

Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Emerging voices from Southeast Asia: seeing a region in its documentary films

November 2013's issue of the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) included a theme program on 'Emerging Voices from Southeast Asia', featuring fourteen recent documentaries from the region and several Q&A sessions with some of the directors. In addition, Cambodian documentary film director Rithy Panh was invited to comment on a retrospective of his oeuvre.¹ Coinciding with this program the KITLV, Leiden University, IIAS and IDFA organised the seminar 'Making History, Everyday Life and Shifting Moralities', in which some of the filmmakers involved shared thoughts about each other's methodologies and ongoing concerns with scholars studying Southeast Asian contemporary culture. A supplementary roundtable, on the use of film in research and the classroom, took place on November 27th at the launch of LeidenGlobal.²

Fridus Steijlen & Bart Barendregt



Emerging voices from Southeast Asia *continued*

Discussions at both occasions proved stimulating but did not – and this won't come as a surprise – provide us with definite answers to all questions we had initially posed ourselves. As we became increasingly aware of yet other themes that merited our attention we realized the need to instigate further dialogue between filmmakers and students of the region. This special Focus issue hopes to prompt such dialogue by referring to some of the discussions at the November meetings, but also by offering some of our colleagues, all experts in the field, the chance to comment on these discussions.

(re)Making the past

A first set of questions was related to historiography and the role Southeast Asian documentary films play in addressing and reinterpreting past events central to the societies they depict. At the seminar, Cambodian director Kavich Neang recounted how when making a film he first does extensive research on the themes addressed, adding that "it is about sharing and what I am learning about the history and about what is happening in Cambodia. By doing this I hope it spreads to other young people [enabling them] to learn about the history and what is happening in my country." Can our directors indeed be considered to be historians of some sort, and if so, how are their materials to be used by students of the region in studying its recent history. In his contribution to this Focus, Keng We Koh acknowledges the relevance of documentary as well as feature films in addressing and redressing historical themes. However, as with teaching all history, an appropriate context is a top requirement if one is to understand such remakings of the past. These remakings offer mostly an alternative to the nationalist and official histories these directors have been growing up with. In doing so they may help fellow citizens to navigate often obscured, painful to remember or simply ignored episodes of their own national or more local pasts, reinterpreting a history otherwise little owned.

In a similar vein, Gea Wijers' contribution illustrates how a young generation of Cambodian filmmakers, often supported by Pahn's Bophana Audiovisual Center, has been "educating itself in expressing their views on Cambodian society through film documentaries". This new generation comes with a shift in themes and its own preferences in writing history, focusing on the pre-and post-conflict periods, rather than the pain and trauma that accompanies the Khmer Rouge conflict for so many. The role documentary filmmakers prefer for themselves as chroniclers of national history seems much dependent on personal experiences. A case in point are the divergent ways Rithy Panh and Joshua Oppenheimer chose to depict mass violence and genocide in respectively Cambodia and 1965 Indonesia, both described in John Kleinen's essay. Unlike Panh – himself a victim of the Khmer Rouge regime – Oppenheimer did not personally witness the atrocities of Indonesia's 1965 'coup' that his film deals with. This may help explain why he resorts to depicting the perpetrators rather than the victims, although Oppenheimer himself has pointed at more pragmatic reasons: past victims are still too scared and traumatized to willfully figure in front of his camera.

Situating the everyday

The films compiled in the 'Emergent Voices' program are a far cry from the usual 'drums and trumpets' history seen in historical feature films. Yes history is being rewritten here, but in small acts, and by zooming in on small people. And it is through the everyday events that they are part of, that we witness social change in a Southeast Asian context.

During our November seminar one of the films featured proved to be illustrative of this. *The Brick* (2013) is a short documentary film portraying a local community producing bricks in a small Myanmar village. The film itself was the result of a *Solidarity Shorts International Workshop* in Rangoon, which teaches inexperienced filmmakers how to handle a camera. Director of *The Brick*, Polish filmmaker Jan Czarlewski, had expected the local trainees to exclusively focus on the brick making process as for the economic viable process it is to the community. Instead workshop participants had started to chronicle the periods in between work shifts, the lunch breaks and power naps or children's play on the factory ground, with the social clearly overtaking more economic dimensions and thus stressing the power of the everyday. It does not necessarily show cultural differences between European filmmakers and Myanmar workshop participants, Czarlewski argued, but for him it did prove the lack of discussion when it comes to our call of documentary films capturing the everyday. Similarly, workshop participants had been asked to record their own family lives, something all of them refused. Underscoring the power of the camera, people explained it as being too intrusive in a country that only very recently started the process of (yet modest) democratization, and where filmmakers had been, just one year earlier, sent to jail for simply filming mass demonstrations. In such a context the (capturing of the) everyday almost automatically becomes a political act.

Documenting change

Does a good documentary capture the sign of the times, does it foretell how it is soon to change or does it actively take part in changing the course of history? These were yet other questions raised in our panel discussions. In fact they may do all of this, but not in the ways we often simply assume.

The IDFA special program included at least two examples proving how directors and their films may act as agents of change, but also how often, due to national contexts and cultural preoccupation, seemingly similar battles may be fought with different weapons. Both the film *The Mangoes*

(2012) by Indonesian director Tonny Trimarsanto, and the Thai documentary *Consider* (2013) by Panu Saeng-Xuto, deal with the topic of transgender. However, they do so in diverse ways. Both films are playing with concepts of gender and sexuality, at once commenting upon the bad fate of those failing to fit a neat and convenient categorization. But *Consider* does so by explicitly visualizing such bad fate of transgender in Thai society whereas *The Mangoes* subtly defends the rights of Indonesian transgenders by depicting the life trajectory of one particular person, showing transsexual Reni on her first visit home to village and family, after having fled to the big city. Such differences in style may obviously be as much dependent on personal as well as societal tastes or preferences.

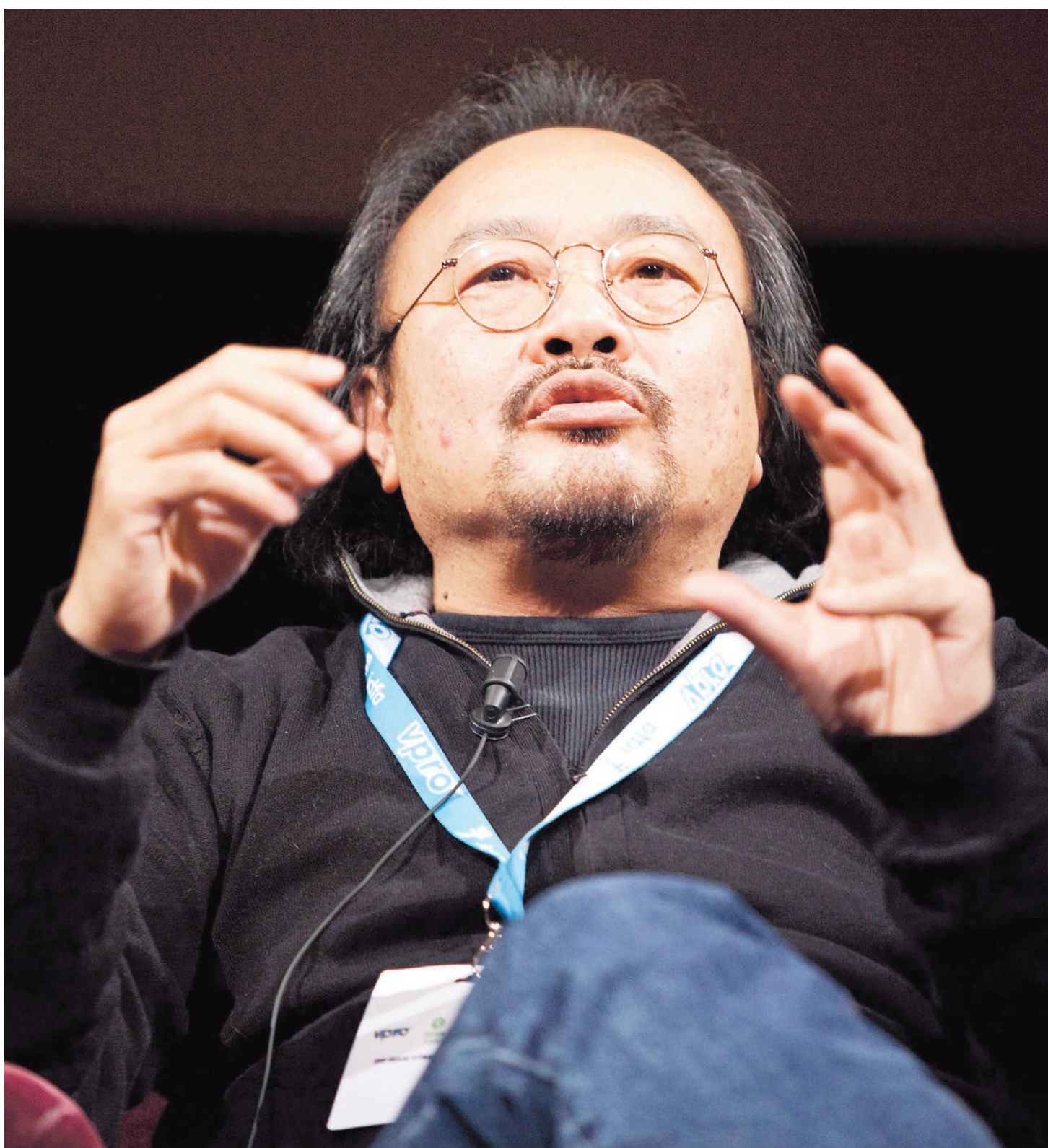
Documentary films and their makers are not seldom attributed with strengthening civil society, speaking for those otherwise little heard, and hence explaining the title of the program and it being sponsored by the foundation for Democracy and Media. Naturally, some critical reflection is required here. During the November seminar, questions were raised about the extent to which funding agencies, sponsors or festival organizers are doomed to impose certain agendas and (maybe even) Western liberal values on other people's cinema? There is no denying that some of the Southeast Asian films that have made it to Western film festivals are successful precisely because they correspond to either (self) orientalist fantasies or the hopes of western audiences that such films may change these societies for the better, and that they read more in accordance with universalist demands of democracy and individual agency. However, today's independent documentary scene in Southeast Asia is multiple in character and does not necessarily have to subject itself to NGO agendas or take notice of the tastes of foreign audiences.

In his contribution, Raul Niño Zambrano, the curator of the IDFA 'Emergent Voices' program reflects on his tour through Southeast Asia and his search for films to be included in the festival. He shows that, although not on purpose, some central themes pop up while curating. Raul also argues how the conditions for documentary film in Southeast Asia differ from, for example, regions like Latin America and what this means in terms of quality.

The essay by Nuril Huda effectively illustrates the multi-voice of today's Southeast Asian documentary 'scene'. Nuril shows how in Indonesia a novel genre of *pesantren* film is emerging from Islamic boarding schools, now that new regulations have enabled the insertion of more 'secular' subjects into the schools' curriculum. *Santri* directors,

Below: Film crew interviewing the leader of a mass organization in Indonesia. Photo by Fridus Steijlen.





Above:
Rithy Panh.
Photo by IDFA.

Below:
Supplementary
roundtable at
the launch of
LeidenGlobal.
Photo by
LeidenGlobal.

mostly autodidacts making use of cheap handheld cameras, increasingly resort to themes and materials little known outside the context of the Islamic boarding school, providing outsiders with a glimpse of (changing) everyday life of these Muslim students. In the aftermath of such films, *santri* cinema has also made it big on the national screen, with popular feature films such as *3 prayers, 3 loves* taking up similar strategies. Erik de Maaker – responding to the ‘Emergent Voices’ program by looking at historical documentary trends in the neighboring South Asian region – similarly shows how changing conditions such as the rise of commercial TV and the resultant breakdown of government control has provided Indian filmmakers with opportunities to gain control of their own agenda.

Old constraints, new challenges

Not everyone equally applauds the winds of change in and throughout the Southeast Asian cinematic landscape, and more reactionary forces and outright censorship still do play a significant role in many of the societies visualized in the ‘Emergent Voices’ program. Nontawat Numbenchapol’s film *Boundary* (2011) – part of the IDFA program and dealing with the tense conflict in Thailand between red and yellow shirts, but also the 2011 border conflict with Cambodia –



was banned by the Thai government for reasons of national security. But by now, all countries in the region have moved away from a 100% tight state control of its film industries, although some countries have only just started to do so. In Myanmar, for example, one still has to take into account opinions of the state apparatus or the pressure exercised by politically motivated parties. In most other places such pressure is, fortunately, only relative. For example, *The Mangoes* documentary about an Indonesian transgender is circulated within Indonesia, despite protests by rightwing Islam movements and accusations that the film is pornographic.

Recent examples from Southeast Asia show how potential censorship can simply be avoided by screening documentaries in more informal settings, or by distribution through the internet, although the lack of broadband internet in many places still clearly hinders dissemination beyond the usual centers. Ismael Basbeth, director of *400Words*, doubts the advantages of internet for distribution and thinks it is better to screen films at festivals where they can prompt lively discussions; he also stresses the importance for himself and fellow directors to profit from ticket sales and thus secure investment for future projects. And yet access to cheap technologies and the shared skills that come with them are already changing the face of Southeast Asian documentary cinema, as are internet based platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube; new audiences are now able to watch Southeast Asian documentaries on a previously unknown scale and outside the usual context of festivals or private screenings. Our directors also mentioned efforts to successfully use social media for crowd funding, a model that in the nearby future may replace the need of selling tickets at international festivals and may provide for an even larger audience at home.

Also for scholars of the region, inter-streamed documentaries prove a big challenge with many of the online posted amateur and short professional movies offering new insights into a region that is rapidly changing. John Kleinen thus told his audience that he is now able to track the rapid urbanization of Hanoi, and the inclusion of the village in which he has been

conducting research since 1992, by using postings on YouTube. With new audiences and their respective demands, indigenous minorities and the rural poor picking up the camera, a complex and very dynamic ‘field’ of Southeast Asian documentary filming is offering itself to the world and is waiting to be studied. But in how can one see and study this changing region and its emergent voices; e.g., what new literacies are required?

Visual literacies and other agendas

An important prerequisite to our discussion was for scholars and directors to engage in each other’s methods. No longer can we hold on to a simplistic and rigid dichotomy between academic writing and film production; both deal with similar problems of how to faithfully tell our stories without having to resort to whole truths. The best way for us to represent the often complex entities we are studying is to listen to the manifold voices trying to speak to us, which is what Farish Noor is trying to do in a new documentary series on Indonesian culture and politics he is currently directing. By working both as an academic and in the media, Farish is personally very aware of the different languages spoken in the two fields, and notes how the “obvious power of the image ... communicates meanings with an economy and effectiveness that words often fail to do”. It is a power that merits further study as diverse societies, and even groups within such societies, tend to read visuals in ways different from others and hence the call for ‘learning to read’ Southeast Asian documentary films, often heard in the two meetings we organized. Learning to read film is about understanding key scenes, the structure of language in stories told, but also intercultural varieties of editing styles – as Erik de Maaker points out in his contribution: audiences in the West often tend to be interested in quite different themes than the societies or circles in which such films are produced, consequently failing to truly recognize what these films are about. In this case a solution is not so much sought in trying to escape a simplistic East-West dichotomy and resorting to produce for local audiences only, but to seek cooperation with counterparts from elsewhere to see how also foreign audiences may be familiarized with otherwise local concerns.

Scholars are familiar with close reading of texts, but do they similarly close read images? Many universities worldwide happen to have visual anthropology programs, but a solid method for reading images is still underway. We still can do better to fully insert documentaries and still images into our curricula and stimulate students to use visuals in the class and their work. Also, a further engagement between directors and scholars may help facilitate the development of reading skills. The discussions triggered by the seminar and roundtable helped us realize the need for a closer engagement between scholars and filmmakers and a further focus on the themes they can explore together. A first step then is this edition of *theFocus*, which we hope may add and grow into a larger debate and potentially shared research agendas.

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References

- 1 See The Newsletter Issue #65, Autumn 2013, p.52
- 2 See participants list below

Participants Seminar

Aung Nwai Hyway, Myanmar | Azharr Rudin, Malaysia
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Fridus Steijlen, KITLV | Ismail Basbeth, Indonesia
Kavich Neang, Cambodia | Kong Rithdee, Thailand
Kyaw Myo Lwin, Myanmar | Lynn Lee, Singapore
Min Thu Aung, Myanmar | Jan Czarlewski, Austria
Nontawat Numbenchapol, Thailand | Panu Saeng-Xuto, Thailand
Philippe Peycam, IAS | Phuong Thao Dong, Vietnam
Ratna Saptari, Leiden University | Raul Niño Zambrano, IDFA
Sopheak Sao, Cambodia | Tonny Trimarsanto, Indonesia

Participants Roundtable

Bart Barendregt, Leiden University | Chairun Nissa, Indonesia
Erik de Maaker, Leiden University | Fridus Steijlen, KITLV
John Kleinen, University of Amsterdam | Ucu Agustini, Indonesia