

Transnational Cinemas

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Imagined communities, imagined worlds: Independent film from South East Asia in the global mediascape

ABSTRACT

The article gives an overview of the recent upsurge of independent cinema in South East Asia. I argue that these films are examples of a new transnational cinema for the lack of alternative: as the political and social situation in the countries where they have been made does not allow for their inclusion into the mainstream of the national cinema, they have turned to an international market to find an audience. I argue that a new generation of film-makers has been empowered by the easy and cheap access to digital video. Thanks to digital cinema technology, film-makers from South East Asia have the opportunity to produce their alternative and often very personal works. Using Arjun Appadurai's influential essay 'Disjuncture and Difference' (1996) as a theoretical framework, I discuss some of the specific traits of recent independent films from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore and the Philippines, and point out their genuinely transnational nature with regard to distribution and reception.

KEYWORDS

independent cinema
South East Asia
globalization
mediascape
Arjun Appadurai
transnational cinema

The past decade has seen a spectacular rise of independent cinema in a number of South East Asian countries. A region that for a long time was more or less a blank space on the map of world cinema has made itself heard in the international art house and festival circuit. Directors such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul 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 and Brillante Mendoza from the Philippines, Royston Tan and Tan Pin Pin from Singapore and Riri Riza, Nia Dinata and Edwin from Indonesia have drawn attention to a part of the world whose rich and diverse film culture and history have so far not been part of the Grand Narrative of World Cinema.

Different and distinct as the work of these film-makers is, this new generation has often been empowered by easy and cheap access to digital video. The arrival of relatively affordable video cameras that allow for shooting in broadcast quality, editing software that runs on home computers, cheap DVD burners that allow film-makers to create their own DVDs and the Internet as a medium to either promote or even distribute one's work are the most important tools that have made this democratic cinema revolution possible in a part of the world that is otherwise not known for its democratic disposition. Most of these film-makers would have never had the chance to forge a career in the commercial cinema of their respective countries. Thanks to digital cinema technology, they now have the opportunity to produce their alternative and often very personal works. I consider myself extremely lucky that I happened to be there – teaching first at the University of the Philippines in Manila, then at the Royal University of Phnom Penh in Cambodia – when this revolution took place and that I was able to observe it happening from a privileged position.

In Europe and in North America, film-makers started to experiment with the possibilities of digital video in the late 1990s. Among the first movies shot on digital home cameras, which were released theatrically and brought the blurry, pixellated look of digital video to actual movie theatre screens, were the early Dogme 95 movies *Festen/The Celebration* (Vinterberg, 1998) and *Idioterne/The Idiots* (Von Trier, 1998) and the independent horror movie *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999). With a slight delay, the kind of equipment that was used to shoot these films became available in South East Asia, and this was the beginning of the Indie Revolution that we are witnessing today.

A new kind of micro-cinema has emerged in South East Asia in the decade since. This development has had a tremendous impact on local film production; in the Philippines, 36 digital films had been exhibited by 2009, while there were 34 movies shot on celluloid. This was the first time that digital films outnumbered films shot on celluloid, since the first digital film was screened in cinemas in the Philippines in 2005. This trend continued in 2010, when 45 films were shot digitally, while only 28 were shot on film (Carreon 2010).

In the countries of South East Asia, most of them 'emerging economies' that are more often than not devoid of any film subsidy system, this development has allowed small production teams, often working with absurdly small budgets, to produce films that are shown around the world at festivals and garner positive reviews and awards internationally. It has brought a new generation of film-makers and new voices from a part of the world that previously was rarely taken notice of in international film circles.

These films by no means constitute a homogeneous group. Their subject matter, as well as their formal strategies, varies widely, from the neo-realism



Figure 1: Still from Chhay Bora's "Lost Loves" (Cambodia 2011).

of Brillante Mendoza – and many other directors from the Philippines – to the magical realism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, from the slick homage to genre movies of Wisit Sasanatieng to the almost no-budget movies of Khavn de la Cruz. If they have something in common at all, it is that they talk about social and political ills of their respective countries that the studio-funded films do not touch upon. Often, these are stories from the dark underbelly of society, like Jim Libiran's ghetto gang movie *Tribu/Tribes* (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* (Thailand 2007), about the red light district Gaylang in Singapore; Jeffrey Jeturian's *Kubrador/The Bet Collector* (2006), featuring illegal betting; or Brillante Mendoza's *Kinatay/Slaughter* (2009), focusing on a contract killer. They take on subject matters that are politically a taboo in their countries, such as Amir Muhammad's *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir/The Last Communist*, which explores the communist revolt in 1950s Malaysia (2006); Yasmin Ahmad's interracial love story *Sepet/Chinese Eye* (2004); or Martyn See's *Singapore Rebel* (2005), on the leader of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). These films 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), a family saga, which takes place under the Khmer Rouge dictatorship, a period that the current government is trying to relegate to oblivion.

However, they also show mundane and unspectacular everyday life, like Woo Ming Jin's *Kurus/Days of the Turquoise Sky* (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 South East Asia in films such as James Lee's *Mei li de xi yi ji/My Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004), Chris Martinez' *100* (2008) and Ken Lume's *Dreams from the Third World* (2008).

In this article, I will look at one particularly vexing issue that many of these film-makers face: while their films typically do well in international festivals, and occasionally even get released theatrically in Europe or North America, they are rarely seen in their own countries. Some films, like the

works of Lav Diaz from the Philippines or Apichatpong Weerasethakul from Thailand, have been screened more frequently abroad than in the country in which they have been produced. I argue here that these films are examples of a new transnational cinema by necessity, as there is only a very limited home market for these often challenging productions. They had to join the fray of transnational cinema, since the political and social situation in the countries where they have been made – and which will be explained in greater detail in this article – does not allow them to be national cinema. Not only do these films circulate in the international sphere of film festivals, television broadcasts and foreign DVD release, they are often supported by foreign funding bodies or other production companies that allow these film-makers to engage in formal experiments and with subject matters that would not find the backing of film companies or the few government film funding bodies in their respective countries.

In trying to understand what national cinema is, a great number of film critics have turned to Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined communities'. Anderson claims that nations as such are always imagined communities that 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' (2003: 6). Anderson singles out 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 on the rise of nationalism in early modernity. However, it seems natural 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. That Anderson takes a number of his case studies in *Imagined Communities* from countries in South East 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 film-makers of South East Asia, whose works do not enjoy the same popularity as the mainstream movies, *telenovelas* or newscasts of their respective countries that might be the contemporary counterparts of the print media that provided the 'glue' that, for Anderson, bound imagined national communities together? As I have pointed out before, many of the films from South East Asia that are screened at international film festivals – and even receive awards there – are not particularly successful in their respective countries, if they secure a theatrical release. Often, they are shown only in film clubs, bars, galleries or other informal screening places or 'micro-cinemas'. Even worse, some films that garnered international praise are censored in their countries of origin.

Prominent examples include films by Amir Muhammad, *Lelaki komunis terakhir/The Last Communist* (2006), *Apa khabar orang kampung/Village People Radio Show* (2007) and *Malaysian Gods* (2009), which were all banned from public exhibition in Malaysia. Other films that were victims of censorship were *Kagadanan sa banwaan ning mga Engkanto/Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007) by Lav Diaz, which was awarded 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

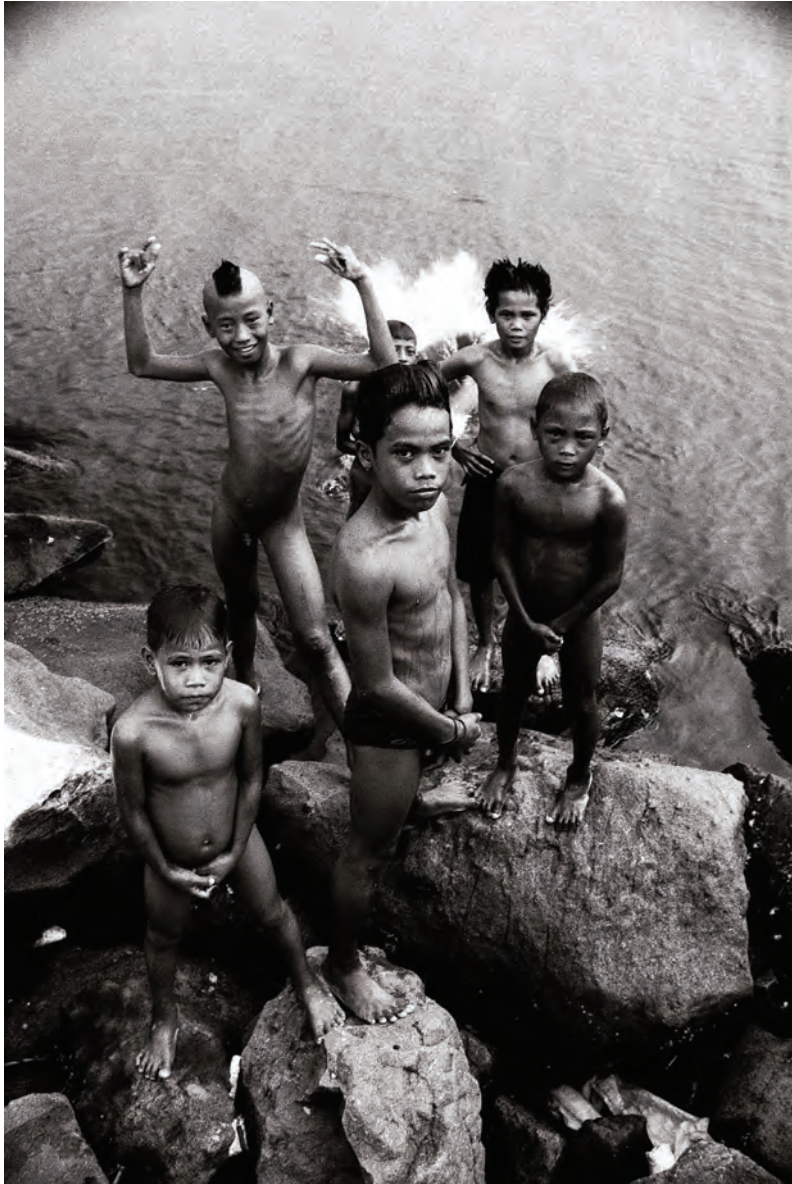


Figure 2: Production still from Khavn de la Cruz' *Iskwaterpangk* (*Squatterpunk*, Philippines 2007).

Sang sattawat/Syndromes and a Century (2006), which was nominated for a Golden Lion 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, Apichpatpong and colleagues, and their reception in their own countries even more striking is that these works are often perceived by an international audience as the very gist of the specific culture of the very countries where both the audience and the government institutions that support films show little or no interest in them.

Gaik Cheng Khoo, a Malaysian critic who has written extensively and favourably about the independent films of her country, calls for a 'cosmopolitical' understanding of Malaysian indie films (2007: 227). Zakir Hossain Raju pursues a similar line of thought, when he writes about 'transnational' Malaysian indie cinema. He notes that '(t)hese films, produced at the margin of the national film industries and circulated mostly outside national borders to a non-Malaysian audience, address the global citizens' of today's world' as their audience (2008: 74).

While I do not disagree with the idea that the contemporary independent cinema of South East Asia is 'cosmopolitical', 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, which are 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' (1996: 27–47), as this approach can help in understanding the discrepancy between the international and the national reception of the independent cinema of South East Asia. I use this essay both as a theoretical framework for my analysis of the structure of the independent film scene in South East Asia and as a thread to keep together some of my observations of this scene. In doing so, I argue against the view that these films are 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 and who thereby leave the context of their own national cinema behind.

In this context, it is worth pointing out that – while many of the film-makers discussed here have been 'foreign trained', a fact frequently stressed in accounts of their works – a number of them worked in advertising in their home countries before starting 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 started 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 (Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Pen-Ek Ratanaruang personal communication). Therefore, 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 slick, 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 its part in shaping nations into 'imagined communities' by focusing on shared spaces and times, the contemporary independent films of South East Asia do the same *ex negativo*

by illuminating what is unresolved, proscribed or taboo in their countries. All of the nations of South East 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, ecology and the rights of minorities. In countries like Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, the emergence of an independent cinema in the last ten years does correspond roughly with a growing political discontent with how these countries are run, even though dissatisfaction with the political situation has rarely translated into support for local indie films.¹ 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 manner than is currently the order of the day.

In 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', Appadurai takes to task some long-standing 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 centre-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centres and peripheries) [...] 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.

(1996: 32)

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

Appadurai identifies five dimensions of the contemporary global cultural flows, which he calls the 'scapes': the *ethnoscapes*, the *mediascapes*, the *technoscapes*, the *finanscapes* and the *ideoscapes*. Appadurai explains these 'scapes':

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.

(1996: 34)

I would argue that the independent film-makers of South East 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 for 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 anymore. Appadurai quips that 'one man's imagined community is another man's political prison' (1996: 32), and in fact that concerted efforts at nation-building in the countries of South East Asia have often led to highly oppressive political situations that one can only avoid by leaving them behind.

1. 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 South East Asian countries.

2. For more on Singaporean cinema, see Millet (2006) and Uhde and Uhde (2000).

One particularly instructive example for the 'dis-synchrony' between local laws and international reception is the Singaporean documentary film-maker Martyn See, whose film *Singapore Rebel* (2005) – on the leader of the opposition SDP – was banned from public screening in the city state by the local censors, which in Singapore ironically are within the organization of the Media Development Authority. 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 film-maker reacted by uploading the film, and his subsequent works on equally sensitive political issues, to a number of video streaming sites like YouTube, and he has since maintained an extensive blog about his case.²

I will return to the special significance that new technologies like the Internet – or the 'technoscape' – have for the independent film directors of South East 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 while physically remaining in the city. At the time of writing – March 2011 – more than 270,000 viewers have watched the film on YouTube, affording See an 'imagined world' audience for whom films that are critical of the People's Action Party, which has ruled Singapore for half a century, are actually possible.

Let us now look at the way the independent films of South East Asia perform in the various 'scapes' that Appadurai has defined. I will begin my discussion with the *ethnoscape*, which 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.

(1996: 34)

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' (Appadurai 1996: 34).

While Appadurai clearly has guest workers and refugees in mind here, his observations apply to some extent to the indie film-makers of South East Asia. In a way, they *are* work migrants 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 travelled group, and in that sense many of them *have* become cosmopolitans. Apichatpong Weerasethakul mentions in an interview that he is abroad half of the year (Baumgärtel forthcoming b). 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. Many of those directors have to carefully schedule their trips in a manner 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 pitied because of his demanding schedule, he joked: 'Jet lag is like free drugs', before detailing his

extensive travel arrangements for the next couple of weeks (conversation with de la Cruz in November 2008).

Another keyword in Appadurai's terminology is the *finanscape*. While the independent films of South East 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 a fact 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 of doing this kind of international co-production has trickled down from international media conglomerates to small funding bodies and film-makers that are often essentially bedroom producers with a camera, a computer and not much else. This is a telling symptom of the globalization of the media market that is now within the reach of film-makers with very limited means.

All this, of course, is mainly due to the breathtaking advancements in modern telecommunications and digital media that Appadurai addresses when he talks about the *technoscape*. He sees this as:

[T]he 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.

(1996: 34)

It is arguably in this sphere that the South East Asian directors have made the most impressive inroads.

Digital video cameras for the consumer market became available in South East Asia around 2000. At the same time, 'new media', 'interactive media', 'digital media' or 'multimedia' were buzzwords, and many colleges and universities added courses and programmes in this field to their portfolio. In Malaysia, the support of ventures in the field of Information and Communication Technologies became state policy, part of the so-called Vision 2020, a long-term programme to transform the country from a supplier of raw materials and cheap labour into a post-industrial economy with a standard of living akin to that of the First World (Mohamed 1993). 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.

(2007: 230)

Malaysian indie film-makers such as Tan Chui Mui, Liew Seng Tat and Deepak Kumaran Menon are all alumni of the Multimedia University.

For these film-makers, the computers as primary workspace serve not just for the production of their works, but also as a tool to market, distribute and promote them. Even tiny production companies like Da Huang Pictures, which 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 film-makers – 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 film-makers such as Khairil M. Bahar or Ed Lejano have a presence on social networks like Facebook, Friendster or MySpace, either for themselves or for individual films.

While a website or a MySpace page might be a prerequisite not just for film directors today, but for everybody who wants to get some sort of visibility, some indie film-makers have made even more 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 also had a frequently updated blog, before her untimely death in 2009. Blogs like these are not just vast resources of information on the directors, which provide links to reviews, dates of screenings, archived videos of television appearances and interviews and thereby paint a much more comprehensive picture of the directors than a static entry in a film encyclopaedia. They are also a means of staying in touch with the audience – some of Ahmad's entries have gathered over 400 comments, mostly by Malaysians, but also from viewers who saw her films at festivals and other screenings abroad. In this 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 for a highly specialized target group. At the same time, many of the South East Asian indie directors are highly accessible via the Internet.

In fact, many of the South East Asian independent film-makers of today 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 film-makers of South East Asia are distant, audio-visual relatives of the 'bedroom producers' of the 1990s, who started to produce techno or house music not in the studio, but in their homes and were therein enabled by new digital technologies.

South East Asian film-makers have experimented with new innovative approaches with regard to distribution, which used to be the bottleneck between independent film-makers and their audience. This starts with straightforward methods of film-makers like 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. It carries on with methods such

as those used by production companies like Da Huang Pictures, who distribute their films worldwide via their own web shops. This is really a quantum leap compared to the problems that indie film-makers faced only ten years ago, when they tried to sell their films internationally.

Then there is the case of Amir Muhammad's *Last Communist* that distributor Red Films sells on the American market via Customflicks, 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 bidder has to upload his digitized work to the server of the company, and is paid a fee, whenever his or her work is sold on a custom-made DVD. While *Last Communist* has not exactly been a best-seller,³ the film is available in North America. Other directors, who have given up hope of financial compensation for their work, simply make their films available for download on the Internet or through P2P networks or video hosting sites like YouTube. After the horror film *Tatlong Araw Ng Kadiliman/Three Days of Darkness* (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 his website for download. More recently, he has put up some of his earlier no-budget films on torrent sites for free download from peer-to-peer networks.

The ease with which one can send DVDs or Digital Beta Tapes abroad has greatly contributed to the international visibility of independent films from South East 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 Festivals, which 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 South East 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 [...] 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.

(1996: 35)

The independent film-makers of South East Asia have successfully fed their works and their 'imagined world' 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 film-maker that I interviewed during my research on South East Asian indie cinema had his Eureka moment that made him want to become a film-maker, when watching a foreign/non-Hollywood film. Nia Dinata mentions *Hong gao liang/Red Sorghum* (Zhang, 1987) and *Da hong deng long gao gao gua/Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, 1991), Apichatpong Weerasethakul cites the films of the Taiwanese New Wave as a central influence. Ironically, both had to study in the United States to see films from other Asian countries. Erik Khoo, Pen-ek Ratanaruang or Amir Muhammad all credit their studies abroad, and the opportunity to see films that were not Hollywood mainstream

3. According to an e-mail correspondence with Amir Muhammad in April 2009, from which all this information stems, less than 100 copies were sold this way.

4. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of pirated films on the works of independent film-makers in South East Asia, see Baumgärtel (forthcoming a).

or local commercial productions, as an important source of inspiration. In the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, the screenings at the Goethe Institut, 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 film-makers (Baumgärtel 2007).

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 South East Asia at the time, when the film directors, who have become protagonists of the South East Asian film scene, grew up. Only in the last decade or so has South East Asia been truly connected to the flow of images of the global mediascape, again thanks to new digital media, in particular the Internet. However, access to fast net connections is still a privilege for 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. Arthouse 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 – which of course is illegal, although rampant, in all the countries of the region – has been instrumental in bringing international art house and world cinema into the countries of South East Asia (Baumgärtel forthcoming a). The importance of piracy in developing film appreciation and media literacy in South East Asia cannot be overstated, and many film-makers have openly acknowledged their indebtedness to pirated films in their development. While Amir Muhammad (2009) has said 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’ (Tioseco 2005).⁴ Therefore, independent film-making in South East Asia is taking place in a reciprocal, but at the same time asymmetrical relationship with the global mediascape. These films would probably not exist without this new flow of images into the countries of the region, although this phenomenon has also allowed the film-makers 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’ are zones of territorial and cultural disjuncture, which he calls ‘diasporic public spheres’. The fact that the independent films of South East 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, are 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, who try to uphold a social and political status quo that is increasingly put into question by the forces of globalization.

The independent film-makers of South East Asia, therefore, live in ‘imagined worlds’ that are very different both from the ‘imagined worlds’ of their fellow citizens and 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 has been trying 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 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' (Manirajan 2007).

While Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines might be behind Malaysia and Singapore in terms of economical development, similar problems persist there. The governments may pay lip service to democracy and human rights, but this is not borne out in social life. Therefore, film-makers of South East Asia have looked for an audience elsewhere, where their values and their aesthetics find a more like-minded and more receptive audience: Europe, North America and Asia. It is there that they enter a shared *ideoscapes* that is different from the oppressive political and cultural environment in their own countries.

Ideoscapes, the last of Appadurai's 'scapes':

are composed of elements of the Enlightenment world-view, which consists of a concatenation of ideas, terms and images, including 'freedom', 'welfare', 'rights', 'sovereignty', 'representation' and the master-term 'democracy'. The master-narrative of the Enlightenment, and its many variants in England, France and the United States, was constructed with a certain internal logic and presupposed a certain relationship between reading, representation and the public sphere [...] But their diaspora across the world, especially since the nineteenth century, has loosened the internal coherence which held these terms and images together in a Euro-American master-narrative, and provided 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'.

(1996: 36)⁵

While 'keywords' such as democracy, freedom, rights and so on 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 functioning democracy in any country of South East Asia, as political censorship and other restrictions that affect the local film industry persist. The film-makers of the region have therefore frequently opted to enter their works into ideospheres that are more compatible with the 'imagined world' they live in.

If the independent films of South East Asia are 'able to contest and sometimes even subvert the "imagined worlds" of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them' (Appadurai 1996: 33) as Appadurai argues for his speculative *Weltbürger/global citizen*, 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 economic

5. 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.

dynamics of the countries of South East Asia. The relationship between the officially sanctioned imagined communities and the individual imagined worlds of the film-makers and other artists and intellectuals seem at this point less fluid and permeable than Appadurai described it. But the independent films from South East Asia prove that there are pockets of resistance to the officially prescribed status quo in those countries. They are part of the transnational circulation of cinema culture because there are no possibilities for their films to be widely released nationally – 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 their home nations are able to bridge the disjunctures that are currently excluding them.

The independent film-makers in South East 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 South East 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 mend? – those ostensibly incommensurate disjunctures.

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