

Cinema and the Archives in Southeast Asia

This special issue of *Plaridel* comprises a cross-section of papers originally presented at the 2012 (7th) conference of the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas (ASEAC), which took as its theme the broader concept of the archive in relation to Southeast Asian film. In choosing “The Politics, Practices and Poetics of the Archive” as the focus, the ASEAC tapped in to what had been a rising exploration of the concept across a broad range of fields, and it is hardly surprising that film studies was and has continued to be a discipline where this critical engagement has had particular purchase, for starters given that film is itself a key archival medium. And yet as significant as the topic has been across the sub-fields of film studies (now not only the focus of much scholarship, but also a component of many post-graduate programs and of such annual events as the Orphan Film Symposium at New York University and the EYE International Conference at Amsterdam’s EYE Filmmuseum), it holds particular salience and resonance for the domain of Southeast Asian cinema: While on the one hand, the region’s own film archives have been especially at risk owing to sundry factors of climate, economics, and politics; on the other hand, the region’s archival records have been a matter of on-going urgency and attention owing to highly contested, fraught issues and conflicts in late 20th century history (witness the continued contestations over the modern historical record in, for example, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Singapore).

Such a doubled problematic—of archival vulnerability and historical contestation—indeed registers across the breadth of presentation topics at the conference. Papers at the event, which was held at the National Museum of Singapore, ranged from discussions of practical difficulties of archiving, archival access, and film preservation in the region; to considerations of the relationship between film and politically charged regional history; to more abstract analyses of the philosophies of differing archival approaches. The conference had a particularly strong focus on case studies from Indonesia and Cambodia and featured a special screening of a newly restored 35mm print of the 1954 Indonesian classic film *Lewat Djam Malam* (After the Curfew, directed by Usmar Ismail). Other highlights included plenary addresses by Bliss Cua Lim and Thomas Doherty, a panel on “Contemporary Challenges for the Archive” with archivists from across the region, and tours of local archives and museums in Singapore.

The selection of papers in this issue of *Plaridel* opens with Annette Hamilton’s examination of the circulation of archival film images from the years of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia. Hamilton focuses on the unclear provenance of many of such images and the varied ends for which the footage has been deployed, in order to highlight the complex ethical issues that arise in conjunction with the use of archival material in documentaries—and ultimately to argue for documentarians to take responsibility to ensure full transparency on such matters. In his paper, Eric Galmard continues the consideration of the ethics of the deployment of archival materials in documentary films, though here with a particular concern to issues of the agency of victims of referenced mass killings. After laying out some of the debates in the issues of representing both perpetrators and victims of mass killings in World War II and Khmer Rouge-era Cambodia, Galmard makes a case for Rithy Panh’s careful avoidance of certain pitfalls of representation in his use of archival material in his filmic representations of Khmer Rouge atrocities and their aftermath.

With David Hanan’s detailed case study of the Indonesian national film archive, we shift from more abstract issues of the ethics of the deployment of archival materials to the very concrete, practical problems of developing, preserving, and providing access to archival collections. Hanan’s account illustrates the serious difficulties of preserving film archives in literal (meteorological) and figurative (political and financial) climates that do not favor them—conditions that have been particularly acute in, but are by no means unique to, the Indonesian case. Gerhard Jaiser’s study of the relationship between Thai cinema and Thai popular music provides an illustrative example of just how crucial such archival collections are to the piecing together of cultural histories, as Jaiser’s concise narrative of the

development of different idioms of Thai popular music (and their status within Thai popular films) over the years requires that he make repeated recourse to various kinds of archival materials (such as contemporary film dubbing scripts) in order to derive historical detail. Jaiser also makes the case that Thai films themselves stand a priori as an archive of other dimensions of contemporary Thai popular culture—in this case Thai music.

In his closing essay, Dag Yngvesson extends the notion of the archive still further, as he is concerned not so much with the archive as a literal or material entity, but rather with the characteristics of the archive as an abstraction and a metaphor, a vehicle for apprehending the operations of narratives which (in archive-like fashion) store and provide access to concepts from across history. Yngvesson's more specific goal (by way of this archival conceit) is to provide an account of the sophisticated evocation of the forces of political and historical causality evident in a 1970 Indonesian melodrama (*Bernafas dalam lumpur* [Breathing in Mud], directed by Turino Dunaidy), which he finds makes for productive comparison with (likewise both popularly oriented and politically attuned) Hollywood thrillers in the decade that follows it.

The 7th ASEAC Conference that gave rise to this issue of *Plaridel* was made possible by a generous grant from the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Additional venue, financial and in-kind contributions and assistance were kindly provided by the National Museum of Singapore, the Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund at NTU, the French Embassy in Singapore/Institut français de Singapour, and the Asian Film Archive.

In terms of the individuals who mounted the conference, special thanks go to my organizing committee co-chairs Tan Bee Thiam and Jasmine Trice for their devoted hard work; as well as to the other committee members Karen Chan, Chew Tee Pao, Zu Boon Low, and Wenjie Zhang for their contributions. Acknowledgements also go to the ASEAC and to its initial paper selection committee, comprised of Sophia Harvey, Gaik Khoo, and Jasmine Trice.



Adam Knee
Issue Editor

