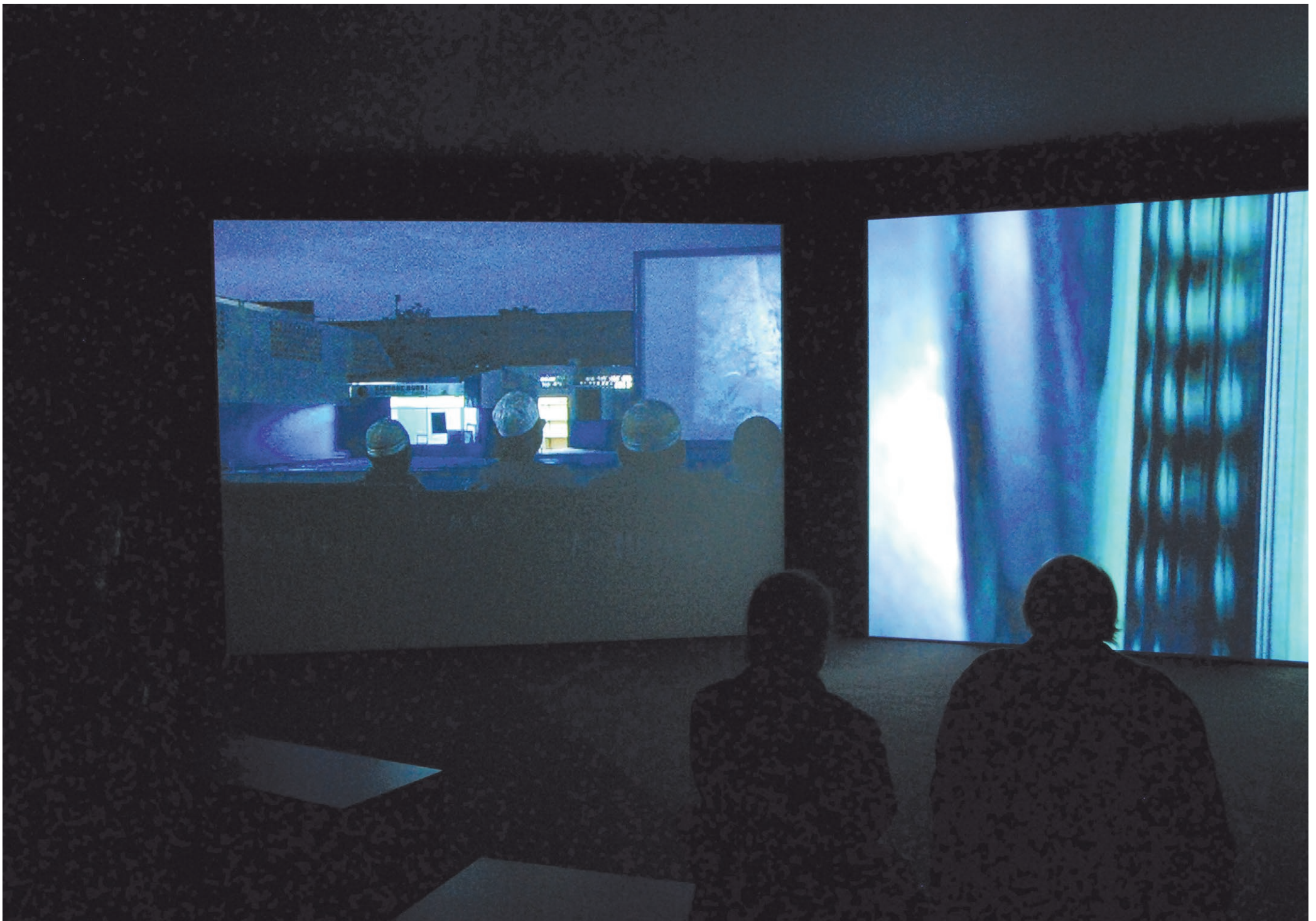


Visualizing Southeast Asia in the classroom through film



The expanding array in the last thirty years of documentaries, historical films, and fictional films on Southeast Asia, and produced from within the region, has provided an exciting resource pool for teaching about the region, not only for Southeast Asian cinema but also history, the social sciences, and other fields. The visual dimension is not new to the university classroom; images and films have become an important part of the teacher's repertoire. Their effectiveness in terms of visualizing concepts, issues, events, and personalities and capturing the attention of student audiences has contributed to their popularity.

Keng We Koh

FILMS, LIKE IMAGES, also pose interesting questions and challenges as a pedagogical tool. These would include the differences and parallels between film and the text as media of mass communication, issues of accuracy, perspective, and creative or ideological license in determining such 'value', as well as their relative importance in the classroom. For example, how do films differ from texts in the way they communicate ideas, concepts, and themes to the audience? Can film not also be read as texts? Are textual sources not subject to the same problems of factual accuracy, bias and creativity often associated with film? How is the value and authority of film in the classroom defined *vis-à-vis* text? To what extent does the power and impact of film in the classroom depend on factual accuracy and derive its authority from this? Are historical films or other fictional genres still useful in the history classroom with the mix of creative license and visual impact?

Fiction, fact and bias: genres and expectations

The main 'value' of films in teaching about Southeast Asia would be their ability not only to visualize the region, but to also bring the region 'to life', making it more immediate, dramatic, intimate, and 'real'. Therein, perhaps, lies its potential and power; but also danger, namely that of substituting fiction, or at best, interpretation, for fact. This is especially so with respect to history.

These issues are not unique to film. Academic and primary historical texts pose the same problems and challenges, although in the latter, it is often assumed that the peer review process and measures to police the standards of the field provide safeguards against factual inaccuracy, and highlight any biases in methodology. Films often enjoy greater leeway in terms of factual accuracy and truth, although expectations vary in terms of genre concerned. Expectations are greatest perhaps for documentaries. Historical films, however, are often assumed to take creative license in representing and interpreting historical events, personalities, and themes, although they are on some level still expected to provide plausible and accurate renditions of social, cultural, and political settings for their creative plots. Documentaries too, like textual sources, often suffer from bias and factual inaccuracies. Are such documentaries still useful for teaching? Are historical films and fictional films, with their penchant for dramatization and improvisation, still useful for teaching Southeast Asian history? These are some questions that I have grappled with in the course of using films in my classes.

Historical films: representing or re-inventing Southeast Asian pasts

Historical films, far from just recreating or representing Southeast Asian pasts, are often also about contesting these pasts, re-framing them, or recalling forgotten ones.

The use of these films in the Southeast Asia classroom needs to locate them in their respective political, ideological, and historiographical contexts. We can perhaps divide the historical films that we use into two loose categories. The first genre encompasses the films produced outside of Southeast Asia, often in former colonial metropolises and Cold War centers. This would include films like *The King and I*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Max Havelaar*, *Mother Dao*, *The Turtle-Like*, *Indochine*, *The Killing Fields*, and various Vietnam War movies, among others. Based on memoirs, real personalities and events or fictional reconstructions, these films were mostly concerned with the memories of these countries' engagements with the region. Several of these films have achieved prominence (and sometimes controversy) in raising questions about the memories and perspectives of the colonizing or imperial powers in Southeast Asia, their relations to local elites and populations, and the perspectives of the latter.

Indochine, for example, was as much an attempt to revisit the memory of Indochina in France, as the positing of a different gendered perspective to this history, from the perspective of women, both French and Vietnamese. The relationship between Eliane Devries and her adopted daughter, Camille, can also be read as a metaphor for the relationship between French colonialism (represented by its fledgling business class) and Vietnam, with Camille the orphaned daughter of rich Vietnamese aristocrats. The story is also located in the

Above:
Filmscreening. Photo
by Fridus Steijlen.

Issues and possibilities

context of the political transformations in Vietnam in the late 1920s, with the Yen Bay rebellion, the radicalization of the communist resistance, and the breakdown of the old Vietnamese socio-political order (especially the old elites allied to the French colonial elites). On the whole, the breakdown in the relationship between Eliane and Camille, caused by her love for the young French officer and her journey in search of him that brings them to the Vietnamese communist resistance, mirrors the changing relationships between Vietnam and France in the context of the nationalist movements and their radicalization.

Historical films on the Vietnam War, produced in the United States between the 1980s and the present, have questioned the role of the United States in the conflict, and the suffering inflicted not only on the Vietnamese and Cambodians, but also the American personnel themselves. *The Killing Fields* not only highlighted the brutality of the Khmer Rouge projects of 1975-1979, but also sought to portray these events from the perspective of a Cambodian. *The Year of Living Dangerously*, produced in Australia, also drew attention to the atrocities of 1965-1966 in Indonesia at a time when political stability, economic development, and state propaganda had led to the gradual forgetting of these events in western countries.

These films provided important dramatizations of key events in Southeast Asian history. While often representing these events from the perspectives of people associated with the colonizers or imperial powers, they, nevertheless, offer interesting objections and alternatives to standard narratives on the past associated with them.

Films from Southeast Asia

Historical films have been an important part of the early histories of the new nation-states and the nascent film industries in the region. Even as they represented local perspectives, we must take into account the political and ideological conditions in which they were produced. The nation-building travails and the Cold War challenges between the 1950s and 1980s, the political changes in the region since the mid-1980s, and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, have created a new environment of debate and contestation over national identity, politics, culture, and the past in many Southeast Asian countries. This period also paralleled the revival and rapid growth of film industries in the region, and new genres of historical films.

Besides films aimed at glorifying official narratives of national pasts, we also see the production of a series of films that have come to question the official historiographies of the preceding period, either for key events or personalities, or in discussing topics or subjects hitherto discouraged. The regional and global exposure of these films was aided by the changing global film market, which has helped several of these films to become commercially re-released in America and other developed European and Asian countries, with some of them not only entered in prominent film festivals, but even emerging victorious as winners in key categories.

In Thailand, the decline during the 1980s of a previously vibrant film industry was reversed in the late 1990s onwards, and we have seen the emergence of a new commercial and independent Thai film industry. Historical film productions such as *Bang Rajan* (2000), *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001) and the *Naresuan* series (2007-2011) replicated the themes or issues of older historical films from the 1960s, namely the glories of Ayutthaya – regarded as the charter state for present-day Thailand – and its contests and wars with Burmese rulers, but on a much larger scale and budget. They can be seen as attempts to revive national pride in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the painful economic restructuring in Thailand.

Despite its nationalistic overtones, *The Legend of Suriyothai* offered the retelling of the story of the politics of Ayutthaya from the perspectives of the royal women. The film also highlighted the cosmopolitanism of the polity during the first half of the 16th century, as well as the structure of pre-modern politics in the region, as outlined in the writings of Wolters and historians of Thailand and Southeast Asia, especially the importance of heterarchies, family politics, shifting loyalties, and the control of manpower in the cultural matrix of the region. *Yamada: Samurai of Ayothaya* (2010) provided a fictional account of the life of Yamada Nagamasa, a seventeenth-century Japanese adventurer who served in the Ayutthaya court.

The Overture was not only the retelling of the life story of a famous *ranak-ed* palace musician from Siam in the early 20th century, but also the reevaluation of a period in Thailand's history after the bloodless coup of 1932, during the 1930s and 1940s, a period dominated by military governments and their nation-building projects. The confrontation between the musical master and the military officer entrusted with enforcing the state's ban on the playing of traditional musical instruments symbolized the tensions between the old and the new in the context of the modernizing projects in this period. It led to a revival of traditional Thai music, and presented certain aspects of Thai culture to the world.

Historical films (including fictional films that locate their plots in a historical event or period) draw their strengths not so much from fictional accuracy, but from highlighting themes and perspectives on Southeast Asian pasts through the visual impact of moving images. Due to the creative license taken with events and people, and even the questions over the reconstruction of the dress, material life, and built environments of the past, there is a need for a more critical use of these films in the classroom. The instructor plays an important role in providing background information, where possible, on the production of these films, their target audiences, and the motivations and concerns of the film creators. Students must be taught how to critically interpret these films, both through the evaluation of 'facts' and the reading of metaphors and narratives.

Rescuing history from the nation?

Like the film industry, the production of documentaries about Southeast Asia has seen similar trends in the last thirty years, both outside and within the region. A multitude of documentaries on Southeast Asian history, heritage sites, cultural life, and socio-political and environmental issues are now available for the classroom, produced either by national broadcasting corporations, subscription cable channels, or independent companies.

The processes of political, economic, and cultural change since the mid-1980s, and especially after late 1990s, have seen the increasing engagement of documentary makers in projects questioning official ideological and historiographical positions, especially with respect to national history. These documentaries also engage social, cultural, political and economic issues often ignored by the state in their respective countries, and present the perspectives of non-mainstream or marginalized interest groups. Amir Muhammad's *Apa Kabar Orang Kampung* (2007) and *The Last Communist* (2006), *I Love Malaya* (2006) by a group of young filmmakers, and Fahmi Reza's *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (2007) are good examples of such attempts to re-examine key periods of Malaysian history, namely the debate over the Malayan Union proposals of 1946, the Malayan Emergency, as well as the recent applications by former leaders of the Malayan Communist Party to return to Malaysia, notably the late Chin Peng.

Fahmi Reza's documentary interviewed politicians and activists in socialist, worker and women groups, who had in

1947 submitted alternative proposals for a future Malaya, which had been deliberately overlooked by the British government in favor of the proposal submitted by the traditional Malay elites and their new political movement. This rebuff culminated in a nation-wide strike in 1947. Drawing on interviews with Malayan Communist Party members in southern Thailand, Amir Muhammad's documentaries and *I Love Malaya* sought to present the voices of the people fighting on the 'other side' or the 'losing' side, their imaginations of the Malayan nation, and their accounts of their past. Although critics might question the bias in the interview pool of these documentaries, they provide an important counter narrative to state-sponsored discourses represented in official documentaries and texts. Each documentary faced the challenges of presenting a balanced history of these episodes, without the demonization or glorification of either side. Presenting the silenced voices was an important first step.

For Indonesia, we note the same trends. The growing numbers of young directors making short films, documentaries and fictional films examining social, political, economic and cultural issues, offer a growing body of documentary resources for teaching about the country.¹ We also see the same questioning of official state historiographies, regarding critical events in the nation's history, in recent documentaries like *Shadow Play* (2003), *40 Years of Silence* (2009), and *The Act of Killing* (2012). Although produced outside Indonesia, they have begun to critically engage the history of a controversial period of Indonesian history and that of the Cold War, namely the events of 1965-1966, especially the massacres that took place across the country in response to the purported coup and attempt to seize power by the Indonesian Communist Party.

The Act of Killing, in particular, has attracted domestic and global attention for this historical event, through the controversy of its methods, which allowed the perpetrators of the killings to make a movie about themselves and the executions they carried out during the 1965-1966 events, and through its winning of a BAFTA for Best Documentary and its Oscar nomination for Best Documentary. The film remains officially banned in Indonesia, but has managed to be screened a number of times throughout the country, and has attracted much discussion on the internet.

Film, text, and history

Films, through visualizing history, and often dramatizing it (even in the case of documentaries), have become very powerful tools for teaching and thinking about Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian history. This power also presents certain dangers, especially in terms of factual accuracy and perspective. These issues are not unique to film, and extend to more traditional text-based print media, although there are more safeguards for the latter in terms of peer review processes. As we have seen above, the use of film is in spite of issues of creative license in the representation and re-enactment of events and characters. The producers have often used film for their impact value, in positing alternative readings of texts or questioning existing narratives and ideological positions.

Film, and other forms of audio-visual mass media, have come to dominate our everyday lives and information flows, through cinema, television, the personal computer, tablets and mobile phones. This prevalence makes it necessary for our students to be trained in the critical use of this media and its different genres, not only in forming critical perspectives on Southeast Asia, but also in maintaining this critical approach in navigating the new information environments. In the modern history classroom, the instructor plays an important role in helping the student negotiate between different media tools in the transmission of knowledge and the training of critical thinking. A variety of online resources have been created, by the film industry and history-teaching associations in North America and the United Kingdom, to guide teachers in the use of this medium. The number of websites dealing with this topic is a reflection of this trend.

Ultimately, film and text are inextricably linked, and both depend on instructor guidance to help students navigate the abovementioned issues. Although it is doubtful that film could ever totally supplant text in the classroom, it can be used to challenge the authority of text in the classroom, and it constitutes part of an increasingly complex and critical repertoire shaped by the possibilities and demands of multimedia technologies in everyday life of the 21st century.

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Note

¹ For more information on the Indonesian scene, see <http://tinyurl.com/docnetSEAsia>

Below:
Still from the film
Behind the Screen.

