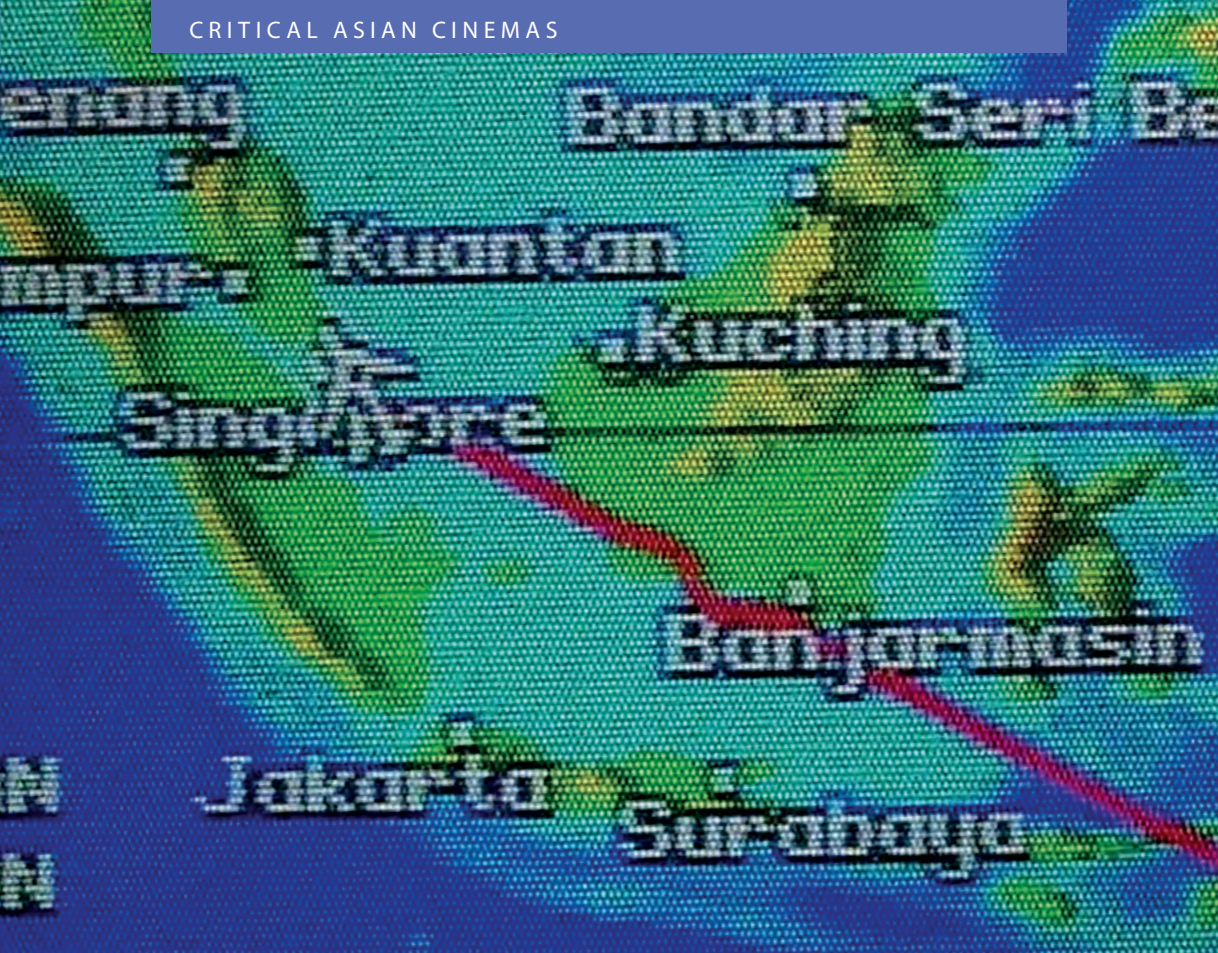


CRITICAL ASIAN CINEMAS



Gerald Sim

Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema

Poetics of Space, Sound, and Stability

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Critical Asian Cinemas

The Critical Asian Cinemas series features book-length manuscripts that engage with films produced in Asia and by Asian auteurs. “Asia” refers here to the geographic and discursive sites located in East and Central Asia, as well as South and Southeast Asia. The books in this series emphasize the capacity of film to interrogate the cultures, politics, aesthetics, and histories of Asia by thinking cinema as an art capable of critique. Open to a wide variety of approaches and methods, the series features studies that utilize novel theoretical models toward the analysis of all genres and styles of Asian moving image practices, encompassing experimental film and video, the moving image in contemporary art, documentary, as well as popular genre cinemas. We welcome rigorous, original analyses from scholars working in any discipline.

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*For my mother,
who took me to the movies
and taught me to love language,
lighting the path to this book.*



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Introduction

Expanding the Postcolonial Map

Abstract

The Introduction situates postcolonial Southeast Asian cinemas within historical, cultural, and disciplinary contexts. With a combination of historical surveys, intellectual mapping, and cultural anecdotes, it recommends a renewal of critical frameworks for the region's emerging cinemas. It connects Southeast Asia's unique geopolitical history to cultural and social particularities in three culturally affiliated nations: Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The postcolonial legacy of each surfaces cinematically through locally specific preoccupations. Their films offer readable manifestations of how postcolonial character manifests in Singapore's spatial imaginary, Malaysia's aural sensibility, and Indonesian discourses of stability. Finally, the Introduction foregrounds the book's continual concern with method, and outlines its self-reflective mode of theoretically informed film analysis that accounts for power differentials between knowledge traditions.

Keywords: postcolonialism, Southeast Asian studies, Southeast Asian cinema, national cinema, postcolonial theory, critical theory

Oh don't worry, you weren't as bad as the Japanese.
– *Taxi driver in George Town, Malaysia*

The opening shots of *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, a Malay Film Productions release from 1961, embark on a short expedition to discover Singapore's movie theater landmarks. Following a montage of impeccable colonial buildings on the waterfront that establish the film's locale, the camera pans to follow a truck decorated with promotional hoardings. For everyone within earshot of "Beer Barrel Polka" emanating from mounted loudspeakers, the mobile

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Figure o.1 Singapore's Capitol Theater. *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, 1961



Courtesy of The Shaw Organization Pte Ltd.

Figure o.2 A movie advertising truck passing Singapore's Lido Cinema. *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, 1961



Courtesy of The Shaw Organization Pte Ltd.

signs advertise a new local film. The vehicle finds a route connecting the stately “Capitol” cinema and more modern “Lido.” (Figures 0.1 and 0.2) The sequence makes an impression, documenting local film history, exploring the former British colony’s spatial imagination, and as a consequence, reveals a national heuristic.

Inspired by how these shots establish location with a cartographic and self-reflexive topos, this book in a way retraces the path of that truck. Through cinema, it explores a geopolitically situated set of cultures negotiating unique relationships to colonial history. The Singaporean, Malaysian, and Indonesian films accounted for in these pages express postcolonial identities that have been shaped in particular ways by Southeast Asian memories of colonial encounter. The pristine colonial monuments on display in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* signify a deep and historical embrace of colonial institutions. Let us begin with a primer on the region’s particular form of postcoloniality, by way of literal passages through striking examples of this attitude and the cultural work that it performs. Casting our eyes on a diverse mix of commercial films, art cinema, experimental work, features and shorts, we will hence discover instances of postcoloniality that manifest stylistically through Singapore’s preoccupations with space, the importance of sound to Malay culture, and the Indonesian investment in genre.

Studies of postcolonial film aesthetics tend to emphasize tropes such as hybridity, syncretism, and creolization, which embody the notion that multiple identities undermine colonial ideology’s essentialist assumptions behind racial purity and cultural superiority. That literature has been crucial to examining colonialism’s material and psychic consequences, and demonstrated the utility of postcolonial thought. The postcolonial poetics in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia’s cinemas however, diverge from convention. They form a nationally distinct regional subset nonetheless bound by proximity, culture, and language. More important, the films reveal three new ways to think about postcolonial film form. For readers informed by Anglo-American or European film studies and their theoretical canon, this book is an exploration of film cultures rapidly emerging on the world scene, and a study of unfamiliar postcolonial narratives. To those already acquainted with these cinemas and cultures, the coming pages invite reengagement through critical theory. While that mode of criticism is de rigueur in film studies as a whole, its application to these films can be fraught. If it is less favored in these parts, the disinclination is a legacy of empiricist area studies traceable to colonialism and the Cold War. Ultimately, necessarily, this is also a discussion about theory’s place in Southeast Asian



film studies, as well as how the field should be configured. These are some pretty high stakes, the journey to which begins on the ground, along the streets rather, of Singapore.

In the summer of 2009, the storied soccer team Liverpool F.C. jetted to the Far East for a set of lucrative exhibition matches. English clubs in particular favor these trips. For sporting reasons, the fixtures offer non-competitive pre-season games for managers and coaches to evaluate talent, implement tactics, and develop fitness. The considerably greater incentive to bear jetlag and stifling humidity, however, is financial. English teams have been popular in Asia for decades, and even before megadollar satellite broadcast deals made it infinitely easier for fans to watch their favorite teams “live” from anywhere in the world, the English league occupied a regular presence in television sports coverage worldwide. Soccer’s global marketing explosion now renders these long trips inexorable for teams that aspire to build a global brand, stoke jersey sales, promote cable television subscriptions, and even tour packages. Among fans in Singapore, Liverpool retains the largest contingent of loyalists. This visit followed sojourns in 1991 and 2001, before another in 2011. The contest was scheduled in the mugginess of late July, and pit Liverpool against Singapore’s national team. Local media buzzed with speculation about whether Fernando Torres, the Reds’ Spanish star forward, would play.

In the midst of sporting publicity, the hubbub turned political. A newspaper’s interview with Singapore’s defensive stalwart Daniel Bennett ignited a controversy over the lopsided fervor of fans supporting visiting foreigners at the expense of the local boys. He wondered aloud about how great it would be if the fans backed the local team. “These fans have no real connection with Liverpool. Their passion should be with the Singapore national team. Instead, the National Stadium will look more like [Liverpool’s stadium] Anfield on match day.”¹ As added irony, Bennett, a naturalized citizen, actually possesses Liverpool roots. His statements incited days of public debate. From a certain point of view, the match itself was a curious spectacle. Both teams wear all red uniforms, and so the sea of red shirts that flooded the bleachers surprised no one. But the crowd’s roars revealed whom most of the ticket holders had come to see. Whereas local players received perfunctory applause, the visitors were greeted with raucous cheers and at times, delirious levels of support. Event organizers went the whole nine yards to transform Singapore’s National Stadium into a facsimile of

1 Wang, “Roar for your country: Bennett.”



Liverpool's home ground literally half a world away in northwest England. The master of ceremonies declared over the public address system, "This is Anfield!" before Liverpool's anthem, "You'll Never Walk Alone," rang out among the excited throngs.

When Liverpool played Melbourne's professional team in Australia four years later, the 95,000 who sang that song produced a stirring spectacle, particularly since Anfield's capacity is roughly half that. These rituals by themselves are not extraordinary. But the public ruminations over national identity in Singapore speak to much more than the vitality of Liverpool's brand or its popularity. This is because anyone who wanders through the former colony is likely to sense a strikingly similar attitude pervading the city-state's culture, on matters beyond the confines of the soccer stadium. This is not to recapitulate C. L. R. James, whose momentous book *Beyond a Boundary* interprets cricket as both imperial instrument and colonial text. Whereas he argues that colonial life influenced the game and vice versa, Southeast Asian colonies' relationship to association football is not nearly comparable. But the Daniel Bennett incident is nonetheless a clear and distinguishing statement of Singapore's postcolonial identity.

Let's travel. Singapore's hub of athletic facilities is connected to the city center by Nicoll Highway and the Merdeka Bridge. This stretch of roadway is an infrastructural expression of the national chronotope. The former was named after Sir John Fearn Nicoll, Singapore's colonial Governor from 1952 to 1955, one of her last before colonial rule ended. "Merdeka" is the Malay word for independence. A journey that traverses Nicoll Highway toward downtown – southwest over a monument to Singapore's self-governance in 1955, then resuming terrestrially on Nicoll – symbolizes Singapore's postcolonial era rather perfectly. The Merdeka Bridge becomes an ironic metaphor for how independence from the British was only an interregnum between colonial rule and a subsequent era of colonial hegemony.

This context draws out and magnifies an uneasy moment in documentarian Tan Pin Pin's arguably most famous work. The U.S. trained filmmaker is one of the country's most prominent artists whose filmography is singularly devoted to exploring national identity. She described the film, *Singapore GaGa* (2005) on the official website as "paean to the quirkiness of the Singaporean aural landscape." It is an episodic collection of interviews and performances from the country's artistic spectrum, from world-renowned musicians to subway buskers. During one poignant discussion, harmonica virtuoso Yew Hong Chow and classical guitarist Alex Abisheganaden opine on the history of music education in Singapore. They argue that when the recorder was adopted for the primary school curriculum, fatefully, the

difficult instrument turned generations of students away from music. In not so many words, Abisheganaden criticizes subservient colonial mimicry.

Our leaders were probably people who had their music education either in Europe or in England. You see? There were some who went to France, there were some who went to U.K. and if you had gone to either France or U.K. [the recorder] was probably used in schools and so they copied the idea from the British. I would think so, you see? Whereas we should have taken the [harmonica] from China.

And yet for their impromptu duet on camera, Yew and Abisheganaden choose an anthem of the American West, “Home on the Range.” That it is such a stirring rendition further suggests that trying to distance themselves from Eurocentrism only deepened their colonial imagination, a circuitous artistic route that parallels the topographical ride onto, then promptly off the Merdeka Bridge.

Nicoll Highway eventually touches the War Memorial Park, near where *Seniman Bujang Lapok* begins. The Park is a one-block area with a 230-foot centerpiece, the Civilian War Memorial, dedicated to those killed during the Japanese Occupation of World War II. The iconic Raffles Hotel, named for the British statesman who founded modern Singapore, sits due north across the street. Located southwest of the monument is City Hall, a resplendent piece of European architecture that for a long time housed the island’s municipal offices. The arrangement of these three structures summarizes again the coloniality of Singapore’s political, economic, and cultural identity. Although City Hall and the Raffles Hotel, in a country of perpetual public construction and residential renovation, have both undergone the local fetish of refurbishment and renewal, their exteriors remain preserved as conspicuous signifiers of a warmly remembered British colonial history. Nestled between them, the somber, towering Memorial commemorates victims of an Asian empire. It reinforces a historical subjectivity, a literally concretized one that recalls Japanese perpetrators and benevolent British overseers. Less than a mile up the road, the difference in attitude towards those two periods of occupation is unequivocally clear in the National Museum’s various historical exhibits. On its second floor walkway, the doors of two exhibition halls face each other. The sign above one entrance says “Surviving Syonan,” in reference to the three-year occupation during which the Japanese renamed Singapore *Syonan-to* (Light of the South). Inside the exhibition hall, this dark chapter is remembered as a period during which resilience, resourcefulness, perseverance, and other precursors of the citizens’ fabled



modern work ethic thrived. Its mythological complement is housed 25 feet away behind a door labeled “Modern Colony.” The British are recalled to have introduced advanced technology, new cultures, and cosmopolitan values. The streams of uniformed children on educational excursions to the National Museum receive an indelible lesson: Japan brought suffering, while the British delivered modernity. Indeed, peruse those students’ history books, and you will find depictions of British colonialism possessing an almost splendid flavor. A Secondary Two textbook, for example, quotes British officials spouting naked racism, evidence that the state-approved account does not completely whitewash history. Nevertheless, the mention of white supremacy feels tokenistic because the text is also replete with subheadings such as: How did the British Government Improve Social Services for the People? How did the British Improve Law and Order? What Problems did the British Face in Maintaining Law and Order? The Orientalist answer to that final question, incidentally, singles out the pernicious threat of Chinese coolie agents and secret societies.²

This postcolonial attitude is not exclusive to Singapore. Two British colleagues offer the following story from their Malaysian trip to George Town, the northern capital state of Penang named after Britain’s King George III. An inquisitive cab driver asked where they were from. “The U.K.,” one of them replied. “Ah ... you know Britain used to colonize us,” which is not really the type of thing a foreign tourist wants to hear whilst trapped in a backseat. Trying to think quickly and react tactfully, she cautiously offered an apology on behalf of Her Majesty, which presented no small anguish for a proud Glaswegian.

“I’m ... yeah ... sorry about that.”

“Oh don’t worry,” reassured the driver, “you weren’t as bad as the Japanese.”³

Indeed, where Singaporean schoolbooks’ unqualified respect for colonial rule punctuates a thorough accounting of crimes committed by ruthless Japanese occupiers during World War II, reverence for Malaysia’s colonial era is also inscribed. In the tourist’s guide to “George Town’s Historic Commercial and Civic Precincts,” European architecture is esteemed as a cultural signifier of growth, development, and progress. The Japanese encounter on the other hand is conversely associated with suffering and destruction. A passage reads: “Sadly, many of these [buildings] were destroyed by Japanese and

2 *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation Pre-1819 to 1971.*

3 Rosalind Galt, in conversation with the author, July 2013.

allied aerial bombing during WWII, leaving George Town today deprived of some of its grandeur of 100 years ago.” The George Town World Heritage Inc., a public-private partnership dedicated to managing, promoting, and preserving the district, states its official mission to “nurture” a “living legend.”⁴

A lengthy sequence of quotidian anecdotes relayed in inordinate detail may seem like a curious way to inaugurate a study of film, until one realizes how pervasive these paradigms are. You cannot help but sense it on the ground and in the air. These are unmistakable Southeast Asian stories. For the benefit of the uninitiated, and indeed those who would expect the postcolonial condition to leave subjugated peoples clinging to enmity, these observations summarize postcolonial identities that are defined with relatively little hostility. Those who have examined the region more carefully are less surprised. Literary scholar Tamara S. Wagner’s analysis of Singaporean and Malaysian literature discovers “revisionist” and “emulative” types of Occidentalist tropes. She formulates an opposition between despisement, rejection, and retaliation on one hand, and on another, the sort of admiration, desire to imitate, and appreciation for colonial rule illustrated in preceding paragraphs.⁵ The “emulative” postcolonial mindset tends to be inconceivable in most progressive and academic circles, where it is shocking and abhorrent to associate colonialism with anything other than exploitation, racism, oppression, and injustice. But adopting that conventional point of view is too easy in this context. It proves inflexible and clearly fails to capture vital nuance, as demonstrated by the situations described in these pages. This book does not advocate discarding the truths about colonialism’s fundamental criminality, only that we must consider the politically incorrect notion of postcolonial nostalgia within former subjects. But does this mean that they are thorough masochists or otherwise irretrievably interpellated? To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, are these in fact subalterns with neither subjectivity nor ability to speak? Or do they wish not to?

What some may interpret more cynically and less generously as affection for the colonizer is not completely unusual. Circumstances vary. Not every colonial encounter transpires around the barrel of a gun. Nor is it too difficult in any postcolonial society to come upon pockets of people in higher castes yearning for the privilege they enjoyed prior to independence.

4 Langdon, *Guide to George Town’s Historic Commercial and Civic Precincts*, 4, 61.

5 Wagner, *Occidentalism in Novels in Malaysia And Singapore, 1819-2004*.



Frantz Fanon explains this aspect of colonial subjectivity when he describes the schizophrenic split between desire and antipathy towards colonizers. Postcolonial governments do not always alter street names and demolish colonial buildings as soon as they are able. Nonetheless, the unconflicted warmth with which some independent Southeast Asian countries remember colonialism is distinctive. It can moreover seem curious if not downright bewildering to some. This book aims to reach those readers; not at historians who shrug knowingly, but at postcolonial cinema scholars whom one reckons are less acquainted with this part of the world.

An Unfamiliar Postcoloniality

Anglo-American postcolonial film studies has thus far trained the bulk of its attention on cinemas from economically disadvantaged lands – developing countries in the so-called Third World, namely the Middle-East, South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In comparison, Southeast Asian histories, cultures, and psyches represent more complex circumstances of another postcoloniality. Studying this unique area of postcolonial history requires a grasp of realities on the ground. The growing need for such studies comes from a film production surge in the region just before the turn of the millennium. German media scholar Tilman Baumgärtel heralds them in the collection, *Independent Southeast Asian Cinema*: “The rise of an independent cinema in Southeast Asia is one of the most significant developments in World Cinema right now, and the film community has taken notice.”⁶ Baumgärtel’s enthusiastic cheerleading exhibits attendant bias, but the statements are not off base. During the nineties, Southeast Asian films began reaching beyond specialized niches. With steady frequency they announced themselves to international film culture via the Cannes Film Festival.

If pressed to name Southeast Asian titles, knowledgeable fans of global cinema are likely to cite a cohort of Thai films first, among them *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), *Un Certain Regarde* selection at the 2001 Festival. Wisit Sasanatieng’s baroque western was topped by two Apichatpong Weerasethakul films: *Blissfully Yours* (2002), which won the award the following year, and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which captured the *Palme d’Or* in 2010. After Eric Khoo’s neorealist urban drama *12 Storeys* became Singapore’s first Cannes invitee in 1997, the trailblazing director began to contend in competitive categories. In 2013, Anthony Chen’s

6 Baumgärtel, *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, 6.



Ilo Ilo won the *Caméra d'Or* for best first feature. More recently, Kirsten Tan (*Pop Aye*, 2017) and Sandi Tan (*Shirkers*, 2018) left the Sundance Film Festival with major awards. Next door, the late Malaysian director Yasmin Ahmad has been recognized by the Berlin International Film Festival, as has fellow countryman Amir Muhammad, an experimental documentarian. Both have been programmed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And although much of the recent attention on Indonesia has been occupied by Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), over the past two decades directors like Garin Nugroho, Faozan Rizal, Edwin, Riri Riza, Nia Dinata and Nan Achnas have emerged onto the regional scene and beyond.

Many of these films are political, which satiates the global art cinema market where sophisticated bourgeois tastes and liberal sensibilities crave serious themes and weighty storylines. Political content in Southeast Asian films is in turn clearly preoccupied – or plainly readable as such – with the social consequences and psychic costs of colonialism, globalization, western influence, and modernity. Audiences should therefore know the context from which the films originate. To bystanders, the depths of postcolonial nostalgia can otherwise seem peculiar or bizarre. Malaysia and Singapore's affection and affinity for their colonial masters for example, would look strange if one expects to encounter hostile revolutionary fervor and bitterness amongst subjected peoples. But these sovereignties did not arise from gunshots or out of revolutions, velvet or otherwise. To understand these films, to more specifically interpret them as postcolonial expressions, makes it imperative to comprehend the textured nature and legacies of their colonial memories.

Certainly, the field of postcolonial studies has never been completely ignorant of these historical instances; its major thinkers are acutely if not manifestly aware of them. Because postcolonial studies' anti-universalism is directly informed by poststructuralist theory, namely as it served to counter Eurocentric ideals of racial and cultural purity, the field is constitutionally predisposed to know that blind spots exist over underrepresented and marginalized areas of research.⁷ Important voices from postcolonial cinema studies in particular have warned about using "postcolonial" as a catch-all vessel for all national or social histories. Ella Shohat may have said it best when she warned of "ambiguous spatiotemporality" or ahistoricism in other words. If postcolonial refers simply to that which is affected by colonialism, then former colonizers in the First World share space under the umbrella of

7 Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 41. For a discussion of whiteness's connection with the idea of purity, see Richard Dyer, *White*.



“postcolonial” with formerly colonized subjects of the Third World. Shohat points out that signifiatory vagueness impedes our knowledge of politics and contemporary power relations. For spatiotemporal specificity then, she suggests alternative designations such as “neocolonial” and “post-independence.”⁸ To an extent, Shohat and Robert Stam go further in their indispensable volume, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. Their specific examples of neocolonialism instantiate empires that continue to impose their will on ex-colonies, not to mention American geo-economic hegemony in the Third World. On that point, historian and theorist of postcolonial cinema Priya Jaikumar admits that the field has a problem – one that recurs in her own pedagogy. In an interview published in the collection, *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, she concedes:

I defined empire mainly through European and Anglo-American political regimes. This is still vast, but I was teaching from what I knew. It has the problem of replicating a certain Eurocentricity in its frame. We did talk about Hong Kong, but I didn’t address the imperialisms of Japan, of China. I think what I offered needs to be more decentralizing.⁹

The editors of that volume concur; Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller encourage future research into the “many more films and film cultures that need to be engaged in postcolonial film studies.”¹⁰ Indeed, good honest work has already begun to examine those complexities. In Hong Kong’s encounter with colonialism on its British and now Chinese fronts, that context takes cinematic form in the emotional knots of crisis and nostalgia coursing through films produced during the run-up to the 1997 handover.¹¹ Michael Baskett’s *The Attractive Empire* has also made the important point of examining the film industry’s role in Japan’s imperial project, and Guo-Juin Hong’s *Taiwan Cinema* follows with a look at Japan’s cultural imprint on Taiwanese postcolonial films. José B. Capino’s *Dream Factories of a Former Colony* has made inroads into Southeast Asia, tracing the Philippines’s postcolonial imagination through the islands’ experiences with American colonization and Japanese occupation. But the outsized value of these books reminds us of the present shortage of such work. Additional projects would

8 Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 38–41. Shohat alone is attributed because the section first appeared in her earlier essay in *Social Text*, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’.”

9 “Postface: An Interview with Priya Jaikumar,” *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, 239.

10 Ponzanesi and Waller, “Introduction,” 14.

11 See Poshek Fu and David Desser, eds., *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, entries by Tony Williams and Natalia Chan Sui Hung in particular.



aid efforts such as Baskett's to redefine history's view of Japanese cinema as occupier and colonizer, rather than as occupied or colonized. World film history no doubt more readily remembers General Douglas MacArthur's influence on Japanese postwar film production during his time as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. In its own way, this book furthers the investment needed to refocus the field. What Jaikumar recommends must surely include Southeast Asian experiences of Japanese occupation. It would certainly cast light on why the Malaysian cabbie in George Town considers the British not as bad as the Japanese.

Jaikumar understands innately that an area's inclusion on a map, merely acknowledging its existence, hardly means that it has been fully explored. Paths remain unpaved. Chua Beng Huat has pointed out the egregious disciplinary oversight regarding "one of the most colonized regions of the world; Southeast Asia does not figure significantly, if at all, in the expanding archive of what is constituted as the academic field of Postcolonial Studies."¹² Furthermore, despite the obvious and understandable sensitivity to incongruities within the so-called "postcolonial" – between its epistemological narrowness and the social and political diversity of the world that it refers to – the term persists with a limited connotative range within film studies. Examinations à la Shohat and Stam of neocolonial or post-independence cinemas have not exactly sprouted all across the field. At the same time, postcolonial studies has purported to remain steadfast in doing what Ponzanesi and Waller describe as "breaking with universalisms and learning to navigate a fluid, situational, relational mode of knowledge production."¹³ For her part Jaikumar prefers to resist any singular analytical method.¹⁴ These valiant commitments retain analytical malleability and breadth in application, but in spite of avowed desires to be "situational" there remain abundant reasons to investigate new situations. This book takes up Jaikumar's challenge to "decentralize" and explore different postcolonial cultures. The need is made only more urgent by the inexorable presence of noteworthy new films, along with the rising production cultures from an understudied part of world cinema.

The state of postcolonial inquiry can be illustrated by the reception of *Ilo Ilo*. For his semi-biographical story of a young boy's relationship to his family's new Filipino housekeeper and nanny, director Anthony Chen adopts conventional visual and narrative styles. His secondary storyline

12 Chua "Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies: an Introduction," 231.

13 Ponzanesi and Waller, "Introduction," 1.

14 "Postface: An Interview with Priya Jaikumar," 237.



depicts the woes of middle-class precarity during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, an economic calamity precipitated by the collapse of the Thai baht. *Ilo Ilo* triumphed at Cannes after eliciting universally warm receptions from audiences taken by the intimate narrative's surprising weight and tendency to emotionally linger. Six months after earning the *Camera d'Or*, the film added a second major win for Best Film at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival. Reviewers praised the script's deft tone and pacing. In spite of that, the film's narrational transparency is deceptive. Although the critical agreement on *Ilo Ilo*'s melodramatic execution is justified, the critical appreciation for Chen's narrational aplomb can also be understood as the natural recourse of an international audience not sufficiently equipped to process other aspects of the film's signification.

Ilo Ilo forces us into a deep encounter with modernity and its transnational flows. First, the title itself codifies mistranslation. The English title centers the narrative on Teresa the foreign domestic worker because "Ilo Ilo" is the Philippine province where many migrant workers originate. But the title's Chinese characters (*ba ma bu zai jia*) mean "father and mother are not home," which shifts identification to the boy. The disjuncture invites readings through a disciplinary plethora of poststructuralist paradigms such as transnationalism, postcolonialism, hybridity, and split address. Second, descriptions of the local setting tend to trip over local nuances. While unfathomable to many Western audiences, the region's labor market makes it eminently affordable to hire a domestic worker, even for households below the middle-class in comparatively more developed countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. Since their rates of economic progression are hitched to colonial rule, infrastructure, and legacies, answers to economic questions often require knowledge of colonial history. Without it, class becomes interpreted in Western-centric terms. For example, *The Guardian*'s review of *Ilo Ilo* explains that "in the globalised labour market, Singapore's professional classes are well able to employ those from the Philippines," and the British Film Institute's synopsis refers paradoxically to a "working couple" in "an affluent family."¹⁵ In actuality, the couple in the film is neither affluent nor professional.

Ilo Ilo follows a number of other productions from Singapore with a visual portrait dominated by iconographic shots of its public housing structures. They are known locally as "flats" – the British term for apartment building derived from Old English. Although structures of well-maintained concrete have widely understood connotations and can thus efficiently signify

15 Bradshaw, "Ilo Ilo review"; Fennell, "Child of the gos."

feelings of isolation, alienation, uniformity, and subjection, they also contain historical and local significance related to socioeconomic class. Erected to house the population during a rapid phase of economic development and urbanization, these buildings were designed for a modernizing project based on an urban plan with roots in colonial ideologies and policies. The brief travelogue that opens this chapter only begins to demonstrate how that history imposes itself on the country's lived realities. An inevitable spatial epistemology affects that existence and is related to many issues of interest to postcolonial studies. For those seeking a socio-political context for these films, this book details a national tradition of cinematic *mise en scène* inextricable from that spatiality. Singapore's postcolonial space on our side of the proscenium is indispensable to understanding the geography being imaged on the other.¹⁶

Highlighting these socioeconomic and architectural particularities is not meant to take writers to task for not being worldly enough or sufficiently acquainted with a Southeast Asian city-state smaller than New York City. For its part, the island has adopted the "red dot" as a popular nickname for itself, and the logo for "SG50" celebrations marking 50 years of independence was designed around the graphic as well. The term is a reference to the fact that its landmass is so diminutive that maps routinely magnify its presence with an alien erubescence mark. It is at once self-deprecating and a proud reference to economic success despite physical limitations.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the country now houses a key financial service sector for the world economy, while its size and dependence on transnational capital make it a useful petri dish in which to observe life under neoliberalism, not to mention late stage capitalist consumerism. If on the evidence, national film production and that of its regional neighbors are in the process of crossing the key divide between festival visibility and greater prominence, we should take a closer look.

That tautology does emit a whiff of Eurocentrism by implicitly tethering a film's worthiness for study to the imprimatur of major European festival prizes, but it is far from the only compelling reason. In one basic respect, this book presents a cinematic journey of ethnographic discovery. By now we intuitively understand the cultural meanings behind visualizations of

16 That spatial reality renders the topic at hand in excess of what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* as "imaginative geography," which is essentially an imperial gaze that objectifies the Orient.

17 "The red dot" is used for titles of children's books, names of commercial businesses, a current affairs program on television, and an important design collective and museum. See also Koh and Chang, eds. *The Little Red Dot*.



America's frontier, Australia's outback, Tokyo's sensorium, and Beijing's density, for example, due in good measure to cinema's role in establishing and disseminating those impressions. We can expand world cinema's map, and reveal a unique set of aesthetics and epistemologies percolating in this corner of the world – stylistic signatures attributable to postcolonial culture and history, which postcolonial film theory and criticism in its current formation does not fully process. The relatively slim set of aesthetic forms through which postcolonial identity is predominantly taken to express adds to the impetus here. If the efforts of individual filmmakers and festivals are towing these films into the waters of international cinema, this book proposes to be at the end of another hawser on a mission to identify and theorize their postcolonial poetics. It might begin as a set of academic meditations, but as film scholar David Bordwell writes, the study of poetics fruitfully informs practical film criticism.¹⁸

Touchstones in Postcolonial Film Studies: On Style and Practice

The matter of postcolonial cinema style has been addressed within eminent works that continue to offer immeasurable value to understanding the films' politics, content, tone, form, and relationship to colonial history and imperial power. Nonetheless, before Southeast Asian postcoloniality's socioeconomic idiosyncrasies, some restrictive limitations become evident. Take for instance, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's 1969 anti-colonial manifesto, "Towards a Third Cinema." In bold Marxist strokes, the Argentine authors outline the mission of revolutionary cinema on behalf of the Third World against the First. These "films of decolonization" reject products of "the System" – works dominated by spectacle and production value that affirm capitalist and bourgeois culture – in favor of "films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System."¹⁹ Solanas and Getino's uncluttered prose and boisterous clarity simplify the conceptualization of films standing outside the commercial mainstream, beyond the author-centric conventions of traditional art cinema. The influential screech carves a stark distinction between colonial hegemony, First World power, commercial modes of production, and capital on one side, and those who

18 Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 17.

19 Solanas and Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," 33, 42.



rebel against them on the other. The authors write with moral clarity and political imperative about ideological aesthetics and radical filmmaking, but the force of their rhetoric is so strident and unequivocal, that it makes for an all or nothing proposition. That is to say, it becomes simplistic if not problematic to apply Third Cinema paradigmatically onto film practices that originate outside the West, resist commercial circuits, or lack production values. The developed and developing former colonies of Southeast Asia rarely produce Third Cinema. Regional films may check off some categories and elicit a temptation to interpret them as such, but these films arise from national histories that bear vastly different relationships with global capital, Marxist politics, and colonial authority.²⁰ They stand a world apart literally and figuratively from Third Cinema's original Latin American context and movement politics.

Solanas and Getino's call for politicized production reverberates in the hermeneutic blueprint for *An Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy's magisterial and deft study of exilic, diasporic, and ethnic filmmaking from Third World and postcolonial countries. Naficy focuses on the aftermath of post-1950s decolonization, revolution, liberation, and other social upheavals brought about by the Cold War. The concern for postcolonial liberation that he shares with Solanas and Getino explains the affinity that accented cinema has for Third Cinema. "The accented cinema is one of the offshoots of the Third Cinema," the author professes, but it is "much more situated," "less polemical," "not necessarily Marxist or even socialist," "not necessarily radical" or even oppositional, but thoroughly engaged in the experience of deterritorialization.²¹ Therefore in contrast to Solanas and Getino, who are so unmistakably clear in defining Third Cinema as to be exclusionary, Naficy is fluid and inclusive. He expects accented cinemas to originate from essentially anywhere geographically, politically, historically, ethnically, culturally, or aesthetically. This inclusiveness extends to *An Accented Cinema's* methodology and theory; Naficy's outline of the accented style hews tightly to postmodern traits.

The array of styles Naficy calls accented reveals his consistent effort within textual analyses to widen treatments of film form beyond the limits of narrative and plot, and in turn, to stretch that discussion outside the

20 Anti-colonial movements in Southeast Asia often included communist involvement at some stage, but they were stymied in civil wars with anti-communist domestic factions. The Cold War and the lure of global capital together deterred colonial regimes from transferring power to communist independent governments. Chua, "Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies," 232-234.

21 Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 10-11, 26, 30-31.



trope of hybridity. In this vein he bemoans, “even those who deal with the accented films usually speak of exile and diaspora as themes inscribed in the films, not as components of style.”²² In this respect, Naficy builds upon the conventional set of tropes associated with postcolonial culture, norms that Shohat and Stam encapsulate well in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.

Postcolonial theory, in so far as it addresses complex, multilayered identities, has proliferated in terms having to do with cultural mixing: religious (syncretism); biological (hybridity); human-genetic (*mestizaje*); and linguistic (creolization). The word “syncretism” in postcolonial writing calls attention to the multiple identities generated by the geographic displacements characteristic of the post-independence era, and presupposes a theoretical framework, influenced by anti-essentialist poststructuralism, that refuses to police identity along purist lines.²³

An Accented Cinema expands the outer limits of postcolonial aesthetics that Shohat and Stam summarize here. Naficy leads his exploration with the subcategory, “structures of feeling” à la Raymond Williams, in reference to stylistic manifestations that are not yet programmatic, recognized, or formalized.²⁴

This book tends that fertile area with him. Its chapters cultivate an appreciation for film poetics related to formal aspects of film space, sound, and genre, and find scant recourse in poststructuralist hybridity. Take this project as a supplementary and corrective effort to vary and renew postcolonial film studies. Among others who also wish to broaden the aesthetic taxonomy of postcolonial cinema, Laura U. Marks’s *The Skin of the Film* stands out. It forges an original path for “haptic visuality” on the backs of Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson. Marks argues that interstitial social groupings create “intercultural films” whose images trigger non-visual senses and evoke embodied memories that disrupt hegemony and challenge visual regimes. The aforementioned *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* collection can also be cited for its attempt to deepen analyses of postcolonial film style in its push to transcend hybridity as the primary aesthetic trope.

Naficy’s expansive idea of what constitutes postcolonial style, however, continues to somewhat recapitulate the poststructuralist and postmodern themes that have calcified around the common definition of what is

22 Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 20.

23 Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 41.

24 Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 26.



“postcolonial.” The aesthetic compendium condensed into *An Accented Cinema’s* Appendix draws from the postmodern lexicon; it is peppered with variations on hybridity, openness, fluidity, liminality, and self-awareness. The problem with this is partly that postmodernism’s political potency has been smothered in recent times by the new international economic order that homogenizes, flattens the world and deactivates boundaries. Naficy himself acknowledges globalization’s ability to nullify borders, but he maintains that physical borders retain an empirical existence and still pose verifiable threats to real people.

The key words that summarize the postindustrial system – globalization, privatization, diversification, deregulation, digitization, convergence, and consolidation – are all associated with centralization of the global economic and media powers in fewer and more powerful hands. However, this market-driven centralization masks a fundamental opposing trend at social and political levels, that is, the fragmentation of nation-states and other social formations, and the scattering, often violent and involuntary, of an increasing number of people from their homelands – all of which are driven by divergence, not convergence.²⁵

Nevertheless, few dispute Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s claims that globalization is a phenomenon that postcolonial paradigms are too outdated and ill equipped to process. They argue on ample evidence in *Empire* that the strategy of weaponizing postmodern and postcolonial concepts such as anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, hybridity, and all the rest can be effectively neutralized through commodification. The market prizes mobility and flexibility all too well.²⁶ This argument may only be waged in finite pockets of postcolonial studies – over the merits of poststructuralist theory, hybridity politics, and subaltern studies, for instance – but the debates are very much alive and active. This was evinced by the fiery reception that met Vivek Chibber’s flagellation of subaltern studies in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013), in which the author decries the field’s rejection of the Enlightenment and de-emphasis of political economy.

Chibber restated the importance of integrating economics into historical frameworks. To do so turns our gaze even more acutely towards Southeast Asia’s direction. The region’s individual economies develop at different rates, but all have benefitted from effectively patching into the circuitry

25 Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 31, 42.

26 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 133, 142-146, 150-152.



of global capital and financial markets. Those externalities sway markets, drive institutional reform, and impose transformation on corporations and banks.²⁷ This political economic history turns these cinemas into very handy cultural windows with which to observe the colonial-to-global transition. This part of the world is not only an unexplored section of the film studies map, it also serves as a fitting and opportune case study of postcolonial societies and globalized economies. It is a critical nexus, even though opinions may differ slightly on how the postcolonial-global relationship should be viewed. Hardt and Negri's perception of global capital as a subsumptive force parallels Arif Dirlik's contention that global capitalism is a condition for postcolonialism. But when Chen Kuan-Hsing stresses the importance of putting "the history of colonialism and imperialism back into globalization studies" because of how globalization discourses obscure "the relationships between globalization and the imperial and colonial past from which it emerged," he suggests that you cannot study globalization without considering colonial legacies, not vice versa.²⁸ Regardless, they all agree that this is an important historical intersection.

The manner in which that is felt and experienced on the ground is demonstrated by a poignant moment in a timely and topical short film from Singapore, *Polling Day* (2012). Its protagonist Gregory is a fresh university graduate doubly alienated by his domineering father and being left behind in a late capitalist economy – a narrative that follows an archetypal premise among local films. A prospective employer, a Chinese national, asks the English-speaking Gregory why he cannot communicate in Mandarin, illustrating the power of China's language and capital. A short decade ago, English proficiency offered a clear postcolonial advantage, but globalization has superseded that. When Gregory's disastrous interview concludes, his dejection is compounded when the next candidate, an American, casually displays Mandarin fluency. Humbled and downcast, Gregory passes his competitor on his way out. This briefest of exchanges, recorded quietly in claustrophobic close-ups, senses something much larger; Gregory's despair condenses the political economic climate with emotional weight. The insight came from an unobvious venue. Director Jesmen Tan was a production coordinator for *Ilo Ilo*; *Polling Day* was his film school thesis project – a skillful but modest work that signals what can be potentially unearthed once we dig deeper.

27 Robison, "The Reordering of Pax Americana," 66.

28 Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura*, 73; Chen, *Asia as Method*, 2. See also Amin-Khan, *The Postcolonial State in the Era of Capitalist Globalization*, 4-5.



Recently, Singapore's booming finance and real estate sectors have made its wealthy's conspicuous luxury consumption irresistible to international media. Meanwhile, its economic moves are tracked with interest, heightened by the 2008 financial crisis, and what has been termed the eastward shift of the global economy's "center of gravity."²⁹ Singapore's economic connections and those of its neighbors are often facilitated by geopolitical alliances and relationships fashioned out of Cold War or post-9/11 conveniences. It is not coincidental that the West's anti-terror discourse so frequently cites Malaysia and Indonesia as examples of moderate Islam. Indeed, "Southeast Asia" is itself a manifestation of bygone American policies of communist containment and Domino Theory. Subsequent to that, nearby Indonesia became what Mary Zurbuchen categorizes as "transitional" – a society that is "transforming systems determined by older geopolitical patterns into a post-Cold War configuration of markets, information, and new democracies."³⁰ These geopolitical developments magnify and sharpen the rising visibility of the textual bouquet studied here, specifically among postcolonial cinemas but also in the larger constellation of world films. The region's particularly deliberate participation in the global economy makes a narrative such as the one Hardt and Negri provide in *Empire*, more applicable to understanding these cultures. For that reason, even though the ideological thrust of Third Cinema seems less relevant, its Marxism comes in handier in analysis than as manifesto.

Strategies Old and New

This book conceives postcolonial film style along national lines, and presumes that each cinema is economically, socially, and culturally inflected. These portraits of national cinema are not comprehensive, but rather curations of films and culture that speak to nationally specific conditions. Still, at a juncture when the "transnational" possesses rising currency in the field, national cinema paradigms may seem outdated or even regressive. James Tweedie's *The Age of New Waves* is the latest and most impressive of those choosing to retain the approach. It argues convincingly that "repetition and simultaneity in various locations" reveals world cinema's "most innovative and revelatory dimensions." Although Tweedie reiterates the well-understood

29 Mahtani, "Wealth Over the Edge: Singapore." See also Quah, "The Global Economy's Shifting Centre of Gravity."

30 Zurbuchen, "Historical Memory in Contemporary Indonesia," 9.



desire to transcend arbitrary borders that the culture industry exploits for product differentiation in the name of novelty and specificity, he acknowledges that the “national” continues to offer both methodological value and situational utility for unique cultures.³¹ Persisting with a national model must however withstand strong intellectual countercurrents. Take for instance, Chris Berry’s transnational studies of Chinese diasporic cinema that devote important attention to films from Singapore. He claims albeit cautiously and with abundant qualification that on balance, the Singaporean texts’ Chineseness outweighs local considerations.³² A cursory look at domestic circumstances would undermine those presumptions, however. Visceral xenophobia among locals, including the ethnic Chinese, came to a boil in recent years over economic policies that exacerbated the wealth gap. Liberal immigration policies had opened doors to an influx of mainland Chinese immigrants, consisting of a wealthy set attracted by neoliberal financial deregulation, and an underclass methodically recruited from China and Bangladesh to suppress the cost of labor. In neighboring countries, ethnic Chinese communities are not any closer to the motherland. Chinese-Indonesian director Edwin’s films lament his society’s marginalization of ethnic Chinese but offer little hint of any connection to China. Similarly, Malaysian filmmaker James Lee’s exploration of ethnic Chinese identity in *Ah Beng Returns* (2001) produces little more than cultural pastiche. Gaik Cheng Khoo, an influential commentator on Malaysian cinema, wrote dismissively: “This search for identity and acceptance seems to yield cryptic signs of Chineseness, whether traditional China is represented in [a] gown, or by the communist statements made by the four gangsters in their conversations.”³³ So although Naficy’s definitions of diaspora and exile parallel Berry’s transnational assumptions, one still senses that they are ill-fitting categories for what remain nationally specific experiences in Southeast Asia. Likewise, fractiousness between Malaysia and Indonesia should discline conflation of Malay and Indonesian cultures.

The strongest case for national paradigms comes in fact from the field of Southeast Asian studies. The etymology of “Southeast Asia” itself provides significant reason to retain national borders. The region originated as a geopolitical fabrication of convenience – a mainly American construction during the Cold War. And yet political scientist Donald Emmerson’s seminal essay “‘Southeast Asia’: What’s in a Name?” shows that the region came into

31 Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves*, 5-6.

32 Berry, *China on Screen*, 214; and Berry ed., *Chinese Films in Focus II*, 1-2.

33 Khoo, “Contesting Diasporic Subjectivity,” 179.



being on the strengths of both nationalism and the borders of nation-states. Geographer Terry McGee more recently echoes the idea.

My recent work on the creation of Putrajaya, the new capital of Malaysia, finds that there appears to be a dynamic hybridity of traditional, colonial, and post-colonial ideas that have influenced its creation. I would describe it an architectural expression of the traditional Malay sultanate, cloaked in a post-modern rhetoric of the modern nation state. It leads to a certain scepticism about post-modern arguments to do away with boundaries.³⁴

A certain national-transnational contradiction may be inescapable in this part of the postcolonial world. The fact that filmmakers with authentic national voices are often reliant on transnational funding creates a conflict that Indonesian film scholar May Adadol Ingawanij refers to as “dialectics of independence.”³⁵ All in all, circumstances support the rationale for nationally delineated study. This book adopts a bifocal method of national uniqueness and stylistic interconnectedness similar to Tweedie’s, but with the transnational project a long-term secondary endeavor built on the former. National analysis of cinema makes for a foundation that may be familiar, predictable, and even intellectually unsound. But it remains useful as an initial line of questioning. Tweedie is not unlike Naficy, who nods toward globalization’s “convergence” while simultaneously stressing national “divergence” within accented cinemas. In sum it is prudent to straddle that national versus transnational divide.

Chapter 1, “Postcolonial Spatiality: Singapore Maps Its Cinema,” kicks off this journey through the region in its most affluent society, advanced economy, and vital transportation hub. The only Asian economic “Tiger” of the group, its economic story is most famous for the breathtaking ascension from developing nation to First World status in one generation. It was achieved in the absence of natural resources, limited human resources – namely an uneducated and fractious multi-ethnic population – and the added challenge of being one of the smallest countries in the world by area. The geographical limitations continue to spur a meticulous approach to urban planning, and thus a profoundly spatial impact on people’s lives. It should surprise no one that Singapore’s real estate market is among the world’s most fevered. The state also wields political power through its management of space: urban development, land ownership rights, and

34 McGee, “Many Knowledge(s) of Southeast Asia,” 279.

35 Ingawanij, “Introduction: Dialectics of Independence,” 2-5.

public works. This chapter examines how that micro-management has occurred under the structural influence of Singapore's real and imagined relationship to British colonial rule. Land scarcity invites postcoloniality to impress itself onto the built environment, and produces a geographically inflected condition that continually finds its way onto its national cinema's expressive palette. The study's foray into history, space, and cinema borrows a theoretical compass from Tom Conley's *Cartographic Cinema*. For him, maps in the film image are windows into history that lives beyond cinema, "written in codes and signs that are not those of film; yet they are of a spatial scale not unlike that in which they are portrayed. And they can never be assimilated entirely into the visual narrative or other modes of rhetoric of the films in which they are deployed."³⁶ Singapore's "red dot" moniker originates from a cartographically attuned national hermeneutic, which leads to the discovery of pregnant codes and signs and activated signals of direction and scale. For the chapter's evocative sample of features and shorts, Singapore's postcolonial identity infuses them with spatial discourse in three forms: aerial cartography, affective maps, and colonial atlases.

Chapter 2, "Reorienting Film History Spatially," applies those conclusions to rethink local film historiography and national identity. Spatial thinking triggers an aesthetic reevaluation of recent films, making it easier to bridge Singapore's bifurcated film history. Socio-political readings have cleaved the story of local cinema into two periods: the "golden age" of the 50s and 60s, and the post-90s production revival. Film production lay largely dormant between the earlier boom during the twilight of colonial rule consisting of mostly Malay films made by Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris Studio (which later released Chinese-language features), and the recent creative surge (a mix of melancholic socially critical works, popular comedies, and horror). Independence in the intervening period, along with the deep, pervasive impact of one-party state policies on every aspect of national life, make it too easy to believe that contemporary films are only informed by the authoritarian governance of modern Singapore. This chapter reflects on that critical tendency through the hermeneutic links between the production eras that can appear unobvious. Postcolonial spatiality helps draw them into view.

The consideration of Singapore goes on to mull the relationship that bodies have with the inhabited environment. Positing the non-fiction work of prominent local director Royston Tan for illustrative contrast, it observes the oeuvre of documentarian Tan Pin Pin at length, and finds

36 Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*, 4-5.



a valuable interlocutor who grasps the importance of space to national identity. Her critically incisive and observationally deft films fashion affective poetics of ambivalence, uncertainty, and hiraeth, in expressing nostalgia for a perpetually elusive and perhaps non-existent place. These insights inform a subsequent examination of the unintended ironies created by recent “new wave” narrative fiction films that appropriate the language of alienation popularized by Western art cinemas. Published criticism has been precipitous in reaching for the usual canon, but reframing analysis in spatial terms accomplishes two things. It routes thinking away from mimicry and related tropes like cultural authenticity, subaltern agency, and the like. It also amplifies the voices of films capable of stretching theoretical predicates. They make it possible to see what happens when Deleuzian time-images associated with alienation, helplessness, and the inability to act either within or on one’s physical setting, are conscripted into the service of a culture where subjective existence is bound up ever so tightly with landscape and the structures within. The conclusions help to resolve the postcolonial paradox, in which new wave-inspired films from the revival period try in vain to wrench from their environment, individuals who are closely attached to their surroundings.

With space in far greater abundance, Malaysia’s experience is naturally different but retains a similar substructural tension. Take *Gerhana* (“Eclipse,” 2009), Chinese-Malaysian director James Lee’s contribution to “15Malaysia,” an omnibus short film project involving the country’s notable film and video artists. Selections were curated to represent a socio-politically sensitive view of Malaysia. Set entirely in a hotel room, *Gerhana*’s geographic location is established by the Malay newscast airing on the television. A woman gazes impassively at the screen from the edge of a bed, while her companion picks over his dinner at a desk. The couple commiserates over a series of wretched stories on the broadcast regarding local politics, the state of Malaysia’s democracy, and the “swine flu” epidemic. Stoically, they rue the unlikelihood of change. The specter of global capital is reified in their modern clothes, the hotel room, and its sleek decor. Lee wryly situates his protagonists as disconnected tourists in their own country. The woman is neither ethnically Malay nor Muslim; it is implied that she eats pork. In view of deepening racial schisms in recent times, is miscegenation the reason behind the couple’s marginalization? Their inability to engage and peripheral state of belonging is thus suggestively attributed to globalization. Postcolonial criticism would be accustomed to employ familiar frameworks to a text such as this, including what Homi K. Bhabha would interpret as “in-between-ness.” Writers such as Dirlik, on the other hand, may insert



capital and the influence of First World power into the conversation.³⁷ Both are applicable. Lee cheekily leaves viewers with audio of the television newsreader's final report: "Barack Obama mentioned Malaysia in his Middle Eastern speech. He praises our country as progressive. This is an astounding achievement as the name of our country was mentioned by a famous president." The line evokes Wagner's formulation of the "emulative Occidentalism" in Malaysia's supplicant postcoloniality, within a nationalist brew of pride, modernity, and independence.

The eclipse metaphor injects both spatial and temporal connotations. Much like history itself, it refers to a limited temporal window (when planetary masses align). In that way "Gerhana" hints at Malaysia's unique position defined simultaneously by postcolonial hybridity and global capital. Gaik Cheng Khoo acknowledges the duality in her analysis of Lee. Pondering whether the director's theme of alienation refers to the sectarian Chinese view of local multiethnic realities or to the universal experience of globalization, she realizes that his films' influences and audiences are both global and local.

This openness to diverse theories would substantially enrich discussions of Southeast Asian films, particularly since many parts of Southeast Asia are undergoing processes that follow from intense neo-liberal capitalism, giving rise to possible disillusionment, and repeating the universal condition of alienation under historical capitalism. Still, the universal does not have to preclude the particular, and vice versa.³⁸

Her tone remains non-committal, almost as if obligated however slightly to make a choice. Those instincts may be right. The examples collected in this book may insist that the global and local are always operative, in the sense that Malaysia's thorough involvement in globalization essentially defines its particular postcolonial situation.

Chapter 3, "Postcolonial Cacophonies: Malaysia Senses the World," examines that identity through one of Lee's contemporaries, the late Yasmin Ahmad, a beloved director of melodramatic and interethnic romances who maintained another career as a high-level advertising executive. Her portfolio at the renowned Leo Burnett outfit included spots for the multinational oil and gas company Petronas. Ahmad's best-known work might be the television spots that the conglomerate commissioned. They celebrate

37 Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura*, 73.

38 Khoo, "Smoking, Eating, and Desire," 133.



Malaysia's multiculturalism as a way to commemorate occasions such as *Hari Merdeka* (Independence Day). Her film and advertising work are thematically consistent, and interpretable as a projection of national identity. Situated astride Malaysian and global film culture, Ahmad's fresh model of postcolonial poetics represents both a departure from traditional hybridity tropes, and an indication of the nation's postcolonial-global duality. As a filmmaker, she embodies Malaysia's postcolonial-global nexus. As art, her films perform it through film sound. The manner in which Ahmad exploits multilingual dialogue is not so much an example of the linguistic creolization catalogued by Shohat and Stam in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* – aural hybridity of different cultures, languages, and meanings. On the contrary, her films lift spectators through sound above the local diversity, to confront them with globalization's emptiness. Set in globalized social and cultural milieus, Ahmad stages interethnic squabbles between speakers of different languages. First, using imperfect or absent subtitles, she steers attention away from dialogue's linguistic meaning, toward the purely acoustic pleasures of dueling cultural phonemes or prosody, what language simply sounds like. The resultant national soundscape harbors an aesthetic that transcends the hybridity paradigm associated with postcolonial culture. Ahmad's second predilection, of highlighting characters that speak ethnically incongruent languages, does not require audience comprehension either. It offers a cinematic experience that is thoroughly aural, spatially marginalized, and yet seductively immersive. Through French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening*, and his eponymous writing vis-à-vis globalization in *The Sense of the World* and *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, we discover a phenomenology that speaks to Malaysia's geopolitical "sense of the world."

Chapter 4, "Postcolonial Myths: Indonesia Americanizes Stability," takes up Indonesian postcolonialism, except that the colonial power in question is not the Netherlands, its longtime occupiers. It instead considers Indonesia's colonial relationship with the United States, which in the absence of physical occupation, Edward Said would describe as "indirect." Indonesia's less antagonistic experience with the U.S. falls more in line with its neighbors' view of the British. The Dutch were ousted by revolution. Moreover, the American relationship forged during the Cold War offers a more unimpeded view of Indonesia's place within the history of contemporary capitalism. The participation of Indonesian fighters with U.S. troops in the Vietnam War is not well known. Internally, Cold War exigencies enabled Suharto's militaristic authoritarianism. The violent excesses of his New Order government birthed the regime in trauma, crisis, and horror. Since Suharto, the country's struggling "transition" into a democratic civil society has been



hampered by its inability to acknowledge and move past the killings of 1965-1966.³⁹ The overall impetus to break through that impasse can be felt in two volumes: Zurbuchen's edited collection of essays titled *Beginning to Remember*, and historian Laurie J. Sears's monograph, *Situated Testimonies*. These two books map a passage through psychic infrastructure on a search for historical troves and repressed memory in forgotten lacunae. Psychoanalysis is commonplace methodology in the humanities writ large. But in the Indonesian instance, it is evidence of a dire need to rescue what decades of authoritarianism and trauma have incapacitated: the subjective power to access, recognize and represent the past.

Debates within the left's mixed reception of Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* tend to glide past the film's most germane offering to that recuperative project, the footage shot by perpetrators of Suharto's anti-communist pogrom reenacting their crimes. While this is much more a film about Indonesia than of it, the documentary manages to find itself staring at emblematic processes occurring in a unique part of national postcolonial history. Many understand the scenes to be part of *Arsan and Aminah*, a garish Hollywood-style production from a script for a wartime romance based on a real-life killer's nightmares. Oppenheimer contests that version of events; he maintains that his subjects always only understood that they were shooting those scenes for the documentary and not *Arsan and Aminah*.⁴⁰ But the "found footage" from the latter provides the most eye-catching and surreal moments. Critics may dismiss the director's reenactment premise as facile conceit, but what of the subjects' prerogatives? Should those be discounted out of hand?

Their series of choices in staging psychic narratives is significant in how typical it all is. Documentary theory postulates that reenactments possess the unique ability to access and negotiate trauma specifically through the body, because the corporeal becomes vital when people cannot verbalize memories. Afforded free creative reign, the murderers fashioned a set of yarns inspired by Hollywood's most famous genres: the western, noir, war film, and musical. Using these individual fantasies as points of departure, this chapter charts how the cinematic uncanny that surfaced on the set can assist thinking about the ways that genres serve psycho-political functions elsewhere. Film genre theory girds a hypothesis that Indonesia's genre-dominated cinema reinforced New Order ideology. Hollywood genres Americanized colonial subjects and their memories. Narrative formulae restated the value of

39 Zurbuchen, "Historical Memory in Contemporary Indonesia," 9, 14.

40 Joshua Oppenheimer, communication with the author, 1 August 2018.



predictability, which dovetailed with the premium placed by the New Order on social and political stability. Suharto sold authoritarianism as a necessary condition of order, and exploited fears of communist instability and disorder to legitimize his administration. The mindset left a legacy in postcolonial Indonesian cinema of taking continued comfort in classical narrative closure and resolution. I focus especially on films precipitated in one way or another by the *reformasi* movement, a drive for democratization, openness, and engagement during the post-Suharto period to remake Indonesian society by working through the traumas and violence of life under the New Order. Based on those close readings, this book identifies Americanism functioning as psychic conduits and historical indices in coming-of-age stories, through the discursive beats and rhythms of the road film.

Cold Wars and Methodological Debates

This book promises only a partial inspection of the Southeast Asian catalog, but the historical and aesthetic paradigms it uncovers are potentially portable and useful for further explorations of films from the region. To a degree, this treatment of film texts is informed by Bordwell's measured approach to film poetics, which identifies key "conventions at the intersection of conceptual distinction and social customs," and considers all modes of study: analytical, theoretical and historical." But where Bordwell insists that historical poetics entail empirical research into specific circumstances of production, the following chapters adopt a more liberal definition of historical context that includes sociopolitical, political economic, or geopolitical conditions of postcoloniality – even if he would dismiss them as "an explanatory prop" or crude cultural reflections.⁴¹

Over those objections, this book is also inspired by Ann Laura Stoler's model of how colonial history exerts pressure on the present. Imperial demands and priorities, she argues, can persist in logics and affective sensibilities that are not articulated or sensed in evident ways. Deviating from "prevailing themes of colonial history as we know it," she suggests that the past can be refashioned, reinscribed, displaced, and amplified on lived conditions today.⁴² More important, Stoler brings attention to where postcoloniality manifests intangibly, in moments and spaces that we have not come to anticipate.

41 Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 12-13, 15, 30.

42 Stoler, *Duress*, 4, 5, 7, 11, 13, 27.



In thinking about how those impositions surface in national cinema poetics, the next chapters withdraw any claim to be performing comprehensive examinations of either nation or cinema. This is not that kind of treatise. It does not canvass every precinct, but the textual readings that follow will shepherd you through a survey of films that make national statements. The Indonesian films for example, are of the transition to liberalism and openness after Suharto. In Malaysia to the north, films like *Gerhana* were curated to represent the nation, while Yasmin Ahmad's personal style was conscripted into a national multiculturalist discourse. And back across the causeway in Singapore, the works of Tan Pin Pin are self-evident studies of its national condition. For the less obvious choices that remain, perhaps film historian Ben Singer put it best in an essay on Japanese cinema.

It would be ludicrous to hold up just one brief sequence in a film as somehow capable of encapsulating the aesthetic essence of an entire national cinema. There obviously are too many different types of scene, in too many different films, made in too many different directorial styles, period styles, and genre styles, for any one instance to somehow illustrate or stand in for the unimaginably vast array of cinematic materializations constituting any national tradition – let alone an unusually prolific and sustained major tradition like Japan's. And yet, there are certain moments in Japanese films that strike one as stylistically so distinctive, so seemingly emblematic, and so hard to imagine having been created elsewhere, that one finds oneself drawn toward an expository position that comes dangerously close to the one just discounted. At least, to rephrase with slight hedging, one is prompted to insist that any viable encapsulation of the aesthetics of Japanese film would need to encompass or account for the cinematic specimen in question.⁴³

One can never do enough to assuage anti-essentialist critics of “national” cinema; Identifying distinctive qualities is sufficiently straightforward, but ascertaining if a text is truly “emblematic” requires definitive knowledge of the “national.” In the way that Shohat and Stam parse the term “postcolonial,” we must always remember to qualify slippery terms, be wary of essentialism, and account for historical contingency.

Let us then proceed with caution on a project about postcolonial poetics upon clarifying its presumptions and parameters. Social conditions within these national cultures can be adequately understood by weighing salient

43 Singer, “Triangulating Japanese Film Style,” 33.



political and economic factors. But the poststructuralist aversion to essentialism with which critics contest the validity of national hermeneutics is layered with suspicions that national cinema studies are Orientalist. The early critical engagements with Japanese cinema remain excellent reminders of how Anglo-American film studies exoticized and homogenized cultures that appear distant from what was familiar. For its part, this project occasionally finds itself in an uneasy position of trying to transcend hybridity as a critical method, but thoroughly aligned with both the poststructuralist trope's utility in enacting "dynamic departures from colonial paradigms of knowledge and power," as well as studies like Ponzanesi and Waller's of cinema's engagements "with history, subjectivity, epistemology, and the political ramifications of all of these."⁴⁴ There can only be opposition to colonialism's exploitation, militarism, Orientalism, racism, and intellectual hegemony. Nevertheless, metaphors involving infants and soapy water come to mind.

This study plainly relies on critical theory and continental philosophy written in the West to address undertheorized films. In these instances, it admittedly shelves Chen's call to look to Asia for points of reference. What are the implications of doing so with non-Western films, even if they nurse colonial affection, or spring from countries that are modernizing with linear economic models? The concluding chapter swerves directly into that debate in hopes of proposing methods for future study of Southeast Asian cinema, while providing a historical appreciation of how we renew our approaches. These films may just be uniquely qualified to facilitate the task that Chen terms, deimperializing theory.⁴⁵ He believes that Asian localities should avert any imperialized overreliance on the West for frames of reference, especially when the aim is to generate self-understanding. Instead, the production of knowledge must expand interrogatory perspectives to include more adjacent spaces and neighboring regions. To an extent, the first installments on that order have arrived in the form of scholarship in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean film theory, or with Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires*, a book in which the author fashions vernacular Buddhism into a theoretical method for Thai film and video. Theory should not be applied as universal knowledge on passive subaltern objects. To that end this book treats films from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia as interlocutors of active subjectivities fully capable of responding in kind – to talk back, as it were – first and foremost to the postcolonial theory canon that can come

44 Ponzanesi and Waller, "Introduction," 1.

45 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 2-3.



up frustratingly short. In fulfilling these conditions among others, Chen believes that theory's problems can be ameliorated. He puts forth an agenda replete with a familiar vocabulary – deconstruction, decentering, relativizing, and so on – and reminds us that Eurocentrism cannot be completely undone so long as material power, resources, and wealth remain unevenly distributed.⁴⁶ To wit, we must marry theoretical critique with real world intervention. This echo of Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach reinforces Sears's recommendations in *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects*, a case to rejuvenate Southeast Asian studies by “deparochializing” the field and encouraging greater interaction “between scholars of and from the region.”⁴⁷

At the same time, Chen pushes colonial subjects to “generate self-understanding in relation to neighboring spaces as well as the region as a whole, while removing the imperative to understand ourselves through the imperial eye.” He is not alone in sounding that call to “actively acknowledge [the West] as a part of the formation of our subjectivity.”⁴⁸ The final chapter sounds out the writings of Rey Chow, Stuart Hall, and Naoki Sakai, who express that very need. This film study is written in that self-critical spirit of openness and willingness to submit to scrutiny. Thereafter, we become better able to assess the intentions of any who deign to apply theory under pretensions of neutrality, objectivity, or universal knowledge. Basically, being ready to accept critiques of Eurocentrism is a form of defense against it. Fair enough. My recourse to French theory owes itself to the University of Iowa's particular legacy in film studies, and reflects the years I spent there in postgraduate training. I wrote this post-tenure book ensconced in the American academy and supported by endowed fellowships at Stanford and the National University of Singapore. On those well-manicured campuses, I was pampered in flush research institutes housed in splendid edifices devoted to area studies. To borrow Chen's term, the views from the offices they gave me would feel like an “imperial eye.” My path to that station extends from genealogical roots in Indonesia and Singapore, where I attended a secondary school named for the country's British founder Sir Stamford Raffles. For four years, I shuttled to classes past his noble bust that kept imperious watch over the main quadrangle. Is the biology degree from Duke that followed the reason why I am instinctively loath to foreclose on Kantian universalism and brash metanarratives? To what extent has that life imperialized the way I think about the world?

46 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 2-3, 217-222, 253.

47 Bonura and Sears, “Introduction,” 3, 9.

48 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 2, 223.



In this moment, I find much to identify with in Chow's description of being "caught, in a cross-cultural context, between the gaze that represents her and the image that is supposed to be her."⁴⁹ I cannot claim to write from the perspective of a subaltern just as it would be absurd to think that I do not. From a position of relative privilege, I know that this manuscript is both an exercise of cultural capital and expression of political interests. By all means, consider this book's relationship to those traditional and knowledge economies. But when Deleuze scholar David Martin-Jones performs a similar self-reflexive nod in the introduction to *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, he describes himself as "just one British scholar's point of view on one French scholar's point of view."⁵⁰ I would rather not concede that much. These are dialectical divulgements, an admission that this could be imperializing knowledge, as well as a petition for the benefit of doubt. Of course, it would be awfully expedient to barter a paragraph's worth of biodata for the license to wield Western theory with reckless impunity. The conclusion, itself a self-conscious contemplation of methodology, shows that it cannot be and is not that disingenuously simple. For now, the gesture acknowledges the "contradictory, complicitous" spot I occupy, in accordance with Chow's dictum that "if 'the West' as such has become an ineradicable environment, it is not whether we 'pay homage' to it but how we do it that matters."⁵¹

This book examines the intellectual origins of that proposition in the final chapter. If analysis and cultural studies are structured by colonial or imperial priorities that reside in critical theory, area studies, and postcolonial theory, the solution is not to avoid theory but to change how it is done. Part of that involves revisiting our ideas of what the response to Western imperialism should be. Is opposition still the only acceptable position when postcolonial subjects declare that they have no hangups, or that the Japanese were worse? It behooves us to pause, listen, empathize, and grapple with the oddity of that situation.

Ultimately, these dilemmas may be what is most Southeast Asian, let alone postcolonial, of all. Put another way, the region might just be the most suitable location to tend these political and epistemological matters, to resume the pursuit for a remedy to Spivak's proverbial question. This could be that part of the proceedings to postulate that postcolonial subjects – liminal, between borders, moving, unstable, contingent – are auspiciously placed to reach the self-awareness that Chen describes, of one's position with respect to other

49 Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 32

50 Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, 16.

51 Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, xv, 32.



cultures, most of all the West. In their own ways, both Naficy and Marks share that conviction. For Naficy, global capitalism facilitates population and cultural flows that engender accented subjects enriched with knowing and perception. In comparison, Marks sees globalization as an adversary that threatens to commodify and diminish cultural difference, but she remains optimistic that “intercultural life will continue to produce new and unmanageable hybrids, given the volatility of sensuous experience.”⁵²

Perhaps postcolonial poetics can deliver some limited salvation through cinema. If that happens in a way that authorizes these films to stake a claim for their uniqueness, which locus would it occupy within film studies as an enterprise? That very question, which Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto and Stephen Teo have ambitiously posed about “Japanese cinema” and “Asian cinema” respectively, could be constructed differently as a result.⁵³ Southeast Asian cinema studies would enjoy an advantage of contemporaneity, for Yoshimoto and Teo were both writing after Japanese and Asian cinemas’ currencies had been circulating for some time. Their insights bequeath a specific benefit, the heightened awareness of being broadly Othered or taken as a particularized variation on “world cinema.” Only time will tell if this means that Southeast Asian cinema will come to enjoy the ability to define itself, but at a juncture when the sister discipline of Southeast Asian studies is so keenly aware of its etymology and heredity in Cold War area studies, does this equip Southeast Asian cinema with the potential for geopolitically informed criticism? As this book re-sounds the calls to expand postcolonial film studies and renew its aesthetic possibilities, those ineluctable responsibilities await.

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⁵² Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 243-244.

⁵³ Yoshimoto, Kurosawa; Teo, *The Asian Cinema Experience*.



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