

Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Emerging voices from Southeast Asia: seeing a region in its documentary films

November 2013's issue of the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) included a theme program on 'Emerging Voices from Southeast Asia', featuring fourteen recent documentaries from the region and several Q&A sessions with some of the directors. In addition, Cambodian documentary film director Rithy Panh was invited to comment on a retrospective of his oeuvre.¹ Coinciding with this program the KITLV, Leiden University, IIAS and IDFA organised the seminar 'Making History, Everyday Life and Shifting Moralities', in which some of the filmmakers involved shared thoughts about each other's methodologies and ongoing concerns with scholars studying Southeast Asian contemporary culture. A supplementary roundtable, on the use of film in research and the classroom, took place on November 27th at the launch of LeidenGlobal.²

Fridus Steijlen & Bart Barendregt



Emerging voices from Southeast Asia *continued*

Discussions at both occasions proved stimulating but did not – and this won't come as a surprise – provide us with definite answers to all questions we had initially posed ourselves. As we became increasingly aware of yet other themes that merited our attention we realized the need to instigate further dialogue between filmmakers and students of the region. This special Focus issue hopes to prompt such dialogue by referring to some of the discussions at the November meetings, but also by offering some of our colleagues, all experts in the field, the chance to comment on these discussions.

(re)Making the past

A first set of questions was related to historiography and the role Southeast Asian documentary films play in addressing and reinterpreting past events central to the societies they depict. At the seminar, Cambodian director Kavich Neang recounted how when making a film he first does extensive research on the themes addressed, adding that "it is about sharing and what I am learning about the history and about what is happening in Cambodia. By doing this I hope it spreads to other young people [enabling them] to learn about the history and what is happening in my country." Can our directors indeed be considered to be historians of some sort, and if so, how are their materials to be used by students of the region in studying its recent history. In his contribution to this Focus, Keng We Koh acknowledges the relevance of documentary as well as feature films in addressing and redressing historical themes. However, as with teaching all history, an appropriate context is a top requirement if one is to understand such remakings of the past. These remakings offer mostly an alternative to the nationalist and official histories these directors have been growing up with. In doing so they may help fellow citizens to navigate often obscured, painful to remember or simply ignored episodes of their own national or more local pasts, reinterpreting a history otherwise little owned.

In a similar vein, Gea Wijers' contribution illustrates how a young generation of Cambodian filmmakers, often supported by Pahn's Bophana Audiovisual Center, has been "educating itself in expressing their views on Cambodian society through film documentaries". This new generation comes with a shift in themes and its own preferences in writing history, focusing on the pre-and post-conflict periods, rather than the pain and trauma that accompanies the Khmer Rouge conflict for so many. The role documentary filmmakers prefer for themselves as chroniclers of national history seems much dependent on personal experiences. A case in point are the divergent ways Rithy Panh and Joshua Oppenheimer chose to depict mass violence and genocide in respectively Cambodia and 1965 Indonesia, both described in John Kleinen's essay. Unlike Panh – himself a victim of the Khmer Rouge regime – Oppenheimer did not personally witness the atrocities of Indonesia's 1965 'coup' that his film deals with. This may help explain why he resorts to depicting the perpetrators rather than the victims, although Oppenheimer himself has pointed at more pragmatic reasons: past victims are still too scared and traumatized to willfully figure in front of his camera.

Situating the everyday

The films compiled in the 'Emergent Voices' program are a far cry from the usual 'drums and trumpets' history seen in historical feature films. Yes history is being rewritten here, but in small acts, and by zooming in on small people. And it is through the everyday events that they are part of, that we witness social change in a Southeast Asian context.

During our November seminar one of the films featured proved to be illustrative of this. *The Brick* (2013) is a short documentary film portraying a local community producing bricks in a small Myanmar village. The film itself was the result of a *Solidarity Shorts International Workshop* in Rangoon, which teaches inexperienced filmmakers how to handle a camera. Director of *The Brick*, Polish filmmaker Jan Czarlewski, had expected the local trainees to exclusively focus on the brick making process as for the economic viable process it is to the community. Instead workshop participants had started to chronicle the periods in between work shifts, the lunch breaks and power naps or children's play on the factory ground, with the social clearly overtaking more economic dimensions and thus stressing the power of the everyday. It does not necessarily show cultural differences between European filmmakers and Myanmar workshop participants, Czarlewski argued, but for him it did prove the lack of discussion when it comes to our call of documentary films capturing the everyday. Similarly, workshop participants had been asked to record their own family lives, something all of them refused. Underscoring the power of the camera, people explained it as being too intrusive in a country that only very recently started the process of (yet modest) democratization, and where filmmakers had been, just one year earlier, sent to jail for simply filming mass demonstrations. In such a context the (capturing of the) everyday almost automatically becomes a political act.

Documenting change

Does a good documentary capture the sign of the times, does it foretell how it is soon to change or does it actively take part in changing the course of history? These were yet other questions raised in our panel discussions. In fact they may do all of this, but not in the ways we often simply assume.

The IDFA special program included at least two examples proving how directors and their films may act as agents of change, but also how often, due to national contexts and cultural preoccupation, seemingly similar battles may be fought with different weapons. Both the film *The Mangoes*

(2012) by Indonesian director Tonny Trimarsanto, and the Thai documentary *Consider* (2013) by Panu Saeng-Xuto, deal with the topic of transgender. However, they do so in diverse ways. Both films are playing with concepts of gender and sexuality, at once commenting upon the bad fate of those failing to fit a neat and convenient categorization. But *Consider* does so by explicitly visualizing such bad fate of transgender in Thai society whereas *The Mangoes* subtly defends the rights of Indonesian transgenders by depicting the life trajectory of one particular person, showing transsexual Reni on her first visit home to village and family, after having fled to the big city. Such differences in style may obviously be as much dependent on personal as well as societal tastes or preferences.

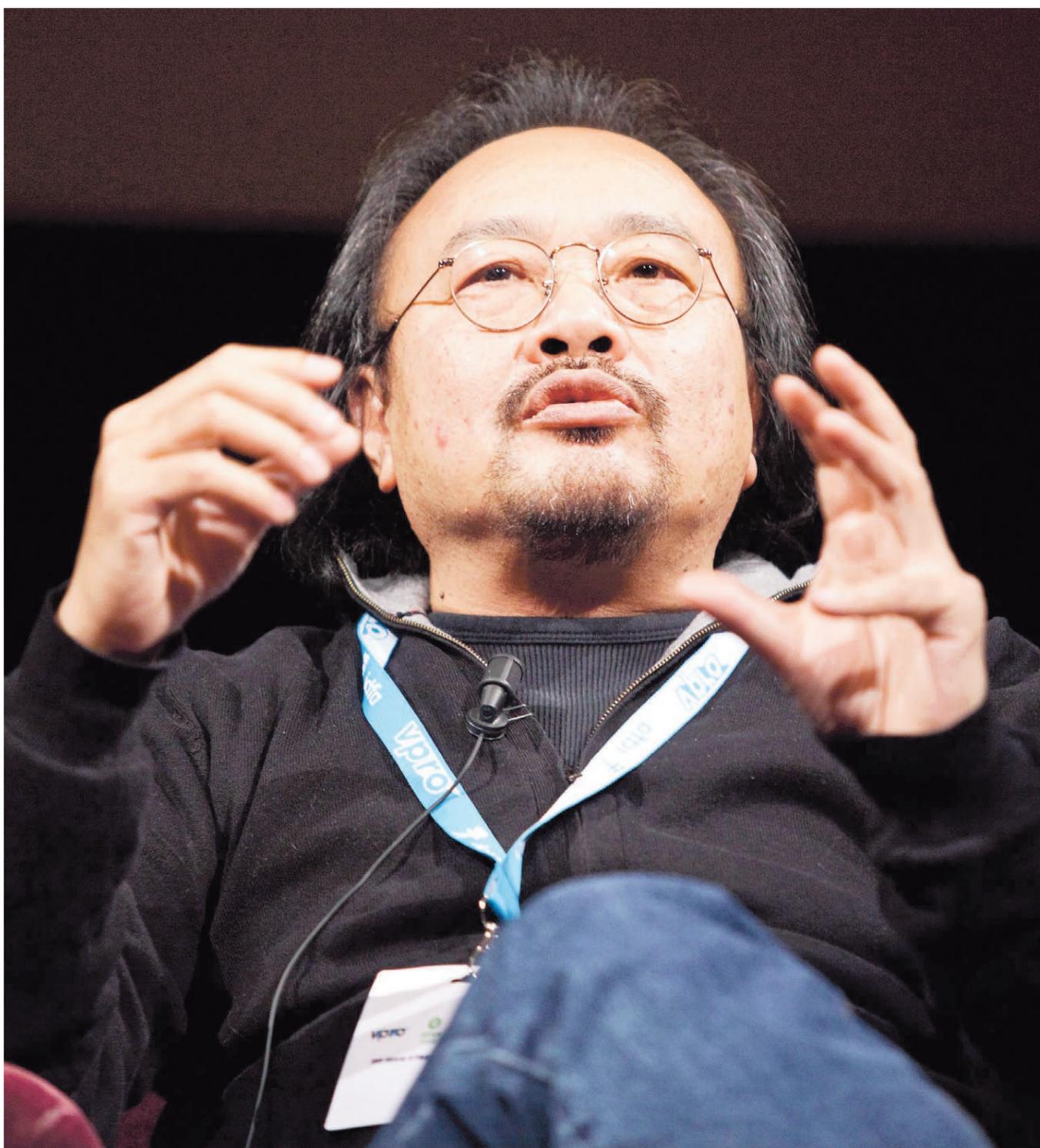
Documentary films and their makers are not seldom attributed with strengthening civil society, speaking for those otherwise little heard, and hence explaining the title of the program and it being sponsored by the foundation for Democracy and Media. Naturally, some critical reflection is required here. During the November seminar, questions were raised about the extent to which funding agencies, sponsors or festival organizers are doomed to impose certain agendas and (maybe even) Western liberal values on other people's cinema? There is no denying that some of the Southeast Asian films that have made it to Western film festivals are successful precisely because they correspond to either (self) orientalist fantasies or the hopes of western audiences that such films may change these societies for the better, and that they read more in accordance with universalist demands of democracy and individual agency. However, today's independent documentary scene in Southeast Asia is multiple in character and does not necessarily have to subject itself to NGO agendas or take notice of the tastes of foreign audiences.

In his contribution, Raul Niño Zambrano, the curator of the IDFA 'Emerging Voices' program reflects on his tour through Southeast Asia and his search for films to be included in the festival. He shows that, although not on purpose, some central themes pop up while curating. Raul also argues how the conditions for documentary film in Southeast Asia differ from, for example, regions like Latin America and what this means in terms of quality.

The essay by Nuril Huda effectively illustrates the multi-voice of today's Southeast Asian documentary 'scene'. Nuril shows how in Indonesia a novel genre of *pesantren* film is emerging from Islamic boarding schools, now that new regulations have enabled the insertion of more 'secular' subjects into the schools' curriculum. *Santri* directors,

Below: Film crew interviewing the leader of a mass organization in Indonesia. Photo by Fridus Steijlen.





Above:
Rithy Panh.
Photo by IDFA.

Below:
Supplementary
roundtable at
the launch of
LeidenGlobal.
Photo by
LeidenGlobal.

mostly autodidacts making use of cheap handheld cameras, increasingly resort to themes and materials little known outside the context of the Islamic boarding school, providing outsiders with a glimpse of (changing) everyday life of these Muslim students. In the aftermath of such films, *santri* cinema has also made it big on the national screen, with popular feature films such as *3 prayers, 3 loves* taking up similar strategies. Erik de Maaker – responding to the ‘Emergent Voices’ program by looking at historical documentary trends in the neighboring South Asian region – similarly shows how changing conditions such as the rise of commercial TV and the resultant breakdown of government control has provided Indian filmmakers with opportunities to gain control of their own agenda.

Old constraints, new challenges

Not everyone equally applauds the winds of change in and throughout the Southeast Asian cinematic landscape, and more reactionary forces and outright censorship still do play a significant role in many of the societies visualized in the ‘Emergent Voices’ program. Nontawat Numbenchapol’s film *Boundary* (2011) – part of the IDFA program and dealing with the tense conflict in Thailand between red and yellow shirts, but also the 2011 border conflict with Cambodia –



was banned by the Thai government for reasons of national security. But by now, all countries in the region have moved away from a 100% tight state control of its film industries, although some countries have only just started to do so. In Myanmar, for example, one still has to take into account opinions of the state apparatus or the pressure exercised by politically motivated parties. In most other places such pressure is, fortunately, only relative. For example, *The Mangoes* documentary about an Indonesian transgender is circulated within Indonesia, despite protests by rightwing Islam movements and accusations that the film is pornographic.

Recent examples from Southeast Asia show how potential censorship can simply be avoided by screening documentaries in more informal settings, or by distribution through the internet, although the lack of broadband internet in many places still clearly hinders dissemination beyond the usual centers. Ismael Basbeth, director of *400Words*, doubts the advantages of internet for distribution and thinks it is better to screen films at festivals where they can prompt lively discussions; he also stresses the importance for himself and fellow directors to profit from ticket sales and thus secure investment for future projects. And yet access to cheap technologies and the shared skills that come with them are already changing the face of Southeast Asian documentary cinema, as are internet based platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube; new audiences are now able to watch Southeast Asian documentaries on a previously unknown scale and outside the usual context of festivals or private screenings. Our directors also mentioned efforts to successfully use social media for crowd funding, a model that in the nearby future may replace the need of selling tickets at international festivals and may provide for an even larger audience at home.

Also for scholars of the region, inter-streamed documentaries prove a big challenge with many of the online posted amateur and short professional movies offering new insights into a region that is rapidly changing. John Kleinen thus told his audience that he is now able to track the rapid urbanization of Hanoi, and the inclusion of the village in which he has been

conducting research since 1992, by using postings on YouTube. With new audiences and their respective demands, indigenous minorities and the rural poor picking up the camera, a complex and very dynamic ‘field’ of Southeast Asian documentary filming is offering itself to the world and is waiting to be studied. But in how can one see and study this changing region and its emergent voices; e.g., what new literacies are required?

Visual literacies and other agendas

An important prerequisite to our discussion was for scholars and directors to engage in each other’s methods. No longer can we hold on to a simplistic and rigid dichotomy between academic writing and film production; both deal with similar problems of how to faithfully tell our stories without having to resort to whole truths. The best way for us to represent the often complex entities we are studying is to listen to the manifold voices trying to speak to us, which is what Farish Noor is trying to do in a new documentary series on Indonesian culture and politics he is currently directing. By working both as an academic and in the media, Farish is personally very aware of the different languages spoken in the two fields, and notes how the “obvious power of the image ... communicates meanings with an economy and effectiveness that words often fail to do”. It is a power that merits further study as diverse societies, and even groups within such societies, tend to read visuals in ways different from others and hence the call for ‘learning to read’ Southeast Asian documentary films, often heard in the two meetings we organized. Learning to read film is about understanding key scenes, the structure of language in stories told, but also intercultural varieties of editing styles – as Erik de Maaker points out in his contribution: audiences in the West often tend to be interested in quite different themes than the societies or circles in which such films are produced, consequently failing to truly recognize what these films are about. In this case a solution is not so much sought in trying to escape a simplistic East-West dichotomy and resorting to produce for local audiences only, but to seek cooperation with counterparts from elsewhere to see how also foreign audiences may be familiarized with otherwise local concerns.

Scholars are familiar with close reading of texts, but do they similarly close read images? Many universities worldwide happen to have visual anthropology programs, but a solid method for reading images is still underway. We still can do better to fully insert documentaries and still images into our curricula and stimulate students to use visuals in the class and their work. Also, a further engagement between directors and scholars may help facilitate the development of reading skills. The discussions triggered by the seminar and roundtable helped us realize the need for a closer engagement between scholars and filmmakers and a further focus on the themes they can explore together. A first step then is this edition of *theFocus*, which we hope may add and grow into a larger debate and potentially shared research agendas.

Fridus Steijlen is an anthropologist, working as a researcher at the KITLV. His work concerns postcolonial migration and everyday life in contemporary Indonesia. Among others he is responsible for the long term data generating audiovisual research project ‘Recording the Future’. (steijlen@kitlv.nl)

Bart Barendregt is associate professor at the Leiden Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, specialising in the popular culture of Southeast Asia and the field of Digital Anthropology. (barendregt@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)

References

- 1 See The Newsletter Issue #65, Autumn 2013, p.52
- 2 See participants list below

Participants Seminar

Aung Nwai Hyway, Myanmar | Azharr Rudin, Malaysia
Bart Barendregt, Leiden University | Chairun Nissa, Indonesia
Fridus Steijlen, KITLV | Ismail Basbeth, Indonesia
Kavich Neang, Cambodia | Kong Rithdee, Thailand
Kyaw Myo Lwin, Myanmar | Lynn Lee, Singapore
Min Thu Aung, Myanmar | Jan Czarlewski, Austria
Nontawat Numbenchapol, Thailand | Panu Saeng-Xuto, Thailand
Philippe Peycam, IIAS | Phuong Thao Dong, Vietnam
Ratna Saptari, Leiden University | Raul Niño Zambrano, IDFA
Sopheak Sao, Cambodia | Tonny Trimarsanto, Indonesia

Participants Roundtable

Bart Barendregt, Leiden University | Chairun Nissa, Indonesia
Erik de Maaker, Leiden University | Fridus Steijlen, KITLV
John Kleinen, University of Amsterdam | Ucu Agustini, Indonesia

Reflecting on the 'Emerging Voices' program

As a festival IDFA is keen on paying attention to developments in film production around the world. Besides economic and political changes currently taking place in Southeast Asia we have noticed a rapid increase in film production throughout the region. We closely monitored how fiction films produced in that region gained considerable respect among critics and audiences in recent years.

Raul Niño Zambrano

THE FILM *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* by Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul serves as an example here, winning the Golden Palm in Cannes in 2010, as does the work of Filipino filmmaker Brillante Mendoza, which has been selected several times for festivals in Cannes and Berlin. This has also been the case with a number of documentary films including *Kano: An American and His Harem* (2010) by Filipino director Monster Jimenez, who was awarded the IDFA prize for best debut film, or *Red Wedding* by Cambodian directors Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon, which in 2012 obtained the IDFA award for best Mid-Length documentary. Additionally, there has been an increase in documentary film festivals such as *ChopShots* in Indonesia and *Salaya Doc* in Thailand, but also the workshop-like *DocNet* seminars that are organized throughout the region and which have encouraged young filmmakers to start producing more documentaries of their own. Altogether, this justified the special attention during our festival for Southeast Asian documentary production.

Research trip to Southeast Asia

A first step, in the beginning of 2013, was making a research trip in order to meet filmmakers and producers in the region. It took us to Malaysia, Cambodia and Myanmar/Burma. In Malaysia, we were much inspired by *The Asian Side of the Doc*, a massive yearly documentary conference, where producers and directors from all over Asia meet. The documentary genre is clearly blossoming, and the need to exchange experiences and tell one's own (his)stories was apparent everywhere. Filmmakers and local funders (mostly from the world of broadcasting) were united in their ambition to realize more documentary projects, but this has not always been this way. In the past, funding for Southeast Asian documentary projects often tended to be sought in the West. In spite of such conditions it was striking to see that most Southeast Asian filmmakers were hanging on to their own approaches and ways of doing things, rather than copying ideas imported from elsewhere. Southeast Asian filmmakers have been anxious to tell stories in their own way.

In Cambodia, we visited Rithy Panh's *Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center*, an institute that focuses on the research of mediated traces of the genocide that took place during the Khmer Rouge regime. The *Bophana Center* restores and preserves visual materials from the past, making sure it is available for future generations to use. Young filmmakers are trained here by professional filmmakers including Rithy Panh himself. Our visit to Cambodia was completed with a two-day seminar organized by DocNet, entitled *The Voice of Southeast Asian Documentary – Reaching out to the World*. This seminar served as a platform of exchange and was aimed at networking between various professional groups in Southeast Asia that are involved in the production of documentary films. It was a great opportunity to meet commercial producers, representatives of TV stations, governmental film board officials, representatives of film schools and NGOs, all of whom may be able to support the sector in the near future.

Burma was a different story all together. After years of military dictatorship, the country's cinematic production is still in its infancy, but they are catching up fast. That much was also proven by our visit to the *Yangon Film School*. With few resources, but with utmost dedication, students are carving out their own ways to tell stories. A good example is *Tyres* (2013) by director Kyaw Myo Lwin, a well-crafted black-and-white short, portraying the recycling of car tires; a practice necessitated by extreme poverty

It is difficult to compare Southeast Asia with other regions, such as Latin America. In terms of documentary production Latin America now seems at an entirely different level. Countries such as Mexico, Argentina and Brazil

have strong documentary traditions and legislation and other facilities have contributed to a climate in which the documentary industry is able to deliver high quality creative products. This is not yet the case for Southeast Asia where we are generally looking at independent productions or documentaries that have mostly been made possible with resources from abroad.

Curating the program

After the research trip it was clear that the focus of the program should be on recent films, films able to reflect on the current state of the documentary scene throughout the region. Noticeably, there is much eagerness among young filmmakers from the region to tell stories of their countries being in transition. That process is enforced with accessible cheap digital cameras now being widely available.

It was also an honor to introduce Rithy Panh and his works to our international audience. We invited Panh as our special guest at IDFA, where he not only showed and commented on a retrospective of his own works, but also screened a program of films that have inspired him in his own work. We invited him to show our audiences how films may well connect personal and regional stories, whilst at the same time address universal themes.¹

For the 'Emerging Voices' program we initially had no specific theme in mind. All we wanted to do was to show how diverse Southeast Asian cinema currently is in its themes and styles. However, an important criterion in our selection process was the balance between cinematographic elements, differentiating documentaries from mere TV reports or home videos, but also their potential to resonate with international audiences. From this selection emerged personal stories that in oft creative ways address changes and challenges that the various countries in this region are currently facing. The documentary *House/Grandparent* (2013) by Azharr Rudin, for example, portrays a grandmother in Malaysia having a hard time keeping her own tempo while her family is thinking of moving to a new place. Similar tensions and challenges were also evident in Ismail Basbeth's film *400WORDS* (2013), showing a young modern Indonesian couple discovering their apparent very different approaches to wedding rituals and family values while attempting to produce a fiction film for their guests.

Out of more than a hundred possible films from the region we eventually selected fourteen; a number that proves the huge potential of filmmaking in and of that region. We were happy that the filmmakers of all fourteen selected films were able to attend the 2013 IDFA festival. They brought to Amsterdam the very same energy and enthusiasm we had already encountered during our trip, and they shared it not only with our audience, but also with other film professionals visiting the festival. The Southeast Asian directors met possible future collaborators and some of them were able to apply for our IDFA Bertha Funding, enabling them to develop follow-up projects. I am very hopeful that some of them will come back to IDFA to show their future products.

Below: Still from the Indonesian film *The Mangoes* (2012) by Tonny Trimarsanto.

Telling stories

In many ways the 'Emerging Voices' program showcased current events and developments in the documentary world of Southeast Asia, but it also highlighted the massive political, economic and social transitions that are presently taking place within the region. In Myanmar, for example, we visited the Yangon Film School. It was only five years old and had but limited means. The institute is nevertheless a hotbed of cinematic activity. It was here where we stumbled upon Aung Nwai Htway's *Behind the Screen* (2013), in which the filmmaker dissects the marriage of his parents - they were film icons in 1960s Myanmar. The film shows how the heartrending scenes acted out on the silver screen were a pretty accurate reflection of their real off-screen lives.

Although we were not looking for special themes, there is a common thread that is apparent in most of the fourteen films screened during the festival. *Behind the Screen* is as such exemplary for the program as a whole, highlighting larger cultural themes by telling personal stories. Most of these Southeast Asian filmmakers are not responding to the oft threatening circumstances by resorting to political statements, but rather they focus on personal accounts, often about family life, to thus say something about changing conditions within their country. *Consider* (2013), by Panu Saeng-Xuto, similarly confronts Thai society, reputed as sexually liberated, with the everyday hardships that transgender persons face.

The personal journey is yet another important theme in some of the films. The Indonesian film *The Mangoes* (2012) by Tonny Trimarsanto provides us with the very personal story of another transgender person who travels from her new home in metropolitan Jakarta to the village where she was born, to face her family for the first time since her life-changing decision. While the filmmaker refrains from explicit comments, the road trip is telling for the conditions of modern-day Indonesia. Finally, Nontawat Numbenchapol's *Boundary* (2013) portrays an age-old border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia through the motif of a road trip by the filmmaker, thus artistically blending his philosophical musings and sociological observations, with personal first hand experiences. While *Boundary* is the only film in the 'Emerging Voices' program to explicitly focus on borders, all fourteen films could somehow be said to deal with such a trope. Each film in its own way laid bare, and challenged, the borders of the societies these films were produced in.

Raul Niño Zambrano has been working at the Program Department of IDFA (the International Documentary Film festival Amsterdam) since 2008. His expertise relates in particular to Latin American documentaries and shorts. Other fields of interest include data visualization and multimodal metaphor. He was the curator of the IDFA theme program 'Emerging Voices from Southeast Asia'. (raul@idfa.nl)

References

- 1 Rithy Panh's Masterclass is available online at: <http://tinyurl.com/rithypanhmasterclass>



Carefully approaching an absent center¹

In the early 1900s cinema arrived in colonized Cambodia. Mainly originating from its colonizer France, the first showings were documentaries that brought Western concepts and understandings to the Cambodian people. Documentary and fictional films started to be produced in Cambodia itself in the 1920s.² This, however, did not halt foreign influence but, rather, incorporated it into distinct local products. After its decolonization from French tutelage (1863-1953), Cambodian cinema went through two decades of modernization inspired by Western examples. In many ways, the 1950s through to the early 1970s can be seen as Cambodia's cultural 'Golden Age'.³

Gea D.M. Wijers



Kavich Neang filming in Cambodia. Photo from private collection Kavich Neang.

WHILE PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK was in power (1953-1969), he proved a proud sponsor of the Golden Age. Fostering the postcolonial nationalist spirit, he instated governmental funding for indigenous cinematic productions and banned Western films. While foreign films would still enter the country from Thailand, India or Hong Kong, the local film industry blossomed.⁴ Remarkably, from 1970 to 1975, while the civil war that would bring the Khmer Rouge into power was raging outside of Phnom Penh, Cambodian cinema drew its largest audiences.⁵ However, most of the films that came out in these years were neglected and lost in the years of conflict that followed; as were the lives of many of the actors, directors and producers that had made the industry thrive.⁶

Formally, the Cambodian conflicts came to a halt with the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. However, it took decades for the restoration of the Cambodian film industry to receive governmental attention. For example, in 2010 only two cinemas in Phnom Penh were showing mostly low quality Cambodian horror films; compared to the 30 cinemas and an approximate 400 film productions in the period 1960-1975. Only in 2011 did two new large film theatres, Cineplex and Legend, open up in Phnom Penh and start to feature international films. Until then, internationally produced documentaries and art house films were only shown to a largely expat audience in the small setting of NGO and cafe film rooms.

Reanimating Cambodia's cinema

Yet this is not to say that no filmmaking took place in post-conflict Cambodia. In the 1980s, video technology brought about a surge of regionally produced films that were watched at home or shown on local television. This small-scale revival, however, was already extinguished by the end of the 1990s.⁷ Larger international productions, such as of course the *Killing Fields* (1984), were shot in Cambodia upon occasion, bringing technical expertise to the country and employing local staff. Additionally, the French Cultural Center (FCC) and other international NGOs, such as the German cultural center Metahouse (2007), started to focus on art, communication and media in order to serve as networking platforms and resource centers for the local creative community. The Cambodian film industry, however, suffered from negative perceptions as most films, and especially the documentaries about Cambodian subjects, were Western-made and conflict-focused.⁸

As one of the first local measures to support the development of a domestic film industry, the Cambodian Ministry of Culture's Department of Cinema initiated the foundation of Khmer Mekong Films (KMF) in 2006. This production company set out to produce Cambodian-made films that would not 'suffer' the foreign view on Cambodia. While KMF depends on international cooperation to build the needed capacity, its aims are rather nationalist in nature. The government aims to stimulate the production of non-political, non-social issue and non-conflict related pictures of Cambodia that will, in their idea, bring forward traditional values and "strengthen the nation". This initiative went hand-in-hand with plans to open a film school at the Cambodian Royal University of Fine Arts.⁹ Unfortunately, so far, neither company nor school can be said to have materialized in reality.

Kon Khmer Koun Khmer: Cambodian films, Cambodian generation

Parallel to this centralized development effort, a young and independent generation of filmmakers has been educating itself in expressing their views about Cambodian society through films and documentaries.¹⁰ Inspired by Western role models such as Martin Scorsese and mentored by Cambodian French returnee Rithy Panh, individual members of this group have set about acquiring as much of the film-making skills available in Cambodia and on the internet as they can.

Known for ethnographic productions like *Rice People* (1994) as well as documentaries that directly confront the national Khmer Rouge trauma, such as *S-21. The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) and Oscar nominated *The Missing Picture* (2013), Panh's support has been essential to the development of most members of this group, both locals and returnees. As no extensive film academy training is available in the country, the locals have had to take their own education in hand. In addition to NGOs and the Cambodian Film Commission that enlists visiting film crews, the support of the Bophana Audiovisual Center, which Panh helped establish in Phnom Penh in 2005, has been very important in this process. Bophana provides many of the (im)material resources that are vital to Panh's goal of giving Cambodian cinema its voice back.¹¹

This piecemeal building of their know-how, forced a new generation of filmmakers to become active cultural entrepreneurs who set out, individually and by teaming up, to make the most of the available (digital) resources and international (funding) opportunities.¹² Independent of the government and formal institutions they found ways to develop their own cinematographic language. The shifting of generations thus brought about a shifting of themes and approaches in filmmaking.

The 'new generation' of collaborators and friends calls itself the Kon Khmer Koun Khmer (lit: Cambodian films, Cambodian generation) and may be distinguished by their own involvement in contemporary subject matters. As if carefully avoiding the pain and trauma that accompanies the Khmer Rouge conflict for so many, they focus, rather, on the pre-and post-conflict periods, thus approaching but never touching on this painful cultural 'void' in Cambodian history. While the consequences of the consecutive civil wars are certainly present in their work, these do not take center stage. Carefully, the gap that was struck in Cambodian filmmaking history is approached through, for instance, the reconstruction of cultural histories or following small stories of everyday life linked to personal experiences of the filmmaker. In this sense their ways of storytelling are not 'new' but firmly embedded in Cambodian history, traditions and culture as well as in international practice. In contrast to the government-related KMF organization, however, they do not shy away from socially relevant issues and do not hesitate to show their personal fascination with the subject under study.¹³

A case in point is the celebrated documentary *Where I go*, by Kavich Neang, which was presented at the 2013 IDFA 'Emerging Voices from Southeast Asia program'.¹⁴ In his following of the everyday life of a bi-ethnic young adult, while not passing judgment or explicitly recounting history, important aspects of the recent Cambodian past are revealed. Neang doesn't attempt to answer the questions he brings forward, but simply acknowledges the fact that they exist. On his motivation for filmmaking Neang states that, as a local, he has insights into current Cambodian culture that those born abroad would just not be able to put into film. He is emphatic, however, that his work is not meant to be political and can be said to practice mild 'self-censorship' in order to not suffer the scrutiny that government critics in Cambodia are subject to.

Thus Neang illustrates how – as Hamilton aptly states in her work on the reconciliatory dimensions of the new Cambodian documentary cinema – the Kon Khmer Koun Khmer opens up and expands on cultural continuity and survival while carefully approaching an absent center.¹⁵ While recent developments in Cambodian society bring an unprecedented number of peaceful young activists, mobilized through Facebook, to the streets in a so-called 'Cambodian Spring', the 'cultural activism' of this new generation of filmmakers brings the changing values of Cambodian society to an international audience.¹⁶

After working at the Cambodian Ministry of Environment for several years, Gea Wijers finished her PhD on Cambodian returnees as institutional entrepreneurs in 2013. She now works parttime at Erasmus University College and is an active member of the Cambodia Research Group applying for a Postdoctorate position. (geawijers@hotmail.com)

References

- 1 The author thanks Kavich Neang and Davy Chou for their helpful insights and constructive feedback during the writing of this article.
- 2 In this article I consider the Cambodian film industry to include fictional as well as documentary filmmaking as the technical expertise and creative insights for their production are largely the same.
- 3 Daravuth, L. & I. Muan. 2001. *Cultures of Independence. An introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s*, Phnom Penh: The Prince Claus Fund and Reyum Publishing.
- 4 Bearing witness to the importance of filmmaking to Cambodian popular culture, it is a member of the new, generation of filmmakers, Cambodian French returnee Davy Chou (Chou, D. 2011. *Le Sommeil d'Or – Golden Slumbers*, film produced by Jacky Goldberg, Paris: Vycky Films).
- 5 Blum-Reid, S.E. 2003. 'Khmer memories or filming with Cambodia', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4(1): 126-138
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Exceeding the gaze of the scholar



Those who are familiar with the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, will be familiar with the episode in which the semi-divine warrior-prince Arjuna, on the eve of the fateful battle between the Pandawas and their cousins the Korawas, beseeches the God Krishna to explain how and why the battle between the two sides is necessary. Arjuna cannot reconcile his duty as a prince and his duty as a soldier, and is thus torn between two seemingly contradictory ends: to protect life and to destroy life. Krishna, on the other hand, warns Arjuna that he cannot hope to understand all, for his own mortal mind and faculties are finite, and that such an understanding would require the capacity to encompass the infinite. When Krishna finally relents to Arjuna's plea, he reveals himself – and the universe – in all its complexity; this image of the infinite is so great in scope and magnitude that Arjuna is forced to beg Krishna to resume his mortal form. The lesson is plain enough for all to see: our knowledge of the world is necessarily limited, subjective and piecemeal so that we can comprehend some of it.

Farish A Noor

All knowledge is partial

The lesson is also instructive for those of us who inhabit the field of academia, and as every scholar knows no academic endeavour can ever hope to be exhaustive in its breadth and scope, and no work can ever represent the subject of research in its totality. This is the problem of full presence, as it has been articulated by successive generations of philosophers, and points to the obvious fact that nothing, *nothing*, can ever be fully reconstituted in its entirety for the sake of academic examination, no matter how sincere and comprehensive that effort may be. It is a caveat that ought to be attached to every sample of academic writing: 'This work cannot and should not be taken as final, closed and exhaustive.'

In my other avatar as a full-time academic, such caveats have been brought into play in my drier academic writing. While working on two massive religio-social movements, namely the Tablighi Jama'at and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS,¹ I was able to add further qualifications to the observations I forwarded in my books, namely that my research was necessarily partial, limited and shaped by the contingencies of the here-and-now. But no such provisions are available to me when I find myself in the unfamiliar terrain of media work.

I am currently in the process of working on a documentary project about Indonesia in the lead-up to the elections of this year, and it is proving to be a herculean task indeed. Despite the fact that the documentary series will include six episodes, there is simply not enough time to devote to the myriad of topics that make Indonesia the complex and hugely fascinating country that it is. Here one is confronted by a thorny question that is on the one hand practical and on the other hand philosophical: How does one ever capture the complexity of a composite entity such as a nation-state, and can such a project ever truly succeed?

Academics and the media

Academics such as myself have a long acquaintanceship with the media, and the fact that I have a weekly op-ed column in several newspapers already testifies to the fact that I do not underestimate the power of media in general. However, the dilemmas faced by the academic when working in and with the media are manifold. For a start, the usual degree of control that an academic has when presenting his work via lectures and tutorials is severely compromised by the practical limitations of the media – be it in terms of time or column inches. The academic is used to working

Above:
Farish A Noor.
Right: Film crew
Farish A Noor in
Cambodia.

Both photos from
author's private
collection.

in an environment where claims need to be proven and substantiated, often via cross-referencing, triangulation and the power of footnotes, endnotes and appendices. The luxury of the academic book is that despite the obvious limitation of pages, there are at least pages – in the plural. Whereas in the case of a regular op-ed, the word limit of a thousand words renders impossible the fall-back position of citations, references and extensive quotations to back up a point.

These limitations are compounded in the case of visual media, where the relationship between the producer, cameraman and the academic is a complex one. On the one hand there is the need to capture not only ideas, but to translate them into visuals that are arresting and interesting for the viewer. The academic on the other hand is less concerned with spectacular images and more concerned with the need to get as much data crammed into the short space of 23 minutes (which is the average for any half an hour documentary, with advertising breaks thrown in). It is not an easy task, I have discovered, to reconcile these very different needs and agendas in a common project.

Imagine then the difficulties I now face while trying to do justice to a topic as vast as Indonesia today. How to bring to the fore the manifold narratives of two hundred and forty million

The challenge of encompassing Indonesia

lives that encompass the nation-state of Indonesia. There lies the epistemic challenge when working on a project such as this one, for the fundamental question is – how do we speak of ‘Indonesia’? The tendency of scholars and the media alike is to speak of nation-states in the singular, thereby giving the impression of a flat, two-dimensional national space that is called the nation; and by doing so reinforcing the view that nations are fundamentally homogenous and with clearly defined boundaries (both political and geographical). That this is erroneous is old hat by now, for it has been debunked time and again by scholars like Benedict Anderson who have presented nations as imagined communities where individual subjectivities tend to overlap thanks to shared interests or the understanding of common national symbols; but this does not imply the existence of a unitary nation. Even if we accept that all nations are complex – and Indonesia is certainly no exception to the rule – how do we capture this complexity in media form?

The challenge is akin to capturing movement in a photograph, which is literally impossible for all photographic images are necessarily static. But a photograph (or rather the photographer) can capture the *impression* of movement at least, and when this is done successfully some epistemic claims can be made. One can look at such a photo and say “I can see that there is movement in the (still) image”. In trying to capture the diversity and complexity of Indonesia I cannot hope to capture it in its entirety, in some raw form that exceeds media/visual arrest. Invariably, so much will be left out thanks to the editing process, and much of what will eventually end up on the screen will be selected. One cannot hope to ever present Indonesia – or any country – in its entirety, be it in the media or in academic scholarship, but one can at least try to allude to that complexity that escapes the camera lens and the TV screen.

Indonesia documented

That Indonesia’s complexity needs to be appreciated and acknowledged now is greater than ever, for the country has undergone so many changes that it would be wrong for us to assume that the Indonesia of 2014 is the same country that it was in the 1980s or 1990s. Decentralisation and demands for autonomy have created pockets of local power all over that vast archipelago, to the point where we may soon be able to speak not of a singular Indonesia, but of several ‘Indonesias’. The youth boom, the demographic changes, massive rates of urbanisation, and the emergence of a new educated urban middle class, have all contributed to a plethora of new subject positions that did not exist two decades ago; and in the process fuelled demands by hitherto-silent and marginalised groups for recognition and presence on the national stage.

The singular voice of Indonesia – if there ever was one, which I doubt – has given way to a cacophony of new narratives and demands, and each of these will demand its share of air-time and column inches too. In short, if the project I am working on now seems a daunting task, it is only because Indonesia has become a daunting nation,

including for Indonesians themselves. In the midst of this complexity, however, there is still the need for us to understand – no matter how fragmentary that understanding may be – the complexity of that vast and great nation-state known as Indonesia.

To this end, several narrative/media devices and strategies were incorporated in the Indonesia documentary series in order to cover as many bases as possible, and to foreclose the possibility of criticism. The first hurdle to be overcome was the very title of the series itself (which is still being discussed by myself and the team of producers). From the outset, it was decided that the title has to convey the impression of Indonesia’s complexity and pluralism, without falling into the trap of reductionism or over-simplification. Titles such as ‘Inside Indonesia’ were rejected for they suggest some privileged ‘inner knowledge’ of the country, which in turn gives the mistaken impression that the host has some form of privileged access that the viewers and interviewees do not. Likewise we wished to convey the notion of a complex country that was still understandable if one were to adopt an open-minded and nuanced perspective on the subject. Sensational sub-titles like ‘the war on terror’ were likewise rejected, as we wanted to go beyond the conventional headlines, stereotypes and tropes through which Indonesia has been viewed thus far.

The scope of the documentary series was also meant to be far-reaching, looking at as many places in Indonesia as possible within the limited confines of a modest budget and obvious time-constraints of the host who is, after all, a full-time academic with other academic responsibilities as well. Yet despite the gruelling schedule that the entire team was forced to work by, we did manage to address issues in places as diverse as Aceh, Jakarta, Surakarta, Jogjakarta, Bali, Makassar and Poso, covering at least three major island groups: Sumatra, Java/Bali and Sulawesi. Our dream of doing an episode in West Papua, however, did not materialise due to restrictions on travel and filming in that province.

The focus of the series was on issues and personalities, and one episode was dedicated to the question of autonomy in post-*reformasi* Indonesia, an episode on youth aspirations, an episode on upward social-economic mobility (and immobility for some), on religion, on culture and on the new paths to power. In this respect at least I was particularly happy to be able to include a wide range of personalities from all walks of life and social class backgrounds. The interviewees included a princess from the royal family of Surakarta Hadiningrat who was running for a Parliamentary seat, a member of the Indonesian Porche owners club, a prominent social commentator and novelist, a range of activists and also ordinary Indonesian *beca* (rickshaw)-pullers, workers and students, each of whom offered a very different glimpse into the socio-economic and political realities of Indonesia today.

Millions of voices

Finally, it was decided that for a series like this the final word should be given to the people of Indonesia themselves, and the final sequence of the final episode features an extended

The singular voice of Indonesia – if there ever was one, which I doubt – has given way to a cacophony of new narratives and demands.

‘talking heads’ gallery of profiles, where each interviewee is asked the same question: What do you hope to see for the future of Indonesia? The result is an extended catalogue of hopes and aspirations, articulated by Indonesians themselves, about what they wish to see in the future of their country. This was a point that I was keen to emphasise from the beginning of the project, namely that no documentary about Indonesia would be complete unless we gave the final say to the subjects of the documentary themselves. If the idea of there being not a single Indonesia, but rather millions of ‘Indonesias’ is to be conveyed at all, then I felt that the best way to do so would be by allowing Indonesians to speak of their hopes and concerns about their own country, and in the process of doing so communicate the impression of the many life-worlds that exist in Indonesia at present, and by showing how this contested nation is still being debated, discussed and dissected by the citizens themselves – proof, if any was still needed, of the dynamic and evolving nature of contemporary Indonesian society and politics. Here the academic host was deliberately pulling himself into the background, in order to open up a new space where the contested imaginaries of Indonesia can instead come to the fore.

As the academic host for the series, I felt that it was vital for me to make my own intervention/s in the documentary process and to ensure that the final outcome would be a documentary series that at least alludes to the complexity of the subject at hand. I confess to harbouring deep-rooted concerns about the power of the media, and the worry that I may not have done justice to a subject as vast as Indonesia today. For there is always the attendant fear that a finished work – academic or mediatic – will leave the subject entirely objectified in the most simplistic manner, and that the final product will seem to the reader or viewer as something that is whole, complete, exhausted. In the light of recent developments in academia and academic writing – ranging from the deconstructive and plural histories of the likes of Simon Schama and the criticisms of post-structuralist thought – such an easy conclusion would be derided as a case of over-simplistic reductionism or lazy encapsulation, and would not be accepted by any serious scholar today.

The anxiety of the scholar who has to work via the medium of the media is thus doubly compounded, as it is in my case. There is not merely the desperate need to be able to make *epistemic* claims, but I confess to harbouring the need to do *justice* to the subject as well, to convey the complexity of the subject correctly – *epistemically and ethically* – to the best of my abilities, and to the extent that the media format accommodates and allows.

Compounding matters for academics such as myself who have chosen to also work with and in the media is the tendency of the academic institution – itself a closed hermetic circle with its own particular rites and rituals of mutuality and association – to view the media askance, and to regard liminal entities such as media-friendly academics as an anomaly. The tag-line often pinned upon such individuals is to refer to them as ‘pop-star academics’ (one of the less derogatory terms, I might add) and their work as ‘pop academia’. Such labels are of course superfluous, but they are not entirely meaningless, for from a Wittgensteinian point of view their meaning lies in the manner in which they point to the gulf (of perspective, norms, modalities) between the academic and media worlds, and they give the mistaken impression of their being an unbridgeable gap (or worse still, a hierarchy) between the two. In my defence of the media I would simply note the obvious power of the image and how in some instances images – understood here as signs/signifiers – can communicate meanings with an economy and effectiveness that words often fail to do. It is one thing to cite statistics of poverty and wage differentials, it is quite something else to show an image of a poor beggar forced to eat mouldy bread from a dustbin. The former satisfies our need for empirical data, but the latter touches upon a raw human nerve and makes such inequalities tangible for us, opening the path to empathy, and consequently – one hopes – understanding and knowledge as well.

Farish A Noor is Associate Professor at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University NTU Singapore, where he is also head of the Contemporary Religious Politics in Southeast Asia Programme. He is currently working on a 6-episode documentary series on contemporary Indonesia with Channel News Asia (CNA) and has completed two other series with the same channel: My Southeast Asia (CNA, 2012) and Across Borders (CNA, 2013) (isbahmad@ntu.edu.sg)

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Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer



My movie and its title *'The Missing Picture'* was partly inspired by my search for a photograph of an execution that a Khmer Rouge guard once told me about. The missing picture, maybe it's the images of genocide that don't exist. Maybe they're lost, maybe they're buried somewhere, maybe someone hid them.¹

John Kleinen

THE CAMBODIAN-FRENCH FILM director Rithy Panh is never too tired to explain why he made his successful Oscar-nominated odyssey of loss and torment in the period 1975-1979, when Pol Pot's reign of terror was accountable for the death of at least 1.7 million people. The movie is an unusual one in the genre; hundreds of carefully carved clay figurines tell the story of the many dead in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime as a result of medical neglect, starvation, slave-like working conditions and executions. The scenes are interspersed with propaganda materials of Democratic Kampuchea; footage that was recovered by the Vietnamese army after it toppled the regime at the end of 1978.

Realist factual footage of mass killings is very scarce. We have exactly 1 minute and 59 seconds of moving images of the executions of Jews in Eastern Europe; similar visual representation of executions of Kulaks during the Great Terror or the starvation of Chinese during Mao's Great Leap Forward is equally absent. Panh's choice to represent the trauma of the Cambodian democide by artificial means is motivated by a well-known filming technique known as 'distancing' or 'defamiliarization'. It disrupts the viewer's emotional indulgence and absorption in a taken-for-granted story, instead of a more general picture of extreme asymmetric power balance.

For Panh, the picture that was missing was a personal one that he never will get to see. "It's the one that I miss the most. It's to see my parents get older, to be able to share time with them now, to help them, to love them, to give them back what they gave me," he said to *Le Point* reporter Ono-Dit-Biot. "I would prefer to have my parents with me than to make movies about the Khmer Rouge" (*Le Point* 3-10-2013).

It is not Panh's first movie about Cambodia's national nightmare. Best known is his *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2003), followed in 2011 by *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*. In between he made movies about the colonial past and the return of refugees to his home country, among others. With his impressive *Bophana, a Cambodian tragedy* (1997), memorializing the victims portrayed in the thousands of mugshots that the prison guards left at Tuol Sleng, he opted to show the atrocities exclusively from the victims' perspective. Separating victims from perpetrators seems to be a deliberate choice for Panh. In an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of *The Act of Killing*, he said: "Now, since (...) *S21* has been made (...) ... there are several films (...) where they bring the victims and the guardians together. But often also against each other's will. And that gives a kind of unease when you see that kind of encounter between people."²

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (*Jagal* or 'Execution(er)' in Indonesian) was the big surprise of 2012. Unlike Rithy Panh, Oppenheimer exclusively used the staged memory of criminal and paramilitary vigilantes who did the dirty business for the Indonesian army and the politicians who toppled President Sukarno in 1965. The *Kudeta* of 30 September 1965 brought Suharto's military junta to power. In a wave of killings lasting five months, members of the Special Forces, ad-hoc criminal gangs and religious Muslim fanatics destroyed the lives of at least, and possible more than, half a million people. Unlike the Khmer Rouge leaders, these people were never brought to justice. Instead, they continue to be feared and in a certain way respected, still enjoying the admiration of many in Indonesia. Two protagonists prominently figure in *The Act of Killing* – Anwar Kongo (72) and Adi Zulkadry (69) – who re-enact their own roles during the murderous events. Anwar was a petty thug in the mid-1960s, trafficking in movie-tickets. Adi was a leading founder of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth and a member of its elite death unit, the Frog Squad. Embarrassingly for Indonesia's democratic rulers, Anwar maintained personal relations with a local newspaper editor who played a coordinating role during the massacre. But similarly uncomfortable is the appearance in the film of the current-day politician Jusuf Kalla, who is seen congratulating members of Indonesia's youth movement, *Pemuda Pancasila*, for their share in exterminating Indonesian communism. Revealing is the applauding audience of a TV talk show that visibly enjoys Anwar stories of his killing spree. Adi reminds the viewer of the victor's justice: "War crimes are defined by the victors. We won."

The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer's movie is for good reason. Filmmakers in Indonesia are confronted by an officially encouraged conspiracy of silence about the past; this is unlike in Cambodia where, already in 1979, the Vietnamese advisors of the Heng Samrin government tried to bring Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary to justice. This trial, often considered a 'show trial', resulted in death penalties, which for lack of defendants in custody were never actually carried out. And it took nearly two decades to successfully arrest and imprison some leaders of the Khmer Rouge, where after the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, better known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal) could finally start proceedings in 2004. Whatever one's opinion of the tribunal, at least the Cambodians have sought justice for the victims. Legal actions have been ongoing since 1979, despite disapproval from the UN, which regarded the Khmer Rouge as the official representative of Cambodia until 1993.

Graphic details of killing

This attitude is clearly absent in Indonesia. When it comes to the search for historical truth in both countries, Cambodian efforts are evidently more successful. Movies such as those made by Rithy Panh are freely distributed, whilst it would be absolutely unthinkable for films such as *The Act of Killing* to be promoted by Indonesia as a national product to be proud of – which is exactly what happened with Panh's movie at Cannes, where it won the prestigious *Un Certain Regard* Award.

Oppenheimer's movie is, nevertheless, path-breaking in the way it brings back a nearly forgotten way of representing the acts of killing, which were not the sole responsibility of the Indonesian army, but also seemingly ordinary citizens who went on a killing rampage. This is accentuated in the movie by the hubris shown by those interviewed, and by the stories made public by the military supporters of the New Order.³

In Panh's movie the graphic details of the killings are portrayed by using clay figurines, whilst Oppenheimer engages over-acted re-enactments to tell the story. Where Panh reinforces his cinematic testimonial by alternating sequences from propaganda movies (shot by China-trained Khmer Rouge cameramen) with stills of the clay puppets, Oppenheimer leaves us puzzled by phantasmatic shots of a bizarre opera-buffa near Toba Lake, or by a mediated act of remorse by Anwar Congo at the scene of one of his former crimes. Both movies confront us with the phenomenon of the mass destruction of humans. In Panh's filmic strategy to unravel the Khmer Rouge's democide, one sees the panic of a regime that fell onto its own sword. This led to its demise but also to a catastrophe for its victims. Oppenheimer's movie is so disturbing because he suggests that civilian psychopaths or lunatics were mainly responsible for the act of killing.

In a recent book, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan makes a more convincing argument than Oppenheimer does.⁴ The killings of hundreds of thousands of people, often randomly executed, go back in history far beyond modern times, but the organized mass killings we have seen in the last century have been possible only in societies where social compartmentalization has taken place. The killings are enabled by a deliberate cutting of social contacts between the majority and a condemned minority. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point within special compartments, which have been physically or mentally erected by the *genocidaires* acting on behalf of the rulers. But this doesn't mean that everybody becomes a killer when circumstances are 'right', De Swaan repeatedly warns. And he categorically calls into doubt Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'. The occasion enables the act, but individuals are still able to refuse under extreme circumstances, as is shown by Panh's not Oppenheimer's movie.

Indonesia and Cambodia

In his book, De Swaan deals with a large number of genocidal regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the nearly forgotten campaign against the Maya-Ixil Indians of Guatemala under the regime of Efraim Rios Montt in 1982 and 1983. Suharto's regime started as a reign of terror driven by an organized military group and ended with a mega-pogrom. To suggest that the motives of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously underestimates the ways in which they became involved in these killings. In Cambodia, the mysterious Communist Party went on a rampage against its own population. In both cases the compartmentalization of their self-created adversaries was the motive and the orchestrated means of the killers. The Khmer Rouge's mass slaughtering did contain elements of an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the experiment is cynically voiced by the French radical philosopher Alain Badiou, who needed 35 years to apologize for his former defense of the Khmer Rouge: "Mieux vaut un désastre qu'un désêtre" ("better a disaster than a lack of being"). It explains very neatly why Rithy Panh, in his movie, avoided confronting the victims with their executioners.

John Kleinen is associate professor emeritus of the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research. He is an anthropologist and historian and has taught visual anthropology. He is still the curator of Camera Lucida for anthropologists. (www.cameracalucida.nl; kleinen@uva.nl)

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The 'cinematic' santri

In Indonesia, over the last five years or so, a new generation of *santri*¹ across the country has demonstrated a progressive attitude toward film production. Mostly using new film technologies such as personal video recorders and digital cameras, many of these young students have made films about, but not limited to, the everyday lives of Muslims in *pesantren*. Some of these films have only been circulated within the *pesantren* circuit, but most of them have also experienced alternative public screenings, particularly through social media such as YouTube. A few of them have even been screened at local film festivals and commercial cinemas.

Ahmad Nuril Huda

Voices hitherto unheard

Some scholars might have anticipated the emergence of these santri-made films in Indonesia,² yet the fact that the majority of these filmmakers made their films inside their *pesantren* raises questions of how they came in touch with film production in the first place. Despite them being many in number, santri are still a minority within the world of Indonesian film, and as far as the history of Indonesian cinema can be recalled, they have struggled to represent themselves within the national film arena. Significantly, this marginal position may hint at the somewhat intrusive character of their cinematic activities, to the world of film as well as the world of the Islamic boarding school itself. Furthermore, when talking to these santri and watching their films, it is clear that they voice concerns that hitherto have been overlooked by major commercial film companies and other media players in Indonesia. This article highlights some of the ways santri have come to producing films and what kind of concerns are voiced by these films.

Film production has been introduced into *pesantrens* in various ways, yet there are some similarities. The story of Ali, a santri in East Java who in 2010 made the documentary film *Para Penambang* (The Sand Miners), is as such revealing. Coming from a rural area in the Western tip of Java, Ali had been living in his *pesantren* in Kediri, East Java, for over seven years. During his *pesantren* studies, he also attended a nearby Islamic college to obtain his bachelor's degree in Islamic education. He was an avid reader and had much interest for writing and journalism. Ali had never seen a film in a cinema before, but one of his friends showed him the highly celebrated Islamic film *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (2008) on his laptop. Having seen the movie, he realized the importance of film in disseminating Islam, but also its potential use for spreading *pesantren* values. Hence he was encouraged to make a film about Islam in the context of the *pesantren*. But he did not own a camera, and he had no knowledge about film production.

Luckily, he was informed that a relative of one of the female santri was willing to lend him a camera, and some of his fellow santri had attended a nearby vocational school and had learned camera skills. In short, a borrowed Handycam, his friends' technical knowledge, and a donation from a parting santri enabled Ali to realize his ambitions; a documentary film about sand miners working the river nearby his *pesantren*. In his film, Ali not only sympathizes with the miners, but he explains his compassion by referring to the *pesantren*'s teachings.

Ali's story exemplifies the emergence of a generation of 'cinematic' santri who are aware of the power of film and film technology to engage in national debates. Importantly, the emergence of these filmmakers has been facilitated by changes in the *pesantren* curriculum, which now allows for santri to follow non-religious studies, and is no longer exclusively aimed at a young mostly rural population, but also welcomes students from largely middleclass backgrounds. In addition, the rise of the cinematic santri has been supported by film-related NGOs eager to introduce film literacy to particular *pesantren*.³

From texts to film

Pesantren films are by no means homogenous. They use diverse narrative methods, tell different kinds of stories and also make use of a range of film formats. *Pesantren* films come as short and feature films, fiction or documentary, and there are amateur and more professional films. Nonetheless, and as far as I can observe, what these films share is that most pay attention to particular *pesantren* traditions; traditions much akin to santri everyday life, but often ignored or simply overlooked in mainstream Indonesian cinema.

One of these traditions is the *kitab kuning*: a collection of classical Islamic texts dating from the medieval period within Islamic history. These texts have long been an exclusive source of Islamic knowledge in Indonesia's more traditional

pesantren.⁴ While many traditional *pesantren*, in an effort to modernize, have included non-religious materials as part of their curriculum, the majority continue to stress the importance of the *kitab kuning* and hence the central role of the scripture for education. Few films have acknowledged the pivotal role of the *kitab kuning* in santri life, instead choosing to foreground the Koran, contemporary Islamic books, or fatwas. A number of Indonesian films and television dramas have incited disappointment amongst the santri as the latter feel poorly represented. Many of my informants were concerned about how commercial films and television dramas discuss the *pesantren* world, but fail to correctly describe current *pesantren* life, with some even outright contradicting *pesantren* norms and values.

Keeping these concerns in mind, it is no accident that the film *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Prayers 3 Loves, 2008), the first ever-Indonesian commercial film directed by a santri, has brought the *kitab kuning* to the screen. Without precedent in the history of Indonesian cinema, this film portrays the *kitab kuning* not only as a source of religious knowledge, but also as an identity marker of Indonesian Islam *vis-à-vis* an Islam of the Arabic heartland. Following *3 Doa 3 Cinta*, other *pesantren* films also started showing increased attention for the *kitab kuning*, and the book's place in santri life, in their films. This is particularly evident in *Intensif* (Intensive, 2012), the second feature film to be produced by the santri of the West Javanese Kidang *pesantren* within three years. The film succeeds in portraying the enthusiasm

Below:
Santri Film Festival.
From author's
private collection.

of students reading and discussing the book. The *kitab kuning* is shown as not only as the book that all Kidang santri have extensively studied in class, but also as the book that provides them with practical advice for their everyday-lives.

Voicing images

During his fieldwork in several *pesantrens* in East Java in the 1990s, Lukens-Bull identified the santri's strong emphasis on the *kitab kuning*, despite all the changes occurring in the *pesantren* environment. He explains such preservative efforts as being part of *pesantren* 'politics', and just one of the ways in which *pesantren* people maintain tradition and identities. They do this in the aftermath of intense educational transformations, in which local Islamic traditions were contested and choices had to be made between being Indonesian or being part of a transnational Muslim *Ummah*.⁵ His analysis is significant for understanding the current 'emblemization' of the *kitab kuning* in *pesantren* films, which should be understood as being part of the ways in which santri give voice to traditions that have been hitherto ignored by mainstream media in Indonesia. Santri films thus offer an alternative imagination and outlet for voices otherwise rarely heard.

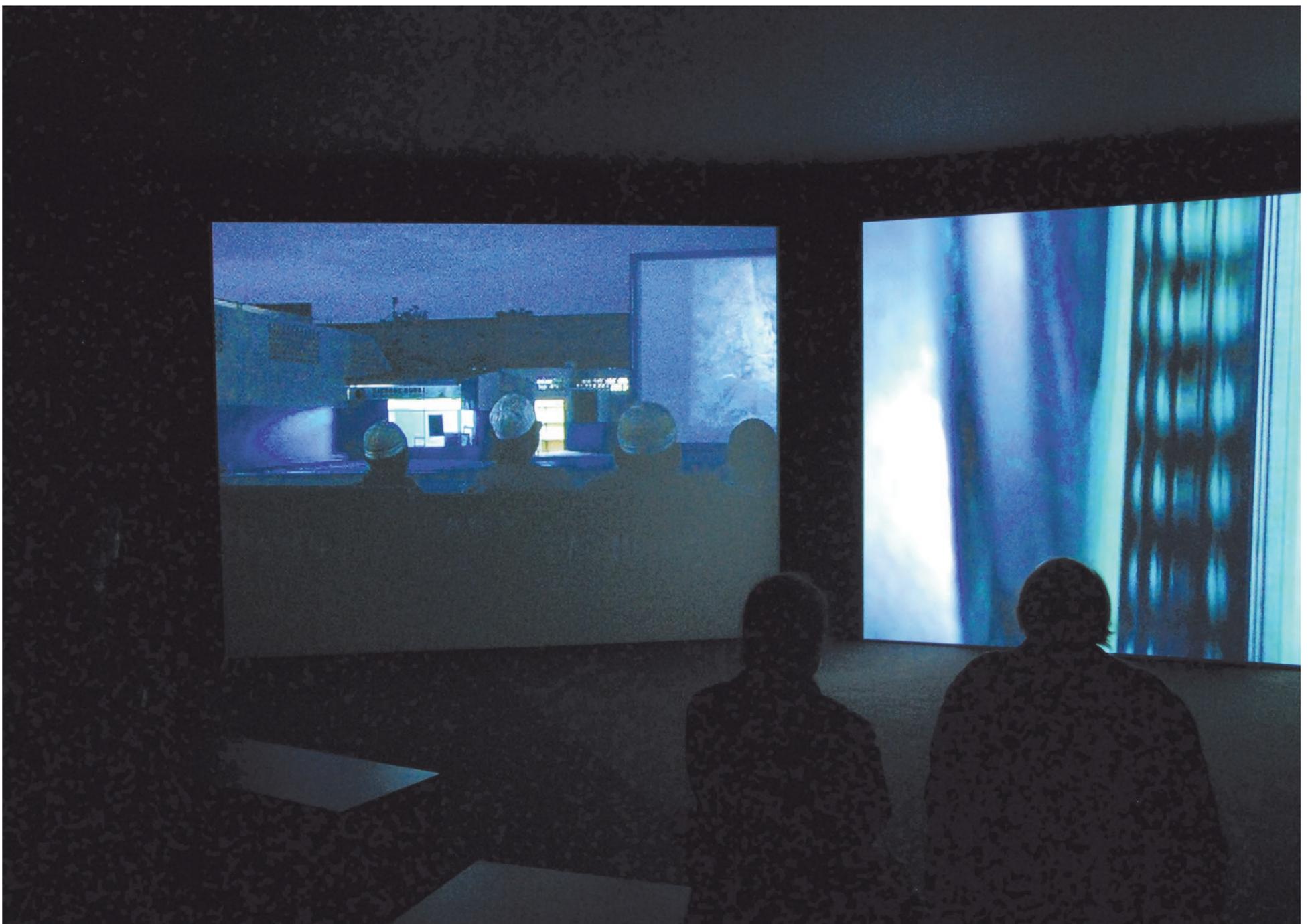
Ahmad Nuril Huda is a NISIS PhD candidate in Cultural Anthropology at Leiden University. His work is about "Santri Making Film: Muslim's negotiation with the secular in an Indonesian *pesantren*", under the supervision of Prof. Patricia Spyer and Dr. Bart Barendregt. (hasanmumba@yahoo.com)

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- 1 The term *santri* generally refers to a student at a *pesantren* – an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. It can also be used to refer to a specific cultural 'stream' of people among the Javanese, who practice a relatively orthodox version of Islam. In this article, I use both definitions interchangeably.
- 2 Eickelman, D.F. and J.W. Anderson (eds.) 1999. *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-18.
- 3 One of these NGOs is SFCG (Search for Common Ground). One of its programs is to give a film workshop to students of *pesantrens* across the country.
- 4 Van Bruinessen, M. 1990. "Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic script used in the *Pesantren* milieu: Comments on a new collection in the KITLV Library", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* 146(2/3), Leiden, p. 227.
- 5 Lukens-Bull, R. 2005. *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java*, New York: Palgrave, pp. 47-70.



Visualizing Southeast Asia in the classroom through film



The expanding array in the last thirty years of documentaries, historical films, and fictional films on Southeast Asia, and produced from within the region, has provided an exciting resource pool for teaching about the region, not only for Southeast Asian cinema but also history, the social sciences, and other fields. The visual dimension is not new to the university classroom; images and films have become an important part of the teacher's repertoire. Their effectiveness in terms of visualizing concepts, issues, events, and personalities and capturing the attention of student audiences has contributed to their popularity.

Keng We Koh

FILMS, LIKE IMAGES, also pose interesting questions and challenges as a pedagogical tool. These would include the differences and parallels between film and the text as media of mass communication, issues of accuracy, perspective, and creative or ideological license in determining such 'value', as well as their relative importance in the classroom. For example, how do films differ from texts in the way they communicate ideas, concepts, and themes to the audience? Can film not also be read as texts? Are textual sources not subject to the same problems of factual accuracy, bias and creativity often associated with film? How is the value and authority of film in the classroom defined *vis-à-vis* text? To what extent does the power and impact of film in the classroom depend on factual accuracy and derive its authority from this? Are historical films or other fictional genres still useful in the history classroom with the mix of creative license and visual impact?

Fiction, fact and bias: genres and expectations

The main 'value' of films in teaching about Southeast Asia would be their ability not only to visualize the region, but to also bring the region 'to life', making it more immediate, dramatic, intimate, and 'real'. Therein, perhaps, lies its potential and power; but also danger, namely that of substituting fiction, or at best, interpretation, for fact. This is especially so with respect to history.

These issues are not unique to film. Academic and primary historical texts pose the same problems and challenges, although in the latter, it is often assumed that the peer review process and measures to police the standards of the field provide safeguards against factual inaccuracy, and highlight any biases in methodology. Films often enjoy greater leeway in terms of factual accuracy and truth, although expectations vary in terms of genre concerned. Expectations are greatest perhaps for documentaries. Historical films, however, are often assumed to take creative license in representing and interpreting historical events, personalities, and themes, although they are on some level still expected to provide plausible and accurate renditions of social, cultural, and political settings for their creative plots. Documentaries too, like textual sources, often suffer from bias and factual inaccuracies. Are such documentaries still useful for teaching? Are historical films and fictional films, with their penchant for dramatization and improvisation, still useful for teaching Southeast Asian history? These are some questions that I have grappled with in the course of using films in my classes.

Historical films: representing or re-inventing Southeast Asian pasts

Historical films, far from just recreating or representing Southeast Asian pasts, are often also about contesting these pasts, re-framing them, or recalling forgotten ones.

The use of these films in the Southeast Asia classroom needs to locate them in their respective political, ideological, and historiographical contexts. We can perhaps divide the historical films that we use into two loose categories. The first genre encompasses the films produced outside of Southeast Asia, often in former colonial metropolises and Cold War centers. This would include films like *The King and I*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Max Havelaar*, *Mother Dao*, *The Turtle-Like*, *Indochine*, *The Killing Fields*, and various Vietnam War movies, among others. Based on memoirs, real personalities and events or fictional reconstructions, these films were mostly concerned with the memories of these countries' engagements with the region. Several of these films have achieved prominence (and sometimes controversy) in raising questions about the memories and perspectives of the colonizing or imperial powers in Southeast Asia, their relations to local elites and populations, and the perspectives of the latter.

Indochine, for example, was as much an attempt to revisit the memory of Indochina in France, as the positing of a different gendered perspective to this history, from the perspective of women, both French and Vietnamese. The relationship between Eliane Devries and her adopted daughter, Camille, can also be read as a metaphor for the relationship between French colonialism (represented by its fledgling business class) and Vietnam, with Camille the orphaned daughter of rich Vietnamese aristocrats. The story is also located in the

Above:
Filmscreening. Photo
by Fridus Steijlen.

Issues and possibilities

context of the political transformations in Vietnam in the late 1920s, with the Yen Bay rebellion, the radicalization of the communist resistance, and the breakdown of the old Vietnamese socio-political order (especially the old elites allied to the French colonial elites). On the whole, the breakdown in the relationship between Eliane and Camille, caused by her love for the young French officer and her journey in search of him that brings them to the Vietnamese communist resistance, mirrors the changing relationships between Vietnam and France in the context of the nationalist movements and their radicalization.

Historical films on the Vietnam War, produced in the United States between the 1980s and the present, have questioned the role of the United States in the conflict, and the suffering inflicted not only on the Vietnamese and Cambodians, but also the American personnel themselves. *The Killing Fields* not only highlighted the brutality of the Khmer Rouge projects of 1975-1979, but also sought to portray these events from the perspective of a Cambodian. *The Year of Living Dangerously*, produced in Australia, also drew attention to the atrocities of 1965-1966 in Indonesia at a time when political stability, economic development, and state propaganda had led to the gradual forgetting of these events in western countries.

These films provided important dramatizations of key events in Southeast Asian history. While often representing these events from the perspectives of people associated with the colonizers or imperial powers, they, nevertheless, offer interesting objections and alternatives to standard narratives on the past associated with them.

Films from Southeast Asia

Historical films have been an important part of the early histories of the new nation-states and the nascent film industries in the region. Even as they represented local perspectives, we must take into account the political and ideological conditions in which they were produced. The nation-building travails and the Cold War challenges between the 1950s and 1980s, the political changes in the region since the mid-1980s, and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, have created a new environment of debate and contestation over national identity, politics, culture, and the past in many Southeast Asian countries. This period also paralleled the revival and rapid growth of film industries in the region, and new genres of historical films.

Besides films aimed at glorifying official narratives of national pasts, we also see the production of a series of films that have come to question the official historiographies of the preceding period, either for key events or personalities, or in discussing topics or subjects hitherto discouraged. The regional and global exposure of these films was aided by the changing global film market, which has helped several of these films to become commercially re-released in America and other developed European and Asian countries, with some of them not only entered in prominent film festivals, but even emerging victorious as winners in key categories.

In Thailand, the decline during the 1980s of a previously vibrant film industry was reversed in the late 1990s onwards, and we have seen the emergence of a new commercial and independent Thai film industry. Historical film productions such as *Bang Rajan* (2000), *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001) and the *Naresuan* series (2007-2011) replicated the themes or issues of older historical films from the 1960s, namely the glories of Ayutthaya – regarded as the charter state for present-day Thailand – and its contests and wars with Burmese rulers, but on a much larger scale and budget. They can be seen as attempts to revive national pride in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the painful economic restructuring in Thailand.

Despite its nationalistic overtones, *The Legend of Suriyothai* offered the retelling of the story of the politics of Ayutthaya from the perspectives of the royal women. The film also highlighted the cosmopolitanism of the polity during the first half of the 16th century, as well as the structure of pre-modern politics in the region, as outlined in the writings of Wolters and historians of Thailand and Southeast Asia, especially the importance of heterarchies, family polities, shifting loyalties, and the control of manpower in the cultural matrix of the region. *Yamada: Samurai of Ayothaya* (2010) provided a fictional account of the life of Yamada Nagamasa, a seventeenth-century Japanese adventurer who served in the Ayutthaya court.

The Overture was not only the retelling of the life story of a famous *ranak-ed* palace musician from Siam in the early 20th century, but also the reevaluation of a period in Thailand's history after the bloodless coup of 1932, during the 1930s and 1940s, a period dominated by military governments and their nation-building projects. The confrontation between the musical master and the military officer entrusted with enforcing the state's ban on the playing of traditional musical instruments symbolized the tensions between the old and the new in the context of the modernizing projects in this period. It led to a revival of traditional Thai music, and presented certain aspects of Thai culture to the world.

Historical films (including fictional films that locate their plots in a historical event or period) draw their strengths not so much from fictional accuracy, but from highlighting themes and perspectives on Southeast Asian pasts through the visual impact of moving images. Due to the creative license taken with events and people, and even the questions over the reconstruction of the dress, material life, and built environments of the past, there is a need for a more critical use of these films in the classroom. The instructor plays an important role in providing background information, where possible, on the production of these films, their target audiences, and the motivations and concerns of the film creators. Students must be taught how to critically interpret these films, both through the evaluation of 'facts' and the reading of metaphors and narratives.

Rescuing history from the nation?

Like the film industry, the production of documentaries about Southeast Asia has seen similar trends in the last thirty years, both outside and within the region. A multitude of documentaries on Southeast Asian history, heritage sites, cultural life, and socio-political and environmental issues are now available for the classroom, produced either by national broadcasting corporations, subscription cable channels, or independent companies.

The processes of political, economic, and cultural change since the mid-1980s, and especially after late 1990s, have seen the increasing engagement of documentary makers in projects questioning official ideological and historiographical positions, especially with respect to national history. These documentaries also engage social, cultural, political and economic issues often ignored by the state in their respective countries, and present the perspectives of non-mainstream or marginalized interest groups. Amir Muhammad's *Apa Kabar Orang Kampung* (2007) and *The Last Communist* (2006), *I Love Malaya* (2006) by a group of young filmmakers, and Fahmi Reza's *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (2007) are good examples of such attempts to re-examine key periods of Malaysian history, namely the debate over the Malayan Union proposals of 1946, the Malayan Emergency, as well as the recent applications by former leaders of the Malayan Communist Party to return to Malaysia, notably the late Chin Peng.

Fahmi Reza's documentary interviewed politicians and activists in socialist, worker and women groups, who had in

1947 submitted alternative proposals for a future Malaya, which had been deliberately overlooked by the British government in favor of the proposal submitted by the traditional Malay elites and their new political movement. This rebuff culminated in a nation-wide strike in 1947. Drawing on interviews with Malayan Communist Party members in southern Thailand, Amir Muhammad's documentaries and *I Love Malaya* sought to present the voices of the people fighting on the 'other side' or the 'losing' side, their imaginations of the Malayan nation, and their accounts of their past. Although critics might question the bias in the interview pool of these documentaries, they provide an important counter narrative to state-sponsored discourses represented in official documentaries and texts. Each documentary faced the challenges of presenting a balanced history of these episodes, without the demonization or glorification of either side. Presenting the silenced voices was an important first step.

For Indonesia, we note the same trends. The growing numbers of young directors making short films, documentaries and fictional films examining social, political, economic and cultural issues, offer a growing body of documentary resources for teaching about the country.¹ We also see the same questioning of official state historiographies, regarding critical events in the nation's history, in recent documentaries like *Shadow Play* (2003), *40 Years of Silence* (2009), and *The Act of Killing* (2012). Although produced outside Indonesia, they have begun to critically engage the history of a controversial period of Indonesian history and that of the Cold War, namely the events of 1965-1966, especially the massacres that took place across the country in response to the purported coup and attempt to seize power by the Indonesian Communist Party.

The Act of Killing, in particular, has attracted domestic and global attention for this historical event, through the controversy of its methods, which allowed the perpetrators of the killings to make a movie about themselves and the executions they carried out during the 1965-1966 events, and through its winning of a BAFTA for Best Documentary and its Oscar nomination for Best Documentary. The film remains officially banned in Indonesia, but has managed to be screened a number of times throughout the country, and has attracted much discussion on the internet.

Film, text, and history

Films, through visualizing history, and often dramatizing it (even in the case of documentaries), have become very powerful tools for teaching and thinking about Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian history. This power also presents certain dangers, especially in terms of factual accuracy and perspective. These issues are not unique to film, and extend to more traditional text-based print media, although there are more safeguards for the latter in terms of peer review processes. As we have seen above, the use of film is in spite of issues of creative license in the representation and re-enactment of events and characters. The producers have often used film for their impact value, in positing alternative readings of texts or questioning existing narratives and ideological positions.

Film, and other forms of audio-visual mass media, have come to dominate our everyday lives and information flows, through cinema, television, the personal computer, tablets and mobile phones. This prevalence makes it necessary for our students to be trained in the critical use of this media and its different genres, not only in forming critical perspectives on Southeast Asia, but also in maintaining this critical approach in navigating the new information environments. In the modern history classroom, the instructor plays an important role in helping the student negotiate between different media tools in the transmission of knowledge and the training of critical thinking. A variety of online resources have been created, by the film industry and history-teaching associations in North America and the United Kingdom, to guide teachers in the use of this medium. The number of websites dealing with this topic is a reflection of this trend.

Ultimately, film and text are inextricably linked, and both depend on instructor guidance to help students navigate the abovementioned issues. Although it is doubtful that film could ever totally supplant text in the classroom, it can be used to challenge the authority of text in the classroom, and it constitutes part of an increasingly complex and critical repertoire shaped by the possibilities and demands of multimedia technologies in everyday life of the 21st century.

Keng We Koh teaches Southeast Asia and World History in the Department of Asian History at Seoul National University. His interests in these fields include migration, business and economic history, state formation, knowledge formation, and religion. He is also interested in the use of films and multi-media content in the humanities and social sciences. (kengwe2010@gmail.com)

Note

¹ For more information on the Indonesian scene, see <http://tinyurl.com/docnetSEAsia>

Below:
Still from the film
Behind the Screen.



Why do South Asian documentaries matter?



The 9th edition of Film South Asia,¹ a film festival held in October of 2013 in Kathmandu (Nepal), created a row that came not entirely unexpected. The festival presented 55 documentaries that focused on Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma/Myanmar. Days ahead of the start of the festival, the Sri Lankan government asked the Nepali government to prohibit the screening of three films about Sri Lanka.

Erik de Maaker

THESE FILMS, *Broken* (2013) and *The Story of One* (2012) by Sri Lankan filmmaker Kannan Arunasalam, as well as *No Fire Zone* (2013) by UK-based filmmaker Callum Macrae, deal with the violent conclusion of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, and its aftermath. Some of these films had already been banned from theatrical screenings in Sri Lanka. The Nepali government gave in to the pressure, and banned all three films.

The organizers of Film South Asia were obviously upset, and protested against “this unwarranted intrusion into the cultural sphere, an action that goes against the freedom of expression and the right of documentary filmmakers to exhibit their work”, as festival chair Kanak Mani Dixit was quoted saying in the press.² But rather than altogether cancelling the screenings, these were instead shifted to a ‘private venue’. As was to be expected, the ban generated even more interest in the films. In addition, the organizers created an ‘impromptu’ panel on ‘Censorship in South Asia’, which gave journalists and documentary filmmakers the chance to express their deep concern about censorship in the South Asian region. By moving the screening to a private location, which was accessible by ‘invitation’ only, the organizers of Film South Asia followed a well established strategy to evade censorship, which has been in existence in South Asia over the last three decades. Controversial documentary films have regularly been banned, but that didn’t stop people from seeing them in large scale private screenings. While filmmakers have vehemently, and usually eventually successfully, resisted such bans, these have generally generated more interest in their films and emphasized the partisan nature of their work.

The turmoil described above is indicative of the impact that documentary films can have in South Asia. Documentary footage, and the analyses based on it, can be highly controversial. This is certainly the case for the last months of the Sri Lankan civil war, of which the Sri Lankan government, a UN Fact Finding mission and Tamil groups have radically diverging readings. According to the Sri Lankan government, the last months of the war claimed about 7000 civilian lives, the UN puts that figure at 40.000, while Tamil groups estimate 147.000 deaths.³ Where the Sri Lankan government spoke of a ‘clean war’, Tamil groups talked of ‘genocide.’ But documentary films do not need to focus on ‘high’ politics or topics deemed newsworthy in order to raise critical and challenging questions. These are often found in relation to culture and religion as well.

Sponsorship, censorship and evasion of control

Below, I focus on the development of documentary filmmaking in India. Documentary filmmaking on the subcontinent started in the colonial period. During the Second World War, the government created a film organization, primarily to produce films in support of the war effort. After independence, in India, this government body transformed into Films Division. From the early 1950s onward, Films Division (based in Bombay) commissioned films that had to contribute, in one way or the other to ‘nation building’. Topics were diverse, ranging from urban planning and immunization campaigns to India’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage.⁴ Producing up to

Above: Making a documentary in a South Asian village. Photo by author.

one film a week, with a length of about 20 minutes on average, Films Division quickly gained the reputation of being the world’s largest producer of documentary films. Until the early 1990s it was compulsory for movie theatres to screen a Films Division documentary preceding the main feature film, which ensured these documentaries of an audience.⁵ Censorship practices that had applied in colonial times, were more or less continued in independent India, and documentary films could (and can) not be screened in public places unless they had (and have) been cleared by the Censor Board. Consequently, the documentaries produced by Films Division tended to avoid controversy. They would not explicitly critique the functioning of the state, nor would they contain materials that one community or the other might consider offensive.

Until the early 1990s, most documentaries were shot on ‘real’ film, which was very costly. Filmmakers dependence on Films Division implied that in a practical sense, the state controlled documentary film production. Since film projectors were seldom individually owned, but only available at ‘public’ venues, ‘real’ film technology also implied the regulation of film screenings.⁶ When videocassettes and video recorders came onto the Indian market in the 1980s, these revolutionized the dissemination of documentary films, as they made screenings in non-public spaces possible. A circuit developed in which documentary films, whether they were certified or not, were screened at venues such as colleges and NGOs, attended by ‘invited’ audiences. Often, such private screenings took place in the presence of the filmmaker, and discussions with the filmmaker afterwards were part and parcel of these events, which they still are.

By the mid 1980s, India also saw the emergence of the first independent filmmakers; such as the iconic Anand Patwardan, whose films on, for instance, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (*In the Name of God*, 1992) and on Hindu fundamentalism (*Father, Son and Holy War*, 1995) made waves in India and abroad. Many of his films were initially rejected by the Censor Board, but after lengthy trials they were eventually screened in public venues and on television.

The liberalization of media space

The 1990s saw a speeding up of the gradual liberalization and deregulation of India’s ‘controlled’ economy, and one of the sectors on which this had an immediate impact was the media. The compulsory documentary screenings in cinema halls came to an end, and television, previously the exclusive domain of state broadcaster Doordarshan, was ‘opened up’ to commercial channels. In a few years, scores of new channels entered the market. Most of these are dedicated to soaps, music videos, sports (cricket!), Hindi movies and news, but they rarely program documentaries. The Indian state broadcaster, with its popularity rather dramatically reduced, gained new importance for the documentary circuit when it became the channel to air documentary films produced by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust, which works with government funding.⁷ Since 2001, it has commissioned more than 500 documentary films, mostly from independent filmmakers.⁸

However, much more important than their TV screenings (mostly late-night slots), the films enter the ‘private screenings’ circuit that has continued to flourish, and continues to be a preferred way for the socially-committed middleclass to engage with documentary films (and the filmmakers that produce these). Unfortunately, with an average budget of €4000 to €6000 per film, production budgets are modest even by Indian standards, and the equipment used is often of a lower quality than what Western broadcasters consider acceptable.

Winning the West?

Tailored as these films are to a South Asian audience, they often lack the kind of contextual information that a Western audience requires. Consequently, such audiences generally fail to understand what these films ‘are about’, and are often unable to appreciate their merit. As a result, these films rarely get selected for major documentary festivals such as IDFA. The disappointment is mutual, in the sense that South Asian documentary filmmakers often fail to understand why the selection committees of such festivals continue to prefer ‘orientalist’ documentaries that either emphasize South Asia’s mysticism, or its ‘communal’ violence. This also holds for smaller film festivals, such as the Amsterdam based ‘Beeld voor Beeld’ festival.⁹

To tap into the rich potential of South Asian documentaries, European producers have been working with South Asian filmmakers. Some of these films, tailored to Western audiences, have been international successes. An example is *Laxmi and Me* (2008), a reflexive documentary by Nishtha Jain on her relationship with her domestic helper.¹⁰ For a South Asian middleclass audience, whose prime concerns are corrupt politicians, Hindu nationalism, and the country’s growing social inequality, this is not directly a topic that conveys a great sense of urgency. For a Western audience though, the film provides valuable insights into the delicate balance between contract and patronage that characterizes so many social and economic relationships on the subcontinent.

The organizers of Film South Asia have from the outset recognized the importance of gaining more international exposure for South Asian documentaries. After each edition of their festival, the 15 most appealing films go on tour. Perhaps not surprisingly, Travelling Film South Asia has mostly been presented at US, UK and Australian universities that maintain substantial centers for South Asian studies. So far, Travelling Film South Asia has come to a small European country like the Netherlands only once (in 1999).

Another increasingly popular way to make documentaries available, is to upload them in their entirety to video sharing sites such as *vimeo*. This is also a way to evade censorship, which continues to be an issue for politically controversial films. Unfortunately, even online distribution cannot solve the problems of ‘context’. So far, too few of these films reach an audience in the world beyond South Asia. There definitely lies a task ahead for the programmers of major international film festivals. Rather than limiting themselves to the presumed tastes of their audience, programmers should – more than they currently do – screen films that have been made for circulation in South Asia, seeking to extend the referential framework of their audience. Documentaries from South Asia deserve to be more extensively viewed, to inform global audiences about the major challenges that the South Asian subcontinent faces, and the radical transformations that its people are confronted with.

Erik de Maaker is Assistant Professor at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology of Leiden University. His research focuses on the changing social implications of religious practices, and their growing importance in terms of ethnicity, indignity and the nation, in the contiguous borderlands of South and Southeast Asia. He is also a Visual Anthropologist, working on the possibilities offered by audiovisual means to strengthen the observational aspects of qualitative research. See: <http://leidenuniv.academia.edu/ErikdeMaaker> (maaker@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)

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