

Fragments, links, and palimpsests: A review of *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)*

Tito R. Quiling, Jr.

Images in cinema render familiar scenes that illustrate how life has waxed and waned throughout the decades. Capturing characters and places, films turn into a palimpsest whose surfaces can be written on, revised and/or erased. Yet, traces of its previous iteration can be sensed or sometimes, sequences and moments re-surface to remind us that cinema contributes in creating multifaceted histories.

Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998), edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), presents a collection of studies on film cultures that explore cinema's function as a vessel of accounts across several Southeast Asian countries. The anthology is divided into three main sections where the accompanying chapters map out topics such as developments on nationalism, advances leading to Golden Ages, contributions by key figures, and selected popular works. The thirteen chapters are composed of scholarly essays that focus on a specific period, film artists, and cultural texts that additionally shape the connections within the Southeast Asian region.

Following Gaik Cheng Khoo's introduction to the anthology, Mary J. Ainslie leads the first section titled "Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-building, Modernity and Golden Eras" by mapping out historical conditions that have affected film practices during the postwar period in Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Burma/Myanmar. Ainslie

takes note of similar colonial histories that allowed the rise of independent movements in these countries. Contained in the works of notable directors and film studios at the time are key subjects referring to the spread of anti-communist and anti-colonial sentiments, government repression and the people's resistance, all of which are reflected in five essays.

Opening the dialogue on independence and nationalism in Southeast Asia is "A Nation Imagined Differently: The Critical Impulse of 1950s Indonesian Cinema" by Dag Yngvesson and Adrian Alarilla, which investigates nationhood and nationalism during the Sukarno years. Framed by Usmar Ismail's *Tamu Agung* (Honoured Guest, 1955) and Nya Abbas Akup's *Tiga Buronan* (Three Fugitives, 1957), Yngvesson and Alarilla examine how various Indonesian cultures outside Jakarta are presented and adopted as "imagined communities" by these directors. With the intent to embody their newly acquired independence, these works contribute to manufacturing a tapestry of images through Indonesian cinema as part of global representation.

Joyce L. Arriola's "The 1950s Filipino *Komiks*-to-Film Adaptation during the Studio Era" reflects an aspect of social development in the Philippines during the postwar period. Focusing on the film adaptations of local comics by studio giants LVN, Lebran, Premiere, and Sampaguita, the familiar narratives of metrical romances, heroism, and social dramas from the prewar years migrated into newer forms that continued to be patronized by the Philippines masses. As part of popular culture, Arriola additionally notes how adaptations of *komiks*-into-film created an imprint of "vernacular modernism" in the entertainment and media industry that aided in fostering Philippine nationalism and movements toward modernity.

In showing the histories of Southeast Asia, the road to solidarity is filled with conflicting views and clashing ideologies as Jane M. Ferguson underscores in "Pearl Tears on the Silver Screen: War Movies and Expanding Burmese Militarism in the Early Independence Years." In the two Burmese historical war dramas namely, Kyaw Swe's *Pule Myit Yee* (Pearl Tears, 1962) and Chit Kin's *Nga Ba* (The Peasant, 1961), Ferguson focuses on the role of Burmese cinema in shaping ideological representations of the government, which are lingering issues in their country—from propaganda, civilian insurgencies, and military conflicts.

Movement, female heroism, and geographical narratives are the main elements in "Gender, Nation and Spatial Mobility in *On Top of the Wave, On Top of the Wind*" by Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen. It details the changes in women's roles through Ngoc Quynh's documentary film (1967), following the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. The concepts of home and nation stand synonymously as Vietnamese women are expected to balance their duties

as they move from the interiors of the domestic space to the public setting. Nguyen's reading works around the notion of "home" as a female domain, but the realities of war altered women's responsibilities from being domestic keepers, to becoming laborers engaging in revolutionary causes.

Echoing the themes of war, independence, and internal struggles is "Spectrality of Nationalism: War, Propaganda and Military in Indonesian Cinema during the New Order Era" by Budi Irawanto. His discussion treads on the effects of pioneering war films on promoting nationalist philosophies. Directed by noted Indonesian filmmakers using familiar narratives of romance and family ties, these historical films recall the impact of the Dutch rule and the Japanese Occupation. Irawanto maps out how in the three decades under the New Order Era, state-sponsored films became tools for propaganda, mostly to deter communist sentiments and further reinforce a strong sense of patriotism and nationhood.

The second section contains four essays that illustrate film directors who have created a diameter of representations that stretched from local, to national and international scales. Khoo introduces distinguished filmmakers from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, who each displayed mastery in their body of work and have left a personal imprint in their films. An important reality that Khoo strongly underscores is that while the section largely discusses male directors, working female directors as their colleagues and contemporaries necessitates another dialogue in current film studies. Whether through others' positioning or finding their corners within the field, these "Key Directors" have produced films framed by the nuances of their time, where politics and social conditions mark how a director becomes an auteur.

In Indonesia, the New Order regime under Suharto generated authoritarian practices and social critiques that were mirrored in the films made in the next two decades. David Hannan and Gaston Soehadi's "Two Auteurs in the Indonesian Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s: Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya" outlines the creative chapters of two important directors whose works tread on popular culture while illustrating strong political and social themes. Considering Sjuman Djaya's and Teguh Karya's backgrounds, Hannan and Soehadi jointly highlight the shared visions of these auteurs who advocated for socioeconomic stability, gender equality, women's rights, and emancipation in many recapitulations, against a doubly suppressive setting.

A narrative of parallelism, "Hussain Haniff and the Place of the Auteur in Popular Malay Cinema" by Jonathan Driskell features Haniff as an oft-regarded key filmmaker, traditionally put in second to P. Ramlee as Malaya's premiere film artist. Working during the height of the "Golden Age" of

Malay cinema, Haniff's directorial reigns influenced the power held by film stars over the moviegoing public. Driskell relays comparative annotations between Ramlee and Haniff as important directors but emphasizes the latter's gamut. In particular, Haniff as an artist leans toward experimenting with genres, shades of history, realism, and stylistic innovations that he worked on, which marked his films as classic spectacles.

Cinema as a medium is entwined with capitalism and is subjected to government regulations. Ainslie's "Ratana Pestonji and Santi Vina: Exploring the 'Master' of Thai Cinema during Thailand's 'American Era'" outlines Thai director, Ratana Pestonji's association with state and American figures in the postwar years. Faced with the struggles of local filmmaking against the dominance of Hollywood, Ratana constantly pushed for technical and financial support from the Thai government to use film as leverage. Ainslie also writes about how indigenous Thai films found its footing abroad, given Ratana's promotion of cinema strengthening patriotism, along with a stronger representation of Thai culture and society.

At the height of Martial Law, the "Second Golden Age" of Philippine cinema came into light as a platform to depict political turmoil and social issues that inundated the country under the Marcos administration. In "Locating Mike de Leon in Philippine Cinema" by Patrick F. Campos, de Leon is regarded as a producer-director who explored genres and features that transcend conventional themes and storytelling from family dramas, horror, musicals, to coming-of-age films. In tracing de Leon's body of work, Campos forwards how each work becomes a re-conception of his previous one that constantly pushes through the margins of Philippine film history and expected practices in filmmaking.

In the third section, Thomas Barker highlights how "Popular Pleasures" establish cinema as part of the social and historical lives of Southeast Asian countries. Despite being frequently regarded as trivial components when discussing national cinemas, the development of commercial films influenced by Hollywood and Hong Kong led to crafting localized versions of common themes in the region. Film practices shift, technologies advance, and materials change, but cultural images anchored on indigenous traditions and values remain important features. Four articles illustrate particular developments in Southeast Asian cinemas where globally recognized images are echoed in the local setting, and vice versa.

Links between cinema, mainstream media, and politics are examined in Chrishandra Sebastiampillai's "Nora Aunor vs Ferdinand Marcos: Popular Youth Films of 1970s Philippine Cinema" where the masses are affected by two powers: the state and the stars. As perception plays a key role in recognizing authority and influence, Sebastiampillai writes about Aunor

strongly symbolizing a “good” influence whose principles are emulated by many while Marcos imposes values, also projecting ruthless authority. Aunor’s images of a good youth, as one of the masses, and an illustrious film star created an enigmatic persona straddling the line between subversion and permitted content during the turbulent Marcos years.

Expounding on the topic of authoritarian regimes, Barker and Ekky Imanjaya delve into international coproductions in marketing Southeast Asia as a center for film production and distribution in “Transnational Exploitation Cinema in Southeast Asia: The Cases of Indonesia and the Philippines.” From mapping out the connection of both countries to American producers and distributors, Barker and Imanjaya evaluate how regional and international film festivals became a platform to show and sell films with contentious matters, from illusive wartime heroism to graphic nudity. Even with the oppressive conditions and policies, these efforts paved the way for Philippine and Indonesian films to advance.

The transnational dialogue is sustained in Sophia Siddique’s “Mapping Regional Ambivalence and Anxieties in *They Call Her ... Cleopatra Wong*,” where the titular figure in the 1978 film stands as a threading element in evaluating the relations between ASEAN member countries. An international coproduction, the spy film starring Singaporean director and actress Marrie Lee and helmed by Filipino director Bobby A. Suarez becomes a cultural text that surveys regional strains. Siddique draws on the concept of “cinematic excess” to describe how geographical mobility and representing the female character crossing national borders aids in emphasizing unity among ASEAN countries by describing parallels between landscapes and cultures.

Preserving cultural practices remains a challenge in the midst of modernization, as Sasinee Khuankaew relays in “The Boonchu Comedy Series: Pre-1990s Thai Localism and Modernity.” The coming-of-age film series by Bhandit Rittakol humorously captures the collective experience of Thais, as they move from rural areas to urban centers. Navigating the city life in pursuit of a better future, the primary goal is to attain higher education to secure proper employment. Represented by Boonchu, supporting characters and their adventures, Khuankaew notes the tension created by their displacement, where local concerns regarding identity, language, faith, personal and shared values continue to face erosion due to rampant globalization.

The curation of the thirteen chapters in the anthology is well-thought out and astutely written, carefully observing specific phenomena parallel to developments in film. A significant note that the anthology forwards is that it does not intend to project itself as a reference for national film histories.

But the profound discussions in the book uncover fragments among national cinemas which developed through exchanges between individual and collective autonomies, reception, and mass consumption. With selected countries in the region, the period of analyses stands in between the prewar and digital ages, making this collection an important work that contributes to the dearth of collated scholarship on Southeast Asian cinema.

Apart from the formal thematic division, an interesting arrangement in the anthology is the referentiality between works and sections that note intersecting issues and topics. This system expands the set references on existing studies and allows comparative views on the subject. For instance, the individual chapters by Driskell and Campos put the spotlight on the usual peripheral views on important directors, while conferring their proclivities for genre experimentation and current events. Ainslie, on the other hand, directly shows the impact of an auteur, whose works earned the attention and support from the state.

Anchoring on the influence of film artists, shared and autonomous practices that present cultures and sociopolitical inclinations allowed a stronger leverage for local cinema to illustrate nationalist views. Apart from noting key figures, issues of independence, representation, and propaganda are major elements in outlining the historical use of cinema, as seen in the articles by Ferguson, Hannan, and Soehadi. As with other art forms, socially conscious and politically loaded works proliferate in times of civil wars and authoritarian regimes, as the masses and artists fight for liberation and patriotism. Such accounts are portrayed in Yngvesson and Alarilla, and in Irawanto's piece, which also takes note of the plight of women. The female is the focal point in Nguyen's report about women occupying more vital roles in society, clearing a space for their contributions and following their movement, akin to Siddique's chapter on the woman as the mediator.

Events and audiences exchange influences as platforms and materials patronized by the masses affect cinema's impact. Hannan and Soehadi's premises are echoed in the chapters by Arriola, Sebastiampillai, and Khuankaew, where images in popular culture not only recommend values, but also support efforts toward modernization. Discussions on globalization and economic progress as part of regional growth while forging connections in Southeast Asia are further propelled by Siddique, Barker, and Imanjaya, whose emphasis on transnational distributions and coproductions relay difficulties and less-than-ideal episodes in the region.

Sarah Dillon's (2007) idea of a "palimpsest" highlights the layering of information from social affairs, inferring how this "[...] was born out of a need to erase and destroy previous texts, the re-emergence of those destroyed texts renders a structure that privileges heterogeneity and diversity" (para.

2). But one considers that there is no complete destruction or erasure of cultural texts and values, since they may exist in other forms, bearing a semblance of continuity and reinforcement in these strata of materials. Yet the palimpsest as a metaphor may not prioritize the connection between the text and its milieu. The reader may construct the relation of the subjects within a text to the other ones, creating “intertextuality” for the object in focus.

The intertextuality of the articles in the anthology becomes a rather complex feature—a laudable effort for scholars, artists, and involved parties, but can be quite confronting as an introductory text for those who intend to delve into film, media, and cultural studies. However, the untiring references to the topics and texts included in the book vividly underscore the links between practices and cultures within national cinemas. In turn, the collated materials further strengthen and generate a cohesive discussion about the Southeast Asian connection, highlighting parallel histories as well as substantial differences.

Though still fragmented as a record, the histories of Southeast Asian nations stand as individual markers, with key events that serve as points of references and intersections of cultural knowledge. Some of these include the New Order era of Indonesia, the separation between Singapore and Malaysia, the Martial Law years in the Philippines, civil disobedience in Thailand, the independence of Vietnam and Myanmar. These episodes are woven into their national cinemas—entrenched in representations of life, observing how their people value practices, traditions, and their sense of freedom that continue to be symbolized onscreen.

The thirteen chapters constitute a copious amount of information. Along with the introductions, the anthology’s success lies in its solid focus, noting important events that transpired to film artists as primary movers, and to what works were produced within the timeline. Among the ASEAN member countries, the political pasts of Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei cited in the introduction, but they are underrepresented given the amount of available scholarship. As some of their national cinemas are in the emergent phase, following their expansion will allow more inquiries with its link to the rest of Southeast Asian film cultures.

With the related histories of Cambodia and Laos as part of Indochina, similar stages during the postwar years may launch more contemporary views on their cinema, perhaps even referencing pioneer artists. Apart from Bruneian history, other principal points of investigation include government restrictions, mainly on censorship, as well as the growth and sustenance of the industry. Among other developing figures, stimulating topics may include the golden age of Cambodian cinema, and notes from

pre-Khmer Rouge directors to the contemporary ones like Rithy Panh and Huy Yaleng. Laotian films and directors Anousone Sirisackda and Mattie Do have been recognized internationally, along with Bruneian filmmakers, Siti Kamaluddin and Abdul Zainidi. With a hopeful tone, the anthology can be the first in a series of work on Southeast Asian cinemas. Here, one's familiarity and experiences with its landscapes and engagement with numerous cultures and peoples augment another layer of attention for film, communication, media, and cultural studies.

Extending Khoo's statement on representations in film scholarship and production, further studies are needed on Southeast Asian female directors and artists who have worked alongside male directors, or whose standalone works have surpassed expected duties within their societies. Considering the timeline covered by the collection, the imbalance on such visibilities in film proves to be a common struggle. As a way of recording societal changes, traditional views on gender roles and related restrictions remain embedded in these readings as individual and collective perceptions continue to stem from strict cultural mores, clashing with the introduction/intrusion of Western ideals. As far as the acknowledged limitations of this anthology, the editors encourage more studies and scholars to engage in future discourses on Asian cinemas.

Covering fifty years following the independence of Southeast Asian countries, this documentation on classic works, directors, and the industry presented by *Southeast Asia on Screen* forwards a trove of information on the networks and practices within the region that constantly adapts to the shifting sociopolitical climate. The anthology proves to be a key work in contemporary film studies, engaging with history and cultures that uncover in the existing scholarship, brightly highlighting the characteristics and distinctive connections across Southeast Asian cinema in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In tracing fragments that show the formation of film cultures, a multilayered record is also discovered. The palimpsest in this context is twofold—preserving the sharpness of single texts, while displaying how one influences the other, similar to how countries within Southeast Asia share trajectories toward growth and modernization. As presented in the exceptional investigation of film cultures and histories across the regions in this book, one sees how cultures and societies are inherently affected by social, political, and economic patterns. The rendezvous of these systems, along with artistry, reveal how Southeast Asian nations prosper and decline throughout the years, with experiences, characters, and stories chronicled onscreen.

References

- Khoo, G. K., Barker, T., & Ainslie, M. J. (eds.). (2020). *Southeast Asia on screen: From independence to financial crisis (1945–1998)*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Dillon, S. (2007). *The palimpsest: Literature, criticism, theory*. Continuum.
- Palimpsest. (n.d.). The Chicago school of media theory. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/palimpsest/>

Grant Support Details

Author Contributions: All research activities and writing were done by the author. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The author(s) received no specific funding for this work.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

About the Author

TITOR. QUILING, JR. has a master's degree in Media Studies (Film) from the University of the Philippines Diliman. At present, he is a faculty member at the Department of Communication and Media Studies, University of Santo Tomas. He is an associate editor for *Pelikula: A Journal of Philippine Cinema* and is a member of the Young Critics Circle Film Desk. (Corresponding author: titoquiling.jr@gmail.com).

Plaridel Open Access Policy Statement

As a service to authors, contributors, and the community, *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* provides open access to all its content. To ensure that all articles are accessible to readers and researchers, these are available for viewing and download (except Early View) from the *Plaridel* journal website, provided that the journal is properly cited as the original source and that the downloaded content is not modified or used for commercial purposes. *Plaridel*, published by the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>).

How to cite this article in APA

Quilling, T. (2023). Fragments, links, and palimpsests: A review of Southeast Asia on Screen: From independence to financial crisis (1945–1998). *Plaridel*, 20(1), 235–244. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2021-05qiling>