

Looking into Island Southeast Asia: Films as Windows to Understanding

University of Wisconsin-Madison - Summer 2004

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"It is better to see once than to hear a hundred times" - Russian proverb

The goal of this course is to provide an inter-disciplinary, visual approach to Island Southeast Asia, using films to teach about certain focus issues ranging from gender and sexuality to colonialism and Islam. Students will develop the ability to "read" films as cultural texts by studying films from several genres and positions: Western feature films about Southeast Asians, Western ethnographic films about Southeast Asians, as well as films made by Southeast Asians about themselves -- their own lives, histories, and cultures. Although the course design emphasizes reading the films as texts, supplementary readings include an eclectic range of Western scholars as well as Southeast Asian novelists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, politicians, feminist scholars, filmmakers, and exiled activists. Weekly focus films provide windows through which students who are unfamiliar with Southeast Asia can begin to understand and to think critically about several focus issues: Colonialism, Gender, Islam, Violence, and Globalization. Balancing continuity with representation is a difficult task for this part of the world, with its myriad of peoples, languages, and histories. The course is designed with certain focus areas, spanning 3,000 miles across the Indonesian archipelago, from the Mentawai Islands in the Indian Ocean through West Sumatra and on to Java, Madura, Bali, East Timor, and West Papua.

In this course, students will be asked to think about colonialism by studying an Indonesian feature film, "Wrong Upbringing", based on a 1928 Indonesian novel about colonialism, tradition, and modernity. During a week on gender and sexuality, students will study a wedding ceremony in West Sumatra in order to understand how cultural ideas of gender and sexuality are reflected in cultural practice. In the following weeks, students begin to understand the various roles of Islam in Indonesia by reflecting on the cinema as propaganda machine of the New Order, especially when we consider the political climate at the time of the 1970s Indonesian feature film "They Return." The latter films in the course examine Island Southeast Asia within a global context. By studying a film about a World Bank development project in Bali, students can begin to think critically about the relationships between international agencies, national government programs, and local practices. In each of these examples, films become the pedagogical platform for a creative learning atmosphere in order to engage students in current issues of Island Southeast Asia.

Guest lectures will add to the depth of this course and also provide students with unique opportunities to learn from distinguished scholars of film and culture. This course curriculum is built upon -- and hopes to instill in the students -- an excitement for learning about culture, film, and Island Southeast Asia. Especially for the student learning about Asia for the first time, films provide unique ways of knowing about our world, visual frameworks with which to understand seemingly exotic peoples and places. To do this, we must study the films as textbooks from which to learn.

Required Textbook:

Karl Heider (1991), "Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen"

The films should be considered the actual texts of this course and should be studied on their own terms, within their own narrative conventions. All other readings listed are just supplementary for those students wishing to learn more about specific issues~ In no way are these readings all-encompassing or necessarily representative of the massive literature on Indonesia, though I have selected a range of sources.

Week 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO ISLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Film: "In the Year of Living Dangerously" with Mel Gibson, Sigourney Weaver

This film provides accessible introduction for students new to Indonesian studies. In an academy-award performance, the journalist's (Mel Gibson) main Indonesian informant explains the cultural system of wayang puppet-master politics in Indonesian history and culture.

June 14: Introduction; film (read pgs 1-38 AND 133-140 for Wed discussion)

June 16: Introduction to Indonesia How do we READ film?:

Related readings:

Salim Said (1991), "Shadows on the Silver Screen: A Social History of Indonesian Cinema"

Robert Cribb and Colin Brown (1995), "Modern Indonesia: A History Since 1945"

Geoffrey Robinson (1998) "Rawan is as Rawan Does: The origins of Disorder in New Order Aceh"

Benedict Anderson (1983) "Imagined Communities"

Laurie Sears, "Shadows of the Empire"

Week 2: INDONESIA: THE DUTCH COLONY BECOMES A NATION

Film: "Wrong Upbringing" (Salah Asuhan) Read Heider, pgs 39-70

This film is based on a 1928 Abdoel Moeis novel about Hanafi, who left his Minangkabau village to study in the Netherlands during Dutch "Ethical Policy" era where he developed shame and contempt of his traditional village upbringing. Through his relations with his mother, an estranged wife, and Dutch-Indonesian mistress, Hanafi's life struggles reveal deeper interplays of colonialism, tradition, and modernity.

June 21: Introduction to Indonesian history via colonialism
Film

June 23: Finish Film

Introduction to Minangkabau, matrilineal ancestry, and merantau

Related readings:

Krishna Sen (1981), "The image of women in Indonesian films: Some observations"

Elizabeth Graves (1981), "The Minangkabau response to Dutch colonial rule in the 19th century"

Mohammad Hatta (1971), "The Putera reports: Problems in Indonesian-Japanese Wartime Occupation"

A.A. Navis (1998), "Rage Feels" (translated by James Hoesterey)

Kahin and Kahin (1995) "Subversion as Foreign Policy" (chapter on West Sumatra)

Mrazek, Rudolf (2002) "Engineers of Happy land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony"

Week 3: MARRIAGE AND GENDER IN SUMATRA

Read pgs 71-98

Films:"Minangkabau Wedding"

"I Love You, Wait for the Year 2000"

"House of Spirits"

June 28: Minangkabau Wedding; Discussion of culture, gender, family, and migration

June 30: I Love you: Wait for the Year 2000
House of Spirits

These films are person-centered ethnographic accounts of marriage, gender, and sexuality in different societies in Sumatra, particularly exploring cultural and linguistic codes of courtship practices. Of particular importance are the prescribed behaviors for gendered sexuality and religion.

Related readings:

Taufik Abdullah (1966) "Adat and Islam: An examination of conflict in Minangkabau"

Dede Oetomo (1996), "Gender and Sexual Orientation in Indonesia"

Evelyn Blackwood (1999) "Tombois in West Sumatra: Constructing Masculinity and erotic desire"

Jeff Hadler (1998) "Home, Fatherhood, Succession: Three generations of Amrullahs..."

Mochtar Naim (1985) "Merantau: Social organization among Minangkabau out-migrants"

Suzanne Brenner (1995), "Why women rule the roost: Re-thinking Javanese ideologies of gender and self-control"

Jean Atkinson and Errington, eds (1990), "Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia" Peletz

and Ong, eds (1995), "Bewitching women and pious men: Gender and body politics in Southeast Asia"

Tom Boellstorff (2004) "Playing Back the Nation: Waria, Indonesian Transvestites".

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Week 4: ISLAM IN INDONESIA

Films: "Bull Magic" and "They Return" Read pgs 99-116

Islam in Southeast Asia has both cultural continuity and variation. This documentary film shows the roles of Islam and magic during popular bull races in Madura, a small island off the northeast coast of Java. Following several bull jockeys and their owners, we come to a greater understanding of the importance of magical Islam in local sporting practices. Related readings attest to the variety of approaches to thinking about Islam in Indonesia. To complement a film on Islam in practice, we will also consider how Islam is politicized within projects of nationalist historiography. This 1975 feature film about the famed Siliwangi division of "Indonesian" troops who were marching back to West Java to fight the Dutch in the years following WWII, but along the way had to battle Darul Islam resistance forces determined on an Islamic Indonesian state. This film re-casts this historical event in the midst of nationalist and secularist concerns of the 1970s trying to minimize the direct role of Islam in a secular state.

July 5: screen "Bull Magic"; Intro Discussion on Islam in Indonesia

July 7: screen "They Return"; Discussion of military, political history

Related readings:

Robert Hefner (2000): Civil Islam (Introduction and Conclusion chapters only)

James Siegel (2003), "Some Views of east Javanese Sorcery". Cornell SEAP Bulletin

Ronald Lukens-Bull (1999), "Ronald McDonald is an Indonesian Mystic and a Javanese Freedom Fighter" NY Times articles on Islamic leaders Umar Jafar Thalib, Abu Bakar Bashir, Hambali

Andrew Beatty (1999), "Varieties of Religion in Java" (Introduction); see also James Siegel's review

Suzanne Brenner (1996) "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and the Veil"

American ethnologist 73(4):673-697.

"Jilbab" a poem by Minangkabau woman Marwan Zein

John Bowen (1993) "Muslims through Discourse"

Week 5: NATIONALISM. "DEVELOPMENT" AND DEMOCRACY 1966-1998

Films: "Village at the Foot of the Hills" ; "The Goddess and the Computer"

July 12: Discuss "They Return"; screen "Village at the Foot of the Hills"

July 14: Discuss Development; screen "The Goddess and the Computer"

The Indonesian feature film "Village at the Foot of the Hills" provides a fascinating portrait at New Order (1966-1998) strategies to build nationalism and development, with all of their perils.

The ethnographic film "The Goddess and the Computer" explores the interaction of international and state development programs and local Balinese religion and ritual. During the years of the agricultural "Green Revolution" in Indonesia, the World Bank, along with the Indonesian state, initiated new methods of rice agriculture intended to double production. Grand development plans, however, neglected the Balinese religion and the role of the water temple priest in controlling the flow of water for wet rice irrigation. This film includes meetings between state government, anthropologist, and local Balinese discussing these Issues.

Related readings:

James Scott (1998), "Seeing Like a State"

Krishna Sen (ed) (1988), "Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia"

Soekarno (1969) "Nationalism, Islam, and Marxism"

John Bowen, "On the Political Construction of Tradition: gotong royong in Indonesia"

Doug Ramage (1995) "Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam, and the Ideology of Tolerance" (Conclusion chapter)

Benedict Anderson (1972 [1990]), "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture"

J. Stephen Lansing (1991), "Priests and Programmers: Technologies of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali"

Week 6: DOCUMENTARY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM PRODUCTION IN SE ASIA

Film: "Dead Birds"

July 19: screen film "Dead Birds" (to be discussed with Karl Heider July 26) Suggested reading: Gardens of War; article on production of Dead Birds

July 21: Guest Lectures (Richard Baxstrom and Johan Lindquist)

Optional: SATURDAY, JULY 24 SEASSI conference panel on film in SE Asia

Week 7: EMOTION AND POLITICS: ALL'S VIOLENT ON THE WEST PAVUAN FRONT

July 26: Guest Lecturer, Karl Heider on "Dead Birds"

July 28: West Papua, the Cold War, Copper and Oil: A recipe for disaster

Related Reading:

John Rumbiak (2002), "What's Wrong with Freeport's Security Policy?" note: John Rumbiak went into forced exile after submitting this report to U.S. Congress and currently stands trial in Indonesia

Abigail Abrash (2002), "Development Aggression: Observations on Human Rights Conditions in the PT Freeport Indonesia Contract of Work Areas with Recommendations"

International Crisis Group, September 2002 report on violence, state, and natural resources in West Papua. www.icg.org - note: org director recently banned from Indonesia

Eben Kirksey (2002), "Anthropology and Colonial Violence in West Papua" in Cultural Survival

Danilyn Rutherford (2003), "Raiding the Land of the Foreigners: The Limits of the Nation on an Indonesian Frontier"

Octo Mote and Danilyn Rutherford article in journal Indonesia

Kenneth George (1996) "Showing Signs of Violence"

William Cutts, "A Weak thing in Moni Land" for a missionary's perspectives on Migani

Week 8: TRANSNATIONAL COPPER MINING AND EVEN "IMAGE MINING"

Film: "The Cargo Cult Comes of Age"

This June 2003 documentary TV program examines the layers of influence and intent that culminate in the building of an airstrip in the highlands of West Papua. It explores the transnational connections of this "remote" highland community with American mining companies and missionary activities, where "local" conflicts revolve around how to best use shovels during airstrip construction - shovels purchased by missionary donors in America. It also documents the encroaching Indonesian government and military, whose initial encounters have been violent, often in direct connection with "security" operations and extortion money between the military and American-based Freeport Mining.

August 2: screen film; discussion of political and economic relations between West Papua, Indonesia, and the rest of the world.

August 4: Cinema Verite? Documentary film on American TV

Related reading:

David MacDougall (1998) "Transcultural Cinema"

Jane Collins and Catherine Lutz (1992) "Reading National Geographic"

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS and PERCENTAGES OF FINAL GRADE

Written Response #1- Due July 5 - 25%

3-4 page paper that provides cultural and filmic analysis of any ONE particular scene from ANY of the films during weeks 1-3. Your analysis should integrate film and textbook.

Written Response #2 - Due July 19 - 25%

3-4 page paper about ways in which films shape nationalism, identity, and historiography. Analysis should include reference to American cinema.

Final Paper - Due Wednesday, August 6 - 35%

6-8 page paper which analyzes ANY particular theme of the most interest. This analysis should follow this theme throughout at least 3 films that we have seen during the semester (or the SEASSI conference) and should make a more general statement on film and society.

Class Participation - 15%