Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia

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Fading Hometown and Lost Paradise
Kuzoku’s Politics of (Dis)location

Abstract
This chapter focuses on Kuzoku, a Japan-based independent film collective of multiple members founded by self-trained filmmakers Tomita Katsuya and Aizawa Toranosuke in 2004. This study first examines Kuzoku’s location shooting by reconceptualizing fūkeiron (theory of landscape). Importantly, I turn to how Kuzoku’s fictional works Saudade (2011) and Bangkok Nites (2016), in tandem with other media projects by the film collective, reconfigure the mode of appearance in making visible previously marginalized subjectivities and locales, and connect with disparate temporalities and modes of affect as a gesture of resistance against the ‘endless everyday’ as well as the powerful globalization. Kuzoku’s filmmaking contributes to rethinking the transnational potentialities of Japanese cinema as well as Asian independent cinema.

Keywords: jishu eiga, fūkeiron (theory of landscape), location shooting, affect, the immiscible/immiscibility

Audience members from my previous feature Saudade often told me the ending looked like a blind alley. That this type of rural town which I had portrayed in the film had no future. So we questioned what could lie beyond this dead end. It was starting from this questioning that the idea of a ‘paradise’ arose [...] After March 11, the issue of the state of the world arose before my eyes in the most radical manner. It’s also to answer the questions that emerged as a result of the disaster that I made Bangkok Nites. In order to better understand the world in which we live, and how we relate to it as Japanese people.

Tomita Katsuya, 2016

1 My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Fujiki Kosuke for his help in proofreading all the Japanese spellings and terms and for correcting some of my translations. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese to English are mine.

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‘The films advertising tourist resorts, those you see on the plane or on TV in the hotel, do not touch your heart at all, since we all know that the world is not like those. Then, what kind of images can show us what the world is like? I think Saudade is one such example’ (Kuma et al. 2012: 217), said Japanese architect Kengo Kuma in his talk with Kuzoku (which literally means ‘Sky Tribe’), a Japanese independent film collective of multiple members founded by the self-trained filmmakers Tomita Katsuya and Aizawa Toranosuke in 2004. As if to continue his dialogue with Kuma, commenting on his 2016 feature film Bangkok Nites, Tomita admitted how the March 11th Fukushima triple disaster in 2011 radically changed the way he perceived the world; for him, Bangkok Nites is used to ‘better understand the world we live in, and how we relate to it as Japanese’ (Tomita & Aizawa 2016).

This chapter sets out to explore Kuzoku’s independent works and, in particular, the ‘world’ explored, mediated, and interrogated in two fiction features, Saudade (2011) and Bangkok Nites, in tandem with other film works by the collective. While Saudade is set in Kofu, a provincial city in central Japan, Bangkok Nites sets out a more ambitious journey into places and communities across Southeast Asia. With Saudade, Kuzoku manoeuvres to scrutinize the landscape of a post-bubble Japan enmeshed in economic downturn and deepened social stratification, manifesting how global capitalism has extended its asymmetrically developed power into various realms of daily life. In Bangkok Nites, Kuzoku follows the journey of several Japanese (male) subjects who finally leave Japan behind in search of the so-called ‘peach-blossom paradise’ or tōgenkyō in Southeast Asian cities, such as Bangkok, and the frontier area along the Thailand-Laos-Vietnam borders.

Film scholar Aaron Gerow’s critique regarding how contemporary Japanese cinema dialogues with the Other and globalism (see Gerow 2009, 2016) in terms of auteurism (e.g. with Kitano Takeshi, Miike Takeshi, and Kurosawa Kiyoshi), themes, styles (textual and inter-textual), and industrial layouts (extra-textual) sheds light on how we can rethink Japanese cinema and its border-crossing, transnational potentialities (or the impossibilities thereof) at various levels today. Specifically, Gerow elaborates on the recurrent imaginary or trope about an ‘inescapable Japan’ in the national cinema: no matter how much the protagonists yearn to leave the island behind and run

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2 This collective borrowed its name from an unfinished sci-fi novel project by the two filmmakers’ mutual friend, in which ‘Kuzoku’ (sky tribe) refers to a species of creatures that used to fly freely in the sky but end up surviving in the underground world and could only catch glimpses of the sky by looking up from the ditches (see ‘Kuzoku tokushū jōei’ [Retrospective of Kuzoku 2011]). Regarding the spelling of ‘kuzoku’, I have followed the way how the collective addresses itself in all types of English publications and promotional materials.
away from its suffocating landscape, their efforts are often doomed, and it is ‘impossible to escape even with the supposed transcending of boundaries that globalism promises’ (2016: 88). As he pinpoints, the sense of entrapment must be perceived less as a problematic only unique to Japanese society and its national subjects (as for an ‘island nation’) than as the manifestation of the cultural politics of globalization, which functions in a mode of ‘capitalist realism’ that ‘both enables and undermines dreams’ and contests alternative ‘imagination (imagining/mediatization)’ (90).

This study primarily situates Kuzoku within the socio-cultural context of contemporary Japanese independent cinema. Then, departing from Gerow’s discussions, I contend that if Saudade has demonstrated how present-day Japanese cinema (with its younger generations’ filmmakers) confronts an urban landscape of disillusioned subjects and exhausted imagination, then the project of Bangkok Nites speaks of Kuzoku’s yearning to look elsewhere for an alternative. The analytic heuristic of (dis)location takes its departure from Kuzoku’s practices of location shooting. More importantly, the question at stake concerns how we can leverage the dialectics of mobility and entrapment that characterize Kuzoku’s thematic tropes as well as their filmmaking practices to reconsider the politics of Japanese cinema today. According to Ian Buchanan, to engage with the deterritorialized world, we need to switch from a neurotic mode that tries to discover meaning and interpret codes to a schizophrenic mode that underpins the ‘delirious’ experiences of living through and coping with the ‘frictionless space’ of a global age (Buchanan 2005: 27-28). I argue that Kuzoku’s oeuvre is significantly underscored with an affective dimension. This chapter, therefore, looks at how both Saudade and Bangkok Nites have engaged with (dis)location in terms of narrative tropes and sensibilities and feelings, especially in relation to the layered senses of ‘home’ and belonging.

Kuzoku as an Independent Film Collective

In a 2002 essay, Aaron Gerow points out how, into the twentieth-first century, the assumed differences and even contestations between ‘major and independent, dominant and alternative’ in Japanese cinema, when examined from the perspectives of ‘industry, style, and politics’, are becoming more ambiguous and untenable (Gerow 2002: 12). Reverberating with Gerow’s observations, however, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano seeks to characterize Japanese cinema since the 1990s with what she describes as the ‘post-studio’ condition, wherein ‘the whole film industry has gradually become financially
dysfunctional’ (Wada-Marciano 2012: 51), with independent filmmakers becoming the ‘norm’ (ibid.: 14). Indeed, Wada-Marciano has leveraged the ‘post-studio’ as an analytical prism to survey Japanese cinema in the global era that is, for instance, characterized by the ‘assimilation of digital media and the presentation of the transnational’ (ibid.: 15). Reviewing the conditions of Japanese film education in the post-studio era, however, Tezuka Yoshiharu has highlighted the significance of *jishu eiga* (sometimes written as *jisyu eiga*), which literally means autonomous filmmaking or ‘self-financed nonprofessional filmmaking’ (Tezuka 2013: 171). Whereas a historical review of *jishu eiga* as a diversified assemblage of vernacular discourses, film practices, works, and filmmakers is beyond the focus of this chapter, here I underscore *jishu eiga* as a type of independent, amateur cinema and film culture that connotes the contingent and transitional condition of the filmmaker’s ‘amateur-auteur’ status. Somehow, it incorporates a future dimension toward the transformation or upgrading into the stage of ‘professionalism’, as suggested by Tezuka (2013).

Self-labelled as an *eizō seisaku shūdan* or image-making collective, Kuzoku has originated from and should be grasped from within the world of *jishu eiga*. The collective favourably affirms the ‘independent/autonomous activities’ (*jishu-teki na katsudō*) as central to its self-positioning, of which *jishu jōei* or the self-organized screening/exhibition also constitutes an indispensable dimension. Neither Tomita nor Aizawa were professionally trained in film production or scriptwriting, nor did they have any

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3 According to Tezuka Yoshiharu, the postwar development of *jishu eiga* as a fertile ground to nurture film talent can be directly related to the structural transformations of the Japanese studio system since the 1970s. He suggests that, ‘making *jishu-eiga* became established as an alternative to undergoing an apprenticeship in the industry and today it is not unusual for a young amateur to direct a commercial feature film without having working experience as an assistant director or equivalent on-the-job training’ (Tezuka 2013: 176-177).

4 In her observation on Chinese amateur DV documentary filmmaking in the post-1990s, Wang Yiman leverages the seemingly oxymoronic conceptualization of ‘amateur-auteur’ to look at ‘a self-consciously assumed subject position that is defined in response to specific material circumstances, and that directly affects the ways of documenting one’s material surroundings and individual experiences’. As such, the positioning of ‘amateur-auteur’ configures the ‘precondition’ of China’s DV documentary in post-socialist China (Wang 2005: 17). Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano borrows insights from Wang and posits that for Japanese documentists working under the new production environment of post-studio, ‘it is not the filmmakers’ intentional stress on their “independent creative consciousness”, but the “material circumstances” that strongly determine how they produce their works’ (Wada-Marciano 2012: 66).

5 As integral to Kuzoku’s gesture of resistance, they also decided not to release their films on home video formats, such as DVD, but emphasize film screening/exhibition as an important platform to engage their audiences (see Tomita 2014).
specific affiliations with the Japanese film industry when Saudade was accomplished. Most of Kuzoku’s projects are self-financed (recently with crowdfunding and co-production funds), and the collective mainly relies on jishu jōei and the alternative, arthouse network (such as the theatres known as ‘mini-theatres’) for distribution and exhibition. Situated within the environment of ‘media convergence’ in Japan, Kuzoku’s image-making is also closely interwoven with independent culture (e.g. hip-hop music), and as evidenced by the long-term project of Bangkok Nites, the collective has also ventured into contemporary art with video installation works, as I shall explore in the following sections.

Gerow stresses how, against the contemporary setting, the ‘independence’ of Japanese independent cinema is not necessarily associated with any pronounced or homogeneous political stances but instead ‘divisions, overlaps, and alliances between different camps have become more and more minute and complex, resisting any simplified mapping’ (2002: 12). It is noteworthy that upon its establishment, Kuzoku envisioned its filmmaking as acts of intervention in the status quo apropos of contemporary Japanese cinema (also see Tomita 2014: 17-18). In other words, modes of independent cinema or jishu eiga have not been considered by them simply as a ‘stepping stone’ to ‘become professional’ (Tezuka 2003: 176) but are leveraged by the collective to identify their own idiosyncratic practices and to carve out a space of autonomy so that, as they claim, they can ‘create whatever films we want to create and screen them whenever we want to’ (tsukuritai eiga wo katte ni tsukuri, katte ni jōei suru) in a gesture of resistance (see Tomita 2014).

Specifically, Kuzoku’s location shooting is an intriguing site to interrogate the translocal, transnational dynamics of contemporary Japanese cinema, the practices of which are emphasized here to lay the groundwork for my case studies to follow. In a radical fashion, to orient their ways of life around their own film projects (Tomita 2014), the collective has been known for its longer pre-production cycle, which seems rare among today’s independent projects. During the shooting, Tomita and Aizawa sometimes alternate their roles as part-time workers and travelling ethnographers who embed themselves in local communities and in people’s everyday life. Kuzoku does not necessarily restrain their research agenda beforehand but would usually launch a film project based on the fieldwork from ‘on

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6 Tomita pointed out how, since the project of Above the Clouds (shot on 8-mm film), the collective members started to use weekdays for their contracted work while using weekends to gather for the location shoot. Above the Clouds took almost three years to finish (Tomita 2014).
location’ participation and investigation, usually through a process of interviewing, documenting, and archiving, in order to make sense of ‘a history of locations and a location of histories’ (Clifford 1992: 105). Such ethnographic impulses have found their most powerful manifestation in Saudade and particularly in Bangkok Nites, a ‘road movie’ that traverses over 4000 kilometres across various Asian locales. The idea for Bangkok Nites, for instance, came into being a decade ago, and the actual film scenario, a collaboration between Aizawa and Tomita, was revised seven times over a period of two years (see Tomita, Aizawa, & Nomura 2017: 4). Furthermore, the filmmakers’ journeys to Southeast Asia and their in situ interactions with the local people significantly shaped their framework and vision of the screenplay, the creation of which occasionally involved the participation of the filming subjects and interviewees. Moreover, logistically speaking, as an independent film collective with limited funding and infrastructural support, Kuzoku had to be resourceful and flexible enough to figure out its own ways of gaining access to potential shooting locations, which demanded an extraordinary investment of energy and time (see Tomita & Aizawa 2017).

Understandably, Kuzoku has been versed in cinematic genres like essayistic travelogues and particularly (quasi-)road movies. While their oeuvre is distinguished with a realist visual style built upon a collaborative, research-based screenplay and a mostly non-professional cast who often play themselves and speak their own dialects and/or foreign languages, it is noteworthy that with individual works, such as Flower Story Babylon (Hana

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7 As the director, Tomita spent altogether four years travelling on and off to Bangkok in order to prepare for the project, until the decision was made that he himself would play the male protagonist Ozawa. Before the shooting actually kicked off, Tomita then settled down in the city for a whole year under an artist-training scheme by the Japanese government and learned the Thai language, during which period Aizawa travelled to Bangkok to work together with Tomita on the scenario. For details, refer to the core members’ diary of film shooting, which was later collected in a book of theirs, Bankoku naitsu: Senkō issen ri [Bangkok Nites: Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles].

8 For instance, the female protagonist of Bangkok Nites, Luck, works at a hostess club on Thaninya Road, one of the most notorious red-light districts of central Bangkok that predominantly caters to Japanese clients. Understandably, it is an area that cannot possibly be promoted in the list of locations recommended by the Thailand Film Office. Therefore, the huge challenge comes in how to secure permission from these entertainment clubs and bars, which are closely tied to the local shadow economy. It was after a long period of communication and relationship-building (four years) that the filmmakers finally gained enough trust and understanding from the club managers and people who earn their lives there, including the prostitutes and hustlers. Kuzoku explained to them that they planned to tell a story about ordinary people’s struggles in life, centring around the idea of ‘chiiwit’ the Thai word for ‘life’ (Tomita & Aizawa 2017).
Monogatari Babylon, 1997) and Babylon 2: The Ozawa – Guns of Babylon (2012) directed by Aizawa, the director has opted for an essayistic approach that blends voice-over narration, experimental superimposition of images, and the use of archival materials.9

Saudade: Beyond the Landscape

Rethinking Fūkei

Kuzoku’s 2011 award-winning feature Saudade, a co-scripted film directed by Tomita, was shot in the latter’s home city of Kofu (the capital city of Yamanashi Prefecture), a place ridiculed by the protagonists in the film as the ‘countryside’ (inaka). Loosely developed from Tomita’s previous feature film, Off Highway 20 (Kokudō nijū gōsen, 2007), Saudade was also based upon the collective’s documentary short FURUSATO 2009 (2009), a pre-production research on the urban condition of Kofu in the wake of the Lehman Brothers shock in 2007.10

Kuzoku identifies Saudade with three keywords, namely ‘construction workers’, ‘hip hop’, and ‘immigrants’ – themes that also grew out of their one-year research in Kofu. The work features an ensemble of characters whose life trajectories parallel, converge, and separate around the tripartite themes. At a building site, construction worker Seiji (Takano Tsuyoshi) befriends Hosaka (Ito Jin), who claims that he has recently returned from Thailand, and freelance-labourer Takeru (Dengaryū), a rapper/musician who leads a local hip hop group called ‘Army Village’. Meanwhile, Denis (Denis Hamatsu), a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian who recently lost his factory job, heads a hip hop band called ‘Small World’ consisting of Brazilian members from similar backgrounds. When ‘Small World’ happens to outperform ‘Army Village’ in a live showdown, the humiliation further fuels Takeru’s xenophobic sentiments. Meanwhile, Seiji is finally confronted by his Japanese-Thai hostess girlfriend Miyao, who finds his dream of leaving Japan and settling down in Thailand naïve and impossible.

9 At the same time, we also need to note how Kuzoku’s works are highly self-referentially and inter-textually related: characters with the same name pop up in different movies and are often played by the same (non-professional) actors; familiar shooting locations are explored in consecutive works; and unfinished storylines are picked up and reinvented in a new project but still remain open. Films that were produced by Tomita and Aizawa prior to the founding of Kuzoku have also been closely knitted into the micro-cosmos of intertextuality of the collective’s oeuvre.

10 Saudade was partially financed by Tomita’s part-time job as a truck driver commuting between Yamanashi and Tokyo, which he also used for location hunting (see Tomita, 2014).
3.1 Seiji and Hosaka at the top of a building, overseeing the city of Kofu in *Saudade*

*Saudade* configures a cityscape of construction sites, dilapidated shopping streets, flashy pachinko parlours, parking lots, nondescript shopping malls, fast food chains, nightclubs, love hotels, snack bars, and so forth. When Hosaka overlooks the city of Kofu from the rooftop, he is not particularly touched by the night view but murmurs, ‘the city is dead’. His sensibility uncannily echoes Walter Benjamin, who observed decades ago, ‘In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled’ (Benjamin 1978: 162). Nevertheless, as Tomita explains, by focusing on a provincial city like Kofu, its cityscape registers the homogenized urban condition of Japan as a whole, wherein the sense of boredom does not change ‘be it in Kofu or in Tokyo’ (see Kuma et al. 2012: 216).

Arguing that *Saudade* could be grasped in connection with leftist filmmaker/film critic Matsuda Masao’s concept from the 1970s of *fūkeiron* or ‘the theory of landscape’, film scholar Mika Ko has similarly departed from a critique of space and power. Leveraging Furuhata Yuriko’s interventionist reading of *fūkeiron* in relation to so-called ‘landscape films’, such as *A.K.A Serial Killer* (*Ryakushō renzoku shasatsuma*), a documentary produced in 1969 by a collective of leftist filmmakers toward the end of the ‘season of politics’ (in which Matsuda also participated), Ko argues that *Saudade*...
could be approached as Kuzoku’s critique of an assemblage of ‘landscape’ under the new circumstances of global capitalism. Ko has specifically indicated that Kuzoku has made visible an external reality that is not readily perceptible in the everyday world. For Ko, Saudade’s fūkei is not only composed of and incorporates spatial formations – such as the banal cityscape, danchi complex (apartment complex or public housing estate in the Japanese setting), streets, and alleys – it also includes subjects such as foreign labourers and immigrants, and the social relations and affective formations that interweave various identities, soundscapes (a mixture of foreign languages, dialects, and music), and memory (Ko 2016: 190).

In her brilliant take on landscape films, Furuhata points out that under her examination such films have shifted their focus onto ‘the nonspectacular and nonrepressive mechanisms of control and governance built into the everyday environment’ (Furuhata 2013: 117-118). According to Furuhata, films like A.K.A Serial Killer even went ahead of the perception of their creators (including Matsuda himself) in thinking beyond a classical model of state power, presciently addressing and reflecting upon ‘the symptomatic waning of the centralized mode of imagining political resistance, which had been anchored around the anthropocentric figure of the subject [shutai] that had for so long dominated the political imagination of postwar Japanese intellectuals’ (2007: 361).

I contend that Furuhata’s discussion reverberates with what Gilles Deleuze has framed as modern political cinema, wherein ‘the people are missing’ (Deleuze 1989: 216), indicating how the ‘biopolitical subjection of people destroys any hope of the masses acting as revolutionary subject’ (Wiese 2014: Kindle Location 157). Arguably, the two landscape films that Furuhata uses as examples – A.K.A Serial Killer and Oshima Nagisa’s The Man Who Left His Will on Film (Tokyo sensō sengo hiwa, 1970) – emerged in response to Japan’s drastic transition into a late capitalist consumer society around the 1970s, when a reconceptualization of state power and governmentality

11 In her illuminating analysis of landscape film and the filmmaking practice of fūkeiron, Furuhata Yuriko posits that fūkeiron converges with the European-American conceptualization of landscape in considering fūkei as ‘an idea’ as well as ‘a practice’. The theory itself forcibly examines ‘the immanent relations of power that produce homogenized landscape’ (Furuhata 2007: 353-354). Furuhata bases her reading of fūkeiron by analyzing the documentary film A.K.A Serial Killers (1969), which, despite a topical title suggestive of its links with a notorious serial killer, threads together ‘actuality footage of urban and rural landscapes from the tip of the northern island of Hokkaido to the southwestern cities of mainland Japan’ (ibid.: 346). As a collective effort, it was shot by a group of leftist filmmakers, including Matsuda, whose participation in the filmmaking was also in order to practice fūkeiron.
became necessary, if not urgent, as has also been suggested by Ko. The socio-political transitions facilitated a rethinking of the ways of imaging and representing political struggles and confrontations visually, that is, cinematically, upon which, for instance, ‘the militant documentary filmmaking’ by documentarist Ogawa Shinsuke of Ogawa Production in the late 1960s left an indelible mark (Furuhata, 2007: 346). As is well articulated by Furuhata, the politics of landscape films could be approached ‘as interlocking sites of visibility and invisibility’ (ibid.: 360),\(^\text{12}\) the dissensual potentialities of which lie in the spectatorial engagement reconfigured and activated through redistributing what could be seen, experienced, and felt, and for whom. Matsuda and his fellow filmmakers’ practices, therefore, forcibly critiqued the activist spectacle of political documentary cinema of its own time precisely by introducing a new way of seeing (see ibid.: 355, 361) and, arguably, in emphasizing a new mode of appearance.

Whereas Saudade has not premised its cinematic style upon the ‘formal strategy’ leveraged either in the early actuality films or landscape films like A.K.A. Serial Killer, namely the patterns emphasized by Furuhata, it would be important to argue how Kuzoku’s take has similarly introduced dissensuality through aesthetic acts that have redistributed a ‘landscape’ of images, sounds, sensibilities, and affective flows that contribute to reimagining the social conditions in a globalized, post-bubble, post-financial-crisis Japan, wherein the interrelations between the filmmaker(s), filming subjects, and audience have also been reconfigured.

The Long Takes

With their early collaborative works, such as Above the Clouds (Kumo no ue, 2004) and Off Highway 20, we could already see how Kuzoku members, leveraging their personal experiences (and particularly Tomita’s uncanny experience of returning to his hometown Kofu after living in Tokyo for years), had developed an acute consciousness of the nondescript urban landscape and ennui in the provincial cities and suburban areas of Japan. They have, in particular, identified with marginalized subjects or precariats,

\(^\text{12}\) For Furuhata, the ‘politics’ of the cinematic experimentations of fūkeiron are not only achieved through ‘an antistate cartographic endeavor’ in assembling shots of a banal, homogenous landscape devoid of human subjects or narrative drives but also in making visible the diagrammatic function of power configuring such landscapes. Also, A.K.A. Serial Killer channels the ‘politics’ of the pre-documentary mode of actuality films that lays emphasis on ‘display’ in foregrounding the ‘exteriority of the spectator in relation to the image’, namely in placing the latter outside of the ‘screen space’. See Furuhata (2007, 2013).
such as part-timers, sex workers, and small-time criminals (e.g. members of the yakuza, drug dealers, hustlers, and loan sharks). These *jishu eiga* works are dedicated to a neorealist rendition of urban malady with its loosened storytelling, everyday mise-en-scène, and non-professional performance and camerawork, which, according to Tomita, is supposed to embody certain characteristics of ‘amateurish-ness’ (*shirōto-sa*) (Takano et al. 2011: 15-16).

In *Saudade*, nevertheless, Kuzoku demonstrated a more mature film style that not only relies on an ensemble of characters and parallel narratives but also a form of expression that consciously utilizes editing and camerawork to survey the relations between the characters and their urban milieu.

Working on the project of *Saudade*, Takano Yoshiko, *Saudade*’s cinematographer, shared the opinion with both Aizawa and Tomita that ‘the city is the protagonist of the film’ and decided that she would treat both human subjects and the landscape ‘as equal’ (Tomita et al. 2011: 19). It needs to be pointed out that Tomita also became more self-conscious of his ‘on-the-scene’ film practice and their aesthetic implications in *Saudade*. Unlike *Off Highway 20*, which was shot on 16-mm, *Saudade* was shot on HDV since Tomita valued how the digital camcorder could respond to the variables and contingencies for an unusually long period of location shooting (ibid.: 17).

Here, Tomita learned how to give up his previous method of following a pre-established storyboard and to suspend his ‘attachment’ to any specific character, which thus allowed more space for *in situ* experimentations and improvisation on the parts of the actors and his cinematographer. The director has accordingly underpinned his own role less as a person who ‘directs’ than as someone who ‘leads’, indicating the creator’s sensibility towards the profilmic contingencies on the scene (ibid.: 10). Tomita then admits that while in the script there is still the central-peripheral differentiation between the characters, Takano shot them together with – and as not all that different from – the *fūkei* landscape.

I shall argue, therefore, that as far as Kuzoku is concerned, its ‘landscape theory’ is not meant to simply reveal how the protagonists have been subjugated to the hegemonic power configuration of global neoliberalism *per se*, which is necessarily premised upon a pre-established conceptual signification system that unpacks symbols and metaphors for the purpose of ideological critique, as is partially manifested in Ko’s approach to *fūkeiron* and Kuzoku’s works. Here I find Rancière’s discussions of Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa’s ‘politics of art’ useful to illustrate my point. Rancière illustrates that the politics ‘is not the one that made a show of the state of the world to expose structures of domination and mobilize energies to change them’ (Rancière 2014: 137). We can borrow Vered Maimon’s insight
that ‘the problem for political artistic practices is no longer the disclosure of “facts”, since it is not necessarily opacity or secrecy that underlines the economy of power in “the age of information” but precisely binary divisions into such defined groups as enemy and friend, our people and “their” people’ (Maimon 2009: 103).

Hence I am more interested in exploring how the landscape in Saudade can be approached in terms of the space-time of appearance in the Rancièreian sense, wherein Kuzoku (especially with the creative contribution of cinematographer Takano) has leveraged formal mechanisms such as the deep focus and the long take to re-structure ways of seeing and feeling the ‘location’ as well as seeing and feeling on location. In so doing, the conventions and systems of signification that correlate human subjects with their surroundings are suspended and disrupted, allowing for the interconnections between the filmmakers, characters, and audiences to be re-imagined.

For example, one could look at how the filmmakers have used long takes to follow how three of the male protagonists – Takeru, Seiji, and Denis – have roamed around the decaying city of Kofu. In a mobile long take toward the end of the film, for instance, Seiji, after his break-up with Miyao and frustrated by Hosaka’s unexplained departure, walks numbly into the emptied shutter streets at night, where he suddenly has the bizarre illusionary vision of a queue of mannequin-like figures waving to him. In the sequence that follows, in which a popular song reminiscent of Japan’s prosperous ‘bubble era’ is played extradiegetically, Seiji is seen moving passively along the crowds on the boisterous night street where a band of yakuza on motorcycles is parading flamboyantly. As Gerow demonstrates, ‘attractive images’ as such end in disillusion in a shot of him ‘standing in front of the same shuttered businesses and empty hopes’ (Gerow 2016: 90). Nevertheless, sequences of Seiji’s stroll are not to be approached merely spatially, as they also register the anachronic temporalities wherein Seiji’s imagined future (apropos moving to Thailand with his loved one, Miyao) is at the same time eroded and overlayered by the present (long-take of the parade) of which he is not essentially a part. He is also haunted by the past: not only the lingering melody from the good old days is played, also the sight of desolate shopping arcades interweaves with the memories of a disappearing friend and a lover who has bid farewell.

Another long take with Takeru’s roaming is more performative and illustrative of my point. We see early in the film that after he walks out of the Thai night club at night, disappointed and irritated by Seiji and Hosaka’s ‘pastime’ of seeking companions among the Thai hostesses, he wanders around town alone. Before he turns to the so-called ‘shutter street’
where most shops have gone out of business, Takeru encounters a street singer whose folk tune of San’ya (the song of ‘San’ya Blues’) is somewhat picked up by himself in the sequence to follow, when he expresses a mixed feeling of anger and melancholy. In a horizontally moving tracking shot of more than ninety seconds long, one sees how the rapper spits his rhymes as a way to vent his dissatisfaction with the unbearable (‘The town’s dying/ It’s suffocating/ It’s a vacuum, a void/ Both the town and its people/ They gave up, full of indifference’). Here with his improvised rap song (owing to the affective labour of rapper Dengaryū, who attempted many takes), Takeru also shares his family story, disclosing the origin of his xenophobia – recalling how his father went bankrupt due to the recession and the influx of migrant workers.

This long take leverages Takeru’s flâneurie to navigate through the bleak scenario of the shopping arcade, where the roller shutters are decorated with bright-coloured election posters for a local politician whose slogan ironically

13 In his monograph, Edward Fowler has provided unique insights into San’ya, ‘the largest of several Tokyo yoseba, or gathering places for casual laborers who get work off the street’ (Fowler 1996: 9). According to Fowler, San’ya was ‘home to as many as fifteen thousand day laborers during its heyday in the late 1950s and early 1960s’ (ibid.). Folk song singer Okabayashi Nobuyasu debuted with ‘San’ya Blues’ in 1968, a song that was about the dire conditions of the day labourers.
reads, ‘To Revitalize the Hometown!’ The MTV-style sequence displaces Takeru from the milieu of construction and labour and relocates him in the dark lane, where the audience observes how it has been turned into a stage by the rap singer’s moving body and his storytelling. It is no longer Takeru’s personal story that Dengaryū narrates: his voice and gestures interconnect in between Takeru’s bitter family memory, the street-singer’s accounts of the conditions of San’ya’s day labourers (played by a homeless singer himself) (also see Ko 2016: 202), and the collective experiences shared by labourers and workers who struggle to cope with the conditions of precarity, whether from Kofu, San’ya, or Brazil. Meanwhile, the long take builds upon the tension between showing and narrating that works with multiple layers of temporality: whereas the shutter street visually registers a future of the past that has already come true, the lyrics return to a past of the present that cannot be overwritten. Nevertheless, Takeru’s moving body opens up the present to a future that can be drastically different from the doomed ending where he will stalk Denis and stab him to death.

‘Saudade’: An Affective Critique

It is necessary to briefly explicate how the idea of ‘affect’ is used here. In the first place, affect is grasped as a personal emotional state and a physiological sensation of the body; it is the translated, signified, and subjectified version of the affective matter. A second way to understand affect is as ‘a dimension of bodily experiences and encounter’ that is non-representational, which registers ‘a dynamic force that passes through but also beyond personal feelings, a force being purely transitive’ (Chang 2009: 35). In my discussion of Kuzoku’s works, both aforementioned perspectives intermingle. Primarily I situate the study of entangled emotions and feelings within specific socio-cultural contexts and affective formations. Inspired by Sara Ahmed’s approach to ask ‘What do emotions do?’, attending to how ‘emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others’ (Ahmed 2014: 4), I also turn to an interpretative framework that focuses on the cinematic narrative in terms of how the protagonists react to what has happened to them through articulating/acting out their feelings while living in and through the conditions of the unbearable and the impossible.

Probably not unlike Takeru or Seiji, other characters in Saudade engage the generic city and react to the new spatial politics by centring their daily activities around the forces of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, shuttling between hope and despair, evidencing the observation regarding
how affect has underpinned ‘the organisation of the way we live now’ to the extent that ‘production, consumption, participation: in every case we are addressed as (and retain relevance by) being affective operators’ (Sharma & Tygstrup 2015: 4). Meanwhile, what has been perceived as the real problematic by Kuzoku concerns the compartmentalization of their subjects as they are trapped in their own predicament (see Tomita 2014), manifesting what Patricia Pisters enumerates as the characteristics of modern political cinema wherein not only is there no unified people anymore but also the story is permeated with the feeling of ‘the impossible and the intolerable’ (Pisters 2003: 90-91). Nevertheless, I agree with Kuzoku that Saudade is not in itself a dark or pessimistic film (see Takano et al. 2011: 21). Instead of imagining how its protagonists have given themselves over to the entropy, the work also turns to how they look for alternatives in exploring relations and (re)configuring affective connections among themselves.

For example, faced with the prospect of unemployment and disillusioned by his marriage, Seiji turns to the Thai bar, Hosaka’s marijuana greenhouse, and his Thai-Japanese girlfriend Miyao for consolation. Trying to convince Miyao that choosing Japanese nationality is not a good idea, he dreams that one day he could leave Kofu and move to Thailand. Meanwhile, Takeru cannot escape from his family’s devastated circumstances and can only channel his growing sense of crisis into enmity towards the foreigners in town. He nonetheless still seeks to connect to his passion for hip hop music, however wrongheaded he is in his belief that he could teach the Brazilians a lesson by leading his band to win the live-house showdown. Also, even though Denis and his friends have borne the brunt of the financial crisis and can do little to reverse the prejudice against Japanese-Brazilian immigrants in Japan, there is still the vague hope that their music and performance may potentially open up a space to not only claim and distinguish their own voices but also to make cross-cultural connections possible with the ‘locals’. However, their differences are essentialized and considered exotically ‘hybrid’ by the latter. Toward the end of Saudade, Seiji loses his way in the parade (as analyzed above), and Takeru turns himself in to the police after stabbing Denis. Seemingly, all their efforts end up nowhere, yet the actions taken to formulate affective associations, even the violent ones, configure the lines of flight from what sociologist Miyadai Shinji (who plays a politician in Saudade) calls the “‘endless everyday’ (owaranai nichijō) where all is empty and nothing changes’ (Gerow 2016: 89).

Here we finally return to the title of the film. It is well known that the Portuguese term of ‘saudade’ conveys a feeling of longing, melancholy, and nostalgia, underpinned with a temporal dimension that connects the past
with the present (see Laplantine 2015). In the film, ‘saudade’ is also used as a pun, wherein the characters tend to mix it up with the Japanese word of ‘Sannō Danchi’ due to their close pronunciation. The latter is an existing ‘danchi’ in suburban Kofu where Japanese-Brazilian workers and their families actually live, which in the film narrative turns out to be Takeru and his brother Yukihiko’s old neighbourhood when they were young.

As awkward as it may seem, the nexus of ‘saudade-sannō danchi’ has intersected and also complicated the multi-layered meaning-making of home(s). What is foregrounded here is not simply a case of transcultural miscommunication. Rather, the nexus poses the question regarding whose ‘home’ or ‘hometown’ it is that has been occupied, lost, and found and whether the seemingly discrepant strands of sensibilities of feeling alien and being displaced (e.g. either for Takeru, or for the Japanese-Brazilian workers) could be interrelated and shared translocally and across various temporalities. For instance, whereas Takeru and his younger brother Yukihiko believe that it is the foreign migrant workers who are now occupying their old ‘home’ and turning the danchi into a neighbourhood that is unfamiliar to them (Yukihiko tells Takeru about his recent visits to Sannō Danchi, which now feels ‘different’ for him), they have ignored how the Japanese-Brazilian immigrants are also cornered in this public housing-cum-ethnic enclave, caught in between Brazil and their supposed ‘ancestral land’ of Japan.14

Here we may then turn to the sequence where one of the Sannō Danchi’s Japanese-Brazilian families is seen having dinner together. Over the meal, the father Mario asks their young daughters where they would choose to go when they have to leave Japan – Brazil or the Philippines, the place where

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14 Endō Toake points out that ‘Brazil is the heartland of Japanese immigration in South America’, and the country ‘embraces more than 1.5 million multi-generational descendants living in its vast territory, forming the largest Japanese community outside Japan’ (Endo 2009: 26). Endō also reminds us that ‘the history of Japanese migration to Brazil started on the eve of the twentieth century and evolved in tandem with the coffee industry’ (ibid.: 27). Japanese Brazilians are often referred to as ‘Nikkei Burajirujin’, wherein as illustrated by Joshua Hokata Roth, ‘Nikkeijin’ (literally means ‘sun line people’) is used to refer to overseas Japanese and ‘members of the Japanese diaspora’ (Roth 2002: 23). Meanwhile, although not specifically discussed in this chapter, the recent return migration of Nikkeijin has been encouraged by the Japanese state since the end of the 1980s in immediate response to the labour shortage in Japan. Most of the migrants ‘came to Japan looking for better incomes’ (Ishikawa 2009: 59). Ishikawa also indicates what kind of impact the revision of the Japanese Immigration Control and Refugee Law in 1990 had upon the return migration of Nikkeijin has been encouraged by the Japanese state since the end of the 1980s in immediate response to the labour shortage in Japan. According to a 2015 report by The Japan Times, the number of Nikkei Brazilians ‘peaked at over 313,000 in 2007 before Japan offered them incentives to repatriate amid the global financial crisis, and fell to under 174,000 in 2015’ (Twaronite 2017).
their mother came from. The ambiguous answers he gets from the kids only leave more questions open. It is noteworthy that the sequence is played by real family members whose conversations smoothly switch between Japanese, Portuguese, and Tagalog. However, rather than reinforcing the triumphalist vision of a borderless, cosmopolitan world where the translocal subjects would always feel ‘at home in the world’, Saudade foregrounds with the scene of Mario’s dining table the fragmented temporalities that this ‘international’ family intersects with. And their sense of ‘saudade’, I shall argue, is directed toward a precarious future where both ‘home’ and ‘hometown’ remain unknown destinations.

Meanwhile, as also mentioned by Ko, there is a documentary-style sequence in which two of the female protagonists, Mahiru (Ozaki Ai) and Pinky (Almeida Hamatsu), the rapper singer from the Brazilian band ‘Small World’, volunteer at a senior day care centre. It is intriguing that when surrounded by Mahiru and Pinky, an old Japanese lady starts to share with them memories about her relatives who migrated to Brazil and the local specialties they sent back to Japan, such as coffee beans. The old lady’s reminiscences, based on the actual stories of first-generation Japanese immigrants to Latin America (usually referred to as issei), interlace with the daily conversations at Mario’s dining table – both strands of narratives complement each other, foregrounding the transgenerational interrelations
between the translocal subjects and their micro-histories of deterritorialization. The nexus of ‘saudade/sannō-danchi’ therefore also comprises an affective critique that connects in between the seemingly estranged characters, disconnected communities, and their disparate temporalities, wherein “other” sensibilities and affective expressive politics’ can emerge and intermingle (Tolia-Kelly 2019: 127).

**Bangkok Nites: Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles**

**Almost a Road Movie**

Backed by transnational funding from several cultural and film entities and money raised through a crowdfunding platform within Japan,15 *Bangkok Nites* best illustrates Kuzoku’s vision in further experimenting with a complicated narrative structure of parallel plotlines and an ensemble cast. Also, the collective’s long-term preparation and fieldwork underpinned its unusually expansive geographical/geopolitical framework, making the work itself an unprecedented project not only for Kuzoku but also for Japanese independent cinema. It is further noteworthy that in this 2016 feature, Kuzoku worked with a larger (transnational) crew from various backgrounds. For instance, their cinematographer team Studio Ishi consisted of two hip hop musicians who brought to the film refreshing yet rather mixed camerawork and a visual style that begs us to approach them with different perspectives (also see Watanabe & Yūki 2017).

Kuzoku also labels *Bangkok Nites* with three keywords: ‘paradise’ (*rakuen*), ‘prostitute’ (*shōfu*), and ‘colony’ (*shokuminchi*). The film opens with a former soldier of the Japanese Self-Defense Force (*jieitai*), Ozawa (played by director Tomita himself), bumping into his ex-girlfriend Luck (Subenja Pongkorn) at a nightclub in Bangkok, five years after their break-up. Luck has become the top cabaret hostess working at Thaniya Road, a red-light district infamous for its tailored service to Japanese clients that flourished in the 1980s as a result of Japan’s bubble economy. Clueless about his future, Ozawa joins his former officer in the Self-Defense Force to work for a Japanese company’s

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15 According to the crowdfunding site ‘motion gallery’, a total of 282 people participated in the fundraising action, raising up to 11,302,862 Japanese yen for *Bangkok Nites* and reaching Kuzoku’s goal (‘Kuzoku ga hatsuno kuraudo fandingu ni “ikarinodesurōdo hōshiki” de idomu! Zenpen tai * raosu satsuei o kankō! saishinsaku ‘Bangkok Nites’! [Kuzoku’s first crowd-funding for their latest movie ‘Bangkok Nites’]’ 2015).
real estate development project in Southeast Asian countries that dabbles in the grey area of the sex industry. Upon leaving for Laos to investigate the local business there, Ozawa is joined by Luck, but their destination is the Northern frontier province called Nong Khai in the Isan (Issan) area, Luck’s hometown.

Bangkok Nites extends Kuzoku’s interest in exploring Japan’s positioning in and connections with Southeast and East Asia by examining the legacies of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. Their endeavour is complicated by the historical memory and trauma of colonialism, authoritarianism, (anti-)communism, as well as the persistent hegemonic power of the US. According to Tomita, although Japan and mainland Asia ‘is separated by the ocean’, he believes that ‘they are linked today by the colonial history’ (2016). Meanwhile, Kuzoku’s questioning regarding Japan’s

16 Bangkok Nites’ survey of colonialism needs to be examined in intertextual and self-referential terms by first of all turning to two 8mm-film short films by Aizawa, Flower Story Babylon (1997) and its sequel, The Ozawa: Guns of Babylon (2012). Both films, in following the aimless journey of
3.5 A map illustrating the trip that Bangkok Nites took in Southeast Asia, from the brochure of ‘Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles’
inter-Asia historical connections is also achieved through several transmedia projects developed from their location shooting and fieldwork for Bangkok Nites, particularly a multi-screen video installation work collaboratively accomplished by Kuzoku, Studio Ishi, and the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM). These projects are intriguingly titled ‘Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles’ (Senkō yisen ri), which also refers to the autobiographical novel, ‘Hidden Journey of 3000 Li’ (Senko sanzen ri), a 1950 bestseller written by Tsuji Masanobu, the controversial former military officer of the Japanese Empire and war criminal (also see Kuzoku et al. 2016).

One could approach Bangkok Nites as a road movie. In highlighting Ozawa and Luck’s re-encounter, journey, and final separation, however, the narrative of Bangkok Nites is less driven by the protagonists’ wanderlust than by the collective’s own desire to trace and delineate the irregular network of the shadow economy (e.g. the sex industry, the drug trade, trafficking, and smuggling), which is underpinned by the political-historical contingencies at the local and translocal levels. Specifically, as explained by Tomita and Aizawa, Bangkok Nites is a film about the futile search for paradise. The work itself embodies two types of movement: ‘one geared towards the future as a quest for a place to live, to escape, and another being a necessary confrontation and exploration of a past and a painful history’ (Tomita & Aizawa 2016). Their location shooting, therefore, ventured into places such as Bangkok, Pattaya, and Nong Khai in Thailand; Vang Vieng, Long Tieng,
and Xiangkhouang in Laos; and Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam (also see Kuzoku et al. 2016). The translocal and transnational journey in the film departs from and also winds back to metropolitan Bangkok because Kuzoku realized that it is impossible to understand this city’s modern conundrum without positioning it within the region’s geopolitical and historical entanglements (see Tomita & Aizawa 2016).

Accordingly, the characters repeatedly bring up topics regarding ‘paradise’ or ‘tōgenkyō’ in Japanese, which translates as the ‘peach blossom land’. While tōgenkyō may stand for the opposite of the intolerable and thus implies hope, paradoxically, as the ancient tale cited in the film goes (e.g. characters in the film mention ‘Peach Blossom Spring’/taohua yuanji by Chinese essayist Tao Yuanming from the 5th century), it is also somewhere untraceable and unreachable. Or, as one of its characters bitterly points out, ‘Once you leave the tōgenkyō, you’ll never find it’. In the film, Thaniya Road figures as one of Bangkok’s most uncanny, prosperous ‘Japanized’ enclaves of the sex industry. Whereas the Japanese (male) clients can still be entertained and satisfied by the service provided by Thai ladies as if in ‘paradise’, to return to one of the keywords underscoring the work, the very existence of ‘Thaniya Road’ is evocative of memories of imperial Japan during WWII in the region. Also, it is indexical of the changing Japan-Thailand relations and in particular their economic ties and power relation during Japan’s bubble era and into the post-bubble transitions in the new millennium.

For Kuzoku, their ‘hidden journey’ extends the critique of Japanese society by turning to how Ozawa and his male Japanese collaborators are frustrated by the post-3.11 malaise in Japan, for which one could think of Ozawa’s complaints in front of Luck that Japan is ‘no good’ nowadays: ‘Economy down! Meltdown! Everything down!’ Nevertheless, what is really at stake is not simply a transcending of the geographical boundaries in order to gain an alternative vantage point to reimagine ‘Japan’ or to rejuvenate the Japanese identity. Arguably, what really haunts the male subjects now may not be so much an ‘inescapable Japan’ or the ‘endless everydayness’ but powerful ‘globalism’ itself (Gerow 2016: 88-89). According to Tomita, ‘at the start you wonder where you can find paradise. You set out in search of it, going as far as possible. But in the end you realize it doesn’t exist anywhere, it’s simply under our feet ... all in all Ozawa undertook this journey to realize he had never left the Buddha’s palm’ (Tomita & Aizawa 2016).

If we refer to the Deleuzian thesis on modern political cinema, its character is no longer an action-oriented agent but a ‘seer’ who has ‘given over to something intolerable, which is simply their everydayness itself’ and is thus ‘condemned to wander about or go off on a trip’ (Deleuze 1989: 40).
3.6 Luck on Ozawa’s motorcycle at the edge of the jungle in Bangkok Nites

With *Bangkok Nites*, people’s search for ‘paradise’ across Southeast Asian cities and frontier zones seems to end up nowhere. As a former Jieitai soldier, Ozawa now returns to Bangkok without any clarified motivation or ambition. Later on, he accepts the offer to visit Laos not because he is particularly keen on his former officer’s secret plan for the connoisseur but simply because he cannot think of better ways to get out of his economic and personal dead-ends. As is typical with most sex workers on Thaniya Road, on the other hand, Luck leaves Isan behind in order to earn money in Bangkok to provide for her family. The film opens with a medium-length shot of Luck’s reflection on the window as she is emotionlessly overlooking Bangkok’s stunning night view from her luxurious residential tower and murmurs to herself, ‘Bangkok … Shit!’ This sequence, reminiscent of the disillusioned Hosaka in *Saudade*, similarly speaks of Luck’s aloofness and ennui.

Both Ozawa and Luck are, therefore, to a great extent defined or even allied by their desperate efforts to regain a sense of home and belonging on the margins of Thai and Japanese societies. The relationship between the two is, however, not fixated by any dichotomized, hierarchical positions such as Japanese/Thai, male/female, or client/prostitute. After both of them return to Bangkok from their journeys, however, nothing radical has taken place – Ozawa has not been cured by his trip to Isan or the romantic
relationship; Luck does not rely on Ozawa for salvation of any type. We see toward the end that Ozawa returns to work on Thaniya to distribute flyers for hostess clubs, whilst Luck retreats to her home in Nong Khai after finding out that she has contracted AIDS without ever realizing her dream of opening a fancy restaurant in Bangkok.

### Into the Jungle

Not necessarily disagreeing with Tomita’s pessimism apropos the ubiquitous neoliberal globalism, I propose that the politics of Bangkok Nites is realized through Kuzoku’s aesthetic acts to disrupt, if not to break free from, the given power geometry of time-space compression (see Massey 1993) by walking into Isan’s jungle. Interwoven with the characters’ disparate, if not desperate, efforts in search of ‘paradise’, Kuzoku’s filmmaking journey into the frontier and borderland traversing Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam is intended as a multi-layered practice of counter-mapping. It is then no coincidence that Luck’s hometown is set in Nong Khai in the Isan region of northeastern Thailand, a border town that spreads itself along the banks of the Mekong River that separates it from Laos. In her homecoming trip, Luck brings Ozawa as well as the audience closer to her struggles and the ‘life stories’ of many other migrant workers and labourers in Bangkok from the Isan area. More importantly, as David Teh has pointed out in his study on Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose works are mostly set in the Isan area and have directly inspired Bangkok Nites, the historical experience of Isan, despite its presence in the national imaginary ‘thanks to decades of labour migration and irrepressible popular cultures’, has actually been ‘under-represented in national historiography and politics’ apropos Thailand (Teh 2011: 600). Kuzoku has regarded its marginality and difference in economic, historical, and cultural-political terms in relation to central Thailand or the official articulation of Thai-ness as points of resistance. Specifically, in blending in their realism segments of fantastic and ghostly encounters in the frontier region in Isan, as mentioned earlier, Kuzoku has intertextually correlated their oeuvres to those of Apichatpong.

It is well known by now that most of Apichatpong’s feature films and shorts are set in Isan. In his award-winning feature Uncle Boonmee Who can Recall His Past Lives (2010), for instance, Uncle Boonmee, a dying patient who suffers from kidney failure, sometimes has confusing dream sequences and also remembers how he killed communists while serving in the Thai army. One day, he reunites with his missing son at their dining table, who now returns as a red-eyed monkey ghost from the jungle. According to Natalie
Boehler, *Boonmee’s* ghosts ‘are carriers of the Northeast’s traumatic past’, referring to the Thai government’s violent oppression of local communities in the 1970s when the activities of communists were extended to the jungles of Isan (Boehler 2014: 70).

Tomita and Aizawa are highly conscious of the jungle of Isan as a ‘metaphor’ of history (Tomita, Aizawa, Arai, et al. 2017). Accordingly, I would like to push the discussion of ‘counter-mapping’ further in proposing that Ozawa’s road trip potentially wanders into the heterogeneous temporalities of Asia. In her studies on the fantastic and horror cinematic genres from Asia, particularly drawing on Filipino national cinema, Bliss Cua Lim has keenly pointed out how the supernatural, uncanny, and spectral have posed a ‘temporal critique’ in ‘translating’ the heterogeneous temporalities into the universalizing code of homogeneous time which, while a violent process in itself, is always a ‘mistranslation’ in still preserving the untranslatable, namely elements ‘of resistance, counterappropriation, or evasion’ (Lim 2009: 32). Further, Lim calls the uncanny hint of untranslatable time ‘immiscible’, which is like oil and water, which seemingly mingle in the same place but can never ‘coalesce to the point of full dissolution’ (ibid.: 144). With Lim, we may contend that the fantastic (for which I also include the imaginary of *tōgenkyō*) and the phantasmal in *Bangkok Nites* also ‘gestures at temporal differences that cannot be fully homogenized’ (ibid.: 33). Therefore, Isan has constituted a site in making visible the ‘immiscible’, where the fantastic and the spectral have emerged to contest the teleological, progressive time of Asian nations as well as the temporality underscored by global neoliberalism, as instanced by the invasion of American and Japanese capital. One of the haunting problematics that intersects the entwined modes of time has been the issue of ‘colonialism and its aftermath’ (Lim 2009: 12), as pointed out by Lim, in tandem with the historical traumas of war (WWII and the Vietnam War) and state violence, if we become more specific with the historical context of Isan vis-à-vis Thailand’s modern history and waves of social movements.

In *Bangkok Nites*, not only does the serpent-like *Phaya Naga*, a divine creature that the locals in Isan believe in, mysteriously appear in the Mekong River, but also Ozawa comes across the phantoms of a group of guerrilla fighters when passing by the jungle on his motorbike (they may be the artist-revolutionaries who are in search of *tōgenkyō* but could also be the spectres of the communists and progressive students who retreated to the forests in the 1970s). His journey to Isan is at the same time haunted by the ghost of an anonymous aging man who, when they encounter him for the first time, emerges from the darkness and approaches him while
lamenting, ‘it’s sad not to have a place to call home, do you agree?’ He then comforts Ozawa by saying, ‘this will be your home one day’. The ghost that Ozawa meets is Chit Phumisak (also spelt as ‘Jit’, 1930-1966), a famous Marxist poet, the so-called ‘Che of Thailand’ who joined the Communist Party of Thailand in the jungle and was finally murdered in the mountains of Isan. It is noticeable that, although the ghost could not totally make himself understood by Ozawa, the poem he recites to us, the audience, is composed of impressionist stanzas highlighting Bangkok/Thailand with the senses of smell (‘stench of night’), touch (of flesh), and vision (‘like fire, it swallows citizens lost in lust’).

Kuzoku has therefore come to an understanding of the jungle also as a space of liminality in locating new structures of feeling. In his interview with Eiga Gejutsu, for example, Aizawa shows great interest in how, during the era of the Vietnam War, Isan’s jungle became the fertile ground not only for communist insurgency but also for protest music genres such as phuea chiwit or ‘song for life’ (see Tomita, Aizawa, Arai, et al. 2017; also see Mitchell 2011; Myers-Moro 1986). Hence, no less powerful than the poetry appropriated in Bangkok Nites is the use of Thai folk songs and country music (lukthung) with realist connotations in the film. Kuzoku’s sensitivity to popular music genres has much to do with its long-term collaboration with independent hip hop bands and DJs within Japan’s media convergence culture. In Bangkok Nites, although the Thai country music is mostly used non-diegetically, it nonetheless underscores the work with the counter-hegemonic forte that characterizes this music genre, which often reverberates among the ‘rural peasants and the urban working class’ because these listeners ‘have found common ground in the stories and melodies’ (Mitchell 2011: 459).

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20 The ‘ghost’ is played by Surachai ‘Nga’ Jantimatawn, the vocalist, songwriter, and also one of the founders of the legendary folk rock band known as Caravan. Formed in 1973 by two student activists (Surachai, together with Wirasak Sunthornsii) when Thailand was experiencing its political transformations following the fall of the military dictatorship of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, Caravan has been famous for their music which contains political messages for social struggles as the ‘art for the people’ (see Myers-Moro 1986). Members of Caravan also fled to the forest in the aftermath of the 6 October 1976 Massacre, and they did not return from their exile until 1979, the year they were granted amnesty.

21 The translation is transcribed from the film’s English subtitle; presumably it is one of Chit Phumisak’s famous poems.

22 The genre of morlam (traditional Lao folk music) is also used in the soundtrack of Bangkok Nites. According to James Mitchell, ‘Lukthung was already identified with Isan culture’, and morlam and lukthung ‘have been conflated across generic boundaries’ (Mitchell 2011: 458-459).

23 Although the film collective has not released their works on digital format, including DVDs, they have been quite passionate about releasing the films’ soundtracks via CDs and LPs.
Whenever *Bangkok Nites* is screened outside of Thailand, the language barrier (even with the carefully translated subtitles) may discourage Japanese-speaking audiences, for instance, from further engaging with a cultural genre that was originally distinguished by a specific class of local listeners and consumers back in Thailand.\(^\text{24}\) However, I would stress that the Isan-originated folk music flowing throughout the film is also leveraged as a repository of affect in narrativizing grassroots feelings, experiences, dreams, and desires. This may further reverberate with and circulate among their transnational audiences, who could potentially become part of a community of empathy and thus a ‘community of sense’ in the Rancièrian sense, however contingently it may be formed. After all, Kuzoku’s appropriation of Thai folk music may not be targeted at the latter’s perfect translation into other cultural contexts but can be considered a gesture interconnecting with the immiscible temporalities contained in the jungle, which has necessarily retained and foregrounded their ‘untranslatability’, even when the film itself has been translocally circulated and exhibited.

**Coda**

Ian Buchanan has suggested that deterritorialization foregrounds the rupture between postmodern subjects and their everyday space, namely a process that challenges the very foundational basis of identity. And therefore one may cease to be considered different, look ‘like everybody else’, and start ‘merging with landscape’ (Buchanan 2005: 23). Reterritorialization, then, does not simply mean a restorative ‘return’ to the extremely localized ‘place’ as well as to its conditions of ‘pre-territorialization’ but rather involves efforts that leverage the deterritorialized as ‘new objects’ to stand for the ‘lost territory’ and thus ‘compensate for’ or ‘substitute’ the ‘home that has been lost’ (ibid.: 30).

Whereas *Saudade* zooms in on a fading ‘hometown’, namely a generic, degenerating Japanese city, the travellers in *Bangkok Nites* strive to (re) discover a lost utopia/paradise that they never possessed in Southeast Asian border-zones and the former-colonial territories. At the meta-level, I would propose that Kuzoku’s filmmaking itself constitutes a series of efforts at reterritorialization, in keeping with searching for the lost homes/hometowns.

\(^{24}\) Kuzoku and a closely knit network of cultural workers are collaborating with and have indeed dedicated themselves to cultivating a small group of local connoisseurs who may be specifically keen on Thai folk music for its exotic, alternative flavour and connotation of temporality.
It is quite thought-provoking that in his 2014 interview, Tomita suggested, ‘Indeed the word “local” has continued to stay with us (Kuzoku). Then this “local”, if approached from within history, has actually connected together places like Kofu and Bangkok. That is also to say “local” as a keyword has attained its new significance. It is possible to view Tokyo as the local too’ (Tomita 2014: 40). To relate to what I have outlined regarding Kuzoku’s works of reterritorialization, what Tomita has stressed here as ‘local’ is actually the ‘translocal’. As such, Kuzoku’s oeuvre has interlinked Japanese national cinema with Asian transnational cinemas not simply at the levels of production (multi-sited location shooting and coproduction) and circulation (festival screening and limited theatrical release) but most importantly through the translocal imaginaries they have persistently explored, created, and examined. Hopping between Asian locations such as Kofu (a generic regional city), Tondo (the largest slum in the corner of metropolitan Manila), and Bangkok (a cosmopolitan city), Kuzoku has chosen each place as an entry point to interrogate how the (trans)local dialogues with the deterritorializing/reterritorializing forces of globalization, and how people, especially those who are not necessarily privileged in the newly formed structures of hierarchy and stratification, have accordingly developed and negotiated multiple ways and layers of identification across these places. Here, I would argue, Kuzoku has also daringly provided with Bangkok Nites – in a departure from Saudade – an alternative to envision inter-Asia border-crossing cinema. They have borrowed the vernacular visual and narrative tropes as well as genres of music/sound from Southeast Asia to configure a translocal landscape of affect and feeling, so that an ‘Asia’ that has been repressed or made invisible in other transnational productions and genres could be made visible and audible and can be experienced anew.

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