

Reflecting on the 'Emerging Voices' program

As a festival IDFA is keen on paying attention to developments in film production around the world. Besides economic and political changes currently taking place in Southeast Asia we have noticed a rapid increase in film production throughout the region. We closely monitored how fiction films produced in that region gained considerable respect among critics and audiences in recent years.

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THE FILM *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* by Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul serves as an example here, winning the Golden Palm in Cannes in 2010, as does the work of Filipino filmmaker Brillante Mendoza, which has been selected several times for festivals in Cannes and Berlin. This has also been the case with a number of documentary films including *Kano: An American and His Harem* (2010) by Filipino director Monster Jimenez, who was awarded the IDFA prize for best debut film, or *Red Wedding* by Cambodian directors Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon, which in 2012 obtained the IDFA award for best Mid-Length documentary. Additionally, there has been an increase in documentary film festivals such as *ChopShots* in Indonesia and *Salaya Doc* in Thailand, but also the workshop-like *DocNet* seminars that are organized throughout the region and which have encouraged young filmmakers to start producing more documentaries of their own. Altogether, this justified the special attention during our festival for Southeast Asian documentary production.

Research trip to Southeast Asia

A first step, in the beginning of 2013, was making a research trip in order to meet filmmakers and producers in the region. It took us to Malaysia, Cambodia and Myanmar/Burma. In Malaysia, we were much inspired by *The Asian Side of the Doc*, a massive yearly documentary conference, where producers and directors from all over Asia meet. The documentary genre is clearly blossoming, and the need to exchange experiences and tell one's own (his)stories was apparent everywhere. Filmmakers and local funders (mostly from the world of broadcasting) were united in their ambition to realize more documentary projects, but this has not always been this way. In the past, funding for Southeast Asian documentary projects often tended to be sought in the West. In spite of such conditions it was striking to see that most Southeast Asian filmmakers were hanging on to their own approaches and ways of doing things, rather than copying ideas imported from elsewhere. Southeast Asian filmmakers have been anxious to tell stories in their own way.

In Cambodia, we visited Rithy Panh's *Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center*, an institute that focuses on the research of mediated traces of the genocide that took place during the Khmer Rouge regime. The *Bophana Center* restores and preserves visual materials from the past, making sure it is available for future generations to use. Young filmmakers are trained here by professional filmmakers including Rithy Panh himself. Our visit to Cambodia was completed with a two-day seminar organized by DocNet, entitled *The Voice of Southeast Asian Documentary – Reaching out to the World*. This seminar served as a platform of exchange and was aimed at networking between various professional groups in Southeast Asia that are involved in the production of documentary films. It was a great opportunity to meet commercial producers, representatives of TV stations, governmental film board officials, representatives of film schools and NGOs, all of whom may be able to support the sector in the near future.

Burma was a different story all together. After years of military dictatorship, the country's cinematic production is still in its infancy, but they are catching up fast. That much was also proven by our visit to the *Yangon Film School*. With few resources, but with utmost dedication, students are carving out their own ways to tell stories. A good example is *Tyres* (2013) by director Kyaw Myo Lwin, a well-crafted black-and-white short, portraying the recycling of car tires; a practice necessitated by extreme poverty

It is difficult to compare Southeast Asia with other regions, such as Latin America. In terms of documentary production Latin America now seems at an entirely different level. Countries such as Mexico, Argentina and Brazil

have strong documentary traditions and legislation and other facilities have contributed to a climate in which the documentary industry is able to deliver high quality creative products. This is not yet the case for Southeast Asia where we are generally looking at independent productions or documentaries that have mostly been made possible with resources from abroad.

Curating the program

After the research trip it was clear that the focus of the program should be on recent films, films able to reflect on the current state of the documentary scene throughout the region. Noticeably, there is much eagerness among young filmmakers from the region to tell stories of their countries being in transition. That process is enforced with accessible cheap digital cameras now being widely available.

It was also an honor to introduce Rithy Panh and his works to our international audience. We invited Panh as our special guest at IDFA, where he not only showed and commented on a retrospective of his own works, but also screened a program of films that have inspired him in his own work. We invited him to show our audiences how films may well connect personal and regional stories, whilst at the same time address universal themes.¹

For the 'Emerging Voices' program we initially had no specific theme in mind. All we wanted to do was to show how diverse Southeast Asian cinema currently is in its themes and styles. However, an important criterion in our selection process was the balance between cinematographic elements, differentiating documentaries from mere TV reports or home videos, but also their potential to resonate with international audiences. From this selection emerged personal stories that in oft creative ways address changes and challenges that the various countries in this region are currently facing. The documentary *House/Grandparent* (2013) by Azharr Rudin, for example, portrays a grandmother in Malaysia having a hard time keeping her own tempo while her family is thinking of moving to a new place. Similar tensions and challenges were also evident in Ismail Basbeth's film *400WORDS* (2013), showing a young modern Indonesian couple discovering their apparent very different approaches to wedding rituals and family values while attempting to produce a fiction film for their guests.

Out of more than a hundred possible films from the region we eventually selected fourteen; a number that proves the huge potential of filmmaking in and of that region. We were happy that the filmmakers of all fourteen selected films were able to attend the 2013 IDFA festival. They brought to Amsterdam the very same energy and enthusiasm we had already encountered during our trip, and they shared it not only with our audience, but also with other film professionals visiting the festival. The Southeast Asian directors met possible future collaborators and some of them were able to apply for our IDFA Bertha Funding, enabling them to develop follow-up projects. I am very hopeful that some of them will come back to IDFA to show their future products.

Below: Still from the Indonesian film *The Mangoes* (2012) by Tonny Trimarsanto.

Telling stories

In many ways the 'Emerging Voices' program showcased current events and developments in the documentary world of Southeast Asia, but it also highlighted the massive political, economic and social transitions that are presently taking place within the region. In Myanmar, for example, we visited the Yangon Film School. It was only five years old and had but limited means. The institute is nevertheless a hotbed of cinematic activity. It was here where we stumbled upon Aung Nwai Htway's *Behind the Screen* (2013), in which the filmmaker dissects the marriage of his parents - they were film icons in 1960s Myanmar. The film shows how the heartrending scenes acted out on the silver screen were a pretty accurate reflection of their real off-screen lives.

Although we were not looking for special themes, there is a common thread that is apparent in most of the fourteen films screened during the festival. *Behind the Screen* is as such exemplary for the program as a whole, highlighting larger cultural themes by telling personal stories. Most of these Southeast Asian filmmakers are not responding to the oft threatening circumstances by resorting to political statements, but rather they focus on personal accounts, often about family life, to thus say something about changing conditions within their country. *Consider* (2013), by Panu Saeng-Xuto, similarly confronts Thai society, reputed as sexually liberated, with the everyday hardships that transgender persons face.

The personal journey is yet another important theme in some of the films. The Indonesian film *The Mangoes* (2012) by Tonny Trimarsanto provides us with the very personal story of another transgender person who travels from her new home in metropolitan Jakarta to the village where she was born, to face her family for the first time since her life-changing decision. While the filmmaker refrains from explicit comments, the road trip is telling for the conditions of modern-day Indonesia. Finally, Nontawat Numbenchapol's *Boundary* (2013) portrays an age-old border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia through the motif of a road trip by the filmmaker, thus artistically blending his philosophical musings and sociological observations, with personal first hand experiences. While *Boundary* is the only film in the 'Emerging Voices' program to explicitly focus on borders, all fourteen films could somehow be said to deal with such a trope. Each film in its own way laid bare, and challenged, the borders of the societies these films were produced in.

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References

- 1 Rithy Panh's Masterclass is available online at: <http://tinyurl.com/rithypanhmasterclass>

