DE-LOCATING "INDEPENDENCE" THE DISCOURSE ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA AND ITS TRAJECTORIES

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Abstract

This essay examines the ways Southeast Asian Independent Cinema can be located – or, perhaps, de-located –, departing from traditional concepts of film studies, by examining the discourse on this cinematic movement as it is shaped by local and foreign voices. The paper focuses on the nexus of independence, political involvement and regionalism and asks how these meanings are negotiated in their transfer from various previous concepts of cinematic independence and alternativeness into the local context. As Southeast Asian Independent Cinema challenges conventional notions of film studies (the frame of national cinemas; the binary system of Hollywood vs. World Cinema; and the pre-digital cinematic apparatus), it presents an opportunity to rethink and expand traditional concepts and the underlying epistemologies in an innovative, non-Eurocentric way.

Introduction

Across the region of Southeast Asia, forms of independent cinema have sprung up since the late 1990s. Filmmakers in various Southeast Asian countries are working outside the dominant national systems of mainstream studios and state-financed television productions, producing short films, features, documentary, and fiction alike. This is all the more remarkable because many states in Southeast Asia have a history of employing the mass media for efforts at nation-building, circulating homogenized, state-defined images of the nation and controlling media content with rigid censorship systems. While studio systems were predominant in the region for decades, they have been in demise in many countries since the 1970s or 1980s; nonetheless, the mainstream prevails. Its output consists mainly of generic, formulaic works for mass consumption, such as genre movies, telenovelas and the like.[1]

Southeast Asian independent filmmakers typically navigate around the mainstream-dominated areas and state-imposed restrictions by working with alternative modes of production, circulation and exhibition. Production costs are typically kept low by working with grassroots methods, low wages and, sometimes, free labor; funding is often provided by private sources, crowdfunding, sometimes by development funds and grants issued by institutions abroad, or by prize money from festival competitions. Independent films are distributed by small production companies, often the filmmakers' own, and frequently via informal modes of distribution. Many of these production

companies use social media, such as blogs, Twitter or Facebook as a platform for advertising and distributing their movies. Thus, the internet serves as an alternative to working modes of the traditional, often state-controlled production studios. For example, the Malaysian production company Da Huang Pictures, founded by four independent filmmakers, uses its website as information channel, business site, online DVD shop, blog, and publicity channel all at once. Online platforms for streaming movies, such as Youtube, Vimeo, or Mubi, are another common way of circulation, as is piracy. The films are shown at alternative venues and festivals, such as the Substation in Singapore or the Thai Short Film and Video Festival, in semi-formal, "underground," and private locations, such as micro-cinemas, bars, film clubs and art galleries. Another prominent exhibition mode is the international film festival circuit, especially festivals that concentrate on showcasing so-called World Cinema or Asian Films, for example Pusan, Rotterdam, or the Forum section of the Berlinale.

To a large extent, these alternative filmmaking practices and strategies are enabled by the emergence of digital technology and high-speed internet connections in the region, innovations that are crucial since they account for possibilities such as (relatively) low production costs, online distribution, circulation via DVDs or online streaming. In fact, many local filmmakers, scholars and cultural activists see digital filmmaking as a cornerstone for independent cinema.[2] It is widely acknowledged as a gateway for new possibilities and alternative aesthetics owed to digital technology.

In the course of the last decade, this cinema has gained momentum with the establishing of regional festivals and specific websites that serve as platforms and places to meet and gather for the filmmaking and cinema-going community. While the individual cinemas of Southeast Asian countries are still primarily understood as national cinemas, the regional scope seems to have gained importance. "Southeast Asian independent cinema" has become a keyword, a much-discussed entity in the regional film community. Among filmmakers, academics and cinema enthusiasts, it has become a local concern to group the region's cinemas together in order to reflect on independent filmmaking as cultural expression, as strategy, and to carve out common ground and overarching traits, while at the same time acknowledging the diversity of the region and its films, and their modes of representation and production.

For many filmmakers and other participants in the discourse, the element of independence is key in this cinematic practice that is seen as a subversive, political cinema, since it presents alternatives not only to mainstream production and aesthetics, but also to state policies of media content and the representation of national identity. Many films touch on off-limits or sensitive topics, and some projects are directly connected with political activism: the Malaysian film project *Kampong Radioaktif* (*Survival Guide Untuk Kampong Radioaktif*, Liew Seng Tat, Tan Chui Mui, Woo Ming Jin and Yeo Joon Han, 2011) consists of four short films that satirically comment the government's efforts to downplay the long-term effects of radiation towards the local population; the Indonesian *Q! Film Festival* screens queer cinema, aiming to raise awareness for queer issues and HIV, while facing protests by conservative religious groups. Independent cinema is also opposed to commercialism and to Hollywood productions and the local mainstream cinemas that dominate the region. The existence of various cinematic manifestos, declaring independence and the search for an alternative filmic vocabulary, is indicative of the pioneer spirit that motivates much of local independent filmmaking.[3]

The emergence of this cinema has put Southeast Asia on the map internationally. Festival screenings and prizes garnered by filmmakers have suddenly made visible a region that was mostly a blank space on the cinematic map, even in the prevalent narrative of "World Cinema." In their home countries, however, where the wide public turns to Hollywood productions, the local mainstream cinema, or both, independent films have a rather marginal audience. They are, paradoxically, viewed less here than abroad, by foreign audiences, even though they often show a strong concern with local problems and issues.[4] In this way, some filmmakers have become global figures, such as Filipinos Lav Diaz and Raya Martin, Malaysian directors Amir Muhammad and Tan Chui Mui, or Thai directors Aditya Assarat and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. For these reasons, Southeast Asian independent cinema has been described as a trans- or postnational cinema.[5]

Discourse elements and their trajectories

Southeast Asian independent cinema presents a fruitful topic for reflection for contemporary film studies, as it concentrates several novel aspects of cinema: the use of digital technologies, their industrial and aesthetic implications; political marginality; and its location in a part of the world still largely unknown to most film scholars. These novelties challenge classical concepts and traditional epistemologies of the discipline – most obviously, the frame of national cinema, classical apparatus and spectatorship theory, and the concentration of film studies on Western cinemas, namely those of Hollywood and Europe.

This essay examines the current discourse on contemporary Southeast Asian independent cinema, especially the way it is defined and positioned. While studying these (self-) reflections, I shall focus on the linkages between independence, the digital, and the regional/national. This nexus of topics seems especially rewarding to research, because it touches on several currently debated subjects in film studies, namely the nation as frame, the digital turn, and theories of world cinema.

By analyzing some voices that shape this discourse, I aim to unravel some of the various strains that shape it. As I shall explain, the discourse on Southeast Asian independent cinema shows obvious parallels to and borrowings from several discourses in film theory and history. The paper's interest lies in how these traditional discourses are received and modified in contemporary Southeast Asia.

There are several reasons I am interested in this. First, the discourse on cinema has repercussions on filmmaking itself: filmmakers shape their self-concepts and identities in the frame of global film history. How, then, do they relate to certain historical concepts? Most of these concepts originate in different parts of the world, raising the question how geopolitical and cultural differences are dealt with.

Further, non-Western cinema presents an important opportunity to mirror traditional film studies. The transferring of traditional Western theory to other places inevitably raises questions of adequacy and conclusiveness; to examine how these theories are negotiated in other places can offer new impulses as to how they can be rethought and expanded.

Finally, as concepts and discourses travel through space and time, they are transformed. Thus, translocalization processes of discourses and theories are highly informative of how film theory, and knowledge systems in general, work in the present day.

Independence, the digital and the regional

In the discussion of Southeast Asian independent cinema, the question of independence is assigned great importance, whilst at the same time, its meaning appears to be rather vague. In fact, the significance of the term "independence" makes the vagueness of its meaning and the lack of a definition for local cinema all the more striking. As the Australian scholar Benjamin McKay wrote, "maybe a definitive 'definition' is not needed. But we need to recognize that one person's independent is another person's 'mainstream'."[6]

As John Lent points out, the term "independence" is used in different contexts, varying according to place, time and speaker. Lent thus suggests looking at three different entities toward which independence manifests itself in this cinema: government regulation, the mainstream studio systems, and traditional methods and styles of filmmaking.[7] Examined from this variety of aspects, the question of independence seems to touch on various levels, namely that of political involvement, an economical and industrial level, as well as one of aesthetics and narration.

The concept of cinematic independence has several lineages in film history, many of which are referred to in the discussion on Southeast Asian independent cinema: independent US cinema of the 1990s, the European New Waves, Third Cinema, and postcolonial cinema. They all comprise the three levels mentioned above. Each of them links independence to new technologies and new ways of handling film equipment, in order to reduce prohibitive costs and enable filmmaking outside the realm of big production studios and their streamlined, commercialized content and style. Moreover, all of them ascribe, albeit to strongly varying degrees, to political involvement or, in some cases, oppositionalism. In this way, they all propose an "other" cinema, contrasting with and opposing cinematic forms perceived as dominant, mainly those of Hollywood.

In the following, I shall examine several references in the discourse on Southeast Asian independent cinema to various cinematic traditions and concepts from film studies, discussing them under the aspect of their translocalization and their conclusiveness for this new discourse.

Confronting the studio system: The influence of 1990s US independent films

Probably the most customary use of "independent" refers to films produced and distributed outside the big studios, which dominate or even monopolize the film industry in much of Southeast Asia. Perhaps, though, the first impulse to make independent films did not primarily arise from local conditions, but rather followed an imported concept of independence. When asked in an interview if independent cinema reacts in opposition to mainstream, commercial Malaysian cinema, independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad negates and instead ascribes a strong influence to foreign tendencies, especially

> *the hype of independent movies, which you can't deny started in America in the early 90s. So we then got the romantic idea of doing it our own way. So I don't think it was consciously in opposition in that sense, because that would only work if mainstream Malaysian cinema were the only films that we see. But we still watch mainstream movies.*[8]

As Gaik Cheng Khoo, a scholar who has worked on Malaysian independent cinema, points out, the lineage of independence of the studio system reaches back to US independent film of the 1960s, while its origins lie in the European avant-garde film of the 1920s.[9] In the 1990s, a convergence of independence and the Hollywood ideals of glamour, stardom and prestige happened; the bridging of the fine line between mainstream and independent became influential for Southeast Asian filmmakers.

According to this point of view, the divide between mainstream studio industries and independent film seems to be less severely handled than might be expected of an oppositionist movement; instead, there might well be the aspect of independent filmmaking as emulating a cinematic strain from the USA. Furthermore, the divide between the mainstream and the independent probably is less absolute than it used to be, as there has recently been a spillover of elements of independent cinema into more mainstream forms. In some cases, successful independent films have enabled their makers' deals with big studios, offering them opportunities such as commercial releases in local theaters and projects with larger working budgets. Some filmmakers work inside and outside the studio system simultaneously, straddling the borders between the independent and the mainstream. Malaysian director James Lee, for example, shoots independent films as well as Malay genre cinema, such as the 2011 *Sini Ada Hantu* (*Here Got Ghost!*, 2011), a horror film.

This spillover might be among the reasons that some critics speak of a recent demise of independent film. Malaysian filmmaker James Lee points out how the accessibility of digital filmmaking leads to a large amount of films being made with little experience and without realizing the full potential of digital work, and thus to a loss of quality in filmmaking.[10] In this way, "indie" has become a hip label that many young filmmakers strive for, since cheap DV presents the possibility of making features from an early career stage on, and the commercial (and financial) success of some independent filmmakers is a strong incentive. According to "Thaiindie," a group of Thai independent filmmakers, "indie" – the popularized, trendy version of independent filmmaking that has established itself in the course of the late 2000s–, has itself become a kind of formulaic genre with a new "set of rules," a fixed style that has become a sort of commercialized brand.[11]

Aesthetic independence, high/low culture and "indie" commercialization

Filipino film critic Alexis Tioseco has written about the demarcation between mainstream and independent cinema becoming increasingly blurred.[12] While he refers to the situation in the Philippines, this statement can be expanded to many contemporary Southeast Asian film industries: it is nowadays harder to distinguish between the two by the categories of film formats (DV vs. 35mm), length (shorts vs. features), form (alternative vs. formulaic), or distribution (limited vs. wide), since the old framework and its boundaries have been confused. Larger production companies have entered territories previously inhabited by the independent film scene, such as small festivals, and have created sub-labels employing young filmmakers working with lower budgets; meanwhile, previously independent companies are producing films geared toward larger audiences and theatrical releases, often accepting financial backing from production companies or corporations. In sum, convergences have taken place that expand new niches in the film industry

and water down the significance of the term "independence," that, in Tioseco's opinion, "was once like a battle cry, but now it is a whimper, a marketing tool, a hip reference."[13]

According to Tioseco, since industrial or technical determinants have seen shifts in connotation, the question of aesthetics is of particular importance for the notion of independence today. In this understanding, independence is seen as cultural and aesthetic resistance; aesthetics clearly is understood as having a political reach, following the belief that representation forms the spectator's subjectivity by positioning him or her in certain ways, based on classical apparatus and spectatorship theory, as coined by Raymond Bellour and Jean-Louis Baudry.

However, it has meanwhile become a common concern that the aesthetics of independent film, too, has become commercialized. The Filipino movie *Ang Babae Sa Septic Tank* (*The Woman in the Septic Tank*, Marlon Rivera, 2011) spoofs the typical "indie" style: slow editing, voice-over-less, extreme long takes and grainy photography seem to have become a cliché and lost their edge. In positing independence as alternative culture, and in stating the loss of political urgency and artistic significance that comes with the commodification of "indie" culture, a Western truism appears: that of high versus low culture. In this notion that was formed in 19th century Europe and links culture to social class, high culture is seen as a force for moral and political good, as opposed to low, mass and folk culture, which are deemed of inferior value. In current film history, the distinction often resurfaces in the contrasting juxtaposition of arthouse and commercial cinema. Whereas arthouse cinema is understood as eschewing commercialism for an artistic and cerebral focus, and existing for a niche audience of connoisseurs, commercial cinema is deemed nonpolitical, escapist entertainment for the masses. The positioning of Southeast Asian independent cinema as alternative culture thus seems to refer to this art/entertainment divide.

Digital cinema and new aesthetics: "Dogme"

By aligning digital practice with alternative culture, as opposed to commercial culture, Southeast Asian filmmakers follow a notion previously employed by several movements or currents in film history: the use of new, more cost-effective technology to produce films understood as alternative counterpoint to more established cinemas, such as the lighter, more mobile camera types used by the European New Waves or New Hollywood, handheld cameras favored by the Danish "Dogme" movement or, most recently, DV cameras as the choice tool of the sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. The novel qualities and handling of these technologies entail an aesthetic and narrative agenda that stands in contrast to that of the according mainstream and that usually features alternative modes of representation and viewer positioning, novel narratives, and the eschewal of the star system.

In his manifesto "The twelve Bowowows of Impurity," Khavn de la Cruz, a Filipino independent filmmaker, directly alludes to the Danish avant-garde movement "Dogme 95," founded by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, and its manifesto and "vow of chastity."[14] Like its Danish predecessor, Khavn's manifesto establishes filmmaking rules based on traditional filmmaking parameters – photography, lighting and color, sound recording, mise-en-scène, narrative conventions, and the like – and advocates the use of low-cost equipment and simple solutions, instead of elaborate technology and high-profile work standards. Khavn calls his manifesto a

"bastardization" of the "Dogme" credo, counterpointing the original aim of "chastity" with that of "impurity." While the Danish manifesto establishes a clear set of rules stating rigid imperatives, Khavn sets up his "rules" as options that allow the filmmaker the widest possible range of creativity and self-expression, the utmost goal being to "just make your film, now." [15]

Political activism: Third cinema, postcolonialism, anti-imperialism

Another recurring notion in the history of independent cinemas is the alignment of their alternativeness with political involvement. In this way, cinema is understood as a mode of cultural and aesthetic resistance against established authorities holding power. Since many Southeast Asian nations are ruled by authoritarian governments and are struggling for democracy, the main authorities contested by alternative films are the state powers. Independent cinema resists state ideologies by speaking about taboos and sensitive issues, and challenges state control by dodging censorship, sometimes even making fun of it. Singaporean filmmaker Royston Tan's short film *Cut* (2004), for instance, is a satirical medley of pop songs and dance scenes making fun of the Singapore Board of Film Censors after it pressured him to cut his feature film *15* (2003). Here, digital filmmaking plays a vital role, as it often enables avoidance of state-approved channels of distribution and exhibition, for example by internet streaming or homemade DVDs, and by creating publicity via social media.

The notion of cinema as political activism, means of resistance and a pathway to freedom can be traced back to Third Cinema. The 1970s Latin American movement aimed to inspire mass revolutionary activism and to counterpoint commercial-escapist films as well as art cinema, by founding a cinematic movement and aesthetic adequate for the economic and political situation of the at the time so-called Third World. Southeast Asian independent cinema, or some of its veins, has repeatedly been read as a possible descendant following the politicized, communitarian and radical spirit of Third Cinema.[16] However, while acting as oppositional voices, various filmmakers or institutions in fact partially depend on state funding. For example, the state-funded Bangkok Art and Culture Centre regularly houses screenings of independent films; the Substation, a Singaporean alternative cultural center, is partially supported by the state, as is the Thai Short Film festival. As Mariam Lam points out, while Vietnamese independent film exists in the form of non-mainstream cinema, the Vietnamese state is involved in all Vietnamese films, thus shifting the definition of independence away from an economical level.[17] The fact that state funding and independent filmmaking are not separated and, in some cases, not separable, relativizes the open oppositionalism and radicalism proposed by Third Cinema, and blurs political positioning. It might be indicative that the alignment with Third Cinema has been constructed by foreign or diasporic critics rather than by local activists, many of whom are involved in and perhaps depend on the complexities of state participation in the funding of film and film culture, and in the negotiation of their own political and economical positioning.

Another aspect of Third Cinema as political resistance is anti-imperialism, a mindset that might seem conclusive to the postcolonial situation of most of Southeast Asia. Digital technology is sometimes seen as a vital tool for the empowerment of local film culture, since it enables local filmmaking with much lower budgets than the use of 35mm stock would require. As Filipino filmmaker Lav Diaz says in an interview:

> *Digital is liberation theology. Now we can have our own media. [...] The issue is not anymore that you cannot shoot. You have a Southeast Asian Independent Cinema now. We have been deprived for a long time, we have been neglected, we have been dismissed by the Western media. That was because of production logistics. We did not have money, we did not have cameras, all those things. Now, these questions have been answered. We are on equal terms now.*[18]

Here, the rise of Southeast Asian independent film is described as an opposition to Western cinema as an agent of cultural hegemony, echoing an essential concern of Third Cinema. Seeing Southeast Asian cinema as a reaction to more dominant cinemas – mainly Hollywood, but also other, more prominent cinemas, such as those of Japan, Hong Kong or India – is a powerful strain in the discourse.[19] However, the resistance towards hegemonic powers claimed by Third Cinema activists has since shifted, as various present-day independent Southeast Asian filmmakers receive contributions from foreign funds and festivals, and other institutions that support film in economically weaker regions, such as the "Hubert Bals" Fund of the Rotterdam Film Festival, or the *produire au sud* workshop run by the Nantes Film Festival.

As the structure of global cinema has profoundly changed since the 1960s, the cultural and political positions constitutive of Third Cinema have shifted. Cultural hegemony, eurocentrism, and capitalist forces are no longer fixed to certain parts of the world, but have become delocalized and, in some cases, even absorbed into non-Western epistemologies, economies and value systems. As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt write, "Empire" can no longer be located geopolitically, but has become a conglomeration of various entities and practices. Therefore, traditional anti-imperialist strategies can no longer be applied against individual nations.[20] While Third Cinema remains a key reference point in the discourse on non-Western film cultures, the changing coordinates that locate the discourse, cause a re-adjusting to the present-day landscape of global cinema. In the case of Southeast Asian independent cinema, this entails a redefining of the notion of independence, aligning itself with institutions offering contributions, and negotiating the transnational positioning that this entails. It also raises the question of current hegemonies and new power centers that are not located in a geographically determined space, but are delocalized, such as transnational funding institutions, the politics of major film festivals, and the influence of critics and academic institutions.

Transnationalism, regionalism, scapes – and the nation

The notions of transnationalism and regionalism figure prominently in the discourse on Southeast Asian independent cinema, as digital technology figures as a way to transcend national boundaries and to establish regional and global networks. In line with communitarian values, the regional frame is thought to help locate the individual national cinemas on the map of global cinema and to bolster their presence, making the region visible as a whole. Several groups, institutions and networks involved with Southeast Asian independent film operate transnationally, such as the websites *Criticine* and *Southeast Asian Film Studies Institute*, the Luang Prabang Film Festival or the Singapore-based Southeast Asian Film Festival.[21]

Several Asian postcolonial critics have theorized regionalism as an alternative conceptual framing to anti-imperialism.[22] In the wake of the concept of the nation as imagined community and

of the questioning of the frame of national cinema, the concept of regional cinema seems to offer a promising point of departure. Tilman Baumgärtel describes the digital and regional aspects of this cinema with a concept developed by Arjun Appadurai.[23] In Appadurai's approach, "scapes" are boundary-crossing spaces created by various contemporary cultural global flows: a mediascape refers to the global reach of media and their ability to disseminate information throughout the world; a technoscape refers to the ability of technology to transcend borders and boundaries.[24]

On the levels of representation and of audience reception, though, the national continues to be of high relevance, and the national cinemas of the region are still very much acknowledged as such. The nation as an authoritative, repressive power is often contested; since many films comment on political issues and social injustices that are specific to their home countries, and often indirectly to avoid censorship, viewers need a fair level of contextual knowledge to understand the various levels of meaning.

Thus, the concept of the national seems to persist as an important entity and frame of reference, side by side with the concepts of the regional and the transnational, as Southeast Asian filmmakers deal with a simultaneous multiple spatial and geopolitical positioning. This multiple positioning is characteristic of present-day cinemas in general, and of their move beyond the binary divide of local and global, as they are embedded in transnational cultural and economic flows and the complex frameworks they entail. In this way, transnational cinemas open up a communicative space that can be inhabited by local and foreign audiences at the same time. In this vein, local writers have suggested an understanding of Southeast Asian independent cinema as cosmopolitan or cosmopolitical.[25]

Conclusion: From traditional concepts toward a vernacular

While the conjunction between digital cinema (or other, previous technological innovations), alternativeness and independence forms an underlying pattern for the discussed cinematic concepts, it also shapes the link by which Southeast Asian independent cinema (partially, in some cases) aligns itself with these concepts. By doing so, this cinema positions itself in relation to global film history, carving out its own meaning based on other discourses, rhetorics and credos.

Various strains of traditional film theory and history are employed in the discourse, either explicitly or implicitly, and are followed rather informally. Some of them, such as US independent cinema or spectatorship theory, serve as loose points of reference; others are parodied, as in the example of "Dogma." Still others are adopted partially and in a negotiated way, such as Third Cinema, anti-imperialism, and transnationalism. In all cases, the preexisting concepts are modified in order to gain flexibility. They are not absorbed blindly and totally, but instead adapted to local contexts, meanings, conditions and concerns, and thus made useful for local purposes, creating an own, vernacular branch of film discourse.

These transformations point toward the general situation of contemporary, transnational cinema. Notions such as alternativeness, independence and transnationalism can no longer be clear, unambiguous stances, and anti-imperialism and anti-commercialism in the original senses are no longer valid concepts, as old binary systems have become unfixed and replaced by more complex, globalized force fields.

Outlook: Widening the scope of film theory

Because it combines several novel aspects of contemporary cinema – the digital turn, multiple spatial frames, and non-Western cinema –, the cinematic movement and discourse I have portrayed here point toward aspects of traditional film theory that need to be reconsidered or updated. In this sense, the flow of discourse from the West to Southeast Asia described above would change direction: what do the modifications that traditional theory concepts undergo elsewhere say about the state of film studies today?

Since many traditional paradigms of film studies depart from Western-based epistemologies, they currently find themselves facing delimitations of reach and of adequacy. As the West's dominance as representational norm and epistemological center is challenged, calls for a repositioning of global knowledge systems are being made.[26] Among the major contested fields are those based on Western notions of subjectivity, individuality and perception, such as auteur theory, classical apparatus theory and psychoanalysis. The classical canon of film history has been criticized for omitting a large part of world cinema; the contextualization of non-Western film in terms of history, language and culture is seen as an often lacking aspect, as are adequate approaches toward non-Western cinema.[27] At the same time, the digital turn begs the question how cinema is redefined in its practices of production, distribution and exhibition, as well as in its aesthetics.[28] Also, the rise of coproduction leads to a questioning of the concept of national cinema, backed by wider scholarly reflection on the concept of the nation as Western construct.[29]

The topic presented in this essay suggests several challenges to traditional film studies. Most obviously, inquiring into the cinema of a geopolitical area largely unknown to Western film studies expands the usual canon of films as well as of theory to a less Eurocentric focus. As Lúcia Nagib suggests, world cinema understood in this way is not a niche opposed to Hollywood or to well-known Western cinemas, but the all-inclusive sum of global cinemas.[30] Much of Southeast Asian independent cinema is produced and circulated digitally. This entails new pragmatics and aesthetics. The conventional working modes of production, distribution and audience reception are becoming historical, and are increasingly replaced by new industry structures, modes of working and viewing habits. Further, as this cinema is transnational, regional and national at once, it departs from the category of nation as sole entity, as well as from later approaches that declare the nation an obsolete category and suggest a distinct change of paradigm, fully replacing it by transnationalism.

This cinema's discourse on independence, with its processes of selecting, reflecting and adapting or rejecting traditional concepts, points to aspects of these concepts that need revision. Among these aspects are the consideration of unfamiliar or newly formed industry structures such as those in Southeast Asia; changes in the filmmaking, distribution and viewing practices due to digital technology; the positioning of the area in relation to global cinema and the transnational industry; and the political engagement of postcolonial areas that connect to the global (and often Western-lead) festival circuit. Previously shaped notions of cinematic independence and political cinema mentioned in the analysis, such as those of Third Cinema, anti-imperialism, or apparatus theory, no longer fully apply to recent developments and have become historic lines of thinking. To this effect, the transformation they undergo in the Southeast Asian discourse is exemplary for changes in film studies in an age of post-eurocentrism, the digital turn, and of cinematic "relocation."[31]

Like all knowledge systems, film theory is not bound to one place, but travels and shifts. As its concepts circulate, their contexts and meanings fluctuate, and they are subjected to processes of exchange and entanglements. They thereby enter into a state of fluidity where their terms and epistemological backgrounds constantly need to be rediscussed and thus find chances of reconnecting to the present. As Lúcia Nagib put it, "world cinema, as the world itself, is circulation"[32] – as is discourse on it.

1 For overviews on the film history of individual Southeast Asian countries, see: John A. Lent, *The Asian Film Industry*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1990; David Hanan (ed.), *Film in South East Asia: Views on Film in Ten South East Asia-Pacific Countries*, Seapavaa, Hanoi 2001; Anne Tereska Ciecko (ed.), *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Culture in a Global Frame*, Berg, Oxford 2006.

2 See: Eloisa May P. Hernandez, *The Beginnings of Digital Cinema in Southeast Asia*, in May Adadol Ingawanij, Benjamin McKay (eds.), *Glimpses of Freedom. Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, Ithaca 2012, pp. 223-236, p. 227.

3 Examples are: Khavn de la Cruz, *Four Manifestos*, in Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong 2012, p. 119-124; or the *I Sinema Manifesto*, in Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, cit., p. 151.

4 This is a paradox shared with other independent cinemas from countries with strict censorship policies, such as China's Sixth Generation.

5 See: Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, cit., p. 22.

6 Benjamin McKay, "Toward New Ways of Seeing Southeast Asian Cinema," in *Criticine*, 29 January 2006, http://criticine.com/feature_article.php?id=25, last visit 21 May 2013.

7 John A. Lent*, Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Independent of What?*, in Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, cit., p.13.

8 Benjamin McKay, "A Conversation with Amir Muhammad," in *Criticine*, 13 October 2005, http://www.criticine.com/interview_article.php?id=18, last visit 10 May 2013.

9 Gaik Cheng Khoo, "Just-Do-It-(Yourself): Independent Filmmaking in Malaysia," in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, pp. 227-247.

10 Eloisa May P. Hernandez, *The Beginnings of Digital Cinema in Southeast Asia*, cit., p. 234.

11 *Idem*, p. 224.

12 Alexis A. Tioseco, *Like the Body and the Soul*, in May Adadol Ingawanij, Benjamin McKay (eds.), *Glimpses of Freedom. Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, cit., pp. 183-184.

13 *Idem*, p. 183.

14 Khavn de la Cruz, *Four Manifestos*, cit., p. 119; Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, *Dogme 95. The Vow of Chastity*, in Andrew Utterson (ed.), *Technology and Culture. The Film Reader*, Routledge, London-New York 2005 (1995), pp. 87-88.

15 Khavn de la Cruz, *Four Manifestos*, cit., p. 122. Critics have pointed out that the "Dogme" credo was mapped out with a certain irony, and that its criticism remains abstract and vague (Mads Egmont Christensen, "Dogma and Marketing," in *P.O.V.*, no. 10, December 2000, http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_10/section_4/artc1A.html, last visit 29 July 2013; Niels Weisberg, "Great Cry and Little Wool," in *P.O.V.*, no. 10, December 2000); some suspect that the rigidity in its phrasing served as a way to attract publicity and to provoke (Ove Christensen, "Authentic Illusions – The Aesthetics of Dogma 95," in *P.O.V.*, no. 10, December 2000). While one might argue that Khavn's text reflects "Dogme"'s irony by mirroring its rigidity, still the contrast between the texts remains obvious.

16 May Adadol Ingawanij, *The Thai Short Film and Video Festival and the Question of Independence*, in May Adadol Ingawanij, Benjamin McKay (eds.), *Glimpses of Freedom. Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, cit., p. 180; Joel David, "Review: May Adadol Ingawanij, Benjamin McKay (eds.), *Glimpses of*

Freedom," in *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, December 2012, p. 531; Cameron Bailey, quoted in Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, cit., p. 6.

17 Mariam B. Lam, *The Postcolonial Condition of "Indochinese" Cinema from Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos*, in Sandra Ponzanesi, Marguerite Waller (eds*.), Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, Routledge, London 2012, p. 87.

18 Tilman Baumgärtel, *"Digital is Liberation Theology." Interview with Lav Diaz*, in Id. (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, cit., p. 177.

19 Benjamin McKay, "Toward New Ways of Seeing Southeast Asian Cinema," cit.

20 Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2001.

21 www.criticine.com; http://southeastasiancinema.wordpress.com, last visit 21 May 2013.

22 See Mariam B. Lam, *Circumventing Channels. Indie Filmmaking in Post-Socialist Vietnam and Beyond*, cit., p. 108. Lam especially mentions the work of Naoki Sakai, Gayatri Gopinath, and K.H. Chen.

23 Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, cit., p. 24ff.

24 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernities at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996.

25 Gaik Cheng Khoo, "Just- Do- It- (Yourself): Independent Filmmaking in Malaysia," cit., p. 227; Z.H. Raju, "Filmic Imaginations of the Malaysian Chinese," in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, no. 1, 2008, p. 74.

26 In keeping with Negri and Hardt's notions of "Empire" mentioned earlier, "the West" here refers to an ideology rather than a geography (Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, *Empire*, cit.).

27 See: Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, London-New York 1994; Saer Maty Ba, Will Higbee (eds.), *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, Routledge, Abingdon-New York 2012.

28 See: Francesco Casetti, "The Relocation of Cinema," in *Necsus. European Journal of Media Studies*, no. 2, 2012, http://www.necsus-ejms.org/the-relocation-of-cinema, last visit 22 May 2013; Barbara Flückiger, "Das digitale Kino: Eine Momentaufnahme," in *Montage/av*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2003, pp. 28-51.

29 See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1991.

30 See: Lúcia Nagib, *Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema*, in Stephanie Dennison, Song Hwee Lim (eds.), *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*, Wallflower, London 2006, pp. 30-37.

31 Francesco Casetti has used the term relocation to describe a new kind of filmic experience in the wake of a transformed media environment (Francesco Casetti, "The Relocation of Cinema," cit.).

32 Lúcia Nagib, *Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema*, cit., p. 37.