

Moving Images as a Means to Communicate across Borders

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Working as a film critic/journalist for more than 15 years, my expertise lies in global contemporary film scenes especially on Asian cinema. Films are usually regarded as one of the show-business industries, produced to merely “entertain” people, with a number of genres to serve individual’s cinematic taste. However, watching films from all over the world at several international film festivals, one may quickly realize that there exist different kinds of films that are far more serious, depicting the problems of society honestly, expressing concerns over community issues and giving strong arguments towards the status quo of contemporary situations and circumstances. The richness of film media components and techniques, comprising story-telling from film script, images, acting, montage, sounds, etc. distinguishes the media from other art forms, such as literature, theater and visual arts. Cinema, therefore, has a unique power to communicate, unlike any other medium.

My focus in relation to the ALFP 2018 program’s theme “Imagining Plural Asias: How Can We Enrich Interrelationships across Borders?” lies on films and other moving-image media presented in the program. Through the course of the program, there were several instances where films and moving-image media were used as a means of expression and/or communication, and I intended to analyze how this form of media plays role in the dialogues on “Imagining Plural Asias: How Can We Enrich Interrelationships across Borders?”—the ALFP 2018’s central theme.

The idea that film and moving-image media can communicate across borders was clear to me even before I joined this program. This is evident in many Thai independent films in recent years by which the filmmakers try to convey social issues through the narratives of film art. Though Thai film industry is better known from commercial blockbusters especially martial-arts films, including *Ong Bak* (2003), *Tom Yum Goong* (2005) and the animation *9 Satra* (2018) that have been distributed and enjoyed by audiences from all over the world, there are also creative independent opuses by filmmakers, such as Aphichatpong Weerasethakul, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Aditya Assarat, Pimpaka Towira, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Anucha Boonyawattana and Thunskana Pansittivorakul. Works by these helmers garner acclaims from various international film festivals. The serious filmmaking in Thailand has been, therefore, very active, and these directors are all auteur filmmakers who always stand for their point of view, making films to address their genuine concerns over societal issues, and are frequently at odds with the government’s censorship board. Their films fearlessly tackle the public issues sprung from Thailand’s social stratification over the three national pillars—sovereignty, religion and monarchy—delineating how these unique roots shape our citizen’s common ways of life guiding to unique conflicts and problems no other nation may encounter. Above all, these

issues are voiced through their films across borders by being invited to overseas film festivals, as well as by getting commercial distribution in foreign countries both Asian and elsewhere.

Upon joining the ALFP program, I have found that films and moving-image media are constantly used as materials to communicate and initiate discussions. The ways these media were made to convey the message merit in-depth analysis in order to see its involvement in the overall discussion of the program. I shall give a survey of moving-image media used in the program, as well as relevant activities as follow.

During the introductory meetings early in the program, where all the fellows are supposed to introduce their own country and to report on current issues, it was notable that, apart from facts, figures and descriptions, tourism promotion videos were used as a part of the presentations especially in the case of Thailand, Malaysia and Pakistan. These short films, produced by the respective government, are intended as publicity material to attract foreign tourists to pay a visit. The sumptuous, glamorous and paradisiacal images, often overtly and positively exaggerated, clearly depict how each government wants foreigners see their own country. The discourse analysis of these videos reveals the idealistic identity each tourism authority pictures towards its own nation, hiding several truths which have no place in this public-image sporting in the first place. The videos provide a nice counter-balance to harsh realities also addressed alongside in the country report sessions.

Documentary or actuality video is another medium that was shown or addressed in several seminars during the ALFP. The seminar on “Remembrance and Forgetting of Negative Historical Memories” by Professor Tomoko Ako about historical museums in Asia also addressed a gruesome documentary on the Nanking massacre as a depiction of past reality. The field trip to Otsuchi Town, Iwate Prefecture, where the fellows visited the Oshacchi local cultural facility includes an exhibition of a short actuality video, shot during the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami in March 2011. This brief video, barely a minute-long, brings a stunningly destructive atmosphere of the great Tsunami, neither words nor photographs may equally express, highlighting our visit to this mournful past with such recorded reality. It is surprising that after the raw image and sound of the incident, the video ends with moving-images of the aftermath with an accompanying bright music, giving hope a posteriori the catastrophe. This shows how the official presentation of the tragedy uses the medium also as a means to encourage the audience to regain and rebuild lives after the fate, besides genuinely exhibiting the situation. It brings about a sense of gentle manipulation to lead the audiences to certain direction by not leaving the viewers abandoned with a loose-end. A visit to Sendai Mediatheque where footages of the Tsunami strike in 2011 are collected and curated as an art exhibition to remind audience of the events is another example of how raw footages can be manipulated to convey certain message or sentiments. In the seminar session on identity issues and a sense of belonging, photographer Kosuke Okahara presented his photography project called “Ibasyo” which portrays black and white photographs of self-loath Japanese girls who

suffered from rape and family problems. Though “Ibasyo” is clearly a photography project, Mr. Okahara borrows filmmaking techniques to exhibit the pictures as a slideshow with a calculated pace, accompanied by carefully chosen melancholic music, again adopting documentary cinema approach to express his visions of the subjects. This shows that documentary form may not just honestly portray facts, but it can also include opinionated or emotional elements with the aim to affect the audiences in a certain way.

Two medium and feature-length films were watched by the fellows as a ground for the program’s discussion. Firstly, a documentary produced by one of the fellows, Lydia Lubon from Malaysia, called *Operation Sumatran Rhino* (2016) directed by Chris Annadorai was about a mission to save the endangered Sumatran rhino from extinction by finding a female mate for the only male Sumatran rhino left before it falls to sterility by disease. Accompanying the real-life twists and turns masterly told by the director are the first-rate cinematic techniques with shots carefully designed, appropriate rousing music, and above all, the earnest portrayal of the zoologists in the mission whose passions, stamina and perseverance radiate throughout the film along with their highly likeable characters. The film generated lively discussion on the region’s environmental issue, as well as how multinational effort across the borders is needed in order to achieve such a challenging task.

Another feature film watched during the program is *Remittance* (2015) directed by Patrick Daly and Joel Fendelman about a Filipino mother who tries to escape poverty by moving to Singapore to work as a housemaid. The film depicts the real-life phenomenon where a number of Filipino workers flock to other Asian countries in order to find better paid jobs, triggering cross-border concerns on migration. This film was shown as a basis for the discussion on the immigration issues especially on the Filipino workers traveling to Japan, which is similar to the case of Filipino maids working in Singapore as portrayed in the film. Though the film *Remittance* is clearly an independent film that tries to honestly convey message found in real-life, the discussion pointed out that the film still has a certain degree of dramatization and narrative maneuver that can make the scenes look unnatural and incredible at times. However, the naturalism of the film managed to honestly portray the immigrant life. The comparison between *Operation Sumatran Rhino* and *Remittance* highlights the fluid interplay between “reality” and “fantasy” in documentary and fiction genres of filmmaking where the associations between documentary-reality and fiction-imagination become blurred.

The cases of international partnership on moving-image media in terms of both production and exhibition can be found in our visit to NHK office where we learned about NHK World Program in English which broadcasts coverages of both local and Asian stories worldwide. This provides a good example of how a local enterprise in moving-image media expands its business to the international sphere, connecting to audiences across borders. A visit to the 31st Tokyo International Film Festival as a program’s optional activity offered an even richer opportunity to explore the case of film co-production among Asian talents. The prime

example is the omnibus film *Asian Three-Fold Mirror: Journey* produced by the festival itself under the Asian Three-Fold Mirror project by inviting three directors from three countries, namely Degen Yun from China, Edwin from Indonesia and Daishi Matsunaga from Japan, to make one short film based on the common theme of “journey.” The result gave a very Asian view on contemporary lives in Asia, which invites cross-culture comparison. The Japan Foundation Asia Center also took part to curate a film section called “Soundtrip to Southeast Asia” by exhibiting nine feature films, old and new, from Southeast Asian region under a common theme of music-making. A few other films in the Tokyo International Film Festival line-up also reflected international co-production, such as *Ten Years Thailand* (2018), which is in fact a franchise of the original Hong Kong film *10 Years* (2015) to be followed by Taiwanese and Japanese takes on the same idea to depict Asia in 10 year time, a very near future.

The role of moving-image media in the ALFP 2018 Program was, therefore, not limited to a supplementary material to support the seminars, visits or discussions. The content of the media itself had its own voice and often initiated both cerebral and emotional reactions from the fellows through the styles and tones of each presented work. This media is universal enough to overcome the cultural differences of its audiences with the power of real/artificial images, sound, pace, text, and, in certain cases, acting. It indisputably enriches the discussion leading to the response to the thematic question “How Can We Enrich Interrelationships across Borders?”

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9 Satra (2018) directed by Pongsa Kornsi, Gun Phansuwon and Nat Yoswatananont

Ong Bak (2003) directed by Prachya Pinkaew

Operation Sumatran Rhino (2016) directed by Chris Annadorai

Remittance (2015) directed by Patrick Daly and Joel Fendelman

10 Years (2015) directed by Jevons Au, Zune Kwok, Chow Kwun-Wai, Ka-Leung Ng and Fei-Pang Wong

Ten Years Thailand (2018) directed by Aditya Assarat, Wisit Sasanatieng, Chulayarnnon Siriphol and Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Tom Yum Goong (2005) directed by Prachya Pinkaew