Panel: Shifting Cultures of Intimacy in Southeast Asian Visual Representation
Coordinators: Brett FARMER and Arnika FUHRMANN

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Abstracts

Panel:
“Shifting Cultures of Intimacy in Southeast Asian Visual Representation”

This panel investigates shifting understandings of sexual subjectivity and cultures of intimacy in Southeast Asian film and other visual representation. The centrality of cinema to formations of sexual modernities in the region cannot be overstated. In Southeast Asia, cinema from its beginnings represented a site in which cultures of intimacy were disseminated and tried out and from which they were learned, rejected, or adapted.

With regard to the present, cinema represents a particularly fraught space for sexuality in several Southeast Asian locations. Thus in Thailand, where film is currently the most censored medium, cinema represents a site in which intimacy consistently rubs up against the juridical authority of the state. At a time when Thai national cultural identity and citizenship continue to be closely articulated with normative prescriptions for sexuality, mainstream films have, for one, focused on the question of how the social suffering of sexual minorities can be made to count politically. In comparison, the forte of independent filmmakers and artists has been to conceive of sexual histories beyond those organized solely by national recognition or rights discourses.

While their parameters differ significantly, other contemporary Southeast Asian cinemas and visual cultures—including the diasporic—likewise register innovation in representing cultures of intimacy as well as struggles over definitions of sexual citizenship.
1. ANDES, Sheryl Rose M. (University of the Philippines)** tbc
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   A Peek at the Winners of the Most Gender Sensitive Film Award of the Metro
   Manila Film Festival

   The power of cinema resides in its ability to portray relations of power in
   society. This makes film an effective vehicle in symbolizing the oppression,
   suffering, victimization, and sexual oppression of women, gays, lesbians and other
   individuals who possess liminal sexual preference. Launched in 1975, the Metro
   Manila Film Festival (MMFF) holds an annual competition for local cinema every
   December, organized by mayors in the metropolis. Its goal is to upgrade the
   quality of Filipino cinema and convince viewers to patronize local products made
   by major production houses. In 2003, led by Quezon City Gender and
   Development Resource Coordinating Office, the MMFF introduced the Most
   Gender-Sensitive Film Award, in order to encourage and introduce to the
   mainstream useful discourse on gender, particularly in terms of advocating equal
   rights of women and queer subjects.

   This study reconsiders the texts, elements, and messages of the MMFF’s Most
   Gender-Sensitive Film Award winners, specifically Homecoming (2003), Aishite
   Imasu (Mahal Kita) 1941 (2004), Bluemoon (2005), Kasal, Kasali, Kasalo (2006)
   and Desperadas (2007).

2. Atit PONGPANIT (SOAS, University of London)
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   Visualising Kathoey Bodies in Thai Sexual Minority Cinema

   This essay explores the cinematic representations of the kathoey
   (transvestite/transsexual) characters in mainstream Thai cinema with a focus on
   sexual minorities. It organizes the discussions according to three different genres:
   tragedy (with reference to Pleng Sud Tai/The Last Song, 1985 and 2006); drama
   (with reference to Phrang Chompoo/Saving Private Tootsie, 2002, and Beautiful
   Boxer, 2003); and comedy (with reference to Plon naya/ Spicy Beauty Queen in
   Bangkok, 2004).

   Selecting The Last Song to analyse within this paper provides a clear
   opportunity to compare and contrast how transgendered women’s bodies are
   portrayed between the past two decades and the present time. Medical technology
   has become the most important factor in transforming a male to female body more
   authentically. The films show that having a female body, or being able to “pass as
   a woman”, helps gain positive reactions and a greater tolerance from the
   heterosexual/majority characters. The kathoey characters who are merely
   effeminate or camp but who do not possess female bodies and are ugly or old, are
   the recipients of negative attitudes and greater intolerance. The tension which
   derives from the kathoey characters’ existence or from the absence of the penis
   becomes an issue and plays a significant role in the films in determining the nature
   of relations between the kathoey and heterosexual characters in the narrative.

   It is also evident from the films in question that to earn a positive reaction
   from, or be recognised as beautiful by, the heteronormative world both within and
   outside the filmic text, the beautiful female figure must not be used to gain sexual
   satisfaction. These films thus provide firm evidence for the obsession with beauty
and aesthetics, and the rigid binary notion of heteronormativity, where only male and female bodies and masculinity and femininity can be accommodated. The films further reveal the presence of a strong patriarchy at play, under which even those who are not women but try to adopt some of the female codes must not express their sexual desire as it is only “real” men who are free to express this. At stake here is the wider issue of what limitations are enforced for kathoey characters in their attempt to carve out a space for themselves in what is predominantly a the heterosexual world. This applies particularly in the field of the workplace. Kathoey characters are repeatedly portrayed as “show girls” (an entertaining object for the heterosexual/majority), as beauticians or as having menial jobs. The positive/tolerant reactions of the heteronormative world in these contexts may not therefore provide an accurate indication of a wider acceptance and understanding towards sexual minorities portrayed in Thai mainstream cinema. On the contrary, the films show how heteronormativity manipulates and locates sexual minorities within a “comfort zone” where heteronormative hegemony can still be used as a means of control over them.

3. DIRGANTORO, Wulan (University of Tasmania)  
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Bodyscape: Renegotiating Feminist Desire in the Works of Indonesian Women Artists  

Indonesian contemporary art is a dynamic arena of modernity, tradition, socio-political contestations and multiple issues of identity, including gender identities. Since the inception of modern Indonesian art, artists have continuously explored and represented these issues through their art practices, in both celebratory as well as critical ways. More recently, the collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 provided the impetus for a momentous shift in the ways of Indonesian women artists working with issues around the female body.

The collapse of the authoritarian regime opened the gate for a new kind of freedom of self-expression in various media in Indonesia. In visual arts and literature there is now a strong representation of subject matters which were previously taboo, including female sexuality and the deconstruction of feminine identity. In order to analyse how these new developments are influenced by the works of Indonesian women artists, this paper will examine the representation of the female body by Indonesian women artists in the post-Soeharto era. It will discuss works by well-known artists such as IGAK Murniasih, Arahmaiani and Titarubi as well as other significant works/exhibitions which are strongly influenced by gender issues, sexual politics, memory and intimacy.

Each individual artist covered in this paper interweaves the past, present and future in their works. They also present complex sexual, political, religious, ethnic and cultural layers of local and global identity through their diverse artistic practices.

Given that sexuality and the construction of feminine identity were tightly regimented by the previous regime, this paper will look at how contemporary Indonesian women artists are representing the newly found, albeit still fragile freedom, through their works. This paper will also examine the strategies and negotiations that they have to apply in addressing these issues.
4. **FARMER, Brett (Chulalongkorn University)**  
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**Magical Love in the Moviehouse: (Re)Negotiations of Thai Heterosexuality in the Films of Mitr Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat**  
This paper focuses on the transformative impact of post-war modernization on discourses of Thai heterosexuality through a critical analysis of the films and combined star image of Mitr Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat. Appearing in over 150 films together from 1961-1970, Mitr and Petchara were unquestionably the most popular star couple of Thai Cinema's so-called Golden Age and were an omnipresent aspect of the popular cultural landscape of the time. Part of their appeal, and arguably part of their ideological function, was their embodiment of a new style of heterosexual relationality or 'coupledom' that, this paper contends, was reflective of the era's changing social economies of erotic intimacy rooted in, among other things, gender egalitarianism, urban capitalism, and consumerist identities. Through their films and generalized personae, Mitr and Petchara offered Thai audiences of the time a popular and deeply affective celebrity-mediated public sphere within which to negotiate and make sense of the rapidly changing sociosexual cultures of Thai modernity.

5. **FUHRMANN, Arnika (ICI Berlin)**  
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**Under Permanent Exception: Queer Buddhist-Muslim Intimacies in Independent Thai Film**  
Against the background of the Southern Thai conflict in which a perpetual state of emergency has become the norm, the paper investigates how cinematic discourses reconceptualize arenas of Buddhist-Muslim coexistence beyond the state. Investigating how the independent films *Hasan* (2008, Attapon Pamakho) and *Boriwen Ni Yu Phai Tai Kan Kak Kan (This Area Is Under Quarantine)*, 2008, Thunska Pansittivorakul) present Buddhist-Muslim same-sex intimacies, the paper proposes a reframing of understandings of the Southern Thai crisis and Buddhist-Muslim antagonisms through the analysis of their quotidian, affective dimensions and through concentration on the ways in which non-state actors, as sexual subjects, approach both conflict and coexistence.

6. **HARRISON, Rachel (SOAS, University of London)**  
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**What kind of yearning? Nostalgia and Crisis in Thai Cinema, post 1997.**  
This paper investigates one form of cinematic response to Thailand's Economic Crisis of 1997 with reference to the cultural impact and expression of economic demise. It looks at nostalgia as an aspect of cultural anxiety, viewing it as a symptom of yearning for an "authentic Thai identity" perceived in "The Past" and expressed through cinematic narrative. The paper refers specifically to films such as the Thai domestic box office hit *Faen Chan* ('My Girl', 2003).