic support from the city and the timeless moral values of the kampung.

In Eclipse, the respective class positions of the protagonists are reversed. Karim (Ahmad Mahmud) is a poor petrol pump attendant from the Peninsula who falls in love with Nora (Zaiton), a rich girl from Singapore. In his memoirs, the director Jamil Sulong recalls how the screenplay was his own invention, based on “everyday stories.” After it was screened, however, he “received a few letters that said the film was the story of [the letter writers’] lives.”

Karim eventually becomes a chauffeur to Nora’s family and is provided with lodgings. Their illicit romance is soon discovered by Nora’s parents, who terminate his services immediately. Nora then runs away from home and suggests that Karim marry her. When a kadi (a Muslim cleric who solemnizes marriages) visits Nora’s house, Nora’s father is compelled to authorize the marriage. Karim and Nora then strike out on their own, raising a son on Karim’s meager income as a mechanic and odd-job laborer, as well as the money obtained by pawning Nora’s jewelry.

In an early scene, we see a shot of Karim’s kampung in the Peninsula, where his mother lives. He has sent a letter back to her, saying that he needs some money to pay for his driving lessons. The mother sits at a table with her neighbor, eating betel leaves, a signifier of a traditional way of life. She asks her neighbor’s daughter, Rogayah, to read it, as she is illiterate. The mother’s responses to the letter’s contents reveal her mistrust of the city. When Rogayah reads that Karim has obtained his driving license, the mother remarks, “Hah? He can drive a car now? I hear that in Singapore there are as many cars as there are worms. I hope he doesn’t become someone who’s crazy over cars.”

Rogayah then reads the part where her son writes, “Life in Singapore is very complicated. Everything requires money,” to which her mother responds, “I don’t know why Karim has to go and look for work in Singapore. Now it’s not him who sends money to me, but he’s the one who’s asking for money. My heart is uneasy thinking of kids who go to big cities like Singapore, who knows what they’re up to? . . . I hear the people there are too liberal. I fear he might get seduced by someone there and end up marrying city people.”
Later, with another child to feed and with Karim himself falling ill through overwork, Karim decides to bring the whole family to live with his mother in the kampung. He tells Nora, “It looks like we can’t survive here anymore. There’s the rental for the house, the water bill, and so many other expenses. In the kampung, I can at least tap rubber. And living costs aren’t so high.” When he returns, however, he is faced with his mother’s gloating animosity. She warns him that if he were to live in the house that she owns, he would have to obey her faithfully. She also says that “this is a kampung, and not Singapore, so Nora can’t do whatever she likes here.” As they own a plot of rubber trees, she suggests that Karim tend to them himself; previously they had relied on hired laborers to tap the rubber.

Karim’s decision to relocate to his kampung actually illustrates another aspect of the city-hinterland dialectic. When one fails in the city, there is the kampung to which one can eventually return. If one is unable to participate in the fast-paced, fragile, and capricious economy of the city, the hinterland is always present to provide some form of security. Because of personal land ownership, there is always an economic buffer against the vagaries of the market. Hence the hinterland offers its prodigal sons financial predictability, self-determination and the possibilities of self-subsistence, either by growing, rearing and fishing one’s own food supply or tending to cash crops.

Unlike A Mother’s Love, Eclipse explores the city-hinterland dialectic in a much more nuanced manner. Nora, the city girl, is shown to be a virtuous wife and mother, who stoically tolerates verbal and psychological abuse by Karim’s kampung mother. On the other hand, Rogayah, the kampung girl, whom Karim is later forced to marry, becomes a dance hostess soon after reaching Singapore. However, the values associated with each location is still enforced: it is Nora’s inherent good nature that has allowed her to perform domestic tasks in the kampung with ease, whereas Rogayah’s naturally corruptible spirit has led her to succumb to the enticements of the city. This sensitive approach, rejecting spatial overdetermination, along with an eloquent screenplay and a remarkably moving central performance by Zaiton, make Eclipse one of the most underrated melodramas of the 1960s.

I would like to add just one final note on the city-hinterland dialectic. By tracing its origins in Malay literature and Malay nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s, I risk essentialising this phenomenon as being exclusive to the Malay community. As Sweeney has noted, “All Malays will agree on the tremendous evocative power of the word kampung, including those city born and city bred.” This could possibly invalidate a comparison of the studio era films with the predominantly Chinese-populated films made in contemporary Singapore.

However, it is important to note that not all kampungs in what is now the city state of Singapore in this time were homogenously Malay. There were many Chinese and mixed-race kampungs in existence as well. In addition, there is an intriguing sequence in the only Chinese-language film made in Singapore, Yi Sui’s
Alfi  an Bin Sa’at

Lion City (1960), where the protagonist Fengling and her paramour visit a coconut plantation in Muar, Johor, belonging to the former’s sister-in-law. Surrounded by acres of coconut trees, the two lovers declare their love for each other and rhapsodize about the beauty of the landscape. While a discussion of this film is beyond the scope of this paper, I hope it does provide some evidence that representation of the hinterland is not the exclusive domain of Malay cinema.

The Heartland As Failed Hinterland

In 1960, the Housing Development Board (HDB) was established, in response to what was perceived as a housing crisis. Large segments of the population were living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, which were considered to be fire and health hazards. The achievements of the HDB are notable: by the end of 1965, it had managed to house 23 percent of the total population in public flats. By the late 1990s, around 85 percent of Singapore’s population was living in HDB flats.

However, such impressive urban planning came at a cost. There was often spirited resistance to the government’s attempts at resettlement and land acquisition. Landowners and squatters often ignored eviction notices or demanded higher compensation. However, the government, especially after its consolidation of power in 1963, managed to push through many of its plans through draconian means, such as the deregistration of the Rural Dwellers’ Association, and the destruction of homes supervised by the police to prevent any incidents from protesting residents.

In Singapore today, the last surviving village, Kampung Lorong Buangkok, is facing demolition. The city-state is almost completely urban, with the exception of a few pockets of land reserved for intensive farming, nature reserves, water reservoirs, cemeteries, and sites used for military training. Singapore’s hinterland is technically the neighboring Malaysian state of Johor, which supplies Singapore with its food, fresh water, and also labor; thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers cross the Causeway each day to toil in Singapore’s factories. Some accounts also refer to the adjacent Riau islands, such as Batam and Bintan, as Singapore’s hinterland based on the idea that Singaporeans visit them for the opportunity to experience a “rural lifestyle.” It is interesting to note how this desire cuts across class divisions, encompassing both Malay male retirees who nostalgically yearn for a kampung idyll, to jet-setting elites who seek out spa-and-villa resorts as retreats from “hectic” city lifestyles.

The disappearance of “hinterland spaces” in Singapore, although widely acknowledged as an inevitable side-effect of land scarcity and urbanization, has also resulted in some anxiety. In 1999, during his National Day Rally Speech, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong introduced the terms “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” to describe two categories of Singaporeans. As is generally understood,
the “heartland” would refer to the mostly-residential spaces that are occupied by HDB public housing, whereas “cosmopolitans” are those who either own private housing, or engage in work and leisure activities in the central city areas. According to Tan/Yeo, often the “the discourse on cosmopolitanism is contrasted with that of heartlander-ism. This cosmopolitan-heartlander divide sets better-educated, highly mobile “cosmopolitans” against more rooted, less mobile “heartlanders.” While both are said to be important in the overall fabric of Singapore, cosmopolitanism is implicitly seen to be the more exalted vision to aim for.”

This slippery, invented typology, lacking any real sociological basis, can be analyzed in various ways. Firstly, it could have been formulated as a way of addressing the concerns of those who lack social mobility as a result of lower incomes, wealth and levels of education. By designating them as “heartlanders,” the state confers on them (as a strategy of appeasement) a status as the necessary “core” of Singapore’s identity. It is interesting to note, however, that the “rootedness” ascribed to these heartlanders is also a euphemism for class immobility.

Secondly, the term “cosmopolitans” addresses those Singaporeans who have a more global disposition, quite possibly well-traveled professionals such as those who work for multi-national corporations. However, labeling them as “cosmopolitans” instead of “transnationals,” effectively implies that their nationality as Singaporeans is secure. This partial recognition of their global citizenship appears to be the state’s compromise in balancing the issues of brain drain and talent flight with that of the aspirations of its more mobile citizens.

Thirdly, these amorphous categories are articulated as mutually supportive, instead of polarized or oppositional. Hence, instead of representing real categories such as left-wing/right-wing, bourgeois/working-class, or liberal/conservative, the state (or rather the dominant party in the government, the People’s Action Party), as part of its political branding, can claim to represent both cosmopolitans and heartlanders. The supposed symbiosis between these two categories is referred to by Goh Chok Tong in a keynote address delivered on March 19, 2000: “The cosmopolitan is the one who has the skills and the global outlook that enable him to do well almost anywhere in the world. The heartlander, on the other hand, has a more domestic outlook. Both groups need each other and are important in making Singapore tick. The heartlanders nurture the cosmopolitans, while the cosmopolitans create the opportunities that benefit the heartlanders . . .”

The idea of heartlanders “nurturing” cosmopolitans brings me to my fourth point. It might seem that the heartland is now expected to perform the role of the hinterland, as a maternal entity which is protective and enduring, offering physical refuge in times of crisis (especially drastic reversals of fortune resulting from speculative economies) and spiritual sanctuary. The “city,” on the other hand, has assumed a more global dimension. This re-mapping of the hinterland on heartland spaces, however, is deeply problematic, and is vigorously questioned by a handful
of “revival” films from the 1990s. These films suggest that contrary to its attributed characteristics, the heartland is no different from most urban spaces: a place marked by materialism, anonymity and ennui.

When City Consumes Hinterland: Singapore Films of the 1990s and Beyond

The “revival” of Singapore film was kick-started by Eric Khoo’s *Mee Pok Man* in 1995. Khoo’s debut feature was the first Singaporean film to gain international recognition, collecting awards at film festivals in Fukuoka, Pusan, Moscow, and Vancouver. The film, true to its title, is about a silent, inarticulate *mee pok* (flat noodles) seller who lives alone in his flat. Chua Beng Huat has called this particular dwelling “a one-room flat, the smallest built by the public housing authority for rental to the poorest segment of economy, very often the single, destitute, and aged.”

Scholars have variously described the character as a “contemporary subaltern,” as a prototype of Singaporeans “who jar . . . with the state’s triumphal self-projections” or even as an as “afterimage” of Travis Bickle, the anti-hero protagonist in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*. However, I would suggest a reading that configures the *Mee Pok Man*, Cai Hong, as a character from a spectral hinterland, a “country boy” who meets a “city girl” in a cynically updated version (or even perversion) of the *kahwin lari* narrative.

Like Hasnah in *A Mother’s Love*, Cai Hong (Joe Ng) is portrayed as an essentially decent character who sells food for a living, and who is often prone to being bullied by others. His passive, unresisting nature allows him to be easily exploited; an acquaintance asks to borrow money from him without returning past debts. In addition, he is often the brunt of others’ jokes, especially a group of prostitutes who visit his stall. Among them is Bunny (Michelle Goh), his object of desire, an attractive prostitute whose melancholy languor seems to enchant him.

Bunny’s character represents a challenge to the fixity of the heartlander-cosmopolitan typology. Although she lives in a depressingly spartan HDB flat, her profession allows her contact with people from various parts of the world, especially sex tourists. One of them is Jon (David Brazil), a sleazy photographer who Bunny believes will be able to bring her to “see the world” and ultimately allow her to relocate outside of Singapore. Bunny’s “cosmopolitan” aspirations thus exceed her own class background. This is a situation which is not uncommon for many Singaporeans, and which exposes the heartlander-cosmopolitan rhetoric as condescending, almost feudalist, in its attempts to prescribe the spatial and discursive limits of being a heartlander.

Bunny’s jaded worldliness is contrasted against Cai Hong’s simpleton nature, typifying a city-girl/country-boy dialectic. One night, Bunny is injured in a road
accident, and Cai Hong brings her back to his flat. He decides against calling for professional medical attention, and believes that he is able to nurse her back to health. While there is an element of amorous possessiveness in this act, there is also the possibility that Cai Hong wishes to insulate Bunny from further degradation in the “city.” His little flat thus serves as a slice of the restorative “hinterland,” a space with the potential for moral and spiritual rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, the “hinterland” here is metaphorical, rather than material. Instead of offering remedial benefits, the sequestration of Bunny results in her death, at which point the film shifts uncomfortably towards depictions of necrophilia. Without any land of his own to bury Bunny’s body, Cai Hong is seen cradling her decomposing body, tenderly stroking her hair. Necrophilia is a powerful, unsettling trope for the underclass: their status as economically unproductive citizens is paralleled with the non-procreative nature of their libidal energies. The last few scenes of the film are static long takes, reflecting the class paralysis and social entrapment of heartlanders like Cai Hong.

In Singapore, two kinds of deaths in HDB estates make the news: suicides from high-rise flats and the discovery of bodies in flats by neighbors when they begin to putrefy. It is the latter that the film invokes, underlining the isolation of heartlanders abandoned by the state’s obdurate anti-welfare policies. These images of decay are eerily echoed in a speech by Lee Kuan Yew: “Other countries can go bad because they got oil, gas, timber, copper mines, whatever, it’s okay, carry on. But we go bad, investments disappear, we have nothing. The educated and the well-off will emigrate to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America. The uneducated, the less well-off will stay here and rot.”

Similarly, Khoo’s 12 Storeys (1997), described by Goh as “significant as an emotional response to the spatial narratives of public housing,” explores the inertia of heartlanders through interweaving three narratives involving characters who inhabit the same block of flats. All the action is located in this particular residential estate, as if it were a hermetic environment, and no shots of the “city”—skyscrapers, hotels, shopping centers, offices, street-fashion and lunch-hour crowds—are shown.

The first story revolves around Ah Gu (Jack Neo), and Lili (Quan Yifeng), his bride from China, in another variation of the interclass kahwin lari narrative. As their story unfolds, it is revealed that one of the reasons that Lili had agreed to marriage was that Ah Gu had oversold himself as a successful businessman in the city of Singapore. When Lili arrives in Singapore, she discovers, to her disillusionment, that Ah Gu is merely a heartlander who works as a hawker. Feeling deceived, she deliberately refuses to have conjugal relations with Ah Gu, preferring to leave the confines of their HDB flat for her secretive daily rendezvous.

The second story involves Meng (Koh Boon Pin), an unmarried school teacher who is tasked to look after his two siblings, Trixie (Lum May Yee) and Tee (Ritz Lim), while his parents are overseas. The suspicious, uptight, sloganeering Meng
attempts to restrict Trixie’s movements and vaguely intuits that she is having sex with her boyfriend. The third portrays the claustrophobic life of San San (Lucilla Teoh), a corpulent single woman living with her adoptive mother. When they are visited by Rachel (Neo Swee Lin), the wealthy daughter of the mother’s ex-employer, San San realizes that her mother had always compared her unfavorably to Rachel, resulting in a lifetime of frustration and disappointment.

While the city is not itself visibly represented, its values are imprinted on the various characters in the film. On one side, we have the “hinterland-bound” heartlanders: Ah Gu, Meng, San San and her mother; while on the other, the characters who regularly commute from the heartland to the city: Lili and Trixie, or those who are “city-bound,” like Rachel, who drives a Mercedes-Benz. These latter characters import certain values into the heartland space, effectively destabilizing the equilibrium of the city-hinterland dialectic, and thus perpetuating the city’s hegemonic grip over the film’s heartlanders.

For example, Lili’s dissatisfaction with her domestic life reveals a lack in the heartland and alerts Ah Gu’s to his own class status. While Ah Gu might have assumed that to bring Lili from China to Singapore would elevate her social standing, Lili obviously believes otherwise. Having promised to transport her to the “big city” of Singapore, Ah Gu has instead incarcerated her in the “small town” of the heartland, a situation at odds with her own aspirations.

On the other hand, San San does not seem to show any outward signs of ambition. As a matter of fact, she is quite possibly suffering from depression, at one point even contemplating suicide by slinging one leg off a ledge. Most of the time, she is silent, staring blankly as she endures the ceaseless stream of invective from her adoptive mother, who verbally humiliates her in Cantonese by calling her “useless” and referring to her as “a pig.” The arrival of Rachel exposes San San’s “deficiencies”: despite being a dutiful daughter, performing household chores and tending to her mother (thus demonstrating “hinterland” virtues), San San is an abject inferior to Rachel’s sophistication and class privilege. In a sense, Rachel’s intrusion into their private, hinterland space had already occurred prior to her physical arrival, warping the mother’s expectations and evaluations of San San’s worth.

Meng, like San San, also displays “hinterland” qualities, although he is more self-conscious of it. To Meng, the heartland is synonymous with conservative values, and he assumes his role as his sister’s moral guardian with a seriousness bordering on obsession. When Meng discovers that Trixie has engaged in pre-marital sex, he erupts in rage, pinning her to a wall and insisting that she list the names of every man she has slept with. While some critics view this as the inevitable result of Meng’s repressed incestuous feelings for Trixie, his bathetic cries of “What about me? What about me?” also reveal a deep sense of having been betrayed. The rhetoric of the heartland as conservative bastion is unraveled, as Trixie brings the city’s “contaminations” home. Meng’s self-sacrifice—surrendering his social and
romantic life to support the family, for example—has come to naught. Guneneratne has observed that "12 Storeys... is amongst other things, a sustained criticism of the lapses in achieving the cherished goal of a uniformly high standard of housing for the underprivileged (when a character throws himself off a block of high-rise apartments, we wonder if it is because of his dark, alienating environment)."

While it is important to recognize that a “dark, alienating environment” might result in certain dysfunctional behaviors, I believe it is more productive to locate the source of alienation in the heartlands as the *disjunct* between what the heartland is supposed to represent in official rhetoric and the actual, lived existence of its inhabitants (or specifically, those who identify themselves as “heartlanders”). In *Mee Pok Man*, the titular character realizes that his flat has become the final resting place for his beloved, instead of offering rest and regeneration. In *12 Storeys*, the heartlanders are unable to maintain effective boundary-maintenance of their “hinterland space’ from the encroachments of the values associated with the city.

In spite of its global image as a “garden city,” Singapore offers few spaces to escape from the city, and all that is associated with it: capitalist overdrive, anonymous transactions, and material conceptions of success. Two films, Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng’s *Eating Air* (1999) and Royston Tan’s *15: The Movie* (2003), portray the lives of working-class youths who are involved, either directly or indirectly, with street gangs. Wee describes the motorcycle motif in *Eating Air* as a “metaphor for machismo identity, excitement and escape—it becomes an essential part of the socio-cultural geography traversed. The motorcycle metaphor is used poignantly, for, in the end, the city’s highways and byways—especially its underground road tunnels—provide no way out for the bikes and the youths from limited confines, but only death.”

However, escape, or rather transcendence, from spatial realities is achieved through fantasy. In *Eating Air*, the protagonist, Ah Boy (Benjamin Heng) often fantasizes about his environment by replacing the characters and situations he observes with those from his favorite *wuxia* (Chinese swordfighting novels) comics. Similarly, in *15*, fantasy is employed to reconfigure physical space, through “a profusion of cartoons, graphics and text” whose idiom belongs to the virtual worlds of video games and music videos. In fact, the opening sequence of *15* occurs in an amorphous, unidentifiable space, with the protagonists posing against a landscape of sand dunes. In both films, an inability to escape the logic of the city is resolved through an imaginative leap to the realms of daydreaming and hallucination.

While these two films portray youthful anomie as a result of the relentless interpenetration of the city into private lives, two other films portray older characters who are similarly disenchanted. In Djinn’s *Perth* (2004), a taxi driver by the name of Harry Lee (Lim Kay Tong) dreams of retiring in Perth, Western Australia. As the director himself has mentioned in an interview: “Perth has become a symbol to many Singaporeans as an alternative Utopia to that being created in Singapore.
The taxi drivers, Army Regular NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) represent a passing generation of predominantly disenfranchised lesser educated blue collar class, who have felt a little marginalized by the emphasis put upon tertiary qualifications and jobs that are “Hi-tech” and with the high pressure environment which is matter of fact in Singapore.”

As a former seafarer and English-educated baby boomer, Harry Lee represents yet another figure of exception to the cosmopolitan-heartlander dichotomy. As someone who is well-traveled, yet who lives in a sparsely-furnished HDB flat, Lee is essentially a Singaporean oxymoron: a working-class cosmopolitan. Perth, with its large tracts of land, low property prices, reduced levels of stress and proximity to Nature, represents all that the city is not. Even if it is not completely rural, a place like Perth can safely lay claim to the status of suburbia, located at a considerable distance from the city center.

In Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen’s *Singapore Dreaming* (2006), the character of Ma (Alice Lim) similarly expresses her weariness with urban life. As she tells her daughter-in-law, “When I was young, I went to school in Muar. In school I loved singing. Then I came to Singapore.” She describes her days of courtship with her husband, spending time away from the city, “We went to Punggol to catch crabs and play in the sand.” Tearfully, Ma then expresses the increasing soul-sapping mechanization she has felt over the years, “But I don’t know what happened to me. Ever since we got married, every morning I’d wake up and all I know is to wipe the tables, mop the floor, go to the market, cook, and make herbal tea.” The reference to the “herbal tea” at the end attests to Ma’s self-concept as a nurturing presence in her family’s life. At the end of the film, Ma makes the decision to leave the house and move to an undisclosed location. There seems little doubt that she is thinking of returning to her childhood home.

**Conclusion**

Singapore films of the “golden age” might, at first glance, share very little with those from the “revival period.” However, one can detect a persistence and recurrence of the city-hinterland dialectic, even if Singapore’s landscape has undergone dramatic transformations over the years. As such, one could make the claim that contemporary Singapore films are *topographically haunted* by those from the studio era. In *Mee Pok Man*, for example, at the end of the film, there is a montage which contrasts shots of Cai Hong’s claustrophobic flat against the twinkling fairy lights of Orchard Road (the shopping district) and the skyline of Raffles Place (the financial district).

In *Singapore Dreaming*, made 11 years later, the opening montage opens with shots from the city—people riding escalators, crowds crossing the road—contrasted against those from the heartland—shots of wet markets, hawker centers
and coffee shops. A wide, high-angle shot of a train decelerating towards an MRT station separates the “city symphony” from the “heartland pulse”: the train is the connecting shuttle between what might appear to be geographically discrete spaces. The heartland shots are notable for their medium shots and close-ups, suggesting an affinity, even intimacy with the environment. Notably, the only close-up shot in the “city” segment, otherwise composed entirely of wide shots, is that of a moneychanger’s hands counting money.

In the absence of an actual hinterland, the “heartland” has been conjured as a symbolic replacement. As Goh has remarked, “the general response to the built environment of public housing is a sense of infrastructural change that, for all its robust efficiency and cleanliness, may have been responsible for or symptomatic of a certain emotional and cultural loss that characterizes contemporary Singapore society.”37 And as pointed out by Goh/Yesoh, life in the HDB ‘heartlands,’ in fact, often negates the state’s vision of the ‘nation’ as a gracious community . . . For example, residents are far from free of problems in the maintenance of cleanliness of common properties such as lifts and staircases. Problems such as irresponsible people urinating in lifts, leaving rubbish at lift landings, and throwing ‘killer litter’ (the act of throwing out of windows of higher floors fragile, large, or heavy items such as flower pots, thus endangering the lives of those passing by downstairs) are common enough trials that residents must battle. They point to a people lacking in social graces, common courtesy, and consideration for others, indicating the slippage between construction and reality.38

![Figure 3.1](image)

Figure 3.1 “Urinators will be prosecuted” in the “heartland” of Singapore, as depicted in Colin Goh’s and Yen Yen Woo’s *Singapore Dreaming*

*Source: SC Films*
Some of these expectations of “graciousness” are the residues of village-style living. In That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for the Kampung in Singapore, Chua Beng Huat identified three factors that have led to the romanticization of hinterland spaces: “an imposed life of leisure,” “an emergent sense of kampung community,” and “the industrialization of daily life.” While these kinds of reminiscences might be accessible only to that particular generation affected by forced resettlement, Chua contends that “the kampung, now past and inscribed as lived experiences in the collective memory of all who are thirty-five years of age, is being transferred to the younger generation through . . . autobiographical accounts.” As such, the social trauma of hinterland-to-city dislocation becomes a kind of inherited post-memory.

The failure of the heartland to denounce its urban character and adopt a rural persona has resulted in a deterritorialization of the hinterland. In some Singapore films, this exists as purely imaginary space. In others, this hinterland is Perth in Australia or Muar in Malaysia. Interestingly, the director of Perth, Djinn, is now based in Los Angeles, whereas Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen, the directors of Singapore Dreaming, spend half their time annually in New York. Perhaps, the only way to recover remnants of the hinterland in Singapore is to conceive of the entire island as a hinterland, with its city located beyond its borders, like a distant pilot light, beguilingly, elsewhere.

I would like to thank Tan Bee Thiam, Ben Slater, Tan Pin Pin, and Chua Beng Huat for their invaluable comments on the first draft of this paper delivered at the Cinemacities: Urban Spaces On Film In The UK and Singapore symposium, organized by the British Council, on April 6, 2008.
Stealing Moments
A History of the Forgotten in Recent Singaporean Film

Ben Slater

There’s a certain spirit to a lot of Singaporeans that’s really special—quite resilient and patriotic . . . because of history and because of bad luck they kind of get pushed, and become marginalised.

—Tan Pin Pin

British author Iain Sinclair has a term to describe people who have been sidelined by the mainstream. For him they are the “reforgotten,” a curious label that he applies to several types of “characters.” There are the underground artists, obsessive multi-taskers, information addicts and culture hustlers whose activities are so strange, subversive or experimental that they will always fall well below the cultural radar, but who are known only by those “in-the-know.” They are reforgotten only so much as they have never been really remembered, except perhaps as rumour or as a bit part in someone else’s biography. They permanently await discovery. Then there are the genuinely forgotten, who at one point years ago may have had a cushy job, a gig on television, or were featured in a big newspaper spread because of a brief moment of fame/notoriety with a novel, film, or scandal. But they are soon relegated to spend long hours and years in the wilderness, sliding down the back of the cultural sofa, until such time as they can be rediscovered, celebrated again, only to once again disappear from view.

All countries and cultures have these figures. But the crucial thing is that there are those who are willing to do the legwork and excavate them from obscurity, to enter into the process of making us remember them for the first time, before our attention moves on and our memories rewrite the mental hard disk once more. This tendency is just starting to emerge in Singaporean film.

The titles of two books published in 2001 articulate the country’s tenuous relationship to memory and its past. Gopal Baratham’s short story collection, The City of Forgetting; and Alfian Sa’at’s volume of poetry A History of Amnesia. Both suggest a nation, which by privileging progress and ceaseless forward momentum, has plastered over the bits and pieces of history that don’t find fit in with the current décor. “History” is only permitted to make an appearance in the form of
propaganda for the government’s milestones, or as water-coloured or sepia-tinted nostalgia for humbler, simpler times.

I wonder whether there is a difference between “amnesia” and “forgetting” in this context. Or are they both involuntary conditions? Certainly the amnesiac has no choice over the matter—an illness, accident or shocking event has caused the memories to drain away and for them to live only in the present; but for the person who simply forgets, have they made a choice to jettison what they know—allowed themselves to deliberately not-remember?

But these titles don’t refer to people; they ascribe this lack of remembrance to a city with no memories, and a paradoxical history that has erased itself.

Exploring Singapore’s collective or national memory loss is inevitably tied up with the politics of the country’s birth and development. An official history (found in every school history textbook) has little ambiguity about the forces of good and evil in the struggle for the nation’s survival and emergence. Other stories and voices, which inevitably complicate the narrative, have been written out. What has been censored and ignored is permitted to be forgotten.

But there are always those who do remember them. The internal exiles. In the dustiest corners of the city and its history, they endure, and wait (sometimes patiently, sometimes desperately) to be found again; to be brought back to the light so that they can be forgotten once more.

Tan Pin Pin’s pair of hour-long documentaries Singapore GaGa (2005) and Invisible City (2007) are both acts of remembrance and documentation. Responses to the tendency to forget or ignore the elements that don’t fit into Singapore’s perfectly constructed urban present-tense. The former focuses on notions of sound and music in the city, a starting point that—in its apparent neutrality—allows Tan to develop critical reflections about Singapore, while retaining a strong and sincere sense that she is celebrating the richly diverse and quirky aspects of the country (the very “unique”-ness that was appropriated by Singapore’s tourist board in 2004 with its slogan “Uniquely Singapore”). Hence the film was highly praised by the local media (It was Singapore’s flagship newspaper The Straits Times’ film of the year), and was released on a single screen at a small venue, The Arts House, for many weeks, while being enthusiastically booked for school and community screenings in Singapore’s “heartlands” (the interconnected towns that lie beyond the city center)4 and reaching a very wide local audience for an independent film.5

Riffing off the sound/music theme, the apparent structure of GaGa is association-al, allowing the viewer to make the connections. Tan shifts across and between a series of vastly different performers, who are often shown in performance and in interview, and are at least very aware of the camera’s presence. Gradually, over the course of each of these encounters, we notice that most of them are characterized by a certain level of intervention or tension.
After being seen with her family and interviewed in a studio, Margaret Leng Tan, the New York-based avant-garde pianist who epitomizes the type of Singaporean who’s had to leave the country to be creative, is brought to a HDB void deck (the empty, open ground-floor space of all government housing blocks) to perform John Cage’s infamously silent piece for piano, 4’33”. This sequence can be taken in at least two ways. The “Uniquely Singapore” version might be that the performance does exactly what Cage intended: It demonstrates that music is everywhere, and that includes the echoes, shouts, traffic rumbles and footfalls of such an ordinary Singaporean space. Another view, is that it reveals the remarkable disconnect between Tan, this perfectly styled High Art diva with her precious toy piano, and the unfurnished, uninterested cultural void of the HDB block, where none of the passers-by can be bothered to stop and watch what’s happening.

Passers-by also play a crucial role during a performance that’s diametrically opposed to Tan’s one-off act of minimalism. Ying, a lively and mentally unhinged busker prefers the maximal approach to music—he tunelessly plays the mouth-organ, juggles and dances at the same time inside the entrances to MRT (Singapore’s public train network) stations. In further contrast to Tan, he attracts the interest of a sour-faced “heartland” Auntie, who along with her husband, demands to know whether he has a license for his basically harmless public display. Just at a point where it seems that GaGa could become a sweet-sounding panorama of nice “folk,” we get a sobering glimpse of what local counter-cultural figure X’ Ho (not featured in the film) calls “The Ugly Singaporean.”

Figure 4.1 Tan Pin Pin’s Singapore GaGa (2005) features Ying, one of the dying breed of street buskers in Singapore.

Source: Tan Pin Pin
One of the strongest tensions that develops through the duration of *GaGa* is the quietly recurring notion of either public or official indifference and/or resistance toward free, uncontrolled expression. The history of the harmonica in Singapore is recalled by two veteran professional musicians, Yew Hong Chow and Alex Abisheganaden. They explain how the government frowned upon this cheap (Chinese made) and easy-to-learn instrument, and forced schools to teach the more expensive (European) and difficult-to-grasp recorder—thus helping to snuff out the pleasure of playing music for generations of young children. We also meet the middle-aged announcers from the one broadcast channel where Chinese dialects are permitted to be spoken on air—the daily dialect news on the radio. This “band of outlaws” (as Tan refers to them on the film’s website) have committed to coming to the studio every day to read for just a few minutes each day (with presumably very little monetary reward). They don’t reveal any bitterness or anger about the situation in which the official promotion of Mandarin has essentially obliterated their roots; rather they are making the best of this minuscule gap in the media ban on their spoken language and culture.

These and other scenarios accumulate. An elderly man sings an anti-Japanese song from the days of occupation, and describes how his wife fought against the Japanese army as part of the Communist resistance. Now senile, she can’t remember what she did, but some days, she recognizes the words to the song. Her silent presence is in many ways the crux of *GaGa*’s recollecting of the reforgotten. She’s suffered the Singaporean double-erasure of being both an amnesiac who can never recover her extraordinary memories, and having been overlooked by a society that has chosen not to remember her.

The emotional climax of the film comes during footage of the finale of 2004 National Day Parade, possibly the most outrageously theatrical edition of Singapore’s annual independence-celebrating jamboree in recent years. That year the first Singaporean had reached the summit of Everest. Back home, climber Swee Chiow Khoo, re-enacted his ascent on an enormous inflatable “mountain,” waving the national flag at its wobbly, ridiculous “peak” to roars from the crowd. As the camera cuts back to show this spectacle from a distance, the words of Melvyn, the much-ignored guitar-playing busker who was featured at the beginning of the film, are heard (and seen in subtitles) over that image. “Wasted days and wasted nights,” he sings. And it’s difficult not to see that moment as an angry lament for all those who have been forgotten in favor of crass triumphalism; who could have given so much to a country’s sense of itself.

Tan’s *Invisible City*, continues this aspect of the project, but is a much more sustained exploration of the fragile relationship contemporary Singapore has with its history. The film opens with a group of archaeologists cutting their way through the lush undergrowth of Sentosa, an island adjacent to Singapore, now mainly known as rather tacky leisure resort, but once the site for a British fort during
World War II. In the absence of ancient artefacts, they stumble upon a 1950s coke bottle. Is history so shallow in Singapore that only the detritus of relatively recent consumer culture is left behind? The answer to this comes in the form of several formidably reforgotten figures.

Ivan Polunin is the movie man. An 86-year-old expatriate now living on the rural edges of the country, who half a century ago shot thirty hours of color footage in and around Singapore and Malaya before independence. What he brought back from the past is utterly invaluable (precious little color footage exists of the area in this period). A record of a world that disappeared almost as soon as the film moved through the camera. In the clips Tan shows us, we can see its power and beauty. Looming apparitions on celluloid—children in Chinatown, Malay tribesmen (the Orang Asli) along the river. They look into the camera, meeting our gaze, wondering about the future just as we now question the past. It’s filtered of course, through the interest and presence of the white interlopers—we see (but can’t hear) Polunin as the bearded young adventurer, exchanging greetings with the grinning natives, and Marjorie Topley, the English anthropologist who brought him and his camera down to Chinatown, chatting primly with the locals; and it’s no less vital for their presence. A document of the documenters.

In his interview with Tan, Polunin (who is recovering from brain surgery) has a grasp of the events of the past that is rather like his archive—chaotically arranged, unlabelled and difficult to assemble. We watch him go through the tricky process of trying to lucidly recall exactly how and when he shot what he shot, frequently stopping to gather his thoughts as if scanning through fragments of film, looking for the splice, never finding it. In fact, Polunin’s memories are the footage, and he knows that he needs to make the two things sync together before time runs out.

The border between the contents of his brain and his archive is finally rendered indistinguishable when Tan witnesses his clumsy attempts to telecine the footage onto Hi-Definition video while simultaneously recording a live commentary track (this is how he intends to make sense of it all, for posterity), it’s both sad and wickedly appropriate that he can’t get the microphone to work. The project will inevitably fail, it’s too late to turn this into something clean, smooth and digitally searchable. That moment might have occurred ten or twenty years ago if anyone had cared to embrace Polunin’s trove as national treasure, but now, it’s just an old man alone in his archive, fiddling with equipment, trying to connect digital to analogue, celluloid to video, memories to history, before they fade away.

Most of the aging subjects of Invisible City, like Polunin, have held onto some relic of the past, a souvenir that they clutch close to themselves like a talisman, almost in the hope that it will keep them from disappearing. Tan Jan Huan has an immaculate set of black and white photographic postcards, depicting left-wing student protests from the late 1950s when he was active in that movement. Printed originally as anti-British propaganda, they are possibly the only images of those
events left in existence, and after all these decades he’s convinced they will have to be “censored” for the film (he’s wrong). He’s also convinced that if he is allowed to speak to the public, no one will care what he says (he’s right).

Marjorie Doggett, like Polunin is one of the last of the pre-independence expats, a Brit who came to Singapore as a young woman and took photographs for a book on buildings and architecture. This volume, her artefact, is now a collection of irretrievable memories, as almost nothing she photographed is still standing. Empty of people, her images present extant architectural structures with chilling precision. It’s a book of ghosts. Doggett, ill and elderly, lies prone on a bed for the interview, and when asked about whether she regrets staying in Singapore, she answers without a trace of bitterness: “Perhaps this is no place to get old in,” and it’s a line that resonates poignantly across the whole film. More than just the eroding qualities of tropical heat, there’s something in the psychic weather of the place that isn’t sympathetic to things outside the social and financial machinery. Nothing can or should get old in Singapore, no memory, building, picture, or person.

Deep down, Toh Hai Leong knows this. Singapore’s most tireless film buff, Toh has been on the periphery of film events (premieres, festivals, special screenings) for years, always ready to talk, to issue an opinion, and pass you something from the swathes of plastic bags he always carries—a VHS tape of a Korean horror film or a photocopy of an article about a new Hong Kong director who might be his latest discovery. Oscillating between being endearing, interesting and a downright nuisance, Toh’s fast, endless rap about movies, actresses, and politics (his three favorite subjects) was refreshingly candid, uncensored, and often embarrassingly uninhibited. No adjustments were made for decorum, no matter what the social situation or whose company he was in. Jobless for years, he cared about money only in so far as it would get him a bite to eat or a bus ticket to attend a screening in Malaysia—this placed him far outside the Singaporean mainstream.

Surprisingly, Zombie Dogs, a strictly one-off metafilmic collaboration between Toh, Eric Khoo, and Chew Tze Chuan in 2004 (which features Toh attempting to cast and shoot a porno-snuff film called Zombie Dogs, and is obviously intended to be the ultimate fuck-you to the complacent safety-zone of Singaporean society), led to him being shoved in the limelight for a moment. He was interviewed in every major English newspaper in town (and the Chinese press). Remembered again, he was the story. But it’s the fate of the reforgotten to always fall back into obscurity, and Toh was no exception. Less and less present at events, not having visited a film festival or written an article in a long time, he was correctly rumoured to be clearing tables at hawker centers. Then after months he appeared again, drastically thinner, with closely-cropped hair and a beard, looking like a wizened sage from a 1960s Shaw Brothers film. Aside from his minimal finances, he had been diagnosed with Type-2 diabetes, a disease that is not only incurable, but requires
the rigorous ability to carefully control and monitor your own body, something that would turn out to be problematic for Toh.

A film about Toh’s condition, Chew Tze Chuan’s *F* (2007), serves both as an act of remembrance and an intervention into a man’s decline—it speaks personally to its subject in order to bring him back to the land of the living, using the only language he understands—film. Interspersed with testimonies about Toh from a number of friends, colleagues and associates (including myself), it shows Toh as he tries to cope physically and psychologically with the punishing limitations of his body. The filmmakers encourage him to engage again, with discussions of cinema, sex, and his favorite Korean actress Kang Soo-yeon (who, in one of the film’s most bittersweet moments, speaks to him on the phone—a call arranged by French cinephile Pierre Rissient, a friend of Toh’s and advisor on the film). Where the anger in *Zombie Dogs* had the air of punk pose (a self-conscious pushing toward excess), *F* is in places a much more violent film, expressed through Toh’s anguish and frustration at his own state of being.

Towards the end of the film, Toh sits in his decrepit, unkempt apartment, holding up a yellowing, faded 12-year-old copy of *The Straits Times* which for some now-obscure reason featured a photo of him on its cover. He’s in a good mood, and Chew uses this moment to encourage him to write again, but Toh Hai Leong doesn’t seem to be listening, he has other things on his mind. “Once you are on camera and photograph, you live forever,” he says referring to the newspaper, “and you won’t grow old, because it’ll steal that moment in time for you.” Back in the *Invisible City*, Polunin mutters about “immortality,” and smilingly proposes “dumping the entire contents of my brain” into Tan Pin Pin’s camera.

“The golden years are over,” sings a female singer from the 96-year-old Hokkien Opera troupe Sin Sai Hong, in the astonishingly poignant closing moments of Royston Tan’s 35-minute-backstage restaging of some of their most famous performances (also called *Sin Sai Hong*, 2006). Aside from a prologue where the grandson of one of the troupe’s founders briefly explains their history, the entire film has been made up of stunningly shot (on 35mm) song sequences. With obvious love and care for the material, Tan seamlessly transforms theater into cinema, capturing the humor, passion, and skill of the troupe, and the distinctive atmosphere of a night at the Chinese Opera.

After the curtain has fallen, the final song is a newly written elegy to a vanished past and an uncertain future. As a cultural form inextricable from its dialect group, Hokkien Opera has been steadily marginalized since independence, affected by the same pro-Mandarin, anti-dialect policy that relegates the newsreaders of *Singapore GaGa* to a few minutes on the radio each day. Erasing a way of speaking inevitably means also rubbing out the culture and traditions that surround that language, and so *Sin Sai Hong* is, in a very real way, a film of protest. The mostly female troupe
members are spectral cousins (or Aunties) to the equally marginalized boys of Tan’s most famous film, his feature-length account of soulful juvenile delinquents, *15*.

While *Sin Sai Hong* documents and celebrates something beautiful and important, it ends with the company’s straight-to-camera plea for support. But this doesn’t feel like a fresh start, it’s still a farewell, a final bow. Royston Tan, like Tan Pin Pin and Chew Tze Chuan, steals a moment in time—for all of the reforgotten and for us as well, the ones who might remember.

Fiction, Interrupted
Discontinuous Illusion and Regional Performance Traditions in Contemporary Thai Independent Film

Natalie Böhler

Mingmongkol Sonakul’s feature debut Isarn Special (Kuen pra chan tem doueng, 2002) begins with atmospheric shots of Mor Chit, Bangkok’s Northern Bus Terminal, around sunset. It’s a busy, bustling place, with people from all walks of life up and about, passengers waiting for their departure and vendors selling food. As a group of travelers sets out on a long-distance bus, so does the movie. The group travels to Nong Bua, a small village in Isarn, Northeastern Thailand. It is the night of the full moon, and as so often, the full moon creates a special mood and announces the extraordinary that soon occurs. After a while, a young female passenger gets up and asks the driver to switch off the radio that has been broadcasting a radio soap opera, a popular Thai audio format. As she goes back to her seat, she starts to take over the part of Phenprapah, the heroine of the show. One by one, the other passengers join in. Some play minor roles, like that of a supermarket cashier or of Phens landlord; other take on larger parts, such as the handsome hero who pursues Phen or the evil older woman. While this happens, the passengers’ appearance remains largely the same; they do not change costumes or their style of gesture or mime. Mostly, they remain seated, with the characters acting out the scene usually in the foreground, grouped together according to their interactions, and the momentarily silent characters in the back of the bus.

In this way, the bus becomes a kind of stage and the setting for an imaginary world, that of the radio soap opera, which comes into existence through the passengers’ performances. It seems as if the full moon casts a kind of magic spell on the bus and the journey, creating a parallel world to that of the passengers’ real lives. In the filmic diegesis, a second, aural diegesis is inserted; this double narrative goes on for as long as the bus keeps moving. The bus interior is brightly lit as it moves through the darkness, like a kind of moving stage in a darkened auditorium space; the only other source of light is the full moon. During rest stops or a breakdown, the passengers’ normal, everyday life goes on as usual, they get to know each other, strike up conversations or ponder their return to the village. They “become themselves” again, changing back to their familiar voices, down-to-earth vocabulary and accents, which are isarn (northeastern Thai), Burmese, or farang (Western), as opposed to the high-class Bangkok accents and elaborate speech of the soap voices.
Remarkably, the characters do not speak the parts of their soap opera alter egos themselves. They are dubbed by real-life Thai soap stars, whose voices might well be recognized by a Thai audience. It is therefore a mystery where the soundtrack comes from: since the radio is off, the sound and the dialogue cannot possibly be diegetic. It is not produced by anyone or anything onscreen, but seems to come into the story from out of nowhere.

The characters’ naturalistic acting style is combined with a grainy, slightly rough look that was mostly likely achieved by underexposing the film stock during shooting and pushing it later on during its development in the lab. This results in an aesthetic usually found in cinéma vérité or low-budget productions, suggesting a certain aspiration to realism and a break with the classical narrative mode; in international cinema, it is generally often deliberately contrasted with the glamorous, high-key aesthetics of expensive blockbuster productions. As such, the film’s aesthetic is in line with the documentary look of the opening scenes at the bus terminal as well as with the portrayal of working class people and their concerns.
This naturalistic style stands in strong contrast with the artificiality of the generic, formulaic soap opera, heightening the surreal effect of the soap scenes and emphasizing their magical nature. Reality—that is, the reality of the diegetic characters—is suspended in favor of the soap opera world; however, there is no visual differentiation between the sphere of the diegetic reality and that of the inserted performed world. There is, however, a shift that occurs in our perception. As we watch actors play characters who play soap characters, sooner or later we figure out what the film plays with: being experienced soap viewers, we become aware that the invisible, generic soap images conveyed by the dialog sometimes seem to appear in our mind, superimposing the images on the movie screen. We watch the soap scenes differently, knowing about the illusionist character of the characters’ performance. But then again—do we really? Every now and then, the illusion grasps us; our perception creates reality from the dialog: as it refers to the setting as “a condominium” or “a waterfall,” these images might magically pop up. For a moment we overlook the fact that it’s just a performance, even a lip-synched one, and develop a kind of double vision, just as the film is structured by a double narrative.

Occasionally, the narratives and the viewing activities merge, providing insight into the power of performance and the pleasure that dramatic illusion provides. The boundaries between reality and the fantastic are definitely blurred, such as when the passengers fall asleep late at night and the bus stops to let a phii, a Thai-style movie ghost, on the bus. As day breaks, everyone wakes up and the soap continues with the ghost on board as if nothing had happened. Like the radio soap, the ghost is an icon of local popular culture, and its presence amidst the passengers contributes to the atmosphere and the strangeness of the fantastic invading the real and mingling with it. With the arrival in Nong Bua, the soap ends and the fantasy world disappears. It is a commonplace that travel sets free the imagination. This journey, a transient time and space prone to dreams and flights of fantasy, is over now, and everyone goes home.

* * * * *

In several aspects, Isarn Special refers to acting and narrating techniques familiar from Thai drama traditions. There is, for one thing, the ensemble acting and the importance of the group performance. This is found in various forms of Thai theater, such as in likay (folk theater), lakbon (dance drama), and khon (drama). Though the plays feature a definite hero and heroine, much importance is laid on the other characters as well. Also, the ensemble of the troupe is fundamental, as all elements of the play, namely narration, acting, music, and chorus, are divided equally and non-hierarchically between the troupe members, assigning to each their specific functions that are, in equal measure, complementally significant in the formation of the artistic synthesis of the play.
An equally important dramatic tradition is that of shared narration. It is common throughout the region in ancient folk storytelling, where the storyteller will occasionally pass on his role to members of the audience for a while, inviting them to take over. From there, this approach found its way into the narration style of folk drama forms such as likay, where the narrator frequently addresses the audience and lets it join in the narrative. As in the tradition of ensemble acting, the group principle is highly significant here. The same goes for the characteristic of improvisation, where performers and the narrator react to input from the audience and weave its requests and remarks into the performance.\(^1\)

Based on his observations on traditional folk theater, Thai scholar Chetana Nagavajara derives four basic principles of the local theatrical practice: The frequent use of improvisation as a performing practice; the constant alternation between prose and verse, speaking and singing, narrating and acting; the fluid line between actor and audience; and the fact that all people involved, both actors and audience, are always aware that they are engaged in a play in which complete dramatic illusion is not an aim. These characteristics shape what Chetana calls the aesthetics of discontinuity, an artistic principle that is vital for Thai performing arts.\(^2\) It employs a variety of expressive modes: singing, music, dance, narration, and acting.

The practice of performing is marked by the combination of, and frequent changing between, these modes. The dramatists must constantly adapt to the interplay of different expressive modes and remain flexible for improvisation as well as the intercession of an audience that is free to join in and comment on the play. As for the audience, the viewing pleasure lies in cognitively linking the performative episodes and creating a continuity of dramatic illusion while remaining aware of its fragility. This illusion is, by implied understanding, a kind of game: the attraction is not to immerse oneself in a fictional world, but rather to toy with it, or to be toyed with by it, perhaps simultaneously. Thus, the audience remains constantly aware of the dramatic illusion as a performed artefact.\(^3\)

These conventions of theatrical practice have, over time, shaped the viewing habits of the local audience and continue to show an impact on movie audiences. This may explain a local cinematic parallel to the aesthetics of discontinuity as sketched by Chetana: the inconsistency of mise-en-scène. Cinematic discontinuity has appeared throughout local film history on multiple levels, both intentionally and unintentionally: 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. While cinematic discontinuity has long been ascribed to an awkwardness and lack of cinematic expertise, it may also be regarded as the present-day continuation of a traditional, locally developed aesthetics, a sort of performative mise-en-scène.

This aesthetic is recently being rediscovered. For example, live dubbing, pak, was practiced extensively in Thai film history from the silent era on, at first
to translate intertitles and later to provide narration, using the form of narration employed in Thai *khon* (classical masked drama): similar to the Japanese *benshi* practice, one or several speakers would dub the movie during its screening. This proved a simple and effective way of solving language problems with foreign films. After World War II, 35mm film was in short supply and expensive, so it became standard practice to shoot on 16 mm stock without sound and to dub the films live during the screening or, from the 1970s on, by synchronized dubbing in the studio during postproduction. Over time, Thai audiences became used to a typical characteristic of dubbed voices: they often sound unnaturally flat and highly artificial, since they are usually recorded in a closed space acoustically unlike the space the image was recorded in. Also, the lip-synching is occasionally slightly off the mark, adding to the unnatural effect. While this artificiality was once regarded as a sign of ineptitude and technical inferiority, audiences have recently come to discover a certain nostalgic charm in its naivete.

The discontinuous aesthetics of mise-en-scène lead us to the question of realism: if formulaic narratives, metafiction and the oscillating of expressive modes are central, which shape does the notion of realism take, and what space does it inhabit? Found throughout the history of Thai mainstream film is a specific conception of realism as conveyed by representation and performance, as opposed to the originally Western emphasis on realism as naturalistic verisimilitude. Cinematic realism, in this line of understanding, is not so much based on the naturalistic depiction of what is visually present, but rather on the notion that the essences of ideas, emotions and relations are represented by visual appearances. The high regard given to representation and performance goes hand in hand with a high regard for surface appearances and imagery. Whether a film appears naturalistic is, from the traditional perspective of the local audience, simply not the point; much more important is what the film signifies and represents. If the local audience deems the film to be adequate, morally sound and interesting, it will readily suspend its disbelief regarding the degree of realism that the film displays. This is especially clear in the case of often highly unrealistic performance inserts and musical numbers.

Hence, the consistency of mise-en-scène is less important in this context than it is in Hollywood’s classical narrative mode. The appearance of this inconsistency was neither deliberate nor a sign of primitive naiveté, but often had economic reasons, and its acceptance by local viewers is indicative of a culture whose notion of realism differs from that of modern-day Western mainstream cinema.

Over time, the concern with naturalistic verisimilitude has, however, become increasingly important in Thai viewing habits, due to the growing popularity of Hollywood movies since the 1950s, the arrival of television broadcasting and the reception of European art-house cinema. Today’s audiences show a gradual shift in perception of traditional films. A changing concept of realism means that what
was, in earlier decades and by previous generations, perceived seriously as scary, sad, or dramatic, is now increasingly perceived as camp. As a result of its intellectual history, however, “realism” still means something fundamentally different in the Thai context, based on representation rather than on verisimilitude, or, in semiotic terms, on the signifier rather than on the signified. The residue of this notion continues to show its impact on audience expectations in Thailand as well as in the Southeast Asian region.

*Isarn Special* refers to the aesthetics of discontinuity by employing its performance practice: a cast acting as an ensemble, characters that seem to improvise the radio soap and who narrate their own story in turns. Furthermore, the film translates the effect of discontinuity into cinematic terms by merging two separate storylines and turning the narrative inconsistencies into magical moments of entertainment. Additionally, it alludes to local filmic practices, such as live dubbing, that rupture cinematic illusion.

By doing so, it refers to a traditional local notion of cinematic representation, from the times before US mainstream productions took over the screens and influenced the viewing habits of Southeast Asia, and reflects on differing notions of realism—all the while with an affectionate nod towards local popular entertainment, embodied in the radio soap format and the local star system. *Isarn Special* is thus a part of alternative culture, but at the same time pays homage to local, as opposed to globalized, pop culture. As the director herself states, the concept was to mix different media in order to create an experience that audiences could recognize in various ways, an entertaining experiment with double realities and the interplay of art and life.6

* * * * *

The work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, probably the internationally best-known and most acclaimed Thai independent filmmaker, reflects on the described key concepts of regional storytelling traditions in a similar way, especially visible in his early work, namely his short films *Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* (Mae Ya Nang, 1996) and *Haunted House* (Ban Phi Sing, 2001), as well as his feature debut *Mysterious Object at Noon* (Dokfar Nai Meu Marn, 1999). These films, too, work in an experimental mode, involving the audience in multilevel narration and leaving it to the viewer to discern a coherent narrative.7 In all of the films, nonprofessionals imitate pop entertainers and use the methods of improvisation and shared narration.

*Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* is a short, vérité-like camera trip around a small seaside town on a hot afternoon. The radio that appears time and again in the images is playing a soap episode—again!—about an encounter between fishermen and the sea spirit Mae Ya Nang. It becomes the aural backdrop of the documentarist images of the town’s inhabitants; their naturalistically
depicted lives and the soap opera are interwoven. There are no hierarchies between
the narrative levels, the people’s stories and that of the sea spirit are intertwined,
linked by the radio waves and the waves on the sea shore. A microcosm emerges: an
inventory of a day in a town, with all the beginnings of the stories it might contain.
This amounts to more than the sum of its parts: joined with the broadcast of the
legend, the people’s everyday lives take on a mythic dimension as well.

In *Haunted House*, the filmmaker reshapes two episodes of a Thai TV serial,
transplanting their sentimental dramas into six villages in the north of the country.
The actors are villagers who play the soap roles in their own, modest homes. Their
performance shows amazing expertise on the part of the amateur actors who dwell
on the kitschy, dramatic and standardized emotional expression of the soap; the
artificiality of the soap genre stands in contrast to the simplicity of the rural setting
and the earnest dedication of the villagers’ acting. The editing style and the use of
close-ups are a discreet parody of television language. Thus, the film becomes an
enjoyable study of media reception in a simple farming village.

*Mysterious Object at Noon* is a prime example of shared narration. The film-
maker and his crew travel through Thailand from the north to the south. They
ask the people they meet on the road to continue telling a story about a disabled
boy and his teacher Dokfar. As the journey continues, we watch and listen to the
story gradually unfolding, being pieced together bit by bit. A fish seller, a tipsy old
woman, elephant keepers, a Thai boxer, two mute teenage girls, schoolchildren on
the playground and many other people: They all contribute episodes to the narra-
tive, which grows and meanders throughout the film. As a result of these contribu-
tions, it takes on elements of science fiction, soap opera, fantasy, television news
and folk legends, becoming a lavish conglomerate. Parts of the story are staged
as a film within the film with nonprofessional actors. One village even performs
its episode as a traditional folk drama, complete with open-air stage, traditional
orchestra and applause at the end of the episode. The ethnic and social origins of
the people who participate are as diverse as their ideas and narrative forms.

All the mentioned films display a similar visual style, marked by graininess,
low-key lighting, slow camera movements, and a monochrome color scheme or
grainy black and white. In *Haunted House* and *Mysterious Object at Noon*, this look
is due to the transfer from DV and 16mm, economical and therefore common
stocks for shooting independent films, to the 35mm format; in the case of *Isarn
Special*, which was shot on 35mm, the filmmaker aimed to copy this specific style
to give the film a special aesthetic that distinguishes it from smoother-looking
mainstream productions and adds a documentary feel. Whichever way, this visual
style produces a further intended inconsistency: the vérité-style contrasts with
the mythological elements, the melodrama and the formulaic structure of the
soap plots and dialogs, enhancing their artificiality. What seems to be a narrato-
logical clash evolves into an intermingling of clean-cut mainstream forms and a
naturalistic, almost anthropological examination of everyday life, in which generic entertainment inhabits an important role. At the same time, there is a fusion of two differing concepts of realism: while vérité realism is conveyed through naturalistic verisimilitude, that of local traditional generic entertainment is brought about through representation and performativity.

The reference to the aesthetics of discontinuity might be part of a larger picture: Throughout Thai film history, mainstream movies have featured characteristics such as prominent narrators, performance inserts, or typically stylized characters and acting. From the earliest films on up to the 1970s, ruptured mise-en-scène was common, caused by elements such as discontinuous editing, visible sound equipment, continuity bloopers, or live dubbing. These peculiarities are nowadays sometimes referenced in contemporary Thai film, such as Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s *Mon-Rak Transistor* (2000) that features an open-air screening scene with live dubbing and an eccentric, omniscient minor character functioning as narrator. The independent films mentioned above intricately comment on the significance of their historic background by weaving traditional Thai drama structure and its peculiarities into the films’ very core and modeling their narration around it, thus reflecting on their predecessors in the field of Thai drama and cinema.

The filmmakers’ production companies, Apichatpong’s Kick the Machine and Mingmongkol’s Dedicate, produce and distribute independently, working outside the Thai apparatus of entertainment conglomerates and semi-independent production companies. The production of *Mysterious Object at Noon* relied on private funding, awards and grants, among others from the Hubert Bals Fund of the Netherlands. It followed a low-budget working practice, using volunteers and offering internships that followed the learning-by-doing-principle. Being independent productions, Mingmongkol’s and Apichatpong’s films are less pressured by the need for box office returns. This allows them to move beyond the necessity to appeal to audience expectations that are linked with mainstream formulas. Instead, independent films have more freedom of artistic choice and can experiment with the cast, the plot, the structure, and the aesthetics.

Unlike studio productions, independent films are not automatically linked to the Thai distribution system. Therefore, international distribution becomes all the more important for their visibility. After grants at the production stage, festivals, awards, and the sales of international rights are crucial at the distribution stage. In order to participate in festivals, an important step lies in funding the transfer from the DV format, which is often used for shooting independent films, to 35mm. In some cases, attention abroad seems to be the pathway to improved chances back home in Thailand: *Isarn Special* premiered at the Singapore International Film Festival, where it was nominated for a Silver Screen award and won a FIPRESCI special mention prize. The film then continued on to numerous festivals abroad, among others those in Vancouver and San Francisco. It received a limited release.
in Thailand in 2002 and was later screened at the 2003 Bangkok International Film Festival.

While independence means dealing with economic and organizational challenges, it liberates expressive and artistic possibilities and encourages creativity that is often restricted by concessions to production companies and to the viewing habits of target audiences. Both *Isarn Special* and Apichatpong’s films refer to the aesthetics of discontinuity differently than mainstream genre cinema does. Instead of reproducing and, at times, pastiching or ironizing mainstream aesthetics and formulas, they experiment with structures of narrative discontinuity, the effect it has on the construction of the diegesis, and the questions about realism it prompts. By doing so, these films reinterpret and reflect on the effect of traditional film form and narration, reinventing formal Thai-ness in an experimental, playful way.
At the end of 2007, the omnibus film *Chants of Lotus* (Perempuan Punya Cerita, 2007), directed by four women filmmakers and produced by independent production house Kalyana Shira Film, was severely cut by the Indonesian Censorship Board for showing sex scenes regarded as obscene by Indonesian standards and for portraying a veiled woman involved in a casual conversation about sex. The filmmakers—Nia Dinata, Upi Avianto, Lasja Fauziah, and Fatimah Tobing Rony—believe that the cutting has disrupted the narrative coherence of the movie and that this act of censorship prevents the audience from fully grasping the problems pertaining to sexuality in Indonesia such as abortion, sex trafficking, teenage sexuality, and AIDS. The censoring of *Chants of Lotus* demonstrates that even after the New Order authoritarian regime under President Soeharto ended in 1998, film policy still operates based on the old, repressive paradigm. The persistence of censorship caused a large number of young filmmakers to join the Indonesian Film Society (Masyarakat Film Indonesia/MFI) in 2006 and urged the government to abolish censorship that they no longer regarded as relevant to the contemporary situation. The demands were brought to the Constitutional Court and rejected in April 2008.1

The anxiety about sexual representation in cinema exemplified by *Chants of Lotus* reveals how the discourse of sexuality has become an inseparable element of the public debates in Indonesia. Since Soeharto stepped down in 1998, various national phenomena ranging from the launching of *Playboy Indonesia* to the controversial erotic dances of the *dangdut* singer Inul have stirred up a moral panic among some Islamist groups, that recently have begun to gain more power in politics, and got the state to push the Pornography Bill (*Rancangan Undang-Undang Pornografi*) that regulates sexuality in public. While some Islamist groups supported the Bill, cultural activists, artists, writers, and filmmakers protested against it for its underlying patriarchal and anti-pluralist logic.2 After almost a decade of debates, revisions, and demonstrations, the Bill became law in October 2008 as the Pornography Law.

Within this sphere of tension around sexuality, my essay explores the connection between the ways in which the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers
channeled their aspiration through Masyarakat Film Indonesia/MFI, an organization established by young filmmakers, and the larger discourse of post-Soeharto sexual politics. I attempt to answer the following questions: How do the new filmmakers see sexuality, and how does this perspective differ from that of the state? What is the significance of depicting sexuality in contemporary Indonesian cinema? My research focuses on the debates around censorship between MFI and the Censorship Board in the Constitutional Court as well as some films, particularly *Chants of Lotus* and *Women: In the Cut* (*Perempuan: Kisah di Balik Guntingan*, 2008), a documentary on how *Chants of Lotus* was afflicted by censorship. Elucidating the historical context of censorship and sexuality in Indonesia, the logic behind post-Soeharto film censorship, and the way that MFI criticizes the Censorship Board, I will show that the new filmmakers conceptualize sexuality differently from the state and deploy sexuality to both question and reconstruct national identity. I will also argue that there are limitations and ambivalences in the new filmmakers’ desire to explore and problematize sexuality as a national issue.³

**Censorship and Sexuality in the New Order State**

To understand the historical context of sexual politics in Indonesia, one needs to trace how the regulation of sexuality and sexual representation was used to create order and stability under Soeharto’s New Order regime. Unlike the previous government, Sukarno’s relatively tolerant “Guided Democracy” (1945–1966) that was marked by economic and political instability, Soeharto attempted to keep every political, economic, social, and cultural aspect under control through military
repression and censorship. Rigid state control has made New Order Indonesia an appropriate illustration of Anderson’s conception of an “imagined community” that is limited and homogeneous. Arguing that print language invents nationalism, Anderson shows that linguistic communality allows national leaders to create political, educational, and cultural systems to maintain national unity. Censorship can thus be seen as one of the language codes that sustain national consciousness. The Film Law no. 8/1992 (Undang-Undang no. 8 tentang Perfilman/1992) states that cinema is a medium of mass communication that plays an important role in “developing the national culture” and “improving security to support national development.” While Benedict Anderson highlights the inclusionary mechanism of language to form an imagined community, here I will focus more on how censorship excludes what the nation is not, and bodies and sexuality serve as sites that mark national boundaries.

Emphasizing the link between visual images and the issues of security, the New Order government controlled cinema through two methods of censorship. In addition to the regular censorship implemented after the film was produced, there was also a pre-censorship stage which required producers to submit their script to the Censorship Board even before shooting took place. In addition to that, the law stipulated that films should not touch on issues that might provoke conflicts in relation to the four subjects that have been codified by the New Order regime under the acronym SARA (short for: Suku, Agama, Ras, Antar Golongan—ethnicity, religion, race, class). It is ironic that sexuality is not included in this “sensitive” category as the New Order state was in fact very much preoccupied with policing the sexuality of its citizens.

The depiction of sexuality in cinema was allowed as long as the narrative did not stray from the New Order’s gender and sexual politics derived from the family-based ideology of the military and Javanese priyayi (upper class). The family is considered to be the core of the nation that in turn was modeled after the priyayi family, consisting of a Bapak (father) as the head of the family, an Ibu (mother), valued for her nurturing and reproductive capacity, and their children. This familial relationship underpinned the culture of political institutions. Soeharto was the ultimate Bapak of the nation, calling himself the Bapak Pembangunan (Father of National Development) and addressing even his ministers as his “children.” This paternalistic rhetoric unified different class, ethnic, and religious groups under the umbrella of Indonesian fatherhood, which Patricia Spyer describes as “the power of the father to transform even strangers into members of the family, with the family understood as Indonesia itself.” Meanwhile, the Ibu was regarded as the keeper of harmony and guardian of power, and her role was institutionalized within the framework of “State Ibuism.”

“State Ibuism” refers to the ideological role of women in organizations like Dharma Wanita (an association for the wives of civil servants) or the PKK (Family
Welfare Organization), in which a woman’s position was determined by her husband’s position. Women may pursue their own career but it should be “balanced” with the fulfillment of domestic duties as mothers and wives. The image of “domesticated” working woman reflects what Suzanne Brenner calls “[The New Order’s] unceasing efforts to create an image of a stable, harmonious, prosperous society built on a foundation of moral, apolitical, middle-class families.”

The New Order gender ideology that defined the roles of men and women served as the basis of sexual politics in New Order Indonesia. The discourse of sexuality was centered around the monogamous, heterosexual marriage. At the same time, politics was sexualized since women who participated actively in politics were labeled as morally loose. The preoccupation of the New Order regime with restricting women’s political participation as mere supporters of their husbands came directly out of the 1965 coup that brought Soeharto to power. His government demonized the Communist Party’s supporter Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Indonesian Women’s Movement/Gerwani) as a part of his campaign to defame communism. A few months after the coup, Soeharto’s army published a tabloid to spread rumors about Gerwani’s monstrous sexuality, full of false stories on how the members of the group performed an erotic dance before they mutilated the military generals. Female sexuality was thus used to stigmatize communism as a national threat. Saskia Wieringa has convincingly argued that Soeharto’s power was not only established upon violence but also upon “sexual metaphors linking women’s political activity with sexual perversion and moral depravity.”

Sexuality since then has been deployed by the New Order state to construct what Tamar Mayer calls “the privileged nation,” as she argues: “one nation, one gender and one particular sexuality is always favored by the social, political, and cultural institutions which it helps to construct and which it benefits from.” In other words, not all forms but only certain regulated practices of sexuality could define the nation. To articulate national identity, it is essential that these specific practices are linked to a certain moral framework, or in George L. Mosse’s term, the notion of “respectability.” Scholars working on Indonesia have pointed out that through marriage regulation and family planning programs, women’s sexuality was treated as an indicator of the nation’s moral health. Julia Suryakusuma has argued that the family ideology of the New Order was instrumental in the creation of Government Regulation (Peraturan Pemerintah [PP] 10/1983) that restrains the sexual behavior of civil servants, viewed as representatives of the state and who became moral lifestyle role models for the nation. Leslie K. Dwyer points out that the New Order ideal of the monogamous family served as a foundation for the birth control programs of the government. The state encouraged—and to some extent coerced—women to participate in family planning programs. They were taught how to control their fertility in order to lower population growth rates, an act that was aimed at supporting Soeharto’s developmentalist project.
The regulated sexuality of women was thus a site of the production of a “national culture” that served to protect multinational investments. Dwyer concludes that sexuality in Indonesia “had become, in multiple ways, a primary idiom through which national identity was articulated, intra-national divisions were stated or smoothed, and international conflicts were defined and waged.”

In New Order Indonesia, cinema was expected to introduce models of a “good” family with appropriate sexual behavior, and the censorship of movies was a way to make sure that movies did just that. Films made in the 1980s such as The Beauty Palace (Istana Kecantikan, 1989) and Virgins (Perawan-Perawan, 1981) might initially sympathize with gay and lesbian characters but soon find remedy to their “abnormality” by returning them to proper sexual orientations. Women’s sexual desire might lead to disorder, and order can only be restored through heteronormativity. The film Dr. Karmila (1981), for instance, is about an intelligent medical student who does not properly guard herself against sexual attacks. She goes to a party, gets drunk, and finds herself raped and impregnated by a drunken man. Abortion is certainly not a solution within the Ibuism framework, so Karmila has to marry the rapist to save herself from shame. While the rapist becomes a sympathetic father and husband, the film neither acknowledges women’s sexual rights nor problematizes sexual violence. Instead, it glorifies marriage as an effective institution that keeps women’s sexuality under control and preserves morality.

Soeharto’s resignation in 1998 after a series of student demonstration paved the way for Reformasi (Reform), a new era that promises democratization and openness in politics and culture. Sparked by the spirit of Reformasi, many women as well as gay and lesbian activists raise issues of gender and sexuality that were ignored and repressed in the New Order period. At the dawn of the Soeharto regime, an organization called Suara Ibu Peduli (The Voice of Concerned Mothers) challenged the notion of Ibuism and reappropriated the rhetoric of motherhood in order to protest Soeharto’s policies during the economic crisis that severely hit Asia. In literature, woman writer Ayu Utami shocked the male-dominated literary scene with her groundbreaking Saman (1998), a novel that discusses sexuality in a blatant and celebratory way. Saman’s success cleared the path for other women writers to voice their concerns about what was considered a taboo subject. Meanwhile, the gay community Q-munity, successfully organized the Q Film Festival to raise consciousness about gay and lesbian issues in the society. Within this new political climate, independent filmmakers emerged and engaged increasingly with issues of gender and sexuality. The Indonesian film scene was revitalized by themes such as teen sexuality in Three Days to Forever (3 Hari untuk Selamanya, 2008), sexuality outside the traditional marriage bond in Dimas Djayadiningrat’s Quickie Express (2007), or homosexuality as a part of contemporary urban reality in Nia Dinata’s Arisan! (2003).
The new climate, however, did not really affect the mechanisms of film censorship. Despite President Abdurrahman Wahid’s gesture toward the democratization of media when he abolished the Department of Information, a New Order institution in 1999, film censorship, a product of this department, was not affected. Although pre-production censorship stage was eliminated, censorship of the finished film is still required for filmmakers who want to screen their films in major theaters. As I will demonstrate later, the Censorship Board’s determination to retain the 1992 Law shows that the democratization process of the Reformasi movement have not yet changed the ways in which the state imagines the nation.

Post-Soeharto Censorship: Protecting the Nation and National Morality

One of the films that was censored in the post-Soeharto period is Tino Saroenggalo’s film, *Student Movement in Indonesia* (2002), which indicates that even after Reformasi, some deep-rooted beliefs are preserved in an attempt to protect the national border. The Censorship Board eliminated parts of the original film title (*The Army Forced Them to Be Violent*) and cut scenes that show acts of violence by the military against students in order to not provoke hatred toward the military. The Censorship Board’s determination to maintain the idea that the military is the guardian of national stability (which was very much a New Order concept) reveals that some of the ideological framework of the state remains unchanged even after Reformasi. This is what the Indonesian Film Society (MFI), founded by young independent filmmakers and producers of the new generation such as Riri Riza, Nia Dinata, Mira Lesmana, and Shanty Harmayn, aspires to change.

The MFI was initially established as a protest movement against the Festival Film Indonesia (FFI), which awarded the film *Ekskul* (2006) as the best film of 2006 despite the fact that the producers had lifted the score from the Korean movie *Taegukgi* (2004). Filmmakers, actors, and critics returned their FFI awards as a sign of protest, and 200 people involved in the film scene signed a petition in support. The jury eventually annulled its decision, yet MFI did not stop there. They continued with their movement, and focused on the reform of the national film policy. Claiming that censorship contradicts Indonesia’s human rights’ law, MFI sued the government in the Constitutional Court to abolish the outdated Regulation no. 8/1992 and replace it with a standard rating system. MFI members argue that film is both an art and a medium for the artists to convey information to the audience. The act of censoring a film would affect the right of the citizens to communicate and to receive information.

The Censorship Board—consisting of seven religious representatives, fourteen experts, and eight academics—can be regarded as the elites representing state power that controls what can and cannot be shown in order to maintain a cohesive
idea of the nation. By focusing on the state I do not mean to say that the source of power is monolithic. After the Soeharto regime ended, Indonesia witnessed a kind of “Islamic revival” as a result of a long repression of Islam by the New Order to prevent radical Islam from corrupting the image of a stable, modern developing nation. There are at least two major consequences of this revival: on the one hand, the growing influence of Islam in politics that urged for the legislation of the Pornography Bill, and on the other hand, the growing visibility of Islamic culture in the media that is more related to the culture of consumption. With the increasing power of Islamist groups, the state compromises not only with the prominent political party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party, PKS) but also with organizations such as Muhammadiyah or the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (The Muslim Clerics Council, MUI), the legitimate institution that issues fatwa. This explains why the argument for morality in defending censorship is similar to the argument made to support the Pornography Bill. Din Syamsuddin, chairman of Muhammadiyah, for instance, pressured the legislative to “stop this drift toward moral liberalization.”

The Pornography Bill, first proposed in 1999 and passed as the Pornography Law in 2008, has created a long, heated national debate, that intensified in the last five years among its supporters (the government and some Islamist groups) and its opponents (liberal activists and cultural producers including artists, writers, and filmmakers). The Bill prohibits any behavior or images that are considered to be sexually arousing. That includes women who show parts of their breasts and thighs, nudity in art, or even kissing in public. This legislation underscores the strong agreement between the government and the religious conservatives in regard to
sexuality. In cinema, this concord became obvious when the Censorship Board pulled out the film *Kiss Me Quick!* (Buruan Cium Gue!, 2004) from distribution after it had already passed censorship, because of the pressure of religious leaders and the radical group *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defender Front, FPI). At the same time, the Board also sought support from the conservatives as witnesses and experts in the case against Regulation no. 8/1992.

The hearings, conducted between November 2007 and April 2008, demonstrated that the New Order’s designation of film as a means of projecting and protecting national unity and national culture still prevails. According to the Censorship Board, film screenings in public should take into account the 1945 Constitution, which states that “the Government endorses the advance of knowledge and technology by upholding religious values and national unity for civilization and the welfare of human beings” (my italics). During the hearings in the Constitutional Court, Jero Wacik, Minister of Education and Culture, declared that the “Indonesian film industry is preserved and developed to avoid characteristics and/or desires that denigrate cultural values, hamper the attempt to build personal character, disrupt national unity, consist of conflicts between ethnicity, religion, race, and origins, or create disturbance toward stability and decency in general.”

The Minister’s statement indicates a deep-seated anxiety about cultural, ethnic, and religious diversities that might cause ruptures in the cohesiveness of Indonesia. In line with this argument, Head of Censorship Board Titi Said claimed in the documentary *Women in the Cut* that without censorship, there would be

![Figure 6.3 Members of the Indonesian Film Society at a hearing on film censorship at the Constitutional Court in Jakarta. Source: Masyarakat Film Indonesia](image)
disturbances in a society that consists of people from different racial, cultural, and educational background. Categorized as “socio-cultural” issues, representations of sexuality should be cautiously regulated to preserve the stability of the nation.

“Nation” and “morality” were keywords that the Censorship Board kept harping on during the trial to defend the need for censorship. Both terms are naturalized as closely linked together in order to maintain a seemingly fixed national identity. Commenting on Chants of Lotus, Head of the Television Cinema Association Anwar Fuady asked what would happen to “the nation’s morality” due to the film’s depictions of sexuality.24

The idea of an inherent national morality, which allows only certain practices of sexuality within heteronormative boundaries and suppresses other forms of sexuality, was never questioned by the Censorship Board. Fusing tradition and the language of liberal discourse, the Censorship Board claims that “it is necessary for the film industry to base itself on national culture, moral values, religion, tradition, decency, and stability in accordance with the Human Rights Law.”25 Hence, the filmmakers’ freedom to convey information through films is restricted by others’ rights.26 For instance, the Board had to censor a scene in Riri Riza’s Gie (2005) for showing a scene in which Chinese-Indonesian intellectual hero Soe Hok Gie kisses his girlfriend because the portrayal of sexual expression of a national hero is inappropriate within the confinement of national morality. Riza’s individual right to represent intimacy, therefore, is limited by the society’s right to retain its moral standards, without any thought given to the question of who defines those moral standards. The aesthetics and narrative of the film are thus of secondary importance in this paradigm.

According to the censorship law, a film needs to be censored if it contains images that contradict socio-cultural traditions of Indonesia. These taboos include:

a. A scene showing a man and a woman in, or giving the impression of, nudity, whether it is from the front, side, or back angle.

b. A close-up shot of genitals, thighs, breasts, or buttocks, with or without clothing.

c. A sexually-arousing kiss between a heterosexual or homosexual couple.

d. The act, movement, or sound of intercourse, or anything else that gives the impression of intercourse, by human beings or animals, in any gestures, explicitly or implicitly.

e. An act of masturbation, lesbianism, homosexuality, or oral sex.

f. An act of giving birth, by human or animal, that can elicit desire.

g. A scene showing contraceptive tools that are irrelevant and inappropriate.

h. Acts that give unethical impressions.27

These criteria are convoluted since they turn issues of “reproduction” (labor and contraceptives) and “sexual orientation” (gay and lesbianism) into acts that can
In Intan Paramaditha's explanation in the documentary *Women in the Cut*, “What we cut is what we think is ‘porno.’ What is ‘porno’? Having sex is ‘porno.’” “Sexuality” for the Censorship Board is analogous to “pornography.” The problematic term “free sex” as a consequence of representations of sexuality was mentioned throughout the Court session. “Free Sex” is a broad term that many Indonesians indiscriminately use to refer to promiscuity, pre/extra marital sex, and homosexuality. The legal framework of censorship in Indonesia therefore reduces all representations of sexuality to “pornography” and places films that problematize sexuality like *Chants of Lotus* in the same “porno” category as pirated porn DVDs. At the same time, it disregards the fact that filmic representations of sexuality can also include problems in the society such as health, reproduction and domestic violence.

Not only is national morality naturalized in the Indonesian censorship law, national identity is regarded as a fixed notion founded on tradition which “should be respected along with the advance of civilization.” The nation is situated vis-à-vis foreign influences, disregarding the fact that cultural exchanges have been happening in the archipelago even before the construction of modern Indonesia in 1928. The absence of censorship that protects national borders will result in “culture shock,” “moral crisis,” “commercialism” and “materialism,” as if these elements were completely foreign. Titi Said views the urgency to guard national culture through censorship because of the “penetration of destructive outside cultures” that makes the nation feel alienated from its own culture. She claims that the Censorship Board should be a “discussion partner” for the filmmakers to prevent “thoughts distorted by foreign ideologies that cannot be accepted within the framework of ‘Indonesian-ness.’” The division between nation and “foreign” influences is evoked in the same way in the debates about the Pornography Bill. Pam Allen has analyzed various responses toward the Bill, including Vice-President Yusuf Kalla’s statement: “This is not America.” Allen infers that the rhetoric of the Islamist and the 1945 Constitution groups that support the Bill revolves around what they deem as “Western” influences threatening the nation: “the dangers of anarchy, hedonism, free sex, obscenity, globalization, and the degenerate West.”

It is important to highlight that the New Order’s paternalism finds its afterlife in the current state’s view of the nation as a community that is vulnerable, easily provoked and “damaged.” This idea is rooted in Soeharto’s familial ideology, which, as I have explained earlier, creates a hierarchy between the knowledgeable father figure who has the authority to rule and the infantilized, undeveloped nation. The paternalistic logic is evident in Titi Said’s argument—made in the documentary *Women in the Cut*—that censorship is implemented to “protect the society from the negative effects of films.” The nation is often explicitly anthropomorphized as an easily-influenced youth, which can be seen from how the Censorship Board and its supporters associate the nation with “the young generation.” KH. Amidhan, a
member of the Indonesian Muslim Clerics Council, says “the Censorship Board carries an honorable but difficult duty” to preserve “national morality, including among its young generation.” He also underlines that the role of the Board, supported by educational institutions, to “save the nation’s young generation from moral decadence and violence in film and TV.”

I see the Censorship Board’s anxiety in regards to sexuality as a part of a larger national crisis; the issue is not exclusive to cinema but is connected to the collective anxiety among the state and the conservative groups of loosening national morality as an excess of Reformasi’s euphoric freedom. The presence of senior poet Taufik Ismail in the court illustrates this phenomenon very well. Ismail is a well-respected right-wing Muslim figure who supports the Pornography Bill and at the same time, attacks the “sexy” trend in literature in which women writers openly discuss sexuality. Connecting film to literature, he claimed in the court that there was a movement, organized by “permissive and addictive [sic!]” groups intruding the nation, that emerged in the Reformasi period. In a form of manifesto, Ismail lambasts what he calls “the Free Lust Movement” (Gerakan Syahwat Merdeka). He mentioned ten components that might trigger nationwide moral decadence: seks liar/free sex/promiscuity, expressions of sexuality in films and television, new publication of pornographic magazines and tabloids, access to pornographic websites, proliferation of porn VCDs and DVDs, distribution of porn comics among students, the emergence of women writers who talk about sex in the Indonesian literary scene, the distribution of drugs, the marketing of alcohol, and the nation’s addiction to cigarettes.

Ismail’s zeroing in on women’s literature is instructive. When women project their own perspectives to reclaim sexuality, which have always been regulated and repressed by the New Order state, the existing idea of the nation is threatened. In literature there has been a long debate around women’s sexuality with Ismail, along with poets and literary critics of the conservative side, condemning women writers as being blinded by their “narcissism” and “exhibitionism.” Similarly, in cinema, sexuality becomes a contested terrain between the Censorship Board and the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers. To maintain the nation and national morality, sexuality—especially women’s sexuality—needs to be tamed and censored.

Post-Soeharto Filmmakers: Sexuality as a National Problem

Before I delve into the relation between the new generation of filmmakers and state/cultural paternalism, I will briefly explain the context in which these filmmakers emerged. At the end of Soeharto’s power, four independent filmmakers—Riri Riza, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani, and Nan Achnas—made the low budget film Kuldesak (1998) to revive the stagnant film industry. These young directors inspired other filmmakers to produce films independently with the spirit...
encapsulated in a famous line from *Kuldesak*, “*Gue cuma pengen bikin film*” (“I just want to make movies”). They soon established small production houses such as Miles Film and Salto Film, which coexist with major commercial production companies owned by Indian-Indonesian producers such as Multivision and MD Pictures. Unlike big companies that produce commercial films in addition to *sinetron* (TV soap operas), the small production houses only produce films and constantly negotiate between idealism and commercialism.

Indonesia’s new generation of filmmakers is completely different from earlier generations in terms of themes, working culture, gender ideology, and the ways in which they perceive the nation. The older generation of filmmakers like Syumanjaya or Nya Abbas Accup—often called “The Maestros” by young filmmakers, either sincerely or cynically—had to voice their critique toward the New Order government in subtle ways, often relying on allegories and symbolism. The new generation has more freedom to talk about taboo subjects. The young filmmakers come from a different background and have developed a different working culture. Unlike the previous generation who were mostly men and learned filmmaking through an apprenticeship with established male directors, the new filmmakers are typically middle-class urbanites who graduated from the Jakarta Art Institute and universities in the US and UK. Not only are they privileged with a cosmopolitan perspective of the world, but they are also exposed to the flows of global images that started to proliferate in the 1990s with the emergence of satellite TV. This is also the generation that grew up watching mainly Hollywood films; they are the product of Soeharto’s monopoly practice shaped by foreign policy in the 1990s, which allowed only Hollywood films to be screened in major theaters and pushed Indonesian films in marginal suburban areas. It is not surprising that MTV music video and Hollywood melodrama constitute a large part of this new generation’s aesthetics.

Many people think that the “maestros” were more committed to voicing their concerns about the nation, which can be seen from their obsession to represent “national reality” such as poverty, social problems, and the failures of Soeharto’s developmentalism through realist aesthetics. The new generation, on the contrary, seems less obliged to a rigid national identity due to their transnational affiliations, the global style, and the seemingly “trivial” themes of their movies that are mostly about teenagers and young people. Yet, instead of ignoring the nation, they construct a different kind of nationhood and depict what they consider as national problems differently. Many of the filmmakers from this generation are women, a fact that affects how gender and sexuality are represented. Gender and sexuality are key issues overlooked by the idealist male filmmakers of earlier generations, who were mostly concerned with class conflicts in their representation of national realities.
Independence from paternalism is probably the most important aspect in the ways that the new filmmakers imagine nationhood. This can be seen from their films, which are mostly about teenagers defying parental authority. *Kuldesak*, the landmark of this generation, has a strong Oedipal theme about vulnerable young people—mostly men lacking masculine qualities—struggling against their parents as well as the bureaucratic state. Other films such as *What’s Up with Love?* (Ada Apa dengan Cinta?, 2002), *The Reality of Love and Rock n’ Roll* (Realita Cinta dan Rock n’ Roll, 2006), *Banyu Biru* (2005), *Whispering Sands* (Pasir Berbisik, 2001), and *Eliana, Eliana* (2002) revolve around young characters who discover their identity in the absence of a complete family.

The case MFI vs. the Censorship Board can be read as an opposition between the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers and enduring state paternalism, which imagines the nation as childlike, uncritical, and unenlightened. In making their case in the Constitutional Court, MFI members argue that censorship prevents people from seeing the reality and therefore it is “fooling” (*membodohi*) the society.38 The notions of *bodoh* (stupid) and *pembodohan* (dumbing down) often came up in the early years of Reformasi as a critique toward the New Order’s lies and propaganda to keep the people unaware of its crimes. Fadjroel Rahman, a socialist activist who served as MFI witness in the court, states that maintaining censorship in the post-dictatorship period is similar to the ways in which Soeharto restricted access to information and “understanding of national history.”39 MFI is aware that censorship is grounded on the persisting paternalistic logic that views how “the nation is not mature enough to protect itself.”40 “Intellectual capacity” and “freedom to choose” are major key terms used by MFI against the Censorship Board’s rhetoric of limiting and protecting. Instead of censorship they suggest that the state use the law for consumer protection (UU no. 9/1999), which allows the audience/consumers to gain access to information as well as to develop themselves as autonomous consumers capable of protecting themselves.

Representing sexuality is therefore important for the new generation of filmmakers for a number of reasons. Sexuality serves as a site in which the young generation asserts their identity and their own perception of national reality in accord with the spirit of Reformasi. Showing the capability and knowledge to engage with issues of sexuality is a way of challenging the state’s paternalistic attitude. To borrow from psychoanalytic terminology: the ability to speak about sexuality is to reclaim the father’s language in order for the children to be autonomous (national) subjects.

While the Censorship Board views representations of sexuality in a narrow sense, i.e., as arousing sexual desire, such representations are used by the new filmmakers to reveal gender problems. An exemplary case used in the court is the cutting of the sex scene in *Love for Share* (Berbagi Suami, 2006) showing the first sexual encounter between a husband and his wife. For Shanty, the actress who plays the wife, the scene is important to show the relation between a polygamous
husband, who has had much sexual experience, and his virgin bride, who is very anxious on her wedding night. This bed scene is not presented as sexually stimulating. As actress and MFI witness Dian Sastrowardoyo says, it is in bed where “domestic violence starts happening.” And that is what this scene is supposed to show.

“The Real Indonesia” in the Eyes of Middle-Class Urban Women

To illustrate how new filmmakers complicate the idea of “the real Indonesia” imagined by male filmmakers of the older generation through issues of gender and sexuality in the films, I will specifically focus on the film *Chants of Lotus* and take into account the role of Nia Dinata as a filmmaker and producer, who constantly shows her concerns on women’s problems in Indonesia. Before *Chants of Lotus*, Dinata directed *Love for Share* (*Berbagi Suami, 2006*), a film that poses a critique on the contemporary attitude toward polygamy in Indonesia. Polygamy becomes a phenomenon in the public sphere due to the post-Soeharto Islamic hype. While the practice was allowed but restricted in the New Order, and to some extent deemed as “shameful,” today it is more visible and even celebrated in contemporary popular culture through the public appearance of polygamous middle-class men who try to present polygamy as an alternative way to regulate sexuality. This development climaxed when Puspowardoyo, a wealthy businessman with four wives, held an event called “Polygamy Awards” in a 5-Star-Hotel. The event was covered by Indonesian print media and TV stations. Sonja Van Wichelen’s observation on the polygamy awards phenomenon in her article, “Reconstructing ‘Muslimness’: New Bodies in Urban Indonesia,” reveals to us that the spectacle of polygamous behavior results precisely from the various trajectories of democratization opened up by the 1998 political reform. As a (male) Muslim interpretation of freedom after the suppression of Islam during the Soeharto regime, the “polygamy hype” offers a new vision of Muslim masculinity that deviates from the New Order’s notion of ideal monogamous family. As Van Wichelen states, it reflects “the need among disempowered Muslim men to assert personal masculine potency against the hegemonic masculinity of the authoritarian New Order.” At the same time, it is also a response to the other facet of democracy: the freedom embraced by women to participate more in the public sphere. Van Wichelen argues that the visibility of the polygamy practice in public reflects anxieties among middle class Muslim men toward the emergence of women in the professional realm.

The celebration of polygamy has been criticized by many, including Muslim women, and Nia Dinata’s *Love for Share* contests these new conservative expressions of gender and sexuality. With four different stories about polygamy in which different characters watch the same national news on the tsunami in Aceh, Dinata compares polygamy and the tsunami: both are tragedies at the national level that have their own victims. Polygamy is presented as problematic for families at
different social levels, from an educated upper-class Muslim family that constantly deals with the question of “fairness” (and we can conclude from the film that it is impossible for the husband to be fair to all his wives) to a lower-class family that has to struggle with poverty and abandoned children. In Love for Share, the activity of watching the news about tsunami on television connects characters of different social background as an imagined community. Yet while the tsunami is regarded as an important issue in the national sphere, the problem of polygamy in the film remains in the domestic realm in which women’s voices are unheard.

In her next project, Chants of Lotus, Dinata also presents various problems of sexuality, ranging from women trafficking, unwanted teenage pregnancy, AIDS and abortion, as pressing national issues. She hopes that after watching the film, the audience would “try to make a change, however small, in their own capacity, for the betterment of Indonesian women.” The debates around censorship suffered by the film, encapsulated in the documentary Women: In the Cut (2008), reflect not only the persisting paternalistic perspective of the Censorship Board but also the filmmakers’ worldview behind the agenda to reconceptualize national realities through sexuality.

A melodrama with a realist approach, Chants of Lotus attempts to represent what is “real” based on a woman’s perspective. The film consists of four stories. “Chants of an Island” (Cerita Pulau) by Fatimah Tobing Rony, is about a midwife who performs abortion to save an autistic girl who was raped; “Chants from the Tourist Town” (Cerita Yogyakarta) by Upi Avianto, reveals how teenagers experiment irresponsibly with sex, which ends up with a girl getting pregnant and having to resort to a loveless marriage; “Chants from the Village” (Cerita Cibinong) by Nia Dinata, is about a janitor in a dangdut music club who loses her daughter in a women/child trafficking crime. Finally, “Chants from the Capital City” (Cerita Jakarta) by Lasja Fauziah, revolves around a single mother infected with AIDS by her husband, who has to give up her daughter to her unsympathetic in-laws because of her sickness. Producer and scriptwriter Vivian Idris claims that the film is based on true story and research done in different places in Indonesia. The authenticity of sexual problems in Indonesia is also confirmed by Dinata: “This is a realist film. We want it to be as real as possible.” Such desire for authenticity, however, is incongruous with the Censorship Board’s understanding of national morality. The Board cut 90 meters of the film, from 3,156 meters to 3,066 meters. This includes a depiction of two teenagers having sex, an abortion sequence, and a scene showing a veiled teenager smoking and posing a question in a casual conversation about sex, “How does it feel to be in a group sex?”

When I interviewed Nia Dinata in April 2008, she said that the DVD release would be supplemented with Ucu Agustin’s documentary about the film, Women: In the Cut. But in 2009 the DVD came out without the censored parts and the documentary, which is a pity as the audience will never get a full picture of the
film. The documentary presents interviews with the filmmakers and combines scenes from *Chants of Lotus*, including the ones deleted by the Censorship Board, with footage showing news in the media and interviews with people whose stories have inspired the film. *Women: In the Cut* puts together an interview with a real midwife from a remote island with scenes from “Chants of an Island” showing the struggle of Sumantri as a midwife in an area with limited access to healthcare. It also goes back and forth between scenes about teenagers browsing porn sites in “Chants from the Tourist Town” and real teenagers revealing their sexual experiences and how they receive their “sex education” from informal places. By juxtaposing the fiction film and concrete issues of sexuality, *Women: In the Cut* legitimizes the reality claim made by *Chants of Lotus*. The film shares with the works of the directors of the older generation the same concern in representing national reality in a realistic fashion, yet “the real” is enriched and complicated by women’s perspectives on sexuality and experiences often undermined within the discourse of “national reality.” Sexuality is not simply questions of “pornography” and “morality” but rather, a complex discourse in which Indonesian women’s health and sexual/reproductive rights are at stake.

As the new filmmakers envision sexuality as a part of larger national issues, the next questions to raise are what kind of people should be foregrounded to represent “problems,” where agency is located, and how the filmmakers situate themselves in relation to the “problems.” The national problems imagined by the filmmakers, who are educated middle-class urban women, are problems that mostly affect women from the lower class. Among the four main characters in the film—Sumantri the midwife, Safina the high school student, Esih the night club janitor, and Laksmi the HIV-infected housewife—it is only Laksmi who comes from a upper-middle class family in urban Jakarta. Yet even though Laksmi might share a similar background with the filmmakers, the film emphasizes how her wealth comes from her husband’s family and not hers, in addition to her non-urban background (she comes from Singkawang, a small town in West Kalimantan with a Chinese-Indonesian majority). Her lack of cultural capital such as education and a social network, commonly possessed by Jakartan women of her class, explains why she cannot support herself after her husband dies.

Dinata says that *Chants of Lotus* is about “women with simple lives, but they have extraordinary problems.”44 I argue that instead of being anti-moral, as accused by the Censorship Board and their conservative supporters, women filmmakers involved in *Chants of Lotus* engages with sexuality within a certain moral framework, i.e., that of the urban middle class. There is a distance between women filmmakers and the women they represent, between the imagined “national reality” and the filmmakers’ position as national elites and cosmopolitans, and finally, between characters’ victimization in the film and the filmmakers’ agency to speak for the others. From the perspective of women filmmakers, the “reality” that people
should look at is that many women outside the capital city are not yet emancipated, as Dinata says, "People in the urban centers think that women are already emancipated, but in reality they are not." In Women: In the Cut documentary, scriptwriter Melissa Karim talks about how she is inspired to write about Esih, the mother whose daughter is kidnapped by a trafficking syndicate, after she heard her maid’s story: “Esih is actually the name of my maid. Esih’s daughter was sold to marry a Taiwanese man. The daughter is the only property she owns as a poor woman who does not have anything.” Shanty, the actress who plays Esih, describes the world that her character lives in: “Women just want to be celebrities in Jakarta. They look for popularity. They are brainwashed not to go to school. School is not fun. That’s what their living standard is.”

The words “simple,” “brainwashed,” and “poor” highlight the different worlds of the marginal female characters and of the filmmakers. The world of marginal women, which represents a broader nation, is full of problems related to women’s sexuality due to the strong patriarchal system and the lack of education; these problems can only be made urgent and intelligible by the filmmakers, who are more “emancipated” as they live in the center of education, culture, and business. Jakarta as a center remains as a point of reference even in the three stories that are not about Jakarta. In “Chants from an Island,” Sumantri has to flee from her island to Jakarta because her community condemns the abortions she performs to help women; in “Chants from the Tourist Town,” the story of teenage promiscuity in the city of Yogyakarta is framed from a critical perspective of Jay Anwar, a reporter from Jakarta; finally, in “Chants from the Village,” Cicih takes Esih’s daughter Maesaroh to Jakarta to be a successful singer.

The way in which women filmmakers position themselves within this complex web of problems is ambivalent. They envision problems related to sexuality among the lower-class women outside Jakarta as a national issue, yet they see themselves as outside rather than as part of the problem. Not only is the distance established between the emancipated women filmmakers and their unenlightened lower-class characters, but the stories are also resolved from a middle-class feminist perspective. Sumantri the midwife, for example, resists the “crazy” label given to the autistic girl by society. Ventriloquizing the Western liberal middle-class perspective, the village midwife claims that the girl is not “crazy” but “special.”

Upi Avianto’s film about promiscuity among teenagers in Yogyakarta is the most graphic in representing sexuality and thus suffered most from censorship compared to the other films. Despite the film’s representation of sex that is considered daring, it is actually very moralistic. Avianto argues, “I want to make it as real as possible because I want to slap people in the face. After being slapped, they will think. If I hide things, I don’t think people will feel slapped.” The question is, what kind of harsh reality does she want to show? A scene that shows the monstrosity of abortion in a clinic certainly “disturbs” the audience, yet it seems more
like an anti-abortion campaign that contradicts the previous film, “Chants from an Island.”

As the filmmakers have progressively brought sexuality into the national political sphere, they might need to delve more into the question of representation, which is not an easy one. The problem of representing marginal women strikingly resonates with the long debates in feminism in which Third World feminists criticize how white, middle-class liberal feminists represent oppressed women in the Third World by using the framework that positions more enlightened Western women as the saviors of their uneducated Third World sisters. The poor women outside Jakarta in *Chants of Lotus* are represented as being in the state of “pre-emancipation,” with the term “emancipation” framed within the urban middle-class perspective, in which women are educated, aware of their bodies and sexuality, and financially independent. The attempt to represent sexuality as a national problem thus reflects the ambivalent ways of viewing the nation: one is the desired autonomous nation free from paternalism, within which the filmmakers locate themselves within their struggle against state/cultural paternalism, and the other is the imagined unenlightened nation constituting “the real Indonesia,” which still leaves uneasy questions of how to speak about—and locate one’s privileged position vis-à-vis—“the rest.”

**Conclusion: New Chapter, Same Story?**

A year after the censoring of *Chants of Lotus* and the struggle of MFI in the Constitutional Court, the House of Representatives replaced the 1992 Film Law with Undang-Undang tentang Perfilman no. 33/2009 (Film Law no. 33/2009). The government regards it as a more democratic law in line with the spirit of 1998 reform. The cutting of the film is eliminated from the mechanism of censorship; instead, the Censorship Board will return the problematic film to the filmmakers for “revision.” If the film screened does not fulfill the censorship criteria, however, the filmmakers will be given sanctions (Article 60, paragraph 3–5). Article 6 of the Law stipulates that filmmakers are prohibited from representing pornography (still without a clear definition of what “pornography” is) and sensitive class/ethnic/religious issues (Article 6, paragraph a–f). In general, the underlying assumptions of the new Film Law still operate based the paternalistic logic of the New Order regime that posits the state as the protector of its vulnerable citizens against films that might “provoke” them to engage in subversive acts. Despite this change, the nation is still seen within the New Order’s framework: vulnerable, naïve, and easily aroused. Up until today, infantilization and prejudice serve as foundations of the relationship between the state and the citizens.

Once again, the filmmakers united, this time with more involvement of non-film people to assert that censorship is a problem that does not only concern the
film industry, but the larger cultural production in Indonesia. At the time of writing this paper, I have been participating in the process of preparing a judicial review for the new law, which will be once again brought to the Constitutional Court. In the meantime, films on problems pertaining to gender and sexuality are still produced. At the end of 2008, Nia Dinata’s Kalyana Shira Foundation produced *At Stake* (*Pertaruhan*), a compilation of four documentaries by emerging filmmakers. Started as a film workshop organized by Kalyana Shira and funded by the Ford Foundation, *At Stake* discusses issues such as female circumcision, prostitution, and reproductive health. Perhaps in the spirit of engaging the public and to popularize the documentary genre among Indonesian audience, the films compiled in *At Stake* combine interviews and archival footage with relatively short duration shots that contribute to the fast cinematic rhythm. The populist style of *At Stake* indicates that the filmmakers still invest in disseminating awareness of sexuality to the public as a form of political intervention. Yet like *Chants of Lotus*, most of the characters followed by the filmmakers come from a marginalized, lower-middle class background. The filmmakers capture the lives of these women with their camera, yet none of them position themselves in the narrative. The same questions for *Chants of Lotus* therefore could be posed to this film: how do the filmmakers situate themselves within the problems and relate their own experiences to those of their subjects? How would interactions with the subjects change them? New modes of representation that allow more room for self-reflexivity are worth exploring. As the problem of speaking about the other has become an internal critique in feminism, the filmmakers’ effort to represent sexuality as a national problem—faced mostly by women in the marginal areas—might require a constant interrogation of how to frame the issue and how to be critical of one’s own position while acknowledging that different class and cultural values, and religion in different parts of Indonesia constitute women’s experiences that are far from homogeneous.
Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia
Religion Using the Market or Vice Versa?

Tito Imanda

The relationship between religion and cinema has often been awkward. Whether it was the Catholic Legion of Decency campaigning against certain Hollywood films in the 1930s before the introduction of the Hayes code, or the Indonesian Islamic Cleric group (MUI) protesting to the Indonesian Censorship Board, religion often tends to regard film as hazardous to society. In Indonesia where the version of Islam is relatively moderate, many religious people still consider film spectatorship as sinful. At the same time, cinema has frequently taken religious life or spirituality as a source of inspiration and of significant stories to tell. Spreading the word of God, the most fundamental reason for the existence of religious organization, seems to be in line with the basic nature of cinema. Film industries across the world tackle humanity’s relationship with a Divine power, with or without endorsement from religious authorities. Moreover, the religious communities provide producers with potential viewers.

In newly democratic Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, movies with Islamic themes have been popular since early 2008, when Verses of Love (Ayat-Ayat Cinta), a love story with a Muslim background, became a box office hit. In a country, where the local film production is dominated by teen flicks, cheesy love stories, and horror movies, this success came as a surprise. While in Indonesia even a poorly selling horror film will still sell 300,000 tickets and the best could sell one and a half million, Ayat-Ayat Cinta sold a total of four million tickets, proving that the local market can occasionally be tapped for unlikely themes.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta was not the first film after the 1998 political reform which attempted to represent Muslim life; a digital film called Doomsday is Approaching (Kiamat Sudah Dekat) was released in 2003. However, this movie failed at the box office. This failure might be the reason why it took five years for another film representing Islam to be commercially released. After Ayat-Ayat Cinta broke ticket sales records for local movies, Just Be It (the Arabic term God uses to create) (Kun Fayakuun) followed in April 2008, confirming the beginning of the new film
trend. Two months later *Claiming to be a Prophet* (Mengaku Rasul) was released, followed by *Converting for Love* (Syahadat Cinta) in mid-August.

Since then, there has been a steady trickle of religious films in Indonesia. At least ten films with Islamic subject matter and titles that translate to *A Woman with a Turban* (Perempuan Berkalung Sorban, 2009), *When Love is Praying* (Ketika Cinta Bertasbih, 2009), *Mom Wants to Do the Pilgrimage* (Emak Ingin Naik Haji, 2009), *The Enlightener* (Sang Pencerah, 2010) or *Khalifah* (2010) have been released. While not all of these films did well at the box office, it is safe to say that a new subgenre in Indonesian cinema has emerged.

This essay discusses the correlation and struggle between the two motives behind making these types of religious films: on the one hand, the propagation of religion to as wide an audience as possible, and on the other hand the desire to make as much profit as possible. In this essay, I shall limit my discussion of mainstream Islamic cinema to the above five mainstream movies. However, I will start the discussion with an independently-distributed movie, *The Teacher/Preserver* (Sang Murabbi), that was released on a limited basis in October 2008.

While the essay’s title might appear provocative by confronting religion and market, I do not want to impose a moral agenda on these films or judge their artistic merits. Another important caveat is that labelling these movies as independent and mainstream respectively in relation to their distribution methods might suggest that the two sides are in clear-cut opposition. They are not, as the producer of Sang Murabbi is considering to release the film theatrically in order to recoup his cost.

My interest in this essay is to identify initial motives in each movie: whether it is religious propaganda or whether they were made merely for economic profit; and then relate these findings to the actual market performance. The Muslim majority in Indonesia is a significant potential market; therefore the production of Islamic (or at least Islamic-looking) movies is a potentially profitable endeavour. Moreover, I discuss how these movies succeed in fulfilling cinema’s function as public sphere, where social issues are addressed. Finally, I will discuss the narrative structure of these films vis-à-vis the narrative structure of non-religious mainstream movies.

### Identifying the Islamic Cinema in Indonesia

In the marketing of these religious movie (*or film religi*, as the Indonesian entertainment news calls this important new subgenre), their religious character has been stressed in promotional tools such as posters and trailers. Their titles usually stem from religious terminology to further emphasize their religious subject matter. Posters of these films show the characters wearing religious attire and posing as in prayer or the like, and trailers also play on the religious character of those movies. In their *mise-en-scène*, the films also emphasize their religious subject matter: some of the characters consistently wear religious costumes and the actors act according
Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia

91
to religious protocols. In some cases, these films even begin or end (or both) with well-known clerics preaching.

The emergence of these movies is significant considering the role of cinema in newly democratic Indonesia. Throughout modern history, authorities in Indonesia tackled religious issues carefully. In the colonial period, the Dutch got the fiercest opposition from certain religious figures, resulting in different policies on Islamic religious life. Soekarno had his biggest problem in harmonizing the leftists and the religious powers. Learning from history, Soeharto crushed communism and was also harsh to the outward expression of religion. Therefore, filmmakers were extra careful when dealing with religious topics. In that sense, the political past of Indonesia is not yet over in the film industry: Despite the democratic revolution of 1998, contemporary filmmakers mostly still shy away from controversial topics. Reasons for this include the trauma of long government control and a market-oriented distribution system. Critics like Widodo have pointed out that the reform process outside the film sphere runs smoother, and Indonesians now enjoy more freedom in political, cultural, and religious expression. The country has a freer press, commercial television and radio stations, liberal as well as deeply conservative religious books. Islamic popular culture grows in correspondence with the Islamic political movement and lifestyle, and spreads especially in among the middle class and the educated urban elite.

When defining what religious cinema is, most critics focus on visual representation. However, in a public discussion about the trend towards a Muslim cinema in Indonesia, film critic Eric Sasono and film scholar Ekky Imanjaya pointed to problems with this definition. Stunned by Fitna (2008), a short anti-Islamic polemic by Dutch politician Geert Wilders, that depicts Islam as a religion of terror by pointing to recent examples of Islamist terrorism, both experts argued that an Islamic movie must be more than a “representation of Muslims practicing their faith.” Imanjaya proposes a concept he calls “prophetic film,” which brings viewers to righteousness, makes them avoid evil, and develops the viewer’s faith in God in an Islamic way. Sasono on the other hand argued in his lecture that an “Islamic cinema” must bring positive sentiments to Islam. He suggested that these sentiments can be achieved by two means. The first is through propagating the teachings of Islam that will give the viewer a better understanding of the religion. The second is through audiences’ emotional connection to Islamic values represented in character development. In her book, Religion and Film: An Introduction, Melanie J. Wright seems to agree with this approach, as she refers to both narrative and visual aspects as well as audience’s interpretation in defining a film as “religious movie.”

However, how is one to appraise the character development in a movie? The prominent Indonesian literature critic Goenawan Mohammad provides a way when he sets apart two main tendencies in Indonesian Islamic literature: one is to put religious life as setting (parallel with the common definitions of religious
Tito Imanda

cinema) and the other is to offer a religious solution to the plot conflict. I will return to the crucial point of the plot conflicts and what solutions are offered later in this essay.

Islam in Film before Political Reform: Suspicious to the Authorities

Before I resume the discussion of the narrative structure of the new Indonesian film religi, it is important to provide a brief history and some context of Islamic representations in Indonesian cinema. Even in the colonial time, the Muslim majority has been seen as a potential threat by the ruling class, and Muslim leaders have been forced to accommodate the political interests of the authorities. Thus, it was a long time after the first Indonesian feature film in 1926 that a movie attempted a representation of Islam. It wasn’t until the Soekarno era (1945–1967) that religious movies became possible at all in Indonesian cinema.

In this period, filmmakers and artists were discouraged from creating works that included strong political or cultural propaganda, since Soekarno emphasized his concept of harmonious leadership under the label of NASAKOM, short for Nasionalis-Agama-Komunis, the peaceful coexistence of nationalist, religious, and communist elements of the country. However, the conflict between these three sectors escalated in the early 1960s, and this took its toll on the arts, as artists and filmmakers started to show their true colors in their works. Khrisna Sen points to the example of the 1961 movie Burning Steel (Baja Membara) by Bachtiar Siagian that showed Islam in a positive light. Ironically, Siagian was a member of LEKRA, an artist group affiliated with the Communist Party, the natural opponent of Islamic power. The movie indeed was harshly criticized by some leaders of the communist party.

In 1964, Djamaluddin Malik produced two films about the hajj pilgrimage: Asrul Sani’s Taubid (meaning literally “God’s singleness” in Arabic) and Misbach Yusa Biran’s semi documentary Abraham’s Calling (Panggilan Nabi Ibrahim). Both films were meant to propagate Islamic values, specifically for the hajj ritual, and took great pains in informing potential travellers about the necessary steps and the process of the trip. The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Religion were both involved in the production of Taubid, and the movie explicitly discusses issues of spirituality among Indonesian pilgrims in Mecca. The involvement of government institutions might be a reason that Taubid was so controversial. The movie sparked the rivalry between members of LEKRA and LESBUMI, another artist group headed by Djamaluddin Malik, affiliated with the biggest Muslim party, Nahdlatul Ulama.

After Soeharto came to power in 1967, the control of movie production was drastically tightened. Officials popularized the term SARA that stands for suku (ethnic group), agama (religion), ras (race), and antar golongan (inter-social
groups). The term was used to remind people not to publicly comment on anything related to these social groups to assure stability. Ironically, the government used religious symbols to propagate their own messages. In 1979, with support from the ruling political party, filmmaker Ami Priono exploited preacher characters to promote government programs in *Dr Siti Pertiwi Returns to the Village* (Dr. Siti Pertiwi Kembali Ke Desa). Later, a film version of an Islamic novel *Under the Shield of the Kaaba* (Di Bawah Lindungan Ka’bah, 1980) was withheld from release for a year before the 1981 elections due to concerns that spectators might give their votes to a Muslim opposition party. In the same year, a proposal for another film, *Cleric War* (Perang Padri), was denied by the Censorship Board under recommendation of the Department of Education and Culture. The movie was based on the history of the struggle of religious leaders against the Dutch colonial rulers, and the officials believed that the storyline—that emphasizes the conflict between the clerics at one side and the Dutch allied with traditional leaders on the other side—was too sensitive.

In 1970s, a young director named Chairul Umam and scriptwriter Asrul Sani teamed up. After a successful comedy in 1975, they produced *The Great Comfort* (Al Kautsar) in 1977, and later in 1982 *A Bridge As Wide As A Hair Divided Into Seven* (Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh). Both films chose young clerics as heroes who resist traditional leadership that takes advantage of credulous mass. Both films, however, were not marketed specifically to the Muslim audience.

During the same time, a popular folk singer named Rhoma Irama was well known for giving his songs and movies, most of them action films, an Islamic bent. He was put on a government blacklist in the 1980s for refusing to support Soeharto’s political party, and was banned from the government-operated television station that had a broadcast monopoly then. This did not really affect his popularity though. When controls were relaxed under pressure for openness and transparency in the early 1990s, the performer Rhoma Irama, director Chairul Umam, and scriptwriter Asrul Sani teamed up with the famous cleric Zainuddin MZ to produce a film called *Tone and Commune* (Nada dan Dakwah) in 1991. This film was specifically marketed to Muslims with a similar marketing model as the contemporary Islamic films, considering the specific Islamic term in the title, the leading actress wearing a Muslim scarf on the poster, and the appearance of a leading religious figure in the movie. The film explores the conflict between the need to develop the economy and to keep religious faith. While the film did not do well at the box office, critic JB Kristanto believes that this is the best Rhoma Irama movie. Indeed it was nominated for and won several awards.

There are also several films on the history of Islam in Java: *Nine Saints/Preacher Pioneers* (Wali Songo, 1985), *Sunan Kalijago* (1983), *Sunan Gunung Jati* (1985), *Sunan Kalijogo VS Syech Sitijenar* (1985), and Chairul Umam’s *Fatahillah* (1997), all of which are movies about the saints who give these films their titles.
these movies are not primarily religious films, but focus on recreating history and historic legends in the drama-action genre, a popular choice especially in the mid-1980s. Moreover, during the 1980s many action and horror movies starred clerics or pious characters that eventually became a staple of these genres. These characters were needed to support the black and white characterizations in these movies, but they were always kept apolitical to avoid unnecessary interest from Soeharto’s censorship board.

**After Political Reform: Under Market Control**

The Indonesian cinema was in a bad state after the import of Hollywood and Hong Kong movies was reintroduced in 1992. After more than one hundred films in 1989 and 1990, the production number dropped to sixty-one in 1991, dropped again to about thirty films a year from 1991 to 1997, and fell drastically to only four movies both in 1998 and 1999. Beginning in the early 1990s, the old guard of the film industry moved on to produce made-for-television films. After the political reform in 1998, a new generation of younger filmmakers tried to rebuild the industry from scratch. The change in the political situation in the post-Reformasi period, a new distribution system, and market resistance to local films were among the factors that shaped the Indonesian film industry in the last couple of years. As the film industry started to grow again in the early 2000s, old players jumped back into film business, and these producers are continuously looking for exploitable patterns in audience preference. In 2007 local feature film production was back to seventy titles per year, most of them horror movies and sex comedies, the two genres that are virtually guaranteed to make a profit in Indonesia.

The new political freedom in the post-Reformasi period enabled the Islamic movement to grow among middle-class-educated-urban Indonesians, and many of these people are becoming loyal consumers of Islamic popular culture. The first movie that seriously tried to cater to this new market was the romantic comedy *Doomsday is Approaching* (Kiamat Sudah Dekat, 2003). It was produced and directed by the veteran actor Deddy Mizwar, who also played a supporting role as the cleric father of the female character. Mizwar was popular for playing the Sufi teacher Kalijogo in the aforementioned 1980s action movies *Sunan Kalijogo* (1983) and *Sunan Kalijogo vs Syech Sitijenar* (1985). With his production company Mizwar has targeted the Muslim market with a number of television series. He has also assumed an image as a pious Muslim by continuously playing clerics in those series, and he has claimed that making movies is part of his prayer. *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* was the first film that Mizwar produced and directed, but in 2003 the market was apparently not ready for religious themes in a movie. (In 2007, Mizwar finally got about 1.3 million viewers for his 1980s comedy *Nagabonar*, a movie devoid of
any religious subject matter.30 In February, 2009, Mizwar proclaimed his candidacy for the 2009 presidency, but was not nominated due to the lack of support.)

Not until five years later, was another film with Islam representation released: *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* was watched by more than four million viewers in May 2008. It is one of the first feature films of the production company MD Entertainment, which was formed in 2003 and makes most of its profit from producing television series. The producer, Manooj Punjabi, is of South Asian origin and not a Muslim. The movie is directed by Hanung Bramantyo, a self-proclaimed secular filmmaker, and written by his old scriptwriter partner, Salman Aristo, and Aristo’s wife, Ginatri S. Noer. The story is based on the successful religious novel written by an Al Azhar University graduate, Habiburahman El-Shirazy. The fact that it was based on such a popular book made *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* a long anticipated movie, especially within middle class Muslim societies.

When the film’s popularity reached a certain point, even Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, claimed that he was crying during the screening: “Back then I shed my tears repeatedly, and my wife did so even more. The movie is great, the message is clear.”31 Before him, his Vice President, a former president, and other politicians, especially from Muslim-related parties, watched the movie and got a lot of attention from the media.32 Since the movie was incidentally released at the same time with the *Fitna* controversy, many stated that the movie indeed had given a more positive image of Islam.

Din Sjamsuddin, head of one of the biggest Islamic organizations *Muhammadiah* and another aspiring, yet ultimatively unsuccessful, candidate for the 2009 presidency, claims that *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* spreads the message of love and peace.33 *Muhammadiah* was involved in the production in Cairo and Jakarta,34 and Sjamsuddin himself has been involved as advisor since the pre-production stage.35 Some sources are convinced that he is accountable for the movie’s quick popularity, as he has the power to send groups of Koranic chanting groups from Muhammadiah’s mosques across the country to go and see the movie. Haryadi argues, that religious housewives, the Koran chanting groups’ main members, are not regular moviegoers, but a perfect target for this genre. Sjamsuddin’s publicity started mouth-to-mouth promotion among similar groups from other mosques.36

Just after *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* hit the box office, *Kun Fayakuun* was released on April 17, 2008. The initiator, the famous cleric Yusuf Mansur, claimed that the movie was planned before the entire craze about Islamic cinema began. He aimed to get 1.2 million viewers,37 a seemingly “rational” target compared to *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, but that proved hard to fulfil. Therefore Mansur worked hard to create a situation similar to *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, including inviting politicians from an Islamic party to attend. He also took the main casts and crews to the presidential palace and asked the President himself to watch the movie. Unfortunately the party
he invited is not the most popular, and while the President was willing to meet
the whole cast even interrupting a cabinet meeting,\textsuperscript{38} there was no evidence that
the President actually watched the movie. In late February 2009, Yusuf Mansur
announced that he will run for the 2014 presidency.

Then \textit{Mengaku Rasul} appeared. It was produced by Starvision, an old film
company that is led by another producer of South Asian descent, Chand Parvez.
On many occasions he keeps reminding people that his ancestors are Pakistani,
not Indian, like other producers of South Asian descent in Indonesia. He chose
Helfi CH Kardif, a filmmaker with experience in making thrillers and mysteries, to
helm the movie. The narrative is closer to the mystery genre than drama, but to give
the movie a more Islamic appeal, two different clerics open and close the film with
sermons about the danger of people claiming to be new prophets. The movie sur-
vived in the theaters for several weeks due to its perfect timing, coming at the peak
of the controversy around the \textit{Ahmadiyah} group in Indonesia, a multi-national
Muslim organization whose spiritual leader who claimed to be a new prophet.

The next Islamic movie was \textit{Syahadat Cinta} in August 2008. This film was
adapted from an Islamic novel of the same name. However, unlike \textit{Ayat-Ayat Cinta},
the production process was rushed, probably because the decision to produce the
film was made just after the success of \textit{Ayat-Ayat Cinta}. Surely, this suspiciously
speedy process affected the quality of the movie, and the adaptation process from
the extensive novel to the film mangled the message of the book. The story ends
with the protagonist leaving and criticizing the traditional institution of Islamic
education. However, the love story part dominates the narrative. There are too
many characters, and the subplots are muddled. The conversion scenes are not
sensitive, strengthening the impression that Islam is above other religions. Hidden
beneath the love triangle is a story of a personal quest for spirituality within Islam.

At the same time when all these commercial Islamic films came out, a film
was released in October 2008 in Indonesia that can be considered as an indepen-
dent Islamic movie: a long feature biopic about the late charismatic cleric Rahmat
Abdullah, \textit{The Teacher} (\textit{Sang Murabbi}) that has been circulated widely among
the members of a popular Islamic political party called \textit{Partai Keadilan Sejahtera}
(PKS—Justice Prosperous Party). PKS is a growing political party with fanati-
cal members consisting mainly of middle class Muslims. The party recruits its
members from religious university students and alumni, and its steadily growing
numbers made them one of the most serious competitors in this 2009 general elec-
tion. The film itself did not utilize any commercial cinema chain for its distribu-
tion and was only launched publicly at a local Muslim trade fair in Jakarta. Instead,
the producer/director Zul Ardhia began screening the movie at party conventions
or other Islamic events. Many of the film’s fans believe that this independent film
represents Islam much better than the commercial ones. This view is strengthened
by the fact that \textit{Sang Murabbi} has been only screened during Islamic trade fairs
or party gatherings, that conduct all affairs in “proper” Islamic ways—unlike the “sinful” conventional cinemas, where men and women sit next to each other in a dark room—according to the filmmaker’s interpretation.

Despite telling the life history of one of the party’s founding fathers, and thereby telling the history of the party itself, Ardhia did not get his budget from PKS. As Ardhia explained in my interview with him, he and his Majelis Budaya Rakyat (People’s Cultural Council) collected the funding from sympathizers and promised to treat the money as business investment. With his long portfolio in theater and television program production, it was not that hard for him to reach his target. Ardhia used a digital betacam camera, thus the production cost was much lower than in mainstream cinema. Surely, the fact that many of the actors (including several long standing female stars, who wear headscarves in real life and crew members were not asking much for this kind of project helped a lot. To get the funding back, he depends heavily on the selling of the film’s DVD and VCD copies. The price of a copy is between $3 to $5 each, and in his calculations, the break-even point would be reached when 30,000 VCD/DVD copies—that Ardhia burned himself—were sold.

Despite some resentment of the “sinful” medium, the film gained popularity quickly and the VCD/DVD copies sold very fast. Orders come from all over the archipelago and even from abroad, from wherever PKS students are studying. In December 2008, Ardhia declared that it was a matter of days before he would reach his financial target. In their trips throughout Indonesia, many of PKS leaders were asked questions from supporters of the movie. This situation, together with the fact that Ardhia has met or has been contacted by so many fans who did not actually buy a copy, let him to the estimate that one copy was viewed by at least ten people. Thus, he believes that his film has the ability to overcome the challenge of releasing the film in commercial theater chains. Right now Ardhia is thinking about making an extended version that would appeal to viewers who are not members of the PKS, as well as preparing a proposal for special male and female separated seating arrangements in conventional theaters.

Plot Structures

As mentioned above, I believe that a movie that is considered as an Islamic film should use Islamic values as solutions to the plot problems, and these values should be reflected in the main characters’ development. The identification process is easier when the movie adopts “the three acts” narrative structure of storytelling, one of the basic rules in modern scriptwriting that can be traced back to Aristotle’s Poetics. Adopted in many films, it leads to a conventional narrative that works especially well for market-oriented films. This structure is based on the assumption that a dramatic story consists of three parts: A beginning that sets up the time
and place, the characters, and the source of the problem; a middle part in which the problem leads to confrontation, and an end where the conflict is resolved. Of course, not all movies adopt “the three acts” structure, even some of the most successful ones, but this structure is obviously adopted in five of the six films I am discussing here. When a movie does not deploy the “three acts” structure in its plot, I shall keep on identifying any problem, solution, and character development that plays a role in the movie.

**Kiamat Sudah Dekat.** **Background:** Fandy (Andre Stinky), an American-born rocker (the actor is the singer of a rock group in real life), meets and falls in love with Sarah (Ayu Pratiwi), a pretty girl with a headscarf, the daughter of cleric Romli (Deddy Mizwar). **Problem:** Sarah has been matched with a young man who studies in Cairo. Romli cannot let his daughter get together with Fandy, a “punk” who does not know anything about religion. However, Fandy’s persistence makes Romli willing to give him conditions: he has to be able to perform praying and Koran chanting. **Solution:** After a long and serious effort of learning, Fandy is finally able to fulfill the requirements and is allowed to marry Sarah.
*Ayat-Ayat Cinta* has three problem-solution plots:

**Plot 1. Background:** Fahri (Fedi Nuril) is an Indonesian graduate student at the famous Al Azhar University, Cairo. His busy schedule at the campus, mosque, and student center made him popular, and several women are interested in him. **Problem:** Fahri is confused when trying to decide whom to marry. He meets Aisha (Rianti Cartwright), a woman who wears a hijab, on the subway train. He defends her for giving her seat to an American woman while other passengers are criticizing her. **Solution:** Fahri picks Aisha who turns out to be a sophisticated German woman from a very wealthy German-Turkish family.

**Plot 2. Background:** Fahri’s marriage breaks the hearts of other women around him. **Problem:** One of the women, Noura (Sazkia Mecca) accuses Fahri of raping her. Fahri is arrested and faces a court unsympathetic to a foreign student. Maria (Carissa Putri), a Coptic Christian neighbor and another admirer of Fahri, is the only person who can testify about what really happened between Fahri and Noura, but the broken-hearted woman is ill. Finding her in a local hospital, Aisha...
learns from the doctor that Maria is not emotionally but physically ill. **Solution:** Aisha convinces Fahri to marry Maria to heal her so she can testify. Maria testifies to free Fahri, sending Noura’s stepfather, the real rapist, to jail.

But then there is another problem, **Plot 3. Background:** Fahri, Aisha, and Maria now live together in one house. **Problem:** How to be married to two women and be perfectly fair. After a while Fahri feels that the situation is more of a burden than a joy. **Solution:** When the problem escalates, Maria falls sick and dies at the end. Thus, Fahri and Aisha live happily ever after.

**Kun Fayakuun. Background:** Ardan (Agus Kuncoro) is a door-to-door mirror salesman, who wants to open his own shop. Living a simple life, he is struggling patiently and sincerely, facing obstacles in his effort to make a better life for his family. He even decides to carry out fasting while working. **Problem:** Ardan is trapped in a school gang fight and ends up with all of his mirrors broken. His faith is shaken. **Solution:** Ardan meets a cleric who strengthens his faith again, stressing the importance of praying, fasting, and giving alms. Ardan’s wife (Dessy Ratnasari) and two kids support him. Suddenly the family encounters the former boyfriend of

![DVD cover of Kun Fayakuun (2008)](image)

**Figure 7.3** DVD cover of *Kun Fayakuun* (2008)
Ardan’s wife who feels bad about the way he treated her in the past. When he offers help, Ardan asks him to invest in his mirror stall.

Mengaku Rasul. Background: Rianti (Jian Batari) is in conflict with her parents because of her relationship with the unemployed Ajie (Alblen). Rianti runs away from home, and to ease her mind goes to a religious school run by Guru Samir (Ray Sahetapy) and Kyai Baihaqi. Problem: Ajie goes to the place and tries to bring Rianti home, but Rianti is a changed woman and does not want to go home. Ajie discovers unsettling things about the dorm. A female student claims that she got pregnant by Guru Samir, who goes on to declare himself a prophet. Solution: Rianti realizes that Guru Samir is a fraud and decides to kill him herself on their wedding night. It turns out that Guru Samir and Kiyai Baihaqi are twins who exchange roles from time to time.

Syahadat Cinta has two repetitive problem-solution plots:

Plot 1. Background: Iqbal (Arif Rahman) is a city slicker who cannot pray or chant the Koran. When he accidentally hurts his mother, he decides to become closer to God. He does so by going to a religious school under Kyai Siddiq (Muchtar Sum). Problem: During the next two months Siddiq only asks Iqbal to get water from the lake. Upset, Iqbal expresses his anger and runs away to a nearby town. Solution: Iqbal decides to stay at a house owned by Jamilah (Donna Harun), a garbage scavenger who lives there with her son and daughter. The family teaches Iqbal how to pray and chant the Koran.

Plot 2. Background: After almost getting kicked out by neighbors accusing him of living immorally with Jamilah, Iqbal is arrested by police who think he is a terrorist. Soon the police find the real terrorist and release Iqbal. The incident raises Iqbal’s reputation; suddenly neighbors ask him for lessons in religion, and people from the Kyai Siddiq religious school come and ask him to come back. Problem: He goes back, but it turns out he finds himself not fitting the school’s rules again. Solution: This time, other students ask him to leave, only to make Iqbal realize that he can learn Islam better outside. Kyai Siddiq encourages him to do so, as if confirming one of Iqbal’s friends who said that he might learn more about Islam from Iqbal and the everyday world than from Kyai Siddiq and his school.

Meanwhile, Sang Murrabi covers almost the entire adult life span of Rahmat Abdullah, the real-life preacher that the movie portrays. The plot does not utilize the “three acts” structure and character development evolves along with the hero’s aging process. If there are three parts of the narrative, they are not structured as a dramatic plot but a way to group fragments of events that narrate the background and influences that lead him to become a PKS founding father. The first tells the
story of Abdullah in his twenties as a highly spirited Muslim student. The second focuses on his late thirties and early forties, when he sets himself up as a cleric. The third tells the story of Abdullah in his fifties and sixties when he contributes to the PKS establishment. If the narration has a need to fulfill, it is about making the community better according to Islamic teaching, a problem that shadows Abdullah’s struggle. The filmmakers use the problem as the backdrop to the film’s narrative. It is about the difficulty in spreading God’s word—a challenge that exists at the beginning of the movie and remains even after Abdullah’s death. We can see the creation of the PKS creation as a solution, but one that has yet to overcome problems. The film ends on a gloomy note, showing the actual footage of Abdullah’s funeral and statements from some PKS leaders about Abdullah’s life and struggle.

**Discussion**

From the comparison above, we can see that all the mainstream films have the “three acts” plots, while *Sang Murrabi* does not subscribe to any formulaic narrative structure. The film simply represents the faith and struggle of Rahmat Abdullah. The plot has no dramatic problem that requires a solution at the end, as the film treats the problem in narrative as a background to the hero’s struggle, from the start to the end. This structure also makes my attempt to distinguish character development harder, because clearly from the beginning Abdullah has specific ideals and goals and does not arrive at these principles by way of a personal crisis. There is
no character development throughout the film; we only learn about the protagonist (his network, students, economy, and a wife) and how he eventually focuses increasingly on practical politics. While all mainstream films have plots with a happy ending, \textit{Sang Murrabi} ends on a sad note.

These facts show that \textit{Sang Murrabi} has no interest in delivering an entertaining story. These choices might not be the most popular, but seem to work for the specific target market that the filmmakers aimed at. Furthermore, the decision to keep the film in alternative distribution is an indication that the filmmakers have no intention to compromise anything for profit or mass popularity. However, there is a question about effectiveness: Does the movie successfully assert Islamic ideals, while it lacks a narrative problem, a solution, or character development? I believe that the story of Abdullah's struggle is most effective in the service of the political goals of the PKS. Telling a story of the Islamic political struggle in modern Indonesia could be an effective way to educate potential new PKS members and sympathizers, and it is surely a way to let the more senior members to affirm their political beliefs.

Meanwhile, the need to entertain is a given for the Islamic mainstream movies discussed above, but at times it mars the aim of propagating Islamism. There are only three mainstream films that try to offer solutions to the main narrative problem that are in line with the Koran. In any case, the narrative problems in these movies are limited to the issues that work well with a mainstream audience: \textit{Kiamat Sudah Dekat} is about teenage love, \textit{Kun Fayakuun} is about the need to fulfill economic needs, while \textit{Syahadat Cinta} questions traditional ways of studying religion. As for the other two, the record breaker \textit{Ayat-Ayat Cinta} stays away from the original novel's quest for spirituality, and focuses on the melodrama. \textit{Mengaku Rasul} takes a quite unique direction: it develops a thriller/mystery plot (which is similar to the plot of the 2007 Hollywood film \textit{The Prestige}) and frames it in a local religious setting.

When these movies fail to provide more significant problems to be solved in Islamic ways, or even fail to provide Islamic solutions at all, producers make sure that the films have enough Islamic symbols to be called \textit{film religi}. Islamic terminology informs the titles, Muslim costumes are worn by main characters, Islamic vocabulary or verses from the Koran appear in the dialog and in some cases, the producers even use homilies by clerics to frame the narrative. The commercial success proves these strategies right, as all these films stayed in the theaters for at least three weeks—a very good outcome for a local film. In addition to this, the films received good reviews. This new commercial subgenre seems bound to stay, and new films are coming out in surprisingly short intervals, more recently every two months. These films might not teach the new Muslim middle class anything new about Islam, but it gives the constituent of this market—that is in the millions—a chance to confirm their beliefs, values, and morals in the public sphere.
While Sang Murrabi clearly serves a political agenda, there are interesting questions regarding these mainstream movies' ability to serve the producers’ (or quasi-producers’) political endeavors. Deddy Mizwar, Din Sjamsuddin, and Yusuf Mansur definitely have longer work resumés than these movies alone, but the rebirth of Islamic cinema in the new sphere of Muslim popular culture, no matter how superficial, is still considered significant. In the 2009 general election, the Islamic parties got only less than 20 percent of the vote. Learning from the long history of Indonesian swing voters, we cannot use the result to predict the future of Islamic parties or certain Islamic figures in the Indonesian politics. On the other hand, the prospect of an Islamic popular culture still looks promising. New films and television series with a more Islamic look are still being produced. There are also interesting questions about Sang Murrabi and the challenge to conquer commercial cinema. PKS supporters—fanatical, middle class young Muslims in urban areas—are supposed to be more media-savvy than housewives from Koranic chanting groups. If the makers of Sang Murrabi could overcome a film theater’s ideological constraints and release their movie theatrically, this Islamic independent movie just might become the next box office success.
Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia

Aryo Danusiri’s *Lukas’ Moment*

David Hanan

Curiously, we both have the same experience of many people asking us, “Why didn’t you interview the military? The government? Why only the victims?” And my answer is the same as Tino’s, that these films are dedicated to the minority, the powerless people.

—Aryo Danusiri ¹

In the USA and in Europe in the 1960s there appeared a new movement in documentary, taking various forms and with a variety of different names. In the USA the movement commenced with *Primary* (1960), a film that followed chronologically John Kennedy’s election campaign. Albert Maysles, who was one of the cameramen who worked on *Primary*, and later made *Salesman* (1968), called the movement “Direct Cinema.” In France in 1960 there emerged a somewhat different but related movement, known as “Cinema Verité,” with Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronique d’un Été*, a self conscious ethnology of life in contemporary Paris, noted for provoking situations with its human subjects, and asking questions about the kind of reality created by documentary. The anthropologist Rouch had, earlier on, made participatory fiction-documentary films with African subjects, films such as *Jaguar* (1955) and *Moi, Un Noir* (1958), using in both cases a 16mm camera and post-synch commentary from his subjects. The Direct Cinema and Cinema Verité films made use of light portable cameras and portable sound-synch tape recorders to produce documentaries that followed stories using long takes, direct sound, no voice-over or “voice-of-god” narrator of any kind, creating reality effects of extraordinary immediacy, based in slices of real time, and often a sense of minimal intervention by the filmmaker. Frequently they do not even use artificially produced inter-titles providing orientation, this being provided as far as possible through pro-filmic material only. It was to highlight this effect of immediacy that Albert Maysles used the term “Direct Cinema.”

The Direct Cinema movement had some notable achievements in the 1960s, for example, *Don’t Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1965), a record of a tour of England by the young Bob Dylan, at that time just coming into the height of his
fame, the film showing his capacity to talk back to an envious and blandly critical English and American media. Also emerging in the 1960s was one of the most persistent exponents of this kind of documentary, Fred Wiseman, originally trained as a lawyer, who made remarkable portraits of the interface between American institutions—a hospital, a juvenile court, a welfare agency, to name a few—and their clients, providing invaluable portraits of rarely documented aspects of the USA. Wiseman, whose films were often funded by American Public Television (PBS), rejects the term “Cinema Verité,” insisting that his films were not unmediated truth, the large amount of material he shot being edited in such a way as to bring out a dramatic structure. In fact Rouch and Morin had derived their term “Cinema Verité” (Cinema Truth) from the Russian filmmaker, Dziga Vertov, who believed the “camera eye” to be scientific, but who foregrounded the filmmaking process in his films. *Chronique d’un Été* emulates a reflexivity about the filmmaking process found in Vertov, but rarely engaged with by exponents of Direct Cinema. 

Rouch and Morin were also prepared to interview their subjects, to include montages in their film, and to preview and discuss their footage on screen with their participants. The varieties of this new kind of documentary of indirect address are almost as varied as the number of the filmmakers using this framework.

Another term for these broad developments, which recognizes its basic approaches, using long takes and no voice-over, is “observational documentary.” This is the preferred term used by Indonesian filmmaker Aryo Danusiri for his two most recent documentary films, *Lukas Moment* (2005) and *Playing Between Elephants* (2007). In this essay I will explore the first of these two films, *Lukas’ Moment*, a film made in Merauke in the province of West Papua. This essay focuses on *Lukas’ Moment* for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, apart from a small number of films by some very distinguished filmmakers (and some student work), Indonesian cinema is singularly lacking in experimentation in documentary form and has never before produced a documentary of indirect address. Secondly, the issue of the absence of West Papuans in the Indonesian media, except as stereotypes, is recognized as one of the most important challenges facing the Indonesian media, an issue recognized in the mid-1980s by the great Indonesian director of feature films Teguh Karya, when he made a feature film, *Ibunda*, which was partly about racism towards West Papuans living in Jakarta. This essay will situate Danusiri’s first work of observational cinema, *Lukas’ Moment*, in the context of the work of a number of key filmmakers who pioneered these interrelated documentary movements, among them, Jean Rouch and Frederick Wiseman, and an Australian documentary collaboration with Aboriginal people made in 1981, *Two Laws*.

A chronological sketch of the history of documentary making in Indonesia from the beginning of the twentieth century has been provided by Gotot Prakosa. Documentaries were mainly made in the Dutch East Indies by Dutchmen, and they appear to have been made for a home audience in Holland to introduce them
to their “colonial possessions,” and to record cultures, usually within an impersonal colonial representational framework characterized by distance of framing and little emotional closeness to their subjects. Only one indigenous Indonesian is listed as having made a documentary film for the Dutch, R. M. Soetarto, in 1939. Some Dutch documentaries were made for Indonesian audiences, but according to one reputable source, these films came to be known as “Film Pes” (Plague Films) because the earliest of them dealt so frequently with issues of hygiene and disease prevention. The Japanese occupation saw the production of information and propaganda films produced by the Japanese to support the war effort and the integration of the Indonesian people into their hoped for “Greater Asia Co-prosperity Sphere”, and they developed portable projection equipment and screens to take these films into villages.

Documentaries were made in Indonesia by Indonesians from the early independence period on. There is one notable documentary record (Pandit Nehru Visits Indonesia), running for more than an hour, of an historic visit by Indian Prime Minister Nehru to Indonesia, in June 1950, only six months after Indonesia achieved independence, in which Nehru is shown traveling through Java and Bali, accompanied by Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno. This film shows remarkable footage of a people newly liberated from colonialism. But even this was a state-funded documentary, as were most documentaries made in Indonesia over the next 50 years. In the 1970s there did develop a tradition of experimental documentaries, from within the Film School at the Jakarta Institute of the Arts, and anthropologist, Hadi Purnomo, shooting on 8mm made films that engaged politically with issues such as land dispossession.

However, leading contemporary Indonesian filmmaker, Garin Nugroho, who has made prize-winning documentaries as well as features, has described the kinds of documentaries that most people got to see in Indonesia—particularly in the Soeharto New Order period—as mainly propaganda, either made by the state or depicting Indonesia in ways that satisfied state ideologies. In the New Order period 90 percent of documentaries were government propaganda, according to Nugroho. They were usually funded by a ministry, and they celebrated developmental projects initiated by a ministry (e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture) and exhorted people (often from the villages) to join in and support them, frequently presenting the minister himself as a key protagonist. Another documentary type was the ethnographic documentary that presented a portrait of a lesser known ethnic group, showing examples of their rituals or arts, but generally at the same time suggesting that they were backward recipients of the paternalism of the state and had little engagement with modern Indonesia.

All of these were constructed in what Bill Nichols terms as “expository documentary”: a range of material gathered together and structured by the discourses of the filmmaker under the mask of objectivity, using a persuasively authoritative
voice-over to do so. Nugroho himself combated these stereotypes in a number of key works from the early 1990s on. He dealt with marginal people who were clearly not beneficiaries of the state (a cleaner of polluted rivers in Jakarta; street kids in Yogyakarta; those calling for independence in West Papua); he used the voice-overs of the protagonist himself as a way of organizing his material, as in Water and Romi (Air dan Romi, 1991), or his own voice expressing his own views clearly marked as subjective expression, as in his essay film My Family, My Films and My Nation (1998); he did protracted interviews with his marginal subjects, as in Kancil's Story about Independence (Dongeng Kancil Tentang Kemerdekaan, 1995); he invited independent political expression from dissidents, as in Icon: A Cultural Map (Aikon: Sebuah Peta Budaya, 2002), where the dissidents were West Papuans calling for independence.7

Another innovator in documentary in Indonesia is Aryo Danusiri. Danusiri established himself as an independent filmmaker with his first film, Village Goat Takes the Beating (Kameng Gampoeng Nyang Keunong Geulawa, 1999). Shot in the troubled province of Aceh in September 1999, only sixteen months after Soeharto was forced to step down as president, and only a month after President Habibie ordered a partial withdrawal of the army from the province, Village Goat Takes the Beating explores human rights abuses by the Indonesian army in Aceh during the period 1989 to 1999, a period known as the DOM period (Daerah Operasi Militer—Military Operation Area), a time when the Indonesian army’s presence in Aceh was reinforced in order to counter the influence of the separatist movement GAM (Gerekan Aceh Merdeka—Aceh Freedom Movement). In this film there are lengthy interviews with victims of torture by the army, and with relatives of the deceased or eyewitnesses to murder. Although Danusiri is a graduate in anthropology from the University of Indonesia, his first film, funded by the human rights organization, ELSAM, does not take a typically anthropological documentary approach: the hard hitting and audacious film is one of the first instances of investigative documentary made in Indonesia dealing with a particular set of crimes perpetrated by a powerful body which commanded much political support. In 2000 Danusiri made The Poet of Linge Homeland (Penyair Negeri Linge), a film portrait of the Acehnese didong poet, Ibrahim Kabir. (Didong is a dynamic oral cultural form specific to the Gayo Highlands of Central Aceh. It involves the competitive performance of poetry between two groups. Rather than simply being a recitation, a didong performance includes group chanting and singing of poetry, and group movement from a sitting position, and dance).8 Danurisi then returned to Aceh in late 2002 and early 2003 (only a few months before President Megawati ordered what in effect was the invasion of Aceh by the Indonesian army) to make Abrakadabra. This film examines the situation in Aceh that followed upon the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between GAM and the Indonesian army on December 9, 2002. In particular it investigated
the effectiveness of measures put in place by this agreement: the establishment in all districts of Joint Security Committees (JSC)—consisting of representatives of both the Indonesian army and of GAM—to set up Zones of Peace and to investigate infringements to the peace agreement. Danusiri has in fact pioneered the investigative current affairs documentary in Indonesia, dealing with issues, people, and regions that are below the horizon of the official media in Indonesia, because they are regarded by the media as topics that are too controversial, embarrassing, and even dangerous. The two most recent films by Danusiri are observational documentaries, the first ever made in Indonesia. Not even Garin Nugroho has tried his hand at observational documentaries.

Figure 8.1 Poster of Aryo Danusiri’s Village Goat Takes the Beating (1999)

The first of these films, the 60-minute documentary *Lukas’ Moment*, explores over a number of months the efforts of a young West Papuan student, working cooperatively with other indigenous students from his tribe in a group called *Mitra Mandiri* (Independent Partnership), to develop (as a way of subsidizing their education) a trading venture of their own in prawn fishing and marketing. The second, *Playing Between Elephants* (2007), running some 87 minutes, graphically shows, using footage shot intermittently over a twelve-month period, the complicated processes involved in rebuilding housing in the village of East Geunteng in Pidie, East Aceh, an area devastated in the tsunami of December 2004. Taking as its main focus the village head—the charismatic Geuchik Abdurrahman—the film provides perspectives on the complicated administrative and decision making processes and three-way negotiations (and conflicts) involved—between the village head and his clients, the villagers; between the village head and the sponsors and funders of the project, UN Habitat; and between the village head and the suppliers of materials and the builders.
As in much of Direct Cinema, Lukas’ Moment uses a minimal crew (in fact only Aryo Danusiri himself, recording both visuals and sound), and long takes, no voice-overs or non-diegetic music, and simply follows events, neither intervening nor organizing reconstructions of situations. While two inter-titles are used early in the film to establish the context, and superimposed titles are sometimes used to indicate new locations, the effect of the film is of a story unfolding chronologically in real time and space, an aspect of the film perhaps underlined by the title itself, Lukas’ Moment, the moment (or series of tense moments, often with no clear outcome) when Lukas defies the status quo and his own ignorance and limited experience, to see how far he can make change in his own environment and the economic environment of his fellow indigenous Papuans by committing their time and limited funds to the venture.

Lukas is an indigenous Papuan, a member of the Marind tribal people who have occupied this point along the coast for generations. He and others speak of him, simply, as a putera daerah (son of the region). With funding and encouragement from an NGO in Holland and its local representative, Ibu Esi, he has formed

![Poster of Aryo Danusiri’s The Poet of Linge Homeland (2000)](image)

Figure 8.2 Poster of Aryo Danusiri’s *The Poet of Linge Homeland* (2000)
a group consisting of upper high school students, like himself, who have begun
to catch prawns along the coast, and to sell them as a way of earning money to
pay for their education, the Dutch NGO paying the cost of the expensive nets.
Prawn fishing is dominated in this South Western part of West Papua, by non-
Papuan Indonesian transmigrants (i.e., migrants from other parts of Indonesia,
usually migrating within the framework of the government *Transmigrasi* policy),
here Bugis people originally from South Sulawesi, referred to in the film as “the
Daeng.” Many of the Marind people are employees of these Bugis people. It has
been Indonesian government’s policy to encourage transmigration to West Papua,
as a way of diluting the influence and ultimately the rights of the West Papuan
indigenous people.

Both the Dutch initiative and Aryo Danusiri’s film have a common purpose,
which is in different ways to support and understand the efforts of Papuans to
become economically equal by competing in trade with the more experienced trans-
migrants from wider Indonesia. It is well known that in much of West Papua, while
basic farming of primary produce is in the hands of the Papuans, transport and
more profitable aspects of trade are almost entirely in the hands of the Indonesian
transmigrants. The film is in keeping with Danusiri’s earlier concerns, voiced in his
2002 essay “Filming Indonesia: Between Mythical and Critical Multiculturalism,”
where he argues that the various Indonesian governments have developed out of
the national motto, *Binneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), a mythical multi-
culturalism based on frozen and static media stereotypes of regional cultures,
without any consideration for either the living cultures in these regions, nor for the
economic welfare of the inhabitants of these regions and their rights to their own
resources, dominated as they are by integration within an aggressive nation state,
particularly that constructed within the Soeharto New Order period, and in effect
surviving into the Post-Soeharto *Reformasi* period. In his essay Danusiri initially
writes of the situation in Aceh. He then goes on:

The same thing also happened in West Papua . . . In the Post-Soeharto
*Reformasi* era . . . [the] government strategically changed the name
‘Irian Jaya’ to Papua, which was also one of the demands of the Papuan
people, for Irian Jaya was a made-up name given by Sukarno. However
the change stopped there. The government even tried to divide the
province of Papua into two provinces, which would effectively mean
changing the imagined community of the Papuan people. Afterwards
the government neglected the many cases of human rights violations,
and forgot to reconsider the status of the Freeport Company (an
American mining company licenced by Soeharto) that had been taking
all the profit of the goldmines in the Central Papua mountains without
sharing any of its wealth with the Papuan people . . . This mythical mul-
ticulturalism, which tries to build an illusory diversity based on cultural
stereotypes, without addressing issues of justice and of genuine decentralization of economic and political power, just as was done by the New Order, is still in the air in Indonesia today.\textsuperscript{10}

In this same article Danusiri affirms that his project in the film \textit{The Poet of Linge Homeland} was to demonstrate in what ways Acehnese \textit{didong} performances were still part of the living Achenese culture, in contrast to the stereotypes of regional performances which were part of the TV schedules during the New Order. Regional cultural performances on Indonesian television almost never show the relation of the performance to a community, but present highlights of performance styles, as television numbers, often in a collage with performances from other regions, as collective symbols of the national ideology, “unity in diversity.”

Early scenes in \textit{Lukas’ Moment} show the process of prawn fishing along the coast, Lukas and his friends establishing rapport with the filmmaker by occasionally speaking to him, although Danusiri is not seen. The key narrative development of the film occurs at about 15 minutes, with the sudden initiative put forward by Lukas not only to sell the prawns at the local Merauke market, where the price might be even as low as 3000 rupiah, but to seek a market in Jayapura, the provincial capital, where the price may be as much as 20,000 rupiah per kilo, and perhaps to seek even wider markets such as Jakarta, where many of the prawns sold have been farmed, and where freshly caught large sea prawns can fetch Western prices. Lukas and his uncle take 30 kilos of prawns packed with ice to the airport, hoping they can get a reduced price for freight. There a surprising thing happens. After a period of considerable uncertainty and confusion, a local who is to board the plane offers to pay the cost of airfreighting the young man’s prawns to Jayapura. For Lukas the cost is prohibitive—360,000 rupiah (US$36) for the airfreight alone.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Lukas-Moment-scene.png}
\caption{Scene from \textit{Lukas’ Moment} (2005)}
\end{figure}
On his arrival at the airport Lukas appears not to know what the likely charge will be, but he hopes he can come to a special deal with airport officials, paying as little as 20,000 rupiah. But his contact at the airport fails to show up. The sudden appearance of the local is a godsend.

The second half of the film deals with the question of the effectiveness of the transaction. Information about the deal coming from Jayapura is scant. Eventually Lukas receives a bank transfer for 150,000 rupiah, not the 400,000 rupiah he expected. His hopes are dashed. He and his uncle question their NGO contact, Ibu Esi, going to her well-furnished home in the town, from where she phones Jayapura. It emerges that she believes the initiative to sell to Jayapura should have been organized with her mediation, given the contacts she has there and her knowledge of trade. But this was not done, and she remonstrates mildly with them. The Jayapura people claim they did not expect the delivery of prawns frozen with ice, and not having a freezer, distributed them quickly at a reduced price. Even though the Jayapura NGO does send further payments, in instalments, Lukas has not covered his costs for the prawns themselves, together with packing in ice. The film ends with Lukas acknowledging his partial failure and the need to retreat to selling only in the Merauke market, but with plans to develop his cooperative so it become important as an independent trading group, rather than its members simply becoming employees of others.

The good luck that intervenes, in the course of the film, is that a local who has made it, and sees himself better off than his indigenous Papuan brothers, decides to help at the airport. The local identity gives his name as Aloy Yopeng. Earlier he said to his traveling companion: “I think it is our responsibility to help the little brothers.” He sees Lukas as indigenous, from a local tribe, like himself, and sees him as typically economically disadvantaged and lacking in contacts and experience. Is Aloy’s deed also a deed done for the camera? This is a question that often excites audiences of the film (for example at the Jakarta International Film Festival in 2005), and one pertinent to the whole venture of Direct Cinema, and to Cinema Verité, a question about the effect of the presence of the camera, an issue posed by Rouch himself at the opening of *Chronique d’un Été*. The answer in the case of Yopeng is perhaps yes and no. But not for personal reputation. It emerges that the energetic and articulate Aloy Yopeng is the regional head of a youth training bureau in the Merauke area (as the subtitles translate it: “Head of the Basic Education Bureau”). The deed of goodwill is done because he has both a personal and a professional sense of responsibility, and a sense of solidarity with his own people, including probably the sense that it is his responsibility to give a good example.

This scene at the airport is a remarkable one, lasting just on 14 minutes, nearly a quarter of the running time of the film. In this scene, the camera follows moments of confusion as well as the moments of clarity and revelation, as the unpredicted events unroll in front of the camera, even as (at one important point)
children scream protractedly in the background with the departure of relatives to the waiting aircraft. This scene also shows the way in which Lukas, at an early stage in the course of making the film, had begun to understand Danusiri’s project and its significance, and to actively co-operate with him. There are numerous scenes, particularly when the prawn marketing venture appears in jeopardy after the dispatch of the prawns to Jayapura, where Lukas allows himself to work through his own difficult emotions in front of the camera. At the airport, too, after Yopeng has paid the cost of the freight, Danusiri holds the camera on Lukas’ surprised face, as Lukas, both astounded and moved, thinks through the many implications of what has just happened. Then Lukas says directly to Danusiri behind the camera: “Ask him why he did this.” “Ask him yourself,” is Danusiri’s response. It is then that Yopeng’s answer is provided. This is a form of participatory documentary as well as observational documentary, in which the protagonist, Lukas, understands the importance of both continuing to initiate his own project, and of letting things happen in front of the camera, as they occur. This role of the film’s central protagonist as initiator is something that Rouch had explored in his earlier films. But *Lukas’ Moment* has little of the reflexivity of *Chronique D’un Été*, and the main subject of Danusiri’s film is the consequences of actions, rather than existential questions of personal happiness, memory, and authenticity of performance that preoccupy *Chronique d’un Été*.

*Lukas’ Moment* deals with a highly pertinent set of questions. How do marginal people (very often indigenous), in distant regional societies, begin to partake on equal terms in a national market? How do inexperienced, often indigenous, young people, begin to improve their prospects? The filmmaker follows one case as it unfolds, a case where lack of knowledge and experience dominate, but where there is initiative and daring, and where some luck intervenes. Once again Danusiri’s subject, as with his films in Aceh, is people who are below the horizon of the Indonesian or international media and who are relatively powerless within the social structure of their marginalized region. The film is respectful towards the culture and circumstances of the West Papuans, free of the stereotypes of their representation as a backward or exotic people, but showing their very basic and denuded “modern” living conditions in houses dispersed on sprawling monotonous rectangular estates of the kind also built for transmigrants. But its primary interest is not culture and environment, so much as the economic advancement of marginalized indigenous people, in accordance with Danusiri’s earlier arguments that, in the Indonesian media, discourses of culture are propagated without consideration for the actual social wellbeing and economic rights of the people of these regional cultures.

In Direct Cinema, because the filmmakers often follow one central character or line of interest, rather than a plurality of points of view, the question of where Danusiri’s camera is positioned is critical. If we compare *Lukas’ Moment* to the
work of a Direct Cinema practitioner, such as Fred Wiseman, whereas Wiseman frequently puts his camera on the interface between the individual and an institution, Danusiri has chosen to place his camera continuously and without anything distracting him, at a highly significant conjuncture within the social structure of West Papua, the key phases of a small project that is being developed for the economic advancement and financial independence of a small group of young West Papuans, as a response to their economically disadvantaged position—and where no official institutions are assisting them, except one foreign NGO.

It would be a mistake to suggest however that the film is objective in some sense, just because it uses “long takes” and because Danusiri appears reluctant to use editing to make points (the film uses far less cutting around compared with, for example, the Maysles brothers’ film, Salesman). Lukas’ Moment is unashamedly partisan. Danusiri does not follow any of the activities of the community with whom Lukas and the Marind students are competing, the people originally from South Sulawesi—they do not appear in the film. Fred Wiseman has objected not only to the term “Cinema Verité,” but to the term “Observational Cinema,” suggesting that this term has connotations of the filmmaker “just hanging around with one thing being as valuable as another and that is not true.” But Lukas’ Moment is entirely in accord with Danusiri’s views on mythical multiculturalism and the need to engage with the actual social wellbeing and economic rights of the people of these regional cultures. The film in effect jointly undertakes affirmative action for young people from a community that is marginalized in its own land.

What does Danusiri gain by casting Lukas’ Moment in the form of observational documentary? In the first place he reduces the temptation to speak for—or, on behalf of—his Papuan subjects, which would have occurred even if he had used Lukas’ voice-over as narrator, but set that voice-over to an expository structure organized by Danusiri himself. In its avoidance of a voice of authority speaking directly for the West Papuans, Lukas’ Moment is similar to an Australian documentary portrait, Two Laws (1981), made collaboratively with the Borroloola people in the Northern Territory (deliberately using a wide angle lens to encompass their kinship-based group sitting arrangements), one of the first Australian documentaries that allowed Aborigines to talk at length, without non-aborigines speaking on their behalf. Secondly, the singular narrative line, resulting from the decision to use long takes, following one small group, in chronological order, as is customary in Direct Cinema (rather than reporting on the experiences and perspectives of a range of people, using a narrator to link them, as occurs in expository documentary), allows the viewer to trace through the options open to a young man in this particular social situation and to see what results from action undertaken by him and his group—what effects they can produce from acting in their society, what knowledge or experience they have or lack, what opportunities do or do not seem to be open to them, how they might react, even to their failure—and to identify
with them in this venture, rather than identifying with the views and perspectives of a narrator. The film is about the possibility of agency for a young West Papuan in West Papua, and one might even surmise that in this case the presence of the camera may just have stimulated more initiatives from Lukas than may otherwise have occurred. Thirdly, the tolerance of dead time, characteristic of some examples of Direct Cinema, a movement which emerged in the early 1960s, at the same time as dead time began to be increasingly tolerated in feature films (for example in films by Antonioni and Resnais and later, Akerman), allows the filmmaker to concentrate on Lukas’ emotions in the second half of the film, when very little action is occurring but when his disappointment becomes so apparent and is protracted by the inconclusiveness of the transaction.

Who in Indonesia cares about a West Papuan’s emotions, given the customary role of West Papuans in the Indonesian media has been to appear in sanitized tribal costume (without the koteka, the penis gourd) performing dances that support the Indonesian state’s ideology of unity in diversity? In Lukas’ Moment the true isolation of the West Papuans in their own society is apparent. This is not just due to political repression, where since 2001 it has been clear that political outspokenness will not be tolerated and may result in death—so no political statements are made by a West Papuan in this film. But West Papuans are a people who in numerous other ways the Indonesian government has tried to divide and marginalize, and reduce their influence. Bureaucratic initiatives, such as the shifting of populations since the 1960s, and since 2002 a reduced role for a central indigenous provincial assembly, with regional districts competing with each other for funds, all have continued to reduce the power (and the capacity to unite) of a people for whom political outspokenness has always been dangerous. These are the unspoken assumptions that lie behind Lukas’ Moment, and give impetus to the feeling that West Papuans need to be represented on their own terms. While Danusiri’s richly observed recent film about Aceh, Playing Between Elephants, has at its center a very engaging central character, and presents on screen overall a more complicated situation—the rebuilding with United Nation funds of a village of at least a thousand inhabitants after a tsunami—what we see in Lukas’ Moment raises more fundamental questions about social structure in Indonesian society and media representation of regional groups, than does the later film.
II

Documents
Four Manifestos

Khavn de la Cruz

Khavn de la Cruz was an early pioneer of digital film in the Philippines. Starting out in 1998, he has so far produced twenty-three feature films and over seventy shorts in his unique quick-and-dirty style, reminiscent of international trash cinema à la Christoph Schlingensief or Bruce La Bruce. In the following manifestos he discusses his style and his general attitude towards digital filmmaking.

Be Movies Manifesto

in film, as in life, you make your own rules. you can shoot without a script or follow the words to the hilt. It’s your film, it’s your life.

i really don’t like revising. It’s like you’re able to fix a part, but in the process damage the sacred whole. i’d rather re-vision; as in start anew and as always, see what happens.

shooting without anything but your camera entails a certain kind of trust or letting go. it’s like saying i love life, everything included. “there are no mistakes.”

First published on January 6, 1998, on the website Kamiasroad.com

The 12 Bowowows of Impurity

The making of the indie digital full-length The Twelve according to a bastardized version of Dogme95’s “Vow of Chastity”

God spelled backwards is dog, & vice versa. —Linda Goodman

Towards Philippines 2000. —Ex-President Fidel V. Ramos

Ang dog. Bow. —Aiza Seguerra

Toward an impure poetry. —Pablo Neruda
I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by
DOGMAN2000:

1. Shooting can be done anywhere. Props & sets can be brought in. (If a part-
cicular prop is necessary for the story, isn’t it easier to bring the prop to the
location than the other way around?)

Make the most of what you have. If you can shoot it here, why shoot it
there. 90 percent of The Twelve was shot in Kamias Road, from Metrobank
to 7/11, with our house in the middle. The production design was half us
(built, bought, brought), half the universe (already there). RIDDLE: The
film waiting to be filmed. ANSWER: The Philippines.

2. The sound can be produced apart from or together with the images. (Music
can be used whether or not it occurs where the scene is being shot.)

Half of the film is pure, unadulterated live-sound. You hear what the
shotgun mic heard. The other half is impure, adulterated music. You hear the
songs playing in my head.

3. The camera can be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in
the hand is permitted. (The film can take place where the camera is standing;
shooting can take place where the film takes place)

Everything was shot hand-held. Except for that moment when I threw
the camera from a skyscraper to the sea, capturing the sun’s death in all its
mysteries.

4. The film can be in color. Special lighting is acceptable. (If there is too little
light for exposure, the scene can be cut, or use whatever is needed.)

The film is in color, black & white, 50s color, monochrome, psychedelic,
& x-ray. Lights used: candles, torches, bulbs, japanese lantern, halogen. Often
though, the sun single-handedly did the job.

5. Optical work & filters are allowed.

Half of the film was shot with a basic filter but left untouched during
post-production. The other half was shot virgin but devirginized in post-pro-
duction with multiple screens, fast-forward, slow motion, rewind, fish-eye,
ghosting, etc.

6. The film can contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. can occur.)

Lights . . . Camera . . . Action is action is action. The superficial & the
profound are merely labels that are subjective & interchangeable, thus negli-
gible. In other words, expect realism, magic realism, surrealism, hyperrealism,
et al.
7. Temporal & geographical alienation are allowed. (That is to say that the film takes place here & now, there & then, everywhere & forever.)

Time & place are at your disposal to play with, juggle, ride, negate, ignore, subvert, deconstruct. You can do whatever with them once you’ve recognized their existence.

8. Genre movies are acceptable.

Genre movies (from the Melodrama to the Western) are like clichés. They have a ring of truth in them, yet needs to be reinvented from time to time. Genre movies are also like the archetypes. Each serves a purpose in balancing the human psyche.

Figure 9.1 Khavn de la Cruz’ Squatterpunk (2007) was shot in one day.
Source: Khavn de la Cruz
9. The film format is trivial.
   The good thing about digital filmmaking is it’s a whole lot cheaper than
   shooting in 16mm or 35mm, you can shoot as many footages as you want, &
   it’s broadcast quality. & if you still want to blow it up, the transfer still costs
   less than shooting a tightly budgeted 16mm.

10. Everyone must be credited.
   Everyone is a filmmaker, from the passer-by extra to the boy who held
   the cable for a couple of seconds. Why, even the Indian who sold you the
   computer is a filmmaker. No rebel is without a crew. No filmmaker is an
   island.

ADDENDUM:

11. Just do it, now.
   With the democratization of filmmaking, you can shoot your opus in
   any format: video8, hi8, vhs, whatever. Your passion is your energy is your life
   is your art. No more excuses, alibis, delaying tactics, cynicism. Just make your
   film, now.

12. This is not the time for short films in the Philippines.
   Due to too many good shorts collecting dust in forgotten shelves, &
   too many bad full-lengths that shouldn't have been made in the first place, I
   prescribe: For 1 year. All full-length filmmakers make at least 12 shorts not
   exceeding 10 minutes. & all short filmmakers make at least 3 full-lengths not
   less than 70 minutes.

   Furthermore, I swear as a filmmaker to be myself, whoever that self is, with
   personal taste & all. I am forever an artist. I swear to continue creating works, as I
   regard the part as important as the whole. My supreme goal is to let my characters
   & settings be. I swear to do so by all the means available & at no cost of any good
   taste & any aesthetic considerations.

   Thus I make my 12 BOWOWOWS OF IMPURITY.
   On behalf of DOGMAN2000,

   Khavn de la Cruz

   Published in Localvibe magazine in May 2000
Filmless Manifesto

to be filmless is to be free from the shackles of the old brain.
to be filmless is to be fearless of fear itself and all its ghosts.
to be filmless is to be unaffected by the conspiracy of initials.
to be filmless is to realize your rainbow, even if you’re blind.
to be filmless is to be happy because you already saw the ending.
to be filmless is to feel truth in fakery, love in hate.
to be filmless is to not give up till the book says “end.”
to be filmless is to nevermind the neverwheres that negate us.
to be filmless is to be different from everyone else, like everyone else.
to be filmless is to believe in the sound and the image, and live it.
to be filmless is to go beyond yourself to reach your innermost well.
to be filmless is to nurture amidst murders.
to be filmless is to not serve the money king and lose your soul.
to be filmless is to express your heart whether in a jar or in the cosmos.

Published in the catalogue of the .MOV International Digital Film Festival, Manila, in January 2002

Digital Dekalogo: A Manifesto for a Filmless Philippines

Film is dead. It is dead as long as the economy is dead, when public taste and creativity are dead, when the imagination of multinational movie companies is dead. At millions of pesos per film production, there is not going to be a lot of happy days for the genuine filmmaker, the true artist who wants to make movies, not brainless displays of breasts and gunfire.

But technology has freed us. Digital film, with its qualities of mobility, flexibility, intimacy, and accessibility, is the apt medium for a Third World Country like the Philippines. Ironically, the digital revolution has reduced the emphasis on technology and has reasserted the centrality of the filmmaker, the importance of the human condition over visual junk food.

Film is dead. Please omit flowers.


II. The only way to make a film is to shoot it. Shoot when you can. Do not delay. If you can finish everything in a day, why not? Sloth is the enemy of the Muse. The shadow filmmaker has now run out of excuses.
III. Your digital camera will not turn you into an instant Von Trier, Figgis, or Soderbergh. Your attitude towards filmmaking should be that of an amateur: half-serious, playful, light, not heavy, thus without baggage. There are no mistakes. The important thing is you learn.

IV. Utilize all elements within your resources. If you have a knack for music, score your own soundtrack. If you have writing skills, craft your own screenplay. If you have money, invest in gear. If you have none of the above, make sure you have good friends.

V. Work within a minimized budget, cast, crew, location, and shooting schedule. Artificial lighting is not a necessity. The story is king. Everything else follows.

VI. Work with what you have. Release the bricoleur within. You are not a studio. Accept your present condition. Start here.

VII. Forget celebrities. Fuck the star system. Work only with those who are willing to work with you, and those who are dedicated to the craft. Avoid pretentious hangers-on with hidden agendas. Use a lie detector if needed.

VIII. Work with humble, patient, passionate, and courageously creative people. Ignore people who are the opposite.

IX. If you are alone, do not worry. Digital technology has reduced the crew into an option, rather than a must. Making a film by yourself is now possible. The past is dead. Those who do not change will die.

X. Create first, criticize later. Take care of the quantity. God will take care of the quality—that is, assuming you do believe in God. A filmmaker makes films, period.

In the name of the revolution,
Khavn

Written on July 28, 2003. First published in the Philippine Daily Inquirer, October 31, 2006. (The Deklogo are, of course, the Ten Commandments.—Ed.)
Why *Ciplak* ended up being made

Khairil M. Bahar

*Ciplak* was never meant to be my first feature.

Originally, I had a script for a love story between a guy whose one wish in life was to be a writer recently returned from studies abroad and a girl brought up in the traditional Malay way whose one wish in life was to be a musician (you read it here first and everything’s been dated and copyrighted. Don’t even think about it). I went through two to three months of rewrites and pre-production: casting the parts, polishing the script, passing it around for opinions, scouting locations, getting a camera, everything. All this while recording an album with my band (Y2k) and going through the hectic life of a copywriter by day.

I had a trip to the UK with my parents planned, so on my final day in KL before my flight I managed to secure a highly prolific veteran actor (whose name I shall not mention) and left everything in the (supposedly capable) hands of my producer (who shall also remain unnamed for I may be incredibly angry with the guy but I’m not a dick). I boarded the plane, caught up with some old friends, came back and . . . nothing.

No dates were planned with the actors, no arrangements, no scheduling, nothing. Then the producer disappeared (at least, from my social circle).
I wrote the script I intended to direct at the Starbucks in Damansara, and it was there that I turned to try and sort out this mess. On the one hand I had a camera, a cast ready and waiting, a bunch of locations and a script. On the other hand I had made an unprofessional fool of myself in front of the veteran actor, I had no schedule, work at the advertising agency was piling up and to top it all off someone who I thought was my friend who I trusted as my producer and partner in this project decided to bugger off and leave me in the lurch for reasons I still, to this day, do not know nor possibly hope to fathom.

It was around this time I saw *Gal & Gincu.*

Watching the movie (which I thought was great), I realized that my script would have to be executed in the same vein, production-quality wise, for the movie to do the script justice and with my shoestring budget (“Bata-slipper” budget would be more appropriate. Bata slippers are cheap plastic sandals). I couldn’t possibly pull it off. Plus, if I made the movie it would *really* look like I jumped the bandwagon. I needed something raw, lo-fi, a movie equivalent of punk-rock.

I sat in that Starbucks and tried to rewrite the script to suit a more rough-n-gritty style, but it just wouldn’t work. I tried this for two months until I remembered an old script that I wrote: “VCD.” I searched for it in my laptop, had a quick read and knew I was on to something.

Where the idea came from

When I first wrote the script for *Ciplak,* it was originally called “VCD.” I wrote the first draft somewhere around 2001–2002 when DVD piracy hadn’t come to the fore yet and VCDs were still the format for pirated movies.

(I’d always buy my movies from the stalls at Bangsar on the corner near Burger King.)

I remember each time I went there I noticed something new and noticed how my purchasing decisions were affected by the packaging design. Some covers were in that silver *Superbit* format. Some covers had little logos at the bottom of seals and planes. Some covers were downright silly, and I’d laugh with my friends as we scrutinized the cover of *Boiler Room,* and wondered why everyone was carrying a gun.

I’d then go home and watch the VCDs and notice other things: the types of copies they were, the little pirate logo in the left hand corner, the cinema-copied beer ad that ran before the movie.

One day, while waiting for my friend Rauf at the cafe in his block of flats, the idea hit me like a ton of bricks. I pulled out a cheap exercise book and wrote the first ten pages. I still remember the first words I wrote: “My name is Jo and I’m a pirate.”

The idea was originally a ten-minute short film (which is pretty close to the opening ten minutes of the movie) where the main character would introduce the viewer to the world of VCDs and as he introduced each type of VCD copy the movie’s video and audio quality would change accordingly.
I loved the idea. I loved it so much, I didn’t want to waste it on a ten-minute short film that only a handful of people would ever see. The ending of the short film script I wrote was quite open-ended and another 80 minutes could easily be joined to the ten-minute short film and turn it into a feature.

Or so I thought.

The original script came up to about 50+ pages and was . . . crude. The idea was there, but the character’s motivation was sorely lacking and the ending was something straight out of Hollywood. I also wrote the script without trying to censor or hold back in any way. I don’t know enough people to play these characters? Screw it. Keep writing. Get the idea out. I wrote three drafts, then kept it in a folder on my computer. For four years.

Reading it again with fresh eyes, I knew that with a rewrite here and there, this could be exactly the type of script my first feature should be.

How the movie was made

Some people teach their kids how to swim by chucking them into a river, the rationale being if you’re about to drown you’ve got two choices: learn how to swim or die. While I don’t subscribe to this as a parenting method, I found that jumping right into something, before you have time to think about what the hell you’re doing or how you’re going to do it, keeps me on my toes.

It also leaves me running about like a headless chicken, but at least I’m getting some exercise.

A lot of research was done beforehand on the type of camera I’d use. I tested out a whole bunch and settled with the Canon XM2, which seemed perfect for my needs: it’s small enough for me to go around without attracting too much attention, the 1/4” 3CCD chip had some funky new technology which made the picture quality look better than most other cameras in the range and the color was biased towards a red tone, which I preferred.

I then tried to study how others had done their own miniDV films by buying a bunch on DVD and listening to the director’s commentary (I highly recommend Tadpole if you’re thinking of doing the same) as well as other low budget indie films (El Mariachi is worth it for the commentary alone). This was followed by a whole bunch of pre-production planning which I shall not go into.

On the first day of shooting, I tried to make it as “professional” as I could. By “professional,” I mean we had a stereo directional mic gaffer-taped to a stick as a boom, a white Styrofoam board acting as a reflector for our borrowed Ikea lamp, a tripod, monopod and headphones. By the third day the microphone broke down, we forgot all about the reflector board, the headphones were forgotten, and the tripod was deemed useless after we lost the “widget” (the thing that connects the camera to the tripod). But by going back to the most basic of tools, we managed to keep an energy going that you probably wouldn’t get on a “professional” production.
We’d shoot only on weekends, except for certain days I managed to get off. Then, after every weekend I’d go home and do a rough cut of the scene to see if it worked and whether or not we got enough footage. This proved invaluable, because if a scene didn’t work out I could figure out right then and there how to fix it and schedule a re-shoot ASAP. Speaking of editing, everything was edited on my home computer.

All KL footage was shot in and around the areas where myself and the cast and crew lived, together with a few locations, where the owners were kind enough to let us run about for free. As for the UK scenes, that was courtesy of the *Shoreditch Connection* . . .

**The Shoreditch Connection**

In order to maximize every possible contact I had, I wrote in scenes based in England, hoping that maybe I might be able to get my friends in England to shoot the scenes and FedEx them over. Worst case scenario, I’d shoot the scenes tight and put a subtitle that says “England.” Right after an establishing shot of Big Ben taken from stock footage.

Thankfully, I had no need to resort to such cheap gimmickry. My friend Saj read the script and agreed to help out, calling in filmmaker friend Adam to direct and shoot the scenes and others from his circle of friends to act the scenes.

First I storyboarded the scenes on my computer and e-mailed them over so that they’d get an idea as to how to shoot it. Then Saj would either call with feedback or pictures.

![Figure 10.1](image-url)  
*Figure 10.1* Khairil M. Bahar, director and leading man, on the set of his debut film *Ciplak*.  
*Source: Khairil M. Bahar*
Why Ciplak ended up being made

Who else has a movie made under RM$10,000 (approximately €2000 or $3000) which features locations eight time zones away?

The Underground Connection

When it came to casting the movie, in order to save myself from the embarrassment of having professional actors telling me “that’s not how you make a movie, dear,” I decided to cast my friends.

It just so happens that (thanks to my involvement in the local independent music scene) most of the cast ended up being a who’s-who of musicians from various local bands . . .

Beg, Borrow, Steal

Given the non-existence of a budget, we tried to beg, borrow, and steal as much as we could to get the movie made. When I bought the camera it came with ten free miniDV tapes, which I used to shoot the film (although it wasn’t enough), so we saved quite a bit on tapes. I had my old tripod from when I was 15, and Ariff had a monopod, so that we could be more mobile. Our lighting rig was a borrowed Ikea lamp and a cheap styrofoam board. Our boom mic was a borrowed stereo directional microphone (which broke down on us).

To set-dress one of the locations, we needed to give the impression that the guy was crazy over movies in the shortest time possible. The easiest way would be...
Khairil M. Bahar

to plaster posters everywhere but posters cost money. The solution? Pull out all my old copies of *Empire* and *Total Film* and (rather painfully) tear out full page pictures of actors, actresses, directors, and movie posters.

All the sets and locations were obtained without a single penny spent. Most of the locations were houses or apartments, where the cast lived. The only two locations where we had to get permission (*Cravings Cafe* in Hartamas and a *kedai runcit* in Damansara Heights) were easily negotiated.

The only thing I really spent money on for this production was food.

This statement was originally published in April 2007 on the now defunct website of the movie Ciplak. It was slightly edited for publication by the author.
Tan Pin Pin’s 55-minute Singapore GaGa (2005), a tribute to the buskers, street vendors, and assorted urban characters of the city state, was the first Singaporean documentary that got a theatrical release. In the following essay the director describes how she managed to get the off-beat film (that is discussed at greater length in the essay by Ben Slater in this volume) shown on the big screen despite the fact that she had next to no marketing budget.

As I write this, Singapore GaGa’s five-week run at The Arts House has just ended. Due to popular demand, they are extending the run for another two weeks. That Singapore GaGa even had a cinematic release is novel as it is 55-minutes long, not your usual feature-length work which runs at least 70 minutes. Moreover, it is a video documentary about Singapore, one that is experimental in structure. The words “video,” “documentary,” “experimental,” and “Singapore” are not usually selling points in Singapore. More so in the combination of those words, it should not even be seen at all.

So it was a surprise to me that every one of the thirty-one screenings was sold out. This article is not about the video, but about the meandering journey Singapore GaGa took around Singapore before it came to have this successful run at The Arts House. I will also mention some of the unusual publicity techniques we used that perhaps contributed to its success.

Digital technology has unleashed many videos of varying lengths, content, and quality in Singapore. The reason why you have never heard of many of these works is that they have not been shown. Even if they are of equal quality, they don’t fit the format required for it to be screened in cinemas or television, which are the usual distribution outlets for content. They were probably too short or too long, the content too adventurous, or their form too playful. Cinemas or television are distribution outlets with standardized content and specifications and if your work does not fit those specs, you won’t be able to find a place within those ranks. With Singapore GaGa, I found that I was a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, so I had to find alternative ways of getting the film known and seen beyond the usual places.
Singapore GaGa is a 55-minute video documentary featuring the songs and sounds that I treasure. It consists of vignettes of Singaporeans performing for the camera; while these musical numbers seem unrelated, when seen cumulatively, they give audiences a sense of life in Singapore as well as of its history. It was my attempt to communicate a view of Singapore with other Singaporeans by tapping into our communal aural memory. In terms of its presentation, it was certainly not mainstream; many cast members meander in and out of the documentary and there was more than one storyline. On the other hand, some people featured are easily identified by many Singaporeans. GaGa’s publicist calls it “avant garde family fun.”

Figure 11.1 Poster of Tan Pin Pin’s Singapore GaGa (2005).
Source: Tan Pin Pin

If its final form was unusual, its birth was even more unusual. It was self-commissioned and produced, made with my own money, with funding from the Singapore Film Commission, the Asia Research Institute, the Lee Foundation, and some sponsors and supportive crew members. We took nine months to make this work; the bulk of it was spent traversing Singapore collecting sounds and footage.
This extended way of shooting was made possible by the small size of video cameras and cheap tapes. It was easy to get up and shoot with minimum fuss. If *Variety*, the film trade magazine, were to give this work a prognosis, it’d be along the lines of “Charming idiosyncratic video with strong word-of-mouth potential within Singapore but in the absence of a big marketing budget, it may take time for news of it to percolate to its intended audience. Its length of 55 minutes may prevent it from being widely released, but it has potential on TV.”

When I first completed this video, I had no inkling that this was the path it would take. I was too embroiled in its making to consider its post-premiere trajectory. There was no precedent I could follow because nothing like this had ever been screened widely in Singapore.

Usually, when a film is made—if its rights are not already pre-sold—the producer (owner of the work) knocks on doors of cinemas to ask if they are interested in showing this film, and between them they work out a deal as to how they want to split the proceeds of the ticket sales (for Singaporean works, the going rate is sixty-forty, in favor of the cinemas). They may discuss how many screens will open the film (smaller Singapore films with no stars open in four cinemas at most, out of more than one hundred forty screens). There will be discussion as to who would pay for the advertising and prints. These ancillary costs usually fall on the shoulders of the producer. Hence, if the run is only in a few cinemas, there is a very high chance that the producer may lose money because he or she does not have economy of scale. More people need to see it for the producer to earn his or her money back, but people will see it if more marketing money is pumped into it to create greater awareness—all of which perpetuates a vicious cycle. This task of approaching people to sell rights is usually undertaken by the distributor of the film. For *Singapore GaGa*, I did not have a distributor, so I had to knock on doors and do the figures myself.

Here is what I found out: the cinema route did not work for *Singapore GaGa*. Firstly, films have a week in the cinemas to “make it,” before they get pulled off or the number of screenings becomes drastically reduced to make way for more profitable blockbusters. This did not suit the temperament of *Singapore GaGa*. *Singapore GaGa* needed a longer run because it was one of those films whose best marketing tool (in the absence of a huge budget) was word of mouth, which needs time to build up. Secondly, I would have had to pay the cost of transferring *GaGa* to film upfront (US$ 2,000/print copy x 4=US$ 8,000) or encoding it to a video format that can be played by the cinema’s video players. I would also have to pay for the advertising costs, if I could not find sponsors for ad slots. With the cinemas taking a 60 percent ticket cut right off the bat and with such a small release, at the end of the day, it would not have been unforeseeable for me to pay people to come to see *Singapore GaGa*. For distribution outlets like video or television, there is a different set of costs involved.
This system of distribution, i.e., released at once on many screens with a big bang, is more suited for blockbusters with big stars or special effects which have instant drawing power. It is ill-suited for handcrafted boutique films like *GaGa* with no stars, no special effects, and tiny ad budgets. Finances aside, I was also a little skeptical about screening *GaGa* in cinemas, because I was not sure what the cinema chains could offer that a place like (Singaporean art-house cinema) Substation (which offered fairer ticket splits) could not. Sure, there were the plush seats and great sound and projection. Sure, there was the prestige of telling people that *Singapore GaGa* has the benefit of a “cinema release”—one could have *GaGa*’s poster hung beside *King Kong* or whatever was screening that day. But all that would ring hollow if one had to be in debt to bring that to fruition. *Singapore GaGa* was already a non-profit making video; I was trying to avoid it becoming a loss-making one too.

Of course, there was the argument that screening it at a cineplex would bring in more audiences. But who is to say that fewer people would come if it was shown in a non-traditional venue? In fact, while running the publicity campaign with the marketing folks at The Arts House, we were very conscious of the fact that we were training and cultivating audiences—that films/videos need not be seen in a cineplex, that films could be experienced in a variety of places, some ephemeral, others not. In fact, very likely, the best and most interesting work (like short 55-minute experimental documentaries) could be found in unexpected venues. I found myself questioning the whole process of film distribution in Singapore as I tried to work out the best course for *Singapore GaGa*.

*Singapore GaGa* started its life in the Singapore International Film Festival 2005 (SIFF). It was screened for free at the Goethe Institut, which seats no more than sixty people. I had sent out blurbs about this screening to the usual film listservs, made a website for it, and not much else. It was an extremely low-key world premiere—I was so unsure of its viability that I did not even notify the press. To my surprise, the screening was completely filled. Philip Cheah, the SIFF programmer, opened another screening slot. The second screening was even more packed, people were sitting on the floor, and many were turned away. This was my first inkling of the power of word of mouth. To my delight, *GaGa* garnered unsolicited positive reviews in *The Straits Times*—the intrepid Ong Sor Fern had hunted down a VHS copy and called it “one of the best films about Singapore.” There was a letter in *The Straits Times* recommending that *GaGa* be shown and taught in all social studies and history classes in Singapore. Online forums helped create buzz too. At the same screening, *GaGa* was also invited to the Rotterdam International Film Festival, giving it an extra fillip.

In my exhausted state, I realized that my work had only just begun. I had a sense that this video demanded to be seen, and I had to work to get it seen. A theatrical release was not very attractive to me, for the reasons mentioned above, but without it, what other avenues were available to me?
I approached Substation, an independent arts center, which is the backbone of the burgeoning short film scene in Singapore. They showed my first documentary way back in 1997 and I knew they would be supportive of Singapore GaGa. Although their calendar was very packed, (the cinema doubles as a theater too), they could spare a weekend in July. They wanted to sponsor the screening, but I declined, so I donated the first night’s ticket sales to them. With five screenings and a seating capacity of 110, we needed to sell 550 tickets.

Zhang Wenjie, Substation’s then-film-programmer, drew up a publicity and marketing plan for this mini-release, along the lines of:

18 May—Prepare press release
27 May—Publicity collaterals (website, posters, postcards) done, send for printing
7 June—Distribute postcards, disseminate press release, send stills to press, invite press
10 June—Press screening
13 June—Tickets go on sale/send first e-mail blast through Substation’s mailing list
27 June—Second e-mail blast

I was to get the posters, postcards, banners designed and printed, and also put together the press kit and press materials. This entailed writing, re-writing, and long conversations with the designer. We got good blurbs from the press, so we leveraged our whole weight on those few lines: we put in “Singapore GaGa will send you guffawing till your sides split” in all our collaterals. Meanwhile, Hatta Moktar, the marketing manager, and my friend Jasmine Ng called the press to impress upon them why they needed to cover this video at the press screening (a job best done not by me). Reporters from AFP, AP, and also South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) came. We got wide coverage in the international press—Singapore GaGa’s review was reprinted in The Bangkok Post and even The Taiwan Times. Meanwhile, the local media wasn’t interested in reviewing GaGa, because they would only cover cinema releases and five screenings at the Substation did not constitute as one. I bore this in mind.

All 550 tickets were sold out.

For all the work we put in, could I have wrangled for a longer run so that there would be better economies of scale, with the same amount of work put in but with more tickets sold? Perhaps. I took a slower approach because—the solid response at SIFF notwithstanding—I wasn’t sure, whether GaGa could obtain an audience for five screenings. I was finding things out as I went along, testing the boundaries of myself, my video, my crew. We all rose to the occasion.
During the screenings, a few teachers came up to me and asked to screen *GaGa* in their schools. One teacher said: “The students need to know that there is another Singapore that is outside the one represented by the mass media.” So quite by accident, *Singapore GaGa* became distributed as part of the schools’ screening programs and I was the lead vaudevillian. I showed *Singapore GaGa* to the students and answered questions about it afterwards. Some schools used *Singapore GaGa* to talk about what it meant to be Singaporean. The students were first asked to write out what Singapore meant to them (most would write about the clean streets, the crime-free environment, and the good government), then *GaGa* would be shown to them to counterpoint and corroborate what they had written. My most memorable school tour moment was when *Singapore GaGa* was screened as part of the National Day celebrations at Madrasah Aljunied (one of the schools featured in *GaGa*). One thousand kids were assembled in the dimmed school hall and they started to scream when they saw themselves on screen.

I wanted to take *Singapore GaGa* out of cinemas and to the “the people,” but I did not imagine that this entailed screening it in stuffy school halls with hundreds of students sitting cross-legged watching it, singing along to it. In some schools, the video projectors and sound systems were shoddy. But I got used to these less-than-ideal conditions for there was something very special about seeing the students peering curiously at the screen, watching themselves. The question that capped it for me was one asked by a young boy from Bedok View Secondary, “Excuse me Miss Tan, does this mean I can make my own film about Singapore with just any camera?” Somewhere during the screening, it had dawned upon him that Singapore was waiting for him to define it with something as simple as a handheld camera. I hope he never lets go of this thought.

I continued to talk with exhibitors, but negotiations fell through once we talked about the number of screenings I would like for it. I wanted them to commit to more screenings than they felt they could afford. They in turn were daunted by my meager marketing budget. I could read their minds: how does she think she can pull in the crowds? However, in my negotiations with The Arts House, I found that they were keen to screen *Singapore GaGa* three times a week for five weeks, which was perfect for the word-of-mouth marketing plan I had in mind. They were also open to increasing the slots, if it was popular. The only snag was that most Singaporeans don’t associate the Arts House with being a screening space. It is a new venue more known for its theater space. I found their 75-seater screening room comfortable, and it had a great projector and sound system. They gave me a split that was more reasonable than what I was offered before. Moreover, I could screen *GaGa* in mini-DV format, so I did not have to make expensive transfers to film or encode it for Barco digital projectors as I would have had to do for the cinema chains. Separately, we had to rent a mini-DV player because the Arts House did not have one.
By the time it arrived at The Arts House in March 2006, about 7000 people had already seen *Singapore GaGa*, so this cinema release was the end point, rather than the start, of *GaGa*’s journey. I had, without intending to be contrarian, inverted the whole distribution paradigm. This would also have been a good reason not to have a theatrical release since so many people had already seen it. To supplement the work done by The Arts House for this run, I hired as publicist Teng Qian Xi, a college junior who was bilingual, enthusiastic, and very independent. Two months before the release date, we threw ourselves into publicizing *Singapore GaGa*.

Our primary target audience was people who cared deeply about Singapore. Their patriotism is tempered by worries about Singapore’s political process’s inability to accept different and discordant voices (*Singapore GaGa* is after all about sounds and music that are ignored or forgotten). This audience had a healthy skepticism about the Singapore presented to them by the mass media and would go out of their way to seek an alternative, independent, and more truthful representation of Singapore and of our life here. They would not be put off by a documentary shot on video which was experimental. In fact, this would be a selling point. Even our choice of venue, though slightly out of the way, was ironically suitable because it required viewers to go out of the way to seek it out. No, it was not going to be shown in a Cineplex near their home. Our marketing strategy (I call it that only in hindsight, since we made this up as we went along) sought out these people in different ways where the Internet played an important part.

1. We organized the first ever press screening for well-known Singapore bloggers (not film critics, just blogs which captured the *zeitgeist* of the segment of Singapore they represented). Because the blogosphere was not monolithic and was perceived to be independent, there was a lot more room for conversation and discussion between the readers and the bloggers. Online conversations are just a more efficient way for word of mouth to spread. The bloggers’ screening was held in Qian Xi’s living room and it was a very informal affair, consistent with the spirit of the video and its marketing efforts. As a result, *GaGa* became a discussed topic in the Singapore blogosphere thanks to a few influential evangelists who promoted us by recommending us.

2. In tandem with our online marketing efforts, *Singapore GaGa*’s e-flyer and poster could be freely downloaded from our singaporegaga.com website so that people who liked it could hang it up on their blogs/websites.

3. We played the *GaGa* trailers everywhere: indie screening spaces, like the Substation, university screenings (In exchange, I would play their trailers before *GaGa*’s screening). The trailers were even played at non-film events like talks and presentations not connected to film.

4. We blasted egroups and listservs with news of the screening, groups that weren’t film-related but had some relationship to the following topics: music,
civil society, politics, and various subcultures, who might identify with GaGa. Many helped us with the publicity by posting for us in their listerv too.

5. We approached smaller magazines like university newspapers, design magazines, and other press, which catered to a niche audience.

Of course, we sought publicity from the traditional media too, and their help was vital to Singapore GaGa’s success. The press, who did not want to review GaGa during its short run at the Substation, now supported us in full force. From 8 Days to The Straits Times to Today to Zaobao, we had the equivalent of four stars. The press also wrote profiles of our cast members in connection with the Singapore GaGa screening. We had articles on Margaret Leng Tan (toy pianist), Gn Kok Lin (juggler), Victor Khoo (ventriloquist) in different settings. Meanwhile,

1. We found an ad sponsor in Maxell Professional Media, so with their help, we bought ad space in The Straits Times and IS Magazine. We also made 10,000 postcards that were distributed at various venues; all these materials had the Maxell logo on them.

2. We made a very concerted effort to reach out to the Mandarin-speaking audience. Chinese subtitles were specially commissioned for this screening, and I took some question-and-answer sessions in Mandarin and English, so that those who didn’t speak English could have their questions answered. I also went on Chinese radio no less than four times to publicize the screening. In addition, as a result of the bloggers’ screening, GaGa was the subject of an editorial column in Lianhe Zaobao, the main Chinese newspaper.

It is hard to quantify, which of these methods amongst the many that we tried, was most helpful. In the feedback forms, a third of the respondents came to know of GaGa through their friends. Others had heard about it through the press, many from blogs as well as the Arts House publicity.

In absolute numbers, the number of people who saw King Kong definitely outnumbered those that saw Singapore GaGa. But I feel that we reached our optimum audience numbers for this video. With our limited resources, we could not afford to target the general public. We targeted a very specific group of viewers and we managed to reach them. With their help, they told more people about this screening so more people came to know about this work.

Did the Singapore GaGa tour make money? We did not lose money, but we did not make money either, if we quantified all the time and effort everyone contributed. It was a labor of love, not just for me, but for many of those involved as well, from the usher, who volunteered during Substation’s screening, to the relative, who hung GaGa’s postcard in her car’s rear window.

By the end of Singapore GaGa’s run, it had been seen by more than 8000 paying viewers. It became the first Singapore film to be released outside the cinema chains.
It was also the first Singapore documentary to have a theatrical run. Moreover, it was the first time The Arts House became an exhibitor for a Singapore film. GaGa was also the first video, in which school tours were an intrinsic part of its distribution strategy. This is more than I can wish for: a mongrel video, that was a labor of love that was an experiment in a way of filming, a way of living.

This text was originally published on the website Criticine (www.criticine.com) on May 4, 2006. It was edited for brevity by the author.
The Downside of Digital
A German media critic plays devil’s advocate

Tilman Baumgärtel et al.

This article was published in the Philippine Daily Inquirer in September 2006, and caused such an uproar in the local film scene that the newspaper felt obliged to print a number of statements by directors and producers in consecutive issues that are documented in extracts here.

The introduction of affordable digital video cameras and the prospect of making films inexpensively and independent of big studio have stirred up a lot of excitement in the Philippine film community. Whereas traditional filmmaking requires huge investments in film stock alone, digital movie making—which accounts for forty percent of last year’s local production—is possible for a fraction of the usual production budget. Therefore many Filipino filmmakers have, by themselves or with the support of the recent Cinemalaya festival or the upcoming CinemaOne competition, started making movies without relying on the resources of mainstream production companies. Some of their output, Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros in particular, has reaped critical acclaim here and abroad.

Now digital movies are seen as a way out of the local film industry’s usual fare and often formulaic productions. Many filmmakers, critics and fans anticipate a third “Golden Age” of Philippine cinema, with directors taking on new and untried subject matter that big studios would rather not touch. They hope that fresh narrative strategies and innovative ways of storytelling will breathe new life into the industry, which is currently in dire straits because of the dominance of American blockbusters and the curse of DVD piracy.

I am about to play the spoilsport here, or the devil’s advocate. I will argue that digital movie making is not magic pixie dust and might actually be bad for Philippine cinema. In contrast to the current euphoria over digital movies, I will point out some of their shortcomings. I understand perfectly well how important it is for Filipino filmmakers to find a cheaper way to make movies. And I was impressed by the variety and quality of the last batch of Cinemalaya entries. Nevertheless, I’d like to offer a dissenting opinion that I hope would be taken as constructive criticism.
Here are, David-Letterman-style, 10 Reasons Why Digital Filmmaking Is Bad For Philippine Cinema:

10. Digital just don’t look as good as 35-millimeter.

Despite arguments to the contrary, that’s just how it is, period.

9. Digital makes it too easy.

The fact that traditional film is an expensive medium has made many directors adhere to strict budgets. A lot of good and ever-popular films have been made with little money. Consider *The Bicycle Thieves* or *Rashomon*, *Psycho* or *Chungking Express*. Manuel Conde’s *Gengis Khan* from 1950 is also a great example—a local film with a low budget, but high impact on the viewer to this very day, simply because Conde consistently knew where to position his camera. At present, many film industries in the region, including South Korea, thrive precisely on this economy of means.

Many local digital movies show a dangerous lack of restraint that makes them dull and dragging. Many of the familiar weaknesses of Philippine films are made worse in digital movies: the directors often rely too much on dialog to tell the story, instead of focusing on the visual aspects of film. These films also make way for cheesy melodrama: actresses who look like models sob uncontrollably; sweaty men in undershirts shout hystERICally; there are endless, tearful discussions and shouting matches; phony tragedy and kitchen-sink drama rule.

8. Digital encourages sloppiness.

Movies such as the otherwise exciting *Rotonda* delight in constant violations of the line of action and other basic rules of filmmaking. While I do not mind violations of the rules taught in film school, I’d like to see good reasons when filmmakers ignore them. Yet in many of the newer digital movies, the camera moves all over the place instead of being positioned in such a way that the viewer easily understands spatial relations in a given scene.

7. Digital breeds its own mannerisms.

Since digital cameras are usually small and easy to carry, many digital cinematographers have chosen to shoot in a quirky, rickety fashion. The handheld camera is all the rage, allowing for shaky shots and super-quick pans and tilts, which are then linked together by jump cuts. While there is nothing essentially wrong with this, it has become a mannerism that gives many of these movies a uniform look. Filmmakers who use such techniques should be reminded that a lot of the Nouvelle Vague and Direct Cinema films from the ’60s, which were shot with 16mm cameras, employed similar methods. Today, they often look contrived.
On the other end of the spectrum of digital mannerisms are endless, self-indulgent long takes or wallowing tracking shots. While I like a good long take or an elegant tracking shot, the picture quality of most digital movies simply does not allow for that (yet). Digital video images are intrinsically flat. They do not provide the depth of field of the old panchromatic film stock that made the long takes in the works of Orson Welles or Jean Renoir so breathtaking. This may change soon however.

6. Digital could lower the audience’s audio-visual standards.

Most Filipinos are exposed to a terrible audio-visual environment. I am not talking about the artistic value of movies, television shows, etc., but about their visual quality. With the Philippines being a Third World country, many cinemas have second-rate projectors and insufficient sound systems because the audience is undemanding. Reception for terrestrial television stations and cable channels is frequently bad. The picture quality of many VCDs, still the most popular medium for movies, is often worse than that of old VHS tapes. And the pirated DVDs that are in the process of becoming the primary source of movie entertainment for many Filipinos are often faulty. Some of them are even filmed directly off cinema screens, so the picture is blurry and the sound incomprehensible. Thus the Filipino viewers have grown dangerously tolerant of low quality. Digital movies, whose images at times dissolve into large chunks of pixels during screening, could encourage this tolerance.

5. Digital will stigmatize local films.

If the majority of local films were to be produced digitally, as some hope, it might add to the public perception that local films are generally cheap: “Di bale na, Filipino film lang naman ‘yan.” (Nevermind, it is only a Filipino film.) I hear this every so often. It certainly doesn’t help in the competition with the 100-Million-Dollar movies from Hollywood currently congesting most of the mall cinemas.

4. Digital could make Philippine movies less competitive internationally.

Maximo Oliveros was a success in international festivals despite being shot on digital video. The film’s visual style fit its gritty tale. Other films do not necessarily benefit from the “digital look.” I am sure international film festivals would pick up the Cinemalaya entry, Batad by virtue of its storyline, I could even imagine it in European art-house cinemas—if it had not been filmed with digital video, which seriously spoiled some of the beautiful shots of the rice terraces and the Cordilleras.
3. Digital will make everybody an intern.

Popular actors, such as Eddie Garcia and Boots Anson-Roa, have worked for little or no pay in recent low-budget independent films. So have many other movie people—from set designers to boom operators. They continue to do so and this is laudable. Many could be hoping to be elevated to work on regular film productions by accepting an honorarium like an intern in the mean time. However, once the major studios and TV stations see how inexpensively they can hire ambitious personnel, they may try to take advantage. Instead of coming up with innovative film ideas for themselves, they might just get independent filmmakers and their crews to work on their own low-budget productions, for lower fees.

2. Digital in the Philippines may come to mean art-house cinema—without art-house cinemas.

A lot of filmmakers in the Philippines right now are eager to produce films that are out of the ordinary. There could be an audience for these, but we may never know because, unlike in Europe, there is no art-house cinema circuit in this country that will play them on a regular basis. The only venues for these movies are schools and universities that hold occasional screenings, or such festivals as Cinemalaya and CinemaOne. These festivals—which, indeed, do a magnificent job sponsoring new productions—should be careful not to breed a new species of filmmakers who produce exclusively for foreign festivals. New methods of distribution on DVD or via the Internet might provide alternatives to the traditional theatrical release. The series of CinemaOne films from last year, recently issued on VCD, is an interesting experiment in digital film distribution.

1. And finally: digital cannot adequately depict the Philippine night.

I don’t know any other national cinema, where night scenes are given such importance as in Philippine cinema. Apart from the American film noir, Philippine movies must be among the darkest in the world. Consider the frequent reference to the pa-siyam (novena) lit by candles, or the attack of the aswang or other monsters under a full moon, a gripping chase scene in the dark back alleys of Manila in films like Lino Brocka’s Manila in the Claws of Neon, or the lovemaking in a dim pigsty in Himala. In Philippine cinema the night is often among the principal characters. It can be haunting, as in Mike De Leon’s Itim, or full of pitch-black despair as in Lino Brocka’s Jaguar. It might ooze with sensuality as in Ishmael Bernal’s Manila by Night or serve as the appropriately gloomy backdrop as in Chat Gallardo’s Geron Busabos.

In no other area does digital cinema look as poor as in such night scenes and there seems to be little improvement in this area, thus depriving Philippine cinema of one of its most important characteristics.
These are some of the replies of filmmakers that Inquirer-editor Marinel Cruz gathered:

Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil, director of the independent movies Stray Dogs (Mga pusang gala, 2005) and Voices (Boses, 2008); board member, Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of the Philippines (IFCP)

Tilman Baumgärtel did say he was being a spoilsport and a devil’s advocate to the current euphoria over digital movies . . . Let his criticisms be a challenge to all.

(On the view that digital simply does not look as good as 35-millimeter) Digital is not static. It is evolving. Both the technology and the practitioners can only get better. Mastery comes with practice, opportunity, sustainability.

(On actors and other personnel being “interns”) A major producer for a digital project found my request for ten shooting days too long. She said, “Please, I don’t want an art film!” Not all major producers are like her. But yes, digital filmmaking could be bad for Philippine cinema, not so much for form—because I am sure it will improve—but [for the possibility that] the same attitudes and sensibilities [may continue to] dominate. The victory of digital cinema for now is presenting new sensibilities to the public via such films as Maximo, Kalimugtong, Kubrador and many others.

(On “digital coming to mean as art-house cinema—without art-house cinemas”) Now, there’s the challenge! For all stakeholders—filmmakers, educators, cultural institutions—who aim to make good films but who should make it a sustainable business for all, artists included, to come together to build the infrastructures necessary to develop such an alternative circuit. I do not even want to call it art-house circuit—it sounds so elitist, so alienating—just an alternative circuit for digital cinema to develop its artists and its audience, and [eventually] boost the industry itself.

Emman dela Cruz, director of Sarong Banggi (2005) and Gabon (2007); chair, Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of the Philippines

Cinema is a very young art; we’re only a century old. The films we’ve seen since the Lumière brothers until the digital explosion now are but “guesses” as to what this art form can do. Let’s stop bickering and enjoy the possibilities.

Much flak has been thrown at digital filmmaking, but very few have written about what has been done so far. It gave Filipinos renewed power to own their images again. True to Pinoy ingenuity, we’ve created bigger things from so little. Digital has done for filmmaking what piracy has done for awareness: it gave so much freedom for the Third World film viewer and filmmaker. The downside is not the medium, it’s closed-mindedness in approaching it.
People dream. Some of us dream of creating movies, like a painter yearning to paint. Digital video creates an opportunity to fulfill those dreams.

The argument should not be film vs. digital. Technical is a given. I agree that film is superior. But to dismiss digital features as inferior would deter several filmmakers from continuing to experiment and, thus, halt their growth and evolution. As it is, when many viewers hear the word “digital,” they shy away from watching these features.

Given a choice, filmmakers would want to use film stock and pay for everything the way they should be paid but that is just not possible for a lot of us. There are those who prefer digital over film, but that’s like choosing Coke over Pepsi or vice-versa. Nothing’s wrong with that.

Some countries are capable of still using film despite low budgets because of government support. This is something we are just starting to realize through Cinemalaya, NCCA, CEB, and FDCP. But it is still very different from the full support given by South Korea to its film industry. Kodak has been very active locally in promoting the use of film but this is not enough without government involvement.

There are problems outside of the technical in both mediums. As far as film aesthetics are concerned, it’s not the car, it’s the driver. The medium shouldn’t be blamed.
(On big studios taking advantage of “cheaper personnel” from the indie ranks)
That’s economics at work—a deeper problem that would take another discussion.
I appreciate Mr. Baumgärtel’s opinion; he could be helping an ongoing weeding-out process. Those discouraged by his views will just fall by the wayside.

*Rico Maria Ilarde, director of seven films including Z-Man (1988) and Villa Estrella (2009)*

The author makes several valid points regarding the inadequacies of digital video as compared with 35mm film. The main flaw in his argument is that he selects his samples from just a few films, mostly shot on the mini-DV format, when in fact, digital video now encompasses several formats ranging from the aforementioned miniDV to HDV to DVCam, all the way to HD (high-definition video).

Two of last year’s Metro Manila Filmfest entries, *Exodus* and *Shake, Rattle and Roll 2K5*, were both shot in high-definition video, and later transferred to 35mm film. Artistic merits of the films aside, to my mind—from an aesthetic standpoint—the two samples immediately debunk Mr. Baumgärtel’s arguments, because these two films rank among some of the slickest-looking Philippine feature films of the last ten years. Don’t believe me? Then I challenge you to compare the glossiest Filipino feature shot on 35mm that you can find on DVD (during that time frame of ten years) and then do a shot-by-shot comparison on your video player. The results will astound you, guaranteed.

Martial artists have a saying: “You will fight the way you train.” Basically what it means is that you need to go all-out in training and try your best to simulate—starting with your mind—the intensity, the ferocity and the physicality of a real fight. The rationale being, that when the real thing happens, body and mind are so attuned to the training instilled, that the martial artist reacts intuitively to the situation. An analogy you could make is that the film camera is a sword, while a digital one would be a wooden staff. The objective would still be one and the same: “Strike hard, strike swift and do not be struck back in return.” A master with a wooden staff would still be far deadlier than a novice with a sword. It’s the same with filmmaking. [No matter the medium] a lousy filmmaker will make a bad film, a lazy director will turn out uninspired work, an inept camera person will shoot ugly images.

*Paolo Villaluna, director of Illusyon (2006) and Selda (2007)*

The digital format is not absolute, and like everything in the universe, including the celluloid format, it has a downside. Jon Red is right: Baumgärtel’s article should have lambasted the triggerman, not the gun.

The digital format in itself is a revolution—just the fact that it has taken away the monarchy of filmmaking from only those who can afford it is a testament to that revolution. That is not to say that all digital films are good, because half of them actually aren’t. But I’d rather live in a world where the digital option is
available; it creates a wider margin for new filmmakers and new ideas, thus developing a healthier cinema for us.

Most important, we should remember that bad and good films are made regardless of format! Baumgärtel has to ponder: Would (Lars Von Trier’s) *Dancer in the Dark* be a better film had it been shot in 35mm? No. Would (Paul Haggis’) *Crash* be a lesser film had it been shot in mini-DV? No. There are films that are so good, they transcend formats. That should be our discourse: how to make good films, not whether film is better than digital. As the cliché goes: That is moot and academic.

*Jim Libiran, director of Tribu (2007)*

I’m not an expert in this field; I am still a student, a filmmaker wannabe, a DVD addict. Tilman Baumgärtel was my professor in UP, when I took the undergrad Film 100 class as a prerequisite for my Masteral subjects. Tilman is a teacher and a friend. I don’t really know if he is a fan of Philippine cinema, but he is absolutely devouring as many Filipino films, old and new, as he can.

(On Baumgärtel’s view that 35mm is better than digital) I don’t really care what… I’m using as long as it hits the target. To say that one is better than the other depends on where you are in the scheme of things. The industry for decades has produced 35mm movies that are just as trashy as the sex videos on mpeg or 3gp. Some may argue that, at least, the former looks better on-screen. On the other hand, not only independent Asian and European filmmakers, but even Hollywood, have brought us digital masterpieces…

The fact is, given the chance, many filmmakers would grab the opportunity to shoot in 35mm. But rather than wait for that 35mm guava to fall from the tree, they pushed on, expressing themselves, honing their craft or, heck, experimenting and sometimes just goofing off with the cheaper, readily-available digital video cam. Shoot or perish.

The momentum is here. Filmmakers will not stop making movies just because film stock is out of their financial reach. Movies will be made with or without films. Are they going digital because it’s the easy way out? Recently, we saw twenty masterpieces by twenty directors in the omnibus film *Imabe Nasyon*. Most, if not all, were done using digital cameras, not only videocams, but Digital SLRs—still cameras! Viva Digital was formed precisely to explore these possibilities.

Does that mean Professor Baumgärtel is wrong? Nope. It means that, maybe, the “Downside of Digital” was not directed against indie filmmakers; [maybe it was] an attack against big players in the film industry who continue to dangle their expensive film stock and equipment way out of young filmmakers’ reach.

(On whether digital movies could “lower the audience’s audio-visual standards”) Jumping in my head right now are one hundred crazy replies. But I will go with this: by all means, let us protect the audience’s audio-visual standards. That may be the only standard in the Filipino psyche that hasn’t been eroded.
(On the effect of the boom in digital filmmaking on the entire filmmaking industry) I see pre-teen filmmakers uploading their masterpieces to souped-up editing stations. I see high school students silently but artistically expressing themselves using off-the-shelf consumer-grade digital toys. I see mobile theaters in the barangays—guerilla theater circuits complementing guerilla filmmaking. I see MTRCB-banned digital films on disc being peddled like illegal drugs in the streets: “Buy this, and free your mind.” I see the Hollywood flood being walled off by Quiapo’s digital pirates. [In fact] I see the pirate stalls in Quiapo turning into the new digital Divisoria of enterprising guerilla filmmakers, a real market. I don’t know how empty mall cinema houses will figure into this. I don’t know if big producers will co-opt this “emergent movement” and turn it into a new revenue stream. I haven’t heard any loud boom that signals the coming of “new cinema golden age.” Maybe there wouldn’t be any explosion, no giant wave. Maybe it will just come in the form of kids playing with their digital toys, experimenting with their editing box and showing off to friends. Digital amateurs, tens of thousands of them. Wouldn’t that be something?

The original article was published in the Philippine Daily Inquirer on September 26, 2006. The responses by filmmakers were compiled by Inquirer-editor Marinel Cruz and published on October 30 and 31.
Despite its brevity, the I Sinema Manifesto is of crucial importance in the emergence of independent cinema in the Reformasi period in Indonesia after the fall of the Soeharto regime in 1998. No essay on the indie film in Indonesia fails to mention it, and a number of those who signed it went on to become important directors, including Riri Riza, Rizal Mantovani, Nan Triveni Achmas and Mira Lesmana, who co-directed the seminal Indonesian indie production Kuldesac (1999). However, the manifesto was apparently never published in Bahasa, as none of my Indonesian informants was able to point me to a published version of this text. In fact, director Dimas Djayadinigrat, one of the signatories, had to retrieve the manifesto from an old floppy disk for the publication in this volume, and he was also kind enough to translate it. Therefore, this seems to be the first time this manifesto appears in printed form.

1. Film as freedom of expression
2. To find a new art form and genre in Indonesian film industry
3. To maintain originality from censorship
4. The ability to use any film material to achieve feature film standard
5. To maintain independence in production and distribution

Friday, October 8, 1999

Members of I Sinema

Dimas Djayadinigrat
Enison Sinaro
Ipang Wahid
Jay Subiykto
Mira Lesmana
Nan T. Achnas

Richard Butario
Riri Riza
Rizal Mantovani
Sentot Sahid
Srikaton
Yato Fio Nual
III

Interviews
“An inexpensive film should start with an inexpensive story”
Interview with Brillante Mendoza and Armando Bing Lao

_Tilman Baumgärtel_

Rarely was there a more unlikely winner at the Cannes Film Festival than Dante Mendoza’s _Butchered_ (Kinatay, 2009). It is a grim, unpleasant story about the killing of a prostitute, filmed mostly at night, with little dialog but a lot of hard-to-bear violence in a festival, where the majority of the jury was female. Yet, Mendoza’s movie won the award for best direction over the likes of Lars Von Trier, Gaspar Noé, Jane Campion, Alain Resnais, Ken Loach, and Quentin Tarantino (who went on to write Mendoza a note of praise for his film). Not since Apichatpong Weerasetakul’s _Tropical Malady_ got the special jury award in Cannes in 2004 had a director from Southeast Asia won such an honor and Mendoza was the first Filipino ever to get that award in Cannes.
Even before that triumph, Brillante “Dante” Mendoza was one of the most acclaimed independent directors of the Philippines. In half a decade, he has made nine movies, which won him three Netpac Awards, the Caligari Award of the Berlin Film Festival, the Golden Kinnaree Award of the Bangkok International Film Festival, a nomination for a Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and numerous other honors. He is also the only director ever who had three films in three consecutive years in the Cannes Film Festival, the latter two in competition. Not bad for a director, who made his first movie when he was 45 after spending most of his professional life as a director of commercials. Mendoza started his career as production designer on Peque Gallaga’s period film *Virgin Forest* (1985), after a brief stint as student at the Mowelfund Film Institute, the film school of the Union of the Philippine Film Workers, that was a hotbed of experimental filmmaking in the 1980s under the direction of director and film critic Nick Deocampo. He worked on a good number of Filipino mainstream movies in the 1980s. His first feature film was the low-budget independent digital film *The Masseur* (Masahista, 2004), that was a surprise hit not only on the festival circuit, but also as an international DVD release, probably partly due to its subject matter as it deals with the life of a masseur in a gay spa.

Armando Bing Lao is the éminence gris of Philippine independent cinema. While only officially credited as scriptwriter for a handful of independent movies, his influence looms large. Both as a professor for scriptwriting at the University of the Philippines and in his own workshops as well as a “script supervisor” or “script consultant” for many independent movies, his approach towards scriptwriting has directly or indirectly influenced numerous Philippine indie filmmakers and their works. Even though he only received official credit for Mendoza’s *Kinatay* and *Serbis* (2008), his advice shaped most of Mendoza’s productions, as well as the majority of the films of Jeffrey Jeturian, for whom he wrote the international festival hit *Kubrador* (2006) as well as a number of other scripts. His first film as a director is *Soliloquy* (Biyaheng Lupa, 2009).

I decided to do a joint interview with Mendoza and Lao in order to stress the often over-looked importance of writers of Indie films. At the same time, I wanted to confront these two important figures with a frequent accusation against Philippine Independent Cinema: that their films are mere “poverty porn” that exploits the troubled life of the Philippine masses in order to gain international recognition in movie circles.
“An inexpensive film should start with an inexpensive story” 157

Filmography

Brillante Mendoza

Lola (2009)
Kinatay (2009)
Serbis (2008)
Tirador (2007)
Foster Child (2007)
Pantasya (2007)
Manoro (2006)
Summer Heat (Kaleldo, 2006)
The Masseur (Masahista, 2005)

Armando Bing Lao as director

Soliloquy (Biyaheng Lupa, 2009)

Armando Bing Lao as scriptwriter (selection)

Serbis (2008)
The Bet Collector (Kubrador, 2006) (screenplay supervision)
Minsan pa (2004)
Skewered (Tuhog, 2001)
Fetch a Pail of Water (Pila-balde, 1999)

* * * * *

Baumgärtel: Both of you worked on mainstream movies in the Philippines in the 1980s, Bing as a scriptwriter, Brillante as a production designer. Then both of you dropped out of the movie business, and only returned to filmmaking in the last decade after an extended hiatus. What happened?

Mendoza: I worked as a production designer for film in the late 1980s. In 1990, I went into advertising and worked on commercials for more than a decade, first as a production designer, than as a director. I did television spots for brands such as McDonalds, Jollibec, San Miguel, Smart, Globe, Unilever, Procter & Gamble. I worked with a lot of celebrities and politicians, too.
Lao: I retired from scriptwriting and went on a sabbatical in 1990. I was confused with my role in the industry. I got disillusioned with what was going on. I was questioning my role. Why am I here? What is my mission? Is it to make money? Is it to perpetuate the kind of filmmaking that the mainstream industry is doing? I was looking for something alternative to the mainstream mode, but I could not find it. I found that the Syd Field-school of scriptwriting that we all adopted as our manual for writing was limiting. Stories that were very Filipino in nature could not be accommodated by that approach. But I did not have an alternative manual, so I spend my time playing Scrabble for seven years. I became quite good at it. So I was sent to London to represent the Philippines in the World Scrabble Championship in 1995. And in a bookstore in London I found this book *Alternative Scriptwriting* by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush. That was the key. It opened my eyes to the fact that there were other ways of telling a story.

Baumgärtel: You are making this up, aren’t you?

Lao: No, no, that’s how it was. I was the National Scrabble Champion of the Philippines!

Baumgärtel: Did you win the World Championship?

Lao: No, unfortunately not. The British and the Americans are very good at Scrabble. (laughs)

Baumgärtel: In what way did this American or Hollywood approach to scriptwriting limit you in telling Filipino stories?

Lao: The Syd Field-school is so dramaturgically correct. It subscribes to this cultural philosophy of America: individualism, humanism, competition. The individual or the ego can somehow overcome all obstacles. It is very ego-driven, very character-driven . . .

Baumgärtel: The film has three acts, the protagonist faces a crisis . . .

Lao: Right! And the protagonist faces the problem alone and he resolves it, whether he wins or loses. That’s the Hollywood template. Every now and then I would come up with a story that I felt was very Filipino, often based on people I know—very laid-back, not very assertive. When these protagonists faced a problem, they did not face it alone. They asked for help from their family, from the neighbors, and from God. Now, when I subjected that kind of character to the Syd Field-process, the character changed and became an American character. He would get very assertive and independent-minded. That disturbed me a lot. It disturbed me so much, that I stopped writing and teaching.
BAUMGÄRTEL: But why were you stuck with this Syd Field-approach? If there wasn’t an alternative screen writing manual, at least there must have been movies that demonstrated a different approach . . .

LAO: I was not exposed to many foreign films at that time. And even the local manuals all subscribed to this Syd Field-approach. It was really this book by Dancyger and Rush that helped me out of this dilemma and got me to write scripts again in the late 1990s.

BAUMGÄRTEL: So when you started to collaborate on Masahista in 2004, you were both well-established professionals, Bing as a scriptwriter, Brillante as a commercial director. Wouldn’t it be natural to make films on people like yourself: middle class people, university professors, film directors rather than these lower class people, small-time crooks, slum dwellers, masahistas . . .

MENDOZA: When I was approached to direct Masahista, there was already some kind of story line. It was a typical Philippine melodrama about a student who was forced to become a masseur; he has a girlfriend, blah blah blah. At that time, I did not know so much about film. But my instinct was to make it more realistic, more true to life. I asked the producers if we could change the plot, and they agreed on the condition that we retained the title, because they felt that the title had great commercial appeal.

So we threw out everything, and started from scratch. We consulted Bing, and we did some research into this issue, and based the story on that. I felt that I was doing the right thing, because I could relate better to the story. I did not go to film school or anything like that, but I felt that this made it easier to do the movie, because it was based on the truth rather than fictionalizing everything.

BAUMGÄRTEL: You had no background in directing feature films. Why were you approached to do this movie?

MENDOZA: I don’t know. The producers of the film are acquaintances and we might have talked about movies at one point. When they approached me about the film, the first question I asked them was “Who is the director?” because I thought they were hiring me as a production designer. And they said: “You are the director” and gave me PHP500,000 (around €8,000 or US$10,000) to do the film.

LAO: Masahista was a guinea pig for me, because earlier that year, I had written another script in the mainstream mode: Mingsan pa. The movie was directed by Jeffrey Jeturian: it is about a tour guide in Cebu. The film was a total flop. It was produced along the lines of PHP20 million (over € 300,000
or US$400,000), and we had all the ingredients that we thought would make the film commercially successful. We had popular actors for the lead and for the supporting roles. We had glossy photography, we had beautiful sceneries, we had sex. But the film made no money at all.

The bad performance of the film at the box office disturbed me a lot. It was supposed to be an independent film, produced by an independent producer, attorney Joiji Alfonso. But it was too costly for an indie film. And since it did not make any money, I started thinking that there must be another way of telling a story. Of course, everybody was blaming the director. But I felt that it was not primarily the director, but it was the script itself that was expensive. It was written in that mainstream mode, and the mainstream mode is an expensive mode. It had about 120 scenes in different settings, meaning that there had to be 120 set-ups. So the approach to the narrative by itself is expensive. In order to make an inexpensive film, there needs to be a different approach to the storytelling. It should affect the film. An inexpensive film should start with an inexpensive story.

Then Dante approached me about *Masabista*. He said that he could not afford me as a scriptwriter, so he would get another writer and if I could be the supervisor? I asked: What is the budget? Half a million peso? Oh boy, what kind of story can I do with that kind of money? I started thinking: Maybe it should just happen in just one or two days. So I started codifying that real-time approach for the alternative films. *Masabista* was the first film where I applied that approach.

![Figure 14.2 Alan (Coco Martin) leaves the Family cinema for good in Mendoza’s *Serbis* (2008).](source: Swift Productions)
Mendoza: Bing has been the script supervisor for all my films since and finally wrote the script for *Serbis*.

BaumgärTEL: Can you say something on how digital technologies made this type of filmmaking possible?

Mendoza: Using a digital camera makes the work process so much easier and faster. I had not worked with digital before. The camera was a 24p that has this very strong video aesthetics. It is what they use for home videos in the States. At this time we were not even thinking about blowing the film up to 35mm. We thought it would be a straight-to-video-type of movie. We could not have done the film on that budget with 35mm film. Eventually we blew up the film to 35mm, and that alone cost us over a million peso.

We just used existing light and you can do that with video. It also enabled me to do some of the cinematography myself. I had to use two different cinematographers, because I could not afford to keep one on the payroll for the whole duration of the shooting. I had to use a cinematographer that was available when we were shooting in Manila and another one that was available when we shot in Pampanga. That actually worked for the film, because the scenes that were shot in Pampanga look very different from the ones that were shot in Manila.

Lao: I think that the independent movement is very technologically determined. There were already independent filmmakers in the 1980s, but the movement could not prosper because of the equipment. It was just too expensive. Technology then was not ready for such a movement. With the advent however of the very handy and inexpensive digital video cameras in 2000, the movement found its equipment.

Mendoza: Even Super 8 was expensive at the time and it just could not keep up with the look of mainstream movies.

Lao: So we had to wait for the advent of digital cameras until we were able to make films like that.

BaumgärTEL: Dante, you make it sound like *Masabista* fell into your lap, and you took it from there. But at the same time, there is a long tradition of films on the life in the slums in Philippine cinema that goes back at least to the 1950s with films like *Anak Dalita* and *Geron Busabos*. Then there are the social-realist films from the 1970s and 1980s. Didn’t you try to tie in with that tradition?

Mendoza: No. I wanted to be a filmmaker when I started out in the early 1980s and if I would have gotten the chance to direct a film back then, I would
have done a mainstream movie, some melodrama. But I was actually happy with what I was doing in advertising until the *Masahista* came along. That changed everything, my views and my life. I was not prepared for that. It just happened.

**Baumgärtel:** Still, there is this legacy of filmmakers like Lino Brocka and their films about poverty and slum life that loom over contemporary independent filmmaking in the Philippines. It almost seems that you cannot make a film that is considered good by critics if you do not follow this template. A lot of recent indie films seem like poor copies of Lino Brocka’s films and it seems that this type of filmmaking breeds its own clichés. Do you consciously try to make films differently?

**Lao:** Other films should not be relevant to what we are doing. Real life is relevant, and the stories that can be derived from real life. It is accidental that we have similar subject matters as the films of Lino Brocka and other directors of the past. The big difference between our underclass characters and those of Brocka’s is that our characters are more matter-of-fact, spontaneous, and resilient. Less calculating and introspective. How can they be otherwise? They’re busy surviving.

**Baumgärtel:** Yet, you are dealing with protagonists that are very different from middle class people like yourself. How do you prepare for a film like that?

**Mendoza:** Basically I immerse myself in the subject matter. In the research process, I go with the writers when they interview people from that class. Like with *Tirador*, we went to their houses, we talked to the real crooks. With *Serbis*, the film really came out of the location hunt. We found this cinema in Angeles City and this family, who ran the place, lived right inside the cinema. That was the starting point of the whole film. While the writers are coming up with their stories, I go an out and I am very open to observe the people, their environment, and their community.

**Lao:** I believe that a story cannot just happen in deep space or in a vacuum. It has to happen in a particular place with a specific locale. And that locale actually has great influence on the people within that place. To write a story about some people or a certain character is actually writing a story about that place. I cannot remove the place from the people. They are one. The place influences the people more than the people influence the place. The place defines, characterizes, and challenges the individuals. In our films, the place is really the main character. Our stories are not psychological, they are sociological, making them more place-driven than character-driven. So, the films that Dante and I develop together are always about a specific place and they
typically take place in a limited time frame, a day in *Foster Child* and *Serbis*,
two days in *Masabista*, a week in *Tirador*.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Are there particular influences on your type of filmmaking,
for example Italian neo-realism?

LAO: I was looking for a theoretical framework for what I was trying to
do, to base stories on what I observe in real life. Since narratives are stories
about people and lives, I thought: What better place to look than in the social
and natural sciences? But eventually I stumbled about this term from the arts:
the *found object*. That’s a term in sculpture. It means using available, man-made
objects and organizing them in such a way that they turn into a work of art.
It is not an imagined or abstract art, but rather something concrete, because
it is made up of concrete materials. So I thought that this might be applied to
writing. Maybe there is something like a *found story* that derives from real life.
That started this new paradigm of writing. So it is logical that we should tell
stories about other people, and not ourselves. It is not personal anymore, but
it is about other people and other events that we translate in narrative terms.

BAUMGÄRTEL: If you put such a premium on realism on authenticity, why
make feature films at all? Wouldn’t it be logical to make documentaries instead?

LAO: It’s like asking a realist painter: Why bother to do realistic paintings?
Why not shift medium and become a photographer? Besides, the real time
mode is just one mode. There’s the dramatic time mode and the poetic time
mode. Who knows what other time modes will emerge in the future?

BAUMGÄRTEL: Yet there is still this class difference between you and the
lower class people you are showing in your movies. How do you deal with that?

LAO: I do not deal with it at all. I just do what I feel, and I feel that it
should be done. I am no stranger to this class, because my family on my moth-
er’s side is very poor. And I am poor myself now, so I identify with the eighty-
five percent Filipinos who are poor. (laughs) Because the majority of the
people in the Philippines are poor, it is not just natural, but logical, that they
should be our subjects. They represent our country more than the ten percent
middle class people, *di ba*?

BAUMGÄRTEL: So, who is the target group for these films?

MENDOZA: The middle class. These films might be about the lower classes,
and it is their stories we are telling, but these films are not *for* them. Our films
are for the middle class and the educated people. We discovered that these
films are really for the students. Lately, with our kind of films and the other
indie films, the main audience is really the students, because they are able to
interpret these films.
BAUMGÄRTEL: One common argument about films like Serbis or Masahista is that they are really made for foreign audiences, not for the people in the Philippines. They are shown at international festivals and might even garner awards, but only very few people in their own country want to see them.

LAO: Actually, I wasn’t really aware of those film festivals before Masahista. I thought that this was something foreign, alien, unreachable, and irrelevant to what we were doing. I could not have foreseen how Masahista would fare internationally. I just did what I thought was the right thing to do. And the world seemed to agree.

BAUMGÄRTEL: But it seems that a lot of people in the Philippines feel that these films only cater to a certain voyeurism in the West. And they feel uncomfortable with the fact that the Philippines are depicted as the one, big slum in the films that are shown internationally.

MENDOZA: I think the foreign audiences appreciate the fact that we show the truth in our films. In the Philippines, there is nothing new about poverty. You see it all the time. So far none of my films has made any money here. People here want to fantasize. They want to see something else: stars, clothes, make-up, glamor, beautiful people. In festivals abroad, people want to see what the Philippines are all about. And the Philippines are not about those petty problems of rich people.

LAO: And not even the middle class in the Philippines is aware of what is really happening. They are kind of sheltered. For example, that game jueteng in Kubrador: middle class people know that this kind of gambling exists, but they do not really know the details until they watch the film.

BAUMGÄRTEL: In many details of your films I can sense the research—the masseur in Masahista, who insists on using baby powder, even though he is an asthmatic and keeps getting asthma attacks when he inhales it. Or the girl in Tirador that flushes her denture down the drain. Or the goat that turns up in the theater in Serbis. It would be hard to invent something like that. Then again, there are these sudden leaps into clichés and caricature—for instance, the girlfriend of the masseur in Masahista with her beer can and her obnoxious behavior. In five years in the Philippines, I have never seen any Filipina behave even remotely like that.

MENDOZA: But actually that character is based on a real person! She is not a common girl, she is a GRO (short for Guest Relationship Officer, an euphemism for a bar girl). Most of these masseurs have a gay lover, but they also have girlfriend. So they spend the money they get from the gay lover with their girlfriend. But then there are also those girls, who, when they fall in love
with a masseur, really go after him and give him money and stuff like that. You’d be surprised to hear that there are even girls who go to these massage parlors for gays. They don’t actually have their “massage” there, but they go there to pick up the boys.

**Baumgärtel:** In many of these recent indie films from the Philippines, and that includes films like *Tirador*, there is a lot of highly emotionally charged stuff and a lot of kitchen-sink drama. Men in their undershirts drink and brawl, women in dusters nag and cry, boys cheat, girls throw tantrums. Everybody seems busy all the time either with screaming or with having sex. What I observed in the slums of Manila is actually quite different. People seem very relaxed and incredibly friendly. They hang around, they giggle, they massage their feet, they play basketball, they even offer their food to me! That kind of slum life is something you rarely get to see in the movies . . .

**Mendoza:** In *Tirador* this kind of drama was needed, especially in the opening scene with the raid, the so-called *zona*. I was very insecure about that because I have never witnessed a *zona* in my entire life. I had to do a lot of research on that and I had to ask the people from the lower classes what the *zona* was all about. There are people who are having sex, when the police come in—everything that was there was based on our interviews. *Tirador* is the mapping of the week in the life of a small-time crook. What does he do on Monday, on Tuesday, etc. Everything is based on real life, on their stories.

**Lao:** It is true that in the squatter areas it is not noisy like that all the time. But if you happen to live near a squatter area, like I do, you know that there are occasionally these brawls. There is usually a drunkard or some other troublemaker that will start a fight; on occasion there are women quarreling. It does not happen all the time, but it happens constantly. If you translate this into a film narrative, it is kind of compressed. When these “highlights” that happen every now and then form the basis of the film, it might appear as if they happen one after another.

**Baumgärtel:** But again, before I moved to the Philippines I read up on the country and on the mentality of the people. And it was stressed over and over again that the Philippines is an Asian country, where a premium is put on avoiding direct conflict and searching for consensus and compromise. However, in these slum films I never see that, I only see people having shouting matches or crying their eyes out . . .

**Lao:** I think what you are saying applies more to the middle class. The lower class is more volatile. They are more spontaneous in expressing their emotions, but the emotion does not last. If they are angry, they show their
anger. If they are lonely, if a family member dies, they cry, they wail. But after the burial, they go back to their normal life. They cannot indulge their emotions. There's physical survival to attend to. However they have to express their emotions first. That's how they cope with personal tragedies.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Yet, I think that some kind of “dead time” is more characteristic of slum life than this highly charged emotional melodrama. In Serbis there actually is a lot of “dead time.” The camera follows the protagonists as they make their way through the cinema, there are these very long takes of people going up and down the stairs, through the hallways, etc. Is that a conscious attempt to cut down on the melodrama?

MENDOZA: No, there is no conscious effort to avoid anything. It is really just meant to be a slice of daily life in this movie house and to just follow it. The filmmaker’s point of view is just that of an observer. We see them from afar. That’s how I interpret their lives.
An inexpensive film should start with an inexpensive story 167

Baumgärtel: Jessica Zafra, a well-known film critic in the Philippines, writes about Serbis: “The filmmakers were calling me a wimp, a delicate coward who could not look directly at the decay and squalor around her. Because that is the subject of Brillante Mendoza’s movie: ugliness.” Is that really what you are trying to communicate with this film: this place is ugly, these people are ugly, this kind of life is ugly?

Mendoza: Basically what we wanted to show in this film is what is going on in this type of theater. And we want to show the physicality of that place.

Lao: The physical filth of that place is really just a metaphor for a “higher filth.” Serbis is about the relativity of morality. In the Philippines, if something is expedient, it is OK with us. If it is not expedient, it is not OK. I find that unpleasant. How do you translate that visually?

Baumgärtel: Was Serbis shot on digital?

Mendoza: No, it was shot on 35mm.

Baumgärtel: But you managed to make it look like it was shot on very bad digital video.

Mendoza: (laughs) Yes. It is supposed to look like an old movie, one that has made the rounds in this type of cinema. Originally it looked too glossy. We had to downgrade it with color correction. It is about really giving the atmosphere of this type of place.

Baumgärtel: A lot of people complained about the constant background noise in this film . . .

Mendoza: But when we shot there, it was really noisy. That is really the environment. Even if you are inside the cinema, you can still hear the traffic noise from outside. It bothered a lot of Europeans; they consider it to be noise-pollution. They did not know that this kind of environment exists.

Lao: Again, it is a found story, a found place, and the noise is found too. I came across this term “material aesthetics.” That is what these films are about. They are about the physicality of these locations, and that informs both the subject matter and the film aesthetics.

Baumgärtel: When you focus on such a microcosm, it is hard to come up with a more far-reaching political analysis of what you see. It is just about this place and these characters, and says little about the structures of the society that makes these things possible.

Lao: Well, there are stories and stories. Tirador tries to include elements from outside this small world, for instance, when we show these politicians
holding speeches at the end. The family in *Serbis* adapts the same tendencies and values that we see all around us. I can see my sister there, and my cousin, and my neighbor.

**BAUMGÄRTEL:** A lot of the characters in films like *Serbis* or *Tirador* seem to have no redeeming qualities. How do you feel about that?

**LAO:** The majority of Filipinos are laid-back and they do what is convenient. This is not to badmouth my countrymen. I love my countrymen. But righteousness is not one of our virtues. Our national virtues include hospitality, loyalty, commitment to life, adaptability. But the same virtues, when abused, become vices. The characters are predisposed to do what is expedient for survival. I am not saying that this is right or wrong. It is a coping mechanism. We are very personalistic—meaning, our virtues stem from our personal relationships. If a local official foots my hospital bills, I become indebted to him, never mind if he is a crook. Come election time, I am obligated to vote for him. We call it gratitude. If my son commits homicide, I will do everything in my power to get him off the penal hook. We call it parental love. It’s economics too. If my daughter becomes a prostitute, the family is upset at first but eventually accepts it as a matter of course. For as long as she is able to send my other children to school, why not? We call it filial duty. We live from moment to moment. We react to the situation and do what is most beneficial and profitable to us in that moment. It is just not within our means to plan long-term, but only from day to day.

**BAUMGÄRTEL:** Did the family that ran this cinema in Angeles and that you based the film on ever get to see the movie?

**MENDOZA:** Yes, we even showed it in the cinema where the film was shot. *Serbis* was a box office hit there. It was the most successful film they had in years . . .

**BAUMGÄRTEL:** If you go to a DVD shop in the Philippines and look at what local independent films are available, half of them have these naked hunks on the cover and titles along the lines of “Macho Dancer.” It seems that this new wave of digital films gave rise to a whole subgenre of gay soft porn. Often *Masahista* is right on the same shelf as those films. What do you think about that?

**MENDOZA:** I think gay people are buying a lot of DVDs. They love to collect, even if they already saw the films in the cinema. It is a very big market. I think these films are actually the ones that are selling.
BAUMGÄRTEL: It seems to me that this is a new development in Philippine film . . .

LAO: In the 1990s, we had these so-called bold films that catered to male viewers. That was a similar phenomenon. But it was still a mainstream phenomenon, catering to a mainstream heterosexual audience. A gay story would not have been acceptable and would have been disapproved by the Board of Censors. The independent films now are an alternative cinema and they do not cater to the mainstream audience, but to a select group. And these gay films cater to a select group with this select group. This is quite new. Maybe gays are more “out” now?

BAUMGÄRTEL: Yet, there is still the problem of censorship in the Philippines. The original version of Serbis was rated X, which means it cannot be shown publicly. You had to take out a number of scenes in order to even get an R-18 rating. How do you feel about the current system of censorship in the Philippines?

MENDOZA: It should be abolished and it should be replaced by a classification system. The problem is the existing law. For us, it is a continuous battle with censorship. It is something we have to live with right now. There have been a number of attempts to change this, but it never happened. I was already prepared for having to cut certain scenes in Serbis that involve sex. I know that we cannot show that in the Philippines. But at least we could show...
these scenes in the University of the Philippines and the Cultural Center of the Philippines, because they are exempt from censorship.

LAO: Third World countries are generally conservative. Censorship is part of these societies. Only when those countries become more progressive and more advanced, will the civil liberties improve proportionally.
“Digital is liberation theology”
Interview with Lav Diaz

Tilman Baumgärtel

Many argue that Lav Diaz is the most important filmmaker working in the Philippines today. Roger Garcia, director of the Hong Kong Film Festival, sees him as an “artist-as-conscience,” an heir to Lino Brocka. His monumental epic movies that last up to eleven hours, examine the continuing social and political malaise of his country. Despite moving in and out of film circles since the 1980s, the heyday of Philippine experimental cinema (when he made one now-lost short film), he only started to make movies after pursuing careers as rock musician and journalist.

Figure 15.1 Lav Diaz directs Yul Servo and Priscilla Almeda on the set of Batang Westside (2001). Photo: Cesar Hernando

He was already 40 when he made his first feature length film, The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion, in 1998 for Regal Films, one of the biggest film studios in the Philippines that at that time produced a series of extremely low-budget movies by promising new directors. The plot idea of the movie—a portrait of a small time crook—might sound like mainstream material on paper; however there was
another Regal Production, *Naked Under the Moon* that starred Philippine sexy starlet Klaudia Koronel, where Diaz managed to impose a sluggish, dragging tempo to the film that set it apart from more mainstream local productions. At the same time, he worked on his first *opus magnum*, the self-financed *Evolution of a Filipino Family* that took him almost a decade to complete.

The first film, where he had relative artistic freedom and certain autonomy with the budget was *Batang Westside*, about down-and-out Filipino expats in New Jersey with a duration of three and a half hours. That should become one of Diaz’ trademarks in the following years, with *Hermias* clocking in at eight hours and *Evolution of a Philippino Family* at eleven hours. His films have been extensively shown at festivals abroad, but rarely in the Philippines.

When this interview was conducted Diaz had just finished editing his movie *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007) that was about to be shown at the Venice Film Festival. Sitting in a tiny windowless room full of broken furniture in the Manila neighborhood of Cubao that served as an editing suite for the post-production, he embarked into one of his famous *diskurso* while the finished film played without sound on the monitor of a Macintosh computer.

**Selected Filmography**

- *Elegy to the Visitor from the Revolution* (Elchiya sa Dumalaw mula sa Himagsikan, 2011)
- *Century of Birthing* (Siglo ng pagluluwal, 2011)
- *Woman of the Wind* (Babae ng hangin, 2011)
- *Butterflies have no memory* (Walang alaala ang mga paru-paro, 2009)
“Digital is liberation theology” 173

Melancholia (2008)
Death in the Land of Encantos (Kagadanan sa banwaan ning mga Engkanto, 2007)
Heremias Book One: The Legend of the Lizard Princess (Heremias, Unang Aklat: Ang Alamat ng Princesang Bayawak, 2006)
Evolution of a Filipino Family (Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang Pilipino, 2004)
Hesus the Revolutionary (Hesus rebolusyonaryo, 2002)
Batang Westside (2001)
Naked Under the Moon (Hubad sa ilalim ng buwan, 1999)
Burger Boys (1999)
The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion (Serafin Geronimo, Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion, 1998)

* * * * *

BAUMGÄRTEL: Your new film Death in the Land of Encantos is a combination of documentary and narrative film. How did it come about?

DIAZ: In 2006, typhoon Reming destroyed the Bicol area on the Philippine main island of Luzon. It was the most powerful typhoon to hit the Philippines in living memory and it killed hundreds of people. Whole families were wiped out. Four years ago, I shot parts of Evolution of a Filipino Family in the Bicol area, where Reming hit the worst. We also spent six months there when we worked on my last film Heremias. After I realized there was so much destruction in the area where I shot much of my films, I wanted to go back. I went there a week after the typhoon struck and found that many of the locations that we had used were completely destroyed.

Originally, the idea was just to shoot some footage of the destruction. After a few days of shooting, I went back to Manila and watched what I had shot. I started to come up with some stories and I decided to do a combination of a documentary and a fiction film rather than a straight documentary. So I invited three theater actors from Manila and started improvising on some ideas and some characters. Every night I would write the script and the next morning we discussed it, and then we shot in the areas where there was a lot of devastation. I had a vision of where the film was going, but I developed it day by day. It developed and developed, not just the film, but also the title; I started with “In Memoriam,” then it was “Padang,” the name of the village, “Our Death,” “Death of a Poet,” and finally Death in the Land of Encantos.

BAUMGÄRTEL: What does “Encantos” mean?

DIAZ: “Encantos” means “enchantment,” but it is also a term for supernatural beings. The title already says a lot about the character of Filipinos. We live in a truly enchanted island, but there are a lot of contradictions. We are
so rich, but at the same time, we are so poor. We are so beautiful, but at the same time, we are so ugly. We know the truth, but we cannot pursue it. That kind of character is very Filipino. We know that the Marcoses did so many bad things to us, but we cannot bring them to justice. They are still out, they are dancing in the streets. The US$30 billion that they stole is still in the banks in Switzerland and Singapore and Hong Kong. We could not get them. We were only able to get US$800 million in the thirty years since they left. It is pathetic. Now they are coming out and claiming that they own all these hotels and the TV station GMA 7, because the new government compromised with them. Before the South Americans had this idea of magic realism, we already had Imelda Marcos! (laughs)

So the film is about all these maladies that we have. There is a lot of misery in the Philippines and then again, there are so many splendors. We also touch on the extra-judicial killings of activists and progressive people that have happened in past years. Lately under the Arroyo government, they have this aim of destroying the Communist Party, and they allotted ten billion pesos to the military to do it. They have a quota actually: in the next three years, they’re going to kill 3000 people. The lead character is a victim of that—he was tortured by the military. I developed the story of the film around the destruction that the typhoon had left behind. It is about a Filipino poet, coming home after learning about the typhoon. The film is also a discourse about beauty and aesthetics. In Bicol is the Mayon volcano. I think it is the most beautiful volcano there is and if you live there, it is just beautiful to look at it. At the same time, the destruction, man! It killed a lot of people!

Baumgärtel: The film is more than ten hours long, one of the longest narrative films in the history of cinema. Why are your films so long?

Diaz: It is an aesthetic standard that I developed starting with my film Batang Westside. My cinema is not part of the industry conventions anymore. It is free. So I am applying the theory that we Malays, we Filipinos, are not governed by the concept of time. We are governed by the concept of space. We don’t believe in time. If you live in the country, you see Filipinos hang out. They are not very productive. That is very Malay. It is all about space and nature. If we were governed by time, we would be very progressive and productive.

Baumgärtel: Where does this attitude come from?

Diaz: In the Philippine archipelago, nature provided everything until the concept of property came with the Spanish colonizers. Then the capitalist order took control. I have developed my aesthetic framework around the idea that we Filipinos are governed by nature. The concept of time was introduced
to us when the Spaniards came. We had to do oracion at six o’clock, start work at seven. Before it was free, it was Malay.

I am a son of farmer and a teacher and when I grew up in Cotabato on Mindanao, in the boondocks, I had to walk to school, ten kilometers every day, go back home another ten kilometers. Same thing in high school. I had to walk five kilometers every day. So this type of slow aesthetics is very much part of my culture. It is not just purposely done, to say I am versus this, or I am anti-that. It is my culture. I am sharing this vision and this experience, this Lav Diaz experience.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Nowadays films seem to be getting faster and faster. According to David Bordwell the average shot length of many Hollywood films is less than two seconds now. Is your cinema an attempt to provide an alternative to this?

DIAZ: I find long, long takes more emotional and more fulfilling in terms of creating pathos. I could chop up a scene in so many cuts, but I find long takes very emotional and very deep. I am not saying all the other concepts of mise-en-scène are not valid. You can do it fast, you can do it slow. But this is the framework that really gives me all the things that I want to see in a film. In that sense, I represent my culture. That is what I want to share as a Filipino.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Are these films made for the cinema? Or could they be released on DVD?

DIAZ: They can be shown everywhere. I can show these films in cinemas or on DVD or in galleries. In Toronto, they will show this film in a gallery as part of a performance. Some people will interact, so it is evolving into something else. I am seeing a different kind of cinema, where we destroy the concept of audience. So many things are possible. Art is really free now.

I don’t believe in the concept that you have to sit in the cinema for two hours and watch a story that is compressed into this period of time. Cinema can be anything. My films are not purposely done for the cinema anymore. You can watch them there, or in the streets, or... on a plane! Brandon Wec, a critic in Toronto, said, “Your cinema should be called the ‘flying cinema,’” and I asked, “Why?” “Because it would be good for planes, if you are on a long flight.” You can watch it at home, you can make love with your girlfriend for two hours, and when you come back, the film is still running. Or you could go to the farm, plough the land, and when you come home, the film is still on.

So there are different concepts of viewing now. My films are just like paintings that are just there. Nothing changes. You can watch it for eight hours and...
you can have a more fulfilling experience. Or you can leave the house, go to
work, and when you come home, it is still there. I used to get really angry when
my films were shown with intermissions. At the Rotterdam Film Festival they
showed *Heremias* with breaks for lunch and coffee, but in the end the audience
complained. They wanted to have an uninterrupted experience of the film, so
after that they showed the film without any breaks. A lot of people bring lunch
to the cinema when they come to watch my films, so they do not need to go out
of the theater when they get hungry.

Of course, if you are a purist, you want to see the whole thing. But you can
also choose the scenes that you would like to see or when you want to enter the
cinema. If you just want to stay for fifteen minutes, that’s fine. When Abbas
Kiarostami watches a film and sees a good scene, he is out of the cinema. Or
take Godard—he only watches the beginning and the end.

**Baumgärtel:** Has this method of working developed out of the digital
video you shoot your films on?

**Diaz:** Digital changes everything. You own the brush now, you own the
gun, unlike before, where it was all owned by the studio. Now it is all yours. It
is so free now. I can finish one whole film inside this room. We were flooded
here four days ago because of the last typhoon and the water went up to our
ankles. But we were still able to finish the film. We do not depend on film
studios and capitalists anymore. This is liberation cinema now. We can destroy
governments now because of digital.

---

*Figure 15.3* *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007) takes place after
the devastating eruption of Philippine volcano Mount Mayon.

*Photo: Laurel Penaranda*
Baumgärtel: Many filmmakers do not like digital video because of its perceived poor visual quality...

Diaz: I think that’s bullshit. I used to be into film. I shot on 16 and 35 millimeter and I really battled with that. But in the end, it is all about application. It is just like in painting. You can do watercolors, you can do chalk. The pen can be as potent as the oil. In Hollywood, they might use the most beautiful 800 ASA footage, but the film will still be trash. Or a Japanese filmmaker with a VHS camera can make a masterpiece just inside this room—alone! Just look at the digital films as cinema. There are people, who are saying, “Oh, the film was shot in digital?” That alone compromises the idea. If you have that kind of issue, don’t watch the film.

Baumgärtel: The relatively cheap digital video has started a cinema revolution in all of Southeast Asia, not only in the Philippines, but in the whole region...

Diaz: Digital is liberation theology. Now we can have our own media. The Internet is so free, the camera is so free. The issue is not anymore that you cannot shoot. You have a Southeast Independent Cinema now. We have been deprived for a long time, we have been neglected, we have been dismissed by the Western media. That was because of production logistics. We did not have money, we did not have cameras, all those things. Now, these questions have been answered. We are on equal terms now. Now there are new people who are doing these very different things, such as Raya Martin, John Torres, or Khavn de la Cruz in the Philippines.
BAUMGÄRTEL: But all your films have been premiered at Western film festivals, while they have rarely been shown in the Philippines. The majority of your audience seems to be in the West...

DIAZ: In Europe, actually . . .

BAUMGÄRTEL: How does this go together with the fact that you are trying to establish a Malay film aesthetic?

DIAZ: In terms of viewing such films, we are so backwards in the Philippines. Our theaters would not accept that kind of thing because they only want to make money. I can only show my films at universities or the Cultural Institute of the Philippines. So it is a question of venues. Of course, we still have our film industry and our stupid television with its soap operas and noon-time shows. If you talk about the struggle to change aesthetic standards, it will take a long time because we have been fed by Hollywood and by the Philippine film studios with trash for almost one hundred years. Maybe it will take fifty more years for them to see that all the crazy things that we are doing are not really madness, but it is for them, for the culture. We are not rushing. It will happen. Culture is growing. So if you make good cinema, you help culture to grow. If you make bad cinema, you demolish culture. It is very true. If you create good things, you reap good things. But in the meanwhile, you don’t have money. (laughs)

An edited version of this interview was published in the German daily “die tageszeitung” on August 28, 2007.
Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul is among the most important avant-garde directors of current world cinema. His films, like Mysterious Object at Noon, Syndromes and a Century, and Tropical Malady, polarize the audience and the critics, since they disregard traditional narrative structures and focus on the visible instead: the rich vegetation of the jungle, the reflections in a brook, the shy interactions between two doting lovers.

Trained as an architect in Thailand and as a visual artist in Chicago, he has not restricted himself to feature films. As an artist he has experimented with audio and video installations, including his Haunted House project, an explanation of the soap-opera addiction of Thai television viewers and radio listeners. His short films are important elements of his oeuvre that he often uses to develop themes and

Figure 16.1 Apichatpong Weerasethakul on the set of Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010).
Photo: Nontawat Numbenchapol
the aesthetic approach of his feature films. While he is a celebrated filmmaker at Western film festivals, in Thailand his films are screened only rarely. *Syndromes and a Century* could only be shown in his home country after a couple of scenes were blacked-out.

The interview was conducted on the occasion of his first major European retrospective that was shown in Vienna, Munich, and Berlin in May 2009. At the same time, he showed a video installation in the Haus der Kunst museum in Munich and he was working on *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. The interview focuses on how to be an independent director in a developing country who has the majority of his audience in other parts of the world.

**Filmography**

**Feature Films**

*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Loong Boonmee raleuk chat, 2010)
*Syndromes and a Century* (Sang Sattawat, 2006)
*Tropical Malady* (Sud Pralad, 2004)
*Blissfully Yours* (Sud Sanaeha, 2002)
*Mysterious Object at Noon* (Dokfar Nai Meu Marn, 2000)

**Shorts and Installations (Selection)**

*A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009)
*Primitive* (2009)
*Mobile Men* (2008)
*Phantoms of Nabua* (2008)
*Luminous People* (2007)
*The Anthem* (2006)
*Worldly Desires* (2006)
*Ghost of Asia* (co-directed with Christelle Lheureux) (2005)
*Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* (1995)
*0116643225059* (1994)

*     *     *     *    *

**Baumgärtel:** Congratulations on your first major retrospective. How does it feel to have such a comprehensive showing of all of your works before you are even forty?
Apichatpong: Oh, it makes me feel old. (laughs) Actually I had a retrospective in Japan before, but it was not so complete. This one really includes all of my works—except for some that I am ashamed of. I think this retrospective is good for me, because now it is getting harder to raise funding for my feature films. I am at some kind of crossroad. I have to decide what I want to do, if I can continue to be as productive as I used to be. I haven’t seen all my works together, so it is a chance to look back and find some encouragement or to question if it is all worth it.

Baumgärtel: Do you have any doubts about that?

Apichatpong: All the time, all the time! First of all, it is a nightmare financially. It gets harder and harder to make the kind of films I am doing. And second of all, it is hard if you have to reach out for the audience and not much of it is in Thailand.

Baumgärtel: I am surprised that a critical acclaimed filmmaker like you has problems raising money . . .

Apichatpong: From the point of view of the producers, that is a different issue. I think it is getting harder even for commercial films to raise funds. All my films are very personal, so I really depend on funding bodies. My last film, Syndromes and a Century, for example, was financed with money from Austria, because the Mozart festival there had this huge budget. But this kind of budget does not come quite that often. The producers still ask if my next film will be more accessible than the last one. And I cannot answer. Even Hollywood movies flop, so you cannot tell what is going to happen with a film.

Baumgärtel: But you are considered to be one of the major representatives of world cinema right now . . .

Apichatpong: No, no, I do not represent anything but myself. I think I am still learning and experimenting. Lately I have been doing art installations and photographs to find a true expression. As for my career in the movies, it is still in its early phase. I am still looking for the way.

Baumgärtel: Are your installations, like the one you are showing in Munich right now, a work in themselves, or are they kind of a first sketch for feature films?

Apichatpong: Some are works in their own right. But the piece in Munich that is called “Primitive Project,” has many elements: an installation, an artist’s book, photographs, a short film, and eventually a feature film. So now we are raising funds for the feature film version. It will be different from the installation, but the concept is there. It is about the history of Northeast Thailand.
where I grew up. In the installation, we focused on a small village near the Mekong River where the government during the 1960s and 1970s hunted down suspected communists. The feature film is focused on a man who was repeatedly reborn in that region. The whole project is about remembering the past of the region. I would like to make a document and a representation of that region and dedicate it to the people of that part of Thailand.

BAUMGÄRTEL: How did you come across this man that you are featuring in the film?

Apichatpong: Uncle Boonmee is an actual person who used to live in a city not far from my hometown, Khon Kaen. He came to meditate at the temple near my home. A monk talked to him and got his story, and wrote a small pocket book on him called *The Man Who Can Recall His Past Life* that I found at the temple. It is not very well known in Thailand, but this book really inspired me because this man stubbornly got reborn in the same area, which is a very difficult place to live—there were all these political operations, the weather, the economy. So I got very curious about this man who stays there. We hope to shoot it by the end of the year. It is about this guy who has forty-eight hours to live, and that is all the time he has to tell his story that he has experienced for centuries. So the film is very condensed and very intense in terms of narrative. The story is told from multiple points of view before he passes away.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Why were you interested in this man who remembers his previous incarnations?

Apichatpong: First of all, I am a Buddhist, so I believe in reincarnation. I also believe that many things in my region Khon Kaen will disappear soon, the folktales and the customs and many of the precious things I grew up with.
BAUMGÄRTEL: I would have thought that a Buddhist just takes these changes as they come . . .

APICHATPONG: Yes, I know. It is also contradictory to the nature of cinema. (laughs)

BAUMGÄRTEL: I noticed that your motto that I see while we are talking via Skype is “In five billion years, even the sun will be destroyed.” That sounds like a much more Buddhist thought to me: everything will eventually disappear. So why bother with the past at all?

APICHATPONG: Well, maybe I put that there to remind myself not to be too obsessed with the past. (laughs) But I do think that in Thailand people forget too easily, especially in politics. Many dictators got away and for many killings and political crimes, justice has never been served. My previous films were very personal. They are about my life, my parents, my interest in movies. But this film is not a personal story. The Primitive project I am doing now is more political. My interests have shifted, because of what is going on in this country.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Does this shift towards more political topics also have to do with the fact that your last film Syndromes and a Century was censored in Thailand?

APICHATPONG: In a way, yes, because before that I was never really interested in how the government in Thailand works. But by getting censored I learned their process of thinking and how the law works. I formed the group Free Thai Cinema with other filmmakers and we got involved with the government officials and people like that. After one year of negotiations we decided that we were wasting our time. The system will not change. That is Thailand. But it has affected my work as a filmmaker.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Apart from being a filmmaker, you are also the founder of the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival. Was that an attempt to create an audience for your kind of filmmaking?

APICHATPONG: When I came back to Bangkok after studying in Chicago, it was like coming back to reality. And I missed the films that I saw in Chicago. So I decided to do a film festival in Bangkok, so we could open up and find out what went on in the rest of the world. The festival is still ongoing, even though I am not involved in organizing it anymore. But I am still there as a supporter. I think it was and is beneficial to film lovers and film students, that we got a lot of films that were not shown at the Goethe Institut or Alliance Française. Some of the people who attended the first festivals became filmmakers and
they still are active in the film community. Before we founded the film festival, there were no other film festivals at all in Thailand. The other festivals came later.

**Baumgärtel:** Why do you come back to works for art shows? Is it more profitable to do installations than to do movies?

**Apichatpong:** It is safer financially, because it does not involve millions of baht. Cinema is more risky. In cinema, I always have to depend on the funding of institutions. In the arts, my main interest is to explore the possibilities of what I can do. At the same time, the practice in the arts is supporting the feature film.

**Baumgärtel:** Are your art works for sale, or are they exclusively for presentation at the art institutions that commission them?

**Apichatpong:** Both. I have a gallery in Tokyo that represents me at the moment. We had a show recently, so I am open to selling my works.

**Baumgärtel:** Considering all these efforts to raise money for your films, do you see yourself as an independent filmmaker?

**Apichatpong:** I would think that I am an independent filmmaker, if independent means that you are not attached to any studio and you are doing your own administrative and production work. In that sense, I am independent. I work really closely with my producer, and in the process I became a producer myself, and I actually line-produce my own movies.

**Baumgärtel:** You have your own production company, Kick the Machine. Can you say a little bit about that company, as many independent filmmakers in Thailand and in the other countries of Southeast Asia do not have that kind of backup, but rather work completely by themselves?

**Apichatpong:** It is really just me and two employees, one of them an accountant. It was established to deal with the laboratory, the equipment, the legal issues. I used to have a dream to turn this company into a distribution company for art-house and experimental film in Thailand and have its own little Cinémathèque or something like that. But that is going nowhere at the moment. I hope that it will happen in the future. I am also producing films by others.

**Baumgärtel:** I was always wondering where that name came from: Kick the Machine.

**Apichatpong:** Well, I used to do these weekly screenings of films at an art gallery and that was the name I came up with for that event. It is a little bit
rebellious on the one hand, like kicking the establishment or something like that, but at the same time it refers to just switching the projector on . . .

BAUMGÄRTEL: Tell me a little bit about your influences. How did you become interested in making independent film in Thailand, a country that does not have a tradition of avant-garde filmmaking?

APICHATPONG: I studied architecture in Thailand, but I always wanted to make films. So I studied film in Chicago. I did not really plan what I would be doing. I took things one at a time. I actually practiced a little bit as an architect, but did not like it that much. Film was also part of the exploration. I like it because it gives me a lot of freedom and the opportunity to experiment with images. So I stayed on. At first, I just wanted to finish my first movie, and then it got some festival screenings and it had this snow ball effect.

BAUMGÄRTEL: In the Philippines, where I currently live, the main way to see movies that were not local commercial films or Hollywood productions in the 1980s and 1990s were foreign cultural institutes like the German Goethe Institute. Even some embassies brought in art-house films. How was that in Thailand? Were did you get to see films that were different from what was shown in regular theaters?

APICHATPONG: We also had the Goethe Institut and the Alliance Française, and those were the most important screening venues, and they still are now. But since I grew up in Khon Kaen, there were no such venues. Therefore I depended on VHS tapes to see movies. But the movies available in that area were not very extensive. So I had only very limited access to film. When I went to Chicago, I was still very naïve about what cinema was.

BAUMGÄRTEL: I assume that the films that were available there were mostly Hollywood and Hong Kong films and local commercial productions?

APICHATPONG: Yes, and sometimes I would find a film by Fellini. That, for me, was already extreme, and I really liked them. But in Chicago, it was an introduction to experimental film, especially American experimental film, people like Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, all those classics.

BAUMGÄRTEL: What exactly were those influences like? I can somehow see how Maya Deren had an influence on you, but not how formalists like Stan Brakhage had an impact on your kind of filmmaking.

APICHATPONG: These films really changed my thinking on film: Wow, you can do a movie by yourself! The influence for my first short films was really structural film. But what was much more important for me was that you basically force yourself to learn the whole art of filmmaking, from sound recording
to editing to cinematography. Even for my first feature film, I thought: Oh, I can do all that by myself!

The other major influences at that time were the very good programs on new Asian cinema in Chicago. They showed all the films by Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Abbas Kiarostami in retrospectives. I could especially relate to the Taiwanese films, because the city landscape of Taipei reminded me so much of Bangkok. The street food and the motorcycles and all that—I could link with those more than with many Thai films at the time.

BAUMGÄRTEL: It is ironic that you had to see these Asian films in Chicago . . .

APICHATPONG: Yes, but that has changed. Right now, you can find so many films in Thailand as pirated copies on DVD. You have to thank the Chinese for that. (laughs)

BAUMGÄRTEL: In Chicago you learned the craft of filmmaking. How did you get from this university education to actually making a feature length film in Thailand, where no film like your debut *Mysterious Object at Noon* had ever been made before?

APICHATPONG: In school, I learned mainly 16mm, and it turned out that there was very little support for 16mm in Thailand. Here it is mostly 35mm. But I knew how to shoot film and how to do sound, so I went ahead. When I came back from Chicago in 1997, I put an ad in the newspaper that said that I was looking for people with or without experience in filmmaking. At that time, the economy was down because it was the period of the Asian financial crisis. There were many people who were interested in doing this because they had no jobs, and they’d rather learn. They took classes and finished their degrees. And they were really open. They were not so interested in money but in knowledge. I think if I would put the same ad in the newspaper now, I would get less response. At that time, people would work for food and accommodation. So I selected five people to work with, and we traveled around in Thailand and shot the footage for *Mysterious Object at Noon*.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Did they wonder about how you made the film, why there wasn’t a script and things like that?

APICHATPONG: They had never done a feature film, just like me, so I told them to have fun with the process and consider it as a kind of game. It was not so complicated, it was like doing a television documentary in a way. We just went to the villages and talked to people. I also did not think of it as a super-complex movie, I just compiled my material and worked with that in
the editing room. Some of the people who worked with me on that movie still work with me now.

BAUMGÄRTEL: In the Philippines, a lot of the contemporary independent filmmakers got the chance to make their movies because of digital video, which is cheap and easy to edit on a home computer. You, however, were able to make such an idiosyncratic movie on regular film . . .

APICHATPONG: Yes, we shot on black and white 16mm reversal film that was later blown up to 35mm. At that time, in the late 1990s, digital was not so popular yet, and there was no support to work with digital. The material I shot for the installation *Primitive* was shot on digital video. I think it depends on the situation. Normally I prefer film, but sometimes if I want to do something as spontaneous as the footage I shot for the installation, I really need digital.

BAUMGÄRTEL: After the festival success of *Mysterious Object at Noon*, where did the funding for your next films came from?

APICHATPONG: A lot of it came from abroad. *Blissfully Yours* was partly done with funds from a Taiwanese in Thailand: *Tropical Malady* is twenty-five percent Thai money, and in *Syndromes and a Century*, there was a tiny bit of money from the Thai government.

BAUMGÄRTEL: And then they banned the film in Thailand . . .

APICHATPONG: Yes. Thank you, government! (laughs)

Figure 16.3 *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) was shown in Thailand in a censored version.  
*Source: Kick the Machine Films*
BAUMGÄRTEL: How much time do you spend abroad per year?

APICHATPONG: Maybe half and half. But is always only for a short time, a couple of days or something like that.

BAUMGÄRTEL: On the website of your company Kick the Machine, I noticed these “image diaries,” which are monthly collections of snap shots that you take during your travels. Sometimes the shots show things that are typically Thai, but a lot of them seem to be taken in Europe or the US. It gives the impression of this totally globalized filmmaker who is at home everywhere in the world . . .

APICHATPONG: I do this in order not to forget those experiences. I have an opportunity that I never dreamed of—to travel to so many places all over the world and meet so many different people. It does not matter so much if it is a village in Thailand or Vienna. For me it is all the same, I just want to keep them.

BAUMGÄRTEL: There is this notion of filmmakers like you from non-Western countries, who depend on funding from abroad for their films, that they do not really produce for the audience in their respective countries, but rather for the international film festivals, for DVDs that are sold in the West. Who do you make your films for?

APICHATPONG: I make films for myself. I know that this is a very ignorant answer, but it is true. If you think about the market, you would not make this kind of film at all. And in France or in New York, my films are not much more popular than in Thailand. It is a very specialized market. Some people in Thailand watch the kind of films I make, but Thailand is a very small country. It is not even as big as Texas, so you cannot hope for big box office success. I depend on very specialized people in a lot of countries. But my first intention is to make something honest and something I feel excited about. It might seem like I do not care about the audience, but when I plan a project I always have several scenarios, and then I work out with the producers what is actually possible. But I don’t consider money from France or from Thailand any different; I am not making a different film because of that.

BAUMGÄRTEL: What is the typical budget for a film like yours?

APICHATPONG: Tropical Malady was one million US dollars, and Syndromes 800,000 euros.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Do your films earn their money back eventually with DVD sales and with the sale of television rights?
Apichatpong: Honestly, I don’t know. This is handled by a sales company, and I think they earn their money back slowly. The money for the pictures is often from non-profit organizations, and the sales company does not invest much in the first place, and they can recoup their money from rentals in other countries and things like that. I really don’t know the figures, but I doubt that they make a big profit.

Baumgärtel: So you get a fee for your work, and that is all, as far as you are concerned.

Apichatpong: Right.

Baumgärtel: Where would you locate yourself in the Thai society economically? Are you a bohemian or are you middle class?

Apichatpong: The word bohemian sounds interesting. (laughs) But if I am honest, I think I am middle class.

Baumgärtel: Since you do not work with any film companies in Thailand and your funding comes mostly from abroad, do you see yourself as a part of Thai national cinema at all? Or do you belong to a new, global cinema that is not part of any national tradition anymore?

Apichatpong: I’d like to think that I do not represent any nation or any country. But you cannot deny that I share the same crew and the same equipment and facilities as other Thai filmmakers. So I think I am somehow part of it. But when I think about the movie itself, it is not for Thailand.

Baumgärtel: Interestingly, for the audience abroad you seem to represent Thai cinema and a certain kind of “Asian-ess” or even “Thai-ness.” How do you feel about that?

Apichatpong: It is just what I like and what my impression of this country is. For example, there is this scene with the aerobic dancing in this park in Bangkok in Syndromes and a Century that I really like and that was really fascinating to me. But nobody shot that on film so far. I don’t know if that makes me a Thai filmmaker.

Baumgärtel: Could you make films in a country other than Thailand, let’s say in the US or in Austria?

Apichatpong: Certainly, if I can relate to the concept and the subject.

Baumgärtel: If your films all of a sudden would become blockbuster successes and you had an unlimited budget available to you, would your approach towards filmmaking change? Or would you still make these relatively restrained films?
Apichatpong: If I had more money, of course I would want to make something spectacular. I am really in love with Hollywood special effects, and I think they could be used for other kinds of films that are more personal. I’d like to try that out.

A shorter version of this interview was published in the German daily “die tageszeitung” on March 26, 2009.
“I love making films, but not getting films made”
Interview with Pen-ek Ratanaruang

Tilman Baumgärtel

Pen-ek Ratanaruang, together with Wisit Sasanatieng and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, is among the internationally best-known directors of the Thai New Wave. He studied art history and philosophy from 1977 to 1985 at the Pratt Institute in New York and worked as freelance illustrator and designer with Designframe. After a brief stay in Berlin, he returned to Bangkok and directed several television commercials, for which he won numerous awards—including a bronze medal at Cannes for an anti-dandruff shampoo spot. In 1997, he made his first feature film *Fun Bar Karaoke*, a pioneering independent movie in Thailand, which was screened at the Berlinale, and started his international career.

![Pen-ek Ratanaruang on the set of *Nymph* (2009).](image)

Source: Pen-ek Ratanaruang

He moved on from Thai-financed films to international co-productions with Japanese and European backers, and his films *Last Life in the Universe* (2003) and *Invisible Waves* (2006) were realized with Australian cinematographer Chris Doyle,
the frequent collaborator of Wong Ka-Wai, and an increasingly international cast that included the Japanese actor Tadanobu Asano. His films are frequently deconstructed versions of genre films, mostly of thrillers, such as Last Life in the Universe, in which Asano plays a suicidal yakuza in Bangkok, and Invisible Waves, where Asano again plays a killer on the run. Monrak Transistor (2001) on the other hand, is his nod to traditional Thai cinema and includes a spoof on the film narrators that used to live-dub movies in Thailand in open air screenings at village fairs. Despite the internationalism of his films both in terms of production and in terms of story line, he has also made a short film for a compilation film, Commemoration of the Celebration on the 80th Birthday Anniversary of the Thai King.

Getting hold of him for this interview was not easy as he was on location shooting his latest film Nymph in the jungles of Thailand. That’s why I started the interview with some questions on this new production, before discussing his career and his perspective on independent cinema.

Filmography

Sawasdee Bangkok (2009)
Nymph (2009)
Ploy (2007)
Invisible Waves (2006)
Last Life in the Universe (Ruang rak noi nid mahasan, 2003)
Monrak Transistor (2001)
6ixtynin9 (Ruang talok 69, 1999)
Fun Bar Karaoke (Fan ba karaoke, 1997)

Baumgärtel: Tell me about your new film that you just finished shooting . . .

Ratanaruang: It is about this city couple, who takes a vacation in the jungle and he falls in love with a tree. That’s pretty much it, and then we follow how the love triangle between the three of them develops. You know, the usual love story . . . (laughs)

Baumgärtel: Is it based on an old Thai legend?

Ratanaruang: No, I came up with the story by myself. But there is this traditional Thai belief that trees have spirits living in them. So, if you are in the forest and you take a pee, you have to apologize to the tree on which you peed. (laughs)
Baumgärtel: When is the film due to come out?

Ratanaruang: The plan is to edit it in the next couple of months and then have it come out maybe in May 2009. Most of the time, my films do not have a definite release date. I work quite slowly and if I am not happy with my work, the producers won’t be able to see it, so they don’t put a date on it.

Baumgärtel: That approach towards filmmaking is not the norm in commercial filmmaking, where deadlines count. Do you see yourself as an independent filmmaker?

Ratanaruang: I am not really sure what the term independent means for a filmmaker because you always have to depend on somebody. But I am definitely not a professional filmmaker in the sense that I can do pretty much what people ask me to do. I cannot. (laughs) It has happened a few times that people tried to hire me to make films in the industry. They gave me a story and I wrote a screenplay, or they even gave me a screenplay and asked me if I would be interested in directing it. There have been three or four attempts to do something like that, but it never worked out.

Baumgärtel: Why not?

Ratanaruang: Well, for one reason or another. In one case, they gave me a story, and then they hated the screenplay I came up with and went quiet. There was another film, where we came so close to making it, but in the end the investor had a falling out with my producer. The investor really liked me though, and wanted to make the film with me. But the script belongs to the producers, so nothing came out of it. They are still saying that they are looking for money, but I don’t believe it.

But anyway, I continue to make my kind of films, which is quicker and faster, and I do not have to rely on so many people. The film I just finished shooting is like my other films in that respect: it was made with people I know, including the investor. So, as long as I do not go over a certain amount of money, I can do pretty much whatever I want to do.

Baumgärtel: What was the budget for this movie?

Ratanaruang: The previous film I made, Ploy, a small film about three people in a hotel room, was half a million dollars. Here it is roughly the same.

Baumgärtel: So, it is not a matter of principle that you are not working within the industry, it just happens to be like that . . .

Ratanaruang: I don’t really distinguish these things. These things are just for scholars and for writers—this kind of film is an independent film, this
kind of film is a commercial film, etc. As for me, I make the films that I can make. If I get to make a film with Julia Roberts or with Brad Pitt, I would do it, as long as they give me the freedom to do what I want. If I am interested in the story or in the characters, I’d do anything. I really don’t care.

Then again, it all comes back to who you are. Even if I say I’m interested in making a Hollywood movie, my character and my temperament and the way I work will automatically prevent me from doing that. I think you can’t really lie to yourself. If I was a bit younger or a bit more ambitious, I might force myself to fit in. But now I am not so young anymore and I do not have that kind of ambition. So I just focus my energy on the things that I enjoy doing.

BAUMGÄRTEL: You are saying that you do not see yourself as an independent filmmaker. Then again, you stick to stories or film plots that are easy to realize with limited means, films that take place in a small hotel room with only three protagonists, or in some apartments and the Japan Foundation, etc. Isn’t that one definition of “independent film” that you limit your projects to such low-budget, “doable” projects?

RATANARUANG: You are right, I stick to “doable” projects. But I’m not sure, if that’s because I’m independent or because I’m afraid of wasting my time. To spend four or five months writing a script that in the end no one is going to give me money to make is not my idea of a good time—although I have done it a few times. Or if someone actually gives me money to make it, but I have to make so many compromises, then I wouldn’t want to do it. I have other interests apart from filmmaking. I’d rather spend that time going places
or having good conversation and drinking with people I like or doing small projects with friends. I just don’t have the kind of devotion and determination that some filmmakers have. I’m totally devoted, once I’m actually making the films. But that’s a different thing. I love making films, but not getting films made.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Your films are often financed in cooperation with international companies, like the Dutch distributor Fortissimo, and you seem to rely to a big extent on your films being shown in Europe, Japan, and the US. Do you see yourself as part of Thai cinema, or are your films part of international “world cinema”?

RATANARUANG: I’m part of both, and my films are part of both. Of course my films are better received abroad than in my homeland, but that doesn’t mean they’re not Thai films. I’ve made seven films and only two of them were made with foreign actors and a foreign cinematographer; the other five were made with 100 percent Thai casts and crew. And Thai cinema is part of world cinema. When I make my films I’m totally focused on how to make them work creatively, never financially. So I don’t think: “Hey, my market is Europe, Japan, and the USA. I’d better put these scenes in because these foreigners will like them.” To make the films come out as close to my vision as possible is already hard enough. If I have to concern myself with the other things, it would be impossible.

BAUMGÄRTEL: But if you look at the credits of your films there are sometimes up to ten producers! If you work with so many people, aren’t there certain other liabilities?

RATANARUANG: Well, certain liabilities would absolutely come with a project that involves as many parties as Invisible Waves or Last Life in the Universe. The cameraman Chris Doyle, the actor Tadanobu Asano from Japan, Hye-jeong Kang from Korea and Eric Zhang from Hong Kong were suggested to me by investors. But they never forced me to work with them. They suggested these people and I figured out on my own if I would accept. And of course, when you work on films with international stars such as these, the atmosphere on the set changes. My way of working had to be compromised. You can say I had to step out of my comfort zone to work on both of those films. But nobody forced me to do that. I accepted both projects and their liabilities, delightfully, as a challenge and an experiment. On one film I did quite well, on another, not so well. But that’s life. If a project like these comes my way again, I would do it again in a second. I had a great time working on those two films and I learnt a lot.
BAUMGÄRTEL: What is the reception of your films like in Thailand. How is different from the reception in “the West”?

RATANARUANG: Here in Thailand I have a small group of people who follow what I make. They would watch whatever film I come up with. But they are not enough in numbers to make a big profit. In fact, so far, none of my films ever broke even in Thailand alone. Most people here complain that my films are difficult.

BAUMGÄRTEL: What do you think makes these movies difficult for a Thai audience, but not for a certain type of “foreign” audience? What are the cultural differences that come into play there?

RATANARUANG: My movies are a bit slow for a commercial Thai film’s standard. And they also leave a lot unsaid and are rather unsentimental. The audience has to get involved. They can’t just sit back and relax and have some popcorn and talk on the phones while they are watching them. So that makes them difficult. I would say that most commercial Thai films are very wordy and obvious and very sentimental. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying these qualities are bad, but they are qualities that my films don’t have. But like everywhere in the world, there is a certain type of audience that actually enjoys these films. I’m one of them. It just happens that this certain type of audience is very small in numbers in my homeland compared to Europe or the US.

BAUMGÄRTEL: At the same time, people in Europe find a film like Last Life in the Universe very Asian or maybe even very Thai. Can you speculate: where does this perception come from? Do you agree?

Figure 17.3  Tadanobu Asano in Last Life in the Universe (2004).
Source: Fortissimo Films
Ratanaruang: I don’t see a film like *Last Life in the Universe* as being specifically Asian or Thai. It’s very universal. The same story and feeling can happen anywhere in the world. People in Europe or America tend to think that a film that takes its time in telling its story, and does so quietly, is very Asian, I think. They think Asians do things slowly and don’t talk much. But I admit that both Chris Doyle and I think that the locations and their spaces in a film are as important as the characters. So we worked very hard to make that happen in our films.

Baumgärtel: So who exactly is the audience for your films?

Ratanaruang: Lonely people tend to like my films a lot. Happy people don’t seem to get my films. When I meet someone who says she liked my films, ninety percent of the time she prefers funerals to weddings, and is also a fan of Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, Bob Dylan, and Nick Cave, like myself. If there was a “Lonely Film Festival” my films would probably win the audience award.

Baumgärtel: I sometimes wonder if there isn’t secretly a new type of cinema evolving—and your films would be an example for that—that is not bound by national traditions anymore, but seems to be directed towards some transnational, cosmopolitan group of people that share certain traits, interests and attitudes. Do you agree?

Ratanaruang: You are absolutely right. I don’t believe for a second that the human race is divided by passports, skin colors, languages, or religions. The human race is divided by tastes, interests, and attitudes—now more than ever. My films can communicate with only a certain type of audience even in Thailand, and that certain type exists in every culture and country. Like I mentioned earlier, someone who likes my films tends to listen to the same kind of music I listen to or read the same kind of books I read, regardless of their nationality or religion. And this explains why Hollywood films are so popular around the world—because a large number of people around the world enjoy hamburgers.

Baumgärtel: You talk about this international category of people, who enjoy your films about lonely and alienated people. As far as I know this was not an important subject matter for earlier generations of Thai filmmakers. Could it be that your films are also a sign of the emergence of a new bourgeoisie in Thailand due to the recent economic growth and that this bourgeoisie can afford to dwell in this kind of attitude? You can see the same happening in other countries. When Italy had its *miracolo economico*, there were directors like Antonioni; in Northern Europe, you had Bergman; in Taiwan the rise of their economy also brought about filmmakers such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien or Tsai Ming-liang, etc. It seems that auteurist cinema often provides an
accompaniment in a minor key to the economic ascendant of a country. Can you comment on that?

Ratanaruang: You are right again here, I think. Big cities in Asia have become like all the other big cities in the world. I think this has been a fact even before I started making films ten years ago. But for most filmmakers of previous generations in Asia this issue of loneliness and alienation was perhaps not something you could make a film out of. I cannot speak for other filmmakers, but for myself: films by Bergman, Woody Allen, Jim Jarmusch, and Shōhei Imamura have shown the way for me that you can make a film about any subject, no matter how trivial it seems, as long as you yourself identify with it. So since my first film, I started making films about how people search for happiness because that’s what I’m interested in. I could make a film about how poor we are in the farms and how life is so difficult in the slums, but perhaps not until I make enough films about lonely people looking for connection. Because that’s how I feel about my own existence. To me, to make a film worth watching is to be honest about your own feelings. A lot of farmers will think my films are full of shit, but to lonely people, perhaps, my films are truthful.

Baumgärtel: In the Philippines, a lot of Indie filmmakers take the cue from earlier neo-realist or social-critical directors from the 1980s (like Lino Brocka) and focus in their films on the gritty life in the slums, poverty, etc. In Thailand there was a similar period in the 1970s and 1980s, with directors like the early Chatrichalerm Yukol or Vichit Kounavudhi. Yet, the younger generation of Thai film directors, you included, do not seem to be interested in these issues anymore, even though these problems still persist. Do you have any explanation for that?

Ratanaruang: I’m obsessed with this subject of alienated people looking for connections. So when I have an idea to make a film it’s always about this subject. I cannot control it. And when I make a film, the dialog and behavior of the people in my film are very important. So I have to write about people I know, otherwise the audience can not feel the film because it would not feel real. I can tolerate bad films, but I cannot tolerate pretentious films. And if I do something I don’t have a connection with, no matter how important the subject is, that is what you will end up with—a pretentious film.

Baumgärtel: Are there traditions, filmmakers, movies in Thai film that you feel particularly strongly about or that you would call an influence on your own work?

Ratanaruang: Chatrichalerm Yukol’s career would definitely be an influence. Not one particular film, but his entire body of work. I admire his passion about filmmaking and the fact that he keeps making them no matter
what. I like that. Rattana Pestonji would be another influence. I admire his films for their beauty and elegance.

BAUMGÄRTEL: In my interviews with filmmakers from Southeast Asia one thing frequently comes up and that is some encounter with a foreign art-house film that inspired the director to make his own movies. Do you have a similar experience?

RATANARUANG: The film that made me aware that there were different types of cinema other than the Hollywood type was Frederico Fellini’s *8 1/2*. I saw that film when I was studying in New York City. I went into the cinema to see that film mainly because of the beautiful poster for I knew nothing about cinema in general. When the film was finished, I was totally blown away. I couldn’t believe someone could make something so incomprehensible and people still come to see it—and call it a movie! I couldn’t believe something like this could exist. I couldn’t understand anything about that film, but I found it profoundly intoxicating. It was like falling in love. You don’t understand it, it confuses you, but you cannot take your eyes away from the screen. That film made me aware and I started to seek out other European art films. I watched Bergman, Antonioni, Imamura, Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, etc. However, watching all these films didn’t make me want to become a filmmaker, because I thought that films had to be made by geniuses only, not people like you or me. I lived in New York city for nine and a half years and happily spent most of my money watching these films in cinemas, not on DVD. This has become a habit. If I watch films not in the theater but on DVD, I fall asleep.

BAUMGÄRTEL: So how did you become a filmmaker after all?

RATANARUANG: Purely by accident. Over ten years ago, a friend opened a production company to make television commercials and he asked me to join him. I did join him two years later out of curiosity. I made TV commercials for five years before writing my first feature film script and going around asking for money. Of course, by that time I had seen enough mediocre films to realize that non-geniuses also make films. It took one full year before someone gave me money to make my film. Although the film didn’t turn out so great, that same person still invests in my films today. And if I’m still interested and someone still gives me money, I’ll keep on making films. I suppose this isn’t good news for people who do not like my films. I had no education, you see, so this is how I learn—film by film, mistake by mistake.

BAUMGÄRTEL: In Malaysia and in the Philippines, filmmakers often point out that there is a sense of camaraderie between them, as they support each other during shoots or even with loans, etc. How is it in Thailand? Are you in touch with other filmmakers? Do you cooperate?
Ratanaruang: Absolutely. We do help each other when help is needed. In my case, I don’t see other directors very often because I’m mostly busy, and they are also busy, and I like to stay home when I’m not working. But they know if they want help from me, I’ll be there, and likewise. Nonzee Nimibutr has produced two of my films. Wisit Sasanatieng has written music for my films. I helped editing one of Nonzee’s films and narrated one of Wisit’s films, etc.

Baumgärtel: Are you aware of the other independent films that are coming out of Southeast Asia right now? Have you seen any other films from the Philippines, Malaysia, or Singapore, by filmmakers like Lav Diaz, John Torres, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, etc.?

Ratanaruang: Yes, I am aware of these filmmakers. Some of them, like Amir Muhammad, I even know personally. You run into these people at film festivals. Unfortunately, I don’t go to as many festivals as I used to. And I don’t watch as many films as I used to. So, some of these filmmakers, I only know them, but never watch their films.
“I want the people of Indonesia to see a different point of view, whether they agree with it or not”
Interview with Nia Dinata

Tilman Baumgärtel

Indonesian director Nia Dinata is no stranger to controversy. She has tackled subjects that were taboo in Indonesian cinema before she approached them. Her debut movie *A Courtesan* (Ca Bau Kan) from 2001 was about the life of an Indonesian-Chinese family in Jakarta in the early 20th century—not exactly an obvious choice only three years after the events of May 1998 when ethnic Chinese (who make up only about three percent of Indonesia’s population) were beaten up, their houses and shops looted and burned to the ground, and hundreds of women systematically gang-raped by mobs. These events ultimately lead to the ouster of President Soeharto. To make people of Chinese descent, who have traditionally been made into scapegoats in Indonesia, the subject of a movie was a brave decision.

---

Figure 18.1  Nia Dinata (right) with crew during the shooting of *Arisan!* (2003).
*Source: Kalyana Shina Films*
Her next movie, *Arisan!*, was among the first movies to openly tackle the gay scene in Jakarta. The satirical comedy takes its title from the name given to a social get-together where friends chip in money to be won later through a lucky draw. While the film primarily pokes fun at Indonesian yuppies, it did include a number of gay characters as well as a gay kissing scene that was a first in Indonesian film history. While that affront went unnoticed by the Islamist groups that began to gather influence and followers in the *post-reformasi* period, her next film, *Love for Share*, was surrounded by public controversy, as it deals with the highly charged subject of polygamy that also made a comeback after the collapse of Soeharto’s New Order. This film was also her international breakthrough; it traveled to many festivals and won the award for Best Movie at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 2007.

It was followed by *Chants of Lotus*, an omnibus film on sexuality, where Dinata shared the directing credits with three other women directors. Her production company, Kalyana Shira Films, has also produced works by other directors, including *Long Road to Heaven* about the Bali bombings. Other films from the company are lighter works such as the sex comedy *Quickie Express* that was the company’s most successful offering so far. More recently she has established Happy Endings, a new company, to produce films for the highly profitable teen market in Indonesia. And she produced Lucky Kuswandi’s daring comedy *Madame X* about a transsexual superhero, that became surprisingly successful in Indonesia despite its risqué subject matter.

Despite frequently taking on issues such as polygamy or sexual discrimination, Nia Dinata’s films are never treatises on social ills, but first and foremost moving and witty films on contemporary Indonesia. Defying the notion of what art-house films from the Third World are supposed to be like, she does not focus on poverty and slum life, but gives a more balanced picture of the Indonesian society that includes people from all social strata.

**Filmography**

*As director*

- *Chants of Lotus* (Perempuan punya cerita, 2007, one segment)
- *Love for Share* (Berbagi suami, 2006)
- *A Courtesan* (Ca-bau-kan, 2002)
As producer

Madame X (2010)
Because of Soccer (Gara-gara bola, 2008)
Chants of Lotus (Perempuan punya cerita, 2007)
Quickie Express (2007)
Long Road to Heaven (2007)
Janji Joni (2005)

Baumgärtel: What is your background? How did you become a filmmaker?

Dinata: I studied Mass Communication for my Bachelor’s degree in Indonesia, and then I studied film at New York University. I grew up watching films and spending most of my time in the cinema. I watched both Indonesian and Hollywood films, because that was all there was in our cinemas at that time. Even up until now, the cinemas only import Hollywood films. I was born in 1970, and I lived in Indonesia until 1988, when I went to the US, and there was no way to see anything else. Even the local film industry up until 1985 or 1989, was pretty dead, because of censorship by the New Order Regime.

Baumgärtel: Could you mention some films that were of particular influence on you during that time?

Dinata: When I was in the United States, I saw Red Sorghum on the campus of my university. That was the first time that I saw a non-Hollywood film. They were showing a lot of Zhang Yimou films in that particular week; I also saw Raise the Red Lantern. And I thought: OK, so this is a Chinese movie, how come I have never seen anything like that before? I was surprised and happy to find out about these films, and I think at this point I became more certain that I wanted to be a filmmaker.

Baumgärtel: How about Indonesian films?

Dinata: I grew up watching films like Ibunda (1986) or Badai pasti berlalu (1977) by Teguh Karya. And also Asrul Sani. These filmmakers had a big impact on me when I was a teenager. The films by Teguh Karya are dramas with a social background. Ibunda, for instance, is about a diabetic person who cannot marry another diabetic. The films by Asrul Sani are black comedies that tried to criticize the government, but not in such a direct way. Because of the harsh censorship of that time, they could not do anything really straightforward, so they had to do it in comedies.
BAUMGÄRTEL: You made your first feature film in 2002. What did you do after graduating?

DINATA: I came back to Indonesia in 1994 and I worked as a journalist and did TV commercials. Advertising was really booming at that time with all the new TV stations that were founded in the early 1990s. That was still under the New Order regime, so you had to submit your script to the censorship board if you wanted to make a film. There was also a regulation that you had to work as an assistant director on so many films before you could do your own movie. There were just so many restrictions at the time if you wanted to make a film! So, after the Soeharto dictatorship fell in 1998, there were all these new liberties. You could get all these books that were banned before. Under the New Order, we could not have any books on Marxism, socialism and all that, not even a book about the Chinese minority! Starting in 1999, we had lots of new publishing companies, literature started to bloom, writers started to publish all these new works or old works that were banned before. That’s when I started to do research for my first film on a Chinese community during the Dutch colonial era in the 1920s. It was based on a book by Remy Sylado that had just been published in 1999. I fell in love with the story, and then I started to do my own research. I met the author and started to develop the script.

BAUMGÄRTEL: So would you call yourself a product of the reformasi area?

DINATA: No. I had already made a television film in 1996. It is called Looking for Rainbows and was bought by one of the biggest TV networks in Indonesia. We already had some kind of networking between the different crews that were making TV commercials. We were all frustrated anyway, because we wanted to make films, but couldn’t. So we tried to find ways to do something safe. Looking for Rainbows is a film for children. I put a little bit of criticism here and there, very lightly. I think reformasi really just made things easier for us. It is like the whole nation is blessing us.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Around that time another group of independent filmmakers made this movie Kuldesak, which many consider to be the beginning of Indie filmmaking in Indonesia. The group included Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani, and Riri Riza, who all went on to become relatively successful directors in Indonesia. Did you have anything to do with them?

DINATA: We are all friends. They were also mainly working in commercials, and we got to know each other through our work. There is only one film school in Indonesia, even up until now: the Jakarta Art Institute. They were mostly from the Jakarta Art Institute, so I was always the outsider because I had studied abroad. But my cinematographers and art directors had all
graduated from the Jakarta Art Institute, so they introduced me to them. At that time, they were already developing their film. They shot the film at the very end of the New Order regime and released it right after Soeharto’s fall.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Some film critics are disappointed with the films that came out of Indonesia after reformasi. They expected more daring or unusual films once the country gained political freedom. Do you agree?

DINATA: I totally agree. The system is actually changing very slowly. We still have the censorship board. The reformasi did not change anything about that. We do not have pre-censorship anymore, but you still have to submit your film to the censors once it is finished. In a way, reformasi is kind of over-rated. The core problems regarding democracy and freedom of speech still exist, even though it is not as bad as it used to be.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Does this go for film in particular or for all the arts?

DINATA: Only for film. The government feels that film needs to be controlled tightly. They don’t care much for literature, because they believe that there are not so many readers in Indonesia. And visual art is for the rich only, anyway. But film is for the masses, so they are really careful about film.

The other thing is that the distribution system in Indonesia has not changed at all. There is a new chain of cinemas, but the monopoly of Group21 has been there since the Soeharto era. They control the majority of theaters in Indonesia. I don’t know why; they have some kind of protection from the government. Therefore it is really hard to make a decent film, because you always have to deal with Group21 if you want people to see your film. There are not many art centers that show films and there are no art-house cinemas or anything like that at all. It is an unhealthy situation.

BAUMGÄRTEL: So it is not a lack of audience, but for the distribution . . .

DINATA: Yes. It is really a pity. It is just not in our system. When you go to Europe, you see an art-house cinema on the corner in the neighborhood. But in Indonesia you do not have anything like that at all. Since the 1980s, Group21 has this monopoly, and they are everywhere. It is really hard to compete with them. It used to be in 1970s that there were these regular movie houses where I used to go with my family. You know, just a regular local businessman running this neighborhood cinema. But they are all dead, because they could not compete with Group21.

BAUMGÄRTEL: The last time I was in Indonesia, one film that your company had produced was playing all over Jakarta: Quickie Express. So you do get your films into the cinemas of the Group21 after all . . .
DINATA: Yes, we have learned how to deal with them. I insisted on making a cut of my first film just for the owner of the Group21, because he controls everything. It used to be very hard to put Indonesian films in the cinema. So it really tested my patience to wait until he had the time to watch the movie and then I sat down and had a serious talk with him. I said: “Please give this a chance for one week. We as Indonesians blah blah blah…” I gave him all this bullshit and he gave it a chance. And I feel that since then it has become easier for Indonesian films to get shown in their cinemas.

It also has to do with the fact that the Indonesian media really support us. They write about our films, and they interview us, and they write about the monopoly of Group21. I think the owners feel that they have to be careful with us. But still, the situation is not ideal. We don’t have contracts; we don’t have anything in writing at all. If he tells us to make so many prints of the film, we have to follow, and he decides in which cinemas to put the film. If he likes the film, he will tell us to make more prints, with our own money of course. He is really a pure businessman. When he saw Quickie Express, he liked it and told me: “You have to give us more prints.” Sometimes, I also do not do what he says. For example, when he saw my film Arisan!, which is about gays and lesbians, he said “You are crazy! Nobody will watch this film! You just make eight prints!” And I said: “No, no, no, I want more prints, because I know the areas where there are gay communities.” After a week he e-mailed me and ordered more prints! The way we have to deal with this cinema owner is really kind of primitive...

BAUMGÄRTEL: A lot of the filmmakers in the region only got started because they could shoot on digital. How about you? I think you started out to work with film proper?

DINATA: Yes. A Courtesan was shot on 35mm. It was really a struggle. But I tested digital video on location, and it did not make my director of photography and our team happy. We shot the film on location in East Java, even though the film is actually set in Jakarta. It is about a Chinese community in the 1920s, and we just could not find places in Jakarta anymore that had this kind of architecture. When we tried digital video, it just did not have the right look for a film set in this time. So we postponed the shooting and started fundraising, so we can do a 35mm shoot.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Period films are always expensive, whether they are shot on digital or on film. How did you raise the money for this kind of production as a first film?
DINATA: Before I started to do commercials, I used to work for a television station in the news department. That was actually my first career. And due to the good relationship with the management of the TV company and the programming department, I did my first film for them. So when I got the film rights to the book from this writer, who is actually very famous and was imprisoned under Soeharto, I approached them. The management of the television station was excited about the story, and they supported me and in return got the television rights for the film, so they showed it after its theatrical release. But their budget was not enough, so I also got money from a lot of Indonesien-Chinese businessmen, who never had the story of themselves and their ancestors told. It was a very slow process, from 1999 to 2001, and at times I felt it was hopeless. But we managed slowly. After the shoot, we were out of money, so we had to fundraise again for the editing. Some people gave money, some collectors let us use their antique collections for the sets. Especially people from the older generation wanted to contribute to something like this. In Indonesia, the Javanese culture is the mainstream culture. But this film was not from the Javanese point of view, and I was amazed how many people wanted to support this.

BAUMGÄRTEL: What was the budget of this film?

DINATA: It was around USD$100,000.

BAUMGÄRTEL: That is not much for a film production . . .

DINATA: No, not much at all. But for Indonesia at that time, it was a huge budget. People thought I was crazy.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Your film Arisan! featured gay and lesbian characters, a subject matter that is kind of taboo in Indonesia. Can you say something about that?

DINATA: When I made this film, I wasn’t really thinking: I am going to break a taboo! I just thought that these things need to be told through film. Why does this have to be a taboo? I do not really agree with that. I grew up in a family with a lot of gay uncles and lesbian aunts, and it seemed to be fine. I grew up thinking that everybody was like my family, that you can have different sexual orientations, and you can marry people from different religions and all those things.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Interestingly enough, the film was quite successful in Indonesia. There wasn’t a big uproar of protest . . .

DINATA: It did well only in the big cities, in Jakarta and in Bandung and in Surabaya. When I did a live radio interview to promote the film for a smaller
city in Sumatra, the local people were really angry at me, because they thought that the film was promoting sacrilegious things.

BAUMGÄRTEL: How about the censorship board?

DINATA: The chair of the censorship board was Titi Said, a former novelist. The censorship board consists of 45 members from various political, social, and religious groups. They have a kind of lottery, where they determine five members of the board to watch your film. So you never know who will judge your film. When they watched my film, they really had internal problems within the board, because in the group that watched my film two said it should be banned, two wanted to let it pass, and one abstained. So, my film was stuck there for a very long time. In such a case, the chair has to make the final decisions. After she watched *Arisan!*, she called me to her office and we had a long talk. She said: “I am new, and I am willing to take the risk.” So, they censored only a little bit. She even told me: “I am glad that the title is *Arisan!*,” because this type of meeting is very important in Indonesia (“Arisan” is a private meeting with a lottery). Everybody is doing it, even myself, in the office, with the neighbors, with the family. She felt it was safe, because with such a title, it would not attract the interest of the Islamist groups and the fanatics. Once the newspapers started to write about the film and mentioned the gay characters in the film, it started to create protest. But that was in the smaller cities, not in Jakarta.

However, after that there was this other film, *Kiss Me Quick*. One of the most important Islamist leaders noticed the poster of this film, and held a press conference about it, saying that this type of film should be banned. So, all these fundamentalist groups gathered together and started to pressure the censorship board. They also found out about *Arisan!*, and then it was debated very heavily in the media. But *Arisan!* had been released a year earlier, so they could not do anything about it. After that incident, the head of the censorship board changed completely. She thinks that she cannot mess with these religious groups and consults them before she makes any decisions.

BAUMGÄRTEL: At the same time, there is a television series that is based on the movie, so it must have had a huge popular appeal!

DINATA: Yes, because in the media and on websites people were demanding a sequel. So a television station bought the rights, and produced two seasons. But then, the religious groups stopped that. It is no longer on air. I was a script supervisor and I oversaw the production. I got to choose the people who worked on it, and they even shot it on 16mm.
In your next film, *Love for Share*, you ran into more problems with censorship. Can you talk about that a bit?

Figure 18.2 Driver Pak Lik (Lukman Sardi) with first wife Sri (Ria Irawan, right) and second wife Siti (VJ and pop singer Shanty) in Nia Dinata’s *Love for Share* (2006). *Source: Kalyana Shira Films*

Dinata: The three years after reformasi were the nicest era in Indonesia, when people were very much excited about the whole thing and very much open to new things. But after 2004 and up until now, it seems to be going back to the old days. The government is getting increasingly conservative and very critical of films like mine. So I had a harder time releasing *Love for Share*. It talks about polygamy, and of course, most of the people in the government are doing that, so that was not very easy. In the Soeharto era, polygamy was forbidden by our former first lady. But it seems that after the fall of Soeharto, everybody forgot about that, and now whoever can afford it is very, very proud to be polygamous.

Baumgärtel: The film has three different episodes that are all intertwined. Can you say something about the narrative structure of the film?

Dinata: This is not how I originally wanted it to be, but it developed when I did my research all over Java. I had this feeling at first that only people with money do polygamy. But it turned out that it is not like that at all. Even people with low incomes still do it. So I changed my structure, based on what I found out through interviews with women. I found out that it is more complex than just having a man with economic stability in his life who can afford to remarry and have more than one wife.
Baumgärtel: Your last film, *Chants of Lotus*, deals also with sexuality and gender relationships. Why is this such an important issue in your work?

Dinata: Well, why not? (laughs) In most of the Indonesian films, the story is about women, and love, and all that. Even in our horror movies, the ghost always a woman! She is always the victim and the story is always told from a very male point of view. So I want to talk about women from a female point of view. And I think it is really exciting to talk about these things in your films that have never been talked about openly before in our society.

Baumgärtel: Do you see yourself as a feminist filmmaker?

Dinata: I think I am a feminist, but I am also a humanist. If you are concerned with women’s issues, you are also concerned with human issues.

Baumgärtel: How do you develop your films? Do you have an issue like polygamy first and then you develop the film out of that? Or do you start out with a story?

Dinata: Well, with *Arisan!* for example, I did not think about the issues at all. It was really personal, because it is a story about my circle of friends. When I wrote I never thought of issues. With *Love for Share*, it was the other way around. I started to get very worried about the government being very tolerant about people with polygamous marriages. And not only tolerant, there was even this kind of support that said it is good for the women, because at least they have economic security and stuff like that. I just cannot stand it! So, that’s how I got started on my research. With *Chants of Lotus*, it is both. For this film, I worked with three other women directors and we all had our ideas for the movie, so it is kind of personal and at the same time it is about issues of sexuality and gender relationships.

Baumgärtel: Generally, your films seem to be informed by the desire to reach out to the audience. Even if you deal with difficult topics, you seem to carefully avoid alienating your audience . . .

Dinata: Yes, that is true, because I want the people of Indonesia to see a different point of view, whether they agree with it or not.

Baumgärtel: You have your own production company that also produces the movies of other directors. What is the rationale behind that?

Dinata: I want to give other directors a chance. It is just nice to have a small team of people I’ve known since my first film. Actually, after *A Courtesan* we asked each other: Why don’t we stick together, and set up our own system? It is fun to work together, and it was born naturally. It is only six people, my
line producer, accountants, a secretary. When we do a production, we hire the
other people specifically for that film. For me it is also exciting, because I can
switch my roles. Sometimes I am a director and sometimes I am a producer. So
it’s not boring at all!

BAUMGÄRTEL: Do you see yourself as an independent filmmaker?

DINATA: Yes, I think so. Most Indonesian filmmakers are independent
because we have to look for our own funding; we deal with our own team and
with our absurd distribution system. There is nobody who supports us, so we
have to do everything by ourselves.
On the telephone, Eric Khoo suggested the bar of the Goodwood Park Hotel as a meeting place. The Goodwood is one of the oldest hotels in Singapore, and in its colonial allure it is second only to the world-famous Raffles. Originally the Teutonia Club, a club for German expatriates, it looms majestically over the busy Orchard Road with its shopping malls full of expensive boutiques and fancy restaurants. While I waited at the bar for the director, I admired the beautiful park that surrounds the hotel.

When Khoo arrived, he just asked for a glass of iced water, and then ushered me into what I at first believed to be a hotel room at the end of a long hallway. In fact, it is the office of his production company, Zhao Wei Films. Eventually it dawned upon me that he is residing there, because his family owns the hotel. I

Figure 19.1 Eric Khoo (left) directing blind actress Theresa Poh Lin Chan in Be with Me (2005).
Source: Zhao Wei Films
learned only later that it was here that a very young Eric Khoo had his first taste of actual filmmaking, when he observed Peter Bogdanovich shoot scenes of his notorious expose of Singapore nightlife, the unfortunately far-too-little known *Saint Jack* (1979). His father had offered the film crew his hotel (and one of his limousines), when they were working on the film that later was banned in Singapore and not shown publicly until 2006. It would be easy to see Jack Flowers, an American pimp in the Singapore of the 1960s played by Ben Gazzara, as an inspiration for the many down-and-out characters in Khoo’s own movies.

Khoo is notoriously tight-lipped about the fact that he comes from one of the richest families in Singapore. He is the son of the late billionaire Khoo Teck Puat, who topped the Forbes list of the richest Singaporeans in the early 2000s before passing away in 2004. However, he has repeatedly pointed out that he financed all his films himself and without help from his family. Nevertheless, he was the one director who put Singapore back on the international film map with his first feature film, the independent production *Mee Pok Man* (1995), picking up prizes at Fukuoka, Busan, and Singapore, after shooting a good half dozen short films with occasionally—in Singapore—very risqué topics, such as sadomasochism in *Pain* (1994). His second film *12 Storeys* (1997) was the first Singaporean film to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival.

He has made four feature length films that won him a FIPRESCI Award and the Award for the Best Feature Film at the Hawaii Film Festival, among other honors, and has through Zhao Wei Films produced some more films, such as Royston Tan’s *15* (2003) and *881* (2007), as well as a television series.

**Filmography**

*Tatsumi* (2011)
*Be with Me* (2005)
*Mee Pok Man* (1995)
*12 Storeys* (1997)
*Pain* (Short) (1994)
*The Watchman* (Short) (1993)
*Barbie Digs Joe* (Short) (1990)

* Baumgärtel: When you started out as a filmmaker, there was no independent cinema in Singapore. Actually there was no film industry at all: film production in Singapore had virtually faltered in the late 1970s, and when you started out in the early 1990s, only a few commercial features had been made here starting again in the early 1990s. How does one become a director under such circumstances?
Khoo: I always loved cinema because of my mother. She took me to the cinema when I was two years old. She was a cinephile and loved horror movies. We went to the movies three or four times a week.

Baumgärtel: Singapore has one of the highest per capita cinema attendance rates in the world and cinemas used to be quite glamorous. What was going to the movies like at that time in Singapore?

Khoo: At this time you had basically two exhibitors. One was Shaw Brothers, the other one was Cathay. They had split the market between each other, and they both had their exclusive supply of movies. For instance, if you wanted to see Jaws, and Jaws was from Universal, that would play in a Shaw theater. Taxi Driver came from Columbia Pictures, so that would be at Cathay. If you wanted to see Bruce Lee, that came from Golden Harvest and would also be at Cathay. If you wanted a Shaw Brothers film, they were of course in the Shaw Brothers theaters. So you basically had one large cinema hall per film and therefore these films could play for months. When they started a new film, there would be long queues around the block. The good thing was that since my mom was such a cinephile, she knew all the ticketing ladies at the cinemas. So she never had to wait in line; it was like she had a VIP card, or something.

Baumgärtel: And if you look at old pictures, these cinemas looked like palaces . . .

Khoo: Yeah, they were beautiful. Unfortunately, most of them were torn down. You should see the Capitol, that is still around. It is gorgeous. Most of these cinemas could accommodate a thousand people. Then there was the Globe that I loved very much when I was a kid. That was a small cinema that played re-runs. The tickets would be half the price of the regular cinemas and you’d get to see these very obscure films. Many of them actually never had an official run here. I remember seeing The Valley of Gwangi there, about this Tyrannosaurus Rex against these four Western cowboys. My mom just loved genre pictures. She liked spaghetti westerns, James Bond, horror films, stuff like that. And when I was a kid in the Sixties, I was into that too.

Baumgärtel: How about the old Malay films that Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris produced in the 1950s and 1960s? Did you watch those at all?

Khoo: Yes, mostly on TV though. I like those old black and white films, the Pontianak-films and some P. Ramlees. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, when Sir Run Run Shaw was still in Singapore, he produced all these musicals and historical films. Their budgets were much higher than what we have today. They made films for S$400,000. Today we still make films for S$400,000, but of course there has been inflation.
BAUMGÄRTEL: But I assume that by the time, when you started to go to the movies the majority of the films that were shown in Singapore were mainstream movies either from Hollywood or from Hong Kong?

KHOO: Yes. But a lot of the more daring films would get banned here. For instance, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Clockwork Orange* were banned. Films like *Taxi Diver* would only be shown in a butchered version, where most of the sex and the violence would be cut out. The censorship was so severe, that there was this guy who had this video store with foreign movies on VHS tapes. The censors would just press “Record” and erased whatever they did not like on his tapes. This guy was so fed up, that he put signs on the tapes saying “Censored!”, “Censored!”, “Censored!”.

So, when I went to Australia to study at the City Art Institute in Sydney, the most important thing was not so much what I learned in the academy. It was the movies that I got to see there that were banned or censored in Singapore. In Sidney you could go to the video store and rent whatever you wanted. Then there were these art-house cinemas, where you paid a little bit of money and you could get these whole retrospectives of films that I had never seen before.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Did you have any practical experience making films when you were young?

KHOO: I enjoyed doing comics; I started to draw at an early age. My mother had a Super 8 camera that she used to film us with. When I was eight or nine years old, I started to make my own movies. I filmed objects and made them move with stop-motion. I would read this magazine, *Famous Monsters of Film Land*, and they talked about how monsters like King Kong were created. So I made films with my GI Joe figures up there (points to GI Joe figurine that sits on a shelf). So he was my first actor and he was fully articulated. It was very exciting to have a new medium of expression, not just static panels as in the comics. In 1980, I went to Australia to study cinematography and that was when I decided to become a filmmaker. The problem was that at that time Singapore had no film industry. You had commercials being shot, you had television, and that was it. I said to myself: So I am going to shoot commercials.

When I was in the army, there was a video competition by National Panasonic. I sent my four films in and I won an award. It was almost like a hobby thing at that time. I got Panasonic products for free. Then in 1991 Philip Cheah of the Singapore film festival also started a short film competition. I made a short film with my GI Joe figures and there were only seventeen
entries. I think today they get hundreds of films every year. International festivals programmers saw that film, and *Barbie digs Joe* went to Hawaii, Tokyo, and Berlin. That felt good, so in 1994, I made another film, this time about sadomasochism. It is called *Pain*. This film was banned in Singapore, but I still got permission to show it at the Singapore Film Festival, because they thought only foreigners would get to see it there.

I got an Award for Special Achievements, and that was a great award, because it meant sponsorship from Kodak, the use of post-production facilities, etc. I decided to do a feature film. I went to the sponsors and told them: “Look, I could do another short film, but where can a short film really go? Why don’t I make a feature film instead? You give me a bit more, and I will try to keep the costs down as low as possible.” They were quite excited about the idea and they came on board.

**Baumgärtel:** Was there a scene of cinephiles or film buffs that supported your interest in more unusual films?

**Khoo:** A handful. Most of them were doing commercials, but in our free time, we had the camera to play around with, so we would do our own little films. Today, we have a much bigger scene. The government is trying to get people to be more creative. So there are a lot of film students now. Back then it was really very few people that were interested in making movies.

**Baumgärtel:** *Mee Pok Man*, your first film, has this punk-rock sensibility to it. It starts with the credit, where you get all these fast-cut images thrown at you, accompanied by punk music. After that, the film seems to try to address as many controversial and taboo subjects as possible . . .

**Khoo:** Since everything was sponsored I wanted to see how far I could push parameters. Around that time, Singapore had just introduced a rating system. There was no rating system before and I wanted to see if I get this film passed. It got an R rating, but surprisingly, it passed without a single cut—and I was really happy with that. I think the authorities were not very pleased with the film, but since they wanted more films to be produced in Singapore, I got away with it. So with my next film, *12 Storeys*, I wanted to get a PG rating. Because with the R rating that I got for *Mee Pok Man*, it could only be shown in the city belt, which basically meant on Orchard Road. So *Mee Pok Man* was shown on only three screens. For *12 Storeys*, I wanted over ten screens. So I went to talk to the board of film censors about the concept of the film, but the censors do not read scripts. However, since they were already familiar with my idea, I eventually got the PG rating that I wanted.
Baumgärtel: A very hypothetical question: If Singapore still had the film industry that it used to have, with a number of different studios and film companies, the way it is now in Hong Kong—do you think you would have ended up making the type of films that you are making today? Or would you have joined the mainstream film studios?

Khoo: Yes, I think so. I do not have anything against commercial films. The point is: If we would want to do an action film in Singapore now, we just do not have the expertise. We would have to get all the staff from Hong Kong, which would be so expensive. But if we already had that here, I would get the best and do something! But in Singapore you have to work with the limitations. If you look at Mee Pok Man, I had only very few angles, because my film stock was sponsored. The ratio was basically two to one—I had to use half of the material that I shot. So you work with the means that are available to you. Even if somebody gave me a great action movie script, we just could not do it. However, if we had that type of film industry here, I’d be the first to jump in. After I did 12 Storeys, I was actually approached by some Hong Kong producers to do an action film. I saw the script, and said: “Well, better not…”

Baumgärtel: In Hong Kong there are not so many independent filmmakers like you. There used to be Wong Kar-Wai and there is Fruit Chan, but that’s about it…

Khoo: And Fruit Chan cannot even release his stuff in Hong Kong!

Baumgärtel: So starting out in Singapore might actually have been a blessing in disguise for you, since it forced you to do your films independently because of the lack of a film industry…

Khoo: I think it is great being here. It is always wonderful when you pioneer something, when you get something going. Everything is fresh. It is harder, but it is also so much more rewarding. When I did Mee Pok Man, nobody who was working on the film had done a feature film yet. Shooting could last eighteen hours a day for two solid weeks.

Baumgärtel: I was actually about to ask: Where did the staff for your films come from? How did you find people like the cinematographer, the designers, etc.?

Khoo: Most of them used to work on commercials. There are all these rental places and that’s where most of the people who worked on this film came from.

Baumgärtel: Do you see yourself as an independent filmmaker?
Khoo: Yes, I think so. My type of filmmaking is not really studio-based with a lot of studio suits that tell you what to do. Although in Singapore the only thing that comes close to a kind of film studio is Raintree Pictures and we do work with them, if we do work with a higher budget. Raintree is basically a subsidiary of a television network, so if you make a film for them, there is a lot of visibility on television. I did four films with them, and then there are films like My Magic that had a very small budget. We shot it in nine days with a grant that I received last year. So I guess that is as independent as it gets.

Baumgärtel: Apart from Mee Pok Man, there is the short Pain that touches on some controversial issues. Is addressing this kind of issue also a reaction towards—or a provocation of—the conservative Singaporean society? Or do you just enjoy this type of topic?

Khoo: I enjoy them. Remember, I saw all these horror films that my mother subjected me to when I was a kid. When my mother saw Pain, she said: “You know that this film will get banned! Why do you do something like that?” And I asked her: “But did you like it?” And she said: “Yes, of course!” Sometimes I just think about putting up a horror company . . .

Baumgärtel: Okay. But back to your relation with Singapore—how do your films relate to Singapore? Are they about Singapore, or could they take place somewhere else either?

Khoo: I would say that especially with the Mee Pok Man, it shows a slice of Singapore that is slowly disappearing. I am glad that I shot it in Geylang (the red light district of Singapore), because a lot of the areas and places where we shot have been demolished since. If you look at the landscape of Geylang, where the prostitutes are, it has completely changed. It looks like Disneyland now, compared to what it used to be like. I wanted to capture that moment. And a lot of the characters in the film are actually people that I know. They are quite real. The characters in the film also speak a lot of dialect, because this is how Singaporeans actually talk. I think the story itself is somewhat universal. It is like a Frankenstein-monster film with a Singaporean background.

Baumgärtel: Which brings us to 12 Storeys . . .

Khoo: That film has much more of a Singaporean background! It is a film about urban survival, but it is much more satirical than Mee Pok Man. It is really a black comedy. That film was inspired by a lot of newspaper items. My co-writer, James Tôh, and I would read the Straits Times, especially the “Home” section, and The New Paper. That was the time, when a lot of these
China brides were coming to Singapore to marry these old guys, and then dumped them. So it was pretty much Singapore in 1996, right down to one murder every week.

I thought it would be nice to do a film that would take place in only one block, because then you would not have to travel so much from one location to the other. Again, we did not have a lot of money, only about S$300,000 Singapore dollars (around €150,000), so I needed to adjust my film in order to stay within the budget. We improvised a lot, before we actually started shooting, because I did not want to improvise during the shoot. We filmed the actors rehearsing with a video camera and we ended up putting a lot of the lines they came up with into the final script.

I had aimed for a shooting ratio of six to one, but we actually ended up with a shooting ratio of three to one. I was very happy about that. Some scenes were done in one take. Since the spaces we used were so small, we used a Super 16mm Camera, which is smaller than a regular film camera. For some scenes we also used two cameras to shoot, so we could focus on two different actors at the same time.

Baumgärtel: 12 Storeys is also your first film with this more episodic kind of storytelling, where different stories are interwoven. You developed that approach further in Be with Me. Could you elaborate on that approach?

Khoo: I like that, because I started out making short films, and in a way to shoot like that is like shooting short films, and then you just string them together. Essentially all my films are short films. My Magic is also just one extended short film, it just happens to be seventy-five minutes long. (laughs)

Baumgärtel: After 12 Storeys, there was a break of almost ten years, where you did not do any films at all. Why was that?

Khoo: That was because I was producing. I produced Liang Po Po with Jack Neo, which was a big hit and made almost three million bucks here in Singapore. Then I did this TV series, Drive, where I had six young filmmakers direct one episode each. I also produced Three Stories about Love, an omnibus film, that was actually the first digital feature film in Singapore.

And then, while I was producing Royston Tan’s 15, that gangster film, I decided that it was time to direct again. During the years when I was producing, I was still coming up with ideas, and I had friends of mine writing scripts for me. I actually have a closet full of finished scripts, but I lost interest in them.

Baumgärtel: Why was it important to you to produce the films of other directors?
Khoo: Because I thought it would be better to have more filmmakers, because it would make for a more vibrant scene. Meeting some of these young enthusiasts, I thought that some of them really could go places. And some of them did make it, and some started their profession as a lawyer or whatever.

Baumgärtel: Be with Me from 2005 shows a much more bourgeois Singapore. Gone are the prostitutes and down-and-outers . . .

Figure 19.2 Chiew Sung Ching in Be with Me (2005).
Source: Zhao Wei Films

Khoo: Well, Singapore is more sanitized these days. Maybe that is because I am less angry than I used to be. I'm a father of four (laughs). If you talk about it in terms of the look and feel of the film, well, there is this old man with the wrinkly face. His neighborhood is Tiong Bahru. That's where I grew up. It is beautiful there, all the houses there are in this Art Deco style. That whole era is preserved. They can't tear it down anymore. It is a place old and untouched.

Then there is that fat guy, the security guard. For him, I decided to go to the heartland. So you see him living in this 12-storey block. And then there are the girls, who I placed in this nice, suburban Singapore. And I thought if I had all these stories taking place in these different pockets of Singapore, it would come together in a more visually pleasing way. And it would also be more truthful to Singapore as it is today. If you think about the fat security guard, he is working in this high-tech building. There is a shot where he overlooks Singapore, with all these high-rises, and it almost looks like an Ultraman set. But where does he belong in this urban jungle? I just felt that the images in the film had to be different from the 12-storey block, that I tried to emphasize in 1997. And with My Magic it is yet again a different urban landscape, that of Little India.
Baumgärtel: Then there is fourth episode in *Be with Me*, that of the deaf and blind lady . . .

Khoo: Yes, Theresa.

Baumgärtel: That gives the whole film an odd twist, because you first think of her as another fictional character, and then eventually it dawns up you that she is actually a real person. How did that come about?

Khoo: I am a firm subscriber to destiny and fate. I think that things happen for a reason. I usually do not go to wedding dinners because most of the time they are very boring. But one night I decided to go to this particular wedding dinner for some reason. And that was the dinner where I met Theresa. So, it was this Chinese affair, ten people around a table, and nobody was really talking, because nobody knew anybody else. But here was Theresa. And I was watching her, because she made a lot of noise and was talking with somebody else in sign language. She asked the guy next to her who else was on that table. So people started to introduce themselves: I am doctor, and so on.

The irony was that my co-writer, Wong Kim Hoh, and I had been working on the script for *Be with Me* for two years. And it just kept changing and morphing into something else. It was like we had a jigsaw puzzle that was missing a piece, and we had to find that piece. In the beginning we had said that this film would be about love, yearning and ultimately about redemption and hope. And it was strange that when the guy who was sitting next to Theresa told her that I was a filmmaker, she said to me: “You should make a film on hope!” So I told her translator: “Tell her, that I will make a film on hope, if she acts in it!” And she went “Cheers,” and we drank up.

I think we exchanged addresses, but I was not really sure if she was joking, because she was getting kind of drunk. But two weeks later I got a typed-out letter from her. And the letter was about how she hated George Bush and his war in Iraq. But the letter ended up with: “Were you serious about me acting for you?” So it turned into this drawn-out-business-type of thing, because I would write her back, and then get my friend to Braille it, and that went back and forth for some time. Eventually she told me: “Why wait any longer? If you still do not have that script, come to my house.” So I went and visited her. And she took out this whole manuscript. I opened it and it was her life story.

Until this point I was still trying to invent a fictitious character for her. But once I read her manuscript, I thought: “Nobody can match that story!” And it became clear to me that here was a way of blending fiction and documentary. Theresa was the final piece of the jigsaw puzzle, and once we got
that into place, we went into production very quickly and shot the film in very short time.

Baumgärtel: Your latest film, My Magic, has an Indian protagonist. A lot of filmmakers would be very hesitant to have a leading character from a different cultural background than their own. Why did you feel confident to work with such a character?

Khoo: Because this guy is my friend. Years ago, I used to go to all these parties, where you would get free booze, just in order to drink. And it happened that at one of these bars, he was the main act. Francis is a real magician. I was already a bit drunk, when he came in and started to blow this fire. I had never seen anything like that. I thought it was some sort of trick, but once he came near me, I felt the heat. It was for real. I thought: “This guy is larger than life!” He is one of the few professional magicians in Singapore.

Baumgärtel: How did you develop a film out of this chance encounter?

Khoo: I struck up a relationship with Francis. We used to go out together, and we would drink, and we would talk. About magic, about what he was going through. We would meet maybe once or twice a year and drink, and I always joked with him and said: “One day we are going to make a film together.” And finally, last year, I got this arts award, the Cultural Medallion, which is the most prestigious arts award in Singapore. I was pretty surprised, because I was really the youngest to get this award. It came with quite a grant. So, I said to myself, I do not want to wait another ten years to make this film with Francis.

I had been to Korea quite a bit. And every time I got interviewed there, the journalists would ask me: “So what is your next film?” And I started to make up this story about a father and his son that eventually turned into My Magic. So it was all in my head already. I’ve wanted to do a movie about a father and son, and how they get together despite their difficulties. After Be with Me, I did not want to wait another ten years for my next film. So, once we sat down to actually write the thing, it took us less than a week. My co-writer Kim Hoh was in India for work but I’d send him script ideas and he would flesh them out. And then we shot it in another week. It actually went faster than we planned. It is my fastest shoot to date. I didn’t want to go big with this film. I wanted it to be intimate, personal, and subtle.

Baumgärtel: How did you achieve the “magic” in his performances?

Khoo: Many of the stunts Francis performed in the movie are real, because that’s how he wanted it. We had to shoot most of them in one take, because I did not want him to get hurt and injured.
Baumgärtel: What was it like to work with an actor who does not speak a language you understand?

Khoo: If Francis would be Chinese, it would be a Chinese film. But since he is Indian, this is my first Tamil film, with 80 percent of the dialog in Tamil. I wanted them to speak in their mother tongue because it is more authentic.

Baumgärtel: So there are already two examples where you developed a film out of an actual character. Is that an approach you take with all your films?

Khoo: Yes. The thing with Mee Pok Man, for example, is that if Joe Ng had not acted for me, I would not have made that film. At that time Joe was a rock ’n’ roll singer, and he had acted for me in one of my short films, so I knew him on a personal level. I think that it is important when I am creating characters—I have to know the person that is going to be the character. It is so much easier if Theresa comes in and motivates me.

A lot of characters in my films are pretty close to what they actually are. And because we do not have so many professional actors in Singapore, I need to look around for characters like that. Sometimes I look at somebody and see something in this person, and then we would mould the character together. I think for somebody who has not done acting before to be something completely remote from his or her being is very hard.
BAUMGÄRTEL: There is line of thinking in critical writing about Singaporean cinema that argues that local film actually played a part in creating a Singaporean identity. Do you subscribe to that?

KHOO: When I am overseas, I can hear a Singaporean a mile away because of the Singlish. And let’s say, if there is a buffet spread, the Singaporean will be the one of the most food on his plate. We do have certain traits. But if you talk about culture, you have to keep in mind that Singapore is such a young state. We are basically migrants from here and there. We are really a youthful city that is mostly interested in pop culture. And we are a multi-cultural society, but if there is anything tangible about that, it is our food. But that whole thing about a Singaporean identity, I don’t think it really exists. We grew up on British shows and American shows and Chinese shows. I think it is a hodgepodge.

We are pretty Westernized, as you can tell. We have a population of 4.5 million, but only two million people were actually born here. Every day, three Singaporeans are denouncing their citizenship to live somewhere else. I think there is no real identity here. Singapore is a little city, it is progressive and that’s it. If you look at a Korean film, you can see that they are deep into their own culture. Here, it already starts with the language. You’ve got Mandarin, you’ve got English, you’ve got Singlish, you’ve got Tamil, and you’ve got Malay. I think how we talk is a good reflection of what we are. And that’s the reason why in 12 Storeys I had all these dialects. I think these things are pretty noticeable for a Singaporean.

BAUMGÄRTEL: How would you describe the situation of cinema in Singapore today?

KHOO: There is much more diversity than before. Jack Neo’s films are really wonderful. Singaporeans love to complain and he really touches on these things. He has an incredible sense of what resonates with what the majority feels. His films do as well as big Hollywood productions here. But basically it is only for Singapore. To be honest, we might very well have the largest variety of films released than in any Asian country. It is certainly more than in Japan, because it is so expensive there. And it is more than Korea, more than in Hong Kong or in Macao. The great thing about Singapore is that you have all these independent distributors, which often pick up very obscure films. Then the problem is how long these films are actually in the cinemas. Often it is just two weeks and then they are out. But in Singapore we are really spoilt for choice. And the censorship is not as strict as it used to be. I only wish they would bring down the age for the R-rated pictures. I don’t think anywhere else in the world, you have to be twenty-one to see a film. You can have sex when you are sixteen, but you cannot watch Borat!
BAUMGÄRTEL: Do you feel a kinship with other filmmakers from South East Asia, from Malaysia, or from Thailand? Or do you rather look to Hong Kong, to Taiwan, to Mainland China?

KHOO: In terms of Malaysian films, I am not too keen on them. I like the recent horror films. The Philippine films—I have not watched that many recent ones. I was a big fan of Lino Brocka though.
The Page and the (Video) Camera
Conversation with Amir Muhammad

Davide Cazzaro

When a research project gave me the opportunity to approach the cultural scene of the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur (KL), and in particular the most recent domestic films that purely for the purpose of classification I will here call “independent,” I had not yet met Amir Muhammad. Nor had I fully grasped his originality, his simultaneously anomalous and prominent position within contemporary Malaysian culture. The more material I accumulated, the more Amir’s name kept recurring and I realized him to be highly versatile and creative. Born in 1972 of Malay-Sri Lankan parentage, he grew up in Kuala Lumpur and wrote his first article for the local press at the age of fourteen. In his twenties, he completed a law degree at the University of East Anglia as well as two filmmaking courses at New York University. During the same years he worked as a journalist, critic, and columnist; a promoter and programmer of cultural events; a playwright, filmmaker and, more recently, a producer, publisher, editor, essayist, and blogger.

Figure 20.1  Amir Muhammad (left) on the set of The Big Durian (2003) with lighting technician Ee Chee Wei.

Photo: Danny Lim
His articles and columns cover a range of subjects (society, culture, politics, literature, and cinema) and betray the disposition of a writer and a sharp acumen, as well as a marked sense of humor and irony—characteristics that feature prominently in his activity as a “filmmaker,” or, rather, a “writer-filmmaker,” since Amir seems to keep the two in such close contact that the latter could be placed in the former. In thinking and rethinking about his work, I gradually became convinced that Amir is predominantly a writer (as well as an insatiable reader) who works in cinema. His lack of interest in a film career (both within and without the official industry), his current, announced rest from the world of movies, and the enthusiasm with which he is focusing on books (in 2007 he set up his own publishing house Matahari Books), seem to offer the most immediate confirmation of this hypothesis.

Thus, when looking at his filmography—marked by a rapid move toward the fertile but dangerous territory of non-fiction and, in particular, the hybrid and “eccentric” realm of the essay-film—it clearly emerges that his favorite form of expression is the word, to which he dedicates painstaking attention and gives, in both the written and oral form, a leading role in his films. Yet this esteem for words does not ultimately suffocate the visual and formal aspects of his work, a risk that Amir seems to have kept in mind from the start. I refer to several processes in his films—in particular, the alternation of the handheld camera and the static frame, the fixed image, narration, captions, split-screen, and various editing speeds—knowingly doled out so as to create a contamination and a mutual enrichment between words, sounds, and images. A description of all of Amir’s films could be drawn from this: a constant, dense work between the image and the word, the one provided by the other.

His career as a filmmaker spans nine years (so far... hoping that he will return to filmmaking sometime soon), during which Amir seems to have always followed his instinct, taking various paths (from both the geographical-spatial and the historical-temporal point of view) and giving in to new needs. It is not surprising, therefore, that his filmography unfolds among variations that are as unpredictable as they are interesting. He completed nine feature films (from *Lips to Lips* to the two completely different versions of *Malaysian Gods*), along with six compiled short films (*6horts*), three other separate shorts (two of which have allegedly been lost), and a cycle of shorts made exclusively for the Web (*Amir's Alphabet*).

Two of his works are most clearly fiction (or it could be said in this case “not non-fiction”), the urban comedy *Lips to Lips* (2000) and the mainstream horror movie *Susuk* (2008), co-directed by Naeim Ghalili. Two are closest to essayistic cinema (which Amir embraced enthusiastically after reading Phillip Lopate’s article *In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film*), the above-mentioned *6horts* (2002) and the renowned *The Big Durian* (2003) which, as noted by film critic Dennis Lim and film scholar Benjamin McKay respectively, “spirals outward from the October 1987 rampage of a Malay soldier named Adam” to become a “hymn
to the urban wonder, confusion and ethnic complexities of [Amir’s] hometown Kuala Lumpur. These were followed up by a foray into experimentalism (Tokyo Magic Hour, 2005) and an unusual “diary-portrait” of Indonesia shot entirely on the set of Riri Riza’s film Gie, called The Year of Living Vicariously (2005). More recently, there is the diptych that was banned in Malaysia: The Last Communist (Lelaki Komunis Terakhir, 2006), launched as a “semi-musical documentary road movie” and inspired by the memoirs My Side of History by Chin Peng (born 1924), the exiled, last leader of the banned Communist Party of Malaya; and Village People Radio Show (Apa Khabar Orang Kampung, 2007), in a sense the sequel to Lelaki Komunis Terakhir, a portrait of life in a South Thailand village where retired Malay-Muslim members of the Communist Party of Malaya live in exile. Village People Radio Show is also the first feature realized within the small but influential production company Da Huang Pictures, established in 2005 by Amir himself along with the three fellow Malaysian filmmakers James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, and Liew Seng Tat. Back in KL, he completed another diptych, Malaysian Gods (2008, 2009), composed of two different projects which share the same title and the same topic—the so-called Malaysian reformasi (reformation) movement. The first one, centered on the September 20, 1998 public demonstration which triggered off the whole movement, was “restricted” by the local censors (i.e., barred from wide release) and was screened for one day only on the tenth anniversary of that event, September 20, 2008. The second, “definitive” one, instead, explores the months that followed that September through a “tour” of today’s KL, interspersed with interviews with (Tamil-speaking) residents—a structure which strongly recalls those of The Big Durian and Lelaki Komunis Terakhir.

While in Malaysia Amir played a key role in opening (along with a few others) a new, unexpected chapter in the history of local cinema, internationally he is regarded as one of the most interesting Southeast Asian filmmakers to have emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century as well as a leading figure of cinematic non-fiction.

Filmography

Amir’s Alphabet (E for Egg, D for Date, B for Book, H for Hair, W for Water, L for Lucky, N for Nude, R for Run, 2008–09, shorts)
Malaysian Gods (second version, 2009)
Malaysian Gods (first version, 2008)
Susuk (2008, co-directed by Naeim Ghalili)
Village People Radio Show (Apa Khabar Orang Kampung, 2007)
The Last Communist (Lelaki Komunis Terakhir, 2006)
The Year of Living Vicariously (2005)
Tokyo Magic Hour (2005)
The Big Durian (2003)
6shorts (Lost, Friday, Mona, Checkpoint, Kamunting, Pangyau, 2002, shorts)
Lips to Lips (2000)

CAZZARO: How did you become interested in cinema?

MUHAMMAD: I enjoyed watching films when I was young but I was not a cinéphile à la Truffaut. My favorite film from the 1980s was Back to the Future. While studying in the UK for the first time I had access to many old films by Hitchcock, Powell and Pressburger, Godard, Truffaut, and others. I also had the chance to take some film classes out of my department. I then decided to go to New York and attend a summer school in filmmaking—it was the best time of my life. I was surrounded by people who wanted to make films; I remember the enthusiasm of my course mates.

CAZZARO: Thinking back to your formative years, especially to your contributions to the print media, do you think there was anyone really influential for your future career as a filmmaker?

MUHAMMAD: I think there are always various people, alive and dead, who inspire you somehow. In 1993 I interviewed film director U-Wei Bin Haji Saari for The New Straits Times (NST) and he encouraged me to approach filmmaking. I would not have done it if I hadn’t met him. There were also people in journalism, especially some of those who happened to work at NST: my editor Kee Thuan Chye, who was also a playwright; and the columnist Salleh Ben Joned, who took writing very seriously and yet there was a sense of fun. He was playful and provocative.

CAZZARO: As a way to give an overview of your oeuvre, could you try to summarize the main concerns of each of your projects?

MUHAMMAD: Lips to Lips was just based on things I saw and almost every scene referenced some other film. It was fun and I wanted it to be fun for everybody involved. However, I then wanted to do something that, I suppose, was closer to what I have always been doing, which is writing opinions, and I thought I couldn’t work within that kind of fictional realm. With 6shorts I wanted the extreme opposite, and they were produced almost without a crew. Then, with The Big Durian I intended to synthesize both, to have a narrative with essayistic elements. Structurally, Lips to Lips and The Big Durian have the same plot—a few strange things happen in one day in Kuala Lumpur—they’re just done differently. The same could also be said for [the first version of] Malaysian Gods.
The following two, *Tokyo Magic Hour* and *The Year of Living Vicariously*, were responses to the places I was living in overseas. I was able to make them because of a fellowship from the Nippon Foundation and this gave me a certain freedom; I didn’t have to worry about making a profit from them and I could explore form and the possibilities of editing. Then came *The Last Communist*, which I think follows quite naturally *The Year of Living Vicariously*. It’s also about seemingly random interviews, but this time organized according to a certain chronology of places; it’s looser than *The Big Durian*, not polemical, I wanted to let it speak for itself. *The Big Durian* did not require any research, it’s purely what I wanted to express, but with the following works I became curious about what other people were talking about as well. I just wanted to listen. I think the experience of being at the Yamagata Festival office for six months was very important in this regard. I didn’t really do much beyond consulting the films in their library. I think I watched almost all the subtitled works available, in order to see what people from other countries have done through the years. My works from *Tokyo Magic Hour* onwards would not have been possible without that experience.

As regards *Village People Radio Show*, it completes one picture: *The Big Durian* is about KL, *The Last Communist* is about small towns, and *Village People Radio Show* is about a village. Originally, it was supposed to be one segment of *The Last Communist*, but we couldn’t go to the village at that time. However, I think it’s OK by itself, because the mood was meant to be different. There’s also *Susuk* . . . at the beginning I wasn’t that interested, the production company already pitched the synopsis and Naeim Ghalili was the director. I was asked if I wanted to come in as co-director. We changed the original story a lot. Lastly, *Malaysian Gods* . . . the idea first came up while I was driving through downtown KL, and I suddenly remembered that the city was more exciting back in 1998; I wanted to do a kind of KL story as well, which is about the place, the city itself.

**CAZZARO:** How would you describe your approach to filmmaking?

**MUHAMMAD:** I think it should always be fun; once it stops being fun, you shouldn’t do it. Filmmaking is not something I would do full-time. I’m not really interested in the technical aspects, in the craft of shooting, editing, etc. I just want to conceptualize a project and then finish it.

**CAZZARO:** All your works but *Susuk* have been shot on digital. What is your position on this technology? Is it just a way to cut a budget or is it something a filmmaker tends to engage with?
Muhammad: There is a kind of ontological relationship between the technology and the product; digital is not merely a tool. Which sort of people have to use this tool, what kind of stories have to be told with this tool, as opposed to more expensive tools, as opposed to people who have greater access to equipment—I think that already reflects what kind of person the maker is. It’s totally misleading to say that it’s just a cheaper camera. However, I’m not in love with the medium, with any medium because, as I said, I’m not so obsessive about technical details.

Cazzaro: In 2000 you debuted with Lips to Lips, which very much emerged from the independent theater environment. What could you say today about this urban comedy featuring a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual cast?

Muhammad: It’s quite film school-like. (laughs) The multi-ethnic cast reflects what the local English-language theater scene is like. I used mainly English, because it was made with the audience of local English theater in mind and because English is free from an ethnic stamp. I only used Malay for the “official voices,” the policemen talking and the radio announcements. We couldn’t submit it to the censorship board, because we didn’t have a license. It was very guerrilla-style and we organized several informal screenings followed by questions and answers. It wasn’t that difficult to make, but I felt that something wasn’t quite there. For instance, the camera we used was a wrong choice, especially in terms of the capture of colors... Originally I was hoping to achieve an Almodovarian feel. However, it was fun and many people who took part in it—either as actors or crew—got engaged with filmmaking. It became important for this reason.

Cazzaro: Let’s talk about 6horts, which represent a departure from your debut. Why did you conceive a project composed of separated shorts and what was the rationale behind their order?

Muhammad: In a way I see 6horts as my first work. Lips to Lips was done almost like a challenge and it was not that successful. The order of the shorts is quite deliberate, it’s meant to go from morning to night and to be a bit more “conventional” as you go on: the first two have just text, in the third the voice comes in, and in the last one there is a voice-over and a kind of score. They all have a one-word title, and they’re on certain aspects of life that I wanted to tell in a kind of column-like way: you have an anecdote and then you extrapolate certain things. But, unlike a column, you don’t try and round it up so much.

Cazzaro: The importance of 6horts within your oeuvre lies also in your move toward the “glorious possibilities of the essay-film,” introduced to you
by Phillip Lopate’s article, as you make explicit in the captions of the opening short, Lost...

Muhammad: I bought Lopate’s collection Totally, Tenderly, Tragically in Singapore. I normally don’t buy film books; I don’t know why I bought this one, I just liked the cover. I was reading some parts on the bus back to KL and the essay “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film” struck me, which is quite odd, because it’s not a manifesto, but it charted a certain region that I knew somehow was there, but it gave shape to it and I found it very exciting.

Cazzaro: I’d like to know your opinion on this passage by Lopate: “The relationship between documentary and essay-film is uneasy at best. They are often mistaken for each other; frequently, a work starts off as an essay-film and then runs for cover in the protective grooves of the documentary.”

Muhammad: I don’t regard these distinctions as very important. For instance, I don’t like cinéma vérité; I find there is something very smug about it, about this pretence of objectivity. I don’t want to generalize, there are some great vérité works, but I’m not tempted to watch something like that. I think when Lopate uses the word “protective,” he refers to a kind of comforting “genre certainty,” whereas in an essay I think you need to be more adventurous in form. What I like about a certain type of form is that it allows you to deal with absence, it’s about things you don’t see. For example, if The Last Communist was made following a certain documentary format (e.g., that of a TV documentary), you would have needed an interview with Chin Peng and archive footage, whereas part of my interest lies also in taking away these things. I actually make a work more subjective by withholding things that I know people would expect to see, rather than putting them in to reassure that it’s a proper thing to watch. That’s why quite a lot of people were very puzzled, even kind of offended, by The Last Communist.

Cazzaro: Could it also be said that you are more comfortable with using an essayistic form because it has the closest relationship with writing or even with the written word?

Muhammad: Yes, I’m not visually-oriented, I don’t go crazy about, say, a painting. I don’t remember shots or visual elements in films, I remember certain lines, dialog; sometimes I can’t even remember if a film I saw was black and white or color. (laughs) That’s kind of bad.

Cazzaro: I was particularly impressed by the fifth short, Kamunting, by its crescendo built just with captions, images, and music...
Muhammad: I confess it’s the one I’m happiest with. It’s the one with fewer mistakes. I think the trouble with my other works, both shorts and features, is that they’re a bit overwritten; this one is not. There is just one line I’m not sure should be there: “[The photo looking into the main prison area] shows, among other things, a Malaysian flag flying behind a fence of barbed wire.” It’s true, actually, but it just sounds like an obvious metaphor. Other than that, I’m happy with it, it has a kind of visual and narrative purity and I like its simplicity.

Cazzaro: Friday deals with Islam in general and the Friday prayer in particular. Why did you choose an approach at once very profound and very light?

Muhammad: I couldn’t think of any other approach. Religion is about ritual, so you need to first talk about the ritual and then about what the ritual is part of. The mosque, therefore, seemed the most logical place in which to shoot, even though it might seem quite corny.

Cazzaro: As regards religion, do you think that being Malaysian-Muslim, or more precisely Malay-Muslim, influences your activity as a filmmaker? You once rejected the label of “the funniest Muslim filmmaker working today,” coined by film critic Chuck Stephens.

Muhammad: I don’t like this label. Being Muslim, however, is obviously an influence. Not only Friday deals with religion, I also regard Village People Radio Show as very Muslim. It seems more objective, but it’s not; there are certain things I chose to dwell on at length. Tokyo Magic Hour is quite Muslim; some of the verses I chose are quite specific to a kind of a Malay understanding of Muslim psychology, which is why I chose them: it has do with a certain old-fashioned, non-didactic kind of emotional attachments to rituals, including religious rituals. Overall, however, I think it’s too easy to make Islamic films, i.e., works that highlight a specific Muslim problem; there is such a demand for them nowadays. After 9/11 people want to know what Muslims think, but I don’t want to do that, to become a spokesperson for this non-existent Muslim worldview.

Cazzaro: The extensive use of what could be defined as “pertinent digressions” seems to characterize your entire oeuvre—6horts and The Last Communist may be the best examples of this. Where does your interest for digressions come from?

Muhammad: I think that’s how people’s minds work: you always take certain detours. Even then, the digression needs to be interesting, at least to me. I always say, that my favorite novel is Sentimental Education, because there
are so many things there that shouldn’t be there, it rambles and that is what makes it very charming. In the case of 6horts, the very idea of wedding captions to images is already a kind of digression, and you can play with it, especially because with text and images you get a different digression than with a purely written text. Sometimes, however, the digressions are as important as the core. Lips to Lips is full of digressions. In The Big Durian a lot of the point is the digression, it’s what you are meant to see and it’s not used to fill up time. The same could be said of The Last Communist. In a way, Chin Peng’s story can be seen as the backbone of the film, but also as a kind digression itself.

CAZZARO: Relating to what you just said about The Big Durian and The Last Communist, could one say that the very story of the running amok of the Malay soldier Private Adam has a similar function to that of Chin Peng?

MUHAMMAD: Yes, what’s interesting about Private Adam was that one thing he did; and what’s interesting about that one thing he did was the ripple it caused. Therefore, I wanted to talk about the ripple rather than what made him do that, otherwise it would have become something very specific. Private Adam can thus be seen here as the catalyst. Like any catalyst in a chemical process, it doesn’t undergo any change, but it enables the other elements to interact—and I wanted to talk about the elements.

CAZZARO: “Do you remember?” seems to represent a key question not only in The Big Durian, but also in your following works up to the latest, Malaysian Gods, which was temporary entitled Do You Remember the 20th Day of September? Why this keen interest toward the act of remembering?

MUHAMMAD: Because I think, that what we remember or what we choose to remember says a lot about what we are. Every word in this sentence is important: “Do,” “you,” “remember.” With “you” as opposed to other people that you may or may not know. I’m not a big fan of history, I’m not “archeologically minded”; it’s just very interesting what people choose to remember and what they don’t. Often what they choose not to remember is what is most telling.

CAZZARO: Let’s talk about The Big Durian and its two establishing shots: the skyline of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) with the famous twin towers and the shot of the muddy estuary.

MUHAMMAD: I had access to a few dozen stills by a professional photographer. Among the stills there was also the shot of KLCC, which, as I say in the voice-over, all contemporary Malaysian mainstream movies have. It seemed natural to make this reference, since every year I watch nearly all the new commercial releases, and I note this common element. So what does it mean when
you always have to have this shot? And how many people remember that KL is named after the meeting of two rivers and specifically that the meeting happens there? Not many would, I think.

CAZZARO: Could it be said that by clashing these two shots as well as by using them as a starting point of your exploration of KL, you wanted to emphasize that “Malaysia is still a work-in-progress. It’s a country of restlessness and contradiction,” to use a comment you wrote back in 2001?

MUHAMMAD: Yes . . . if you sum up *The Big Durian*, a lot of it is about Mahathirism, and KLCC is a symbol of that. If you erase this prominent landmark you go back to the pre-Mahathir era.7

CAZZARO: Why did you choose to mix—without overtly declaring it—authentic and staged testimonies in *The Big Durian*?

MUHAMMAD: To make it more fun. It’s not stated, because the local audience would recognize the actors onscreen. The film wasn’t meant to be shown that extensively overseas. However, I didn’t fabricate testimonies in the sense that it’s still based on interviews; the actors also perform other people’s real interviews.


MUHAMMAD: Well, KL is not widely called “The Big Durian,” Jakarta is, and the title is not meant to reference KL as such. “The Big Durian” just seemed a fun, local, and a bit mysterious title. To be honest, the title came first, I knew I wanted to do something entitled “The Big Durian” about a year before starting the project and deciding what to talk about.

CAZZARO: The reference to the durian—the “king of fruits”—leads me to ask you about the frequent presence of food and food metaphors throughout your oeuvre . . .

MUHAMMAD: Food is a key part of life in Malaysia; we’re very eager to talk about food, whereas we don’t feel very free, or maybe we’re reluctant to talk about certain other things. . . and often when we talk about food, we’re talking about other things. It seemed very local and immediate to deal with food. To see people eating is like seeing people going on with their lives. The normal excuse used for people not getting involved in politics or whatever, is that they have to *cari makan*, to “look for food.”
Cazzaro: In 2004, you had an opportunity to live in Tokyo and, as you said, *Tokyo Magic Hour* is a response to the place. How did you develop this “sixty-minute visual and narrative experiment”?

Muhammad: The experimental approach is somehow specific to Tokyo. I enjoyed staying there, but it was very disorienting. It’s actually the most dislocating place I’ve ever been in. By coincidence, I was also watching a lot of experimental works at the Yamagata office. Something different was therefore needed to capture that sense of disorientation. On one level, I quite like that *Tokyo Magic Hour* looks gimmicky, but done in a low-budget way. I don’t mind it seeming gimmicky, because it’s not so serious, it’s not such a solemn thing, unlike most experimental works. You can see certain attempts to do something, to work to create something really wacky. Most people really dislike it, but that’s OK. (laughs) I quite like it and there is one segment that I regard as my second favorite after *Kamunting*: part number 3, where love turns to indifference and the sun is setting.

Cazzaro: Could you comment on your choice not to shoot in person? You stated that you wanted to be more the “DJ” than the “director” of this work. The opening titles, indeed, read “compiled,” instead of “directed” by Amir Muhammad.

Muhammad: *Tokyo Magic Hour* seems very non-subjective, but actually it’s incredibly personal. I see my choice of asking some Japanese students to shoot as a way of filtering. I told them where to go; I knew those places but I wanted to see them through someone else’s eyes.

Cazzaro: Let’s move to your experience in Indonesia and to *The Year of Living Vicariously*. How did this quite unusual project come into being?

Muhammad: I was asked to shoot a documentary around Riri Riza’s *Gie* and several approaches came to mind. The production allowed me access and I followed a third of the shoot. In total, I interviewed around fifty people. The presidential elections were going on at the same time, and I basically asked anything that came to mind, trying however to mirror some thematic concerns of the book *Notes of a Demonstrator* by Soe Hok Gie—the student, activist, and writer whose life is chronicled in *Gie*—as well as to focus on what Malaysians understand or don’t understand about Indonesia. It became very difficult to arrange.

Cazzaro: Does the extensive use of split-screen arise from this difficulty?

Muhammad: I thought of split-screen to show that there is a lot happening. At the beginning I was thinking about the same division in half I used in
Tokyo Magic Hour, but Azharr Rudin, who worked on the editing and played a big part in the final result, proposed this split-screen with different sizes and the alternation of views, which I thought was much more dynamic. The split-screen was also meant to give an idea of busyness in Indonesia and also the idea that there are always two sides to the story: the fictional reality of Gie and the documentary reality of The Year of Living Vicariously.

Cazzaro: Once again, the title you chose is rather peculiar. . .

Muhammad: The idea of making a film is experiencing something vicariously. By interviewing people to find out what their lives are like, I live vicariously through them. The final title came very late—the one suggested at first was “Deconstructing Gie,” which I really disliked—when suddenly I remembered about The Year of Living Dangerously, and I think it fits well since, like Gie, that story is also about 1960s Indonesia.

Cazzaro: Once back in Malaysia, you started developing The Last Communist. I found quite interesting that, except for its coda in Merdeka Square, the film is entirely shot and set outside of KL. Among other things, were you trying to “detour” from a certain KL-centrism that seems to characterize social, political, and cultural life in Malaysia?

Muhammad: Well, I think that in very different ways both Tokyo and Jakarta are very exciting cities so when you come back and see KL. . . this city is very boring! In addition, reading Chin Peng’s memoirs made me desire to visit the small towns he talks about. I can say it was more a selfish desire for me to find what these towns were like rather than a desire to give voice to other people. Originally, there was a part set in KL, but I then cut it out, since I just wanted the images of these very small towns.

Cazzaro: Could you comment on the structure of this journey?

Muhammad: It’s structured following Chin Peng’s life, using as a kind of road map the life of a person Malaysians are encouraged to think is invisible. I wanted to combine the use of very visible, “physical” roads and towns with this very invisible person and narration. The Last Communist is thus a road movie, and like all road movies it’s about more than one type of journey. It aims at something we can never find, because it is invisible. Chin Peng lives in exile in Thailand and therefore, he’s physically and “hermeneutically” discouraged from being part of the Malaysian experience.

Cazzaro: In talking about the film, it is impossible not to mention its banning. Before this, however, I would like to know if you self-censored something in the making of The Last Communist. . .
Muhammad: I think I must have, because I’m Malaysian and that means I self-censor! I’ve never not self-censored. In The Big Durian, for example, I censored which sultan (we have nine in Malaysia) I refer to, even though the local audience knows who he is, but I just said “a sultan.” I didn’t want to be specific, because I was reporting rumors and the sultan’s case never came to trial.

Cazzaro: As far as the banning is concerned, what is more striking to a foreign observer is the fact that none of the people who started attacking the film had actually seen it.

Muhammad: Well, I’m very proud (laughs). It’s the first Malaysian film ever to be banned. This doesn’t say that the film is very daring, but that other film people must have tried very hard to self-censor to avoid offending. I therefore think that this became a kind of absurdity in its own way to the point that
people criticize something which is absent. I think the banning says a lot about Malaysia and, in a sense, it’s now part of the film.

CAZZARO: In an interview with the Malaysian press you said: “I don’t see myself as controversial. It’s fun to annoy people. It’s too easy to be controversial in Malaysia. The slightest thing could be controversial.” Could you elaborate on this?

MUHAMMAD: To give you an example, in 2006 there were controversies around a new brand of biscuits. Someone took these biscuits to the police station, because—when looking very closely—it looked like there was a crucifix shape on the surface, so there was a fear of becoming Christian by eating them. Things that are not even supposed to be controversial, that would be uncontroversial anywhere else, end up being controversial here. So you shouldn’t even try not to be controversial, because you will be anyway. It’s pretty common here to be attacked before getting accepted. For every single filmmaker, artist, writer, there comes a point in which they’re attacked, just to see how they respond.

CAZZARO: As you mentioned earlier, Village People Radio Show completes a picture, or even a journey, initiated in KL with The Big Durian, continued through the small towns in The Last Communist, and concluded in a Malay village in South Thailand.

MUHAMMAD: Of all the things I have done, this is the closest to something made to document and preserve something before it disappears. I also knew that no one else was going to do this, since even within the Communist Party of Malaya this regiment of Malay-Muslims was an offshoot and its members were just forgotten. Within one year of shooting it, three of them died. I wanted the film to be very linear, quiet, uneventful. While shooting, I particularly had in mind an impressive Spanish documentary, The Sky Turns (El Cielo Gira, 2004) by Mercedes Álvarez, which is set in the filmmaker’s native village in Spain. She was the last person who was born there, so it’s a village full of old people, a village waiting to die.

CAZZARO: Why did you decide to contrast this lack of events, this sense of inertia, with the use of the Thai radio drama?

MUHAMMAD: I wanted to use the radio partly because it’s also intertextual. I saw some short films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and if asked to imagine the Thai countryside, I would imagine his shorts, and in lot of them the radio is present. I wanted to give the idea that other stories were going on, that there is another story being told in the air. Lastly, the Thai radio reinforced the idea that there is a disjunction... this Malay kampung [village] is in Thailand.
Cazzaro: Around the same period you also had a chance to debut within the mainstream film industry with Susuk. What could you say of the finished film?

Muhammad: For a number of reasons, the actual making was kind of a mess. I co-directed it with Naeim Ghalili and I was one of four people writing the script. Directing-wise, I definitely did less but maybe script-wise and story-wise a bit more. I also chose the cast. It was fun, however, and I’m quite happy with it.

Cazzaro: Why did you decide to focus on black magic and show business?

Muhammad: It evolved from several different ideas, but basically I liked dealing with ambition. I see Susuk as a black comedy about ambition. Its principal idea is that in order to be successful you have to turn into someone else. It’s not so scary, maybe the plot should have been simpler, since it seems to become too involved as it goes along. However, the audience was curious to see it, even based on the title alone. The magic practice of susuk, indeed, it’s quite sensational, and it’s forbidden in Islam.8

Cazzaro: You once ventured to launch the film as a “lesbian vampire movie”. . . whereas you seem more cautious to comment on a political subtext noticed by some commentators.

Muhammad: Yes, I think the lesbian vampire element is quite obvious, although many reviewers did not notice that. As for the subtext, I think it’s there, if people want to read. Susuk is about power, about people who want to hold power. . . and power is always political.

Figure 20.3 Amir Muhammad’s lesbian vampire film Susuk (2008) was his only genre movie so far.  
Source: Grand Brilliance
CAZZARO: Let’s talk about *Malaysian Gods*. First of all, why did you choose to develop two completely different versions?

MUHAMMAD: I thought about that since the very beginning, although I preferred not to state it openly. As for the first version, since it retraces the same path of the September 20 demonstration, I wanted it to be like a demonstration, something temporally limited—so I screened for one day only, and then deleted the audio and video files. I liked this quite romantic idea, normally you don’t think of films in that way. As for the second one, it’s more factual, more a kind of record to be kept, and this one will circulate more. I wanted to open it up more to explore the whole year after that September demonstration. I think the whole year provides a different story about that period and that’s also the time span covered by Sabri Zain’s book *Face Off: A Malaysian Reformasi Diary*, from which *Malaysian Gods* draws inspiration.

CAZZARO: Like *The Year of Living Vicariously*, also the final title of this project is very peculiar and came quite late. Do you refer to something in particular when talking about “gods” in Malaysia?

MUHAMMAD: The title suddenly occurred to me while thinking that we tend to treat our politicians like gods, like demigods. Yes, particularly in the second version I wanted to show different representations of gods in Malaysia. I used many logos, flags, and religious symbols in the captions in order to refer not only to the religious gods in the mosque and the temple, but also to the political system and to that modern-day gods which are corporations, nation-states, the institutions which have power over us and determine our fate. . . which is what God is in a kind of secular context. Obviously, it’s kind of a playful thing as well, also because some of these logos are not completely accurate.

CAZZARO: Another interesting, specific choice is the focus on Tamil language in general and on the ethnic Indian minority in particular...

MUHAMMAD: I chose this angle, because you can always tell a lot about a society from the way it treats its minorities. Often minorities would tell stories that the majority would never have heard before. Moreover, although Tamil is the smallest language in terms of usage in Malaysia, when it comes to political consciousness, the Tamil population has undergone the most profound change recently, so it’s also a tribute to them.

CAZZARO: It could be argued that both *The Big Durian* and *Malaysian Gods* are, first and foremost, "stories in and about KL."... if a lot of *The Big Durian* deals with Mahathirism, then what about *Malaysian Gods*?
Muhammad: It’s about the beginning of the end of Mahathirism, and it also reflects on the post-Mahathir situation as it refers to the latest general elections in March 2008 as well as to how people now are quite open to talk and oppose. I believe it all started back in 1998; it wouldn’t have happened without the events at that time.

Cazzaro: You are currently taking a break from filmmaking, aren’t you?

Muhammad: Yes, I wanted to mark a kind of closure with Malaysian Gods and with that concentrate only on books. My publishing activity reminds me of what I was starting to do with 6shorts and The Big Durian, it has that kind of feel of making things up as you go along. That’s the main reason, and it’s fun. I’m learning a lot of new things.

Cazzaro: And then?

Muhammad: Let’s see… Maybe come back to filmmaking in two or three years time, but I should do something different, less “editorial,” less factual. What would be the point if it’s the same?

Cazzaro: Lastly, let me ask you to elaborate on this rather poetic passage of an article you wrote in 2007 for a local newspaper: “Film, among many other things, is an act of love. The very fact of recording something is also an act of faith: You believe that this will survive somehow, and be seen. So that is why we are children of hope.”

Muhammad: I think that if you’re not optimistic, then you wouldn’t be doing anything. So no matter what the problems are, you will still want to continue. Film critic Dennis Lim referred to The Big Durian as “an impertinent love letter to its people.” It was the first time someone described the film in that way. Lim is originally from Malaysia, he lived in KL for a while, and I think he noticed what no one else noticed. The Big Durian is not purely a kind of political exposé. Actually, his full sentence was: “An impertinent love letter to its people that doesn’t let them off the hook for their apathy.” I suppose that’s a very close description, because on some levels you have to like the people you’re documenting. You can’t just be angry with them. You have to recognize that whatever flaws they have are probably flaws that you recognize in yourself.

This conversation was conducted as part of both a doctoral research project (supported by a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and a travel grant from the University of London) and a tribute to Amir Muhammad organized by the Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema di Pesaro (Pesaro International
When Yasmin Ahmad died on July 25, 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, the film world of Malaysia suffered a tragic loss. The country lost one of its few directors, whose films got international attention, yet are decidedly Malaysian. And the world lost a filmmaker who could take on serious topics such as racism and intolerance with wit, intelligence, and humor. The six feature-length films that she managed to finish (another production was under way when Ahmad died) are as much document of the multiracial society of Malaysia as they are an expose of the institutionalized racism that structures Malaysian society.

“\textit{I want you to forget about the race of the protagonists half an hour into the film}”

Interview with Yasmin Ahmad

\textit{Tilman Baumgärtel}

When Yasmin Ahmad died on July 25, 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, the film world of Malaysia suffered a tragic loss. The country lost one of its few directors, whose films got international attention, yet are decidedly Malaysian. And the world lost a filmmaker who could take on serious topics such as racism and intolerance with wit, intelligence, and humor. The six feature-length films that she managed to finish (another production was under way when Ahmad died) are as much document of the multiracial society of Malaysia as they are an expose of the institutionalized racism that structures Malaysian society.

Nobody would have expected the lively, feisty filmmaker to go out like that—aged fifty-one, she collapsed during a work meeting after suffering a stroke and died during surgery for cerebral hemorrhage at a hospital only a few hours later. Both in Malaysia and Singapore (where many of her films were successfully released),
retrospectives of her work were held; her last film *Talentime* posthumously won the award for the best Malaysian movie at the Malaysian Film Festival, and her colleague Amir Muhammad even wrote a book about her to deal with the loss of one of Malaysia’s most important filmmakers, who had become something of a patron saint to the younger generation of digital independents in Malaysia.

However, as long as she was still alive, her films attracted controversy and even censorship in her country. Despite her stout Muslim leanings, Yasmin Ahmad’s movies have drawn the ire not just of the Malaysian censorship board, but also of people who think of themselves as highly religious Muslims. It might seem that Ahmad often deliberately set out to provoke sensibilities in Malaysia, where both questions of religion and ethnic identity can lead to grave reactions. Her first feature film *Sepet*, a Romeo and Juliet story between a Malay middle class girl and a Chinese vendor of pirated VCDs, was only allowed to be screened in Malaysia after eight cuts were made. (The objectionable scenes included one shot that shows the father of the female protagonist tickling her mother in bed!) After focusing on Orked (Sharifah Amani), the charismatic female protagonist of *Sepet*, and her family in her next two films, *Gubra* and *Mukhsin* (which won the Grand Prize of the International Jury at the Berlin Film Festival), she took on a story with a more serious tone with *Muallaf* (2007). Ahmad however denied that she was courting controversy, and stressed that she was only interested in stories on the human condition.

Ahmad started to make movies at a relatively late stage of her life (she was forty-six when she made her first feature length film) after working for two decades in the advertising industry of Kuala Lumpur, where she rose from copywriter to director of commercials for clients that included the state-controlled gas company Petronas. A commercial in which a Chinese grammar school student confesses his love for a Malay girl in his class has become exceptionally popular in Malaysia. Despite her regular output of feature films, she kept working for Leo Burnett, and she was at her office at the international advertising agency when I got her on the phone for this interview. Little did I know that it would be one of her last interviews.

**Filmography**

*Talentime* (2009)  
*Muallaf* (2008)  
*Gubra* (2006)  
*Sepet* (2004)  
“I want you to forget about the race of the protagonists half an hour into the film” 247

BAUMGÄRTEL: Do you see yourself as an independent filmmaker?

AHMAD: No. Independent is a strange term. The word has taken two routes. The first one is the description of a film that has not been backed by a big studio. In that sense, two of my films are independent, and the rest are not. But at the same time, “independent” has become a genre in itself. In fact, I don’t want to be an independent filmmaker, because it is a tough thing. You have to run after people all the time to get your films produced.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Which of your films were independently produced?

AHMAD: Sepet and Muallaf. They were both not produced by a major studio. Sepet was my first feature film, so we had to get money here and there, and my producer and I had to use some of our own money. For Muallaf, I got money from a rich man from Ipoh, who liked Sepet and Gubra so much that he gave us one million ringgit (€ 210,000 or US$ 270,000). So we did not need a big studio to help us finance the film. However, usually it makes life much easier in many ways if you work with a studio. Of course, you have to answer to a lot of different people if you work with a studio and they sometimes want to change this or they want to change that. But I have a reputation of being stubborn. So if they say, “I want to do your film,” they usually expect that I won’t allow them to change much—unless they are being reasonable. (laughs)

BAUMGÄRTEL: So, unlike other directors, you do not see working for a big studio as a limitation to your creativity?

AHMAD: Well, in Malaysia, yes. But now I am working on a production for a small Japanese studio. They liked my previous movies, so now I am about to make a Japanese film. They do make comments, but the Japanese producer is a reasonable person and his comments make sense. I am not stubborn for the sake of being stubborn, and he knows Japanese culture better than I do. He is completely Japanese, whereas I am only one-quarter-Japanese. So I do listen to him and in fact, I rely on him for many details of the film.

BAUMGÄRTEL: There is a very lively independent scene in Malaysia right now, with directors such as Ho Yuhang, James Lee, Amir Muhammad, Azharrudin, Woo Ming Jin, Tan Chui Mui, Deepak Kumaran Menon, and Liew Seng Tat. Do you see yourself as part of this group, or is it an entirely different scene?

AHMAD: Even James Lee has made a studio-backed film and Amir has done so too, incidentally for the same studio that produced my film Mukhsin (2006). All of these films were box-office hits, so technically we are no longer
independent. But we are spiritually united, I think, because we began at the same time, with Amir spearheading the whole thing. And we became friends, because at the time we shared the same problems. We acted in each other’s films, and we helped each other find money and we helped to produce each other’s works.

Baumgärtel: What is unique about you is that you still have a day job at an advertising agency, at Leo Burnett Malaysia. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ahmad: Oh, that’s how it all began. I began making films partly to entertain my parents and also to exercise my skills as a filmmaker because I enjoyed it so much. Making commercials has really helped me in making films because you learn the economy. At the same time, making films has helped me make commercials.

Baumgärtel: But do you need to keep the day job or do you want to keep making commercials?

Ahmad: Yes, because it pays the rent. Malaysia is a country with fewer than thirty million residents, so it is hard to earn enough money just by making films. So I do advertising. They pay me a good salary and they even bought me a Mercedes-Benz to drive, so I see no reason to quit the job. I need to live. And I still need to build my parents a house. (laughs)

Baumgärtel: So you are saying that making movies in Malaysia, even films like yours that make money at the box office, is not a living?

Ahmad: Yes. There are a lot of rumors about some Malaysian mainstream directors who pinch and scrape on the productions and pocket the money for themselves. But I don’t want to do that. I want to lavish the production as much as I can with whatever money I can get and I want to pay the crew and the cast as much as I can. I don’t want to squeeze them so I can get rich. If you rely on movie making for a living, you have to be more stringent with money. I don’t want to do that.

Baumgärtel: Well, that sounds like it is another kind of independence. Compared to some of the other independent films that are coming out of Malaysia right now, your films seem to be relatively traditional in terms of narrative. Is this approach influenced by working in advertising, or is this simply your style?

Ahmad: Well, it comes from being a film viewer. I always thought that if I make people pay ten ringgit to come and watch my film, it behooves me to try and make it entertaining for them. Also, my heroes in film history are people
who make films appealing. I admire some films from various parts of the world, which are a bit more contemplative. But my absolute favorite films are from people like Pedro Almodóvar and Yoji Yamada and Charlie Chaplin and Clint Eastwood and James L. Brooks. The films that I really like are films by people who make an effort to be engaging.

BAUMGÄRTEL: One interesting aspect of your work as an advertising director is that you made more than fifty clips for Petronas, the big government-owned company that is vested with all the oil and gas resources in Malaysia. These spots were not advertising in the usual sense, but showed the multi-racial Malaysia of today in an emotional way. I guess one could call it an attempt at nation building. Can you talk a little bit about that and how it relates to your feature films?

AHMAD: You may call it nation building, but I just hate borders, and I hate those arbitrary divisions between people. I simply want to make films about humanity. Ever since I was young, I was always concerned about humanity—not in a Mother-Theresa-kind of way, but I was interested in the day-to-day-interactions between people. I find that in our pursuit to achieve success, we sometimes forget some basic human qualities, like kindness and compassion. I always tried to inject those feelings that I have into any film that I make, whether it is an advertising film or a movie. For me, film is the opportunity to remind human beings to be human again.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Your film Sepet is about the interracial love affair between a Malay girl and a Chinese boy, a hot-button subject in Malaysia, where the relationship between the three major ethnic groups is often problematic. The conflicts and commonalities between Malays, Chinese, and Indians are a major reoccurring motif in many independent films from Malaysia. But you are saying that your films not about Malaysian identity at all?

AHMAD: No, they are basically about people. There were some local critics who said that my films were championing the Chinese, and others said that my commercials were championing the Indians, and the Malays were complaining anyway. But I kept saying my films are about human beings. I want you to forget about the race of the protagonists half an hour into the film, and focus on their character. I say that specifically because Malaysians are so aware of the race issues in the country. But now, that my films have won, thank god, international awards, nobody can say anymore that I make films just for Malaysians.

BAUMGÄRTEL: So you are saying that your films are not about race relationships at all?
Ahmad: They are, but I think that this is mostly because of my life. I was married to an Indian before and now I am married to a Chinese. And if I am writing a script, I can only write about things that I know. My screenplays are like that, because my life is like that.

Baumgärtel: Nevertheless, you had problems with your films in Malaysia. Sepet ran into trouble with the local censorship board, and could only be shown in a version that had some objectionable scenes cut out. The film was attacked on television, and there was a controversy in the newspapers . . .

Ahmad: It was difficult, because a small group of very vocal people in Malaysia could not accept this type of film. The censors made nine cuts, and then I argued with them, and they made eight. And then the complete version ran in Singapore, and you know—Malaysia has a very healthy video piracy industry (laughs). So the public saw all of Sepet on pirated DVD, despite the censorship. And people were saying: Why did they censor this film? That was stupid! It came out in the newspapers; it came out on the Internet and on TV. And with my subsequent films, they became less strict with me, because it became pretty obvious that the public had no problems with the way Malaysia was portrayed in my movies. So with the films after Sepet, I had it quite easy. The other films had not to be edited anymore . . . or it was very negligible.

Baumgärtel: So what exactly was the argument against Sepet that the censorship brought forward?

Ahmad: Well, the Censorship Board—that sounds like one big institution, but in fact it changed a lot over the years. In the year, when Sepet came out, I happened to encounter a Censorship Board that was quite bigoted and small-minded, so I argued with them a lot. In the end, the film won the award as best film at the Malaysian Film Festival, so I felt the censorship board looked quite silly. Fortunately, this board is comprised of different members now, so they are much more open.

Baumgärtel: But what exactly didn’t they like about the film? What were the objectionable scenes? As a foreigner, I do not see anything problematic about it at all . . .

Ahmad: They said I was portraying the Malaysian family in a disgraceful way. (laughs) My own family was very bohemian, and so the family of Orked, the girl in the movie, is also very bohemian. They are half-naked most of the time, you see them playing, the talk of sex is very open. But with the subsequent films, the public got used to Orked’s family after a while. Some people even said: I wish I had a family like that!
BAUMGÄRTEL: What scenes did they cut?

AHMAD: There is one scene where the mother and father dance, and then the mother pulls down the father’s sarong. That got cut. Then, there is another scene where Jason’s friend says to Orked: “Not every Chinaman is a cheat and not all Malays are lazy” which got cut. Well, it’s a fact, but some Malays are so sensitive about these things.

BAUMGÄRTEL: Did anybody ever approach you about turning the story of this family into a TV series? This family seems like the perfect material for a sitcom . . .

AHMAD: Actually yes, there was talk about Mukhsin being turned into a TV series, but I turned it down, because I kept emphasizing that I have a day job. And television just does not pay as well as advertising.

BAUMGÄRTEL: What is the audience you make your films for? Do you think about a specific kind of people for which you make your films?

AHMAD: No, I don’t, because I deal with humanity. My film Mukhsin won two awards at the Berlin Film Festival. It is about a ten-year-old girl and a twelve-year-old boy, and how they deal with first love. So, a lot of people said: Oh, it’s a children’s film. But at the box office it turned out that people from all ages and from all races went to see the film. In the end, human problems are human problems. I don’t image any kind of audience when I am making my films, because I want to talk to the human heart.

BAUMGÄRTEL: If you look at Malaysian film history, are there any films that are important to you? Do you see yourself, for instance, in a tradition with P. Ramlee, who also dealt with contemporary human problems in many of his films?

AHMAD: I don’t think so. I admire P. Ramlee’s comedies, but I don’t like his dramas very much. But apart from them, I don’t identify with any Malaysian filmmaker. In fact, I don’t even think about them. When I am making my films I think about Charlie Chaplin, and maybe a little bit about Almodóvar, or Yoji Yamada, nothing else.

BAUMGÄRTEL: So you would rather look at international than local cinema. Why?

AHMAD: I don’t know. Maybe their sincerity and humanity appeal to me more. I am absolutely excited about the films by Yoji Yamada. His Tora-san films are absolutely influential for my work—films about ordinary people with ordinary problems, a little bit charming, a little bit hopeful, and a little bit sad. I think that this is what life is about.
BAUMGÄRTEL: Are you aware of other contemporary filmmakers from Southeast Asia? For instance from the Philippines, like Lav Diaz, Brillante Mendoza, Jeffrey Jeturian?

AHMAD: No, I am not. When I am making my films, I am very busy, and when I am not making my films, I am also very busy with my advertising work. Last year one of my commercials got a Gold Medal at Cannes, the first for a commercial from Malaysia, and it became the fourth most-awarded commercial of the year in the world. As a result, jobs are pouring in, and I don’t have much time to watch films or read stuff—other than haikus, which are very short (laughs). But I love being busy, it’s nice!

BAUMGÄRTEL: Some film theorists have tried to find a certain “Malay aesthetic” in your films. Elements of this aesthetic include relatively long takes and a blocking, where scenes are often shown through windows, doors, and other elements that kind of “frame” the action, etc. Can you say something about that?

AHMAD: Malay aesthetics are an eclectic thing. Ours is a crazy mixture of Indian, Chinese, Arab, Indonesian, Portuguese, and English cultures. So to be honest, I think those film theorists you mentioned were making things up, as film theorists oft en do.

BAUMGÄRTEL: But a lot of the key scenes in your films are shot in long takes, aren’t they?

AHMAD: My long takes usually involve some interaction between actors. When I require the conversation or physical interaction to be intense, I prefer not to interrupt the sincerity of the moment with cuts and reverse angles. This is not to say that this is the only right way to do it. It’s just how we like to portray such situations. In other words, we follow our own feelings about the scene. I don’t think it’s a “Malay aesthetic,” it’s just our aesthetic.
Notes

Introduction: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia
1. For a comprehensive list of film releases during the "Golden Age" of Philippine cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, see Momblanco 1979, Junio 1995.
2. According to an unpublished interview that I conducted with veteran producer and actor Htayaung and scriptwriter U Aye Kyu Lay in the film museum of the Myanmar Motion Picture Association in Yangon in January 2010, the Burmese film industry produced a total of 92 pictures at its peak in 1962.
4. All this information stems from the interviews with the filmmakers in this book.
5. The essay has since disappeared from the website of the Toronto Film Festival together with the rest of the material on the 2007 edition of the event.
10. However, there are indications that South American countries like Colombia are about to see a similar renaissance of their national cinema very similar to what is happening in Southeast Asia right now.

Chapter 1: Southeast Asian Independent Cinema
3. Lent, 1990, 166.
13. Lent, 1990, 156.
Chapter 2: Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds

5. See for example the interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul in this volume, where he talks about the production of his first feature length film *Mysterious Object at Noon*.
6. For historic overviews on the film history of these countries, see the respective chapters in Hanan 2001, Lacaba 2000 and Lent 1990. Ciecko 2006 has chapters on the contemporary film scene in the major Southeast Asian countries. For insightful essays on Thai and Malaysian cinema, respectively see Chaiworaporn 2002 and Muthalib 2002.
10. For more on Singaporean cinema, see Chea 2006, Millet 2006, and Uhde 2000.
13. He maintains a photo diary on the website of his production company, Kick the Machine, that nicely demonstrates this lifestyle, showing pictures of dinners in Europe next to snapshots of shootings in the Thai jungle.
17. According to an email correspondence with Amir Muhammad in April 2009, from which all this information stems, less than one hundred copies were sold this way.
19. For an account of the role of the Goethe-Institute in developing the Philippine experimental film scene in the 1980s, see Baumgärtel 2007.
21. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of pirated films on the works of independent filmmakers in Southeast Asia, see Baumgärtel 2010.
25. Appadurai, 1996, 36. This passage is an indicator of the period in which Appadurai wrote this text. Almost twenty years later, the enlightened “Euro-American master-narrative” might not be so dominant anymore, while “keywords” in the global ideospheres might include Jihad, anti-Zionism, tribalism, genocide or creationism.

Chapter 3: Hinterland, Heartland, Home
4. Regular retrospectives are conducted by FINAS, the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia. Various studio era artists have also been conferred with titles and honors, among them Dato’ Jins Shamsuddin and Dato’ S. Shamsuddin, for their contributions towards “national culture.”
8. In both The Trishaw Man and My Mother-in-Law, the kampung as represented on screen are surrogates: a shantytown in the former, and Penang in the latter. The relatively more obscure films that I cite, however, portray actual kampungs shot on location.
9. The archetypal film of this nature is P. Ramlee’s classic My Mother-in-Law. The mother-in-law’s class-conscious harangue of P. Ramlee’s character, Kassim Selamat, in the film is one of the most oft-quoted lines in Malay cinema: “Kassim Selamat? Who is Kassim Selamat? Lawyer? Magistrate?...A musician? My ancestors are turning in their graves! A musician! You ungrateful daughter!”
11. Translation mine.
15. This occurred after Operation Coldstore, a nation-wide sweep which resulted in the arrest of suspected Communists and their subsequent detention under the Internal Security Act. The PAP was able to eliminate its main opposition, the left-wing Barisan Sosialis, from the political arena.
19. Ibid.
20. Wong, 2005, 68.
21. This title bears a resemblance to P. Ramlee’s *The Trishaw Man* made forty years earlier. In both films, the title suggests a character defined by his occupation, whose individual subjectivity is subsumed under his role in the economy. In both films, the occupation is a working-class prototype, announcing the filmmakers’ sympathy or solidarity with the less-privileged.
26. Anonymous: We’re going to get better men and we’ll fight, *Straits Times*, May 9, 2006.
28. Rachel’s violation of the heartland space is underlined by the fact that she audaciously parks her Mercedes-Benz on a lot reserved for the handicapped. While this might suggest a critique on Rachel herself being either socially or emotionally handicapped, a more obvious reading would be of the “city girl” who is oblivious to local norms of expected behavior.
32. Ho, 2007, 310.
33. This particular location, a sand stockpile in Singapore which is used for construction projects and land reclamation, is a favorite spot for Tan, who has used it before in his short film *Sons* (2000). It is interesting how in both these films, the sand stockpile is never referred to as what it actually is, but is employed as a signifier for limbo and indeterminacy.
34. Lui, K. n.d.
35. Punggol, in the Northeastern part of Singapore, used to be one of Singapore’s last surviving areas which still consisted of farmland. In 1996, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the Punggol 21 plan, where the government intended to develop “21st century model housing” in Punggol, a mix of private houses, executive condominiums and high-grade HDB flats.
36. The annual Orchard Road Christmas Light-Up is a typically consumerist Singaporean event that spruces up the downtown shopping district to encourage greater spending. Notably, the light-up often starts a full month before the advent of Christmas.

Chapter 4: Stealing Moments
1. The term “reforgotten,” may have been first publicly coined in the title of the poetry event *Return of the Reforgotten*, organized by Sinclair’s early publisher Mike Goldmark at the Albert Hall, London, in October, 1995. Later it would be used and more clearly defined in Sinclair 1997.
4. In the Singapore context, the term “heartland” and its occupants, the “heartlanders,” signifies ordinary, working class people, usually of Chinese ethnicity. Government rhetoric often makes the distinction between the conservative, family values of the majority “heartlanders” versus the more progressive, liberally inclined, city-center “cosmopolitans,” a highly reductive construction of national identity and geography.
5. For more information about the film’s distribution, see Tan Pin Pin’s essay in this book.
6. HDB is an acronym for Housing Development Board, but is commonly used as a noun to refer to high-rise public housing that the HDB are responsible for building and maintaining, in which the vast majority of Singapore’s population dwell.
7. “On the whole, I think a lot of people have become immune to the Ugly Singaporean. You require a certain sensitivity to detect this behavioral pattern. I think once you’re used to such face-to-face encounters on a daily basis, you come to accept it, and you also tend to get infected by it, to take on The Scowl.” From Sa’at 2002.
8. A government campaign strongly encouraging Chinese of different dialect groups to speak Mandarin was initiated in 1979, after that dialect was phased out from television, radio, and cinema. Today, Cantonese TV drama and films from Hong Kong will routinely be dubbed into Mandarin for Singapore. The majority-dialect of many Chinese Singaporeans, Hokkien, is partly permitted in theatrically released films from Singapore, but there are no official guidelines permitted as to how much is acceptable. See Slater 2007.
9. The song of that title was written in 1959 by Freddy Fender, an American country musician. It’s worth quoting from the second verse: “Why should I keep loving you / when I know that you’re not true? / and why should I call your name / when you’re to blame/for making me Blue?”
10. This film was commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore as part of their (re) opening festival in 2006, it was screened on December 17 of that year, and after that has never been publicly screened in Singapore again. It is entirely in Hokkien.

Chapter 5: Fiction, Interrupted
3. This might call to mind the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. As Chetana 1996 points out, Brecht’s alienation effect bears similarities to the aesthetic effect of traditional Thai drama (98). However, the background of this illusion differs greatly from that of Brecht’s theory, especially with regard to the explicitly political dimension of the latter. It is doubtful whether the parallels extend far beyond the level of appearance and effect.

6. In an e-mail to the author (March 14, 2009).

7. The links between the films are indicative of the ties between the filmmakers who are acquaintances and have worked together earlier. As Mingmongkol’s production homepage (that is not available on the internet anymore) stated, Isarn Special was inspired by an idea by Apichatpong.

8. In an e-mail to the author (March 14, 2009).

9. By the term semi-independent, I mean independent productions that rely on distribution by majors, as described in: Musikawong 2007. For a descriptive overview of Thai independent film, see Chaiworaporn 1997.

10. See Sudarat 2007 (as cited above).

Chapter 6: Cinema, Sexuality and Censorship in Post-Soeharto Indonesia

1. For MFI’s statements and media coverage about MFI, see the MFI website.


3. I am indebted to Tilman Baumgärtel and Anna McCarthy for their suggestions in the process of revising this essay.


6. Film Law no. 8/1992


16. This regulation was supposed to strengthen the position of wives of civil servants in the Dharma Wanita organization because it made practices of divorce and polygamy more complicated. Yet the deeply-entrenched patriarchal values resulted in unintended consequences with men taking mistresses secretly or abandoning their wives without giving financial support. See Suryakusuma 1996.


Notes to pp. 77–92

24. Ibid.
26. Ibid, 92.
29. Ibid, 125.
30. Ibid, 173.
33. Ibid, 117.
34. Ibid, 118.
35. Ibid.
39. Ibid, 42.
40. Ibid, 54.
41. Ibid, 80.
42. Van Wichelen, 2007, 104.
44. Ibid.
45. Nia Dinata, interview by author, April 24, 2008.
46. Ibid.

Chapter 7: Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia

5. Ibid, 38.
7. Ibid, 213.
10. Imanjaya based prophetic cinema on the concept of prophetic literature movement of the Muslim author Kuntowijoyo. Nevertheless, I find Imanjaya’s concept of the “prophetic film” a little problematic for my purpose, since being “prophetic” does not necessarily mean “Islamic.” See Imanjaya 2008.
11. Ibid.
Notes to pp. 92–108

18. Ibid, 75.
20. A common metaphor in the Koran to describe how hard it is to get to heaven.
22. However, some of the conversations in the movie are on the correct interpretation of the Koran.
26. Ibid.
27. Wijaya, 2008, 137.
30. The original movie tells the story about a pickpocket turning a nationalist fighters' leader in the 1947 Indonesian war of Independence. The sequel, *Nagabonar Becomes 2* (*Nagabonar Jadi 2*), is about the same protagonist, who—now old, rich, and religious—cannot accept the way his son as well as the new generation deal with social and nationalist issues. Mizwar played as Nagabonar in both movies.
31. Translated from Haryadi, ibid, 7.
32. This reaction includes attacks from the opposition: the former head of *Muhammadiah* and Congress, Amien Rais, cynically said that he does not want to see the movie to avoid crying about a movie, while there are many real miseries in Indonesia to cry about.
33. Ibid, 14.
34. Ibid, 12.
36. Ibid, 30–32.
37. Ibid, 52.

**Chapter 8: Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia**

5. Ishizaka, 1999. This view of the majority of documentaries produced in the New Order period, particularly those shown on television, being mainly propaganda, is supported by Prakosa, 2008, 187.
12. For more information on Two Laws, see Williams and Grace 2008.
13. For a discussion of political murder in West Papua, see Ipenburg 2002.
14. For an account of the early years of Indonesian rule in West Papua, see Osborne 1985 and Budiardjo/Liem 1988. For an account of the reaction of Indonesian authorities to the May–June 2000 West Papuan Congress (where a preference for full independence from Indonesia was expressed), see Chauvel 2001. For an account of the reduced role of a Papuan central indigenous provincial assembly, see Chauvel 2008.

Chapter 10: Why Ciplak ended up being made
1. Bernard Chauly’s romantic comedy from 2005, that was reasonably successful among young Malaysians.
2. VCD is a digital format for storing video on a compact disc that is still very popular in many countries in Asia.

Chapter 20: The Page and the (Video) Camera
1. For a more in-depth look at Amir’s persona and a systematic approach to his films, see McKay 2005, McKay 2010.
3. The essay can be found in Lopate 1998.
4. Respectively, Lim 2008, 32, and McKay 2006. The official website of The Big Durian contains further material on and around the project. The production notes are of particular interest.
5. For details and comments on the making, the attempted release, the subsequent domestic banning, and the participation at international film festivals of both films, see the blog created by Amir himself and regularly updated between 2006 and 2007.
6. Tamil is the most common language spoken by ethnic Indians, who are the smallest of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia.
8. In the magic practice of Susuk, small objects such as gold, silver, and diamonds are embedded in a person’s skin in order to increase his or her allure.
Bibliography

All online resources were accessed on February 1, 2011.

Introduction: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia
Htayaung. 2010. Interview with the author at the Myanmar Motion Pictures Museum.
Lay, U Aye Kyu. 2010. Interview with the author at the Myanmar Motion Pictures Museum.

Chapter 1: Southeast Asian Independent Cinema


**Chapter 2: Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds**


**Chapter 3: Hinterland, Heartland, Home**


Anonymous. 2006. We’re going to get better men and we’ll fight, *Straits Times*, May 9.


**Chapter 4: Stealing Moments**


**Chapter 5: Fiction, Interrupted**


**Chapter 6: Cinema, Sexuality and Censorship in Post-Soeharto Indonesia**


Chapter 7: Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia
Ardhia, Zul. 2008. Interview with the Author.
Chapter 8: Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia


Chapter 20: The Page and the (Video) Camera


Index

In this index, the title of a film is its English translation. To learn the original title, go to the first reference of the respective film.

12 Storeys, 18, 45–47, 214–25
6ixtynin9, 192

Achnas, Nan Triveni, 4, 151
Ahmad, Yasmin, 2, 5, 9, 17, 23, 28, 245–52
Almodóvar, Pedro, 249
Alvarez, Mercedes, 240
Anderson, Benedict, 21–24, 71
Antonioni, Michaelangelo, 116, 197, 199
Appadurai, Arjun, 21–32
Astruc, Alexandre, 7, 49, 145
Avianto, Upi, 69, 83, 85

Baba, Shuhaimi, 14, 17, 36
Bahar, Khairil, 4, 27, 125–30
Batang Westside, 171–77
Be With Me, 213–23
Bergman, Ingmar, 197–99
Bernal, Ishmael, 14, 144
Blissfully Yours, 1, 180, 187
blogs, 27, 28, 137, 138
Bogdanovich, Peter, 214
Bordwell, David, 175
Brocka, Lino, 9, 14, 144, 162, 171, 198, 226
Brooks, James L, 249

Cathay-Keris, 15, 35, 36, 38
Chants of Lotus, 69–87, 202, 203, 210
Chhay Bora, 5, 24

Chronique d’un été, 105, 106, 113, 114
Cinema Verité, 105, 106, 113, 115
Cinemalaya, 2, 141, 143, 144, 146
Cinemanila, 8, 16
Ciplak, 4, 125–30
Conde, Manuel, 142

Da Huang Pictures, 27, 29, 229
Danusiri, Arjo, 105–16
Days of the Turquoise Sky, 5
Death in the Land of Encantos, 4, 22, 172–76
de Guzman, Mez, 6
dela Cruz, Emman, 145
de la Cruz, Khavn, 2, 4, 26, 27, 29, 31, 119–24, 177
de Leon, Mike, 16, 144
Deocampo, Nick, 2, 16, 156
Diaz, Lav, 2, 4, 8, 16, 22, 171–78
Dinata, Nia, 2, 17, 23, 27, 30, 69, 73, 74, 82, 83, 87, 201–12
Direct Cinema, 105, 106, 110, 113–16, 142
download, 27, 29, 137
Doyle, Chris, 191, 195, 197

Eating Air, 34, 47
Eclipse, 38–41
Edwin, 2
Evolution of a Philippine Family, 8
Index

Facebook, 27
Fauziah, Lasja, 69, 83
Fellini, Frederico, 199
Fitna, 91, 95
Flower in the Pocket, 5
Foster Child, 157, 163
Fruit Chan, 218
Fun Bar Karaoke, 191, 192

Gengis Khan, 142
Godard, Jean Luc, 176, 230
Gubra, 246, 247

Heremias Book One: The Legend of the Lizard Princess, 173, 176
Hitchcock, Alfred, 230
homosexuality, 73, 77, 78
Hou Hsia-hsien, 8, 186, 197
Ho Yuhang, 2, 247

Ilarde, Rico Maria, 147
Internet, 2, 25–30, 137, 144, 177, 250
Invisible City, 52, 54–57
Invisible Waves, 191, 192, 195
Isarn Special, 5, 59–67

Jakarta Art Institute, 80, 204, 205

Karya, Teguh, 106, 203
Kiamat Sudah Dekat, 89, 94, 98, 103
Kinatay, 5, 155–57
Khoo, Eric, 4, 18, 34, 44, 56, 213–24
Kubrador, 5, 145, 156–64
Kuldesak, 4, 15, 17, 79–81, 204
Kun Fayakuan, 89, 95, 100, 103
Kurosawa, Akira, 199

Lacaba, Jose, 14
Lao, Bing, 155–70
Last Life in the Universe, 191, 195, 197
Lee, Bruce, 215
Lee, James, 2, 5, 17, 27, 28, 200, 229, 245, 247

Lee Kuan Yew, 13, 15, 37, 45
Lejano, Ed, 4, 27
Lesmana, Mira, 4, 17, 74, 79, 151, 204
Librian, Jim, 5, 148
Liew Seng Tat, 5, 27, 229, 247
Lips to Lips, 4, 17, 228, 230, 232, 235
Loach, Ken, 155
Lola, 157, 169
Lost Loves, 5, 24
Love Conquers All, 5
low-budget filmmaking, 2, 17, 79, 127, 142, 146
Lume, Ken, 5

Malay Film Productions, 35, 38
Malaysian Gods, 6, 27, 228, 231, 235, 243
Mantovani, Rizal, 4, 79, 151, 204
Martin, Raya, 2, 5, 177
Masabista, see Masseur, The
Masseur, The, 5, 156–64, 168
Maysles Brothers, 115
Mee Pok Man, 18, 44–48, 214–19, 224
Mendoza, Brillante, 2, 4, 5, 9, 155–70, 252
Menon, Deepak Kumaran, 27, 247
Merdeka Studio, 35
Monrak Transistor, 192
Mother’s Love, 38–44
Muallaf, 246–47
Muhammad, Amir, 2–5, 9, 14, 17, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30, 200, 227–44
Mukhsein, 246, 247, 251
My Beautiful Washing Machine, 5
My Magic, 214, 219–24
Mysterious Object at Noon, 4–6, 64–66, 179, 180, 186–87

Naked under the Moon, 172
Neo, Jack, 45, 220, 225
Netpoc, 156
Nimibutr, Nonzee, 2, 18, 23, 200
Noé, Gasar, 155
 Nugroho, Garin, 107, 109
Nymph, 28, 191, 192
Pablo, Chris, 4, 5
Perth, 34, 47–50
piracy, 30, 31, 123–26, 141–45, 250
Playing between Elephants, 106, 109, 116
Pleasure Factory, 5
polygamy, 82, 83, 202, 209, 210

Ramlee, P., 35, 38, 215, 251
Rashomon, 142
Rasul, Mengaku, 90, 96, 101, 103
Ratanaruang, Pen-ek, 2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 30, 66, 191–200
Ray, Satyajit, 199
Red, Jon, 4, 147
Red, Raymond, 2, 16
Resnais, Alain, 155
Riza, Riri, 2, 4, 17, 74–79, 151, 204, 229, 237
Road to Kalimugtong, 6
Rony, Fatimah Tobing, 69, 83
Rouch, Jean, 105–6

Salesman, 100, 105, 115
Samsudin, Jins, 35
Sang Murrabi, 90, 101–4
Sani, Asrul, 92, 93, 203
Sasanatieng, Wisit, 1, 18, 23, 191, 200
satellite TV, 80
See, Martyn, 5, 14, 25
Seper, 5, 17, 246–50
Serbis, 156–69
Shaw Brothers, 15, 35, 38, 56, 215
Singapore Dreaming, 48–50
Singapore Rebel, 5, 25
Skype, 28, 183
Soedjarwo, Rudy, 13, 17
Sonakul, Mingmongkol, 5, 59, 60
Squatterpunk, 121
Sulung, Jamil, 35, 38, 40
Syabadalat Cinta, 90, 96, 101–3
Syndromes and a Century, 22, 179–89

Tahimik, Kidlat, 2, 16
Tan Chui Mui, 5, 27, 28, 200, 229, 247

Tan Pin Pin, 2, 50, 51–58, 131–38
Tan, Royston, 4, 18, 34, 47, 214, 220
Tarantino, Quentin, 155
Taxi Driver, 44–48, 215
Tears of the Black Tiger, 1
Tirador, 157, 162–68
Todo Todo Teros, 5, 7
Torres, John, 5–9, 29, 177, 200
Tropical Malady, 1, 155, 179–88
Tsai Ming-Liang, 197

Uekrongtham, Ekachai, 5
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, 1, 179–80
University of the Philippines, 2, 156, 170
U-wei Bin Haji Saari, 14, 230

Verses of Love, 89
Vertov, Dziga, 106
Village People Radio Show, 22, 229–40
von Trier, Lars, 28, 124, 155

What’s Up With Love?, 13, 81
Wiseman, Fred, 106, 115
Woo Ming Jin, 5, 28, 247

Yamada, Yoji, 249, 251
Youtube, 25, 29
Yukol, Chatrichalerm, 9, 198

Zhang Yimou, 203