

‘Sometimes it takes an outsider’s view to appreciate something that is very close to home’ – A conversation with Philip Jablon about the Southeast Asia Movie Theatre Project

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Introduction

Philadelphia-native independent researcher and photographer Philip Jablon fell in love with Asian culture at a young age through cinema. After his undergraduate degree in Asian studies and while studying for his masters at Chiang Mai University (Thailand), he was inspired to photograph and document old stand-alone movie theatres in Southeast Asia. What started as a final project for his degree quickly turned into a much larger venture of research and activism. Through his travel blog (<http://seatheater.blogspot.com/>), a series of books and international exhibitions Jablon tries to raise awareness for the need to preserve architecturally significant buildings and, thus, local cinematic and cultural heritage. In December 2020 he joined Maya Nedyalkova to discuss his work, research and future aspirations in the present interview. In March 2021, as part of the Film Industries: Conversations, Collaboration and Crisis Management webinar series at Oxford Brookes University, Jablon presented more extensively on his initiatives. The recording of the latter talk can be found here: <https://youtu.be/B0tJOGHpKfE>.

Maya (Q): Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Phil. Would you like to briefly introduce yourself?

Philip (A): Sure, I am a cinema photographer and I’ve been documenting vintage and historic movie theatres in Southeast Asia for the last 11 or 12 years now. So far, I’ve covered Thailand, Burma and Laos. My main focus is documenting them photographically, but I also try, to the best of my ability, to do kind of layman’s research, digging up whatever facts I can about the theatres and trying to tie them into the political and/or social and/or economic context of places that I visit.

Q: Are you hoping to expand your project and go to other countries as well?

A: There are a few more places which I'd like to visit. Maybe Vietnam. And maybe the Philippines, but... I realize that, as time goes on, these places become either demolished or so unrecognizably augmented that I feel like I wouldn't get the same output that I have in the past. That is because these things change so quickly.

Q: Some of those theatres, which you photograph, become part of restoration initiatives where they become functional again. Have you been back to any of the sites that you originally visited to take photos of the restored theatres?

A: I have most recently. When I first started documenting theatres in Myanmar, they were kind of on the cusp of... obsolescence, I would say... In 2010 they were very much unchanged from when they were first built, mostly in the mid-1950s or so... And by 2010, they were really very much in decline. There has been a somewhat strong movement to restore and renovate them led by Myanmar's largest private theatre operator, called Mingalar Cinemas. And so I was able to go back and reshoot some of the cinemas that I photographed in my first couple of rounds in Myanmar.

Q: Does Mingalar Cinemas have any links with Hollywood or is it completely a national initiative with no global forces intervening?

A: Myanmar went through some fairly strong political changes during the course of the time since I started taking these pictures and they have now opened up to market forces.¹ They were sanctioned by most Western countries for a long time and then, after the election in 2015, things started to normalise. For decades, Hollywood had an embargo against Myanmar, so they weren't allowing their movies to come in. All of a sudden those embargoes were lifted. Hollywood comes in. So in a sense, yes, there are global forces at work that have made the theatre industry in some ways more viable. But in terms of the actual renovations and the actual projects to restore... I'm not sure if there is any sort of national legislation or funding available to private developers to renovate the theatres, but there is definitely a private initiative and there is definitely a belief in the growing market for movie exhibition.

Q: Back to your project, how many individual cinema theatres in Southeast Asia do you think you have visited so far and how many photos have you taken (approximately)?

A: I used to keep track, but I don't really know now... In terms of theatre documentation throughout those three countries... let's say between 250 and 350. That is in Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. I visited a lot more places... more sites than that... more towns... in the hopes

of finding an old theatre. But I didn't find anything. It was either demolished or they maybe never had one.

Q: And out of the places that you have visited, which is perhaps the one where you were so impressed that you would like to go back?

A: Two years ago in northern Myanmar, the city of Mogok... a theatre called... let's see if I can remember... the Baho Cinema. It was a mid-20th century movie hall in a very, very stunning setting... a very steep mountain valley with very steep green mountains behind it... And the town was built up the mountains. But the theatre was by far the largest and most striking structure in the whole area. So it looked very much like a fortress. Just in terms of aesthetics and environment landscape, that was definitely one of the most impressive... That movie theatre, when I visited it in 2018, was inactive, but all the people I spoke to said it was going to be restored and then about eight months ago, somebody contacted me through my blog or through Facebook, and they sent me photos of the restored theatre. So it's back in operation after I don't know how many years... maybe 10 years dormant.

Q: Were you able to take pictures inside of it?

A: I was, but there wasn't much to photograph. The auditorium had been completely gutted by the time I was there. There were some cool details in the lobby area and there were lots of leftover ephemera in the office. But in terms of the interior architecture, not a whole lot worth shooting. But I can tell you, based on my experience in that era of Burmese movie theatre and just from talking to people, it would have had wooden bench seats, built out of teak, very uncomfortable to most modern sensibilities. But that is how things endured in Myanmar for much of the last 60 years. They didn't change until very recently.

Q: And if they had an embargo, what did they use to screen?

A: There is Burmese cinema... they would also get Indian films... lots of connections with India... but mostly Burmese, really cheaply made Burmese movies in the last 10, 20 years. I mean extremely low-budget, made basically on video... with video recorders. So that was... the biggest film fare, followed by India, and... I'm trying to think if there were any other national cinemas that might have been screened there. There was some smuggling of Hollywood films into Myanmar during the embargo period. Most of those didn't make it past Yangon and maybe Mandalay, so the very large markets. They were still screened in the main theatres. They just wouldn't get official permission to do so from the Motion Picture Association of America. There were strong connections between Myanmar and Singapore. So my sources said that the films were being smuggled through Singapore into Myanmar.

Q: Some of the places that you've been to are in urban settings and some are, as you say, in quite remote, isolated rural locations. From your engagement with local communities, have you gained a sense of their relationship to film and cinema? Is it still quite important in communal life or has it become a lot more individual and private as in the West, in general?

A: In most of the rural places I visited, the small towns... public cinemas or movie theatres in general had been closed already... in some places for quite some time. This was the situation in Thailand, Myanmar and Laos... definitely more so in Laos, but even in Myanmar and Thailand. You had a generation of people growing up without having the experience of a cinema, without having collective viewing experiences outside of the home. In Thailand, to some extent, there were itinerant movie screenings or outdoor screenings. They would sometimes hold public screenings at temple fairs. Sometimes the municipality would hire these screenings. It used to be very common, but it kind of has fallen out of favour a bit with the younger people. But in general, I would say, when you talk to people who are old enough to experience the cinema in its prime... yeah, it was the social and entertainment thing to do in these rural communities. They often have extremely interesting stories, especially when compared to someone coming from a big city like [Philadelphia], where everything was kind of formalized. Things were very different in small-town Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. The movie theatre and going to the movies was almost like a portal into another world. I remember when visiting one small-town theatre. The operator talked about how for really popular movies, sometimes the theatre would hire a bus to go around to the villages and scoop people up and bring them to the theatre because people didn't have their own transport. It was the only way in which they could get there. For a really popular movie, sometimes people, especially rural women, would pay for the ticket entry with a little gold nugget or a link from their chains. A lot of rural people, especially rural women, would keep their wealth in gold and sometimes it would be in their little gold bracelets or gold necklaces. Instead of paying for the movie theatre ticket in cash, they would break off a link from their chain and basically barter their way in. In the big cities, they would really put on pageants for some movies to promote them. For instance, if a cowboy movie was coming to town, they would hire people to dress up like cowboys, get on horses and gallop through the town with a car, following them, with a bullhorn, announcing the film: "Today at the Diamond Theatre, they're going to be showing John Wayne from America!" And they would really put on pageants and do promotional performances.

Q: Have you ever considered doing oral history research?

A: When I go to these places, I do collect some oral histories. I talk to local people, to the best of my ability. Unfortunately, I had not been recording these conversations, outside of my note-taking, until fairly recently. That is how I got all of these stories, through informal interviews. I would love to do something more structured. There are a lot of things which I would love to do, but the time and the resources... I simply don't know if it is tenable.

Q: From an academic perspective, in film studies there is this methodological and epistemological divide between the primacy of the filmic text and the importance of the film-viewing experience in terms of context, the place of film viewing and the lived experience of it. What do you think of it? To what extent does the big-screen experience matter? And how important is the film itself or the programming?

A: Watching films in the movie theatre... it's the difference between night and day. It's the difference between... a kind of formal, although informal... going to the movies isn't necessarily a formal affair... but it's a formal event versus doing something casually and whimsically at home. It is a collective experience. It's an economic experience, a social experience... It's all these things at home, too, but in a kind of microcosmic way. The more dependent on technologies we become in a general sense, the more atomized, alienated and isolated we become. There's nothing like the actual cinema experience in any context, even if it's a negative context. You might argue that there are negative cinema spaces where dangerous things can happen, but still they constitute some sort of social arrangement that is necessary for people, for humanity. Programming is very important as well. I'm thinking now in terms of what has happened in cinemas in a lot of places, the kind of megaplex complex, where you have screens dominated by a few types of cinemas and that limits people's options. It just becomes an exercise in hyper capitalism, what kind of deals can be struck from the corporate studios and their distribution arms with the theatres that they screen them in. Thailand is a great case-study for a country of millions of people that still has many active screens. They are all in multiplexes and shopping malls. But because there is that arrangement, basically there might be 700 screens in Thailand and at any one moment, they are probably screening no more than ten films. Eight of them from Hollywood and seven of them are some sort of Marvel spin-off.

Q: So that does link with my next question – the closing down of the old cinemas across a lot of Southeast Asian places. I assume that there will be different answers regarding the different contexts, but what led to these closures? Was it the advancements of new technology that made these cinemas obsolete? Was it the inability to digitize the old venues? Lack of interest among the population? Private interests? The pressure from Hollywood to move to a multiplex environment where they have more control over distribution?

A: Through my research, I uncovered that you have three totally different contexts between Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. Let's think about the Thai context here, because Thailand still has a very robust market. The way in which you posed the question leans towards the Thailand case-study. There are a number of factors, mainly, I would say a combination of the monopolisation of the film industry ... or of the exhibition industry... you had distributors in various regions of the country, who had very unfair practices with regards to how they

distributed their films. They would have their own theatres where they would screen the films first. It is very much like what happened in the US prior to 1948 when we had the United States versus Paramount Pictures, resulting in the antitrust act. Basically things were vertically integrated. In the United States back then they broke up the studios' monopolisation of both distribution and exhibition. While the studios do not own exhibition, there is a vertical integration within distribution and exhibition in Thailand, which has led to the collapse of small independently-owned theatres throughout the country. So that is one aspect of it. And then they were a victim of their own success, in a certain regard. As Thailand became a more middle-class society, the population jumped on the car-owning bandwagon to an extremely high extent. Old single-screen downtown movie theatres that don't provide parking for a nowadays driving population became untenable. This was a common thing which I came across. Once people got cars, you'd think it would make their lives more convenient and maybe make movie-going an easier thing. But it often didn't. People would drive everywhere, and if they couldn't park near the movie theatre, then they would miss the show time. So, in larger markets, in the big cities, that really helped seal the deal. Then you have the influx of an availability of cheap bootleg DVDs and VCDs that for a family, which is living on a small income, makes it a lot easier and more affordable to screen a film than paying full price for four or five movie tickets at once. They didn't use to be expensive during the old days of the stand-alone movie theatre. But nowadays, with the proliferation of the multiplex... it's still not an arm and a leg... but they have definitely jumped in price by 100 to 200 percent, I would say... even in upcountry somewhat rural markets or smaller markets.

Q: Learning about your work, I feel like you have this very special position of a "privileged outsider", living between Thailand and the United States. When you try to be vocal about activism and preservation measures in Thailand, do you feel that you are able to see and appreciate sites that locals might take for granted? And would they listen to you more because you're an American, an outside person?

A: That is a great question, and I think the answer is mostly yes. I would say that things have changed in Thailand over the course of time since I've been doing my work, in terms of how vintage architecture and the old movie theatres are viewed. It has changed from an attitude of indifference to an attitude of interest, and it's mostly in the younger generation who grew up without them... and see these old spaces in a new context. For people who know the work that I have done... yes, they see me as maybe a pioneer in that regard, helping to bring it to people's attention and make it part of the preservation context. I don't know whether they give me more credit because I'm a foreigner. Maybe some people recognise that sometimes it takes an outsider's view to appreciate something that is very close to home.

Q: You mentioned young people. In one of your other interviews, you talk about old movie theatres or old buildings, in general, as historical roots to past times. Where do you think the film-viewing roots of the contemporary generation who are just growing up rest?

A: It's very different between Myanmar and Thailand or Thailand and Laos. In Thailand the young, very middle-class cosmopolitan population are the people who are leading the current social and political revolution. They are trying to get reforms passed... I think people are accessing what is most available to them in terms of what they can see and where they can see it. But I think that there is kind of an intellectual yearning among the younger generation to reinvigorate elements of their past, which they see valuable. To a degree that definitely carries over into the movie theatre and cinema spaces in general. There is definitely a large segment of the population that is aware of the importance of theatrical venues as opposed to just streaming. You can see this in the rise of independent mini-theatres that have opened up in Bangkok and other screening room type places. People want this. Obviously, that is on a small, niche scale. Also with the support for the Scala Theatre, which was Bangkok's last movie palace... There is a huge amount of support from young people and people who didn't necessarily grow up with it, but people who came to discover it later on and realised its historic worth... realised its uniqueness in a sea of otherwise uniform multiplex movie theatres.² They were the ones who seem to have the strongest voices, or at least in the context of making social media noise, whereas the older generation just had this passive stance: 'Oh, it's old, it needs to go down!' So while their roots may be in going to multiplex theatres and streaming services, the young generation are also the leading voice and potentially the leading market for these preserved, or revived, or new screening venues.

Q: Given your love for cinema, have you considered going into documentary filmmaking?

A: I have done some [documentary filming] to a very small degree, I would call them observational films. I have the photography done for one which I need to edit together. It's probably going to end up being surrealist observational cinema. We'll see how it turns out. I would like to do more of that. It's fun. I enjoy it.

Q: And, lastly, how has the COVID-19 situation affected your work?

A: I've taken the year off, basically... I'm not doing any actual field work. This is my normal time for doing field work, November through March. Because of COVID-19, I've decided to err on the side of caution and stay at home, not travel. I'm using this downtime, so to speak, to work on my second book, which focuses on movie theatres of Myanmar.

Q: Thank you, Phil! I look forward to your new book and future work!

Biographical note:

Maya Nedyalkova is a Research Fellow for the Creative Industries Research and Innovation Network (CIRIN) at Oxford Brookes University, interested in popular culture and digital audiences. She previously explored selected transnational aspects of the Bulgarian film industry, during her AHRC-funded PhD at the University of Southampton, and investigated the shifting patterns of contemporary Bulgarian film consumption, positioned within global culture and economy, as part of her British Academy postdoctoral fellowship. Contact: mnedyalkova@brookes.ac.uk.

Notes:

¹ This interview was carried out in December 2020, prior to the military coup in February 2021.

² Unfortunately, after a period of closure and public attempts at revival, the Scala Cinema was officially dismantled, with parts of the interior moved to other sites or sold to fans as memorabilia.