The choice of cover for this issue of SPECTATOR presented somewhat of a challenge and dilemma for me. What image could possibly speak to the socio-cultural, economic, historical, linguistic, religious, and political complexity of Southeast Asia? As I received a stream of images from contributors, one image in particular seemed to stand out. It was a still image from Singapore director Royston Tan’s 15. The image, in Barthes’s meditations of the punctum, seemed to “sting, peck, cut.” For Barthes, the punctum is “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” I looked on, mesmerized by the two youths who seemed to stare so forlornly and defiantly at me. It was their eyes that stung as they gazed intently at me. Their hypnotic faces beckoned for a measure of understanding, yet were inscrutable. My senses were bruised by the sight of their tattooed bodies. As I worked through my vivid, visceral sensations, I began to realize that this was indeed the evocative image that I had been searching for. The image speaks to a range of issues that I believe are central to any discussion of cinema in Southeast Asia, in which a diverse population of 500 million dwell. Such common issues include: identity politics, unruly dialogues with religion, race, class, and gender, the intricate mediation between the rural and the urban, visions of (post)modernity and (post)coloniality, and the interplay between the global, local, and regional, of which all appear in their complexities, multiplicities, and heterogeneities within cinemas in Southeast Asia. Screening Southeast Asia aims to highlight the myriad ways in which cinemas in Southeast Asia are both imaged and imagined.

Contributors

Contributors to Screening Southeast Asia seek to address these issues. SPECTATOR begins with a regional focus with John A. Lent’s article on the state of animation in Southeast Asia, a geographical area that continues to remain largely within the shadows. Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, in the second article,
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tackle the incredibly under-examined and under-theorized domain of the short film within Singapore cinema. Both authors outline the potential for the short film format to evade Singapore’s rigorous censorship guidelines. The next four articles utilize textual analysis as a mode of critical engagement with films from/about Malaysia, Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines. Zawawi Ibrahim delves into Erma Fatima’s *The Last Malay Woman* or *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* to examine constructions of Malayness through the lens of gender. As his title suggests, David Hanan focuses specifically on the political documentaries and essay films of Garin Nugroho, set during the late New Order period and the post Reformasi era. Annie Goldson’s article provides a textual analysis of *Punitive Damage*, a human rights documentary made by her about the Dili massacre in East Timor. She centers specifically on the death of a young activist, Kamal Bamadhaj and his mother’s attempts to seek justice for his death. Bliss Cua Lim examines notions of cult operating within the critically-acclaimed film, *Himala*, and the popular following of its highly-canonized star, Nora Aunor. She further unpacks and traces *bakya* temporality within Nora Aunor’s cult fandom. The final article of the issue moves beyond the boundaries of the nation-state of Thailand, when its authors May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald, examine the practices and politics of world cinema spectatorship with respect to *The Iron Ladies*. Two book reviews, one on film in Southeast Asia, and the other on animation within Asia and the Pacific, complete the issue.

It seems fitting to include Gloria Shin’s book review on *Film in Southeast Asia: Views from the Region*, edited by contributor David Hanan, as *Screening Southeast Asia* seeks to build upon this influential book by offering articles that provide additional insights on particular genres (short film, animation, documentary), film texts (those which examine the cultural thickness within and those that tease out the implications that occur
when film texts no longer remain within the boundaries of the nation-state), and cinemas within Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, East Timor).

It is with deep regret that I was unable to secure submissions from Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos and as such, Film in Southeast Asia: Views from the Region remains a predominant contemporary resource about the cinema histories of those nations. This is particularly true for those scholars interested in the cinemas of Myanmar and Laos. Screening Southeast Asia also owes a debt of gratitude to East-West Film Journal’s July 1992 Special Issue on Southeast Asian cinema. In many ways, the article by Wimal Dissanayake, “Cinema, Nation, and Culture in Southeast Asia: Enframing a Relationship,” planted the kernel for Screening Southeast Asia and I wish to conclude this introduction with some thoughts inspired by his article.

Shaping the Field

Wimal Dissanayake writes about constructions of the “national” within Southeast Asia. He places this search for the articulation of a national identity along four registers or levels. These include the local, the national, the regional, and the global. I am most concerned with the regional aspect, as I think that recent developments in ASEAN (the Association for Southeast Asian Nations, founded in 1967) may sow the seeds for a more regional cinema in the future. Wimal Dissanayake places ASEAN within the framework of the regional level that all national cinemas within the region must at some point negotiate.

At the time of Dissanayake’s article, there were six member nations (Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Thailand). In 2004, that number has grown to ten, with the additions of Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. ASEAN released its Vision 2020 in 1997. In this master plan, ASEAN purports to inculcate by 2020: …an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity.

This concept of a regional identity took on an added socio-cultural emphasis with the declaration of ASEAN Concord II in October, 2003 which stipulated that the ASEAN community would:

...nurture talent and promote interaction among ASEAN scholars, writers, artists and media practitioners to help preserve and promote ASEAN’s diverse cultural identity while fostering regional identity...

This most recent mandate, this recognition of regional artistic and cultural identity brings me to a final set of rather speculative questions: Are we, in the twenty-first century, able to observe the development and articulation of a specifically Southeast Asian cinema? Or are we still operating within a framework that is defined by the individual cinemas within Southeast Asia instead? What is at stake in such a categorization and can we even speak of a Southeast Asian cinema? How would one define Southeast Asian cinema? What would regional films styles, themes, and/or content even look like? How would a Southeast Asian cinema negotiate the complexities of language? Do the cinemas of Southeast Asia already struggle with constructions of a regional identity at the levels of industrial and filmic practices? How do these cinemas engage with ideas of the national within this nexus? Indeed, what is at stake in deploying constructions of the national? Donald Emmerson, in his article, “Southeast Asia: What’s in a Name,” writes:

Some names, like “rose”, acknowledge what exists. Others, like “unicorn”, create what otherwise would not exist. In between lie names that simultaneously describe and invent reality. “Southeast Asia” is one of these.

Like the two youths in the still image, who exist in a liminal space between adolescence and adulthood, between being and becoming through their tattooing practices, so does the...
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term Southeast Asian cinema lie in its own peculiar liminal space. As countries within Southeast Asia continue to grapple with imagining both the nation and its contours within ASEAN, I suspect the answer lies somewhere in between.

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Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Singapore is perhaps the compelling exception as it does not have a “rural” hinterland. Many Singapore films focus instead on the other(ed) spaces within the city-state, most notably through the classed other(ed) space of the “heartland.” See, Beng-Huat Chua and Wei-Wei Yeo, “Singapore cinema: Eric Khoo and Jack Neo--critique from the margins,” Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 4, no. 1 (2003): 117 - 125.
7 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II), http://www.aseansec.org/15159.htm. Italics are my emphasis.
8 The golden studio era of the 1950s and early 1960s in Singapore was an interesting example. Cathay-Keris and Malay Film Productions would employ directors from a variety of countries, including India and the Philippines to produce Malay films for the regional Malay-speaking audience. For more information, see Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, Latent Images: Film in Singapore (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Kay-Tong Lim, Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991).
9 For a discussion of regional co-production ventures see articles by John A. Lent and Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde in this issue of SPECTATOR.