



Of Scent and Sensibility: Embodied Ways of Seeing in Southeast Asian Cultures*



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[*Abstract*]

One of the goals of this article is to continue the momentum begun by emerging scholarship on theory and practice of writing about visual culture of and in Southeast Asia. I hope to offer culturally sensitive and embodied ways of looking at images and objects as sites/sights of cultural knowledge as further theoretical intervention. The argument put forward in my essay is three-fold: first, I critique the prevailing logocentric approach in the field of Southeast Asian Studies and I argue that in a postcolonial, global, and transnational period, it is important to be inclusive of other objects as sites/sights of social, political and cultural analysis beyond written and oral texts. Second, I argue that although it has its own political and theoretical problems, the evolving field of Visual Studies as it is practiced in the United States is one of many ways to decolonize the prevailing logocentric approach to Southeast Asian Studies. Third, I argue that if one reads these Euro-American derived theories of vision and visuality through the lens of what Walter Mignolo calls “colonial difference(s),” then Visual Studies as an evolving

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field has the potential to offer more nuanced local ways of looking at and understanding objects, vision, and visibility. Last, I point out that unlike in the West where there is an understanding of pure, objective and empirical vision, local Southeast Asian perspectives on objects and visions are more embodied and multi-sensorial. I argue that if one is ethically mindful of the local cultural ways of seeing and knowing objects, then the evolving field of Visual Studies offers a much-needed intervention to the privileged, lingering logocentric approach to Southeast Asian Studies. Moreover, these alternative methods might help to decolonize method and theory in academic disciplines that were invented during the colonial period.

Keywords: Visual Studies, Sensorium, Colonialism, Logocentrism, Body

I . Preface

I would like to begin by stating upfront that I subscribe to what the English poet, Alexander Pope stated eloquently in his poem, *An Essay on Criticism*: “A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again” (Pope 1896: 14). I am aware of the breadth of material and ideas covered in this essay. The purpose of my essay, however, is not to provide readers with a water-tight argument, but to generate a conversation that I hope will open up alternative ways of thinking, seeing, experiencing, and knowing the idea of image and object in Southeast Asian cultures. More important, I would like to foster conversation from a comparative, cross-cultural, transcultural and cross-disciplinary perspective.

II. Introduction: Situating Visual Studies in the Field of Southeast Asian Studies

While the disciplines of archeology and epigraphy have long been part of the colonial and pedagogical project in Southeast Asian Studies, as well as part of local nationalist research, the discipline of Art History and the evolving field of Visual Studies have been slow in gaining traction as a viable method and theory, as approaches to understanding local knowledge, aesthetics, vision, “sight as physical operation,” and visibility: that is, “sight as social fact” (Foster 1998: IX). Southeast Asian Studies as an academic discipline is genealogically rooted in colonial scholarship that has the propensity to fetishize cultural and racial authenticity. More important, at its inception, it encouraged a bias toward the written text, archaeology, and antiquity. One of the research institutions founded on these principles is the *École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, established in Hanoi on December 9, 1898. Its foundational decree spelled its mission out clearly, and here I quote Article 2: “Its objectives are: to carry out research on the archaeological and philological exploration of the Indochinese Peninsula, and to contribute, by every means possible, to the understanding of its history, its monuments, and its languages; to contribute toward the study of the neighboring regions and civilisations: India, China, the Malay world, etc.” (Clementin-Ojha and Manguin 2006: 18). Not surprisingly, A. L. Basham’s 1954 book *The Wonder That Was India*, reflects a similar colonial mindset in his search for the “the golden ages” necessarily gone by, as indicated by the past tense, “was” and not “is,” in his title. Furthermore, Penny Edwards, Boreth Ly, and Khatharya Um point out, “This emphasis has been particularly acute with regard to Cambodia, whose ancient monuments encourage a neglect of contemporary issues, and privilege archaeology as a site of cultural engagement, inscriptions as the core texts of national scholarship” (Edwards, Ly and Um 2008: 2).

Philology as a discipline was based on the idea that language comprises two components: an analytical intellect and a true “psychology,” *logos* or “spirit,” both of which could be exposed via grammatical deconstruction. Moreover, the genealogy of the

discipline of philology harkens back to the Hegelian notions of writing as the pinnacle of a “civilized” society:

Alphabetic writing is on all accounts the more intelligent: in it the word (the mode, peculiar to the intellect, of uttering its ideas most worthily) is brought to consciousness and made an object of reflection. Engaging the attention of intelligence, as it does, it is analysed; the work of sign-making it reduced to its few simple elements (the primary postures of articulation) in which the sense-factor is brought to the form of universality, at the same time that in this elementary phase it acquires complete precision and purity...It leads the mind from the sensibly concrete image to the more formal structure of the vocal word and its abstract elements and contributes much to give stability and independence to the inward realm of mental life [Spirit] (Thomas 2006: 484).

In brief, according to Hegel and the philological schools that subscribed to his hierarchy of language, any kingdoms or nations that had perfect grammar in their languages marked great “civilizations.” This equation can be read vertically as language= race=culture.

Richard Rorty subsequently characterized this philosophy of language in the West as “the linguistic turn” (Rorty 1967:1-39). Moreover, as the late Benedict Anderson argued was the case in post-independence Southeast Asia, the written and dominant local languages became the signifiers of “imagined communities,” that is National imaginaries (Anderson 2016).

Not surprisingly, in the past three decades we have seen innovative methods and theories developed in the field of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States that focus on written and oral texts; most of the scholars proposing these theoretical frameworks have come from the discipline of history.

Interdisciplinary writings that are inclusive of images came from the disciplines of visual anthropology, visual culture (film studies included), and art history (albeit mostly focusing on ancient art objects) have slowly contributed to our understanding and accessing of local knowledge production through images and art

objects in Southeast Asia. Scholars such as Stanley O'Connor, Kenneth George, Peter Jackson, Rosalind Morris, Benedict Anderson, Ariel Heryanto, Rudolf Mrázek, Jan Mrázek, Goh Beng-Lan, and especially Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly with their coedited 2013 book *Images That Move* and Brian Curtain, ed., *Queer Theory and Visual Cultures in Southeast Asia* (2015), Lan Duong and Việt Lê, eds, Special Issue in *Visual Anthropology: Myriad Modernities: Southeast Asian/Diasporic Visual Cultures* (2018) as well as the *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas Journal*, have contributed to and challenged what W.J.T. Mitchell called "The Pictorial Turn, the general anxiety of linguistic philosophy about visual representation" (Mitchell 1994: 11-13). Last, in his keynote lecture, "Area Studies in the Age of Big Data and Hyper-Utilitarianism," delivered at the 2018 Southeast Asian Studies Conference held at Busan University of Foreign Studies in South Korea, Thongchai Winichakul, a historian, recognized the importance of Visual Studies as an emerging academic field. It provides us with methodological and theoretical tools to analyze data in a digital age (Winichakul 2018).

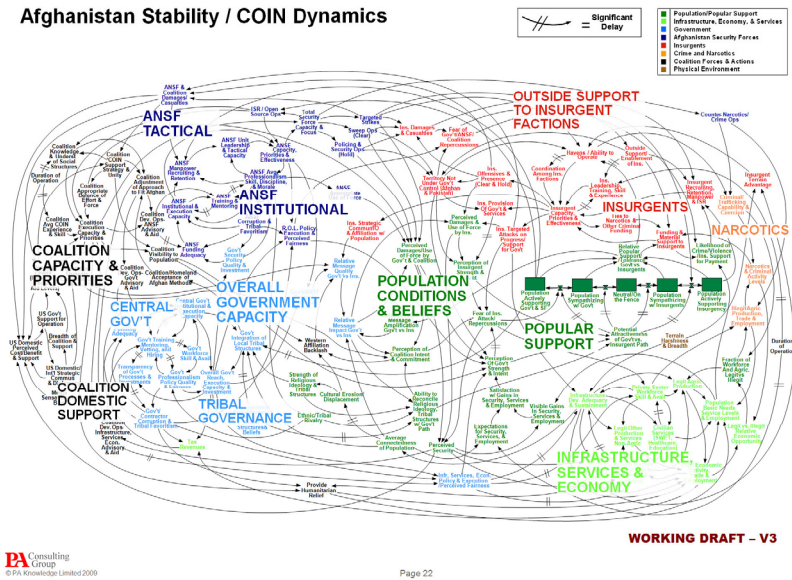
One of the goals of this paper is to continue the momentum begun by this emerging scholarship on theory and practice of writing about visual culture of and in Southeast Asia. I hope to offer culturally sensitive and embodied ways of looking at images and objects as sites/sights of cultural knowledge as further theoretical intervention. The argument put forward in my paper is three-fold: first, I critique the prevailing logocentric approach in the field of Southeast Asian Studies and I argue that in a postcolonial, global, and transnational period, it is important to be inclusive of other objects as sites/sights of social, political and cultural analysis beyond the written and oral text. Second, I argue that although it is equally problematic (an issue which I will unpack below), the evolving field of Visual Studies as it is practiced in the United States is one of many ways to decolonize this prevailing logocentric approach to Southeast Asian studies. Third, I argue that if one reads these Euro-American derived theories of vision and visibility through the lens of what Walter Mignolo calls "the colonial difference(s)," by which he means that "the changing faces of colonial differences

throughout the history of modern/colonial world-system” in the West that have silenced local discourses on knowledge, then Visual Studies as an evolving field has the potential to offer more nuanced local ways of looking at and understanding objects, vision and visibility (Mignolo 2002: 61-63). Last, I point out that unlike in the West where there is an understanding of pure and persistent objective and empirical vision, local Southeast Asian perspectives on objects and visions are more embodied and multi-sensorial. I argue that if one is ethically mindful of the local cultural ways of seeing and knowing objects, then the evolving field of Visual Studies offers a much-needed intervention to the lingering logocentric approach to Southeast Asian Studies and in turn, helps to decolonize method and theory in the discipline. I advocate in my conclusion that this theoretical intervention may help us to rethink and to reframe the discipline of art history and aesthetics as it is practiced in Southeast Asia and its diaspora by considering the definition of the “object” in expanded fields of visions, visibility, materiality and multi-sensorium. I will demonstrate these different cultural and gendered ways of approaching and understanding of object and visibility by analyzing the following case studies: ritual veneration of the Mahamuni Buddha image in Mandalay, Myanmar (Burma); *Tropical Malady*, a film by Thai filmmaker, Apichatpong Weerasethakul; the installation art of the late Thai artist, Montien Boonma; the lyrics of a Khmer pop song from 1960s Cambodia; Cambodian kisses; and a documentary film about the significance of scent in the cultures of the Middle East.

III. White Feminist Intervention in the Field of Visual Studies

As I have mentioned earlier, one of the problems in the evolving field of visual studies is its colonialist, militaristic, and racist theoretical understanding of what constitutes objectivity and scientific truth. In his 2011 article, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?,” Alexander Galloway opens his discussion of visual representations of data with a digital image of a military map from the American General McChrystal’s PowerPoint slide on “American Military Strategy in Afghanistan,” where he quotes McChrystal’s remarks: “When we

understand that slide, we'll have won the war" (Galloway 2011: 86). What is relevant to my discussion of embodied ways of seeing and culture is not what Galloway said about data, which he "reduced to their purest form of mathematical values," as "first and foremost," a number with a "primary mode of existence [that] is not a visual one," and did not bother to unpack its implications on gender and racial difference (Galloway 2011: 88).



<Fig. 1> General McChrystal's Military Strategy Digital Map

Source: Google: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.htm>
(Accessed Mar. 11, 2018)

Indeed, one of the shortcomings of his article is the lack of a gendered analysis of data and military mapping. Digital, analog mapping and data was and is highly associated with U.S. military strategy and thus it is a white masculine mode of representation from above (i.e, aerial view). Regrettably, Galloway never addressed how digital data and aerial-view photography are used for military surveillance. Historically, this racialized and masculinist perspective on mapping and scientific image of objectivity harkens back to the French physiologist, E.J. Marey, who insisted that since written language was born before science, only graphic images can represent

science with precision and exact measurement. Subsequently, Marey and his contemporaries invested in the creation of mechanically produced images such as polygraphs and photographs due to their mistrust of images and atlases made by human hands believed to interfere with scientific objectivity. As a result, photography was considered to be the ideal objective image to document science in nineteenth century (Daston and Galison 1992: 81-83). This scientific image of objectivity is the precursor to the digital atlas discussed in Galloway's article I have mentioned earlier. In the late twentieth century, aerial-view photographs were used for surveillance purposes during World War II and the American bombing of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1960s and 1970s. Paul Virilio pointed out that war, cinema, and technology are interrelated, with atlas and digital mapping being instruments for warfare (Virilio 1984: 1). Perhaps it is not a coincidence that McChrystal's digital military map looks very similar to the one featured prominently in the "war room" from Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove*. Likewise, in the military map in Kubrick's satirical film about the Cold War and the atomic bomb, the map is as illegible as the one embedded in McChrystal's PowerPoint slide.



<Fig. 2> Stanley Kubric, "The War Room" from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)
Source: Google Stanley Kubric, "The War Room" from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)
(Accessed Mar. 11, 2018)

White feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway and Caroline Jones have critiqued and dismantled this masculinist, militaristic, and Euro-American centric claims to scientific objectivity, universality, and vision. In her article “The Persistence of Vision,” Donna Haraway put forward a feminist and an embodied understanding of science and vision that she called “situated knowledges.” Haraway explains “situated knowledges” in this manner:

I would like to proceed by placing metaphorical reliance on much maligned sensory system in feminist discourse: vision. Vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions. I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribed all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim to the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White, one of the many nasty tones of the word *objectivity* to feminist ears in scientific and technological, late industrial, militarized, racist and male dominant societies, that is, there, in the belly of the monster, in the United States in the late 1980s. I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges* (Haraway 2012: 671).

This disembodied perspective on the sense of sight and denigration of the olfactory harkens back to the nineteenth century when anthropologists “proved” that savages had a better sense of smell because they were closer to the ground and thought to be lower on the human development scale (Jones 2006:12). This association of the sense of smell and taste with the primitive and the inhuman Others contributed to the colonial discourse on civilization which in turn, was internalized by the local Southeast Asian monarchs and in post-independence political regimes as not civilized, modern, or progressive (Winichakul 2000: 528-549). This rhetoric on human civilization has also contributed to the great

divide between the country folks and urban dwellers in Southeast Asia. The local cosmopolitan, modern, and progressive colonial subjects who participated in this process of cultural and racial whitening in the metropolitan areas of Indochina, and later on Southeast Asia considered the country folks as backward and primitive (Winichakul 2000: 38-62). In her 2006 book on sensorium, Caroline Jones points out the reasons for the privileging of sight over olfactory in Western thought:

Smell, at least since Locke, Kant and Condillac, has been relegated to philosophical abjection, with fragrance, aroma, odor, perfume and stench all placed at the bottom of the epistemological hierarchy. Because it is ephemeral, Locke speculated that smell could not stimulate considered thought and the poverty of our descriptive language for smells, was proof for him, of this low status...Thus the hierarchy of placing sight at the top of the sensory aristocracy are anxious narratives, not neuronal imperatives. Perhaps we privilege sight because it's one of the more recent acquisitions in our sensory toolkit? Freud reflected both classical and modern prejudice when he decided that homo-erectus founded his [sic] civilization on sight, celebrating the triumph of an erect, far-seeing body over those quadrupeds bound to smell for orientation (Jones 2006: 11).

Furthermore, I would like to point out here that the rarely discussed sense of bodily odors in Western writings about Southeast Asian cultures is due to local practice of self-censorship and self-presentation as ways of subverting the colonial perceptions of the natives as primitive, a racist perception of "Others" as inferior that is embedded in the European rhetoric on the need to civilize them. In a well-researched article, "The Politics of Defecation in Bangkok of the Fifth Reign," M.L. Chittawadi Chitabongs discusses how King Rama V (1868-1910) was so disgusted by the smell of rotten corpses and raw sewage in the city of Bangkok that he started modernizing the city by installing a sewage system and toilets (Chitabongs 2011: 172-194). Peter Jackson has written about this strategic self-censorship in what he identifies as "regimes of images," as a result of the semi-colonial and modern Siam/Thai Nation in his 2004 article, "The Performative State: Semi Coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand." Jackson writes:

A defining feature of the Thai regime of images is a rigid demarcation between what is publicly unspeakable, especially in the presence of a non-Thai audience, and what is “common knowledge” in private, local discourses. This intensely policed bifurcation underlies many of the institutional rigidities and forms part of the cultural logic of the modern Thai political [cultural] system...This “regime of images” was called into being to placate Western demands for “civilized” behavior (Jackson 2004: 220).

I hope my theoretical intervention would help to rethink and to reframe the discipline of art history and aesthetics as practiced in Southeast Asia and its diaspora by reconsidering the definition of the “object” in an embodied and expanded field of multi-sensorial experience.

IV. A Multi-Sensorial Ritual Veneration of the Mahamuni Buddha Image in Mandalay, Myanmar

Housed inside a shrine located within the Mahamuni temple complex in Mandalay is an image of the Mahamuni Buddha, made of bronze and measuring 12 feet high. This charismatic image has a fascinating story. According to Burmese chronicles, in 1784, King Bodawpaya of Mandalay conquered the nearby kingdom of Arakan and brought the Mahamuni image back to Mandalay along with Cambodian bronzes. Moreover, according to legend, the image was cast in the 1st century CE under the reign of King Chandrasurya of Arakan, a kingdom situated in lower Burma. Local lore tells us that the Buddha visited King Chandrasurya in his capital, Rakhine. The Buddha acted as his advisor and taught the king his *Dharma*. After seven days, the Buddha wanted to leave but Chandrasurya lamented that he and his court would not be able to pay homage to him, and so they asked the Buddha to have an image made in his likeness. Chandrasurya gathered all his gold and jewels and commissioned a “portrait” of the Buddha. The Buddha breathed life into this image (his portrait), which became his “living double” (Schober 2002:

260-263).



<Fig. 3> "Brushing the Mahamuni Buddha's Teeth"

(June 12, 1997, Mahamuni Temple, Mandalay, Myanmar. Photo: Boreth Ly)

I visited the Mahamuni temple on June 11 and 12, 1997 and observed for two days the behind-the-scenes preparation for the daily ritual of caring for the Mahamuni Buddha image. The original image was smaller, but Burmese affix gold leaf onto the Buddha's body as an act of merit making. As a result, the original bronze image appears larger due to a 15-centimeter thick layer of gold left

by devotees. Today, in addition to affixing gold leaf to the image, men also touch the parts of the Buddha's Body that correspond to where they have aches and pains as a way of asking the image to heal their illnesses. Some press their heads against the Buddha's body to absorb the aura from the potent image. The head monk and devotees perform tasks ahead of the ritual. The head monk prepares sandalwood paste and *thanaka* for the ritual of washing the Buddha's face in the morning.

The ritual of venerating the Mahamuni Buddha image began at 4:30 am. The head monk opened the gate and let in a group of brahman priests, all dressed in white, and other participants. The priests set up the altar in front of the Buddha image so that the head monk could climb up and brush the Buddha's teeth; scrub his face with sandalwood paste prepared the day before; and fan the face of the image with a hand-held fan. The ritual concluded with the priests serving the Mahamuni Buddha his breakfast, which comprised of rice, fruit, and flowers.

Firstly, we see here a local narrative provided for the miraculous origin of the Mahamuni Buddha image. Secondly, it is considered to be the "living double" or a portrait of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. It is this desire for the presence of the Buddha's being that inspired the daily ritual veneration of this image. I would venture to argue that it is this embodied and multi-sensory approach to a daily ritual—where and when participants experience the smell of sandalwood paste, perfume, fresh flowers, and incense—that provides ritual temporality. Lastly, this local focus on the ritual care of the image in the Burmese Buddhist religion contradicts entirely the Protestant propensity to stress the value of the written scripture as the *logos* of religion. As Gregory Schopen points out insightfully in his article, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism":

Missionaries came into contact with Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, and Indochina and with different forms of Mahayana Buddhism in China and Japan. Their knowledge was based upon what they observed, and on discussions with Buddhist priests, but very rarely on the study of Buddhist literature itself. For these

reasons it must have been very difficult to gain a clear notion of the main Buddhist ideas. A religion like Buddhism which is based upon principles which are very different from the guiding principles of Christianity cannot be understood without a thorough study of its scriptures (Schopen 1999: 9).

Clearly, this embodied ritual of venerating the Mahamuni Buddha image is a counter argument to this Protestant logocentric desire to define and make rational sense of the Buddhist religion that is based exclusively on the written text.

The lack of “ethnography” in accessing local voices might vex some readers, but I would like to present my observations of this elaborate use of the body as an instrument of ritual to access and provide a multi-sensorial experience of seeing and knowing. This is where I locate the sight, site, and sound of disruption of Western empirical notions of vision and visuality. In sum, the human body as a visual marker of cultural, gender, and racial difference here interrupts established Western habits of thinking about, viewing, and seeing ritual.

V. Unapologetically Primitive in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Film, *Tropical Malady* (2004)

So far I have discussed representations of scents that are considered to be pleasant, but there are other scents and sights that are considered to be what Julia Kristeva called “abject,” for example, images such as decaying corpses, feces, and repugnant body odors. Abject sights and smells like these are considered signs of an uncivilized society and nation (Kristeva 1982: 1-3). In the past decade, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a Thai film auteur who was born and raised in his hometown of Khon Kaen in the northeast of Thailand, has explored the culture of country folk in northeast Thailand, in films such as *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). Apichatpong defined and elaborated on his conception of the “primitive” in an interview: “Another way we can look at the word “primitive” [is] as a way to preserve the place, the agricultural community...Like when you see

the dream in my two screens [installation], when you listen to the dream, it becomes really a primitive society in the future. So utopian space does not have to be shiny and high tech, but maybe in the future utopian space comes back to agricultural base society” (Weerasethakul 2006).

Tropical Malady is most relevant to my discussion of embodied vision and breaking the self-censorship by Thai government officials and nationalists who avoid any display of “uncivilized” images of Thai culture. *Tropical Malady* narrates two different stories that are linked by themes of humanity, culture, and nature. The first story is about a soldier named Keng who was sent to the northeast of Thailand to investigate the mysterious killing of cattle. There, he meets Tong, a local boy. They encounter each other again while riding in their respective trucks in traffic. They subsequently spend time together in the countryside and enjoy a brief romance. The second story is about a soldier who enters the forest to find a lost villager. En route he encounters the spirit of a tiger shaman; the soldier becomes frightened and loses his way in the woods.



<Fig. 4> Keng smells Tong’s hand

(a film still from Apitchapong Weerasatthakul’s *Tropical Malady*, 2003)

Source: <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/thecinefiles/clips/tropical-malady/view>

(Accessed Mar. 11, 2018)



<Fig. 5> "Tong Licks Keng's hand"

(a film still from Apitchapong Weerasathekul's *Tropical Malady*, 2003)

Source: <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/thecinefiles/clips/tropical-malady/view>
(Accessed Mar. 11, 2018)

One particular scene in Apitchapong's film is relevant to my discussion of *sensorium*, embodied ways of seeing. It occurs in the middle of the film at the moment when it shifts to the second story. This particular scene begins with Keng riding on the back of Tong's motorcycle in the dark of the night. Tong needed to take a bathroom break so he is seen urinating on the side of the road while Keng waits with the motorbike. After Tong zips up and returns to resume the journey, Keng takes hold of Tong's right hand and sniffs it. The viewer can imagine Tong's hand probably smells like a combination of urine, *smegma* from his uncircumcised penis, and other bodily odors (Quandt 2009: 72). Initially, Tong is amused by this act, but we see his facial expressions slowly transformed to sexual arousal. Tong takes Keng's hand and starts to lick it, tasting his lover's hand and savoring it. This exchange of each other's bodily odors and tastes is a way of remembering each other's body. The scene ends with Tong wandering off into the dark of the night, and the narrative of the film shifts to the second story; the same actor appears, but now playing a different character riding a motorbike alone. This is perhaps one of the most powerful and embodied filmic representations of primordial sexual intimacy, desire, and homosexual love in contemporary independent Thai cinema.

VI. Sensorium: healing and the body in the art of montien boonma

Another Thai artist whose works explore multi-sensorial ways of healing the body is the late Montien Boonma (1953-2000). He was arguably one of the most prolific and brilliant multimedia Thai artists of his generation, only that his life was cut short when he succumbed to a brain tumor (Poshyananda 2003: 37). He received his Master of Fine Arts in painting from Silpakorn University in Bangkok. Early in his life, Boonma was introduced to the writings of Achan Chah Phattayo, a venerable Thai monk well-known for his teachings, particularly *vipassana* meditation. After his initial exposure to Achan Chah's lectures on insight meditation, Boonma began to integrate Buddhist philosophy and meditation in his sculptural installations. For example, one sees in his 1995 installation, *Nature's Breath: Arokhayasala*. This installation is composed of a



<Fig. 6> Montien Boonma, *Nature's Breath: Arokhayasala* (installation, 1995)
Photograph: Courtesy of Dr. Apinan Poshyananada and the estate of Montien Boonma

stack of rusty colored metal boxes filled with medicinal and aromatic herbs; they are arranged to suggest both the shape of a Buddhist stupa and the rib cage of the human body. Inside are lungs made of clay to symbolize the house of healing. The installation invites the viewers to enter and see the lungs from below and thus enable them to experience *vipassana* through embodiment. The artist wanted “viewers to cleanse and cure the mind in order to experience the condition of relaxation and mindfulness” (Poshyananda, 2003: 108).

The significance of the human lungs as the organs used in breathing is reinforced and explored further in another installation by *Alokhayasan: Temple of Mind* (1995-96). This particular installation comprises numerous wooden boxes stacked on top of each other to form a Buddhist stupa with four entrances. The artist placed human lungs made of metal in the niches situated on the interior of the structure (Poshyananda, 1996: 47). The lungs are filled with scented herbal medicine. Viewers are invited to go inside to experience and embody the literal experience of *vipassana*. As viewers look at the lungs stuffed with scented medicinal herbs, they inhale and exhale the scent generated from the herbal medicines, which provokes them to be aware of their breathing and in effect, participate in healing their mind and body through the act of breathing. The meditative space and the aroma that permeates the installation arouses the olfactory center of the brain, which in turn, helps to provoke other senses of perception (Ly 2012: 270-271).

VII. Embodied Scent of Sight in a Cambodian Popular Song

One of the richest texts and sites/sights for the analysis of gender and sexuality in modern Khmer culture is popular songs of the 1960s; embedded in the poetic lyrics of these songs is a sensory experience of the Khmer female body. An example is a 1969 song sung by Cambodian crooner Sin Sisamouth. It is titled “The Fragrance of a Hidden Flower”:

I can smell the trail of your scent, but your body is invisible.

Where and who is the owner of this invisible body?
I want to see and get to know you.
To know how beautiful you are.
I can never be tired of smelling this fragrance, the scent of your body.
If I could see your body now, I would beg you to love me.

No matter how hidden your body, I continue to look for it.
I promise to search for and to love you during this lifetime.
If you are not willing, then it is not meant to be.
Please have pity on me and love me.
Please make manifest your body. My heart belongs to you.
No matter how hidden your body, I continue to look for it.¹

On the one hand, one can interpret the erotic lyrics of the above song as a man caught in a whiff of the scent of a blooming flower, intoxicated by it; in a more sexualized reading, it is the story of a male sexual predator with a strong olfactory sense. He is clearly aroused by the scent of the love object's body and subsequently searching to look upon her face and body. This hidden female body is so erotic precisely because it is hidden and her invisibility is her erotic tease. In brief, the male olfactory sense paves the way for the male gaze. In both cases, the female body as object of the male's attention concurs with Laura Mulvey's argument that the female body is the object of the male gaze in the viewing of cinema (Mulvey 1999: 833-844).

VIII. Conclusion

I have discussed the need to approach Southeast Asian images, objects, and the body through sensorium, one's complete sensory abilities. I argued this by pointing to examples where the senses provide a complex layering of experience: the ritual veneration of a Buddhist icon; the sense of smell, taste, and touch in a film and a Khmer pop song that captures the male eroticizing of scent when experiencing the female body. I would like to conclude this essay

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgCZPd7bvUM>

Sin Sisamouth, *Bopha Leak Kloun* (accessed 05/01/17). The above translation of the Khmer lyrics is mine.

with what Walter Benjamin termed “anecdote” as history in his essay, “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” (Benjamin 1968: 253-264). A Khmer friend of mine, who is now in her early sixties, shared this story with me. Bopha sent her three-year-old son, Vireak, to kindergarten in Paris, France.² Like all mothers, every time she dropped him off at school, she would sniff his cheeks and take in his bodily scent; this is comparable to how newborn babies navigate their environment by their senses of smell and touch due to their yet to develop eyesight. Interestingly, the Khmer word for kissing is *thaeb*, which is literally to sniff in the way one sniffs the scent of a blooming flower. One day, a French mother was dropping her little daughter off at school; this little girl was the same age as Vireak. She kissed her daughter goodbye with her lips on both cheeks. When the little French girl saw Bopha sniff her son’s cheeks, she pointed at them and said to her mother: “Mama, can you do the same to me?” Clearly, the three-year-old French girl may not have been able to put into words what she saw, but she registered this culturally different way of expressing affection by pointing at the scene with a question and a demand. She had yet to develop the ability to describe this embodied act of cultural difference in French, but she recognized the difference.

Samdech Hun Sen, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, is often shown in photographs kissing his wife, Bun Rany. Again, in accord with the Khmer manner of showing affections, Prime Minister Hun Sen sniffs one of Rany’s perfumed cheeks. Khmer women often dab a drop of perfume on their cheeks so that their loved ones can sniff their perfumed cheeks. Similarly, Khmer women traditionally sniff their beloved on the cheeks. One is reminded of a line from the lyrics of a well-known song “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend,” “a kiss on the hand maybe quite continental,” from the 1949 American musical, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, made famous by Marilyn Monroe in the 1953 film version of the same musical; I would argue here that a sniff on the cheek is far more local.

² The names of my participants are changed to protect their identities.



<Fig. 7> Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen kisses his wife Bun Rany
 Source: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/yet-another-doctorate-bun-rany>
 (Accessed Mar. 11, 2018)

Before the era of exporting cheap labor to the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and especially Cambodia, was well known for its export of precious agar wood to this region of the world, and it still exports rare, valuable woods (Hall 2011: 43). Comparable to Southeast Asia, the Middle East is situated at the crossroad of all cultures along the trade routes. Moreover, in Arab culture one traditional way of greeting involves rubbing each other's noses. In fact, scents such as frankincense, a tree resin native to Oman and *oud*, oil extracted from agar wood imported from Southeast Asia and India, has always been highly valued. In a 2016 documentary film by Dom Rotheroe, *Scent from Heaven*, Mohamed Al-Woozain Ali, a native of Qatar, investigates the significant role the scent of agar wood has played in his and Arab culture at large. A poignant scene from the film shows us how Cambodia, Southeast Asia, and India are made manifest in Qatari men's imaginations. We see a group of

Qatari men dressed in their *thobe*, an elegantly long white robe, and *ghutra*, the national Qatari headdress for men, share the scent of agar wood smoke coming from a censer at a gathering. Al-Woozain Ali asked one of the participants in this setting to describe his experience of the scent of *oud*:

Mohamed al-Woozain Ali: "When you burn oud, what do you smell?"
Mohammed Menekher: "I smell the scent of heaven. Amongst other useful things it does, *oud* drives depression away. One has a feeling of joy. It also depends on the type of *oud*. Each type of *oud* triggers certain memories. For example, [when] I smell Cambodian *oud*, I remember my mother. Whilst I smell Indian *oud*, I remember my father (Al- Wozzain Ali 2016)."



<Fig. 8> A Middle Eastern man getting perfumed with smoke from burning agar wood
Source: <http://persolaise.blogspot.com/2014/11/kicking-up-stink-definitive-guide-to.html>
(Accessed Mar. 11, 2018)

Clearly, the scent of Southeast Asia and Cambodia prevails and lingers in Middle Easterner's imaginations and memories as embodied in sensuality and commerce.

The events featured in the case studies I have discussed demonstrate that experiences of vision and visuality in Southeast

Asian cultures are clearly embodied and multi-sensorial. Additionally, with the arrival and use of Facebook and other social media in Southeast Asia more than two decades ago, I would argue that both “pictorial” and the “digital” turns have taken place in the region. In a 2012 interview with Global Parliamentary Report, Saumura Tioulong, a Cambodian politician, has pointed out insightfully how social media and visual culture play such an important role in Cambodian politics:

Nowadays, politics is not the boring type of field that it used to be, say twenty years ago or even ten years ago. Now with the eruptions of pictures, everybody’s lives, just on the small screen of a hand phone you can see what’s happening and all the sensational images that come from thousands of miles away. And so it is easier for people to relate to others and to the main issues that confront our society (Interview 2012).

How then do we situate the evolving field of visual studies within the field and discipline of Southeast Asian studies and Southeast Asian art history?

I argue here that this embodied approach to optics in Southeast Asian visual cultures helps to decolonize the lingering logocentric method found in Southeast Asian studies and encourages a move away from both textual and “visual essentialism.” Mieke Bal, a Dutch art historian and cultural theorist, defines “visual essentialism” as privileging sight over other the senses (Bal 2003: 7). I would like to make clear that I am not advocating for “visual essentialism,” but for a situated (as in Donna Haraway’s “situated knowledges”) sense of sight/site and objects. Indeed, it is important to situate both definition and values of the “objects” under consideration from the perspectives of local cultures. Moreover, the multi-sensorial approach to objects, visuality, and the body in Southeast Asian cultures suggests that it is leading in the evolving field of theory in visual studies, complicating and validating white feminists’ quest for an embodied vision and “situated knowledges”:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition

of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above from nowhere, from simplicity...Feminism loves another science: the science and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood. Feminism is the science of multiple subjects with (at least) double vision. Feminism is about critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in homogenous gendered social space. Translation is always interpretive, critical, and partial. Here is a ground for conversation, rationality, and objectivity (Haraway 2002: 683).

According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Asia is always trying to catch up with the West, (Chakrabarty 2010: 53) but in this case, the West has finally caught up with Southeast Asia in its search for an embodied vision. In the case of the West, it took white women to intervene. Audre Lorde, an African-American poet once said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," but it seems here that the white mistress can dismantle the master's house using his and her tools (Lorde 1984: 110-113). Since the colonial encounter, the West's perception of Southeast Asia and Asia at large was that of the feminine and exotic "Other" as found in discourses of Orientalism. Moreover, the Southeast Asian body, especially the male sovereign body, has been castrated by the white master as part of a gender and sexual game of competing colonial and racial masculinity. One is inclined to see the white mistress as the liberator of the Asian women and castrated Asian men, but as Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, the inequity of power dynamic between gender and race remains problematic:

Arguably, Western feminism has provided a more radical challenge to knowledge than Marxism because of its challenge to epistemology: not just the body of knowledge and worldview, but the science of how knowledge can be understood. Even Western feminism, however, has been challenged, particularly by women of colour, for conforming to some very fundamental Western European world views, value systems and attitudes towards the Other (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 45).

To this end, I think Beng-Lan Goh, a Malaysian anthropologist,

is most insightful in advocating that we consider seriously the role of contemporary local artists as “ethnographers” and archivists in their “re-looking” of colonial archives and inclusions of quotidian cultures and conflicts in Southeast Asia in their art—an endeavor that would further embodied local ways of seeing (Hafiz and Goh 2015).

I hope the issues raised by the politics of methods addressed in my essay will foster conversations about methods and theories about sensorium in our understanding of images, objects, and texts in multilayered ways that go beyond what the late Stuart Hall historicized and critiqued in his article, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power” (Hall 1996: 184-227). Scholars such as Naoki Sakai (Sakai 2001: 71-94) and Kuang-Hsing Chen have destabilized the idea of the “West” (i.e. Europe) as equally a historical construct as that of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. While I find Chen’s advocacy for an interregional exchange of knowledge a viable theoretical possibility to reclaim, a continent of our own (i.e. Asia) in his 2010 book *Asia As Method: Toward Deimperialization*, I think the West can learn from Asia, especially Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is an area that only came together as a region with shared cultural and economic networks in 1967 when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was founded (Frey and Spakowski 2016: 7). Admittedly, competing national sovereignties prevent the region from achieving an ideal economic and cultural zone; so perhaps we can think of it as a *holon*, in which the whole and the parts are symbiotic (Koestler 1967: 48). In this case, the situated knowledge and the practice of embodied vision in Southeast Asian cultures can stand on their own terms vis-à-vis the West and not just for Western consumption: that is, not for the consumption of the white anthropological gaze and the collecting of “ethnography.”

Lastly, these embodied ways of seeing in Southeast Asian cultures have exciting potential for reframing texts, objects, and aesthetics in expanded and localized fields of vision and visibility in Southeast Asian Studies and Southeast Asian art history and visual studies.

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