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REVIEW

Selves as Worlds, Worlds as Selves

A Review of *Worlds We Are*, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) Manila, 2023

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It is easy to think that one understands what Southeast Asian cinema is, especially because of the ready availability of films from Southeast Asian countries in online streaming sites. In Netflix, for example, one is spoiled for choice: horror films, action thrillers, comedies, romance and drama films, and period pieces from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam vie for attention against Korean dramas, Hollywood and Bollywood films, and films and series from other countries around the world. We can hardly say now that we are unaware what our neighbors in the region are watching. And it does seem that what we Filipinos like watching are very similar to, if not actually are, what they are watching.

Of course, these genre films are representative of neither the length and breadth of current filmmaking practice nor the wealth of creative talent in Southeast Asia. Patrick Campos's curated showcase *Worlds We Are*, held last September 14–16, 2023 at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila, is an exciting revelation of the bold new forms of current cinematic work that adeptly deal with the intractable issues of identity and history, colonialism and diaspora,

authoritarianism and resistance that resist easy categorizations—mostly by women—from and on the region. It does not only trouble a seeming understanding—an unproblematized assumption that “Southeast Asian cinema” is the national cinemas of a (colonially-determined) geopolitical region read collectively—but it also expands, in the process, possible ways of thinking about the region and about cinema itself as a medium that represents the varied experiences of the people who dwell in Southeast Asia and its various iterations: as lived space, as imagined utopia, and as memory. The program frames these filmic engagements as encounters between and among worlds, as these are lived out by disparate selves. Contexts are not so much what gives these articulations their potency, as it is the filmmakers—and their familial subjects as well—their act of *dwelling* in these contexts.

Worlds We Are “explores the aesthetics of vulnerable self-invention arising from experience, the ethics of alterity animated by encounters with difference, and the politics of solidarity advocating collective struggle against forces that negate we.” (Campos) The films in the showcase are not necessarily only those made by

filmmakers from the region, but by filmmakers who identify part of their life stories and identities with the many violent upheavals at different points in time in the region. Many of them are children of the diaspora tracing the lines of rupture, the roots of their hurts and their families' pain; at the same time, their multiple, overlapping identities are made material to shape the stories that they re/tell. Running through the different films is the assumption that we are each a world unto ourselves, and that these disparate worlds are themselves borne of how we locate ourselves and make our place within the world that we share. Of course, this common characteristic—a disposition, a certain way of being in the world—is not unique to Southeast Asia. What *Worlds We Are* does, however, is to prod us to think about the activity itself of bringing a “Southeast Asian cinema” into being, an initiative that has been seeing a fair amount of attention in film programming and scholarship on the region. The questions “Who are we? Where are we? When are we?” instead are posed to prompt conversations among the films, as well as between the films and their audiences. An openness to speculation is encouraged by the films; the interrogation itself is the point.

Three sections, corresponding to the provocations, group the films featured in the showcase: Selves, Worlds, and Histories. Selves fleshes out personal histories and perspectives, tracing individual lives as they get entangled in large-scale historical events in the region. Worlds poses pasts and futures as distinct spaces, exploring how memory creates the past as a world on its own—different but not quite entirely so—and how new imaginaries of community can be constructed with others. Histories mines colonial heritage and how these have been felt most acutely in the present, proposing as well the feminine character of resistance to authoritarian regimes.

Otty Widasari's *Kemarin* (Yesterday) (2008) opens Selves, the first of the categories in the showcase. Capturing a conversation among three friends about their lives ten years ago, around the beginning of Indonesia's *reformasi* period, the short film plays around intimacy and distance. While the audience is privy to the youthful loves and mischiefs of Widasari and her friends, an incomprehensibility permeates: aside from personal references that only they understand, the English subtitles betray a flippant attitude to the act of translation itself. This opaque way of presenting a mundane act throws us off, so that our attention feels

intrusive—not unwelcome really, but such that the encounter with an other is made material. Displacement as it is felt in one's body is the subject of *The Songs That Sung Her* (2015), filmmaker Sun Koh's account of her two years in Sweden, during which she found herself singing the Singaporean national anthem in her head at odd moments in her everyday life. The body as vessel is also conjured in Thuy Han Nguyen-Chi's *Into the Violet Belly* (2022), a luminous work undertaken in collaboration with her mother whose desperate act of jumping into open sea is the violence of escape from the Vietnam War and into a vast unknowable life in an alien land. A child of the Vietnamese diaspora, Haya, is the subject of a short documentary by Ugne Alaburdaite (*HAYA*, 2022). Speaking haltingly in Lithuanian, Haya retells growing up in Vilnius disconnected from both Vietnam and Lithuania. After having spent most of her young life thus unmoored, she finds expression and grounding in her body and its movements. This emphasis on the body is troubled by Ly Trang in her *Con mèo của Sisyphus* (*Sisyphus' Cat*) (2022), where a body is discarded so its soul can travel in time in pursuit of a lost cat, only to arrive at a semi-hypothetical future where humans have become servers locked in endless labor. The juxtaposition of the moving *A Worm, Whatever Will Be, Will Be* (2022) by Mickey Lai and the film essay *Fifth Cinema* (2018) by Nguyen Trinh Thi at the end of Selves strongly argues for the inextricability of experimental form and affect. Resisting the linearity and comprehensibility of history, the two films operate at the level of subjectivity and revel in the gaps that oblique associations to historical events, Hollywood films, daily life, family histories, film manifestos, and other archival material—in visual, aural, and textual forms—tease open. Via the Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay, Nguyen makes a provocation that reverberates across the showcase: Is it possible to make an indigenous film? How would such a film be like? What kind of film would represent the experiences of people in Vietnam and elsewhere, the identities of people whose lives have been shaped by the history of that country, now? These questions can only come from a position defined by multiplicity: Nguyen defines herself as a citizen, a filmmaker, a woman, a mother, and an artist (Minneapolis Institute of Art).

Also working with assemblage, Natalie Khoo puts together moving images to capture the elastic interwovenness of the stories that her grandmother

tells of a spider spirit and of her life as a migrant from the Riau Islands to Singapore in *A Spider, Fever and Other Disappearing Islands* (2021). The work is also a gathering of the retellings of Khoo's collaborators, a mélange of visions that run into each other so that the original narrative, already fluid as it is, "became sentient and living, continuously growing and distorting" (Objectifs). In *A Spider*, as in Pam Virada's *Casting a Spell to Alter Reality* (2020), storytelling is how a strange world is occupied, lived in, and made one's own. Using clips from Hou Hsiao-hsien's Coming of Age trilogy (*A Summer at Grandpa's*, 1984; *The Time to Live, the Time to Die*, 1985; *Dust in the Wind*, 1986), Pam Virada draws out similarities between her grandfather's storytelling and those of Hsiao-hsien's old folks to surface strategies of occupying a strange present by weaving magic with memories of people and places that might be real or made up. Stories as words that become text, sound, and image construct a new world in *A Day Without Sun in Mengkerang (Chapter One)* by Au Sow Yee (2013). Utterances by different people weave together the fictional place of Mengkerang (an other-Malaysia, if you may) where three races—Malay, Indian, and Chinese—live together in peace. World-building in practice is the subject of the short documentary *Rasa dan Ada (Flavors, Feelings, and Hopes)* (Okui Lala and Nasrikah, 2022) about the efforts of Pertimig, a group of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia who brought the community into being using activities done together via Zoom during the pandemic lockdowns. The little acts of showing off their cooked Indonesian dishes, playing games, writing poetry and reading them to each other, and dancing together take on significance as an acknowledgment of each other's existence and a commitment to care for each other.

Kassaram (Thania Petersen, 2020) can be quite a jolt after *Rasa*: reveling in deliberately klunky aesthetics, the short film surfaces colonial strategies of delineating identities of South Africans who trace their ancestries to the many different people who were brought to the Cape to work. Though initially bewildering, *Kassaram* lulls us with its dancing musicians in fez, twirling brides, flower-throwing girls, marching figures and prancing clowns set against richly illustrated landscapes of Cape Town into thinking this is all harmless fun—until the screen erupts in flames and scenes of violence are glimpsed in the torn shreds of the screen. The interruption is largely successful: a

young person from the audience says disappointedly, "Ay akala ko happy lang tayo." ("Oh I thought we'll only be happy here.") If *Kassaram* delights in visual pleasures, Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati's *Expedition Content* (2020) denies vision in a critical engagement with colonialism's visual regime and ethnography's complicity in perpetuating Western stereotypes of indigenous culture. Drawing from sound recordings made by Michael Rockefeller, once heir to the Rockwell family's Standard Oil fortune before his disappearance, for the 1961 Harvard Peabody Exhibition in the Netherlands New Guinea, *Expedition* exposes what was unseen in *Dead Birds* (Robert Gardner, 1964), the documentary produced following the expedition. As black blankets the screen, we are engulfed in the sounds of everyday life in a Hubula village in West Papua, of children playing, women talking and singing, birds and insects raucous in the forest air, enjoining us to participate in this recovery and restoration of a way of life long vanished and to consider the latent violence in its documentation.

Shireen Seno's *To Pick a Flower* (2021) and Camilla Griggers and Sari Dalena's *Memories of a Forgotten War* (2000)—the oldest film in the showcase—bookend Histories, the last category in the showcase. By conjuring colonial pasts to loom over the present, *To Pick* and *Memories* frame the four other works that try to unpick the knotty political realities in the region. Plants and trees captured in archival photographs during the early years of American colonial rule in the Philippines are primarily the subject of Shireen Seno's *To Pick a Flower*. Melancholic early twentieth century Filipinas and their potted plants lend the short film an uncannily contemporary feel,¹ while murmured names caress the grey, gigantic trees to which they belong—gestures that intimate but not soften the past, that nevertheless seeks to unearth the ravages of colonialism on local ecologies. As in the nocturnal lives of snails and frogs in the forest undergrowth, secrets are kept close in the lives of Bangkok's inhabitants shuttered inside their homes following the 2014 coup d'état of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. Danaya Chulphuthiphong's *Night Watch* (2015) documents the social decay that undemocratic rule effects, and converses with Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Nightfall* (2016) which uses the 1973 exchanges between Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to reveal Thailand's aspirations to achieve Singapore's modernist, albeit undemocratic,

development. Completely unmentioned is the Thammasat University Massacre in 1976, though it looms large in the film. Instead, the work follows an anonymous woman—who at times is visited by a double—as she traverses underpasses and paths through a park in Singapore. A young girl’s wish to return to the safety of her mother’s womb is Drestel Galang’s response to then-President Rodrigo Duterte’s infamous “Barilin niyo sa puke” (“Shoot them [women] in the vagina”) statement in *Puke ng Ina* (2018). In this film, the puke is reclaimed as space to a more secret place where no one—an oppressive force, such as a man—can trespass. A distinctly feminine character of resistance is articulated further in *February 1st* (Mo Mo and Leïla Macaire, 2021) where two female perspectives, captured as video diaries by a Burmese woman (Mo Mo), newly returned to Myanmar after studying in the US, and a French woman (Leïla Macaire), recently home from a trip to Myanmar, are made to speak to each other. This conversation highlights some obvious differences—while Macaire looks back fondly at her time spent in the country, Mo Mo worries about the future of Myanmar’s democracy following the February 1, 2021 coup d’état. Shooting scenes of anti-military junta protests after, Mo Mo surfaces the practice of stringing up women’s longyis (wrap) to provide protection to the protesters against Tatmadaw forces.² In Kiri Dalena’s *Gikan sa Ngitngit Nga Kinailadman (From the Dark Depths)* (2017) women are revolutionaries who sustain life, simultaneously breathing life into and mourning the resistance. Grieving women loom large in the last film of the showcase, *Memories of a Forgotten War* (2001) by Sari Dalena and Camilla Griggers, which visualizes Filipino suffering during the Philippine-American War. Using Griggers’ family history as entry-point, the documentary becomes part of the archive on the little-known war, giving it emotive force.

In *Worlds We Are*, Campos proposes a latticed view of Southeast Asian cinema, and this is borne out by the different connections across the showcase that can be mapped out. Certainly what cuts through Selves, Worlds, and Histories is the monumental—because deeply personal—effort to reach back through time—via memory, where reality slips into fantasy and vice

versa—and space to flesh out stories of violence contained in the body and are passed on to the next generation. These moving image works can be thought of as islands, giving “pedestrian [views] from the ground [that is] anecdotal” (Choy 344) that discourses a “continental” view of Southeast Asia that aims to thematize across disparate works and practices.³ Islands are individual and self-contained but they are also part of the sea: these anecdotes are also part of a bigger narrative of filmmaking in Southeast Asia. While this narrative has usually taken the form of a gathering of national cinemas juxtaposed with their respective national histories,⁴ film programs have more room to imagine the region as “itinerant and diffuse” (Lovatt 177) and to explore and elaborate possible subjectivities. *Worlds We Are* for one, enacts exchange that is lateral and textured. Images run into each other, shimmer, pulsate, burst, bleed. Sound and text acquire presence and heft. The archival is unearthed and reanimated. All these serve to present narratives in the full extent of their intractability so that the limits of the idea of “narrative” itself is teased and tested and gaps are revealed as openings.

Affective and relational, *Worlds We Are* is regioning as world-making, a proposal to consider the region as a worthy scale both “under” and “above” the modern nation (Lovatt and Trice; Campos, “Topos, Historia, Islas”) to make sense of shared realities and to plot out lines of solidarity that go well beyond national boundaries.⁵ Bridging these differences however, we are constantly reminded of the distance from one to another. Each film, because of its paradoxical brevity and density, requires our thoughtful consideration and asks us, after the event of watching, to expand ourselves. This difficulty, the films’ resistance to easy comprehension and seeming understanding, “encourages [us] to start from the artwork but not stay there, to think with it but also away from and against it.” (Lind) Our movement surfaces distances—between histories and cultures, utterances and translations—and our efforts to narrow them in our (brief) encounter with cinema. This in turn articulates dwelling in its fullness, discursing our way of understanding the world and our place in it with that of our neighbors’, thus bringing forth “Southeast Asia” as an intersubjectivity.

Endnotes

¹ I am reminded here of the plantito/a phase that many Filipinos had during the pandemic lockdowns.

² In Myanmar, men lose their (masculine) power when they walk under garments that cover women's private parts, such as longyis.

³ Playing with spatial metaphors that have been used to describe the region, Choy uses the dual nature of Southeast Asia's topography—as continental and insular—to describe curation practices of contemporary Southeast Asian art.

⁴ See for example the most recent edited volume on Southeast Asian cinema, *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)*.

⁵ Campos put together a film showcase titled Lumad for the Minikino Monthly Screening and Discussion in May 2021. He describes, in the program, regional cinemas outside Manila as Fourth Cinema (following Barclay): "Lumad Cinema politicizes Philippine regional films and situates them in translocal space alongside indigenous cinemas around the world where the struggle for land remains vital." (MMSD MAY 2021: LUMAD)

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