Southeast Asian film archives in focus at the 7th Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN CINEMAS (ASEAC) held its seventh international conference on 19-22 June 2012 at the National Museum of Singapore – in the city that also hosted the inaugural conference back in 2004. Focusing this year on the theme of ‘The Politics, Practices, and Poetics of the Archive’, the well-attended event was organized in cooperation with the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University, and included plenary talks, panels with scholars and archivists from around the world, archival film screenings, and visits to archives and galleries in Singapore.

An opening panel on practical issues that arise in film restoration – and in particular on the restoration of the historically significant Indonesian film Lewat Djam Malam (After the Curfew, 1953) – was followed by a screening of a newly struck 35mm print of this just-recovered work. The first evening of the conference featured an opening address from film historian Thomas Doherty (Brandeis University), who spoke of the importance of archives for facilitating historical research, Doherty noted how luck and happenstance inevitably bear upon such research, which in his experience has often come to fruition only owing to the alert eyes (and the strong memories) of seasoned archivists with full knowledge of their respective collections (before the days of the computer database).

The second day of the conference began with a special focus on Cambodian archives, with the first panel of the day addressing both the use of Cambodian archival materials in film and the present state of the Cambodian archives themselves. As part of the panel, a talk from Sopheap Chea, a representative of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre in Phnom Penh, introduced those present to an important regional resource for scholarship. The panel was followed by a rare screening of Baby Panh’s Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy (1996), a film which makes use of archival materials to dramatize historical events of the Khmer Rouge years. The Cambodian focus was picked up again on the third day, with a special screening of the new documentary Golden Slumbers (2011) – a work which bemoans the absence of archival material from the golden age of Cambodian cinema before the rise of the Khmer Rouge. French-Cambodian filmmaker Davy Chou was also present to discuss his work with a very appreciative audience.

A mid-day break on the second day afforded conference participants the opportunity to join a guided tour of the National Museum of Singapore’s newly-refurbished Film and Wayang Gallery. Other highlights of the day included a panel dealing with ‘Film as Archive’ – that is, with the archival functions films themselves can serve – and a plenary talk from Bliss Cua Lim (University of California at Irvine). Taking the situation of film heritage in the Philippines as its key example, Lim’s talk considered practical conundrums and philosophical contradictions posed by the archive; that in preserving some works the archive historically need to make them less accessible to the public, and may also condemn (by omission) other works that may in some ways be equally significant.

The third day of the conference included panels on the struggles of the Sinematek Indonesia in Jakarta, and on audiovisual archival materials pertaining to Singapore. Such materials were also the subject of a talk from representatives of the Ivan Polunin archive, which included some screening of rare color footage of Singapore filmed in the 1950s by the archive’s namesake. The afternoon was given to an event in memory of two important figures for the film archive community: Mosbach Yuna Biring, the founder of the Sinematek Indonesia, and Alexis Tsevoie, a youngFilipino-Canadian critic and advocate of Southeast Asian independent cinema. Short films from Indonesia and the Philippines were screened, accompanied by brief introductions and reminiscences about the two men.

The fourth and final day of the conference featured panels on ‘Religion and Film’ and on ‘Film and Cultural Memory’ – both of which demonstrated in differing ways how, in preserving or capturing history, film itself may also be a site of ongoing cultural and religious negotiation and contestation. Also on the final day, some of the conference’s fundamental concerns were highlighted at a plenary panel with film archivists from Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, which provided a unique opportunity to take a regional perspective on ‘Contemporary Challenges for the Archive’. Panelists spoke of, among other things, potential preservation problems that arise with the digitizing of audiovisual collections, difficulties in securing funding for the continuation of archives, and practical matters of maintaining enough space for growing collections and providing public access – in particular for audiences who may not have much experience in using archives.

Members of ASEAC were quite pleased with the success of this year’s event, which attracted close to one hundred participants (speakers and attendees) and produced quite a few animated discussions between panelists and audience members. The organization intends to continue to build upon the evident interest in scholarship on Southeast Asian film, and is already making plans for its next conference in 2014 at another Southeast Asian city to be determined.

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