

the trajectories of film in other regions, nations, and influential locales in the Global South.

ARCHIPELAGIC AESTHETICS, THE NATION, AND FISSURED POSTCOLONIAL IMAGES

A question that is repeatedly raised across this book is how the materiality, aesthetics, and discourses of Southeast Asian film history can be used to critically expand the established conventions and theoretical paradigms of film studies and other fields. In the most basic sense, my findings in Southeast Asia suggest an intriguing distinction from conventional scholarly narratives of technocultural astonishment and stark epistemic shifts wrought by the arrival of motion pictures on the world's Eastern and Southern shores. In Ella Shohat's and Robert Stam's survey and analysis of the aesthetics and politics of global cinemas, for example, films are understood to create a fraught, alienating double consciousness across the decolonizing world. Via imported Hollywood and European movies, cinema proffers a "linear, comprehensible destiny" (2014:102) as a shining symbolic tool of liberation that is in fact illusory: the ideal images of smooth, homogeneous modernity it sells are at odds with the messy, fragmented realities of decolonizing societies. The mismatch, furthermore, implies a lack in such "underdeveloped" audiences for their seeming inability to achieve or comply with imposed Western standards. Especially for the many groups who were brought together by European conquest in the first place, Shohat and Stam argue that cinema's clarity of vision is premised on hiding the facts of its underlying paradoxes and conflicts of interest.

The result is what they term a "fissured colonial spectator" (103), one goaded by mass media to recognize and conquer a "foreignness" that, in most of the imported films that dominated markets in the Global South, is associated with how non-Europeans are presented on the screen. What is ostensibly foreign in the modern discourse of films consumed by colonized spectators is thus the colonized themselves, leading to a crisis of identification. Brian Larkin's more geographically targeted study of Nigeria makes a concurrent point. He argues that the implementation of electricity, radio, and mobile cinema units in Northern Hausa regions in the 1930s and 1940s functioned as an irresistibly alluring "colonial sublime"—a politically charged spectacle of technological achievement (and liberation) that caused much local conflict and consternation on its arrival but then quickly cast its spell on Hausa society, triggering a broad epistemic shift. For Larkin, the Westernized technoaesthetic regime that resulted was especially influential on nationalist leaders, who initially fought its implementation but soon reversed course and "internaliz[ed] . . . its logic" (2008:8). The result was long-standing cultural, political, and identitarian divisions similar to those identified by Shohat and Stam elsewhere in the Global South.

As Larkin, Shohat and Stam, Miriam Hansen (1999, 2000, 2012), and many others understand broader processes of development and contestation throughout the world, cinema has consistently been a medium through which the spread of Western modernity, and the sublime technological advances associated with it, are experienced as a series of "shocks." Packaged and exported together with other emergent technologies and Western conceptions of modernization and rationalization, cinema is capable of disrupting the continuity of older aesthetic patterns, exerting a "levelling impact on indigenous cultures" while "challeng[ing] prevailing social and sexual arrangements and advanc[ing] new possibilities of identity and cultural styles" (Hansen 2000:12).¹¹ Among the most important sources of disruption and shock, in which cinema and various other mass media are heavily implicated, is the reorganization of postcolonial and non-Western parts of the world into nation-states that are assumed to impose a Western epistemic outlook in their basic design and function. For Shohat and Stam, the eventual emergence of what they call "Third Worldist" filmmaking represents a broad critical response to the psychological, political, and aesthetic schisms instituted by the rapid formation of modern nations in the Global South and of the more-or-less homogeneous national cinemas that correspond to them.

If the majority of Third Worldist films then come to construct "a peculiar realm of irony where words and images are seldom taken at face value [and] . . . techniques of metacinema and reflexivity have been virtually ubiquitous" (Shohat and Stam 2014:279), it is the result of an accumulated lack of trust in the fissured images and unreconcilable identities proffered by Hollywood and Europe and by the national films that are argued to take after them. The tactic of decoding and deconstructing classical Western imagery is in some ways similar to what we have seen so far in Southeast Asia. Yet the experience of real shock and sense of lack, trauma, and other negative psychic complexes that Shohat and Stam and others attach to the coming of cinema and nation appears distinct from the playful, subversive reflections on political, economic, and aesthetic compulsion that characterize the films of Akup or the Malayan writer-director-actor P. Ramlee, for example. From the first inklings of Southeast Asian "national" cinemas in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the work of regional filmmakers displayed a presumption that cinematic imagery is characterized by fakery and construction and should be taken and enjoyed as such. In Shohat and Stam's analysis, by contrast, it is normally only after decades of overdetermined nationhood and co-opted film production that the psychic splits associated with Third Worldism can "reappear in a liberatory, anticolonialist register" in the form of conscious hybridity and politically barbed syncretism (8). The eventual emergence of these "oppositional" aesthetic regimes, understood to be immersed in a common global struggle against the influence of Hollywood, is what also finally contributes to the questioning of the imported-yet-inexorable logic of the nation itself.

The immediate questioning of national ideals, sly self-reflexivity around formal and generic borrowing, and demonstrably “calmer” (if still jumpy and compulsive) reception of cinema that my study shows throughout Southeast Asia thus stands as something of a global anomaly. Very few Southeast Asian examples of “Third Worldism” are cited by Shohat and Stam; outside of India, Asian films overall are sparse in their otherwise broad study. Krishna Sen, among the most influential nonnative scholars of Indonesian cinema, concurs: “Indonesian radicalism and ‘Third Cinema’ (both as movements and as sets of ideas) seem to have by-passed each other” (Sen 2003:147). Yet despite this distinction, in the broader picture of Indonesian cinema that emerges in Sen’s work, its development is painted in more familiar strokes. In her seminal *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (1994), for example, Sen frames the arrival of motion pictures in Indonesia in the conventional terms set by other studies of film and globalization: as a modern process of “changes, interruptions and disruptions” (1994:3) that bring about epistemic shifts and sharp departures from the past. The question I take up here—why Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations have not responded to such disruptions in the more typically “Third Worldist” manner outlined by Shohat and Stam and others—is left open by Sen.

Perhaps the problem is indeed a “national” one. Sen’s exclusive focus on Indonesian cinema as a product of modern nationhood leads her to view the possibility of links with the historical conditions of media and aesthetics in the region with suspicion. To do so, she argues, would be to imagine film or other mass media as drawing on a “putative national cultural past.” This, furthermore, “may well mean that we fall into an essentialist . . . mistake of emphasizing continuities and universalities within a national cinema” (1994:3). For Sen, the formation of a nation relegates the cultural and aesthetic logics of the past to the status of archaic myths and artifacts. In the modern present, these are, if anything, decontextualized beyond recognition or co-opted by the state to support its image of national identity. “In what sense,” she asks, “is the ancient, pre-colonial available to the [contemporary] popular audience?” (1994:3). In Sen’s analysis, the past has largely vanished from the visual regimes of modern nationhood.

Seeking to move beyond this impasse, this book looks at aesthetics in the archipelagic context of nations that are understood to be shaped by regional histories and powerful subnational territories, as well as by conventional trends of development and Westernization.¹² Looking at Southeast Asia in relation to its formative transpacific struggles and alliances, I follow Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins in their focus on the trajectory of emergent nations outside the binaries of East and West by producing “new sets of relationships based on heritage that may be even stronger than those of nation and citizenship.” Similar to my analysis of Southeast Asia, the translocal and regional spaces defined by such connections are seen by Nguyen and Hoskins as inseparable from “a complicated history of competition, conflict, and negotiation with the west, with each other, and with their own minorities” (2014:12).

As I have begun to show, from a regional—and, indeed, transregional or transoceanic—perspective, procedures and understandings of cinema function in complex and conventionally unpredictable ways. They attach themselves to discourses, texts, and practices that reach beyond, before, deep within, and potentially *after* the nation and its expected role as a mirror or specter of Western influence. Looking at cinema and other media this way aims to interrogate the lingering myth in which nation formation is understood as an absolute historical cut—one into which potentially useful and relevant elements of the past are too often understood to simply vanish, leaving important questions about the status of national cinemas unanswerable. Engaging the cataclysmic, "leveling" incursions of cinema and nation in terms of regional *continuities* of long, prenational histories filled with various disruptions, I position the coming of modernity and national cinemas in Southeast Asia as an enabling paradox: a disruption that is always already expected.

As Hassan Muthalib puts it in the context of Malaya, because of the pervasive influence of local/regional aesthetic strategies and patterns, "the link with [our] historical and cultural past was . . . maintained and so the arrival of cinema did not result in a cultural shock for the locals" (2013:2). Seen in this way, Southeast Asian films of the 1950s might be more comparable with what Shohat and Stam term the "Post-Third Worldist" (2014:292), a state of aesthetics that follows and builds on an earlier "stage" characterized by a more direct oppositional stance toward Hollywood (and other Western) cultural products. This is especially salient if Southeast Asia is seen as part of a larger transpacific region encompassing both South and North America, in which cinema is an active site of political and economic contestation. With its self-conscious "aesthetics of garbage" and structure made up of a "compilation of pastiches, [like] a kind of cinematic writing in quotation marks" (Shohat and Stam 2014:310), the Brazilian *Bandido da Luz Vermelha* (*Red Light Bandit*, dir. Rogerio Sganzerla, 1968), for example, takes an approach and style closer to that of Southeast Asian films in the 1950s. Yet unlike them, *Bandido* still smacks of works aimed at audiences steeped in the logic of emergent global "alternatives" to Hollywood heralded by intellectual elites and screened at international festivals. In comparison, Southeast Asia's geographic and cultural distance from North America, combined with its historically robust regional aesthetic practices, appears to have diminished, if not completely eliminated or ignored, the influence of Hollywood. The region's cosmopolitan, yet distinctly lowbrow, archipelagic approach to film aesthetics has also generally been spurned by elites and, especially prior to the 1990s, is far less recognized or appreciated in the spheres of international art and oppositional cinemas.

Many early Southeast Asian filmmakers, like their contemporaries in the cinematic new waves of Europe, South America, and elsewhere, were intellectuals well-versed in the world's various cinematic movements, styles, and politics. Many wrote and translated prolifically alongside other creative outputs like painting and

theater. Yet unlike their internationally lauded, post-Third Worldist comrades in South America, the primary audiences for films like *Tiga Buronan*, *Tamu Agung* (*Honored Guest*, dir. Usmar Ismail, 1955), *Labu dan Labi*, the Filipino hit *Juan Tamad Goes to Congress* (dir. Manuel Conde, 1959), or the Thai *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* (*Mae Nak from Khanong*, dir. Rungsri Tasapayak, 1959) were understood to be much less engaged in high modernist or intellectual spheres. The implicitly elevated status of “garbage” films like *Bandito*, touted for their radical aesthetic “cannibalism” (as opposed to imitation) of mainstream cinema is largely absent from early Southeast Asian films. While regional movies, as I have begun to show, were equally engaged in the politics of globalism through “eating” and regurgitating popular genres and conventions in satirically modified forms, they traded on their potential to appeal to much larger, popular audiences (see chapter 2 for more details on the economics of Southeast Asian films).

This populist potential was both a blessing and curse, as locally made films were generally seen by critics and much of the educated elite as actual trash, blighting the ideals and pretensions that they—unlike typical audiences—attached to national cinema. Politicians and official custodians of national purity often derided Southeast Asian films as cheap, incoherent, or, in the films’ complex and darkly critical views, even “counterrevolutionary.”¹³ Ironically, had critics succeeded in pressuring regional producers to make their films more “properly” aligned with elite ideals of national representation, Southeast Asian cinemas might well have fallen into the same “fissured” relationships with audiences that plagued many other areas of the Global South in the 1950s and 1960s. In this context, the fate of makers of popular films in India in the 1950s and 1960s was perhaps most similar to those in Southeast Asia.

DISRUPTION VS. HAPPY ENDINGS IN INDIA AND HOLLYWOOD

Indian filmmakers, too, relied on the patronage of popular audiences mainly from the lower classes. Their works—with ubiquitous genre-bending, self-referentiality, and similarly excessive levels of humor and emotion to Indonesian, Malayan, Thai, or other regional fare—were likewise distinct from, and resistant toward, Western classical approaches. Steven Crofts, for example, sees the unique relationship Indian and Southeast Asian cinemas built with Hollywood as “an accomplishment managed by few” (1993:50). But Indian popular films, like their Southeast Asian counterparts, were generally dismissed by elite viewers and critics as “alarmingly noisy and nonsensical, if not dangerously seductive and utterly vulgar” (Sunya 2022:14). In some ways, as Samhita Sunya (2022) suggests, things were even harder for mainstream Indian filmmakers owing to the emergence of what became known as parallel cinema. This more independent, self-consciously experimental or intellectual wave of films was driven by a new crop of independent writer-directors