

## STORIES AND VOICES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

### EUROSEAS 2019 FILM PROGRAM



*Last Night I Saw You Smiling* (Kavich Neang), 2019

Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo

The Film Program of the EuroSEAS 2019 Conference showcased five award-winning films by Southeast Asian filmmakers. Featuring diverse filmic styles, the Film Program highlighted nuanced and sensitive portrayals of various aspects of Southeast Asian lives and societies told from Southeast Asian perspectives. As the only event within the conference that was open to the public, the highly attended public screenings signal to the importance of making exclusive academic conferences accessible beyond the academe and of the effectiveness of film as a medium to tell stories, publicize and illuminate issues, and to provoke questions.

The Film Program opened with Puangsoi Rose Aksornsawang's feature film *Nakorn-Sawan* (2018). Weaving together documentary and fiction, Aksornsawang draws on her experiences with and memories of her parents and the loss of her mother to tell the various ways in which life and death are negotiated in Thailand. Rosalia Engchuan, a social anthropologist and filmmaker who co-curated the film program, said in her

introduction to the film that it “blurs binary lines through its hybrid form and opens up new spaces for explorations on life and death, sadness and sorrow.” She suggests that we can think of *Nakorn-Sawan* (lit. *Heaven City*) “as a documentary of the things felt and experienced. A documentary of all those things that cannot be directly grasped. A fiction towards something deeper than observable surfaces.”

Likely dealing with memory and family but in their entanglement with capital-led development and displacement in an urban space and the struggle for the right to the city is Kavich Neang's 2019 documentary *Last Night I Saw You Smiling*, which was screened exclusively to conference participants. Neang documents the last days of residents who were being evicted from the White Building, an architectural landmark in Phnom Penh where the director has lived since birth. Drawing attention to the materiality, as well as the non-visibility and subtleness of memory, Neang writes of his filmic process, “I searched obsessively for little signs of life and resistance: a 60s’ pop song sung for the last time, an old memory told in the place it happened, the abandoned objects on the floor of

a building that, progressively in the film, grows emptier and emptier.”<sup>1</sup>

*A Land Imagined*, Yeo Siew Hua's 2018 feature film is also set in the city. Screened exclusively for EuroSEAS participants, the film is a neo-noir mystery thriller that looks into the labor exploitation of migrant construction workers who toil on a Singapore land reclamation site, part of the city-state's land redesigning and construction projects that are driven by and drive Singapore's economic miracle. “New migrants,” Yeo writes in his directorial statement, “are brought into the fold to reinvigorate the imagination of this economic miracle - a success story that is built upon the backs of low wage migrant labourers from the region who are hired to build a nation they can never become a part of.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly tackling the plight of migrants is the 2013 feature film *Transit* by Hannah Espia, which was screened publicly. Set in Tel Aviv, *Transit* shows the precarious lives and anxieties of a family as they strategize to remain together amid a law deporting children of migrant workers, a

1 NEANG, K. (2019). LAST NIGHT I SAW YOU SMILING PRESS KIT. ANTI-ARCHIVE. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTP://WWW.ANTIARCHIVE.COM/UPLOADS/7/9/9/1/79912428/LNISYS\\_PRESSKIT\\_WEB.PDF](http://www.antiarchive.com/uploads/7/9/9/1/79912428/LNISYS_PRESSKIT_WEB.PDF)

2 13 LITTLE PICTURES (N.D.). A LAND IMAGINED [WEB PAGE]. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTP://13LITTLEPICTURES.COM/A-LAND-IMAGINED/](http://13LITTLEPICTURES.COM/A-LAND-IMAGINED/)

theme that has renewed resonance and urgency in various parts of the world. The film portrays as well the complex subjectivities of children and youth who grow up in the diaspora. "I wanted to tell a story about youth who struggle with identities and sense of nationhood, children whose tongues are caught in the clash of cultures", Espia writes of her motivation. "Filipino children who are forcefully uprooted from the world that they know - who seem to be citizens of no country."<sup>3</sup>

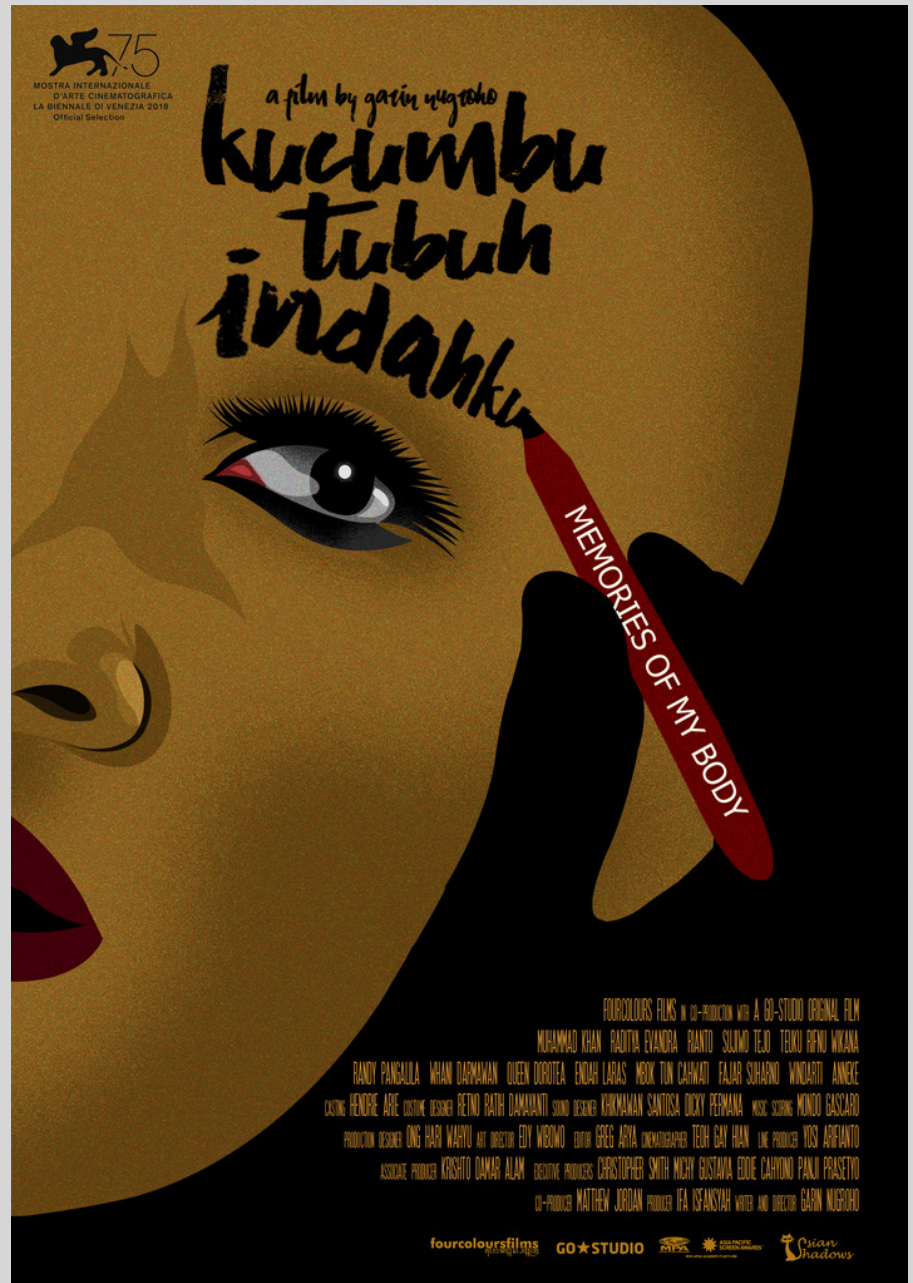
The Film Program and the conference closed with the public screening of Garin Nugroho's 2018 feature film *Memories of My Body*. Suffused with social and political commentary both subtle and manifest, *Memories of My Body* is a coming of age story about a Javanese boy who learns the Lengger Lanang dance where male dancers dress up and move as women. He discovers his sexual identity in his journey of becoming amid violence in 1980s Indonesia. Nugroho writes that in this film, he is "very interested in the issue of masculinity and femininity merged in a person's body. Having a body that is both masculine and feminine has been a very sensitive issue in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world."<sup>4</sup>

*Nakorn-Sawan*, *Last Night I Saw You Smiling*, and *A Land Imagined* were introduced by Engchuan during the screenings. Aksornsawang and Yeo were also present for the post-film discussion. Meanwhile, anthropologist Claudia Liebelt, author of the book 'Caring for the Holy Land: Filipina Domestic Workers in Israel' introduced *Transit* and answered questions about the situation of Filipino migrants in Israel. *Memories of My Body* was presented by anthropologist Ferdiansyah Thajib who works on queer modes of endurance and forms of affective entanglement in everyday life.

The Film Program was coordinated by Rosa Castillo. She co-curated it with Rosalia Engchuan and Carmen SchmöL.

<sup>3</sup> SEVENTH ART RELEASING (N.D.). *TRANSIT - 7THART RELEASING (PRESS KIT)* [WEB PAGE]. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTP://WWW.7THART.COM/FILMS/TRANSIT](http://www.7thart.com/films/transit)

<sup>4</sup> QUEER LION (N.D.). *KUCUMBU TUBUH INDAHKU (MEMORIES OF MY BODY)* BY GARIN NUGROHO [WEB PAGE]. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTPS://WWW.QUEERLION.IT/EN/KUCUMBU-TUBUH-INDAHKU/](https://www.queerlion.it/en/kucumbu-tubuh-indahku/)



*Memories of My Body* (Garin Nugroho), 2018

### About the Author:

Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo (PhD, Freie Universität Berlin) is an anthropologist and Assistant Professor at IAAW. Her research interests include violence and subjectivity, peacemaking, memory, imagination, temporality, anthropology of emotions, anthropology of religion, and decoloniality. She organizes film screenings and discussions through the platform Philippine Studies Series Berlin.



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