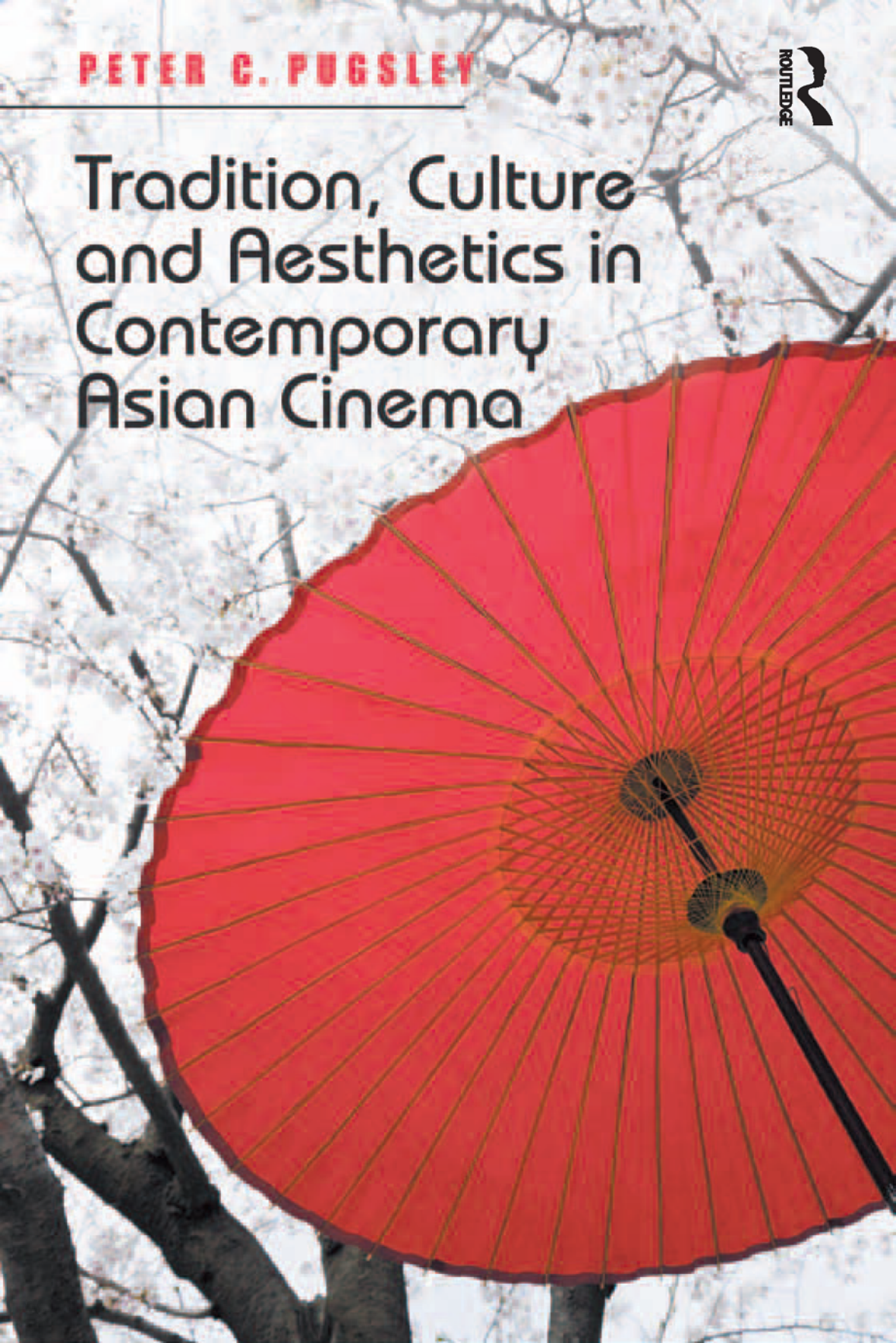
PETER C. PUGSLEY

Tradition, Culture and Aesthetics in Contemporary Asian Cinema



TRADITION, CULTURE AND AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN CINEMA

Dedicated to Bob and Beth Pugsley

Tradition, Culture and Aesthetics in Contemporary Asian Cinema

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Introduction

Tradition, Culture and Aesthetics in Contemporary Asian Cinema focuses on cinematic output from the Asian region – increasingly a force in global media production and in the exchange of cultural understanding. Two key themes will be discussed throughout this book. The first is a working toward a conception of an Asian aesthetic in films from and about Asia – a recognisable visual and aural assembly of culturally-loaded images that appear on screen. The second is, perhaps, a more hotly debated topic – that of Asia as 'the Orient'. Although there are many who decry the Orientalism debate as dead and buried, revisiting some of the central tenets of the various discourses surrounding it serves as a valuable device for unearthing why and how 'Asian cinema' still stands apart from its Western counterparts. The book's central approach is through a text-based analysis of contemporary Asian films, although the impact of Asian media in the global marketplace is also taken into consideration. My search is for those images and motifs that lead us toward an understanding of how identities are constructed and how ultimately, in what is being cited as 'the Asian Century', we see ourselves and others. Through the medium of cinema (often more global in its reach than television) identities are articulated utilising ready-to-hand images and myths which, combined, create a recognisable aesthetic of Asianness, and an ontological site for the maintenance of social and cultural identities.

In this book I ask readers to consider how Asian cinema's aesthetic construction may affect its popularity in different countries and / or cultures at different times. In other words, I explore the spatial and temporal influences within films from Asia including themes of localisation, nationalisation and globalisation and how these are situated in the context of popular cinema as a global phenomenon. Therefore, it is hoped that through this book readers can acquaint themselves with a variety of Asian cinematic texts from diverse cultures (and nations) – as well as from a range of genres (such as action, comedy, and drama). It introduces readers to the growing body of academic literature that focuses on the success of Asian film, and reflects upon possible influences of the West on Asia and increasingly of Asia on the West. Through looking at key filmmakers (a select body of contemporary auteurs) I illustrate how individual filmmakers produce works that maintain a particular aesthetic and continue an Asian presence on global cinema screens.

It is hoped that the ensuing chapters will enable readers to develop an understanding of film and cultural production throughout the Asian region, increasingly important in the region's desires to resist the hegemonic invasion of

Western cinema. *Tradition, Culture and Aesthetics in Contemporary Asian Cinema* will enable readers to participate in the active and vigorous discourse surrounding a prolific cinematic output marked by the unique and exciting characteristics of the Asian region.

My research foci to date have centred on popular media in China, Singapore, India, Japan and Malaysia; the nations mostly focused upon in this book. I am fully cognisant of the limitations of a work such as this, and I take full responsibility for the omission of discussions on the cinema(s) of Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and The Philippines (to name but a few). I also focus upon live-action films with fictional narratives rather than documentaries or animations. Sacrifices have to be made in any such selections, and my key concern is to ensure that my discussion is based on those films that best reflect recent (and current) trends in Asian cinema.

Of central importance to this book is previous work on aesthetics by Theodor W. Adorno, and more recent works linking aesthetics with film by authors such as Fredric Jameson and Katherine Thomson-Jones. Of course I am privileging cinema here as an art, with the full awareness that it is beholden to a range of commercial, social and even political necessities. Certainly, if film is art then it follows that it must contain inherent aesthetic properties. I am also indebted to a recent collection of essays edited by Ken-ichi Sasaki and titled *Asian Aesthetics* (2010) that furthers debate by exploring the dawning of a new age of aesthetics in Asian art; signalling a shift from the preceding centuries of the modern era to something altogether different. I also see cinema as an art form well entrenched in the twenty-first century despite various cries predicting its death via new media technologies. Echoing the sentiments of Bordwell and Thompson (2001), I see that cinema is art because it has the power to communicate with us; to engage with us at a cognitive level via our sensory perception. Essential to Bordwell and Thompson's argument is the idea that an 'artwork cues us to perform a specific activity' (2001: 39) such as to laugh or to cry. In line with Althusser's concept of interpellation, they consider the formal expectations that audiences are equipped with to engage with a work of art such as a film. It is then that the more utilitarian aspects of aesthetics emerge through cinematic texts in the form of exhibited moral tales, social behaviours and culturally-constructed ideas of beauty. Culturally, an audience is able to make meaning from narrative and style in order to create an emotional engagement with a film, but as Bordwell and Thompson note:

> [T]here are no absolute principles of form which all artists must follow. Artworks are products of culture. Thus many of the principles of artistic form are matters of convention. (2001: 51)

These conventions are those with which both filmmakers and audiences are well versed.

In the face of competing media, cinematic films (whether in celluloid or digital form) have survived and endured as one of the most popular forms of story-telling. Of course, it would not be possible to contextualise my examination of Asian film aesthetics with debates on Orientalism (and Occidentalism) without the work of numerous others before me, including Edward Said's pivotal *Orientalism* (1978), and the resurgent debates sparked in the 1990s and beyond by Chen (1995), Carrier (1995), Clarke (1997), Bernstein and Studlar (1997), Sardar (1999) and Venn (2000). Within this historically situated contextual framework I am keen to explore the concept of a regionally-based aesthetic that negotiates the various tensions between traditional (local) cultures, the idea of the nation-state, and the 'forces' of globalisation. And while Sasaki's collection is the most recent (to date) discussion of Asian aesthetics, its applications are specifically limited to traditional visual arts. I therefore wish to extend such theories of Asian aesthetics through their application to the world of cinema.

Methodological Approaches

While fixing the geographical location of Asia as The Orient, I wish to clearly distance myself from the hegemonic assumptions inherent in earlier discussions on Orientalism (and also some of those found within the Occidentalism debate). At the risk of constructing what may be considered an Orientalist approach toward the geographical hub of what is known as the 'East', I nevertheless cling to commonly used classifications of regional and national boundaries as a means of differentiating film environments or industries. I am not suggesting though, that this geographical closeness means that Japanese film is in any way closer to (or further from) Hong Kong film than it is from Indian film. While some may argue that geographical proximity is a valid basis for measuring media output, I would much rather align myself with those who push the term 'cultural proximity' (Straubhaar, Iwabuchi and others) to make any worthwhile links between the media of different nations. The idea of diasporic groupings surely makes more sense than spatial notions of physical closeness. Similarly, the term transnational is at once helpful and problematic. It is, as Meaghan Morris notes, a 'heavily spatialised' term that conjures up images of Appaduraian flows across the various 'scapes' of being (2004: 181). At the same time it threatens to collide with the term '*inter*national', a word that perhaps carries with it the stronger spectre of the bordered nation-state. Higbee and Lim (2010) propose the concept of a 'critical transnationalism' in an effort to dissociate the discursive 'transnationalism' (as a field of study) from its Eurocentric roots and to remove the Orientalist stigma attached to it

by dint of an assumed universalism and the concurrent privileging of English as the chosen language of the field. Perhaps what transnational means is a more ethereal spread – an enveloping fog – of circulating, drifting peoples, monies, cultures and products? But such notions deny the text a birthplace, which is what, ultimately, media texts are trying to promote. In Althusser's parlance, they interpellate, they shout from the rooftops: 'Here I am! I am a product of India!' Japanese cinema *is* distinctly Japanese. Bollywood productions *are* distinctly Indian (albeit, Mumbai-centred, Hindi films). So while the transnational may presuppose globalised influences and audiences, ultimately we arrive back at the point of departure – a unique and culturally loaded source that projects an aesthetic embedded with cultural meanings and values. In the chapters that follow, I track the relevant points of foreign contact and the cultural interstices of the craftsmen and women involved in the creation of dynamic, new and exciting films that are embedded with a strong sense of Asianness. Thus, while aiming toward a singular definition of an Asian aesthetic I recognise that such an aesthetic is, and will always be, fractured by the cultural and national differences across the region. It exists only at the broad level of 'otherness' in contrast to non-Asian texts.

The Fertile East

It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the interest in Asian films shown by western-based media giants is little more than an extension of the Orientalist trope – another attempt to exploit the creativity of the East, long milked for its unique and grand ideas only to be reconstituted by western powers 'as an agency for self-criticism and self-renewal, whether in the political, moral, or religious spheres' (Clarke 1997: 27). The East, in its traditional, broader sense (incorporating the Middle-East and Central Asia) emerges as a site to be exploited via 'fertile cross-referencing, the discovery of similarities, analogies, and models; in other words, the underpinning of a productive hermeneutical relationship' (Clarke 1997: 27). The Hollywoodisation of such films as *Ring* (1998, dir. Hideo Nakata), remade as *The Ring* (2002, dir. Gore Verbinski) or *Il Mare* (aka *Siworae* 2000, dir. Lee Hyun-seung) as *The Lakehouse* (2006, dir. Alejandro Agresti) could be seen as exemplifying this 'fertile' relationship. But such a view is overly-reductive. There is much to suggest that Asian media is well able to hold its own against encroaching Western media hegemons. Scholarly works emanating from Asia over the last decade have shown us as much. Indrajit Banerjee's timely article at the dawning of the new millennium, under the playful title, 'The Locals Strike Back' (in reference to Ashcroft et al.'s seminal 1989 *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*), suggests that a 'new Asian television landscape' vigorously 'reasserts

the importance of cultural specificities in media flows and expansion' (2002: 518), a role that I see film as now able to fulfil through the rapid development of pan-Asian distribution networks.

In recent years sections of the Asian film industry have begun to capitalise in earnest on co-productions and the sharing of resources across national boundaries, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, and a significant rise in co-productions with the West, most notably through Hollywood and French co-productions. Also, throughout Asia the tension and relaxation of state controls has occurred alongside the waxing and waning influences of commercial interests (mostly waxing) as various states battle with notions of democracy and free-market economies. And while in the 1990s there were considerable changes in television broadcasting structures across the region, moving from a 'predominantly national basis to a much more complex system in which regional, national and transnational broadcasting coexist' (Hallin 1998: 156), it appears that such a shift is now occurring in the film industry.

Film

The choice of film as a point of focus for this publication is informed by its role in the day-to-day lives of people throughout the world. The Habermassian notion of a public sphere is, in the transnational sense, dispersed into the plurality of multiple public spheres where we, the audience, view particular texts within particular public (or private) environments. We may enjoy watching DVDs with our family, for example, but choose to go to the cinema with our peers. We decide within constructed frameworks of shared common interests. Film parallels some of the complexities of television, and could be said to also provide a site where although "public sphering' is clearly not television's dominant purpose' it is nevertheless, 'the dominant medium of the public sphere' (Dahlgren 2000: 148). Films invoke emotional and often quite public responses, whether through their popularity, such as James Cameron's global blockbuster hits *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009), or through near-hysterical debate over such controversial films as Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) with its portrayal of pretend mental-retardation, and images of self-mutilation in *AntiChrist* (2009). Also, cinema emerges as an individual event where the audience is subjected to a text with few distractions, as opposed to media such as television which is often seen in relation to its dailiness where its 'discourses are juxtaposed with the other experiences of everyday life – sometimes confirming them, sometimes framing them in a mythic way, sometimes challenging and contradicting them' (Dahlgren 2000: 148). Film offers similar experiences, but is rarely consumed on a daily basis. Furthermore, as Roland Robertson notes, we 'live in a world which increasingly acknowledges the quotidian conflation of

the economic and the cultural,' and where 'globalizing trends are regarded as in tension with 'local' assertions of identity and culture' (Robertson 1995: 31–3). While this may suggest a situation where the local is subject to various external hegemonic forces resulting in the suppression of one less-powerful culture by another, it does not have to be the case. Film still plays a pivotal role, emerging as Graeme Turner (1993: 3) once noted as 'a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.' In other words, film plays an incisive role in the construction of identity at a cultural or national level. The concept of 'national cinema' is one intensely promoted (and funded) by individual nation-states around the world, and it is often seen as a more accessible entry point into the culture of another nation. National cinema is a project in which policies are enacted, and departments and ministries are created all in the name of ensuring an institutionally-governed cinematic output that (hopefully) projects the values and ideals of a particular culture – often a singular culture (e.g. Hindu in India) chosen for its ability to represent the nation. Language too is crucial in creating identities. The use of Singlish (the conflation of English, Malay and various dialects of Chinese) in Singaporean TV and cinema, for example, has been subjected to an array of differing state regulations; Hong Kong film and TV has similarly wavered between favouring Mandarin, Cantonese, regional dialects and English at various times in past decades (Gunn 2006).

There is of course a caveat here, we must be wary of putting too much emphasis on the role of film in representing nation – after all, if the nation is merely an 'imaginary' construct (in Anderson's reading) or a 'discursive formation' (in Foucault's) then it is perhaps overly ambitious to expect a 90-minute fictional narrative to shoulder the responsibility for the identity of an entire nation. Additionally, the increased urbanisation of societies creates fractured images of individual nations. How does one, for example, reconcile the urban specificities of Feng Xiaogang's 2003 film *Cell Phone* [*Shǒujī*] with the stark rural images exemplified by Zhang Yimou's award-winning *The Road Home* (*Wǒde Fùqīn Mǔqīn*, lit. 'My father and mother' 1999), or the representation of modern-day Shanghai as a barren apocalyptic wasteland in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (*Sūzhōu Hé* 2000)? Which represents the 'true' China? Or the recent arrival of the 'Japanese' film *Norwegian Wood* (*Noruwei no Mori* 2010) an adaptation of the best-selling novel by Japanese author Haruki Murakami, but directed by award-winning French-Vietnamese director Anh Hung Tran (*The Scent of Green Papaya* [*Mùi du du xanh*] 1993, Cyclo [*Xich lo*] 1995)? *Norwegian Wood* also features a musical score by British pop musician Johnny Greenwood, played by the BBC Concert Orchestra and recorded at London's Abbey Road Studios, and further consolidating the link to The Beatles pop tune chosen by Murakami as the title to his book. Yet the film retains an indefinable sense of Japaneseness (apart

perhaps, from Tran's stock-in-trade visual aesthetics, as discussed in Chapter 2) and is certainly promoted globally as a 'Japanese' film.

Another factor in the significance of film is that the closing decades of the twentieth century saw the previously public mode of cinema brought into the private home following the major shift in the role of television as a receptor of terrestrial broadcasts to a wider application for the playing of asynchronous videos (1980s), VCDs (1990s) and DVDs (late 1990s). These technical advancements are important here. For instance, Morris (2004: 185–7) tracks the schism between the 'major and minor' economies at work in the production of action cinema, with Hong Kong filmmakers unafraid of the immediacy afforded by producing straight-to video texts. Crucially, for filmmaking globally, these technological advancements served to broaden the scope of filmmaking, not to reduce it. The *language* of film, as Mitry would have it, is still retained, so that a film 'appears not as an abstract form to be supplemented by certain aesthetic qualities but as the aesthetic quality itself supplemented by the properties of language, in short, an organic whole in which art and language are fused' (1997: 15). And it was now available to be consumed at home; viewed repeatedly at any time of convenience with its grand visual aesthetics reduced in physical scale from the metres-wide cinema screen to the centimetres-wide domestic television set. The ontological properties of cinema are thus heightened by its immediacy and availability, a process even further developed with video-phone technologies. Through the investigation of Asian aesthetics in film, I hope to show that the fusion of art, technology and language results in a dynamic body of readily available cinematic texts that inform us of the myriad cultures and traditions of the Asian region.

Chapter Outline

This book begins with a questioning of the place of an Asian aesthetic and the extent to which cinema may be a contributor to a self-imposed sense of aesthetic. Key use of images, colours, and sounds creating an ontological sense of time and place are discussed utilising the work of Theodor Adorno (and others) to head toward a greater understanding of the role of aesthetics and how this may be applied to cinematic texts from Asia. Also noted is how Asian cinema features a number of performance styles that differ remarkably from those generally found in Western cinema. Cinematic performances that might be perceived in the West as overly-emotional (whether dramatic or comedic) are found in films from Japan and India (for example), and the appearance of dance is a surprisingly frequent narrative device in films that would not be tagged with the genre of 'musical'. These performance styles often have their

roots in traditional cultural pursuits such as theatre, and therefore emerge as less astonishing to local Asian audiences when featured in film.

Chapter 2 then looks at the ways in which tradition is used on screen to create an Asian aesthetic marked by images of a constructed 'Orient'. By drawing on a case study of three films by Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai, this chapter explores how the use of the past in Wong's loose trilogy of films *Days of Being Wild* (*Á Fëi Zhèng Zhuàn* 1990), *In the Mood for Love* (*Huāyàng de Niánhuá*, lit. 'the age of flowers', or 'the flowery years' 2000), and *2046* (2004) creates a recognisable aesthetic pallet. The chapter then presents a discussion of how two very different Asian countries, namely India and Japan, create their own aesthetic representations through film.

Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of the auteur in Asian cinema and whether such a title is still applicable to directors in the rapid paced, high-output cinema industries of the twenty-first century. In exploring the relationship between the auteur and their chosen aesthetic imagery, the chapter draws on a case study of Korean director Park Chan-wook, and his 'vengeance trilogy' of films, *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* (*Boksuneun naui geot*, lit. 'Vengeance is mine' 2002), *Old Boy* (*Oldeuboi,* 2003) and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (*Chinjeolhan Geumjassi*, lit. 'Kind-Hearted Ms. Geum-Ja' 2005). This chapter also makes reference to the ways in which Chinese and Singaporean cinemas deal with the issue of the auteur.

The next chapter investigates the sense of an 'emerging consciousness' of Asian culture and the specific traits of 'Asianness' found in films from across the region. The central focus of the chapter is a case study of the late Yasmin Ahmad and her trilogy of family drama films based around the female protagonist, Orked, namely *Sepet* (lit. Chinese/slant Eyes 2004), *Gubra* (lit. Anxiety 2006) and *Mukhsin* (Mukhsin is the name of the film's young male protagonist 2007). This chapter contains a discussion on modes of representation in the aesthetics of films, returning to examples from India, Japan and China.

Chapter 5 moves (geographically) beyond Asia to see how the Asian aesthetic fares in the West. It examines the rising influence of film festivals in not only the judging and appraising of films from Asia, but as an increasing source of funding for the development and distribution of films. How might such involvement impact on the narrative or visual construction of a film? This chapter therefore questions the hierarchical importance of film festivals, and the Western (American and European) privileging of honour for filmmakers whose films are selected for screening at festivals in Cannes or Sundance (for example) in preference to Busan or Hong Kong. It also looks at the work of Asian directors such as Ang Lee, Stephen Chow and Wong Kar Wai in Western markets, in their non-native environments.

The brief conclusion summarises the central themes explored throughout the book and discusses the temporal aspects of the aesthetic image with a view toward the future. It ponders what the film theorists at the close of the Asian