REPRESENTATIONS OF BORDERLAND IN MALAYSIAN AND INDONESIAN CINEMAS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on 21st century cinematic representations of frontier living in the Malaysian and Indonesian borderland. These representations raise the question of the power relationship between the progressive 'centre' and the less advanced 'periphery'. Many of these Borderlands films deal with the issue of identity and belonging as a question of power relations among filmmakers, the people and the state. And some that transect the political and cultural borders of Southeast Asian cinemas stem from the filmmakers' growing recognition of the nationalist processes of cultural delimitation and border reinforcement. This investigation reads Dain Said's film, *Bunohan* (2012, Malaysia) and concentrates on representations of the borderland as a site of encounter between the traditions, the modern nation state system and its citizens in these peripheral areas. This paper draws on a chapter from my doctoral thesis, which looks at cinema as a cultural space through the representation of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

Keywords: Borders, Southeast Asian Borderlands, Malaysian Cinema, Indonesian Cinema

Introduction

Usually, when we think of international land borders between two countries, we tend to imagine a heavily guarded and fortified place that may also represent cultural barriers. Most of us would expect to see a significant number of law enforcement officers, the high walls or barbed wire fences, and to cross the other side of the border; we are required to present a passport.

Film representations of borderland inhabitants in Malaysian and Indonesian cinemas are rare, but there are a few that depict life near the territorial lines that have been released in local theatres since the 2000s. These films, made by a new generation of Malaysian and Indonesian cine-literate directors who either have had formal education about films or other related studies before making films of their own. These individuals have the courage to do something special which renders making popular, mainstream movies is not an option. They understand their roles and responsibilities as cultural producers and are engaged in a process of reaffirmation of the state's cultural identities, encapsulating the ambiguity and power that the public should see through their interpretive lenses. A number of these filmmakers envisioned regional borderlands and use it as tools to intervene in the questions of marginalisation, identity politics, and power relations between states and societies.

What is more, these representations should also possibly be understood as challenging the idea of film *nasional* which is based on the territorial concept and uses the border to define the limits of nation-state sovereignty plus national identity, which is now outdated because the concept itself, cannot be fully defined by the [Indonesian] government

(Arda 2011, 159). Perhaps, it is true that Malaysian and Indonesian nationalism only really captured the popular imagination after the disappearance of colonialism[1].

This paper argues that film representations of borderland communities within the two national cinemas, not only challenge the ability of the governments to hold power over these peripheral societies, but also, raises the question: How does the borderland work as a subtext (visual and narrative)? How does this decentring tendency contribute to the debate regarding tradition and modernity, past and future? Does it represent the borderland as a space of encounter, or as a continuous space? Do these representations integrate different kind of borders in the debate on cultural and national identity? It is also worth noting that before the Common Era, 'living in the absence of state structures has been the standard human condition' for Southeast Asians (Scott 2009, 3).

In this spirit, this paper puts forward a brief analysis on Indonesia's borderlands films plus, a close analysis of *Bunohan* (2012) because the film speaks to the Malaysian audience about self-reflection, which links with the problematic ultranationalist politics and culture. *Bunohan*, in its own way, rejects the idea that there are fixed boundaries in the relationship between people and place, and between time and space. It can be seen that the film is deconstructing the politics of ethnonationalism in Malaysia[2]. Dain Said as quoted in Norman (2013) states that '[t]he modern Malaysian state has long tried to define this place by its borders. But how the communities there see themselves – borders don't mean anything. This swathe of land from the northern fringes of Terengganu, through Kelantan, and across the border to Pattani in southern Thailand is the Malay heartland that defies sovereign boundaries' (199).

The hard territorial line between two states is almost invisible in most of these films. Many cinematic representations seem to propose that borders between people, the tension between cultural identities and belonging, tradition, and modernity are more relevant than the political dividing line itself. Inter-state political lines for films like *Jogho, Bunohan, Batas, and Tanah Surga… katanya* would not affect the bi-directional flows of people as well as goods, and the cultural, social, plus linguistic intersections formed in the process.The characters in the films can cross the border without political obstruction because they can fit in plus, there is ethno-cultural and linguistic similarity on both sides of the frontier.

Border, Borderland, and Power

'The geopolitical situation of a country is changing under the impact of various global and other external processes but also because people revisit their attitude to different levels of power' (Kolossov and Scott 2013).

Kolossov and Scott's statement above raise in our mind about different kinds of boundaries for various groups of people and diverse individuals depending on their peculiar socio-cultural experiences that act simultaneously, with 'several functions of demarcation and territorialisation – between distinct social exchanges of flows, between distinct rights, and so forth' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 4). Boundaries are everywhere, whether it is psychological or physical, the boundary between humans and another organism in this world serves to restrict interaction because the competing species communicate with each other in complex ways. Borders are indeed a limitation, however, they also endeavour to safe space for both sides.

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[1]Read Anderson (1983), '*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism'.* London: Verso

[2] According to Mauzy (2006), '[t]he Malay elites believed that a political system that offered a common citizenship and equal political rights for all would destroythe Malay race and unjustly strip Malays of their inherent rights as the historical community' (49).

A border, according to Agambenian, is 'a manifestation of inclusive/exclusionary sovereign power'[3] of the state and now, '[t]he border is found increasingly at the centre of the politics of identity, security, environment, mobility and economy' (Konrad 2015, 1). Still, for Elenes, '[t]he uniqueness of the border region necessitates the examination of the relationship between the region itself and the borderlands and between its history and culture' (2010, 29). Anzaldúa, however, notes that '[a] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of the unnatural boundary [besides] in a constant state of transition' (2012, 25). It is clear that Borderlands is not a quiet space and there is a lot can be learned from border region, conforming to Paasi (2009), 'a critical study of the 'interface' between socio-spatial consciousness and social representations can reveal elements that are 'invisible' in common-sense thinking and thus may also reveal forms of symbolic violence that are often part of nationalist discourse' (229). We need to understand these representations better, to uncover underlying factors that may explain the differences in levels of belongingness between the peoples of the borderland and the states' national ideals.

In terms of power, the way person of Southeast Asia look at power differs from that of the Westerners. Foucault's ideas' regarding the Western ideas of power is rather different, as he believes that 'power is everywhere' and it goes beyond politics (Rabinow 1991). It stands parallel to Southeast Asian traditional beliefs about spiritual power that exists in and around them. For example, it is Errington's opinion that Southeast Asian Indic states share similar ideas about power, ideas that are fundamental to the polity's shape and meaning. In other words, it is not like the abstract relation familiar to Western societies but the central energy of which is such, that the state, as well as individuals, can accumulate it without limit (1989, 9-10). For Benedict Anderson, the differences between Javanese ideas of power and Western perceptions are as follows [1990, 19-23];

Javanese	Western
Power is absurd.	Power is concrete.
The sources of power are heterogeneous.	Power is homogeneous.
The accumulation of power has no inherent limits.	The quantum of power in the universe is constant.
Power is morally ambiguous.	Power does not raise the question of legitimacy.

The nature of power relations between individuals and institutions in the vicinity of the borders does play a significant role in the process of border production. Some see the process of bordering in the context of socio-political order and centres on the territorial organisation that barrier of "otherness" which 'may change over time as some groups or territories expand and others decline, but […] will always demarcate the parameters within which identities are conceived, perceived, perpetuated and reshaped' (Newman 2003, 15). Therefore, it is important to consider the sociological context of the borderland's inhabitants over the years and particularly since this archipelagic space of Southeast Asia has been divided into political units.

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[3]See Salter (2008), *"When the exception becomes the rule: Borders, sovereignty, and citizenship,"* Citizenship Studies, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 365–380.

As for the two national cinemas, research shows the centre of the power relationships among the filmmakers (as cultural producers), the state, and the audience shifted once again with the advent of digital technology as well as the effects of Indonesia's *reformasi* that offered new forms of film narratives. These new generations exposed the fullness of local film representations and productions to the world of film as well as academia. Contextually, these works offer various indications that filmmakers are constantly negotiating the idea of national cinema through their works.

Studies on the borderlands of Southeast Asia are not new. For instance, the *Society for South-East Asian Studies* (SEAS) in Vienna in 2011 dedicated a section of the topic in their own journal. And, in 2012, the *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies* co-organised a conference about Asian borderlands in Singapore focusing on themes of connections, corridors, and communities. Some scholars dealt with Southeast Asian borderlands, however, no one has to date discussed film representations.

Indonesian Borderland Films

Films dealing with border living have not been a popular choice for filmmakers of Indonesia except for *Daerah Perbatasan* (1964) and *Segenggam Tanah Perbatasan* (1965) of Indonesia made during the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation (1963-66), and both touch upon the territorial conflicts in Borneo. However, borderland films have grown as a genre and continue to evolve from the decentralisation program in 2004 when, Indonesia's *House of Representatives* approved two new decrees marked as *Law No. 22/1999* and *Law No. 25/1999*. These new laws have shifted political and economic powers which previously were administered from the centre in Jakarta out to the local level.

The subject of borderland has increasingly become a factor in Indonesian cinema, consequentially, it is important to discuss what kind of borderland films does it make and which borderlands were involved in the representations. For example, *Denias Senandung Di Atas Awan* (2006), *Melody Kota Rusa* (2010), *Lost in Papua* (2011), *Di Timur Matahari* (2012), *Negeri Di Bawah Awan* (2013), *Di Bawah Langit Jayapura* (2015), and *Tanah Mama* (2015) all represent Indonesian subjects in Papua[4]. It is worth noting that Indonesia has convoluted political experience with regards to its colonial relationship to Papua and it is clear that questions of self-determination in Papua are intermingled with issues of cultural identity and belonging. In recent years, there have been several failed attempts at self-governance in Papua[5]. The representational power of these films caused much uneasiness in Jakarta. This is evident from the move by the *Lembaga Sensor Film* to co-organise a film censorship conference at Jayapura in June 2014. The antagonism between local and national culture became the theme of the gathering, '*Opportunities and challenges of Papuan culture in National cinema*'. That being said, films like *Denias Senandung Di Atas Awan* and *Di TimurMatahari* by Alenia Pictures of Jakarta, however, promote social integration and Indonesia's republican nationalism, and both films deal with the institutionalisation of children in Papua.

Another set of Borderlands representations is linked to the people of Timor. The island is divided into East Timor and West Timor (under Indonesia). The films *Tanah Air*

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[4]Garin Nugroho carved out a niche for Papuan people in Indonesian cinema through a documentary essay film and then, a feature length fictional film *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* (2003). However, both films are set in Jayapura, the capital of Papua.

[5] For Instance, Koswaraputra (2016) reports that '[h]undreds of Papuans arrested over self-determination rally plan' which reflects the fact that 'national challenges persist for the Government of Indonesia' (Winoto 2010, 11).

Beta (2010) and *Atambua 39° Celsius* (2012) both show families divided by the division of Timor and, *Aisyah: Biarkan Kami Bersaudara* (2016) tells the story of an Indonesian teacher in Atambua. If previously the film industry often has been Jakarta centric in its representations and language, these films represent significant responses to such criticism.

Next, is the area between Indonesia-Malaysia that split the island of Borneo. Two films, *Batas* (2011) and *Tanah Surga… Katanya* (2012) are both set in Kalimantan-Sarawak border areas. It appears that these two representations may have been constructed almost precisely to fit the divided but interconnected nature of Borneo Borderlands. These two films, like other Indonesian Borderlands films, are indicative of the power of filmmakers in prompting discussion concerning the liminal state created by the existences of political boundaries in a shared cultural space. Ethnic minorities in Kalimantan-Sarawak borderlands also want to establish their own political and moral orders (Horstmann 2011, 212), plus, they have their own sets of laws (*Ibid,* 206) as explicitly represented in these films.

What is more, *Tanah Surga* tells us that Indonesians at the Kalimantan-Sarawak border work very hard but they prefer *Ringgit* over *Rupiah* and, they are more familiar with *Bahasa* Malaysia than *Bahasa* Indonesia. The film also shows that the main character Salman is rather confused by the location and the permeability of the border at the place in which he lives.

Batas on the other hand, explains that the people who live along both sides of the dividing line are actually from the same group. Even though the boundary in *Batas* is noticeable through a border marker but I think the director cinematically demonstrates that the borderland populations as shown in the shot below, are not bound by boundaries because it was taken from the Malaysian side thereby legitimising border crossing activities in such spaces. So, maybe it is true that 'the borderland is the space where an experience can be accepted as it is, and where the possibilities burgeon. This space, created through the dynamics of encounter between different cultures, changes the landscape of the culture' (Park 2016, 73).

Malaysian Borderland Films and *Bunohan*

In 1995, *Jogho* of Malaysia speaks of the people and culture at the Malaysia-Thailand border which is a space of strict social relations particularly from the standpoint of identity and gender (Khoo 2002). The film takes place mainly in a district of Patani, a trans-border space where there are no political boundaries (Zawawi 2009). I contend that the borderland films coming from Malaysia are closely related to the backgrounds of the directors because of the complex variations of belonging and social identities as well as the effect their social mobility might contribute to the sense of *in-betweenness* as shown in their works. The director of *Jogho* belongs to second-generation Javanese Malaysian, and social alienation is a consistent theme in his cinematic works. For *Bunohan*, Dain's relationship to Tumpat on the Malaysia-Thailand border of Kelantan where he spent his childhood is seen throughout the film. In addition, he grew up in various places, from Kuala Lumpur to Cairo, to London and currently back to Kuala Lumpur.

> 'I like to think that they live in a vertical time because the stories are repeated […]. I did a lot of work […] on the nature of narrative in the land, how we live with the land, how we shape the land, the land, in turn, shape us […] I think we all share this in Southeast Asia, where we live in so many contradictions, side by side. In particular, in Nusantara region, the contrast is so amazing […]' – Dain Said in Khoo (2016).

The first impression gained from the opening sequence of the film is that it is fictional that is undoubtedly associated with the limits of time and space but, not as we know them. *Bunohan* is a film with political undertones that harkens back to the spatial and social partition of Malaysians by race, religion, and ethnicity; all of which are apparently considered unhealthy in the context of nation-building. Despite the fact that it is a regional specific film with its dialect involving ethnic Chinese, the film does not advocate for racial superiority or cultural exclusivism.

The film begins with a handheld shot of an exterior village setting giving a sense of realism. It follows two men into a crowded coffee shop. They speak with a Kelantanese dialect and their conversations are hinged upon the assumption that people in the city do not understand rural populations. They laugh at how the urbanites ask them to reconstruct their culture and their spiritual practice into performance art.

The opening sequence of *Bunohan* is certainly a postmodern cinematic gesture that is beyond conventional cinematic language and meaning. It seems that Dain is aware of the

inadequacies of cinematic language, especially when he sets the end shot of the opening sequence to move toward a television at the centre of the shop, showing the film's footage with its two main characters (Bakar and then, Ilham) in it while the extras shout the actor's real name. As perplexing as that is, Bakar is seen sitting in the coffee shop.

The scene at the coffee shop is sutured with a scene at a beach of which begin with a long shot (LS) that show two characters dressed in corporate attire walking across with large sheets of white paper that looks like development plans. At the background, the audience may see two people in the background doing a ritual. While they move out of the screen after joining Bakar at the other side of the frame, a young boy runs toward the camera and then, he accidentally stumbles and falls off the frame. When the boy re-enters the frame, it seems like he has discovered something because there is blood on his chest and runs away. The camera follows then stays at torn shadow play screen or *kelir* which happens to be there, and through it, the audience can see the boy continue running. After that, Dain returns to the coffee shop, but more perplexingly, the scene at the beach is recalled again as part of the ending sequence for the film.

The beach is an important set of the film, it signifies transience or constant change, and it does help to express 'the shifting sands of time.' The border between land and sea changes with the tides and perhaps, the director could be getting at the Thai-Malaysian border that changed historically depending on the rise and fall of ancient kingdoms. The boy, who appears from time to time, is mysterious. He seems to resemble a spirit in human form because he performs with different kinds of voices and appear out of nowhere. The opening as a whole, complicates time, space of the film, and seems to indicate that time is space. In a way, *Bunohan* proves that Lim (2009) might be right because the film incorporates both mysticism and metaphysical borders as part of its narrative. This representation expounds on the structure of space-time on a local level that doesnotfit into Western ideas of space-time or what Lim describes it as 'modern homogeneous time' (12).

Borderland in *Bunohan* is seen as an ambiguous and undecided space (Anzaldúa 2012) as well as some areas that defy conventional categories (Coutin 2003). It is about the ambivalence of the in-between space of the Malaysia-Thailand borderlands and, the film presents 'an interstitial future that emerges in-between the claims of the-past [sic] and the needs of the present' (Bhabha 1994, 219). The film has negotiated borders in more than one way. The border of Malaysia-Thailand that Adil and Muski cross at the beginning of the film is just a swamp full of pandanus plants.

There is another piece of land at the beach, a space that is set in the past which was where Ilham and his mother Mek Yah lived after she was separated with Pok Eng. The house is no longer there; what is left are just the cement steps.

There are old gravesites where Mek Yah is buried and Ilham sits on the steps mulling over how things are in his mother's land. Someone has opened the old graves where his mother and others are buried (tombstones foreground) and the shot actually starts with a wider long-shot (LS) which also includes the cemetery. Ilham then moves to the steps, the camera follows and it ends here. The land is what Bakar wants on the pretext of developing his inheritance into something beneficial for the family. The set is a shoreline with an estuary nearby – a metaphorical border – a place where land meets water as well as the saltwater mixes with freshwater. The siblings, however, are unfailingly trying to harm and dominate each other so all three go all-out to defend their identity and to give meaning to their lives. The film later reveals that the three siblings are, in fact, uncertain about their past and, therefore, each has his own version of reality.

In the heart of conflict-ridden *Bunohan*, lies hope for a better future. Jamaluddin rightly observes, that 'Adil or fairness is the classic arc of cinematic renewal for he epitomises his father's dream for a better […] future as a family [and] Ilham sees this sense of existential renewal in Adil; hence, using his brother as a way of redeeming his path albeit via death (2014, 87). As a professional killer, his physical and mental skills are better than the other characters. Previously, he was a sailor, and he is very aware of the world around

him. And he finds his purpose and surrenders his power and life for Adil. Despite that, like others in the family, Adil died because of Bakar's heartlessness.

Mystical power in this film is just as profound as the brother's struggle for control over their inheritance. Evident of the complex power structure of the border space is not solely between traditional and modern thinking. In this peripheral area, animistic beliefs still exist as exemplified in the characters of Pok Eng, who is also a *Tok Dalang* and Mek Yah, the *Puteri* in *Main Puteri*, an indigenous healing ritual that involves the spirit world. Such traditional beliefs which only exist in the margins of Malaysian urban society and the nation state but in the borderlands of the modern nation-state, they are represented as a form of resistance against the central government. But more importantly, the filmmaker seems to be saying that such resistance is futile against the forces of capitalism and greed. Ilham the elder brother finds his purpose and surrenders his power and life for Adil. Despite that, like others in the family, Adil died at the hands of Bakar and his sidekicks because Bakar was determined to develop their land.

Dain is highlighting the dynamics of power in Southeast Asia as well as the deeply rooted issues of belonging and identity amongst its populations. It seems that *Bunohan* captures the sense of unsettledness through the inconclusive nature of Southeast Asian borders. Even though the decision-making processes within national societies are now centralised in many ways, the idea that power is illogical exists in many forms, has no limits, and is ethically perplexing.

Conclusion

In *Bunohan*, boundaries are everywhere and formed not only by the physical boundaries of political entities but also by social situations that influence individual and their social mobility. The film also reveals that the idea of power is to be found within society, in people's attitudes and in their natural behaviour. But it is just a matter of choosing the right way to use it. Power relations within these lands are not only between individuals and establishments, but also involve ideologies of spirituality that may not have a logical explanation. The mystical/spiritual power in Borderlands is well portrayed in *Bunohan* due to the director using it as an integral part of the film's narrative, and of Southeast Asian borderlands culture.

I will say that nearly all Malaysian and Indonesian borderland films contend with and attempt to unpack layers of cultural identities, belonging, and issues of mobility amongst the inhabitants. Despite everything, there is one common theme; its people are caught between

local and national cultures, between past and present, as well as between politics and customs.

It is time to call attention to the limited ways Malaysian and Indonesian national films engage with cultural identities in Southeast Asian cinema discourses, thus, we may improve our prospect in understanding and ultimately speaking of Borderland film in ways that are culturally inclusive. A narrative as *Bunohan* is simply poetic musings about Malaysia's, Indonesia's, as well as Singapore's cultural imagery and the political landscape. Borders and powers, as informed by these films, are not concrete, homogenous, and fixed, but rather ambiguous in that they exist in many forms, across time and space. Although my focus is more on *Bunohan*, it can be seen that apart from the state being dominated by the 'Centre', the representations of Borderlands from two national cinemas submit that national boundary lines have hardly seen any different effect there at all.

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