

Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)

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Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998) (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainsle, contributes significant historical perspectives to the current scholarship on regional cinemas. In 13 chapters and two historical overviews of substantial length, the volume unpacks key junctures and developments of filmmaking and selected films up to the 1990s resurgence of cinema. It also covers important contributions by mostly understudied film directors and explores regional commercial streams that served “popular pleasures.”

The book expands remarkably on a rather contemporaneous view of the subject, which usually tends to appraise the period that peaked at the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the key moment of the resurgence of regional cinemas. The historical continuum is extended as far back as the post-World War II period, where film intertwines with postcolonialism and the rise of Southeast Asian nations.

The centerpiece of the book is Gaik Cheng Khoo’s introduction, in which she foregrounds the body of scholarship that became the impetus for this collection. She outlines the state of the discipline and narrates a well-framed “Long History of Film in Southeast Asia.” The history takes on the difficult task of characterizing “an overall narrative associated with film in this region” (14–15), and synthesizing the separate and often insular nature of cinema historiography, thus putting together the larger story of the region’s romance with the medium.

In piecing together what used to be separate histories, Khoo observes that “the decades of boom and bust in each country do not tend to coincide,” with some modernizing “much faster than others,” while other nations were “held back by war and poverty” (15). Global technological developments were formative to this story, as were military and ideological wars, the influx of Western popular culture, and the emergence of middle class, youth, and counter-cultures.

While the volume is unable to solicit contributions from Cambodia, Brunei, and Laos, where film industries are in their nascent stages, it manages to explicate, albeit tentatively, the points of evolution as chronicled in the introduction's historical overview. This is through the specific explorations by the volume's contributing scholars, emergent commentators in the field who are "in the midst of producing forthcoming work on the region's cinema" (26).

The first section, "Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-building, Modernity and Golden Eras," examines the film industries of Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Burma, teasing out, on the one hand, the patriotic bent and governmental and ideological functions of film and filmmaking of this period, and on the other, the intertextual relations of film with other media.

Dag Yngvesson and Adrian Alarilla's chapter on 1950s Indonesian cinema looks at how films by early directors imagine the nation differently, and subsequently trouble the nationalist impositions by the Soekarno government (1945–1967). The same subject is also examined by Budi Irawanto in his study of Indonesian New Order war films (1966–1998). Meanwhile, Jane M. Ferguson's chapter delves into Burmese golden age cinema (early 1950s–1960s) which coincided with post-independence militarization (1948–1960s). Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen's chapter discusses women's mobility in Vietnamese revolutionary cinema (1964–1967), an anti-American media-instrument during the Cold War. Finally, Joyce L. Arriola's chapter focuses on Philippine komiks-to-film adaptations, a hallmark of the film industry's studio era (1950–1959).

The second section, "Key Directors," pays critical tribute to veteran filmmakers from the Southeast Asian region who are "lesser known in the English-speaking world" (131). Adding on scholarship that revalues masters like Malaysian P. Ramlee, Filipinos Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal, and Indonesian Usmar Ismail, the section turns to the cinematic legacies of select directors whose careers span the time period covered by the previous section. They are esteemed not only for their innovations, but also for social advocacies and their critiques of their often repressive circumstances they were forced to work in.

The chapter by David Hanan and Gaston Soehadi discusses the contributions of Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya in popular films that were also, in effect, social exposés. Jonathan Driskell's chapter locates the place of the auteur in Malay cinema, focusing on the films of Hussain Haniff. Ainslie's chapter explores the cinema of Thailand and recognizes the talent of Ratana Pestonji, the "rare early Thai auteur untouched by the trappings of commercial filmmaking" (171), while Patrick F. Campos' chapter celebrates Filipino director Mike de Leon's lasting contributions to progressive nationalist cinema in the Philippines, in light of his reemergence from retirement in 2018, during the height of the Rodrigo Duterte regime.

The last section, "Popular Pleasures," provides a fitting punctuation to the volume. It accounts for the transformations that took place in Southeast Asian film industries from the 1960s to the 1990s. With the sunset of the golden eras of the 1950s came the shift to studio systems and the full commercialization of film. By this period, popular genres became staple and cinematic influences from the West as well as Japan and Hong Kong largely shaped film reception. The section investigates mainstream cinema, a much overlooked and frowned upon in academia topic. It recognizes mainstream productions as equally responsive to challenges brought about by economic development, authoritarian regimes, the rise of the middle class, and the expansion of global cinema.

Chrishandra Sebastiampillai's chapter on Filipino superstar Nora Aunor expounds on the actress' potentially subversive image during the Marcos regime. As an insightful contribution to regional star and fandom studies, the chapter elaborates on how the Philippine studio system disciplined Aunor's star power to promote "permissible freedom" to her young and mostly lower-class fans (215). Meanwhile, Thomas Barker and Ekky Imanjaya's chapter ventures into transnational exploitation cinema in Indonesia and the Philippines in the 1970s and 1980s. Production systems in both countries, then under authoritarian regimes, developed various means to produce film exports that served global exploitation and B-movie markets.

Sophia Siddique expands the general understanding on regional exploitation cinema by focusing on the transnational cult phenomenon, director Bobby A. Suarez's *They Call Her Cleopatra Wong* (1978). An Asian spy flick, the film follows the exploits of Interpol agent Cleopatra Wong, played by Singaporean actress and director Marrie Lee (aka Doris Young), as she races against time to prevent a shadow organization from completely flooding Southeast Asian countries with counterfeit money. Siddique uses the film to map what she calls "regional ambivalence and anxieties" (255). Finally, Sasinee Khuankaew discusses the Thai comedy series *Boonchu* released between 1988 and 1996, which paints rural Thailand as embodying idealized Thainess, as well as a nostalgia for an idyllic old order in the midst of modernization and an eventual regional economic crash, referred to in Thailand as the "Tum Yum Kung" financial crisis, that began in 1997.

Across the three sections, three essays stand out – Arriola's study on komiks-to-film adaptations, Ainsle's reconsideration of Pestonji, and Siddique's work on *They Call Her Cleopatra*. Arriola showcases her command and mastery of the period's archive in demonstrating the intimate relations between the komiks and film industries in the Philippines as cultivated by the studio system. Ainsle showcases the "sole visionary Thai auteur" (131) in a new light. She meticulously draws from historical sources and accounts, and boldly offers an alternative opinion to assumptions about Pestonji's nationalist and anti-Hollywood positions. Finally, Siddique's attentive reading of *They Call Her Cleopatra* establishes key insights that further elaborate on the political and economic tensions of the times.

All in all, this volume succeeds in enriching the critical imagining of regional cinema. It makes for a timely and compelling argument for further interventions in a region where film scholarship is still considered rare, and film practice itself has yet to be fully recognized as a legitimate discipline of the arts. Transcending the tendency to subsume the region's industry into the dominant film industries in Asia, it asserts the distinction of Southeast Asian cinemas and filmmaking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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