

Filipino Indie by Way of Southeast Asian Independent Cinema

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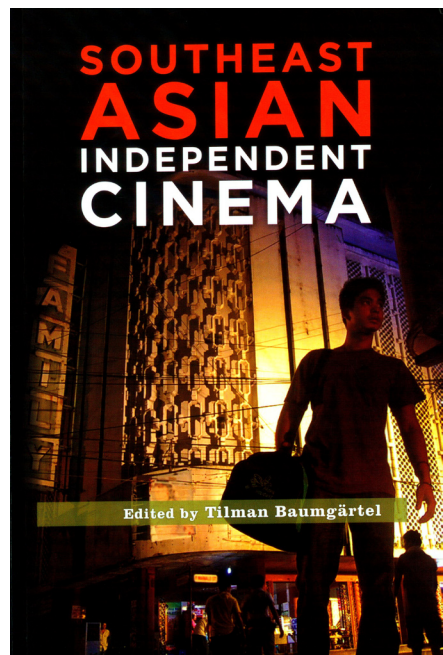
A Review of

Southeast Asian Independent Cinema

Edited by Tilman Baumgärtel

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Tilman Baumgärtel's *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (2012) is an invaluable contribution to scholarship on the independent ("indie") filmmaking revolution in the Southeast Asian region. Its exploratory project – integrative film scholarship in the region – fleshes out critical issues and discourses in independent cinema, such as its definition and diversity of forms, global context, practitioners (particularly their artistic manifestos and insights on their own filmmaking), crossroads with economy (e.g., mainstream cinema) and culture (e.g., religion), and prospects. Through this venture, the book reinforces a macro perspective in looking at independent cinema, and poses a significant question: Is it possible for Southeast Asian people, albeit their divergent political, economic, and social milieus, to find common ground – as regards to how their history,



technology, and culture have determined production modes and images/representations – in various independent cinemas in the region? This book review uses contemporary Filipino independent cinema as a vantage point in seeking how Southeast Asian scholars, filmmakers, and other stakeholders can learn from each other in a mutually constructive manner.

The book features eight critical essays, five documents, and eight interviews with Southeast Asian independent filmmakers. The reader will notice that some Southeast Asian countries are not explicitly represented in the book. As the editor of the book, Baumgärtel appropriately addresses this question in his introduction of *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (2012). He notes, “And finally, it needs to be pointed out that a number of countries that are considered to be part of Southeast Asia have so far had no or only a very small part in the recent digital film revolution: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, East Timor and Brunei have for a number of different reasons (state censorship, lack of film culture, extreme poverty) not participated in the recent upsurge of filmmaking that can be observed in their neighboring countries.” (“Introduction: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia,” 2012, p. 8). The reader recognizes that since the countries named above have so far not reached “critical mass” in terms of their participation in the independent cinema phenomenon, the book engages itself in the specificities and cross-dynamics among the following Southeast Asian nations that at the time of the book’s publication, mainly characterize Southeast Asian independent cinema: Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

John A. Lent’s essay, “Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Independent of What?” (2012) and Tilman Baumgärtel’s “Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds: Independent Film from Southeast Asia in the Global Mediascape” (2012i) critically examine the very concept of independent cinema and provide a conceptual framework that can be used to contextualize the phenomenon of Southeast Asian independent cinema. The book then proceeds to critical essays that focus on specific national cinemas in Southeast Asia. The reader, while gaining considerable knowledge from the case studies, ultimately develops a much more holistic perspective as he or she compares and contrasts the issues, contexts, discourses and prospects of the independent cinemas in Southeast Asian nations, as exemplified in these critical essays: Alfian Bin Sa’at’s “Hinterland, Heartland, Home: Affective Topography in Singapore Films” (2012); Ben Slater’s “Stealing Moments: A History of the Forgotten in Recent Singaporean Film”(2012); Natalie Böhler’s “Fiction, Interrupted: Discontinuous Illusion and Regional Performance Traditions in Contemporary Thai Independent Film”(2012); Intan Paramaditha’s “Cinema, Sexuality and

Censorship in Post-Soeharto Indonesia” (2012); Tito Imanda’s “Independent versus Mainstream Islamic Cinema in Indonesia: Religion Using the Market or Vice Versa?” (2012); and David Hanan’s “Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia: Aryo Danusiri’s *Lukas’ Moment*” (2012).

The five documents presented in the book – “Four Manifestos” by Khavn de la Cruz (2012), “Why *Ciplak* ended up being made” by Khairil M. Bahar (2012), “*Singapore Gaga Tours Singapore*” by Tan Pin Pin (2012), “The Downside of Digital: A German Media Critic Plays Devil’s Advocate” by Tilman Baumgärtel et al. (2012), and “I Sinema Manifesto” by Djayadinigrat et al. (2012) – are significant in analyzing the socio-cultural nuances of the independent filmmaking revolution in Southeast Asia and in approximating an understanding of the notion of “indie spirit” in Southeast Asian nations. To exemplify, the document by Tilman Baumgärtel et al. (2012), which was originally published in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in September 2006, records not just the article itself, but also, quite significantly, the reactions of the Filipino independent filmmakers and producers – Mike Sandejas, Emman dela Cruz, Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil, Rico Maria Ilarde, Paolo Villaluna and Jim Libiran – who sent their responses to the newspaper because of the uproar caused by Baumgärtel’s article. Through the said responses, the reader fleshes out the passionate level of engagement of Filipino independent filmmakers in both the digital revolution and the indie filmmaking revolution.

The eight interview articles featured in the book elucidate the statements of independent filmmakers as artists, citizens (local and global), and public intellectuals. Of the eight, Baumgärtel conducted seven interviews documented in the book; the other interview article is Davide Cazzaro’s “The Page and the (Video) Camera: Conversation with Amir Muhammad” (2012). Baumgärtel uses quotes that embody his interviewees as the titles of his interview articles, namely, “An inexpensive film should start with an inexpensive story” Interview with Brillante Mendoza and Armando Bing Lao; “Digital is liberation technology” Interview with Lav Diaz; “I make films for myself” Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul; “I love making films, but not getting films made” Interview with Pen-ek Ratanaruang; “I want the people of Indonesia to see a different point of view, whether they agree with it or not” Interview with Nia Dinata; “I do not have anything against commercial films” Interview with Eric Khoo; and “I want you to forget about the race of the protagonists half an hour into the film” Interview with Yasmin Ahmad.

The easiest definition for an independent film deals simply with production mode (economic): that it is produced by a film outfit or an organization outside the mainstream. In the context of contemporary Philippine cinema, this means

that any Filipino movie not made by Star Cinema, Regal Films, Viva Films or GMA films is an independent film. The expansion and maturation of the new wave of Filipino indie films – which largely defined the output of Philippine cinema in the 2000s – has opened up various connotations and attributions of characteristics. Some would say that an indie film is tantamount to an art film: that it should be anti-establishment; that it should resist mainstream formulas, genres, or even narrative structure; that it should experiment with form, style and even the medium itself; that it should be accessible only to artists and hard-core film lovers; that it should be shot digitally, not on celluloid; and/or that it should impose upon itself the mission of rising above all the “trash” that commercial cinema has produced. In actual practice, these pronouncements do not apply to all contemporary indie films; this shattering of the said assumptions about indie films is one of most significant insights that the book provides, especially for novice film buffs. Nonetheless, a considerable chunk of the films’ audiences consider the above characteristics or any combination thereof as defining ingredients of what an independent film is. Any study on Asian independent cinema should deal with the discourse between the independent cinema of its nation and its people – the cinema audiences and cultural stakeholders. The economic (production mode) definition of indie cinema, while clearly denoting what is independent cinema, is too simple. This is where the book comes in strongly, since it facilitates gaining a wealth of insights by comparing and progressively building on how different Southeast Asian countries construe their own independent cinemas, in relation to various “others:” their neighbors in the region, mainstream films and the West.

In his introduction of the book, Baumgärtel (2012a) – while recognizing that there is one country in Southeast Asia, the Philippines, which had a tradition of independent filmmaking before the year 2000 – states that it was the New Wave of art house films in the 2000s that put Southeast Asian cinema on the map internationally (p. 1), wherein the filmmakers associated with this movement drew attention to the region whose rich and diverse film culture and history are so far not part of the “Grand Narrative of World Cinema” (p. 2). He affirms that the aim of *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (2012) is “to document this new development that is a genuine outcome of the democratization and liberalization of film production brought about by digital technologies” (p. 3). The book succeeds in its project because it does more than document the rise of independent cinema in various countries in Southeast Asia. It “curates” its content – critical essays by film scholars, interviews with filmmakers and some key documents created within the indie film phenomenon in contemporary Southeast Asia – in such a way that the reader will appreciate the beauty and the

complexity of the interweaving histories, discourses, images and representations among the countries in the region.

Southeast Asian film scholars and filmmakers can benefit from each other by comparing and contrasting their experiences in independent cinema, in a similar way that food connoisseurs and chefs can benefit from learning the cuisine – histories, the paradigms of ingredients and cooking processes, and implications on culture and identity – of their neighboring countries in the region. The point is not to merge Thai, Malaysian, Singaporean, Indonesian, Filipino cuisine into a monolithic Southeast Asian cuisine. The essence is for each national cuisine to recognize that amidst their distinctiveness from each other, there are common ingredients and some shared techniques. Consider, for example, the use of coconut in cuisines in the region. This ingredient gives a distinctive Southeast Asian flavor – a possible initial common ground in talking about the Southeast Asian way of life – but expresses itself differently in the cuisines of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines. A cuisine-cinema analogy is in order. We can look for ingredients (characters, themes, genres, issues, discourses) and techniques (especially in manipulating space-time that may resist Western models) that are common in Southeast Asia but express themselves differently in various countries in the region. Indeed, both culinary art and cinema art are salient expressions of culture and identity.

The book opens up interest, discourse and jump-off points that readers can use to make sense of Southeast Asian independent cinema. The book uses an eclectic approach in introducing its readers to filmmakers, including Apichatpong, Wisit, Nonzee Nimibutr and Pen-ek Ratanaruang from Thailand; Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, James Lee and Ho Yuhang from Malaysia; Royston Tan and Tan Pin Pin from Singapore; Riri Riza, Nia Dinata and Edwin from Indonesia; and Lav Diaz, Khavn de la Cruz, Raya Martin and Brillante Mendoza from the Philippines. The reader discovers that these seemingly disparate filmmakers, geopolitically separated by country of origin, share common contexts (ranging from lack of government support to state repression of cinema), issues (e.g., evasiveness of defining the concept of independent, space for women filmmakers, alienation of the mass audience to independent films), and, perhaps, a common destiny – as regards evolving digital platforms, and coming to terms with their role in nation-building, identity formation and even social change.

As for Filipinos, through the book we can get significant insight into Filipino indie cinema by reading about how the eminent scriptwriter Armando “Bing” Lao and celebrated filmmaker Brillante Mendoza respond to a question on “a

frequent accusation against Philippine Independent Cinema: that their films are mere ‘poverty porn’ that exploits the troubled life of the Philippine masses in order to gain international recognition in movie circles” (p. 156) in an interview by Baumgärtel (2012b). This discourse can be enriched by looking at another interview by Baumgärtel with Indonesian director Nia Dinata who defies the notion of what art-house films from the Third World are supposed to be like by not focusing on poverty and slum life (Baumgärtel, 2012h, p. 202). Back to the former interview, the reader also gains important background information on how Bing Lao developed the real-time approach in the narrative design used by many contemporary Filipino independent films. The reader then connects the thread on cinematic execution of modes of time-space-reality with another national cinema, say Thai cinema, which, in the words of Natalie Böhler (2012), in her article in the book, “as a result of its intellectual history, however ‘realism’ still means something fundamentally different in the Thai context, based on representations rather than verisimilitude, or, in semiotic terms, on the signifier rather than the signified” (p. 64).

To conclude, Tilman Baumgärtel’s *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (2012) is a springboard to more film scholarship, for it is practically a call to film scholars to delve into the independent cinema as an exciting field of research. It makes the film scholar want to consolidate, analyze and write about, for example, the political economies of the NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) and the SEA (Southeast Asia) Competition of the Cinemanila International Film Festival, and integrate this with the findings of the Cinemalaya Film Congress in 2011 (theme: “Building Bridges across Asia through Films”). It makes the Southeast Asian filmmaker consider artists from the region as brothers and sisters who may have divergent paths and styles but are unquestionably linked via their love for cinema. The book inspires the readers--many of whom, it is hoped, are Southeast Asian scholars, filmmakers, and cineastes themselves--to “process” and write about their observations, analyses and practice. This will lead to more and more academic discourse on Southeast Asian film scholarship and a powerful assertion of presence in the scholarship on World Cinema that is currently dominated by the West (i.e., Europe and North America).

Ultimately, it is hoped, that the blossoming of independent cinema production in Southeast Asia will also find a parallel revolution in film scholarship in the form of more books, journal articles, and e-media that will help us Southeast Asians understand our own national cinemas – and ourselves – by appreciating our interconnectedness via independent cinema in the region.

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