

## Religion on Film in Southeast Asia

FALL 2011

Fridays 2:30 – 4:00

Lecturers:  
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*In cooperation with the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i Manoa*

### COURSE OVERVIEW:

Do we get a religious education when we go to the movies? How do we think about films as 'texts' that can tell us something about religious beliefs, practices and politics the Southeast Asian context?

This course aims to look at how religion is characterized and displayed through the medium of film, and to introduce students to methods of approaching films as texts. Films will be related to their cultural contexts, as a window on the current politics of religion and religious identity in Southeast Asia. What kinds of 'signifying practices' (Turner 1999) do films employ to portray the significance of religious practices and identities? By learning the language of film and the techniques used to communicate meaning, we'll consider in what ways regional films interact with the dominant discourses regarding religion.

Seeing how religion is captured on film across Southeast Asia will facilitate comparison between cultural and political contexts in the region, and illuminate some of the dominant narratives about religion (and responses to them). The theory of "national cinema" will be applied to see what kind of role governments play in national film industries, and the influence of political context on how religion is portrayed on film.

In this course, we will view both feature films and documentaries from Southeast Asia that touch on religious themes. Film showings will be held every other week – the sessions between viewing the films will be structured as discussion seminars for students enrolled in the course.

The complimentary purpose of this course is to create a forum in which the public will be exposed to contemporary representations of religion on film in Indonesia, and from other regions of Southeast Asia. Viewers will be encouraged to take a more critical approach to what is portrayed on the "silver screen" and think of film as one tool for exploring current constructions of religion. Students will take a leading role in facilitating discussions, applying methods learned in class to encourage a more critical

interpretation of the portrayal of religion on film in the contemporary Southeast Asian context.

**\*\*\*Selected film reviews and papers from this course will be published on the website of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at UH Manoa, as part of their Southeast Asian Film Program**

**([http://www.cseashawaii.org/wordpress/category/film/film\\_news/](http://www.cseashawaii.org/wordpress/category/film/film_news/)) \*\*\***

**COURSE GOALS:**

1. Introduce students to critical film theory and the ‘language’ necessary to reading and analyzing film
2. Use films from across the Southeast Asian region to identify trends in the presentation of religious issues in popular context
3. Use the medium of film to think about how normative values are communicated through popular culture, and the role of national film industries in Southeast Asia
4. Improve student’s skills in critical analysis, discussion facilitation, and reading for graduate seminars

***Assignments:***

Assignments will be divided into three main parts: group facilitation, film responses and a final essay.

**\*\*\* A NOTE ON SEMINAR PARTICIPATION \*\*\***

Attending and participating in the seminar sessions is a requirement for this class. Participation in the seminar does not mean just attending the class session, but also completing the readings assigned and coming prepared to discuss them in class. In order to facilitate a supportive environment for our seminars, students will be required to **BRING A HARD COPY OF ALL ASSIGNED READINGS FOR THE SESSION WITH THEM TO CLASS and REFRAIN FROM USING COMPUTERS OR CELL PHONES DURING THE SEMINAR SESSIONS.** No more than one (1) seminar session can be missed without permission from instructors.

## **GROUP FACILITATION**

Students will be assigned to a small group in the first class session. Small groups will share responsibility to complete (1) seminar facilitation and (1) after-film discussion

### **(1) a. Seminar facilitation:**

The group responsible for the seminar facilitation will need to read the assigned articles ahead of their classmates, and prepare 3-4 questions that will help the class identify important themes in the assigned readings for that week. On your facilitation week the questions should be emailed to the class by Wednesday evening before our Friday meeting. Weekly facilitators should strategize about how to help the class find common themes in the articles, and theorize about how they are related to the films we view over the course of the class.

### **(1)b. Film showing facilitation**

Each group will also be responsible to help facilitate a film showing. Facilitator groups will be responsible to 1) view the film before the Friday film showing 2) introduce the film to the audience, with some suggestions for paying attention to particular themes or points of interest (3) facilitate a half-hour discussion after the film is shown

### **(2) Film Responses**

Each student will be responsible for completing (4) film responses (for films of their choice) of 2-3 double spaced pages. The form of these responses will be discussed in our first meeting. Film responses will be due in class on Friday following the film viewing.

### **(3) Final Essay**

Students will be given a choice of three topics for a final film essay, which should address critical themes reviewed in the course of the class.

<b>09/23</b>	<b>Session 1: (SEMINAR) 'Reading film' strategy and vocabulary</b>	Readings: Turner 1999 Lydon, 2003 (excerpt): pp 41-55) Film Review Guides
<b>09/30</b>	<b>Session 2: (SEMINAR) National Film Theory and Ideology</b>	Readings: Turner 1999 Koo Gak Cheng 2005 * Barker 2011
<b>10/7</b>	<b>Session 3: (FILM)</b>  Synopsis In Muallaf, Yasmin Ahmad's 5th film follows two sisters on the lam from their abusive father and their relationship with a young Chinese teacher at their local school.	<b>Muallaf (2008)</b> by Yasmin Ahmad, Malaysia
<b>10/14</b>	<b>Session 4: (SEMINAR) Representing 'traditional' Religion on Film</b>	Readings: Morris, 2002 Kitiarsa 2004
<b>10/21</b>	<b>Session 5: (FILM)</b>	<b>Mekhong Full Moon Party (2002)</b> Jira Maligool Thailand
<b>10/28</b>	<b>Session 6: (SEMINAR) Producing Reality: Documentary and Ethnographic Film</b>	Godmilow, 1997 Aragon 2001 Irawanto, 2011
<b>11/4</b>	<b>Session 7: (FILM)</b>	<b>Which Way to the War? (2009)</b> Sue Useem, Indonesia
<b>11/11</b>	<b>Session 8: (FILM)</b>	<b>Shape of the Moon (2004)</b> Leonard Retel Helmrich
<b>11/18</b>	<b>Session 9: (SEMINAR) Producing Reality: Documentary and Ethnographic Film (continued)</b>	Yusuf, 2007 Sumrongthong 2008 Schiller, 2001
<b>11/25</b>	<b>Session 10: (FILM)</b>	<b>Baby Arabia (2010)</b> Panu Aree, Kaweenipon Ketrapsit, Kong Rithdee, Thailand
<b>12/2</b>	<b>Session 11: (SEMINAR) Reading into religion on film</b>	Readings: Ho 2009 Brac de la Perriere, 2009 Review: Ho 2010
<b>12/9</b>	<b>Session 12: (FILM)</b>	<b>Legend of Lady Hill (2005),</b> Yee Mint, Burma

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<b>12/16</b>	<b>Session 13: (SEMINAR) Mediating the 'other' onscreen</b>	Readings: Shaheen, 2003 Milligan, 2003 Review Alonto
<b>12/23</b>	<b>Session 14: (FILM)</b>	<b>Bagong Buwan (2001)</b> Marilou Diaz Abaya

**COURSE READINGS:**

Alonto, Mualna. Review: Bagong Buwan From Muslim Eyes.

Aragon, Lorraine. 2001. Communal Violence in Poso, Central Sulawesi: Where People East Fish and Fish Eat People. *Indonesia* Vol. 71 October, 45-79

Brac de la Perriere, Benedicte. 2009. An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies. *Asian Ethnology*, 68(2) Power, Authority, and Contested Hegemony in Burmeses-Myanmr Religion, 185-2010.

Cheng, Koo Gak. 2005. Malay/sian Films: Cinema of Denial. In *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. Vancouver, UBC Press.

Godmilow, Jill and Anne Louise Shapiro. 1997. *How Real is the Reality in the Documentary Film?* History and Theory, Volume 36 No. 4 Theme Issue 36: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy, 80-101.

Ho, Tamara. 2009. Transgender, Transgression, and Translation: A Cartography of Nat Kadaws Notes on Gender and Sexuality within the Spirit Cult of Burma. *Discourse* (31)3 273-317.

Ibid., 2010. Film Review: The Legend of Lady Hill. *Visual Anthropology* 23, 254-257.

Irawanto, Budi. 2011. Catatan dari Kursi Juri Festival Film Dokumenter: Wacana Film Dokumenter Independen Kontemporer. *Mau Dibawa ke Mana Cinema Kita? Beberapa Wacana Seputar Film Indonesia*. Barker, Thomas and Cheng, Khoo Gaik, eds. Jakarta, Selemba Humankia, 183-199.

Kitiarsa, Pattana. 2004. Of Faiths and Films: The Crisis of Thai Buddhism on the Silver Screen. Paper presented at *Burmese Buddhism, and the Spirit Cult Revisited: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Religion in Contemporary Myanmar*. May 22-23 2004, Hartley Conference Center, Standford University.

Lydon, John. 2003. Clifford Geert'z Definition of Religion and it's Application to Film. In *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, Rituals*. NYU Press, NY, New York, 41-55.

Milligan, Jeffrey Ayala. 2003. *Teaching Between the Cross and Crescent Moon: Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Public Education in the Southern Philippines*. *Comparative Education Review*, 47(4), 468-492.

Morris, Rosalind C. 2002. A Room With A Voice: Meditation and Mediumship in Thailand's Information Age. In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*.

Finsberg, G. Abu-Lughod, L and Larkin, B.. eds. New Jersey: University of California Press

Shaheen, Jack. 2003. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People*. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 588, Islam: Enduring Myths and Changing Realities, 171-193.

Schiller, Anne. Capturing Dayak Deathways on film. *American Ethnologist*, 28(1) Feb. pg 32-55.

Sumrongthong, Bussakorn. 2008. *The Blending of Thai-Muslim Musical Performances in Southern Thailand*. Manyusia, Journal of Humanities, Special Issue No. 16., 99-119.

Yusuf, Imtiyaz. 2007. *The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World*. Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs 27 (2) 319-339.

***ADDITIONAL READINGS:***

Barker, Thomas. 2011. Mempertanyakan Gagasan “Film Nasional” *Mau Dibawa ke Mana Cinema Kita? Beberapa Wacana Seputar Film Indonesia*. Barker, Thomas and Cheng, Khoo Gaik, eds. Jakarta, Selemba Humankia, 7-28.

Sen, Krishna. 1994. *Indonesian Cinema*. Zed Books, London.

Hanan, David. 2010 *Innovation and Tradition in Indonesian Cinema*. 2010. Third Text 24(1), 107-121.

**FILMS:**

**Bagong Buwan**

**PHILIPPINES**

**2001**

**Directed by Marilou Diaz Abaya**

**Filipino with English Subtitles**

Ahmad (Cesar Montano) is a Muslim who lives in Manila as a doctor. His wife Fatima (Amy Austria) and only son Ibrahim live in Mindanao with Ahmad's mother, Farida. Ahmad is devastated when he is told that Ibrahim has been killed by a stray bullet fired by vigilantes. Returning home, Ahmad finds himself opposing his family's wish to stay in their war-torn homeland. In spite of his son's death, Ahmad still wants to live a peaceful life and insists that the best solution is for his family to move to Manila with him. Musa, Ahmad's brother, disagrees. Musa believes that a war against the unbelievers is the only solution, and even trains his young son for a Muslim warrior's life. An explosion near a public marketplace thrusts Ahmad and his loved ones into the center of a bloody conflict between Christians and Muslims, the government and the Moros. Montano's performance garnered him a Best Actor nod for a Gawad Urian, the Pinoy equivalent of an Oscar.

**Which Way to the War?**

**INDONESIA**

**2009**

**Directed by Sue Useem**

**Indonesian with English Subtitles**

At a time where religious violence seems to draw more media attention than ever, *Which Way to the War?* is a unique and exciting documentary that exposes the truth behind a conflict that lies and fear have fueled, with devastating consequences. American filmmaker Sue Useem, along with a crew of courageous Indonesian journalists and activists, went to great risks to collect the footage, interviews, and stories that make up the first ever documentary feature film on the Poso conflict in Indonesia during the decade from 1998 to 2008.

Instead of just taking one angle on the conflict, *Which Way to the War?* examines and analyzes the whole story behind the story of Poso, an extremely complex conflict, told by the people who lived through it. Generally cast as a "religious war" between militant groups of Protestants and Muslims that started by fighting between two drunken youths, one Protestant, one Muslim, this documentary identifies the causes and the conspirators who encouraged and armed groups of young men, readily mobilized by calls for religious solidarity at a time when political, economic, and religious stability in the Poso area was under threat.

**Mekhong Full Moon Party**

**THAILAND**

**2002**

**Jira Maligool**

**Thai and Lao with English Subtitles**

*Mekhong Full Moon Party* is heavily brandished with Thai charm and wit, and this charm and wit is what director Jira Maligool does best! I find Maligool being able to really sum up Thai culture better in *Mekhong Full Moon Party* than I have seen from any Thai film to date. The film throws together a mixed bag of characters who are all trying to push their beliefs on the origin of the Naga Fire Balls. There are the skeptical scientists, devoted believers in the Buddhist faith, cheeky Buddhist monks, and then the barge loads of tourists (or “farangs” if you will).

Maligool takes each school of thought provided by the many characters, and contrasts them playfully. A good example of this is the vignettes of Dr Narati and Dr Surapol trying to convince the locals on their opposing theories about the origins of the Fire Balls. The contrasts in the film pose the question on what to believe in, traditional spiritual faith or modern day technological skepticism.

**The Legend of Lady Hill**

**MYANMAR**

**2005**

**Directed by Yee Myint**

**Burmese and English with English Subtitles**

The Legend of Lady Hill is a supernatural melodrama. When young rich city boy, Tun, visits the town Lady Hill and impetuously flirts with a pretty village girl named Thuzar he unknowingly disrupts a village spirit ceremony. When Thuzar’s husband dies in an accident that evening, she and the rest of the village believe it is the vengeful punishment of Ma Ma U, the protective spirit who guards the village. Thuzar and angry villagers blame the recalcitrant Tun and chase him from the village. Twenty years later the repercussions of this sad event are still being felt. When Tun’s son, La Min, visits the same village and meets the beautiful Pha-yaung Ban, all sorts of trouble befalls them. Have the spirits cursed this couple? Or are more terrestrial forces working to keep them apart?

The Legend of Lady Hill is a soap opera love story transfused with Buddhist ethics and Myanmar’s rich religious culture. Scenes rich with traditional music and religious ceremony will please those with an interest in Burmese culture.

**Baby Arabia**

**2010**

**Panu Aree, Kaweenipon Ketrapasit, Kong Rithdee**

**THAILAND**

**Thai with English Subtitles**

BABY ARABIA follows one of the oldest Thai-Muslim bands specializing in the sub-cultural genre of Arab-Malay music – the bouncy ethnic cross-pollination of Arabian melodies, Malay throbs, Thai luk-thung kicks, and a bit of Latin tempo. We meet Geh, founder of the band who taught himself to play the accordion 35 year ago. Joining Geh is guitarist Umar (a former Koran teacher with a knack for Egyptian numbers). Fronting their band is Jamilah, a husky-voiced, humble diva who teaches the Koran during the day and sings Arabic songs at night while wondering if the world of melody can be both faith-bound and joyously secular. Baby Arabia plays cover versions of classical and contemporary Arab and Malay music (though the band members do not speak those languages) and they've been touring Muslim communities around Bangkok and the Central Region for three decades. Though some Islamic scholars question their brand of worldly merry-making, claiming that it's against the law of the religion, the humanizing power of music and irresistible exuberance of their songs provide a definitive counter-argument (Review from the HIFF Spring Showcase) [http://hiff.org/program/index.php/films/detail/baby\\_arabia\\_2010](http://hiff.org/program/index.php/films/detail/baby_arabia_2010)

**Shape of the Moon**

**INDONESIA**

**2004**

**Directed by Leonard Retel Helmrich**

**Indonesian and Javanese with English Subtitles**

Winner of IDFA's top feature prize and Sundance bound, Leonard Retel Helmrich's docu, "Shape of the Moon" reps an ambitious melange of ethnography, family drama and expressionist style. Focus is the same Jakarta-based matriarch, Rumidja Sjamsuddin, and her family featured in Dutch-Indonesian helmer's previous "Eye of the Day," here seen moving back to her home village after life in the city gets to be too much. Sometimes slow, but punctuated by breathtaking views, digi-shot "Moon" waxes brightly on a big screen and should draw more fests and upmarket broadcasters into its orbit, but is unlikely to have much theatrical pull.

As in "Eye" -- which along with "Moon" will form part of a projected trilogy -- Retel Helmrich's gaze aims to encompass the cosmic, the near-microscopic and everything in between. The human story encompasses marriage, relocation and cataclysm, the last repped by a ferocious fire, impressively filmed up close, that destroys a swathe of Jakarta's poorest district.

The Main protagonist is Catholic widow Rumidja, who struggles with poverty, homesickness, and trying to accept the conversion of her maturing son, Bachtrar, aka Bakti, to Islam in order marry his Muslim girlfriend.. Rumidja is the main caretaker for

granddaughter Theresia, aka Tari, a bright child of 10 or 11. Although the Sjamsuddin family remains the main focus, the doc takes in anti-U.S. protest marches and observes characters discussing Indonesia's inter-religious strife to add political and sociological dimension.

Synopsis by Leslie Felperin <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117925880?refcatid=31>

**Muallaf**

**2008**

**MALAYSIA**

**Directed by Yasmin Ahmad**

In Muallaf, Yasmin Ahmad's 5th film follows two sisters on the lam from their abusive father and their relationship with a young Chinese teacher at their local school.