

Asian Cinema and the Use of Space

Asian cinemas are connected to global networks and participate in producing international film history while at the same time influenced and engaged by spatial, cultural, social and political transformations. This interdisciplinary study forwards a productive pairing of Asian cinemas and space, where space is used as a discursive tool to understand cinemas of Asia.

Concentrating on the performative potential of cinematic space in Asian films, the contributors discuss how space (re)constructs forms of identities and meanings across a range of cinematic practices. Cities, landscapes, buildings and interiors actively shape cinematic performances of such identities and their significances. The essays are structured around the spatial themes of ephemeral, imagined and contested spaces. They deal with struggles for identity, belonging, autonomy and mobility within different national and transnational contexts across East, Southeast and parts of South Asia in particular, which are complicated by micropolitics and subcultures, and by the interventions and interests of global lobbies.

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Interdisciplinary Perspectives
Edited by Lilian Chee and Edna Lim

Asian Cinema and the Use of Space

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by Lilian Chee and Edna Lim

First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Asian cinema and the use of space : interdisciplinary perspectives / edited by Lilian Chee and Edna Lim.

pages cm. — (Routledge advances in film studies ; 36)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Space and time in motion pictures. 2. Space in motion pictures.
3. Motion pictures and transnationalism. 4. Motion pictures—
East Asia—History and criticism. 5. Motion pictures—Southeast Asia—
History and criticism. 6. Motion pictures—South Asia—History and
criticism. I. Chee, Lilian, editor. II. Lim, Edna, editor.

PN1995.9.S668A85 2015

791.43'095—dc23

2014029855

ISBN: 978-0-415-70937-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-88557-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Foreword

Seeing Space/Crafting Space/ Moving Space

Ryan Bishop

Space has a history.

Victor Burgin, *In/different Spaces*¹

Space is not given; it is made. Through optics, geometry, technology, cosmology, visual culture models and history, we craft space out of the ether of experience. Our senses, our experience, all of these are learned from the positioning of our unique chronotopes. Technologies of representation are in turn technologies of production, and few have been more productive spatially and temporally than those associated with cinema.

In their introduction to *Asian Cinema and the Use of Space*, Chee and Lim offer this volume's desire to explore how space can help us understand Asian cinema in innovative ways and in turn how cinema can help us understand Asian space. Following the basic systems theory tenant of foldback and feedback, their understanding of space in Asia and space in cinema casts them as inextricably intertwined, mutually dependent and influential. Thus, space and cinema, in this Möbius strip of representation and production, positions us such that there is no outside, no meta-position from which to view either. Cinema's capacity of apparently unmediated documentation (an oxymoronic belief if ever one existed) is undermined by its metaphysics, its ability to transform the metaphysics of the material world into cinematic metaphysics, which includes reversing time and inverting space. The question of indexicality becomes moot as space is formulated through inherited cinematic forms, framing traditions of mise-en-scène, genre and other formal elements. The heterotopic promise of cinema—the transportation of the viewer to an “other space” (*hetero*—other, *topos*—space)—becomes compromised by the very conditions of possibility that allow the viewer to imagine the existence of that other space. We cannot reach that “other space” because we have already been there and thus it is not “other.”

Space in Asian cinema, much as it does in general public discourse, often becomes synonymous with urban space. Similarly cinema, from its very outset, has been an urban-based art form and cultural commodity. In the

first few decades of cinema's history, laborers in urban factories spent their wages by going to the cinema, usually to watch narratives of people who worked in cities. The phenomenally rapid growth of Asian cities in the second half of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries, coupled with endless urban-centered films and popular culture productions, leads us to this default mode for thinking Asian space. Indeed, one could argue, as John Phillips and I have, that the rural has almost solely disappeared into the urban, such is the extent of control over their rural hinterlands that the emergent megacities in Asia exert.² Just as these rapidly developing megacities are largely controlled at the macro-level by global cities and the economic/technological/political systems they generate, so too do megacities completely overwhelm their rural environs. Much of this overrunning of the rural takes place in its most visible form as pollution and environmental destruction. A multitude of other ways that urbanism generally controls rural areas exist and operate at material and immaterial levels: economics, politics, popular culture, broadcast and IT technologies, migration patterns, consumerism, exploitation of raw materials and, of course, the collective cultural imaginary to which cinema contributes substantially.

The built environment of urban locales simultaneously encloses and produces space. Just as the literal and figurative ways space is conceptualized and understood expose the prior conditions that make our understanding of them possible, so the built environment relies on the unbuilt.³ In the most basic manner, in order to build on a space whatever occupies it must first be unbuilt. At the conceptual level, the design, the plan and the undecidable elements against which any design decision occurs render the unbuilt essential to the realization of the built. The unbuilt provides us a way of thinking through the built environment beyond three-dimensional concerns and the concrete representation of decisions made, but as an occupation of the imagination, even if at the most basic level of the image or the moving image. Thus, cinema becomes an important delivery system for a collective urban imaginary.

If anything affects or haunts Asian cinema in a unique fashion, it is this unbuilt dimension of urban space manufactured by a host of representational regimes created by the manner in which disasters, war and rapid urbanization have actively unbuilt spaces and environments—sometimes under the banner of progress, sometimes under that of battered enlightenment. Each architectural structure simultaneously bespeaks and elides a violence of dwelling, of communities, of other built environments and memories now erased by the sheer presence of what serves as backdrop or setting. The setting becomes a *dramatis persona* simply by existing, much in the way that it did for the haunted post-WWII European cinema, betraying trauma, erasure and absence by the simple presence of the setting. The neorealism of the latter finds some analogy in Asian cinema, but the general aesthetic does not translate well to that found in most Asian cinema—from neo-noir to dystopic futures to saccharine weepies to teletechnological horror films.

The intensely futural nature of much Asian cinema rests more comfortably in surrealist engagements with space and temporality, rendering it a fecund site for traversing imaginaries.

Given the transnational nature of most theatrical films, attempting to determine anything as something heterogeneous and diverse as that which would fall under the rubric “Asian cinema,” much less a nationalist cinema, proves well nigh impossible, and the taxonomies become mere tags with only the vaguest sense of definitional integrity. These are concerns this collection addresses directly and boldly, attempting to wrest some specificities as to how scopic and spatial regimes have manifested in certain sectors of the globe that we can sweepingly term Asian. In so doing, the contributors to this volume attempt to foreground that which often serves as background in cinema and life, to question further the ground upon which we stand and think. As the epigraph from artist and theorist Victor Burgin that graces this brief foreword asserts, space does indeed have a history; in fact it has many and many of these have been and continue to be cinematic.

NOTES

1. Victor Burgin, *In/different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 40.
2. Ryan Bishop and John Phillips, “The Urban Problematic,” in *Theory Culture & Society* 30, Nos. 7/8 (2013): 235–36.
3. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Yeo Wei-Wei, “Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity,” in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 6–7.

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Acknowledgments

This book arose out of the workshop *Performing Space in Asian Film: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, co-chaired by Lilian Chee, Charles Leary and Edna Lim, held in February 2010 at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore. Our sincere thanks to the speakers and discussants whose engaging papers and thoughtful comments were instrumental in developing this collection: Ackbar Abbas, Ahmad Mashadi, Amir Muhammad, Paramita Brahmachari, Thosaeng Chaochuti, Esther Cheung, Kukhee Choo, Chua Beng Huat, Ma. Ledda Brina Docot, Colin Goh, Duncan Harte, May Adadol Ingawanij, Izumi Kuroishi, Lai Chee Kien, Charles Leary, Lee Hyunjung, Sohl Lee, Erik Gerard L'Heureux, Liew Kai Khiun, Intan Paramaditha, Ugoran Prasad, Paul Rae, Christophe Robert, Tsuto Sakamoto, Florian Benjamin Schaetz, Tan Pin Pin, Tan See Kam, Jocelyn Woo Yen Yen and Gilbert Yeoh.

We thank Ackbar Abbas for his captivating keynote lecture, which invigorated the thematic focus of the workshop and expanded its intellectual concerns to a wider audience. His paper is developed here in this volume. Our heartfelt thanks to Ryan Bishop who has been generous with his time and advice, and for also contributing the Foreword to this publication.

We are especially grateful to Chua Beng Huat for his unstinting support and advice in the nascent stages of this project, and the Asia Research Institute for generously funding the workshop. Special thanks to Valerie Yeo, whose thoroughness in organizing the workshop made such a big difference. And to Charles Leary for offering precise feedback in the initial stages of the conference call.

In addition to select papers developed from the workshop, six new chapters were commissioned for this volume. Our gratitude to all the contributors who have moved beyond their disciplinary boundaries, and responded to the subject of “the use of space” with such vigor and attention. At Routledge, Felisa Salvago-Keyes and Nancy Chen provided a crucial support structure for this publication. We are grateful to them and to Lynne Askin-Roush for their patience and dedication in seeing this to its completion.

Lilian Chee acknowledges the Ministry of Education Singapore’s start-up grant and MOE-National University of Singapore’s academic research Tier

1 funding, and the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore for their support. She thanks Barbara Penner and Peter Sim for their thought-provoking questions and constructive suggestions. She is especially grateful to Vani S. whose astute knowledge and generosity of spirit significantly lifted the quality of the original manuscript. Edna Lim is grateful to the Theatre Studies Programme and the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore for supporting this work, and would like to especially thank Yong Li Lan for her constant belief, encouragement and guidance.

1 Asian Films and the Potential of Cinematic Space

Lilian Chee and Edna Lim

The foregrounding of space as the subject of inquiry in film studies is, in itself, not new. Indeed, the variety of scholarly work that focus on space in cinema is as wide-ranging as the ways in which space may be defined; from discussions on landscape, geography and cartography in films to how space is constructed in particular genres (such as science fiction) and cinematic representations of urban space and particular cities, as well as within the boundaries of specific cinemas (such as European, notably Italian, cinemas).¹

This book is concerned, on the one hand, with how cinematic space can be used to study, understand and reveal new perspectives on Asian cinemas, and on the other, to reciprocally employ these cinematic spaces as a means to understand the construction and production of physical spaces within a national milieu. Given its cultural diversity and immense geographical coverage, we acknowledge that “Asia” is a conceptually problematic term and use it here as a broad label to bring together a limited range of cinematic practices. Our intention is not to develop an Asian-based theory for exploring Asian cinema through space or to propose an Asian conception of space. Nor do we assume that Asian cinemas use space differently from other cinemas. Instead, this book forwards the proposition that a dedicated study of how space is used in a range of Asian films could potentially allow us to learn more about cinema in Asia in ways that are either new or relatively unexplored. The aim is to respect the cultural diversity of “Asia” as a series of relatable but independent entities through chapters that seek to represent this plurality while also recognizing the possible commonalities and overlaps between different cinematic practices. Mindful of the global and transnational flows of capital, labor, culture and commodity impacting these cinemas, this book also argues that a productive understanding of transnational mobility can be achieved when viewed in tension with specific national ambitions. As such, the inquiry is couched within the remits of a range of Asian cinemas and foregrounds cinematic space as the site of inquiry in films from different genres across various cinemas in Southeast, South and East Asia. The chapters focus on the negotiations that occur within these cinemas and takes into account the specificity of geopolitical contexts, different articulations of nation and

2 *Lilian Chee and Edna Lim*

nationhood and how these issues are enacted in cinematic performances and representations of space.

In this volume, space is projected as a conceptual tool that allows access, consciously or unconsciously, to the latent political, social and cultural ideologies underpinning a geopolitical region. We are interested in the role of space in film, that is, when such ideologies find material expression in spaces portrayed through filmic media. What we propose here follows on from Frederic Jameson's argument that "the political content of daily life, with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the filmmaker must work"² finds its unembellished form in a series of spaces and locales, which when read closely suggest that they are more than just *mise-en-scène*. The essays here propose that space becomes the prime motivator of filmic plot, narrative and style. More importantly, such cinematic space ultimately reveals the "emergence of profound contradictions"³ that mark the material or absolute spaces to which the films refer. In particular for this volume, such contradictions revolve around the persistent dialectic of the national and the transnational, with their attendant sites and spaces, as these ideologies and identities are played out in the cinematic spaces of Asian films.

Taking its cue from the multidimensional potentials of space as a conceptual tool to unpick Asian films, this book engages the relationships, outcomes and discourse which ensue between space and film by exploring the performance of space in Asian films in two ways: how cinematic space (re)produces or (re)imagines the material space to which it refers, and the implications that such negotiations reveal about national cinematic practice(s) in an increasingly transnational field.

TRANSNATIONALISM AND NATIONAL CINEMA

Current research on Asian cinemas tends to involve what Mette Hjort calls "the 'transnational turn' in film studies."⁴ Indeed, the currency of transnationalism seems to have elevated critical conceptions of Asian cinemas from the boundaries of area studies. As Hjort puts it:

The assumption, much of the time, seems to be that 'transnationalism' is the new virtue of film studies, a term that picks out processes and features that necessarily warrant affirmation as signs, amongst other things, of a welcome demise of ideologically suspect nation-states and the cinematic arrangements to which they give rise.⁵

Defined by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden as "the global forces that link people or institutions across nations," transnationalism emphasizes the globalization, networks and flows that underpin film production, distribution and exhibition.⁶ Based on the assumption that cinema is international,

transnationalism complicates and questions the adequacy of viewing films within the seemingly outmoded rubric of national cinema. As Kathleen Newman observes, “changes in film industries and in film style are now understood not merely to be a response to national conditions and pressures, but also to have, most always, multiple international determinants.”⁷ As such, “[b]orders are seen to have always been permeable, societies always hybrid, and international film history to have been key to the process of globalization.”⁸

Although transnationalism has played a key role in integrating Asian cinemas, particularly those of less developed countries, within a globalized community and network of cinematic production and consumption, it is, nonetheless, also a problematic concept that urgently needs critical definition or risk exhausting its value as a “virtue” in film studies. As Hjort points out: “Oftentimes the term functions as shorthand for a series of assumptions about [contemporary] networked and globalized realities . . . and it is these assumptions, rather than explicit definitions, that lend semantic content to ‘transnational’.”⁹ Moreover, as she notes:

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that a number of film scholars are tiring of the endless incantation of ‘transnational’ and are beginning to ask themselves whether the very cinematic phenomena currently being described in 2009 as transnational would not, just some ten years previously, have been discussed in terms of a now allegedly outdated national cinemas paradigm.¹⁰

Transnationalism, as the trendy, relatively new buzzword in film studies is, in short, in danger of burning out if its critical possibilities are not properly arrested, developed and advanced. To that end, Hjort calls for “a far more polemical and less unitary discourse about cinematic transnationalism” and clarifies her own view that:

the more valuable forms of cinematic transnationalism feature at least two qualities: a resistance to globalization as cultural homogenization; and a commitment to ensuring that certain economic realities associated with filmmaking do not eclipse the pursuit of aesthetic, artistic, social and political values.¹¹

This collection of essays follows Hjort’s valuation of transnationalism. Here, the conception of transnationalism is less about “transcending” national boundaries or the taken-for-granted-ness of what Newman sees as the “geopolitical decentering of the discipline,”¹² but takes on an inter-national perspective, where the emphasis is on the prefix “inter-.” Unlike its implication in the term “international,” which Nataša Đurovičová sees as “predicated on political systems in a latent relationship of parity,”¹³ the prefix is used here to highlight the inter-relation and inter-action of cinematic connections that acknowledges the mobility of cinema and the uneven relationship

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between cinemas. This is consistent with what Ďurovičová views of the “transnational” as an “intermediate and open term” receptive to the “modalities of geopolitical forms, social relations and especially the variant *scale* [sic] on which relations in film history have occurred that this key term its dynamic force, and its utility as a frame for hypotheses about emergent forms.”¹⁴ According to Ezra and Rowden, “the transnational at once transcends the national and pre-supposes it.”¹⁵ As such, far from signaling its demise, integral to this conception of transnationalism is a (paradoxically) renewed focus on national cinema as a simultaneous point of access and departure. The national is no longer viewed in isolation but within the context of the global, underscoring the role and theorizing of the national in an age of permeable boundaries where, according to Jürgen Habermas:

we must distinguish between two different things: on the one hand, the cognitive dissonances that lead to a hardening of national identities as different cultural forms of life come into collision; on the other, the hybrid differentiations that soften native cultures and comparatively homogeneous forms of life in the wake of assimilation into a single material world culture.¹⁶

Habermas’ “two different things” inform not only current cinematic practices but also the study of it as critical trajectories move beyond conventional perspectives of national cinema towards a consideration of the transnational, requiring a reframing of how we think about the interaction between cinema and the nation. According to Chris Berry, “[w]ithin this framework, the national is no longer confined to the form of the territorial nation-state but multiple, proliferating, contested and overlapping.”¹⁷

This framing of the national is important if we are to understand cinemas, particularly the lesser known and/or those of less developed nations, as not just connected to and imbricated in a global network, participating in and producing an international film history, but also as functioning within the scope and scale of particular cultural, social and political movements and transformations within nations and nation states. As Dudley Andrew observes, “[q]uite distinct strains of national and regional styles and genres surely tell several histories of East Asian film, each harbouring its particular idea of cinema.”¹⁸ It is, therefore, the aim of this volume to find, through a focused perspective on cinematic space as a methodological tool, these “distinct strains” in South, East and Southeast Asian films and discover their particular idea(s) of cinema.

CINEMATIC SPACE

Cinematic space is represented or produced space, and if, as Henri Lefebvre argues, “space is produced, then the ‘object’ of interest must . . . shift from

things in space to the actual *production of space*.”¹⁹ Lefebvre’s theorizing of space is the starting point for Yingjing Zhang’s recent *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, one of the few published works that focus on space in general, and Asian cinema in particular. However, whereas Zhang emphasizes how spaces of production and reception affect our encounters with films from mainland China, this volume interrogates instead the (re)production of space(s) in Asian cinemas, and provides a critical context for understanding Asian film via space; and vice versa for negotiating meanings and constructions of nation and the space(s) implicated in such constructions via film.

Since its inception, theoretical discussions on film as art have focused primarily on the medium’s ontological relationship with reality; between the realist position that film records reality and the formalist view that film renders reality. These schools of thought seem so fundamentally opposed as to never be reconciled. However, according to Irving Singer, the formalist–realist divide could be less divergent than previously realized. He argues that formalists like Sergei Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim and Béla Belázy “are aware that film ‘captures’ reality, in one sense or another,”²⁰ whereas realists like Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin “also understand that films are not just reproductions.”²¹ As such, he states that whereas “reality may be revealed through photographic images . . . the use of these images shows the extent to which reality has been transformed.”²² Nataša Đurovičová goes further and characterizes the medium as “indebted at once to photographic capture of space and to movement, mobility, displacement,”²³ built “on the paired desires to bring the distant closer and to make the proximate strange enough to be worth seeing.”²⁴ If this is so, then the experience of watching a film involves a kind of “double vision” that she describes as akin to irony in literary terms, or the same “consciousness of doubleness” that Richard Bauman ascribes as central to performance.²⁵ Marvin Carlson singles out Bauman’s articulation that

all performance involves consciousness of doubleness, according to which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action.²⁶

Hence, the difference between “performing” and “doing” is that the former “introduces a consciousness” to normative actions (“doing”), enabling a critical reappraisal of such actions, which may otherwise remain opaque, perfunctory or mundane.²⁷ For film, this difference is translated into the consciousness of the medium’s doubling of reality. This consciousness can take two forms: on the part of the person/thing performing (i.e. the deliberate process of filmmaking and/or a film’s emphasis on verisimilitude) and the people watching the performance (i.e. the audience is conscious of the constructedness of what they are watching).

How a film performs, how it uses photographic images, is determined by the formal configurations of that film’s style. This is especially evident when

applied to space because the setting in a film is perhaps the most tangible visual reference that a film makes to the reality it refers. The choice of setting gives us important information about, and affects our understanding of, characters and the world they inhabit. It can refer to a real space or locale, giving audiences a frame of reference for the film's diegesis and so also its narrative. However, the design of the setting can also create particular views of that space that may differ from, or reinforce prior, knowledge or impressions of that space to which it refers. The composition of a shot and the space of a frame can determine what we see, and affect how we see what we see. Editing techniques can articulate specific relationships among spaces whereas sound effects like music can also affect how spaces register with audiences. Therefore, although a film may refer to, or even contain, photographic images of real space(s) in a recognized world, how it chooses to use, depict and articulate that space transforms it and produces a particular realization, version or performance that can interrogate, impact and inform the 'reality' to which it refers or (re)produces. As such, although setting as a function of *mise-en-scène* locates narrative and gives it context, the narrative in turn also dislocates and recontextualizes the deployment of space as performative.

How cinematic space performs, therefore, is the central focus of this collection of essays. Here, space is foregrounded as a conceptual tool. Some qualifying remarks are necessary to establish what we mean by this. Although cinematic space may be understood as one possible representation of space—a condition 'out there' which has been conceptualized, aestheticized, and expressed as a reflection of such an entity—there are prevailing arguments that space should not be seen as embedding only one modality at any one time.²⁸ Instead, the interpretation and internalization of space (and here we refer specifically to cinematic space) as well as the ideologies such a space implicitly holds, relies on the imagination of that space as triadic or trilectical, that is, space should be understood *simultaneously* as what is represented (aestheticized or otherwise), what is actual (because it draws upon the "raw material" out there) and what is ultimately experienced (because the images that circulate around us tend to influence how and what we perceive).

What this means is that cinematic space is emblematic of a larger conception of space within the ideological tendencies associated with national or transnational movements or peoples. Consequently, the study of cinematic space has wider repercussions on the actualized politics of space as a symptom of nation building, or as embedding the seeds of a more complex, and fluid, transnational idiom. Through an understanding of this representation of space via cinema, one traverses complex and multiply coded identitarian questions dealing with issues of location and displacement such as belonging, spatial justice, rights or access to the city and its modes of expression, the rural and the dispossessed, loss, estrangement, migration, diaspora, self-exile, alienation and naturalization.

The triadic notion of space as inseparably actual, represented and experienced is delineated in geographer David Harvey's *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*.²⁹ Harvey frames space, which he sees as coterminous with time, in two parallel, and comparable, dimensions. The first dimension describes space (and time) as absolute, relative or relational; the second dimension (following Henri Lefebvre's definition) sees spaces as materially sensed, conceptualized or lived.³⁰ Harvey argues that the two schemas share some common points, and when combined, give us a multi-dimensional perception of space and time.

Absolute space refers to space perceived through measurement and calculation. It is a "space of cadastral mapping."³¹ This space corresponds to Lefebvre's materially sensed space, which is perceived through our direct sensorial engagement and primary experience with a physical environment. The next two definitions of space—relative and relational; or conceptualized and lived—are much more entwined in their relationships with each other. On this other level, space may be understood as relative to where others are located. Thus, space is defined through its specific surrounding contexts and communities of people, objects, events, practices, and locales, which are in turn, subject to movement and time. Conceptualized space or "representations of space" describes the abstracted representations of space deployed to depict how we perceive a space. Conceptualized space may be manifested through texts, diagrams, pictures, graphs, geometry, and mathematics. This is primarily the space that appears in the drawings of architects and planners, the space that circulates on the internet, as well as the space which materializes in film, art, poetry and literature. Harvey cautions that the fit between materially sensed space and what is represented is often open-ended as "concepts, codes, and abstractions" are used to depict our primary experiences, and these modes of deciphering are often subject to the specific cultural contexts or milieu in which we operate.³² Such abstract representations are further related to a third category which Lefebvre awkwardly calls "spaces of representation" or what Harvey prefers to refer to as "space as lived." Lived space is how our appreciation (affinity, fear or indifference) towards space is cultivated through our physical and emotional experiences as well as our cumulative worldview.

Harvey's combination of the two schemas underscores the importance of understanding representations of space—of which cinematic space is a subset—as simultaneously reflecting *and* producing what is "out there." It then makes sense to think of space in film as one part of a trilectical tool that underpins larger questions related to location, locality, and place, and as a consequence of this, leading on to issues of belonging, rootedness, and mobility, whether elected or forced. Thus, the study of space in film is not an end unto itself, but a means to engage entanglements of politics, culture, social life and the individual within a geopolitical region like Asia where the ambitions of state, nation and its peoples have often been too easily conflated or otherwise purposefully repressed.

NATION, NATIONALISM, NATION SPACE

The definition of nation, according to Benedict Anderson, is “an imagined political community,” which hinges on the imagination or the invention of a comradeship amongst peoples who will “never know most of their fellow-members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”³³ Anderson’s understanding of nation is premised on a collective imagination, or a shared image of what “a people” may be. This imagination is often enacted within a network of spaces and events, or sites and practices that facilitate the placement and movement of such peoples. Rather than hypothesize “nation” as a static entity, Anderson’s definition may be interpreted as performative—nationhood is consequently constituted through a reflective action that reworks an existing image or idea of community. Nations, as Michael J. Shapiro reminds us, “should be regarded as dynamic and contentious domains of practice. . . . At a symbolic level, they are imaginaries (abstract domains of collective coherence and attachment), which persists through a complex set of institutionalized modes of inclusion and exclusion.”³⁴

At the same time, there is strong support against nationalism which can be perceived as masochistic, divisive, and as Anthony Giddens argues, downright “belligerent.”³⁵ Yet, nationalism still matters because it is a shared concept which “helps locate an experience of belonging” in a world inundated by global flows; “underwrites the struggle against the fantastically unequal and exploitative terms on which global integration is achieved,” and more importantly because it offers “a deeply influential and compelling account of identities and structures in the world.”³⁶ Inasmuch as nationalism is criticized as anti-democratic, the nation is also a structure of integration—it consolidates solidarity and enables international cooperation.³⁷

Consequently, nationalism is an “ambiguous and contradictory construction” manifested through a complex ordering principle involving politics, culture, and society, whose intertwined roles are played out in time and space.³⁸ Nationalism may also be associated with the state, hence, the portmanteau term “nation-state,” although nationalism can be a sentiment belonging to individuals and groups not connected to the state’s larger agenda. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott describes how state attempts to make society legible have entailed officials taking “exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, such as land tenure customs or naming customs, and [creating] a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored.”³⁹ As Scott points out, what is fascinating is not the standard legible grid but instead what escapes or cannot be accommodated by this grid. Thus, although there are obvious architectural edifices which exemplify the political will of a state such as key civic buildings (parliament houses, courts of justice, presidential palaces), monuments and public plazas, the essays in this book explore the way national preoccupations and imaginations are taken up by nonstate actors in spaces not specifically constructed for state

purposes.⁴⁰ These spaces differ in types, occupancy and scales: from dwellings to landscapes, construction sites to rooms, urban to rural, actualized to projected. In comparison to state edifices, these spaces are consequentially more nuanced in their encoding of meanings arising from national or nationwide preoccupations.

All space is political. Space is “fundamental in any exercise of power.”⁴¹ Its political dimension comes from its “ability to link the social, symbolic and experiential,” and the “transformative politics” of space arises from how these different dimensions are manipulated.⁴² For Margaret Kohn, spatial configurations can either naturalize or transform fluid social relations so that these appear “immutable” or empowering:

The physical environment is political mythology realized, embodied, materialized. It inculcates a set of enduring dispositions that incline agents to act and react in regular ways even in the absence of any explicit rules or constraints.⁴³

Following Kohn’s argument, the essays in this volume explore the ways in which space is implicated in the conscious or unconscious articulation of national (or transnational) identities and politics. The affinities between national cinema and space seem significant although this relationship has not been exhaustively explored, save for a few examples.⁴⁴ As David B. Clarke notes, rather than analytically dissected, the visual representation of space, vis à vis the city in film, has been largely disregarded as “specialist,” “tangential” or “maverick.”⁴⁵ This volume aims to fill this gap by advancing the primacy of space. It does so by exploring how Asian film may be critically understood through the spatial networks it reflects, projects, and ultimately produces.

This book is structured around the performative potential and implications of space in Asian films. By this we are interested in how space is called upon to construct and reconstruct particular forms of identities, meanings and situations, which in this case, will be specifically studied in the context of particular national cinemas and cinematic practices. For our purposes, the representation of spaces in film is taken as a discursive text, not as a mirror of reality, nor a binary relationship featuring fiction versus fact. We suggest that film in its various formats—feature, shorts, propaganda, documentary, experimental, and amateur—may offer a series of “texts” or ideas, which reveal how spaces are reflected, constructed, and how they may be performative, transformed or transgressed. This concept exposes the constructed nature of space, reinforcing the argument that space, whether real or imagined, cannot be essentialized. It is neither reified nor static, but evolves according to the dynamics of experience (use and occupation) and interpretation (translation and reproduction). This would begin to suggest that space as imagined, constructed and/or transformed within the contexts of specific cinematic practices, through narrative, genre, or the work of particular

filmmakers, enacts and exposes how Asian films perform, engage and relate to the national—complicated by micropolitics, myriad subcultures, as well as transnational, and global interventions and interests.

The essays in this volume foreground the use of space in Asian films as sites of inquiry that open up new perspectives to the study of Asian cinema. These examples are by no means exhaustive. Indeed, the objective of this book is not to close the argument but to introduce new ways of seeing and discussing Asian cinemas.

SPACE IN ASIAN CINEMAS

Forwarding the book's overarching interest in cultivating new perspectives on cinemas in Asia through space and vice versa, for understanding Asian space through films, Ackbar Abbas' chapter, "Between the Visible and the Intelligible in Asian Cinema," directly addresses the complex and rapidly changing relationship between space and cinema in a globalized world of intricate information networks and mediatization. He argues that whereas space is both socially produced and produces the social, space itself has also become so complex and enigmatic that it cannot be directly described. Urban spaces in particular are like black holes: we perceive them only in the effects they produce; effects that we call "architecture," "cinema," "new media" and so on. All these cultural forms can be thought of as different ways of performing space. Film, he notes, can be taken to be the paradigmatic case. By focusing on disconnections, including the disconnection between the visible and the intelligible, *film*—specifically the films he discusses as examples—allows us to glimpse a problematic space that looks recognizable enough but whose internal ordering principles have changed. Cinema enables us, therefore, to trace a spatial history that would otherwise remain hidden.

Following on from Abbas' chapter, the subsequent chapters in this book are structured around three spatial themes that deal with the struggles for identity, belonging, autonomy, and mobility within different national and transnational contexts across Asia. The themes of *ephemerality*, *imagination* and *contestation* delineate how spaces are negotiated by nonstate actors to engage with nationwide preoccupations, whether such engagements result in co-option, resistance or active transformation of the status quo. The essays use space as a discursive tool in two ways. On the one hand, they attempt to negotiate the agendas and subtexts in Asian cinema through the study of spaces in the films. On the other hand, they engage these cinematic spaces in order to understand the construction and constitution of physical spaces that are reproduced in these films.

In *The City of Collective Memory*, M. Christine Boyer discusses two diverging views of space by Maurice Halbwachs and Walter Benjamin respectively. Both Halbwachs and Benjamin converged on the point that

“collective memory always is embedded in a spatial framework.”⁴⁶ For Halbwachs, city spaces remained enduring and unchanging even in the face of calamity:

It is to space—the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination—that we must turn our attention to. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear.⁴⁷

In contrast, Benjamin argued that the spatial structures which aided memory were continuously under threat, and would ultimately be destroyed by the forces of progress. Such gradual decay was abetted by the advent of the photographic image, which simultaneously recorded each detail to precision but also relegated the past to “a pile of rubble” waiting to be “appropriated and recorded.”⁴⁸ The essays under *Ephemeral Space* suggest that cinematic space may straddle the divide between Halbwach’s and Benjamin’s polarized worlds. This relies on cinematic space’s capacity to depict the rich narrative and temporal qualities of these transitory spatial frameworks, caught as they were, in the midst of change. The contributors reevaluate disappearing and fragile spaces and structures, posing these as productive new modes for approaching identitarian issues entangled with memory, tradition and loss.

Examining Trần Anh Hùng’s *Vertical Ray of the Sun*, Christophe Robert asks whether there is an emerging genre of Vietnamese self-expression which strategically transforms the nation’s violent wartime past into an introspective survey of nostalgic spaces linked to longing, anxiety and loss. Although Hùng’s film raises issues such as extreme poverty and abjection, which have been, until recently, censored and repressed by the state, there is also ambiguity as to whether such nostalgic spaces and their stock narratives can effectively reclaim new sites for understanding loss as a regenerative process.

In comparison to Hùng’s ambivalence towards a repressed past, Chinese director Jia Zhangke’s cinematic cities depict, as Esther M. K. Cheung argues, a nation in drift. Focusing on Jia’s *Still Life* and *24 City*, Cheung sees the assembling and dismantling of cities through the picturesque ruins and grimy construction sites as both realistic and allegorical—simultaneously documenting what is ongoing in real time but also creating an open-ended critique on the kind of loss and destruction which accompanies capitalism and modernization. Jia’s perspective of space also resembles the Situationist *détournement*, a tactic of journeying and movement which juxtaposes normative space with aspects of the extraordinary, surprising and shocking.

The leitmotif of transience is carried into Lilian Chee’s chapter on Singapore filmmaker Tan Pin Pin’s work. It focuses on Tan’s underlying spatial narratives of Singapore’s capitalistic urbanism, and the filmmaker’s bid to create a topographical montage of the city-state’s peripheral spaces, shaped

as it were from below—through occupancy, everyday use, personal history, and habit. Examining Tan’s postmodern and posthuman spatial perspectives in six films, including *Moving House*, *Singapore GaGa*, *The Impossibility of Knowing*, *Snow City* and *Yangtze Scribbler*, Chee argues for a latent network of affective spaces which arise from Tan’s preoccupation with, and ambivalence towards, entangled issues of nationalism, individualism, tradition and modernity in contemporary Singapore.

Contrasting Singapore’s sociopolitical stability, Adam Knee demonstrates the volatile and oppositional conceptions of Thai identity as these are played out between two cities—the capital Bangkok and the northern city of Chiang Mai. Examining representations of, and discourses about Chiang Mai in recent Thai cinema, focusing in particular on *The Letter* (*Jod mai rak*), *Ladda Land*, and *Home: Love, Happiness, Memories* (*Home: kwamrak, kwamsuk, kwam songjam*), Knee makes the case that Chiang Mai is distinctively associated with values of home, family, tradition and culture, which are antithetical to Bangkok’s drive towards modernity and globalization.

Imagined Space resonates with Anderson’s definition of a nation as an imagined community of peoples who share a sense of belonging even though they may never know their fellow citizens. However, it also extends this definition by suggesting that cinematic space has historically offered “a new urban imagination, (and) a new structure of visibility” which framed specific modes of seeing.⁴⁹ James Donald argues that cinema has educated its audiences on “ways of seeing and imagining” the city “whether or not they live in one.”⁵⁰ Consequently, our perceptions of physical space are so influenced by cinematic space that the former is at once real but also equally fictional, conjured up through associations and alliances, which are charged with excess imagery and meaning: “the imagined landscape of the city has become inescapably, a cinematic landscape. . . . film represents urban space as itself representational, as simultaneously sensory *and* symbolic.”⁵¹ The essays in this section explore such spatial imaginations.

Deborah Shamoan discusses the implications of a highly fictional but incredibly influential space found in Japanese animation. Evocatively called “superflat”, a description which befits its character, Japanese animators have tended to emphasize sideways two-dimensional motion and a dynamic iconography rather than mimetically reproduce three-dimensional spaces and movement in depth. One recent intriguing example of the superflat style is *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (directed by Shinbo Akiyuki). *Madoka* contrasts modernist, spare architectural settings in the “real” world with a baroque “magical” world composed of superflat montages. As the teenage characters negotiate transitioning from school life to the larger world, personal struggles of love, friendship and sexual maturation take on literally earth-shattering dimensions.

Lai Chee Kien’s chapter casts a fresh critical perspective on Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai’s films by situating these within a Southeast Asian

diasporic milieu particular to Hong Kong in the 1960s. Examining the parallel spaces featured in Wong's trilogy—*Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046*—Lai identifies the emergence of Manila, Singapore, and Phnom Penh/Angkor as corollaries to Hong Kong, the latter acting as an important edge between China and the overseas Chinese communities. He argues that Wong's films reimagine the lost connections between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, expressed particularly through the popular media of film, literature and art.

The notion of “tableau” is introduced as a means to understand how the oft-neglected background space in film, constituted by “extras” with limited narrative roles and their attendant scenes, may destabilize the film's obvious spatiotemporal rhythm and narrative structure. Drawing attention to the 1959 Hong Kong film *Air Hostess*, Charles Leary suggests that its cinematic space collapses the mundane with the primitive, the grotesque, and the absurd. Reading as it were, in between these spaces, Leary argues for a more deconstructed and ambivalent sense of self-presentation in these films, often typecast as monodimensional and without self-critical content.

The concern with consistency among elements of *mise-en-scène* has not always been as important in other national cinemas as it has been in Hollywood cinema. A lack of consistency among realistic and unrealistic parts of *mise-en-scène* in Singapore's Malay-language films persisted into the 1950s and 1960s. In his chapter, Timothy R. White examines this lack of verisimilitude, with special attention on the spaces depicted. White offers explanations for this lack and suggests reasons for the change in the perception towards this lack. He argues that the conception of realism was replaced by another, essentially Western, idea of verisimilitude.

“Space is,” as Rosalyn Deutsche contends, “political, inseparable from the conflictual and uneven social relations that structure specific societies at specific historical moments.”⁵² Through feminist theories on the politics of images, Deutsche argues that visual images (and by extension, films) of the city actively represent and construct the social relations and “identities for viewing subjects.”⁵³ Therefore, often unremarked “vantage points” may purposefully subordinate, obscure, or render invisible other subject positions. The final section, *Contested Space*, interrogates such vantage points and their corollaries. The essays revisit questions of agency, voice, and struggle for autonomy within the fractured, multiple and contradictory conditions and identities present in an Asian geopolitical context. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the contributors posit their arguments via feminist, postcolonial and gendered theories of spatial contestation as a means to recover agency, thus, concurring with Deutsche's opinion that visual representation, or in this case, film, and its contemporary spatial theories, are complicit in spatial production.⁵⁴

Intan Paramaditha and Ugoran Prasad discuss the films of Indonesian filmmaker Garin Nugroho, which illustrate the mismatch between a state-sponsored version of national culture and the rich cacophony of local

traditions found across the nation. Focusing on Nugroho's *Opera Jawa*, which advocates a hybrid aesthetics reflective of this cultural melting pot, Paramaditha and Prasad argue that the spaces in this film enact the idea of nationhood by opposing the essentialized concept of "tradition", yet remains paradoxically bound to the expectations of a transnational, Westernized audience in its insistent exoticization of Indonesian culture. The paper highlights a catch-22 situation in which the struggle for an autonomous, ground-up version of culture, free from national dictates, is ultimately dependent on its perceived audience.

The Korean black-and-white historical fiction *Jiseul* (directed by O Meul) attempts to cinematically enact the trauma of 'Jeju 4.3'—referring to the massacre of Jeju islanders in the anti-communist campaigns begun in 1948 by Korean troops of the then U.S.-backed regime. By closely analyzing selected scenes from the film, Sohl Lee discusses how this cinematic space of homage incorporates the performative elements of the shamanistic ritual (*kut*) to connect the present with the past through the experience of "documentary consciousness." O's poetic depiction of history ultimately moves away from conventionally didactic forms of narrative.

Extrapolating Judith Butler's theories on the performativity of gender, Edna Lim looks at how contemporary Singapore cinema functions as a national cinema. Taking in particular Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* and Royston Tan's *15*, she considers the performance of the "heartland" in these films—the public housing estates that cluster the island and form a significant part of not only the nation's landscape but also its performance of success. Lim argues that the heartland and other spaces in these films operate as sites of performance, consistent with the way films after the 1990s constitute a national cinema that counterperforms (an)other Singapore.

In the final chapter, Anoma Pieris examines the pivotal role of women in Sri Lanka's Black Cinema through the classical trope of Antigone, a figure opposed to violence, war and patriarchal order. Pieris's gendered reading of this figure is set within the context of Sri Lanka's civilian women who have been forcibly co-opted into the nation's conflicts because of their loyalties towards country and overwhelming need to protect their families from harm. Pieris proposes that Black Cinema may be interpreted through the conflicted roles of these women, to understand how their opposing loyalties are painfully negotiated through the cinematic (and real) spaces across the nation.

The contributors to this volume come from different disciplinary backgrounds including, architecture, film and cinema studies, media studies, cultural studies, comparative literature, literature, cultural anthropology, and art history. Although every chapter deals with the use of space in Asian film, each contributor approaches space with different disciplinary concerns. Hence, the perspectives offered here are radically diverse, perhaps even contestable, in their readings of the chosen cinematic texts. We see such diversity as a strength because it expands the interpretive repertoire of the films, as well as enlivening current filmic discourse.

Finally, the variety offered here is deliberate. In an age of permeable boundaries and transnational flows, the writings aim to reveal the performative potential of cinematic space across genres and cinemas. The interdisciplinary perspectives further highlight discursive opportunities arising from new ways of seeing and understanding Asian cinematic connections, practices and responses. These relationships, we argue, are simultaneously particular, multiple and varied, and thus, challenge us to see Asian cinemas and their use of space anew.

NOTES

1. For discussions on landscape, see, for example, Martin Lefebvre, *Landscape and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006). On geography, see, for example, Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner, *Cinema and Landscape Film, Nation and Cultural Geography* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010); Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield (eds.), *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films about the Land* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006). On cartography in films, see, for example, Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*, (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2007). On space in particular genres, see, for example, William H. Katerberg, *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction* (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 2008). On cinematic representations of urban space and the city, see, for example, Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities: Cinema and Urban Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Richard Koeck and Les Roberts, *The City and the Moving Image: Urban Projections*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). On space and specific cinemas, see, for example, Tiziana Ferrero-Regis, *Recent Italian Cinema: Spaces, Contexts, Experiences* (Leicester: Troubador, 2009).
2. Frederic Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 38.
3. Ibid.
4. Mette Hjort, "On the plurality of cinematic transnationalism," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds., Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 13.
5. Ibid., 14.
6. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, "General Introduction: What Is Transnational Cinema," in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.
7. Kathleen Newman, "Notes on Transnational Film Theory: Decentered Subjectivity, Decentered Capitalism," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, 4.
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9. Hjort, "On the plurality of cinematic transnationalism," 13.
10. Ibid., 12.
11. Ibid., 15.
12. Newman, "Notes on Transnational Film Theory," 4.
13. Nataša Đurovičová, "Preface," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen E. Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), x.
14. Ibid.
15. Ezra and Rowden, "General Introduction," 4.

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16. Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. and ed. Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 72–3.
17. Chris Berry, “From National Cinema to Cinema and the National: Chinese-Language Cinema and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s ‘Taiwan Trilogy,’” in *Theorizing National Cinema*, Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemsen, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 2006), 149.
18. Dudley Andrew, “Time Zones and Jet Lag: The Flows and Phases of World Cinema,” in *World Cinemas*, 62.
19. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 37.
20. Irving Singer, *Reality Transformed: Film as Meaning and Technique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 4.
21. *Ibid.*, 7.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Nataša Đurovičová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic Translation,” in *World Cinemas*, 92.
24. *Ibid.*, 90.
25. *Ibid.*, 92.
26. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5.
27. *Ibid.*, 72.
28. See Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 1–4.
29. David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 133–65.
30. *Ibid.*, 134. See also Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38–46.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 142.
33. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2000), 6.
34. Michael J. Shapiro, “Nation States,” in *A Companion to Political Geography*, John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 272.
35. Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 129, cited in Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort, “Introduction,” in *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity*, Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), viii.
36. Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1, 8.
37. *Ibid.*, 147.
38. Hedetoft and Hjort, “Introduction.” x.
39. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How certain schemes to improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 2.
40. For discussions on political will and state-sponsored architecture in the context of capital city designs, see Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
41. Michel Foucault, “Questions on Geography,” in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (London: Harvester, 1980), cited by Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism*, 161.
42. Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 8, cited by Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism*, 158.
43. *Ibid.*
44. See, for example, Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010); Myrto

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2 Between the Visible and Intelligible in Asian Cinema

Ackbar Abbas

No one can be unaware that in Asia today, we are living in a changing space. However, behind the cliché lies an important characteristic of our time: how in the midst of a rapidly changing space, something has happened to the nature of change. *Change itself has changed*. Take, for example, the changes that globalization has brought about in Asia.

Associated with processes like the restructuring of capital and the creation of economic and infrastructural networks, globalization has not only introduced a space that is new and unfamiliar, most obviously in the proliferation of novel forms of architecture. It has also introduced something else more paradoxical, a space that is old and unfamiliar, like when historical areas and buildings are preserved more for the sake of global tourism than for heritage. These preserved buildings may look familiar, but the grids and coordinates by which we understand them have all shifted. The spatial and the historical, the visible and the intelligible, contradict each other at every turn. Take one example that can stand for many: the tourist and entertainment district in Shanghai called Xintiandi. The area uses preserved buildings and replicas of old architecture and design elements to create a sense of instant history and nostalgia for a Shanghai that never was, all in the service of global tourism. We find here not “the shock of the new” but the “shock of the old”; not a case of “the more things change the more they remain the same” but a case of “the more things remain the same, the more they change.” Change has changed.

When it is not just the new that is unfamiliar but also the old, then new and old have lost their measure and appearances are against us. Social space becomes so contradictory and dense that, like black holes, it cannot be observed directly, only deduced from the effects it produces; effects that include cinema, architecture, new media and so on. As effects whose spatial “cause” is occluded, forms like cinema or architecture can no longer be thought of as representations of space; rather, we will have to think of them as performance, where “performance” itself is understood in an expanded sense as responding to, working with, and working through elements of a space we have not mastered or understood.

What I am suggesting is that although there is a relationship between space and performance, it is not (especially in the most interesting cases)

necessarily a direct relationship—just as there are certain symptoms that are not directly related to what caused them. Thus, we might think in terms of two different classes of symptoms: organic symptoms, strictly relatable to what caused them (you have a stomachache after eating something unclean), and hysterical symptoms, which manifest themselves in what seem like exaggerated and arbitrary ways (“anxiety” can manifest itself as migraine, or deafness, or muteness, or verbosity, or eating 30 cans of pineapples, and so on). Performing space, as we have noted, is not the same as representing space. Like the hysterical symptom, performance is both connected to and distanced from social space; we can call the relationship between them a disconnected resemblance. This double relationship of disconnection and resemblance enables us to imagine a history that is more than another chronology of spatial changes; a history that, by focusing on contradictions and anomalies, and by not linking too hastily the visible to the intelligible, allows us to deduce the existence of a spatial formation that would otherwise remain indiscernible or merely glossed over: a spatial history. Let me now try to develop this argument about space, history and performance by reading cinema as a performance of social space.

My first example is *Crazy English* (1999), a documentary film by the Sixth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yuan. The film evokes the spatial history of the New China by documenting the performance of a charismatic and phenomenally successful teacher of English, Li Yang. When performance takes place in a space whose grids and coordinates are tacitly understood, we have the possibility of a *classic* performance, where a lot can be said with a beautiful economy of means. However, when performance takes place in a space where the grids are shifting, then what we find is erratic performance: exaggerated, confusing, ugly at times and at times very funny. Such is the case with *Crazy English*.

In interviews, Li Yang proudly tells us that he failed his university exams several times, and that he failed three semesters of English. So failing to learn English, what does he do? He decides to teach it—or a version of it that he calls “Crazy English.” What Crazy English teaches is not merely language efficiency, but worldly success. English is the language of globalization, and “crazy” means, Li Yang tells us, not mad but “100% commitment”. In the new global world only the paranoid succeed. Hence, the spectacle of student after student repeating earnestly and diligently the line “I want to be crazy,” as if iteration would become identity. Learning Crazy English does not involve linguistics or phonetics or knowledge of any kind. What it involves is performance: the use of hand gestures (patented), and above all, practicing the three extremes (i.e., speaking loudly, quickly and clearly). Course content consists of shouting slogans, a practice reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, except that the slogans now take a new direction. Students practice sentences like:

*Never let your country down!
I want to be somebody someday!
I enjoy losing face!*

Students are not so much learning a new subject (English) as learning to become a new kind of subject through performance. The role model is no longer the Confucian gentleman, the man of letters, or the revolutionary hero, but someone like Li Yang: the media person, the communication expert, the celebrity and, above all, the entrepreneur. Students can learn from him to “enjoy losing face,” and to discard traditional identities and affective attitudes. They learn to become generic, in the sense that Rem Koolhaas gives to that term: the generic not as loss of identity, but as liberation from a fixed identity.¹

The crazy or crazed space of the New China is evoked nowhere more poignantly or hilariously than somewhere near the middle of the film, in a scene when we see Li Yang teaching English to a group of eager PLA soldiers at the Great Wall. The scene is full of historical resonances and dissonances. The Great Wall gives up its historical role as defense against invaders and becomes a tourist site where “foreigners” are welcomed, not repulsed, while the PLA—which since Tiananmen no longer holds its venerable position as the sworn defenders of the people—are now the born-again disciples of Crazy English, eager to learn the new global language.

We see this scene repeated in an uncanny way when the language of global architecture is introduced to Chinese cities. To take just one example, it is none other than Rem Koolhaas who constructed the new CCTV headquarters in Beijing. The question is, why should such an arch-conservative institution like CCTV commission an ultra-modern architect like Rem Koolhaas to design its headquarters? It seems that in many Chinese cities today, what we see everywhere we look, are examples of “crazy architecture” that, like Crazy English, speak loudly, quickly, and clearly.

Consider a second film that also uses the documentary form: Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (2006). We might take this opportunity to discuss briefly the relation of documentary to a problematic space: how does documentary cinema “perform” space? It can do so only by changing the basis on which documentary is made. Theory has shown that the documentary ambition to be “objective” can never be realized, because there are things like “point of view” or “camera angles” involved; furthermore, that it is all representation and the “politics of representation” and so forth. But as we have already noted, performance is not the same as representation. In spite of theoretical doubts, we see today not just the persistence, but the growing importance, of the documentary form, especially in experimental filmmaking. Why is this the case? An explanation I would hazard might go as follows: We know that documentary, like translation, is always a betrayal. But if this is so, we

must start with the fact of betrayal, with the betrayal of fact, and not with “objectivity.” Documentary must become duplicitous, not in the cynical sense that there is no such thing as truth, but in the etymological sense of duplicity as made up of layers and folds. In a relatively stable space, we can try to “seek truth from facts”; in an erratic space, we may first have to “seek facts from lies.” In the duplicitous documentary, nothing is true except the exaggerations, as we already saw with *Crazy English*.

With some of these considerations in mind, let me now turn to Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*. The film is set in a small town called Fengjie on the Yangtze River, which, because of the building of the Three Gorges Dam, is about to be demolished. The film is usually read as a critique of ruthless modernization that does not weigh the human costs, and a celebration of the persistence, courage and resourcefulness of ordinary people. Hence, the Chinese title, *Sanxia Haoren*, The Good People of the Three Gorges, with its Brechtian overtones. But such a reading of *Still Life* as social documentary with humanist overtones does not do justice to the film’s spatial complexity.

First of all, space in the film is not neutral; people disappear in it, or better still it disappears people. The twin plot deals with a coalminer looking for his wife and child who left him sixteen years ago, and a woman looking for a husband who went to work on urban reconstruction in Fengjie two years ago, and was never heard from since, as if he had fallen through some worm hole in space. These holes in space are suggested by another feature. In a film that adheres for the most part to a realist documentary style, certain anomalous details intrude. For example, the characters look up at the sky and see what appears to be a UFO, and in the midst of a town under demolition, we see, incongruously, a newly constructed building—which suddenly takes off like a rocket being launched. It is as if behind the “still life” pictures, beneath the surface, the spatial grids and coordinates were twisting and changing. What the film documents therefore through these anomalies is a social condition that has undergone a spatial twist, just as ‘the socialist market economy’ is a twist in the history of socialism.

These spatial twists are everywhere accompanied by a twist in temporality, and nowhere is this alluded to more clearly than in the changing nature of nostalgia. We usually think of nostalgia as a strong desire to hold onto the past in the face of a confusing present. But what becomes of past and present when time is speeded up? What happens to nostalgia when the present instant becomes so quickly the instant past?

When he arrives in Fengjie, the middle-aged coalminer, Sanming, strikes up an unlikely friendship with Mark, a young local hoodlum. As they exchange phone numbers, we hear the different ring tones on their cell phones. Sanming uses the old song “Bless the Good-Hearted People,” redolent of the Communist era that has long gone. Mark uses the theme song from the popular Hong Kong movie, *A Better Tomorrow* (John Woo, 1986), and likes to quote the line “Present day society doesn’t suit us because we are nostalgic.”

Through this juxtaposition of Sanming and Mark, nostalgia begins to take on novel characteristics. It is no longer a generational phenomenon. Not only are the old with a past nostalgic, so too are the young, with no past to speak of, as if the young were now old before their time. Second, nostalgia belongs not just to the individual. There can be large-scale mass nostalgias, like the curious nostalgias that China in its globalizing phase has been experiencing. One bizarre example is nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution, seen in a brief vogue for Cultural Revolution memorabilia and the appearance of restaurants serving atrocious Cultural Revolution food. When this vogue died down, another took its place: nostalgia for the 1980s, the period that marked the end of the Cultural Revolution when universities, conservatories and art academies were re-opened. But the fact that there can be nostalgia both for the Cultural Revolution and for its demise; the fact that nostalgia can be so arbitrary, the fact that both Sanming and Mark can be subject to it, suggest that what we are dealing with is more like a form of hysteria when time itself is twisted, and history is experienced as hysteria, including the history of socialism itself.

Nowhere is history-as-hysteria more evident than in the current characterization of China as a “socialist market economy.” What does the phrase mean? Are we dealing with the continuing life or death of socialism; or with something else more paradoxical, its afterlife; with a posthumous socialism whose emblem might be Mao’s embalmed body lying in state in Beijing like a preserved building. Socialism in posthumous form can have a vitality stronger than ever before. A specter is haunting China today, we might say, and it is the specter of socialism. Even globalization can be part of such a spectral history: China’s turn to globalization can be thought of not as a contradictory about-face, or as a decision to sleep with the enemy (capitalism), but as the form that a posthumous socialism takes; just as it is only by means of spectral images like the UFO and building-as-rocket that the spectral history of socialism can be evoked.

Let me turn now to a third film, *Infernal Affairs* (2002), by Hong Kong directors Alan Mak and Andrew Lau (a film that Martin Scorsese adapted as *The Departed* in 2006). The film takes the form of melodrama rather than documentary, and it allows us to raise another set of questions that have to do with performance in the space of the spectacle. The best known theorist of the spectacle is of course Guy Debord, but if his notion of the spectacle is still relevant today, it is because in his last book, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, he radically revised his earlier position, arguing that a mutation in the form of the spectacle has taken place: from the “diffused” and “concentrated” forms found in earlier capitalist and authoritarian societies respectively, to a recent merger of the two forms into the “integrated spectacle” that characterizes global society.² What is the “integrated spectacle”? If what integrates global society are information networks, then another word for integrated spectacle might be—information. Moreover, because of the speed with which it moves, information does not necessarily

take on a visual form. This is tantamount to saying that the integrated spectacle confronts us with something of a paradox; it is a spectacle that is no longer spectacular, a spectacle that has reversed itself in that it is more covert than overt, a spectacle that is secret, less concerned with appearance than with disappearance.

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the most remarkable films to come out of post-1997 Hong Kong takes place in just such a space. Using the popular police-and-triad genre, *Infernal Affairs* evokes the strange space of the integrated spectacle: a world of information, secrets, and undercover agents. The plot involves how a police agent infiltrates the triads, and how a triad agent infiltrates the police. The film opens with images of the Buddhist hell, an afterworld of fire and brimstone from which there is no respite, where twisted human figures are punished for their sins. But this opening image is very quickly overlaid with images of cell phones, computers, coded messages and so on (i.e., the space of information). The moral space of Buddhist retribution is dissolved into and recoded as the space of information, which obeys no such moral laws. Furthermore, the two spaces are fused and confused with each other. Just as there is no respite in the Buddhist hell, there is no respite from information (note that even though there is still physical violence, the main action involves the passing of information). Triads and police, like hell and information, are everywhere, and almost indistinguishable from each other. In the confusion, police agents can infiltrate the triads; triad agents can infiltrate the police. The control center has become occult as the opposition between triad and police turns into a fearful symmetry. Debord has a passage in *Comments* that sounds almost like a commentary on *Infernal Affairs* itself:

It is in these conditions that a parodic end of the division of labour suddenly appears. . . . A financier can be a singer, a lawyer a police spy, a baker can parade his literary tastes, an actor can be president. . . . Such picturesque examples . . . go to show that one should never trust someone because of their jobs. . . . Yet the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is still to turn secret agents into revolutionaries and revolutionaries into secret agents.³

The two main characters adopt different affective stances towards the space of information, and perform their secret identities in different ways. The police agent wants to hold on to the possibility of a personal identity that exists beyond information. This makes him capable of all those “old fashioned” things like friendship, fidelity and love; for example, we see him develop genuine camaraderie with some of the triad gang members. But it also introduces moral issues of divided loyalties and the betrayal of friends. In a final attempt to prove his identity, he forces a meeting with the triad agent and gets shot in the head. In contrast, the triad agent only acknowledges the truth of information, however arbitrary. He brackets

identity, protects his alias and would kill to preserve it. Eventually, he even kills the triad boss he works for, the only person who knows his real identity. Murder is simply the deleting of information; there is nothing personal to it. Moral and affective concerns like love and fidelity have all but disappeared and with them all sense of moral ambiguity. The film ends with the triad agent killing the police agent and when the police arrive, the triad agent shows his ID card and says, "I am a cop," and gets away with murder. This ending is a scandalous one for the commercial cinema, and the directors Mak and Lau have provided an alternate ending where the triad agent is arrested by the police; but it is this first ending that carries the logic of information, because it indicates what a dystopic urban future dominated by information might look like: not a hell situated in an afterlife where sinners are tortured by fire, but a hell situated in this life, where things just go on; a cool hell, an "air-conditioned nightmare," where information is processed.

Finally, I want to turn to a work where the issues we have been considering—spatial history, new media, spectacle, information—come together, and "performing space" takes place on a massive scale. I am referring to the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony, under the overall direction of filmmaker Zhang Yimou.

Doubtless, Zhang Yimou was given the assignment because with the popular success of a film like *Hero* (2002), he is regarded as a master of the spectacular effect. *Hero*, we may remember, also had a blatantly ideological theme. The story is about an assassin commissioned to kill the first emperor of China, because of what seems at first to be the cruel and ruthless way by which he governs the country. However, when the two antagonists finally meet, the emperor convinces the assassin that to prevent the country from descending into chaos, order and control are necessary. In the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, we do not find an explicit ideological statement; rather, what we see is the performance of order and control, most obviously in the way the movements of 15,000 performers are choreographed and synchronized. But even more important is the fact that unlike older spectacles that relied on the disciplining of bodies, here control is achieved through technology. It is as if each performer has been transformed into a pixel on a high-definition television screen. In fact, what is most memorable for most viewers about the Olympics Opening Ceremony is the advanced media technology used to produce the spectacular special effects, including the world's largest LED screen, which matched the size of a football field. This suggests that in spite of the presence of 15,000 material bodies on the ground, what is central is the virtual space created by lighting and electronics, an immaterial space that is much more malleable and controllable than actual space (just as lip-sync singing is more controllable than performing live). In this space, 5,000 years of Chinese history can be presented to a world audience in a seamless narrative as a media event. This is the performance of nationhood on an epic scale.

The question we might now ask is: when was the last time China had a comparable media event that riveted the world's attention? And the answer would have to be the tragedy of Tiananmen on June 4, 1989: Beijing Tiananmen Square as bloodshed and atrocity, played out live on television screens all over the world. But with hindsight, and in no way condoning the massacre, Tiananmen was also the first confrontation in Chinese history between two forms of power: the old power of military force and state control, and the new power (which the students knew how to wield) of information and global networks. Although the PLA had guns and tanks and a whole state apparatus behind it, the students had telephones and fax-machines, *Newsweek* and CNN, as well as "world opinion" on their side. In this confrontation, the old state power was made to look awkward and gauche because it had little understanding of new media, relying on old-fashioned violence as the means of reasserting control; hence the massacre, which is also an example of the state losing control. With the Beijing 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremony, the space of Tiananmen 1989 has come full circle. No longer is the state opposed to and suspicious of new media; it has learnt, with the help of filmmakers like Zhang Yimou, to appropriate it, and perform with confidence in this new space.

Only a Fifth Generation filmmaker could have directed the Beijing Opening Ceremony. Unlike the Sixth Generation, which emerged after Tiananmen, the Fifth Generation emerged after the Cultural Revolution, when conservatories, film and art schools, and universities were re-opened. Their films were experimental and film-school influenced, but hardly examples of "independent cinema," as they were largely state-funded. These filmmakers therefore were not predisposed to be hostile to or critical of the state. In fact, it is possible to read *Hero* and the Beijing 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremony as the Fifth Generation paying back a debt of gratitude to the state.

The space of Olympics Opening Ceremony is the space of the "global cultural salon," where cultural annuals, biennials and triennials proliferate, one main purpose of which is to put a city or a nation on the cultural map. This is both an acknowledgement of the importance of culture and its instrumentalization. On the other hand, the link between the Beijing 2008 Opening Ceremony and Tiananmen 1989 that I am proposing introduces a more complex spatial history, and raises the question of cultural memory and forgetting. It shows us that forgetting is also a matter of *remembering something else*; that is, forgetting is additive not subtractive. The 1989 Tiananmen massacre not been, and cannot be, excised from history; but the function of an integrated spectacle like the Beijing 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremony is to give us something else to remember, so that we can forget.

NOTES

1. See Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. "The Generic City," in SMLXL, ed. Jennifer Siegler (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), 1238-64.

2. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imre (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 8–11.
3. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

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Ephemeral Space

3 Notes from Elsewhere

Spaces of Longing in Trần Anh Hùng's *Vertical Ray of the Sun*

Christophe Robert

A PERFECT DAY: ANXIETY, REPETITION AND WORKING THROUGH

Trần Anh Hùng's film *Vertical Ray of the Sun* begins with a foreign song unlikely to be heard in Hanoi in 2000. The soft melody from Lou Reed's "Perfect Day" drifts in the background as a young man wakes his sister. A curtain and a mosquito net separate their beds, two thin veils which she repeatedly pushes aside as the film progresses. This morning scene repeats itself in the initial sequences to mark the passage of days. The repetition, coupled with her playful insistence that they look good as a couple, is underlined by the American song that gradually turns into a refrain. It recurs each time they wake up.

The pastel green and yellow walls of the apartment filter sunlight, refracted from the tree tops. There is no traffic noise from the street below, only this music and those primary colors. This space is a bubble, isolated from the city. It is a refuge, a cocoon, a place akin to Jorge Luis Borges' *Aleph*, said to contain all the world's spaces in its focal point. Framed by recurrent sound-images and flashes of color that interrupt the narrative flow of images,¹ this space gradually expands to include the family members' anxious peregrinations. The initial, peaceful moments of family harmony quickly give way to journeys along treacherous emotional pathways. The slow tempo and purely optical signs that recur throughout the film displace socialist-realist narrative modes common in Vietnamese literature and film. Instead, the repetition of fragmentary images, distressed silences and aborted journeys puncture holes in the smooth surfaces of speech and narrative. Familiar spaces of belonging (family, ritual, wholesome love and political identification) that immediately evoke a recognizable "Vietnam" are displaced: uncanny spaces emerge unpredictably instead, and through them new experiences of longing for an unattainable elsewhere.

The political projects of nationalist anticolonial struggle, and socialist normalization and reconstruction after the Vietnam War, mandated the mobilization of all sectors of society for revolutionary purposes under the

control of the Vietnamese Communist Party.² Hùng's "Vietnam Trilogy" presents a seemingly apolitical reassessment of official Vietnamese cultural nationalism, founded upon popular mobilization for the task of achieving independence, building socialism and developing the country.

Hùng's work, however, unsettles the comfortable national-cultural fictions that frame most Vietnamese intellectual production. In his films, family belonging, ritual practices and cultural nationalism no longer help people make sense of increasingly complex urban lives and desires. For almost a generation now in the wake of economic reforms, the search for meaning has become unmoored from the clichéd repetition of traditional forms of authority and narrative representations of national culture. Hùng creates nondescript aural and visual spaces of longing in the midst of the new boredom, anxieties and alienation of urban lives. Although they suggest rather than show, his representations of incestuous desire or extramarital sexual pleasure have unsettled Vietnamese audiences. The Vietnamese reception of his work domesticates the uncanny spaces and the "elsewhere" of longing and alienation in his films by branding them as foreign—as *other* and non-Vietnamese. Hùng daringly suggests that marriage, family life and ritual may actually leave characters deeply alienated, as they search for alternative "elsewheres." The question here is less what this "elsewhere" may mean or where it could be located but rather to query why the married couples and the younger unmarried sister in *Vertical Ray of the Sun* were so intent on seeking release from alienation, attempting to achieve momentum and release, as opposed to remaining mired in the immobility of ascribed family spaces, roles and speech.

The apparent rejection of Hùng's work in Vietnam—as too foreign and *avant-garde*—suggests a deeper ambivalence about new nondescript spaces and images of time in his films. His fragmentary narratives resist neat dialectical analysis in terms of self and other, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. He introduces anxiety-producing, uncanny spaces of longing. These undermine the fixed binary notions of belonging that buttressed Vietnamese political projects of anticolonial mobilization and struggle during the two Indochina conflicts, or those of postcolonial cultural nationalism. As opposed to suggestions that Hùng presents a quintessential Vietnam, immediately recognizable to Western audiences because he draws on "traditional" motifs—faded colonial villas, street life, family belonging, or iconic spaces such as Ha Long Bay or rural villages—I propose instead that he subtly deconstructs these, albeit in a nostalgic manner. He introduces new ways of seeing and narrating spaces of everyday life that are deeply unsettling, especially to censors and conservative intellectuals, since he suggests that kinship roles, marriage, family and the conundrums of desire unsettle the revered key tenets of official Vietnamese national culture.

The "perfect day" that repeats itself over three mornings soon gives way to ambiguous and contradictory desires. Hùng suggests that dislocations run deep and invisibly underneath the smooth surfaces of daily routines.

These disjunctures are profound and cannot be willed away by recourse to arguments of culture or tradition. No amount of soul searching or conversation among siblings or friends can account for gaps in the inner lives of these psychologically riven and emotionally stunted characters. They face the modern conundrums of urban daily lives that seem to be beyond their emotional and intellectual grasp.³ They have become alien to themselves. Hùng narrates these new disquieting experiences of disjointed belonging and unfulfilled longing by recourse to fragmentary images, by means of what Fernando Pessoa called “the voice of space and landscapes of sound.”⁴ Until now in contemporary Vietnam, this “elsewhere” is still without a language or robust interpreters.

I examine the cracks in the Vietnamese status quo and the desire for an alternative “elsewhere” by analyzing Hùng’s narrative in *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* (2000), and making references to his *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993) and *Cyclo* (1995), and other Vietnamese works. I follow characters from *Vertical Ray of the Sun* in the three journeys that structure the film’s plot: the photographer’s journey to the pristine blue-green seascapes of Ha Long Bay’s islands in search of inner peace; the writer’s sexually charged journey to Saigon in search of past family secrets; and the eldest sister’s ambivalent sexual journey in a hidden and mysterious apartment. These journeys remain inconclusive searches for an elusive, soothing “elsewhere”; they are not enlightening Bildung narratives of self-discovery. Here strange new spaces, sights and encounters reverberate with distorted images that ambivalently undermine the characters’ search for meaning. By the subtle use of nondescript spaces, saturated splotches of color, silences or sound images (such as Lou Reed’s refrain) that puncture the expected narrative flow of images, Hùng convincingly traces the breakdown of communication among characters, couples, siblings and even strangers. Inner monologues themselves erode into muted silences.

A DEATH ANNIVERSARY IN THE SHADOW OF FAMILY SECRETS

The Vertical Ray of the Sun begins on the morning of a death anniversary ceremony. The three sisters chat as they prepare the family banquet meal in memory of their mother’s death. This is a scene of harmony. Human spaces are mirrored by a domesticated nature that houses, protects and feeds. The nostalgic feel of this Edenic abundance is conveyed by the soft reflections of sunlight on the bright green plants in the garden. Yet this is tempered by tensions, silences, unanswered questions, and the elusive, unfulfilled desires that set the film’s narrative into motion.

But first the family banquet unfolds with the ritual performance of kin-group harmony and closeness. Family members take turns praying to deceased parents and family ancestors. With its familiar household scenes

and conversations between relatives, the death anniversary ritual forms an essential and recurrent celebration of the ancestors' ongoing presence. These yearly celebrations delineate family spaces and routines, as embodied in kinship positions and roles. Couples and individuals occupy these in relation to each other and to the world outside. Death anniversary rituals do not mark a space of death, but rather of life through remembrance of the deceased.

Rituals create spaces suspended in time by momentarily disrupting the recurrent rhythms of daily life. In the death anniversary banquet, conversations between family members and reminiscences by the three sisters after the meal, all mark a momentary intensity, captured in the film as comforting spaces of family ritual. These spaces are designated by a temporary suspension of time while still being in time, a succession of routinized gestures of prayer and sharing of food and words. These are spaces of apparent fullness and completion: temporary moments of effervescence and harmony that eventually subside into the routine patterns and rhythms of "normal" time and everyday life.

Yet, these apparently harmonious spaces of family, ritual and tradition are rent by tensions that remain largely unarticulated, but begin to surface soon after the ceremony ends. In the beginning of the film, familial spaces are first articulated by ceremony, and in response to ritual space-time and memories of ancestors' past lives. The formal and routinized language of the ritual family banquet gradually gives way to painful attempts to voice what cannot be voiced, yearnings and longing desires that the characters themselves cannot articulate, or face directly or comfortably.

In *Vertical Ray of the Sun* these desires are expressed indirectly by means of wanderings and journeys. These passages expand the film's narrative beyond familiar household spaces with their soothing pastel interiors and warm colors, toward an unnamed "elsewhere" which the characters long for in order to break free from the suffocating hold of everyday life. Tensions between spouses reemerge instantly after the end of the ritual; couples once again face the weight of silence, suspicion and unvoiced desires. The eldest sister and her photographer husband are estranged, tense and silent. The next morning he departs without exchanging more than a few words with his wife and child. The middle sister and her husband, a writer, share a deep complicity, but he too departs, in a search for family secrets in faraway southern Vietnam. She remains behind in Hanoi, hopeful but anxious. The writer is troubled by his inability to complete his novel and momentarily contemplates a sexual tryst while away in Saigon. Meanwhile, in Hanoi, the third journey depicts the eldest sister's ambivalent attempts to end a sexual affair. These three journeys are punctuated and interrupted by the sudden irruption of patches of color, and by recurrent sound motifs that fragment and displace the characters' (and viewers') hopes for the familiar narratives of self-discovery or redemption.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER: DOUBLED SPACES OF AMBIVALENT OSCILLATION

The day after the death anniversary the photographer leaves on a field trip to a remote and eerie site in Ha Long Bay. Bustling and crowded Hanoi, with its dense interpersonal and kinship networks, gives way to wide, empty, silent and mysterious spaces. The photographer and his colleagues camp on a remote island. They are alone, except for an old fisherman whose small skiff drifts silently on the green waters of the bay.

Upon his arrival at a lone boathouse in a remote cove, we realize that the photographer has another family. The young boy and the woman whose faces we recognize from his secret photographic archive live here, tucked away in a maze of coastal islands among fantastic rock formations rising from the green waters. The photographer speaks very little, except in interior monologues punctuated by brief remarks to his “second wife.” These sound more like fragments of an inner struggle than any real dialogue between two parents. He is clearly torn and ambivalent about what to do next.

Spaces have shifted visually toward empty places that mirror his emotional struggle. The loud and chatty spaces of the household and festive ritual in Hanoi provided a social structure in which characters somehow found a position by virtue of kinship relations. The quiet spaces of the islands and green waters of Ha Long Bay provide no such answer, no possibility for positioning oneself in relation to others. The others in relation to whom the photographer tries to situate himself are elsewhere: the woman and young son he visits on this remote islet do not echo the tranquility that reverberates from the still water landscape. The photographer’s journey and translation across space does not provide an escape or even a temporary way out of a tense, personal situation. Instead they redirect his longing back towards the city, and the family he left behind. His inner chaos is marked by ambivalent oscillation: the loud spaces of the city and family cannot simply be contrasted to the quiet and reflective spaces of these remote islands. In spite of external differences, both sets of spaces are similar, bounded by impossible relations to one’s double: two women occupying the position of wife, two young sons and a man who ferries back and forth across these spaces, as lost to himself as he is to both women simultaneously.

This journey from chaotic city to peaceful countryside (or sea) does not provide the usual metaphoric possibilities of release from urban impurities, desires and pollution in a pristine, primitive landscape. Instead the desire for something else, for release perhaps, or at least for quiet and contemplation, is undermined by demands of kinship and belonging that cannot be fulfilled in both spaces at once. The photographer’s loss of sexual desire in Hanoi is not necessarily relieved in Ha Long Bay. Quiet seawaters send his mind wandering back to the city’s bustle and the problems he left behind.

THE WRITER: SUBLIMATION OF NON-CONSUMMATED DESIRE

The writer flies to Saigon to seek information about his mother-in-law's youthful love. He searches for a narrative that would help the siblings make sense of their parents' past. He is an articulate man. He releases tensions and blockages from writing through love. His relation to his wife is harmonious and fulfilling. They are visibly affectionate with each other. Shortly before he departs for Saigon she announces that she is pregnant and asks him to keep this news private for the moment.

On the plane to Saigon he notices a beautiful young woman. Her alluring presence is visually signaled by a tight, short red dress and high heels. This attractive figure reappears later with haunting insistence. She sits alone at the hotel bar. They do not speak. She discreetly writes down her room number on a piece of paper and leaves it behind as she retires for the night. In the hallway the door to her room is ajar. The writer pushes it open and enters. She has fallen asleep lying on the bed in her red dress. He observes her for a long while without waking her. The oblique camera shot takes in the whole room. We gaze sideways at the writer gazing down at the sleeping woman. The red spot of her dress in the dark room and the eerie fluorescent blue light reflecting from the swimming pool outside are arresting. Nothing and no one moves. The contrast between bright red and bright blue interrupts the narrative flow: colors saturate the screen and the mind. The writer leaves the room silently and closes the door behind him.

His wife later finds the note in his jacket's pocket. The silent exchange of gazes and the fact that the writer did not sleep with the stranger in the red dress further accentuate the theme of unfulfilled journeys and movements across spaces that take protagonists back to where they began, though with added complications.

The writer's journey to Saigon is a voyage into lost time, into the unknowable past of the siblings' mother before she married. The revelation of a family secret opens up new narrative possibilities, though there is no hint of impropriety. The writer is the family's messenger. Beyond a search for origins and information, he seeks to understand desire. This is not formulated directly but reinscribed by the three sisters as the beautiful, innocent story of their adolescent mother—a love for someone they do not know, before she met her husband, their father. The writer's journey does not result in adultery but rather expresses a silent meditation on desire, chance and love.

One may wonder about his reasons for not acting on his desire for the stranger. The movement from Hanoi to Saigon's modern spaces does not provide clear answers, especially not about the mother's past. It leads to confusion and doubt, to distrust and silent despair, especially since the writer's pregnant wife believes that he has betrayed her. Yet, his journey grants the writer the concluding chapter to his novel. He translates these anonymous spaces and silent gazes into sublimated desire: he writes his final chapter quickly, almost automatically, the night after he returns to Hanoi.

**ELDER SISTER: INNER SPACES OF REMORSEFUL,
SILENT PLEASURE**

While the two brothers-in-law are away, the photographer's wife journeys to an interior space to which she retires with her lover. They meet in an apartment painted in deep red tones. The entire space appears in sharp contrast to the pastel colors of the family interiors, or the bright greens and blues of the garden and the sea. This space, at first, seems to echo the lovers' passion.

This journey too takes place in silence. As her lover opens the apartment door for her, they embrace and kiss. They do not exchange words. Her lover later complains that he cannot bear her silence any longer. She raises her index finger and places it on his lips to silence him. She smiles and silently begs him to be quiet. Her lover complains that her silence has eroded a relationship originally based on animated conversations. The flow of words, now dried up, is replaced by swift encounters. She redirects sensations and emotions inwards. Silence here is not shared. It is her silence. She wants to move beyond speech and words. We can wonder whether it is because she thinks words would fail to express anything, or whether she is gradually detaching herself from her lover. Is she attempting to experience sex as a way to feeling "something"? The status of that "something" is unclear.

As in other journeys in this film, her search is an interior monologue. It takes place primarily in relation to the color red.⁵ Red here is less the color of passion than a surface layer that could signify desire but mostly underlines the disjuncture between outer and inner worlds. The apartment, a warm soothing place, isolated and quiet, turns into a vertiginous space of alienation as her lover insists on communicating by speaking. What she wants instead is for words to recede, for silence to puncture the routine and predictable communication—including the sexual acts—towards which her lover tries to entice her.

Her silence is conditioned by the unbridgeable space between her husband and herself. This gap resulted, one presumes, from growing silences and distance between them: they barely speak as her husband leaves for Ha Long Bay. Their lives now only touch at small points, social nodes such as the death anniversary rituals, or because of parenting responsibilities. While apparently lifting the dead weight of this silence, sexual pleasure—displacing speech into sensation, shifting registers of emotion and response—reinforces her immobility, deepened by guilt and remorse, and made worse by her lover's insistence that she should speak to him.

NOTES FROM ELSEWHERE

Regardless of actual places traversed, these three characters journey mostly through interior spaces. It matters little whether their journeys take them from city to country, from "old" Hanoi to "modern" Saigon, or from the

shared speech of family relations to the silence of guilt-ridden adulterous sex and extramarital affairs. The neat and normative boundaries between these binary counterconcepts collapse in the proliferating confusion of interior monologues.

In two earlier films, *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993) and *Cyclo* (1995), Hùng explored the interplay between interior and exterior spaces, house and street, virtue and crime, or more broadly the purity of the countryside as against the corruption, spiritual pollution and dangers of the city. In the final film of his “Vietnam Trilogy,” Hùng returns to these themes and displaces them further toward ambivalence and lack of resolution. While his two earlier films afforded a sense of resolution, however painful or anguished, the journeys that orient the narrative flow of *Vertical Ray of the Sun* cannot easily be reincorporated into a redemptive framework. In *Cyclo*, incessant movement through city spaces was mediated by the opposition between inside and outside, day and night, visibility and invisibility (and the explicit contrast between the virtuous poor and depraved criminals). In *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, narrative movement mostly takes place in journeys away from the city, in which time and space lose their actual coordinates and become pure potential.⁶ These journeys attempt to leave things behind. They aim to secure an opening, an unarticulated something, a non-locatable “elsewhere” that would retroactively help make sense of the conundrums faced by the characters.

This is not unheard of in Vietnamese literary and film narratives. Since the late 1980s, Vietnamese writers have made extensive use of the trope of journeys to express tensions and attempts to escape family problems, or find solutions to the sorrows of war and postwar melancholy. This is clear in the works of some of the best-known authors from the postreform 1980s who launched the “new literature” of contemporary Vietnam.

Đuờng Thu Huoàng’s harsh war novel, *Novel without a Name*, is structured as a journey on foot by a soldier delivering battle zone reports to northern Vietnam.⁷ His dystopian trek through the devastated wartime countryside is punctuated by hallucinatory flashbacks and disillusioned memories of youthful innocence before the war broke out. The long journey on foot gives rise to reminiscence: movement across space brings the past back to mind, and memories emerge unconsciously. Similarly, Bảo Ninh structured *The Sorrow of War* by means of journeys to and from the frontlines of war.⁸ He evokes the sorrows of war by describing the loss of innocence among youth enrolled in war, and the impossible return to “normal life” in Hanoi after victory.

In both novels, the war waged by the United States in the 1960s and 1970s provides key sets of events and reference points. Even more relevant to Hùng’s narrative use of journeys is the work of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, as in his 1985 short story “Run River Run”.⁹ Here the return of a middle-aged man to his childhood village ends in a melancholic quest for the lost time of youth. Villagers he knew as a child are now dead. Images of his childhood

recede in front of his eyes as he tries to pin them down. Akin to Hùng's work in *Vertical Ray of the Sun*, Vietnamese postreform writers since the late 1980s have privileged movement across space as a shorthand for movement across time.

Vertical Ray of the Sun occupies an ambiguous position in this narrative landscape. Hùng's vision of individuals unmoored and uncertain of what to do next, of couples alienated from each other and seeking comfort in affairs, are all deeply disturbing to a Vietnamese viewing public, who have been fed the bland narratives of socialist realism and Asian or Western blockbusters. Hùng proposes an unsettling view of where to go next. He examines the possibility of positing if not locating a newness found "elsewhere." This can be done by journeying to new and unfamiliar places that defy understanding, or perhaps through new pleasures, or by simply floating in images as if suspended in a world of daydreams, music and poetry. But "elsewhere," reached by imaginary or actual movement across space, takes the characters back to the same abject failures that continue to haunt them and weigh down on their memories. Hùng subverts a narrative landscape familiar to Vietnamese writers, readers and viewers. Ultimately, he forecloses the possibility that this elsewhere provides an opening through which characters might establish a new sense of who they are. Hùng and his characters entertain, but in the end, ambivalently negate these possibilities.

NONDESCRIPT SPACES

I examined articulations of space and belonging in *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*. The death anniversary ritual presented a familiar picture of some spaces of belonging that frame Vietnamese social selves, namely, kinship relations buttressed and sustained by ritual practices. Yet these familiar notions of belonging are disrupted by the youngest sister's playful or play-acting desire for her brother. The second disruption of family belonging comes from the revelation of the mother's adolescent love, before she met her future husband. The siblings quickly reframe this as youthful love and innocent yearning. We can contrast this to Marguerite Duras' novel *The Lover*, which details an intensely sexual love affair in colonial Saigon between a fifteen year-old French girl and an older Chinese man.¹⁰ The three sisters and their husbands do their best to domesticate their deceased mother's early love: they entirely evacuate the scandalous potential of desire and sexual pleasure.

Yet the writer is sent out by the family as a messenger and truth seeker about the family's past. Now that both parents are deceased, he occupies the strange position of a messenger who travels, Orpheus-like, to the land of the dead. He journeys to faraway spaces of desire peopled by attractive strangers. But these spaces remain alien to him; he remains in awe of their silent pull over him. He does not sleep with the stranger in the red dress.

She remains a ghostly apparition, both there and not there at the same time, temptingly close but unattainable in the end.

Nondescript spaces course through the film, and through Hùng's works overall. The refrain from Lou Reed's song "Perfect Day" recurs in scenes when the brother wakes his younger sister. It constitutes something akin to a sound-image. This sound-image combines with intercalated optical signs.¹¹ Witness for instance the harsh contrasts between the red inside of a split fruit and the soft green hues of the garden plants, or between the red dress of the sleeping stranger, shadows in the room and the fluorescent lights rising from the swimming pool outside. These nondescript spaces transform the movement of images along temporal narrative axes—however jumbled by memories and flashbacks—into virtual images of time. These time-images stop the narrative flow and invigorate it with virtual images, possible pathways for the emergence of new visual series and combinations of memories.

In his discussion of time-images, Gilles Deleuze notes that purely optical and sound situations give rise to a "seeing function, at once fantasy and report (*constat*), criticism and compassion" as opposed to a pragmatic visual function (of realist situations) that remains involved in a system of actions and reactions.¹² Here, on the other hand, "something has become too strong in the image."¹³ Deleuze makes the link to Romanticism, which had set out a similar task for itself: "grasping the intolerable or the unbearable . . . and therefore becoming visionary, to produce a means of knowledge and action out of pure vision."¹⁴

In *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, we encountered various attempts to make sense of journeys and movement across space while searching for an elsewhere that would give meaning to the absurd flow of everyday life. The photographer sets up a second household, replicating a similar unsatisfactory family structure elsewhere. The writer follows a stranger into new and unknown spaces. The eldest sister withdraws ever further into silence and muteness to plumb the depths of pleasure while attempting to circumscribe guilt and empty chatter.

Recurrent, nondescript spaces introduce an additional dimension to the failed search for "resolution" by flashing unhinged time-images on the screen. These time-images—of something that has become "too strong" in the image, as Deleuze would have it—disrupt the movement of images, the hoped-for redemptive narrative movement across spaces in actual journeys, or in inner journeys into sex or interior monologues. Where do these time-images come from? How do they work? What do they achieve? By introducing nondescript spaces into the movement of narrative, these time-images slow down or stop altogether its logical flow: something in the image has become too strong.

Deleuze discussed the shift from movement-images to time-images, from realist to neorealist cinema, as a consequence of the historical fracture of WWII. New spaces emerged in devastated European cities after that war: no man's lands in bombed cities; neighborhoods undergoing demolition; slums

housing rural migrants in search of work; altered urban physiognomies, as post-wwii governments ringed cities with new housing projects.¹⁵ The neorealist cinema of Rossellini (e.g., *Germany Year Zero*) or Antonioni (e.g., *L'Eclisse*) brought these nondescript spaces to the screen. The intolerable force of these images came from their dislocation of grand narratives of historical and political progress, rendered moot by the savagery of two successive world wars.

More modestly perhaps, especially since he remains an isolated voice in Vietnamese cinema, Trần Anh Hùng proposes new ways of representing Vietnam in the wake of mass death and wartime destruction. In *Cyclo* or *The Scent of Green Papaya* he relied on what I called “uncanny spaces of loss.”¹⁶ In *Vertical Ray of the Sun*, he uses what I interpret as nondescript spaces and ambivalent searches for an imaginary “elsewhere” through errant journeys.¹⁷ But in Vietnam the process differs from the move from realist to neorealist cinema in post-wwii Europe. The Vietnamese Communist Party’s official historiography of the struggle for independence remains framed as a sacred people’s war of national liberation. There has been little space in this nationalist discourse for more nuanced reflections on the human costs of war, loss and alienation in the war’s aftermath and the abjection of poverty and social problems such as prostitution and drug use.

Vietnamese cinema and literature have until recently been unified under key objectives and slogans dictated by political aims—to mobilize all active forces in society for armed struggle, to achieve independence and, in peacetime, to rebuild the country and construct a new socialist society. Hùng returned to Vietnam in 1995 to film *Cyclo*, after living as a refugee in France for over fifteen years: his search has a certain Vietnam in mind, but an uncanny one—fragmented, disconnected and empty. I proposed here that the repetition of nondescript spaces in his work estranges viewers—Vietnamese, diasporic Vietnamese and foreign—from their expectations about a “true” or “real” Vietnam.

Hùng’s use of time-images moves his cinema beyond the narrative flows of realist (or socialist-realist) Vietnamese cinema. In conversations about Hùng’s films, even progressive Vietnamese intellectuals dismiss his plots on realist grounds. Yet his visual mastery, brilliant cinematography and formal innovations in terms of time-images and nondescript spaces, are recognized as unique and new in Vietnamese film.¹⁸

Trần Anh Hùng introduces another, more subtle, way of looking and seeing. He disconnects and empties spaces from their coordinates. He evacuates the exhausting search for grounding and positioning of a fixed and unchanging “Vietnam” projected back to various points along the conflict-ridden histories of Vietnamese-speaking people in the region.¹⁹ He interrupts the desire for fixity by short-circuiting the search for origins. He leaves empty and disconnected spaces in the place of fixed origins. These new spaces are suggested by flashes of pure sound and optical images on the screen, fragmented and severed from referents, and left open to multiple interpretations—or to an exhausted inability to interpret any longer.

NOTES

1. I am referring to what Gilles Deleuze calls *espaces quelconques* (nondescript spaces). He discusses this key notion in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. I rely here on his analysis of the move from (narrative-based) “movement-images” in prewar European realist cinema to (virtual, fragmented) “time-images” in neorealist Italian cinema after 1945. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1986); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
For a critique of Deleuze’s time-image, see Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London: Berg, 2006).
2. On the Vietnamese Communist Party’s policies to control and direct intellectual production in Vietnam, see Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
3. This is one the key aspects of modernity, as discussed by writers and thinkers as diverse as Baudelaire, Simmel and Benjamin, to name a few. On the experience of modernity as a “maelstrom of perpetual struggle and contradiction, ambiguity and anguish,” see Marshall Berman’s seminal *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin, 1988), 15.
4. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin, 2001), 242.
5. I recall here Deleuze’s analysis of *espaces quelconques* (nondescript spaces) in chapter 7 of *Cinema 1*. For him, color in film, along with shadows and the use of white, is “capable of producing and constituting *espaces quelconques, disconnected or emptied spaces*” (120). Nondescript spaces no longer have specific coordinates locating them in space and time. Space now becomes “pure potential,” exhibiting “pure powers or qualities independently of the states of things or milieux which actualize them” (120).
6. As indicated previously, this is how Deleuze defines nondescript spaces in film. See again *Cinema 1*, 120.
7. Dương Thu Hương, *Novel Without a Name* (New York: Penguin, 1995).
8. Bảo Ninh, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).
9. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s *The General Retires and Other Stories* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992).
10. Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).
11. I am referring to Deleuze’s discussion of time-images in *Cinema 2*, especially in Chapter 1. For him, “what defines neo-realism is this build-up of purely optical situations (and sound ones), which are fundamentally distinct from the sensory-motor situations of the action-image in the old realism,” Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 2.
12. Deleuze, *ibid.*, 19.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. For Deleuze, derelict postwar urban spaces were essential to the emergence of new ways of filming time and disconnected or emptied spaces, particularly in Italian neorealist cinema. See Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 120.
16. Christophe Robert, “The Return of the Repressed: Uncanny Spaces of Nostalgia and Loss in Trần Anh Hùng’s *Cyclo*,” *positions* 20 (2012): 389–415.
17. Panivong Norindr speaks of “errance” (wandering) in Marguerite Duras’ novelistic representations of the colonial cities of former French Indochina.

- See Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 109 ff.
18. Hùng's influence on Bùi Thạc Chuyên's acclaimed film *Adrift* (*Chơi vơi*, 2009) is unmistakable.
19. See Keith W. Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 954.

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4 Between Demolition and Construction

Performing Drifting Identities in Jia Zhangke's Films

Esther M. K. Cheung

THE “POSTSOCIALIST NOW”: BETWEEN FICTION AND REALITY

Contemporary Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke demonstrates how auteurism performs an essential role in shaping an impressive grassroots poetics within a rapidly vanishing space.¹ Hailed by some critics as “the cinematic poet” of postsocialist China,² Jia has developed an expansive field of citation where the recurrent spaces of demolition and construction are notable tropes. Bound up with the transformations of local and global relations as well as negotiations between personal and objective forces, his films have opened up a world of their own by negotiating a hermeneutical space within the intersecting cultural space of global capitalism and postsocialism in the People's Republic of China. This hermeneutical space is a result of Jia's auteurism which does not only encompass the traditional categories of the-matics and aesthetics but also how the filmmaker interprets his historical context by operating within a field of intersubjectivity, as well as grappling with the material and economic conditions of his time.

While there are historical and cultural differences between Jia and the Situationist International critics, it is useful to refer to the idea of *détournement* to show how Jia reassembles and repositions Chinese contemporary reality into visual memories of diverse groups of drifting identities in postsocialist China.³ This chapter explores how Jia's creative endeavors of re-presenting historical reality, open up a hermeneutical space for himself and his viewers to decipher the maze-like transformations of postsocialist China. To analyze this hermeneutical space, I focus on the use of silence and ellipsis so as to tease out a spatial typology unique to Jia's films.

Jia belongs to the Sixth or Urban Generation filmmakers of the PRC who competed with the world-renowned Fifth Generation to define the social and cultural space of China in transformation since the 1990s. While the Urban Generation cannot be recognized as a unified movement, their earlier films in the last two decades are often described as “independent from the state system of production, distribution and exhibition.”⁴ More recently, Jia's personal style of filmmaking has become “corporatized,” to use his own words, when his films are increasingly recognized in the international art

cinemas and have already migrated to “above the ground” in China. Jia has, to date, produced numerous films, the best known being his “Homeland Trilogy”—*Xiao Wu* (or *Pickpocket*, 1997), *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002)—as well as *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *24 City* (2008), *I Wish I Knew* (2010), and *A Touch of Sin* (2013). Well-known for his interest in depicting his changing hometown, Fengyang, through a semi-autobiographical and realistic lens, he developed what one critic calls “heimat realism” in his earlier work, whereas his later films are identified by another form of grassroots realism bound up with other people’s drifting experiences.⁵ In sum, Jia’s films have recorded the Chinese people’s changing plight through documentary realism, painting group portraits of ordinary people displaced from their homes.

Besides being noted for their documentary realism, however, Jia’s films are also widely recognized for their performative aspects. His viewers are often impressed by his hybrid mode of realism which depicts the ongoing process of destruction and construction in Chinese cities. In *Still Life*, the oft-quoted examples are the unidentifiable flying object that flashes across the sky, the surrealist memorial structure which shockingly takes off, and the tightrope walker in mid-air between abandoned buildings. *24 City* is a talking-head style quasi-documentary in which five authentic interviews are blended with four fictional accounts. In some ways, actress Joan Chen’s reflexive and fictional account in *24 City* is as surreal as the other two examples.

I have previously argued that this mixed mode of realism brings forth a basic, philosophical question about epistemology, experience and representation.⁶ Jia’s realism should be understood as quasi and mixed rather than reflective and mimetic. However, this is not to suggest that Jia is not historical. As filmmaker Li Ying remarks, whereas history begins with truth and ends in fiction, myth starts with fiction and ends in truth and history.⁷ Driven by an urge to decipher China’s complex and elusive transformations, Jia brings us closer to historical reality through his fictional and mythic endeavors. On different occasions, Jia has remarked that his mixed mode of realism has arisen from the “surreal” condition of postsocialist China. As he explained when he was making *The World*, his sense of disorientation is a result of the dramatic shift from the post-Mao era to the wholesale structural changes after 1989. The speedy process of demolition and construction produced “not only space-time compression” but also “space-time dislocation.”⁸ The consequences of sensory overload on the mental life of urbanites have been so daunting that he describes China’s reality as surrealist.⁹ Equally intriguing was the construction of the Three Gorges which brought about the disappearance of Fengjie in its entirety, an event which later became the backdrop of *Still Life*. More recently, *24 City*, triggered off by the demolition of the munitions factory Chang Fa Group Company, made him wonder what the situation would be like if the collective memory of a whole generation of workers were erased. As exorbitant as our ontological reality is, China’s cultural space generates bewilderment, challenging

the representational potentialities of film art. Consequently, a mixed mode of representation in *The World, Still Life* and *24 City*, which opens up a hermeneutical space, is not only a departure from his earlier *vérité* mode but also an interpretive endeavor to make sense of the changing reality in postsocialist China.

After the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, dramatic twists and turns in China ushered in an era that is differentiated from the Decade of Reform (1977–89) characterized by the goals of the Four Modernizations and New Enlightenment discourse. The 1990s and the millennium—“Post-New-Period” (1989–present) have witnessed unprecedented and wholesale transformations in China. In both periods, relentless socioeconomic developments do not necessarily bring about the demise of socialism—politically, China is still a socialist state. Without the dissolution of modernization and teleological ideology, as Xudong Zhang succinctly describes, postsocialist China has seen a greater degree of “radicalization and permeation” of a developmentalist ideology within the worldwide “postmodern circumstances of globalization.”¹⁰ Consequently, while consumerism and market forces now define the ethos of postsocialism, “the actually existing socialism” still remains a powerful tool for the state to control its people.¹¹

Responding to this contradictory condition, Jia imagines a unique film world of demolition and construction through which a new structure of nostalgic feeling is articulated. Associated with urban transformation, this new structure is not reducible to one ideal type of personality. Without the image of the Superman with the Nietzschean will to power, it differs markedly from what was seen as “creative destruction” at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead Jia’s cinematic spaces are populated by a generation of nostalgic drifters. This generation is, however, not a totality. With an amazing array of subjects—migrant workers, floating artists, lost youth, anonymous border-crossers—Jia weaves together a tapestry of postsocialist identities in contemporary China. Rather than signifying a sense of the past or the future through spaces of destruction and construction respectively, Jia’s cinematic cities hinge onto the historicity of disjointed times and the cultural logic of postsocialism of the present. To echo the title of this paper, what is between destruction and construction is a moment of time, a process in the making—the postsocialist now” which resonates with “the apocalypse now” in an eerie manner.

Owing to its temporal-spatial disjointedness, the psychological landscape in Jia’s films is largely characterized by a sense of displacement and nostalgia. In those comprising his *Homeland Trilogy*, Jia attributes his characters’ nostalgia to their drifting and uprooted experiences because of the tidal waves of change. In *Xiao Wu*, the protagonist not only moves through what one critic calls “the post-Mao ruins” but a space that also conveys Mao’s historical legacy.¹² Unlike his close friend who has turned into a successful entrepreneur and regards money more important than the value of brotherhood, Xiao Wu is unable to catch up with the capitalistic way of life nor adopt its attendant cultural values. Elsewhere the floating artists in *Platform*

are drifting across real locations whilst adjusting to new modes of entertainment and performances. The youngsters in *Unknown Pleasures* express a strong sense of loss in their aimless wandering. The most interesting aspect is the way in which nostalgia is presented in *Platform*. In an epic style, the film looks back at the 1980s as if to imagine a forthcoming promise, which as Jason McGrath observes, does not materialize.¹³

In these films, one may spot many examples of a lost home which is physical and tangible, but more importantly, the sense of homesickness is grasped as a drifting sense of uprootedness. Unlike the dystopian literature and films in the West, nostalgia in Jia's films does not express any technophobia or yearning for a precapitalistic and prelapsarian state of utopia. Even in *24 City*, when he deals with four generations of workers' memories of their shared Communist past in the state-owned factory called 420, there is no nostalgic return to a precapitalistic socialist past. None of the characters adopt a wounded-literature style of the 1980s to indict the Communist past; similarly seldom do we hear any celebratory singing of the good old days. The singing of *The Internationale* is mingled eerily with the sound of mahjong tiles. While the characters' experiences may differ, what ties them together is a specific mode of nostalgia, not turned toward the past but engaged with the fleeting present. This is not to suggest that these characters do not have their histories. Quite the contrary. The process of knowing their different histories leads viewers to discover the absence of a holistic and unified view of what a better world should be like. Without the capacity of what Svetlana Boym calls "restorative nostalgia" to retrieve national and nationalist revivals,¹⁴ Jia's characters deliver their memories as partial, fragmented and incoherent. Intriguingly, they are evocative of a contemporary sentiment of loss in postsocialist China, a structure of feeling which arises from the ruins of disjointed times. Their nostalgic sentiments mediate shards of memory that have acquired greater status and resonance in comparison to grand narratives and official discourses. In what follows, I would like to explore this hermeneutical space by focusing on the depiction of the mutating spaces in *Still Life* and *24 City*.

PERFORMATIVE SPACE: BETWEEN LUCIDITY AND AMBIGUITY

To examine Jia's cinematic space, let us start with the basic assumption that any image needs to be deciphered in more than one dimension. It is often argued that the fundamental layer is historical, anthropological and mimetic, whereas the mythical, allegorical and performative aspects make a film text open-ended in meaning.¹⁵ The first layer corresponds to actuality whereas the second layer, which is more complex, is constituted by the filmmaker's creative treatment of the subject matter as well as the viewer's interpretation of the film text.

It has been remarked that the performative quality of Jia's films can be comprehended with reference to the processes of destruction and construction in a maze-like postsocialist China. On the one hand, the actual locations of demolition and construction serve as sources of historical experiences of the characters in his films. Critics have called this on-location realism, or *xiangchang* in Chinese. On the other hand, these documented recurrent spaces allegorically acknowledge the existence of a vast space that constantly attempts to subsume the aesthetic and cultural responses within it. The more dominant the space is, the more responsive the aesthetic and cultural practices have become. These artistic practices are comparable to ideas of the production of space advocated by critics of the Situationist International. Here, Guy Debord proposed the tripartite model—*dérive*, *détournement* and spectacle—as how avant-garde art may be practiced. Elsewhere, Henri Lefebvre argues: “The (relative) autonomy achieved by space *qua* ‘reality’ during a long process which has occurred especially under capitalism or neo-capitalism has brought new contradictions into play.”¹⁶ In this light, the cinematic space in Jia's films is a product of representation, perception, and interpretation, in that it is inspired by the historical reality of post-socialist China, lived, aestheticized and conceptualized as a vibrant force in the struggle for meaning and power.

In other words, the cinematic spaces in Jia's films are reflective and mimetic as well as performative. Here, performativity entails two major concepts. Inspired by theories on deconstruction, cinematic spaces are “iterable” in the sense that they exist in a field of citation. As Jacques Derrida argues in his critique of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, any sign or citation “can break with any given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.”¹⁷ I wish to analyze how Jia's films, albeit being fueled by a documentary impulse, simultaneously attempt to transcend, question, and defamiliarize historical reality, in order to reach his domestic and global audience. When reality is cited as the historical backdrop in his films, it is never “an exact citation” as it is often “adapted to new contexts.”¹⁸ Corresponding to Debord's *détournement* and Lefebvre's “spaces of representation,” Jia's cinematic spaces are thus results of his creative treatment of historical reality in postsocialist China.

Related to this, performativity pertains to what may be called “the performative aesthetic.” Unlike face-to-face context, an artistic discourse must depart from its “author” to reach new hearers who will interpret it in new contexts. “The performative underlying the aesthetic discourse,” Ross Chambers explains, “would then be something like: ‘I offer myself for your interpretation.’”¹⁹ For a film artist, unfolding an action that exemplifies a character's responsibility for that action and showing how it is performed in a specific space and time is a conscious interpretation of history. Jia's selection and artistic design constantly delivers a minimalist mode of performance both by the characters and the *mise-en-scène* as a way of interpreting the changes in postsocialist China. In *Still Life* and *24 City*, Jia uses

restrained or mixed emotion, silence, ellipsis, and observation to illuminate the performativity of an ambivalent, ephemeral reality. Such a composite space, immersed in an ambience of nostalgia for the fleeting present, is both historical and hermeneutical; it simultaneously records, innovates, as well as invites the viewers' interpretations.

STILL LIFE: SILENT SPACES, DRIFTING CHARACTERS, MOVING LANDSCAPES

Set in Fengjie in the Sichuan Province, a small town along the Yangtze River which is gradually being submerged by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, *Still Life* narrates the story of two people from Shanxi—Han Sanming and Shen Hong—in search of their lovers. Sanming, a coal miner, comes to Fengjie to look for his wife who ran away from him sixteen years ago. Having been estranged from her husband for some years, Hong, a nurse discovers her husband's affair and decides to terminate their relationship. While the film weaves together two stories of lost-and-found at Fengjie, it also presents the changing landscape as one of its major characters. If the Three Gorges Dam is a cited text in *Still Life*, Jia has given us a reassembled text, divorced from its dominant historical discourse. In addition to Li Bai's famous poem about the picturesque and sublime landscape of the Yangtze Gorges, historically, the Dam was envisioned by Chinese political leaders as a nation-building-cum-modernization project. As early as 1919, Sun Yat Sen proposed the damming of the Yangtze to generate electricity and spur China's industrialization and modernization. The Dam structure was completed in 2006 whereas the project's originally planned components were completed on October 30, 2008, as the twenty-six turbines were brought into commercial operation, thus celebrating the nation state's ability to control nature. This national achievement echoes the film's portrayal of the suspension bridge at the Dam. At one point in the film, the monumentality of this modernization project is accentuated when the gigantic bridge is lit up at a celebratory ceremony officiated by a government official. This reassembled text, however, is adapted to a new context where the natural landscape at the Three Gorges Dam is depicted to be as transient as the drifting people who traverse its ephemeral space.

Shot during the actual demolition of Fengjie, the film employs on-location realism to respond to the problems of postsocialism and, as Luke Robinson suggests, as an "aesthetic of transition" also to the more "general process of capitalistic modernization."²⁰ While the demolition process at the Three Gorges flooded the entire Fengjie, and destroyed many houses and families, such violent transition is also metonymic of other kinds of displacement in postsocialist China. By the same token, as Jie Li argues, the characters in this film also stand metonymically for the other Chinese people who are displaced, homeless, and nostalgic because of the massive demolitions taking



Figure 4.1 The slow, panoramic long shot in *Still Life*.

place in many parts of China.²¹ With a series of steady panning shots, the camera movement resembles the slow unscrolling of a traditional Chinese scroll painting that depicts both the people and the landscape as moving across space and time. The slow, panoramic long shot allows the landscape to delineate violence through minimalism and silence (Figure 4.1). Albeit being monumental and stable, the landscape is “animated,” if not “dramatized,” as moving and mutating when we experience the screened time as “real,” hear the actual hammering in the rubble and follow the points of view of the characters when they walk through the ruins of the town.

What is more, the use of “deep focus” in high definition format is an effective aesthetic device to depict this ephemeral space with great clarity and precision, creating what Shelley Kraicer aptly calls “the shock of truth,” that is both “trivial” and “saturated with significance.”²² Echoing Derrida’s phraseology, both the characters and the landscape are “iterated” in a depth of field where both the foreground and the background of the *mise-en-scène* are given equal emphasis. This newly iterated context, however, is often presented without fixed and transparent meanings as viewers are invited to make their own interpretations. Jia’s cinematic images “show” rather than “tell.” In other words, the direct transcription of reality in these films does not guarantee that meaning is immediately available to viewers.

In fact, many realistically depicted scenes and details in the film cannot be definitively deciphered. For example, the meaning of the four categories of objects—cigarette, wine, tea and candy—underlines the film’s intertitles being as ambiguous as the moral plight of the ordinary people. While viewers may agree that the four categories substitute fuel, rice, oil, and salt to define the quotidian culture at the Three Gorges, there is much to decipher

in terms of the relationship between humans and commodity culture at a time when the country and its people open up to massive cultural flows and marketization. Similarly, the ordinary people in Fengjie may look harmless and arouse our sympathy because of the impending loss of their homeland, but they are also the ones who cause some form of violence to happen. Some of them participate in the demolition of the town while others spark off feuds among the local inhabitants. Even Sanming, the protagonist, whose path we follow throughout the film, becomes one of the demolition workers and later reveals to us that the wife he is looking for was in fact sold to him as a commodity sixteen years ago. In this ephemeral space of chaotic and violent energy, mediated through the eyes of its characters, we are constantly bewildered by these lucid but ambiguous and performative images, which induce interpretation.

This kind of interpretive urge is particularly strong when we analyze the performance of Sanming and Hong who are presented equally as observers and participants in the narrative. Unlike conventional narrative films, the plot development is not character-driven, lacking a causal link between events. Instead, viewers are constantly guided to observe the changing world through the characters' perspectives. If both Sanming and Hong are meant to deliver performances, they have done so through minimalist acting, rendered in silent moments. With subdued emotions, they seldom speak but always observe. In both strands of the film, when the two characters are introduced, they are presented as observers who look closely at the ephemeral reality, witnessing its surreal appearance. Their roles as outsiders in Fengjie emphasize their detachment. They are the ones who see the UFO flashing across the sky. Separately, Sanming catches sight of a tightrope walker crossing the Three Gorges while Hong glimpses a strange structure taking off like a rocket. They also plunge into deep contemplation. In one scene, Sanming looks out toward Kuimen, the spectacular narrow gateway that opens into the Three Gorges downstream, then examines the reverse side of a ten-yuan note on which this landscape is depicted; after an interval he flips it over and sees Mao Zedong's portrait. From a medium shot to a point of view shot of Sanming, Jia's camera slowly moves from an objective depiction of Sanming as an observer, to suturing the viewers to his point of view. Interestingly, without verbal language, this series of performative images initiates an urge to make sense of the ephemeral reality of postsocialist China as a moment of disjointed time. Sharing Sanming's bewilderment, viewers may decipher the postsocialist present as a ruthless symbiosis of capitalism and socialism, and contemplate how much influence Maoism and its legacy may have on the political and cultural conditions of the present. Hong's observation is equally interesting. In her search for her estranged husband, she witnesses the celebratory ceremony of the suspension bridge that, ironically, precedes her separation with her husband. In a scene where Hong reunites with her husband, the monumental structure is vaguely glimpsed in the far distance, inducing viewers to make sense of the

connection between individual happiness and socioeconomic achievements celebrated by the nation state. With the combined power of realism and performativity, *Still Life* opens up a hermeneutical space with the observer being as prominent a trope as the moving landscape and its drifting people.

24 CITY: TALKATIVE TALKING HEADS, SILENT TABLEAUX

Whereas *Still Life* places fictionalized characters in real locations of drastic change and focalizes observation centrally, Jia continues to explore the limits of documentary realism in *24 City*. The ephemeral reality of China is captured by the demolition of Factory 420, Chang Fa Group Company, a large aeronautical plant in Chengdu, Sichuan, which was then converting itself into a real-estate development named “24 City.” Built in 1949, the huge factory was once a self-sufficient city in itself, housing roughly 100,000 workers and their families. In 2007, after having interviewed 130 workers, Jia made a quasi-documentary film composed of five real accounts and four fictional stories delivered by professional actors. The four fictional ones include: Lu Liping’s character, who lost her child on the trip to Chengdu; a beautiful Shanghai woman named Gu Minhua, with a nickname “Little Flower,” played by actress Joan Chen; Chen Jianbin’s character, who tells his story about growing up in the Cultural Revolution and, last, Zhao Tao’s character, the daughter of the workers representing the younger, urban generation. As Jia himself explained, these nine accounts compiled in a mixed mode form a “group portrait” of the people with a collectivist mentality under the Communist state system.²³ In this regard, the creative treatment of the interviews is a matter of Jia’s interpretation of postsocialist China as a composite space where the lingering influence of collectivism is still prevalent. He has achieved it by allowing ordinary people to act, actors to play the role of ordinary people, and history to appear as “a form of performance.”²⁴

Adopting the talking-head documentary format, the film narrates a dramatic shift of a munitions factory to service industry in a new era of global capitalism. This historical process of transformation is cinematically narrated by a series of tableau-like frames that punctuate the film narrative. The silent long shot of the front view of the factory gate, depicted in a painterly style, posits a meditative, extradiegetic viewer who witnesses the transformative process (Figure 4.2).

This objective view resembles the viewing position of the spectator in tableau aesthetic. Unlike the moving-scroll-like camera in *Still Life*, the pseudo tableau captures another epic panorama whose stillness is only illusory. Functioning as a narrative device, this tableau image is iterated five times, each time with new, subtle details appearing to document a linear process of development. Existing in a field of citation, this set of performative images, however, invites more provocative reflections and interpretations than a linear understanding of history. The establishing shot at the beginning of the film shows workers entering the factory gate. When it reappears for the



Figure 4.2 The silent long shot of the entrance of the Chang Fa Group Company in *24 City*.

second and third time, Lu Liping and Little Flower's accounts are presented. The fourth time shows the factory demolished and the character "Fa" in the main signage being lowered down, and the fifth time shows the renaming from "Chang Fa" to "China Resource, 24 City." At one level, this sequence seems to suggest a chronological, developmental view of China's transformation from Cold War militarism to global capitalism. However, this series of scenes is elliptical because between each tableau scene, meaning is incomplete and unstable. When these tableau scenes are analyzed in connection with what precedes and comes after, the meanings they evoke are not as stable and straightforward as they appear.

Indeed, the reality behind this transition is more complicated than a linear plot development. As mentioned before, the nine talking heads, whether authentic or fictional, are meant to iterate a generational group portrait, capturing the 1950s to the present. This records the collective experience of the Chinese people who lived and worked in state-owned factory premises. In the new era of postsocialism, most people have already left such work units and living spaces, and many of them, like characters in Jia's earlier films, have drifted to other parts of China. In exploring the workers' collective experiences in *Factory 420* Jia explicates how the Communist state organizes people's experience within such a social structure and how it has impacted human relationships. In an interview, Jia explained that in *24 City* he wanted to reveal "a China still locked in memory" in the new era.²⁵

As a matter of fact, despite their individual differences, the interviewees' recollections do cast a certain sense of temporal continuity and thematic unity. Since many workers Jia interviewed were unwilling to talk about their

stories, the performativity of this selection is thus an interpretive endeavor to fill the silence that exists among the workers. The interviews include the mundane nature of their daily labor, sad memories of lost children, unfulfilled marriages, unsuccessful businesses, indescribable feelings of drifting, displacement and homesickness as well as the sense of alienation between the new rising urban generation and their working class parents. Their performativity undoubtedly gave shape to a collective image within Communist China from 1949. Nonetheless, despite the use of the talking head style documentary, the film is punctuated with silences and ellipses, producing many gaps and contradictions for viewers to construct their own meanings. One of the challenges is to decipher the interviewees' mixed emotions. Unlike *Still Life's* Sanming and Hong who appear emotionally neutral, some interviewees here deliver their speeches with pathos. Nevertheless, their mixed emotions seem rather bewildering.

One of the most intriguing examples is actress Zhao Tao's performance. Zhao plays the role of a bright young professional named Su Na, whose parents were workers in the factory. Typical of the upwardly mobile urban generation, she looks modern and chic, drives a trendy sports car, and does business in Hong Kong. A consequence of Mao's China, Su Na yearns to be prosperous and successful in the new postsocialist landscape. At the close of the film, recalling her exhausted mother doing harsh labor as a worker, Su Na declares tearfully that she is determined to earn enough money to buy her parents an apartment in 24 City, "I know I can do it—I am the daughter of a worker!" Su Na's declaration reveals a highly ambiguous position. Although she is totally committed to the new capitalistic way of life in postsocialist China, she does not refrain from admitting her working-class lineage. Her tearful declaration seems to mourn the disappearance of a generation of labor once held up as a revolutionary class but who have now become anonymous employees in a new era of global capitalism. As viewers, we are struck by her mixed emotions. While trying to grapple with Jia's critique of Communist China's lack of individuality at a time of collectivism, we are also invited to question China's "progressive" transition to mass marketization. Due to such mixed emotions, we waver between distance and involvement, not fully interpreting the tableau series as an expression of a progressive and developmentalist discourse in the context of China's postsocialist modernity.

A SPATIAL TYPOLOGY: JIA'S HERMENEUTICAL SPACE BETWEEN DISTANCE AND INVOLVEMENT

Jia's creative and performative treatment of raw materials from the lived reality of postsocialist China is an act of *détournement*. By reassembling historical reality, he produces what Lefebvre calls "spaces of representation," where the importance of observation is given prominence. In this

chapter, I describe it as “hermeneutical” because Jia’s images invite his viewers’ interpretation just as the ephemeral postsocialist space induces decipherment. Such acts of performativity bring us close to a reality through an in-between mode of viewer identification. On the one hand, Jia’s efforts to transcend the limits of documentarism invite his viewers’ creative interpretation. On the other hand, this freedom is constantly restrained and controlled by some reluctance to make definitive judgment because of the open-ended and ambiguous nature of his film images. With a unique spatial typology predominantly characterized by silence, ellipsis, observation and a mixed mode of realism, Jia’s films render this in-between mode of distance and involvement effectively. From the strolling observers in *Still Life* to the extradiegetic viewer beyond the film screen in *24 City*, Jia’s films “show” rather than “tell.” The aesthetic distance created by the observer produces a somewhat Brechtian alienation which resists any ideologically suspect legacies. Without overblown sentimentality and any teleological visions, but with the urge to capture changing reality, meanings in his film images are open-ended. Emotions can be evoked but are constantly restrained. In an intriguing manner, this ambiguous response places viewers in a tug of war between being moved and developing a resistance against it. Witnessing the plight of a displaced people drifting across China’s physical, social, cultural and psychological landscapes, viewers are deeply moved. However, this emotional resonance is often constrained by their position as observers who are intentionally distanced from the people and landscapes on screen, especially during moments of silent observation. I agree with Ouyang Jianghe that the myriad realities of China’s transformation are complex and ungraspable.²⁶ Consequently, when the filmmaker attempts to render this as intelligible, concrete and believable, it is but a matter of interpretation, the prerogative of creative license that is beyond the terrain of academic criticism.

Combining the mimetic power of documentarism and the indeterminacy of performative images, Jia’s films show us how an expansive field of citation has created a hermeneutical space for the filmmaker and his viewers to launch their commentaries on China’s social and economic transformations. The recurrent motifs of destruction and construction are intra-textually and inter-textually recycled not so much to repeat themselves; rather they explore the impact of the unprecedented transformations in various spheres of Chinese social life, from patterns of everyday consumption to grand-scale national campaigns. The use of silence and ellipses in his films requires viewers to grapple with the open-ended nature of texts, allowing different opinions to negotiate with each other. In conclusion, his cinematic poetics has constructed an affective landscape of nostalgia, memory and longing where critical reflection is hinged onto the sense of displacement, arising from a disjointed time. Such a landscape, constructed by the filmmaker’s manipulation of affect between distance and involvement, is also a hermeneutical space where different kinds of interpretation exist in a field of tension, openness and cultural exchange.

NOTES

This paper benefited from the Hong Kong University Grants Committee's General Research Fund allocation for the project "Creativity, crisis and everyday life: Studies of Hong Kong urban cultural texts" (HKU 743110H).

1. See Ouyang Jianghe and Cui Weiping, eds., *Zhongguo du li dianying fang tan lu* (*On the Edge: Chinese Independent Cinema*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2007), which includes a collection of interviews with contemporary independent filmmakers in China.
2. Chris Berry, "Xiao Wu: Watching Time Go By," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (New York: A BFI book published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 250–57.
3. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
4. Paul G. Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, eds., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), vii–xi.
5. Originally described as "homeland realism" by Wang Hui and others, "heimat realism" comes from Jie Li, "Home and Nation Amid the Rubble: Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, No. 2 (Fall, 2009): 86–125 in which he describes the latter form as "bumpkin surrealism."
6. See Esther M. K. Cheung, "Realisms within Conundrum: The Personal and the Authentic Appeal in Jia Zhangke's Accented Films," *China Perspectives* 1 (2010): 11–20.
7. Director Li Ying made this remark in a post-screening discussion of his award-winning documentary *Yakuzuni* held on 17 February, 2011 at the University of Hong Kong.
8. Cheung, "Realisms," 16.
9. Andrew Chan, "Jia Zhangke Interview," *Film Comment* (March/April 2009): www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview
10. Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
11. *Ibid.*, 3.
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5 Chasing Inuka

Rambling around Singapore through Tan Pin Pin's Films

Lilian Chee

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not believe in the events which happen to us, love and death, as if they half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film.

—Giles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*¹

By my decision to move back to Singapore, I made the sub-conscious decision regarding the work I would be making.

—Tan Pin Pin, “Why and for Whom Do You Film Today?”²

In their iconic text on the modern city *Collage City*, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter lamented that despite its “good will and good intentions,” modern architecture has failed to materialize a city which carries the greater good, hopes and liberalism of its people.³ This shortcoming is attributed to the conflict between “a retarded conception of science and a reluctant recognition of poetics” on the part of its urban planners and architects.⁴ Until today, the unresolved dualism between “efficient (urban) management,” which Rowe and Koetter critiqued was being “disguised” as “science,” and the dynamism of a “counterculture” generated by city life, its people and communities, continue to fracture and divide cities.⁵ *Collage City*’s postmodern reaction to a “total design” approach is its advocacy of fragmentation and bricolage to produce a constellation of micro-utopias across the city’s spaces. Indeed, Rowe and Koetter’s reminder about the importance of historicity in the formation and perception of the modern city is particularly relevant to a critique of Singapore’s contemporary urban evolution.

In this sense, *Collage City* sets the urbanistic, poetic and political contexts for Tan Pin Pin’s Singapore films. An award winning documentary filmmaker, Tan’s persistent object of inquiry is “Singapore,” a site as simultaneously opaque and unknowable as it is banal and predictable. She has openly declared her interest in immortalizing the city-state, a Sisyphean task against time as the city reinvents and obliterates itself at an alarming rate.⁶ This

intellectual anxiety is not particular to Tan alone. It signals a shared concern amongst a younger generation of artists, writers and filmmakers working in the current Singapore milieu, who recognize that the rapid remaking of this city is taken at the cost of irreparable historicity, and that the standardization of space will no longer accommodate singular differences.

Tan's filmic output, which surveys Singapore's statist prerogatives at the same time as it develops a counternarrative to these, similarly weigh between control and poetry, discipline and freedom, the collective and the singular, "History" and "histories." Armed with her own childhood memory of frequent visits to buildings sites and architectural destinations, Tan, whose parents were architects, professes an obsession for Singapore's distinctly uncertain spatial future, which makes her feel she is "standing on soft ground."⁷ Asked "why and for whom do you film today?", Tan expressed her desire to open up views of Singapore as "a teeming, contested terrain."⁸

A significant number of reviews have placed Tan's work in the recurring registers of history, memory, nostalgia, alternative nationalism, or recognized its ability to offer a counterstatist narrative to Singapore society.⁹ This essay traverses an altogether different route. My subject is Tan's perspective of Singapore's spaces constructed through her cinematic output. Notwithstanding her films' obvious emphases on presenting Singapore's alternative memories and histories, I am intrigued by Tan's "other," perhaps even covert, constructions of filmic space. I suggest that even as her documentaries focus on its arresting human subjects or a forgotten historical narrative, there is an important subtext which is steadfast in all of Tan's films, and this subtext is concerned with the narrative potential, emotive dimensions and materiality of *space*. However, it would be misleading to claim that such space is readymade in Tan's oeuvre. It is not. Instead, her films can be seen to consistently *produce* space—meaning that space is not a priori but specifically manifested for the viewer's personal experience, with the latter's realization of its presence significantly augmenting an identification with the documentary's counternarrative. Moreover, the space in Tan's films does not just represent, or mirror, or simply critique Singapore's "soft ground." Instead, it undermines her audiences' fixed perceptions of the spaces in which they were born, in which they grow up, live, grow old and die.

The spaces in Tan's films tend to be tangentially encountered. They may be glimpsed through peripheral vision, caught only as it were, in flight, just as the camera pans and leaves her motley Singapore, a cacophonous counterpoint to the controlled urbanism of this hyper-capitalist city-state, where not only is space scarce, but also restricted for visual representations and counterstatist narratives. At the same time, the spaces that emerge in these films are neither abstract nor supplementary. They provide precise conditions that interpellate Tan's documentary subjects, giving them voice, context and prominence.

The route to Tan's spatial subtexts, however, necessitates a corresponding method which mimics the filmmaker's technique of fragments. As Tan sieves Singapore society for what is left behind, left out, or buried in history, I am

reminded of Walter Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk* in which "the 'refuse' and 'detritus' of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of life of 'the collective'," became the subject of his study and made Benjamin more akin to a "collector of antiquities and curiosities," or a "ragpicker" rather than a historian.¹⁰

As though storing up seemingly unrelated objects in a cabinet of curiosities, the distinctive montaged fragments in Tan's films are, I argue, key to unraveling the way she sees Singapore's spaces. Montage is a conscious, non-organic form of art, which, as Jonathan Hill reminds us, "proclaims its artificiality":

Montage deploys all the techniques of allegory: the depletion of meaning, the fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of parts and their dissemination through a new context. The uneasy resolution of montage indicates that meaning is historically contingent, open to revision, and cultural rather than natural. It opposes the mythical autonomies of culture and can directly engage in ideologies and modes of representation outside the confines of a discipline through the appropriation of procedures and images taken from the world as a whole.¹¹

The use of montage, of course, is not revolutionary in film. Yet more than its oft-discussed juxtaposition of subject diversity, what distinguishes Tan's montaged sequences of Singapore's variegated urbanism and its unexpected subjects (who are neither famous nor important figures) are the unremarked silences and gaps in the montage. These gaps and silences are specific points where Tan quietly diverts her audience's attention to the space around the documentary subject. It is this, the network and capillaries of space within and across the montaged sequences, that I argue produces a new kind of filmic space, one that changes with time, history and context, and works against the static conceptions of urban space embedded in the state planning agencies' psyche.

IN NO PARTICULAR SEQUENCE, SIX FILMS AND THEIR FRAGMENTS

breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.

—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*¹²

Film ceases to be images in a chain. . . . Between two actions, between two affections, between two perceptions, between two visual images, between two sound images, between the sound and the visual: make the indiscernible, that is the frontier, visible . . .

—Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*¹³



Figure 5.1 The gravediggers opening up an ancestral tomb.

Moving House (2001): At the break of dawn, an extended family treks cautiously across uneven landscape. Upon arriving at their destination, they light candles and lay out a spread fit for a sumptuous picnic. What follows is unexpected. Accompanying them are gravediggers who use mechanical and manual means to break open the family's ancestral graves (Figure 5.1). Exclamations calling forth protection and prosperity from the heavens ensue as the tombs are violated. The scene is macabre, bizarre and surreal—bits of human bones and precious belongings of the dead are retrieved for safe-keeping. The family migrates their ancestral remains to a pristinely maintained columbarium, accepting the nation's need to sacrifice sacred ground in order to house the living.

80km/h (2004): Traversing Singapore in a car cruising along an expressway at a constant speed of 80km/h. The viewer travels from Changi Airport at its eastern-most end to Tuas in the island's furthest west side. An entire country measuring one long cinematic take of 38 minutes with no toilet stops. This cartographic document is intended to be updated yearly, a filmic topographical map where the eye may choose to sense, absorb or dismiss space in its usual distracted state.¹⁴

Yangtze Scribbler (2012): A journey narrated by an amateur archivist of city signs, Singapore artist and hobbyist psychogeographer Debbie Ding, about her repeated encounters with a set of symbols, first found in the grimy

stair core of the Yangtze Cinema in Singapore's Chinatown. The cinema, a haunt for elderly men of the Internet illiterate age, is infamous as Ding explains, for its sexually explicit films with "salacious titles" but also for screening award-winning art-house films. It is a space which perpetuates a counterculture that a blogger notes "oozes its appeal, both dirty and nostalgic."¹⁵ The symbols—three rows of digits, scrawled in haste—are placed next to two stick figures, and these altogether enclosed in a circle. Ding who puzzles if these "could be gang messages, or a message to someone" finds them on every floor in the cinema, and as she is absorbed by the trail, the symbols also lead her deeper into the bowels of the building.

Singapore GaGa (2005): A sonic landscape of Singapore never performed before. Among these, two stand out for their inscriptions of space. First, John Cage's 4'33", performed by Singapore-born, New-York based avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan on a toy piano, in the unadorned interstitial space of the public housing "void deck," which is ordinarily used for casual gatherings, Chinese funeral wakes, Malay weddings, the occasional football game (Figure 5.2). Second, six persons reading the daily news in six southern Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka, Hock-chew). These nightly three-minute radio broadcasts are faithfully followed in taxis and domestic spaces, those citadels where the unwritten "mother



Figure 5.2 John Cage performed in the spare surroundings of one of Singapore's public housing "void decks."

tongue”—passed gently from grandmother to mother, and then to child, or stalwartly held onto by an endangered species of “uncles” plying the streets of Singapore—is being erased with the official decree of Mandarin as the “native” language for the majority southern Chinese population.

The Impossibility of Knowing (2010): An abandoned house, two apartments, a burnt out mosque, a canal, a green field and an expressway are captured on film with the camera looking for something “other” that might designate these as previous sites of trauma (Figure 5.3). A found skeleton, two suicides, an act of arson by an angry teenager, a deer crossing the expressway that had its antlers dislodged on impact with a car, and was left on the road, bleeding from the nose for four hours, before it was put down. A schoolgirl was swept away by the sudden swelling waters of a neighborhood canal as she climbed in to retrieve her mobile phone. A nondescript green field, whose only evidence of a tragic ordeal was the presence of joss paper and sticks that had been burnt for the dead, scattered at a particular grassy patch. A tunneling contractor was buried alive here. A few days after filming, Tan “noticed the rain had washed everything away.”¹⁶

Snow City (2011): A group of people in ties and high heels walk into a new traffic tunnel amid cheers and clapping, with champagne glasses and canapés in hand, music, confetti and dry ice in the background. A slither of a beach littered with signs of previous occupancy—bricks from a defunct factory and mosaic pieces mix with stone and overgrown with weeds—an urban wilderness proximate to expensive condominium apartments. Then we are taken back to manicured landscapes, pristinely ordered glass towers, air-conditioned food courts and office workers beaver away in their neat cubicles. The film moves on to witness Singaporeans in full winter wear, tobogganing down an icy slope, with a sign behind them saying, “Snow is



Figure 5.3 The transient signs of tragedy above a Mass Rapid Transit tunnel site.



Figure 5.4 Inuka at the Frozen Tundra section of the Singapore Zoo.

slippery. Play with care.” Next, a white polar bear drifting languorously in his icy tank (Figure 5.4). And to finish off, two workers seated in their makeshift shelters at the exit/entrance to a construction site, patiently waiting for the next vehicle to drive out so that they can hose it down before it leaves the site.

UNFOLDING THE SHRIVELED HEART OF SINGAPORE

The camera eye is the one in the middle of our forehead, combining how we see with what there is to be seen.

—Wright Morris, *Time Pieces, Photographs, Writing, and Memory*¹⁷

I want to put practically everything in, yet to saturate.

—Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*¹⁸

Placed side by side, these fragments remind one of Michel Foucault’s description of a Chinese encyclopedia by Borges, in which the presented list of items do not merely escape any known taxonomy but also confound any knowledge of a suitable “site” in which such diverse items may occupy proximate positions. This “site” is what Foucault famously calls “the table,” or

“the tabula”—a physical location *and* an epistemological space—for which to accommodate and conceptualize such inconceivable bed partners. And yet, what appears like a non-site for Foucault is, in Tan’s case, a reality which is Singapore, a location marked by a “culture of excess,” a “spectacularly successful nation . . . troubled by historical trauma, (and) permanent vulnerability,” ambivalence over of immigration, fear of a brain drain, inferior in its territorial assets with a perennial crisis of space, but with a political structure so stable that its citizens may be lulled into complacent ennui.¹⁹ The fantastic joints, fissures, networks, fault lines and gaps in Tan’s films are arguably emblematic of this amazingly complex yet also arguably overplanned and, consequently, too predictable city.

Nevertheless, the absurdity of Borges’ encyclopedia is consistent with Singapore’s condition. A space that has evolved through diverse circumstances: a mystified native history, a mythicized origin legend, enduring colonial affiliations, an abrupt severance of political incorporation in Malaysia (that still rankles older Singaporeans), accelerated growth and prosperity under the ruling People’s Action Party, whose tight governance propelled the rapid reinvention of the tiny city-state into one of the four Asian Tigers—Singapore is nothing short of a spectacular urban phenomenon. It is completely urbanized with no countryside, no hinterland and may be easily crossed from one end to the other, in under an hour, as Tan’s documentary *80km/h* attests. A space of multiple, conflicting and overlapping scales—simultaneously a city, a state, and a nation—Singapore is much more complex than what it is generally perceived to be: the outcome of top-down urban renewal, a homogeneous city of no prevailing past which successfully made the big leap from tabula rasa to first world nation without bloodshed.²⁰ Tan’s films open up spaces that refute such generalizations.

Watching and re-watching these films over the years, Tan’s subtle critiques about Singapore have been refined through her use of its spaces. This is evident when comparing *Moving House* (2001) to *Snow City* (2011). Where *Moving House*’s reference to the tussle between tradition and development is clearly played out between three related spaces—the graveyard, the public housing flats (shown as archival footage and in their contemporary state) and the compact multi-storey columbarium—*Snow City* is an allegorical, ironic and elegiac work which captures the entangled banality, absurdity and hyper-ordering of the city’s spaces and accompanying practices. *Moving House*’s spatial narrative is more obvious, while *Snow City* requires a combination of insider knowledge, a measure of sophistication and the ability to detect strategically placed clues and cues. In this respect, one might say that the growing complexity of Tan’s films are moving in tandem with the growing maturity of her primary audience of Singaporeans, towards whom Tan’s work is specifically targeted.²¹

Without the aid of narration or intertitles, the guideless *Snow City* presents a surreal ramble through Singapore. Its itinerary features a traffic tunnel’s grand opening party; an office; a land reclamation site; an

air-conditioned food court; the Frozen Tundra section of the Singapore Zoo, with its chief attraction, the magnificent Inuka, a white polar bear and a temporary snow park. The film unfolds at a languid pace as though mimicking Inuka's graceful movements. Through this seemingly pointless amble, the audience witnesses some distinctly Singaporean practices: the revulsion of dirt necessitating construction vehicles to be washed down at every construction site exit, the physical disconnect between the inside and outside for desk-bound office workers, and the unbridled enthusiasm for wholly artificial spaces of leisure.

Perhaps if inconceivable actions such as reclaiming almost a third of the country's land from the sea, or demolishing a much-loved library building for the sake of constructing a traffic-easing tunnel (that takes only 10 seconds to drive through), are taken as norms, these neutralize the strangeness that accompanies the wearing of winter clothing in the tropics, tobogganing down a fake icy slope, and giving a carwash to every construction vehicle. All in all, these may indeed be "natural" reactions, embedded in the spatial psyche of denizens belonging to this postmodern, posthuman city-state.²²

Instead of seeing Tan's filmic space as representative of specific meanings, I am intrigued by what these spaces *do*—how they are projected, the kinds of atmospheres and actions they provoke in her audience. Tan's sense of space is in many ways acute. I use the word *sense* intentionally because she is trying to capture in very material terms—through details, space and duration—what is specific to this island yet indescribable through the kinds of narratives and representations in current, unhindered, circulation. Tan's perspective on space is not intense in a conventionally aesthetic way, say by its framing, or use of long or short takes, or application of nostalgic overtones. Its acuity comes from the absolutely equal partnership she brokers between the human subject and space, where the former and the latter collaboratively perform to relay the film's agenda. Given that the human subject's role is something Tan chooses not to control, it is space instead that becomes the conduit through which she converses directly with her audience.

Contrary to hackneyed accounts of Singapore as over-controlled and homogeneous with an existence bordering on mere platitude, Tan's spaces burst with unthinkable events. Many of these are spontaneous rather than self-initiated. These spatial vignettes serve to remind her audience of what is probable, to realize the potentialities of the spaces they encounter daily beyond what they are conditioned to accept, or habitually act upon.

Chosen as the site for Margaret Leng Tan's performance of John Cage's *4'33"*—a three-movement composition where the musicians do not play their instruments for the entire duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds, thus translating the musical score into a parallel duration of unpredictable ambient sounds—the spartan and purposeless space of the public housing "void deck" is brought into relief.²³ This shared space was designed as an integral

architectural feature of the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) first-generation flats, which were rolled out in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁴ The HDB "void deck" was intended as a communal ground, ultimately attempting to mimic the unbounded settlement spaces that most of the flats' first residents had been part of (including resettled from). Yet, the move from a usually clustered hamlet setting to high-rise public housing did not translate so easily in terms of habits and spaces. Residents became more inward looking, seldom venturing out of their flats to socialize. The sense of loneliness in the semi-public "void deck" is magnified in the fragment from *Singapore GaGa*.

Elsewhere, the unsavory staircase at the landmark Yangtze Cinema is recast as a beguiling scene of mystery, or otherwise reconsidered as a cabinet of unresolved curiosities that must be revisited again and again, slowly peeled apart like a delicate flower. The nondescript expressway built across land wrested from once extant villages, farms, forest and wilderness, is rematerialized as a site of urban "violence" manifested through the loss of its surroundings, and brought into relief by the unfortunate incident of a decimated deer. Yet elsewhere, unremarkable infrastructure—a canal or a tunnel—are transformed into temporary memorial sites where human lives are lost but quickly forgotten with the accelerated pace of Singapore's urban development.

At the same time, ethical questions are raised through these spatial forays: Is Singapore so completely built-up as to have no natural features or wild animals? Is there such scant attention to social memory and even less of a collective conscience? Where and how do we live? Where and how do we *want* to live?²⁵ These are huge existential questions of history that no film can adequately address. What Tan achieves, or what the spaces in her films do, is to allow us to intuit these uncertainties in a very material and concrete way, such that what we sense is directly linked to our singular, temporary occupation and personal experiences of these filmic spaces, thus circumventing the route of the clichéd narrative.

By "material" and "concrete," I mean that although the documentaries are not dramatized, there is an intensity of space from within which Tan's subject matter unfolds. Instead of the prosaic backdrop, every space throbs with a force: the "non-places" of the void deck, the expressway, the cinema stair core, the canal and the open field, as well as the sanctity of home in the three dwellings—a public housing flat, a terrace house and a private condominium—featured in *The Impossibility of Knowing*, and the placid public housing blocks in *Moving House*, built over ground in which ancestral bodies long laid to rest are now susceptible to disruption since "the Singapore government requires this land for further national development."²⁶ Here, space is perceived as immanent sites of importance, charged with history, loss, intrigue, death, crime or trauma.²⁷ Neither filtered nor manipulated, these spaces are also captured straight on, pictured in their actual physical condition. Tan uses space as part of the film's "cinematic body," or the cinematic as Barbara Kennedy puts it,

“as a ‘material capture,’ not as a text with a meaning, but as a body which performs, as a machine, as an assemblage, as an abstract machine.”²⁸

The audience’s experiences of these spaces are not fixed by the films’ narratives since there is an absence of conventional plot in these documentaries.²⁹ Rather, the outcome of such an open-ended experience is what Gilles Deleuze calls “affect,” which is an intuitive and process-conscious event of perception—the viewer experiences the space through various registers—through the film’s visuals, the sensing of an environment that envelops and gives place to the human subject of Tan’s documentary, and the viewer’s own sociocultural and political makeup. The experiential outcome is restless. The meanings generated are fluid, depending on the way these different registers assemble and reassemble themselves. Writing about *Yangtze Scribbler*, Ho Rui An discusses the impact of its “affective” status:

affect refers not to emotion, for emotion is intensity already captured and qualified by a sensing body that makes possible the utterance of one’s feelings as ‘happy’ or ‘sad’. Affect is really more of a force—the sense we get of something acting upon us but which has yet to be assimilated into our subjectivity and to ‘make sense’ to us on the level of the body.³⁰

Kennedy also emphasizes affect as prepersonal, acting at the level of the sensorial and the material, “the affective is formulated through color, sound, movement, force, intensity,” with the film experience acting as an “‘event’ . . . explored as a mind/body/machine meld,” where meaning emerges through a conscious process (as opposed to something which is consumed and predetermined) in the “in-between” of these different registers.³¹ I argue that space is used in Tan’s film as affective background, with this background taking on a conscience-forming role: “If background seems inappropriately modest, we should remember that in our modern use of the word it means that which underscores not only our identity and presence, but also our history.”³²

Here, space is only sensed in the background but it lingers on, in the back of the viewer’s mind, imprinting itself as a network of interconnected and entangled routes. I would even say that such mental connections of Singapore’s spaces, as I have tried to make in this essay, are enacted across Tan’s different films—what Claire Colebrook calls an “out-of-field” perception of space that designates an awareness not confined to one scene or one film, but a spontaneous sensing of connections and relationships of space, event, and subject that moves fluidly in between the different films and contexts.³³ This faculty exposes the audience to a nascent “elsewhere”—an aurally rich nation, a city of trauma, a landscape of absurdities, a partisan people whose passion for where they live and love drive them to make choices that confound the status quo, and whose singular spaces with differentiated durations need to be recognized rather than homogenized.

WE, IN WONDERLAND

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice . . .

—Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*³⁴

What you chart is already where you’ve been. But where we are going, there is no chart yet.

—Audre Lorde, in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*³⁵

In closing, some remarks about Tan Pin Pin’s approach to space—the way it is used in her films, and how she sees space as instrumental in creating meaning and forging relationships require reiteration.

Contrary to the objective and distant nature of documentary, Tan’s approach is arguably personal, instinctive and intuitive. She has, for example, admitted that she has a huge and random archive of Singapore scenes that she has filmed but not used, and like Benjamin’s nineteenth-century collector, has amassed over the course of a decade, newspaper clippings detailing crimes of passion. Such casual rambles through Singapore life, space and society are, for Tan, a vital creative resource. Partly due to lack of financial resources and partly because of the crowd she thinks her work will (or will not) attract, Tan has also chosen to showcase her films in non-commercial venues—higher education institutions, schools, art venues, museums, community-run locations and international film festivals. This is the space of reception which Tan controls. Local bloggers review her work with critical acclaim, and much of her newer shorter films are available online. The screening of her documentaries are low-key events, popularized through social media and by word-of-mouth.

This community-level, bottom-up approach coheres with what Rey Chow argues is a new trajectory towards gaining “visibility” in a postcolonial, media-saturated milieu. Chow emphasizes that “visibility” means not just being seen, but also a force to be reckoned with since “visibility is implicitly analogized to power, hegemony, status and authority”:³⁶

What must now be recognized as embedded in the postcolonial as such are the thresholds, limits and potentialities of visibilities, of visibilities as the “multisensorial complexes” of shifting social relations.³⁷

Chow cites Helen Grace’s research which taps on the changing site-spectator dynamics. Grace, a photographer, filmmaker and producer, writes about the advent of “a strange new domestication of history” which focuses on the affective engagement of audiences, through popular sites such as YouTube and Flickr, around “images of local significance.”³⁸ Although Tan’s work does not operate in the same realm, Grace’s argument about the importance of having a “co-extensive” relationship between the image

(film) with the present (with a community, or a group of people who can be motivated into action) resonates with the affective power of Tan's films.

Summarily, affect in Tan's documentaries is propelled by her ability to give different durations to different spaces, and in doing so, strategically transform what is unremarkable and homogeneous into something singular and unrepeatable. In *Singapore GaGa* and *Moving House*, the concept of time and space becomes highly differentiated as diverse practices—the fragile existence of Singapore's talented street buskers and their relationship to the didactic street laws and ruthless passersby, dialect-speaking southern Chinese newsreaders persistently broadcasting each evening to unknown listeners whom they believe exist all over the island, the slow trek through uneven landscape to pay respects to the dead versus the violent and rapid act of exhumation—reveal competing durations that persist in maintaining tradition, personal habit, forgotten rituals, fraternal and filial ties. These differentiated durations are then mapped onto space, thus challenging “the case that the space we have mapped on to time is a space devoid of intensity, devoid of differing speeds and dimensions.”³⁹ When we can understand these different durations, we can also “intuit durations other than our own,” thus empathizing with, and understanding the need for, the construction and preservation of different pockets of space, or micro-utopias.⁴⁰

Space is *not* the point of Tan Pin Pin's films. Nonetheless, her use of space, in its subtle and tangential way, is inseparable from the meanings of her films, however diverse or similar these meanings may appear to the individual viewer. This strategic use of space and its ability to demonstrate the physical (size, scale), the socio-political (power, wealth, hierarchy, privilege), and the psychical (love, resistance, commonsense, nonsense) is nowhere better exemplified than in the hypnotic scene in *Snow City* where Inuka, the first polar bear born in the tropics, swims in his artificial arctic habitat. Inuka momentarily transfixes us in his, and our, Wonderland. In this one fantastic, endearing, humorous, absurd and unforgettable moment, Tan brings home the complexities of Singapore's spaces in all its critical and entangled dimensions.

NOTES

With thanks to Melany Park, Serene Ng and Tan Pin Pin.

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone, 1989), 171.
2. Alexis A. Tioseco. “Why and for Whom Do You Film Today?” posted August 23, accessed June 21, 2014, http://criticine.com/feature_article.php?id=40&pageid=1187886966
3. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978), 2–3.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*

6. Tan Pin Pin, "Death-defying Act," an interview by Billie Cohen in *Time Out Singapore*, posted July 17, 2007, accessed November 8, 2013, www.time-outsingapore.com/film/feature/death-defying-act
7. Emily Chua, "Works by Young Singaporean Artists reflect a deep sense of loss," in *The Straits Times*, December 5, 2004, 31.
8. Tioseco, "Why and for Whom Do You Film Today?"
9. See, for example, Kenneth Paul Tan, "Violence and the Supernatural in Singapore Cinema," in *New Cinema: Journal of Contemporary Film* 8, No. 3 (2010): 213–23; Kenneth Paul Tan, "Alternative Vision in Neoliberal Singapore: Memories, Places, and Voices in the Films of Tan Pin Pin," in *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention*, David C. L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 147–67; Gaik Cheng Khoo, "Where the Heart is: Cinema and Civic Life in Singapore," in *New Suburban Stories*, Martin Dines and Timotheus Vermeulen, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 97–109; Joanne Leow, "The Future of Nostalgia: Reclaiming Memory in Tan Pin Pin's *Invisible City* and Alfian Sa'at's *A History of Amnesia*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45, No. 1 (2010): 115–30. An exception which focuses on how difference is mapped through Tan's multilingual, multidialectal aural landscape of Singapore is Olivia Khoo's, "Singapore, Sinophone, Nationalism: Sounds of Language in the Films of Tan Pin Pin," in *Sinophone Cinema*, Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 77–97.
10. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, "Translator's Foreword," in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1999), ix.
11. Jonathan Hill, *The Illegal Architect* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998), 46.
12. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xv.
13. Deleuze, *Cinema* 2, 180.
14. "With no cuts, I document every inch of the country. I keep the speed consistent at 80km/h so that this document has cartographical value. If the same route along the Pan Island Expressway is recorded every year, Singapore's topographical changes can be mapped with previous recordings." See Tan Pin Pin, "80kmh," *Notes from Serangoon Road*, accessed June 18, 2014, www.tanpinpin.com/wordpress/?page_id=31. For a discussion on the role of art or film in addressing what Walter Benjamin calls "reception in a state of distraction," see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 232–4.
15. Low Beng Kheng, "Yangtze Cinema: Curating to the Masses," *Singapore Memory*, accessed June 21, 2014, www.singaporememory.sg/contents/SMA-39cb3836-858b-4ee6-a9df-26c19c6ccb2b
16. Tan Pin Pin, "Production Talk: The Impossibility of Knowing by Tan Pin Pin," interview by Jeremy Sing, in *SINDie*, posted October 11, 2010, accessed June 15, 2014, www.sindie.sg/2010/10/production-talk-impossibility-of.html
17. Wright Morris, *Time Pieces, Photographs, Writing, and Memory* (New York: Aperture, 1999), 11.
18. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, eds. (London: TH Hogarth Press, 1980), Vol.3, 210.
19. See Souchou Yao, *Singapore: The State and the Culture of Excess* (London: Routledge, 2007); Tan, "Violence and the Supernatural in Singapore Cinema," 214.
20. For a discussion and debates on Singapore's meteoric rise into first-world status, see Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis," in *SMLXL*, ed. Jennifer Siegler (New York: Monacelli

- Press, 1998), 1008–89; C. J. Wee Wan Ling, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).
21. Tioseco, “Why and for Whom Do You Film Today?”
 22. For their pioneering text on postmodern space, see Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1972).
 23. For an updated critique of the void deck as a space of transgression, see Stephen Cairns, “Singapore’s Void Decks,” in *Public Space in Urban Asia*, William Lim, Sharon Siddique and Tan Dan Feng, eds. (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2014), 80–9.
 24. For a comprehensive history on the early years of the Housing and Development Board, its objectives and output, see Aline K. Wong and Stephen H. K. Yeh, eds., *Housing a Nation: Twenty-five Years of Public Housing in Singapore* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1985); Chua Beng Huat, “Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful: The Public Housing Programme in Singapore,” in *Understanding Singapore Society*, Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser, eds. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 307–27.
 25. For a discussion on the effects of losing old villages, and the absence of a hinterland in Singapore, see Alfian Bin Sa’at, “Hinterland, Heartland, Home: Affective Topography in Singapore Films,” in *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Essays, Documents, Interviews*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 33–50.
 26. Dialogue from *Moving House*.
 27. According to Marc Augé, a non-place is a space of passage, somewhere to pass through, which has no particular historical value: “they are not integrated with anything; they simply bear witness, during a journey, to the co-existence of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected.” Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2000), 111.
 28. Barbara Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 5.
 29. “The two English words ‘experience’, ‘experiment’ are one ‘experience’ in French . . . so in the Deleuze-and-Guattari-world, life’s experiences are also always experiments.” Andrew Ballantyne, *Deleuze and Guattari for Architects* (London: Routledge, 2007), 42.
 30. Ho Rui An, “Documenting Affect: Yangtze Scribbler, Jalan Jati and *All the Lines Flow Out*,” in *Cinematheque Quarterly*, Oct–Dec 2012 (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2012), 27.
 31. Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema*, 5.
 32. John B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 8.
 33. Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2007), 48, 49. Here Colebrook is explicating Deleuze’s thesis on the vital connections that film can make through montage.
 34. Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Random House, 1998), 35.
 35. Audre Lorde, in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 180.
 36. Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 154.
 37. *Ibid.*, 162.

38. Ibid., 166. See Helen Grace, "Monuments and the Face of Time: Distortions of Scale and Asynchrony in Postcolonial Hong Kong," in *Postcolonial Studies* 10, No. 4 (2007): 467–83.
39. Colebrook, *Deleuze*, 26.
40. Ibid., 27.

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6 Chiang Mai and the Cinematic Spaces of Thai Identity

Adam Knee

It is hardly a surprise that Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, looms largest in the popular imagination of Thainess, both domestically and internationally. Yet, Chiang Mai too, though a city of a much smaller scale, has an important place in this imagination, perhaps all the more so in recent years given that it is the home base of the country's most visible political family (the Shinawatras).¹ Bangkok, on the other hand, has paradoxically had an increasingly ambivalent and qualified relationship to Thailand and Thai identity, owing to its positioning as by far the most internationalized, modernized and urbanized center in the country, and hence as growing furthest away from popular understandings of Thainess. Indeed, the two cities can be seen as in conceptual opposition, as adhering to differing poles of Thai identity—as had become all the more clear at the time of this writing in early 2014, in the context of a political crisis now routinely characterized in spatial terms, as a tension between the center (and in some accounts the south) of the country, on the one hand, and the north and northeast of the country, on the other—a tension simultaneously described as one between Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

This chapter is concerned with the exploration of a significant popular arena for the articulation of this opposition—that of domestic commercial filmmaking. Over the past decade Chiang Mai has figured centrally in a number of top local box office successes, most notably *The Letter* (*Jod mai rak*, 2004), *Ladda Land* (2011), and *Home: Love, Happiness, Memories* (*Home: kwamrak, kwamsuk, kwam songjam*, 2012). An examination of these films can illustrate aspects of contemporary discourses about Thailand's second city (and to a lesser extent, Bangkok, by contrast) in relation to Thai identity and culture as these function through and in relation to the cinema. A case will be made for the predominance of tropes connecting Chiang Mai to the non-urban, the natural, the spiritual and the cyclical nature of life (a central concept in Buddhist cosmology)—all in divergence from metropolitan Bangkok.

This polarization between Chiang Mai and Bangkok, between the Lanna north and center, is longstanding. Through the Burmese–Siamese war of the late eighteenth century, when Chiang Mai (then capital of the Lanna

kingdom) was wrested from Burmese rule, direct day-to-day influence of the walled and moated northern town by Bangkok was hindered by its relative inaccessibility.² This changed, by design, with the radical implementation of central administrative controls from 1874³ and the opening of a rail link between the two cities from 1921, which greatly sped up transit, and further expanded this historic trading town's regional importance as a crossroads between Bangkok and the south and the more rural and inland borderlands in the north and east.⁴ With greater control and connection gradually came (in subsequent decades) greater perceived exploitation of various kinds—with the central Bangkok people and government benefitting from northern and rural natural resources, hydroelectric power and labor, and locals increasingly feeling they got nothing in return.⁵

It needs to be stressed that Thailand's Lanna north is distinct, geographically and culturally, from the proximate Isan northeast, but these regions can be linked for the purpose of discussing the broader oppositions outlined here because Chiang Mai hosts considerable numbers of northeasterners and because the rural populations of both regions share the same concerns. Relatedly, because of the significant presence of Shan and other Burmese communities, and of various hill tribes and other ethnic and national groups,⁶ Chiang Mai has also been the seat of substantial transregional rural activism.⁷ This link to the rural hinterlands, in standing as a potent symbol for all that is not-Bangkok, is sustained by Chiang Mai, though well-known, not meeting the typical definition of a city in terms of density of development and population.⁸ Chiang Mai's built environment remains largely low-rise, despite sprouting mid-rise hotels and condominiums, and because the city sits within relative proximity (though ever less so) to rural and agricultural areas, and Thailand's border regions (about 100 kilometers away). Most popularly held imaginations of Chiang Mai, then, are of an entity at the crossroads of the national and the regional, the center and the borderlands, the urban and the rural, but an entity firmly leaning towards, and standing in for, the regional and rural.

One last and pertinent discourse about Chiang Mai I would also mention by way of introduction, linked again with an understanding of Chiang Mai as not-Bangkok, concerns the city's positioning as an attractive place to escape Bangkok's urban hardships, indeed a place worth visiting because its remote nature makes it so outside the mainstream of Thailand as to be, in effect, trendy for cutting-edge locals and tourists alike. This sense of Chiang Mai's trendiness continues to be endorsed, not least by many big-name Thai film personalities, including the popular heartthrob Ananda Everingham and the filmmakers Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chookiat Sakveerakul (a Chiang Mai native whose work is examined here). Indeed, recent research confirms the trend of middle-class Thais, as well as well-to-do retirees, including expatriates, relocating to the Chiang Mai countryside to enjoy rural comforts.⁹

ARTICULATING A FRAMEWORK

The Letter is the film that solidly established Chiang Mai in the contemporary Thai cinematic landscape, and at the same time significantly raised Thailand's profile on the regional filmmaking map. A remake of the 1997 Korean film *Pyeon ji*, (which also bore the same English title), this romantic tearjerker was a major success and received some regional distribution at a time when such was not yet the norm for Thai commercial cinema, save for the rare break-through hit (Figure 6.1). *The Letter* receives particularly close attention in this essay because it used creative license to characterize Chiang Mai through certain narrative tropes which, intentionally or not, have been strongly hewn to since in Thai films purporting to be set there. And also because it so strongly and explicitly articulates a distinctive value-laden, spatial-thematic framework that yokes the varied environments of Thailand with contemporary dynamics and tensions underpinning Thai national identity.

The narrative of *The Letter* is set in motion in the film's opening moments with the receipt of a letter in Bangkok that draws the main protagonist of the film (Dew) up to Chiang Mai for the funeral of a great-aunt, accompanied by her roommate Ket. While there, Dew meets Ton, with whom



Figure 6.1 *The Letter*, playing at a theatre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 2006.
(Source: Author)

she feels an immediate affinity, and after her return to Bangkok, she and Ton gradually develop a romance via phone calls and then emails. The brutal murder of Ket (by a date she has met through online chat) prompts Dew to flee Bangkok to take up residence in an old-fashioned Chiang Mai house she has inherited from her grand-aunt, which also affords the opportunity to be comforted by Ton. The romance continues to develop, and before long the two get married, but their happiness is soon disrupted by the revelation that Ton has a terminal illness (type unspecified). After Ton's death, Dew planned to escape from sorrow, this time by moving back to Bangkok, but changes her mind when she starts receiving posthumous love letters from Ton. It is eventually revealed that Ton had made arrangements for the letters before his death and, in an epilogue, that Dew goes on to have a child by Ton and lives on in Chiang Mai.

Even this thumbnail sketch of the plot should suggest its spatially bifurcated structure, and indeed both the narrative organization and the editing patterns of the film consistently foreground the sharp distinctions between the disparate realms that the film identifies as those of Chiang Mai and Bangkok. This national duality plays out in the film on a whole range of levels, one of the most immediately evident of these being Chiang Mai's link to the rural (and, contingently, the natural and less developed) juxtaposed with Bangkok's link to the urban (constructed and overdeveloped, and modernized). This duality is quickly established in the early sequences of the film which light-heartedly show the discomfiture of the two city girls in the rustic old Thai house with no television, internet access, coffee maker or cooker, and their terror at the loud cry of a gecko in the night. To preserve the duality, the film must absent the real-world development of Chiang Mai, opting instead to recreate, in the northern town of Pai (where *The Letter* was filmed), a rural corner of a type that has disappeared from the main city.

The reinvention of Chiang Mai as quaint and rural is achieved with further scenes of a local village settlement with houses and shops that seem as rustic as the aunt's amidst extensive imagery of natural settings steeped in greenery. These exterior natural settings are presented as open and scenically beautiful, with a great deal of spatial depth, suggesting a freedom of movement. For example, in scenes of motorcycle rides though the countryside or repeated sequences of spending quiet time in a favorite spot of Ton's: an open green hillside looking out over distant vistas of mountains (of the type Chiang Mai is known for) upon which sits a tree that was planted by Ton's parents on his birth. In fact, Ton, and by extension positive themes of romantic love, is linked with the plant realm in numerous ways in the film: he is employed at a local agricultural research station developing new techniques for the region's farmers, and the first meeting of the future couple comes about because Dew has chosen to buy a cactus Ton has cultivated.

Again, the contrast between the environment of Chiang Mai and that of Bangkok is emphatically articulated. The leisurely and idyllic scene early on, where we are introduced to Ton's hillside and his "birth tree" (and

where Ton and Dew start to fall for each other) is graced by a soundtrack of gentle music and the sounds of insects and birds that is disrupted by the sound bridge of an alarm clock and a rapid-fire sequence of the young women's morning ritual of rushing to work in Bangkok. Instantly, the open spaces, quiet atmosphere, slow pace, profuse greenery and sparsely populated sanctuary are displaced by upbeat music accompanying the women's frenetic preparations, a high-speed commuter train traveling through a skyscraper-crammed cityscape, a crowded office with dozens of computer professionals plugging away at their keyboards, then an even more crowded and loud discotheque. Indeed, detail for detail, as the plot unfolds in scenes and sequences that alternate between the Chiang Mai setting and the Bangkok setting, such direct and highlighted oppositions continue: open-hearth coffee versus coffee maker and Starbucks coffee;; home cooking versus purchased prepared food, hand-washed versus commercial laundry; agricultural versus high technology occupations, pay phones versus cell phones, naturally cool temperatures versus air-conditioning; and so on, respectively augmented by dialogue and activity in almost each instance.

Among these various oppositions, one of the most instructive is that between Dew's dwellings in the two locales. In Bangkok she lives in a cramped apartment with a roommate; in Chiang Mai she lives in the house inherited from her grand-aunt that she will subsequently share with her husband Ton. This family home is not just bucolic, it is a regional style wooden Thai-stilt house, and the lifestyle it suggests with its local furnishings and lack of modern conveniences entails local knowledge and customs which Dew at first lacks. So it is largely from Ton that she gains much of this knowledge, a character deeply rooted in the local and in the family who had planted a tree to literally connect him with his Chiang Mai ancestral lineage, whose legacy in agriculture he continues. All of such details serve to link Chiang Mai, largely positively, with place, home, family—a recognizable Thainess. Bangkok, in opposition, is negatively aligned with modern and foreign-oriented ways of living (which tend to be mobile, mechanized, commercialized, deracinated) and manifests a loss of connection to home, family, nation.

There is a bit of a paradox in this in that while Chiang Mai is clearly positioned as somewhat peripheral, represented as an out-of-the-way hamlet inhabited by simple, and thus sometimes amusing, folk, who occasionally need to venture all the way to Bangkok to acquire various essential goods and run basic errands (as Ton is doing in a scene when he meets Dew there). And Bangkok (at least initially) appears lively and bright—and in a brief skyline shot immediately stands in for Thailand's arrival as a modern state. Yet, in the dualistic thematic framework established here, it is clearly Chiang Mai that is more profoundly linked to Thai culture and figured more positively. Concordantly, though Ton and his friends often come across as somewhat unexposed to the world beyond Chiang Mai, they are presented as kind-hearted, trustworthy and having a genuine sense of community

spirit. In contrast, the Bangkok social realm, as dramatized in the women's workplace, would appear to be purely profit-driven and heartless, which is underscored most strongly when Dew's boss demands that she return from her dying husband's side to complete a project swiftly. The Chiang Mai ethos of cooperation and charity is exemplified both in the aims of Ton's work (designed to help local farmers) and his use of commerce to support the community rather than for personal gain (he sells his cacti in order to raise money for a school library).

The evidently chaste and restrained courtship of Ton and Dew is itself a nod to traditional Thai values and customs, while Ket's pursuit of the man she has met online runs plainly counter to those values and bespeaks a technologized, globalized loss of old-fashioned morality. In stark contrast to Ton, the man Ket pursues proves to be untrustworthy and dishonest (standing her up on their first date, lying about his wealth and status) and, far worse than that, a crazed killer. Ket's death at the hands of this stranger can be read as symptomatic of Bangkokians' loss of morality, and as a cautionary tale of wrong-minded pursuit of a mate (attracted as Ket is by his claims computer training, overseas travel and wealth).

The fact that Ton, a paragon of Thai virtues, also dies prematurely would seem to run counter to the argument that Ket's death has moral and/or karmic overtones. But it needs be noted that Ket's death is a bad death—sudden and violent—whereas Ton's death is fully anticipated well in advance, and thus allows the continued development and expression of love for his new wife (which the film exploits to full effect). More importantly still, Ton's death is positioned (like most else in the imaginary realm of Chiang Mai) as part of a larger natural cycle of life (not a jarring rupture like Ket's death): Ton must pass away, but his birth tree, rooted in Chiang Mai soil, continues to grow, as will his lineage, the descendants of the son we discover he has given his wife in the film's coda (set, appropriately, by the picture postcard hillside tree).¹⁰ Even the spasmodic vomiting from his illness is subsequently formally echoed in the spasmodic vomiting of his widow from her pregnancy, the movement toward death in effect transferred into the movement toward birth. Chiang Mai's temporality is not just slow-paced, it is cyclical, quite unlike the rapid, linear, forward-moving timescape of Bangkok. Ton's letters too, evocative as they are of a transcendent love, to some extent override the linear drive of time and find their way to his widow after his death—albeit with a little canny help from his community.

Whereas this tragic love story in part makes Chiang Mai a place of sorrow and isolation, in the film's terms, it is clearly also a place of life and spiritual development, a place that (positively) retains things and values that are lost in a Bangkok metropolitan environment. Such a binary conceptual framework is hardly idiosyncratic, corresponding as it does to widespread contemporary discourses (especially in the wake of the 1997–1998 economic crisis) about Thailand's need to return to local resources and wisdom

and use these as a way of supporting itself. These discourses, which underpin a loosely constituted popular movement, have been discussed in some detail under the rubric of “rural localism”—a philosophy championed by the King of Thailand, one that advocates a renewed emphasis on self-sufficiency for healing and rebuilding community ties.¹¹ *The Letter*, in effect, gives a blunt pop cultural articulation of this, looking forward to future regeneration in a town that embodies a return to older ways of life.

CLOSE VARIATIONS, THEN A DARKER TURN

Although *The Letter* did not lead to a huge wave of films in Chiang Mai settings, it did appear to spark a minor trend over the subsequent decade, seen in a group of films partaking similar discourses about the city—and, interestingly, almost all of them being exceptionally profitable at the box office (discussion of which cannot be contained in this essay). Among the noteworthy titles are the romantic comedies *Dear Dakanda* (*Pheuan sanit*, 2005), which shares more than a few themes with *The Letter* concerning thwarted love, and *Hormones* (*Pidtermyai huajai wawoon*, 2008), a teen-oriented omnibus film. Chookiat’s 2007 drama *The Love of Siam* (*Rak haeng Siam*), although not set in Chiang Mai, is also relevant to this trend owing to a key—mysterious and tragic—subplot connected to events surrounding the disappearance of the protagonist’s sister while on vacation there.

Such melancholic dimensions of the cinematic discourse about Chiang Mai—the repeated linkage to themes of death (albeit with highly spiritual overtones)—have their apotheosis in some sense in *Ladda Land*, a horror film about vengeful ghosts in an eponymous Chiang Mai housing development. *Ladda Land* certainly engages some of the positive discourses about the town articulated in the earlier films, yet also offers a less idealized projection of what Chiang Mai stands for. Indeed, although it is in the least conventionally realistic genre of the films described here, being a horror film, it is also in many ways paradoxically the most realistic film, both in that it references some of the real-world complexities and difficulties of Chiang Mai’s present-day situation and that, partly as a result, the north-central split in Thai identity it presents is somewhat more complicated and less black-and-white.

Ladda Land concerns its protagonist Thee’s decision to escape the difficulties of life in Bangkok (most centrally his inadequate wages and a mother-in-law who looks down on him) by moving with his family to start anew in Chiang Mai. In fact we never see Bangkok itself within the film, but its presence is strongly felt, not only through narrative references to it and the family’s past life there but also through the voice of the mother-in-law (also never seen, save for brief flashbacks), whose phone calls continue to create tensions at a distance. The negative associations that Bangkok

receives in this way notwithstanding, Chiang Mai itself is no longer presented in idyllic fashion as a largely rural and open setting but rather as a claustrophobic space in which nature is compromised by modern commercial development.

Soon after the film's opening, we briefly see Chiang Mai's historic center when Thee picks up his family from the airport to drive them to the new home he has prepared, and once or twice there are transitional shots of the city's mostly low- to mid-rise skyline. But for most of the film we are behind the gates of the Ladda Land housing development on the fringe of the city (a development very much like the ones that are proliferating around Chiang Mai),¹² within which the two-story houses (themselves gated) are built claustrophobically close together, such that neighbors can often be seen watching each others' comings and goings. The sense of this being a denatured space, of the hallmark qualities of Chiang Mai attenuating, is repeatedly driven home with crane shots that show the expanse of gated houses with the famed mountains surrounding the city visible in the far distance. Added to these shortcomings of Ladda Land of course is the still more immediate (if less realistic) one of its being frequented by angry and mutilated looking ghosts, and thus a source of nightmarish anxiety rather than homey comfort.

But although Chiang Mai's once-touted habitat is here presented in less than idyllic terms, the film still does make the strong connection between Chiang Mai, home, and family seen in some of the other films: Thee has moved north from Bangkok precisely because Chiang Mai gives him the opportunity to have his own home, and it is through this home that he intends to strengthen ties with his family. Family love and happiness, however, again seem fleeting here, in this case evidently not so much because of the inherent impermanence or transience of existence (as *The Letter*, for example, suggests with its Buddhist framework) but because of the negative forces arrayed against both family and community in changing times. Chief among these forces are those of economic hardship evident in part in the fact that the ghosts that are encountered in the housing estate are themselves victims of economic oppression: the first one that residents report seeing is that of a Burmese maid whose mutilated body is found stuffed into the refrigerator of a recently abandoned house in the complex. And the bloodied ghosts in the house next door to Thee's are themselves the result of a family massacre precipitated by financial pressures.

Such pressures and other negative forces, moreover, are linked in particular with Bangkok. Ironically, though Thee has traveled to Chiang Mai to find a way out of the financial difficulties of his life in Bangkok, his new managerial job in the northern city itself proves short lived because of covert, exploitative decisions made by bosses at a central office in Bangkok, which suddenly leave not only him but also his Chiang Mai underlings out of work. Such underhandedness, indeed the infidelity of things Bangkokian, is also suggested in the overtures of Thee's wife's former employer in Bangkok who wants her to

go back to work for him, but clearly has a sexual interest in her as well. But perhaps the strongest embodiment of Bangkok as a negative space and force is Thee's mother-in-law, not physically present but always able to wield influence on the family from afar, in part because of her wealth, her social position and her long-established foothold, all of which serve to make her not only an actual part of a Bangkok elite but also a symbolic stand-in for a central power bloc that tries to impose its will on the entire nation.

But whereas *Ladda Land* on the whole positions Chiang Mai in distinct contrast to Bangkok society, the film also manifests a blurriness in its figuration of what a local Chiang Mai society might look like. Modern-era Chiang Mai is shown as fostering flows of differing people and comprising a mix of groups and identities, both economic and social haves and have-nots, insiders and outsiders. The main protagonists, for example, are themselves displaced Bangkokians, the murdered maid one of many Burmese, like many other ethnic and regional communities either migrant or settled in Chiang Mai owing to its proximity to the Thai borderlands, and her missing employer, the film indicates, is a foreigner. So while Chiang Mai is linked to home and to Thailand's past natural beauty, *Ladda Land* also registers the uneasiness, indeed quite literally the horror, of transitional environmental, economic, demographic and social circumstances.¹³

RETURNING HOME

Home, the last film to be discussed here, might appear to be much more a throwback to the unqualified nostalgia and localism of *The Letter*. Like the other films discussed in this essay, *Home* was quite successful and visible (receiving a number of local film awards and garnering regional distribution), though unlike most of director Chookiat's films appearing at least on the surface as a lighthearted and relatively uncontroversial personal reflection on his warm memories of his home town. The second of the film's three stories (all set in Chiang Mai) in some ways so strongly recalls that of *The Letter* that one might indeed wonder if the intertextual referencing is intentional: a woman (Jan) faces the challenge of living in the old Thai-style house and farm she shared with her late husband, who suffered from a terminal illness and who now communicates with her through posthumously discovered handwritten notes (which he left amongst his papers and belongings). Yet again, movement towards resolution is predicated upon her apprehension of the cyclical nature of existence and releasing her late partner to transit through death to rebirth, a rebirth that again is distinctly linked to images of nature as we see the spirit figure of her husband walk through an open field and look to the stars. Chiang Mai's putative association with older cultural traditions, spirituality and nature (and the positioning of these within a cyclical time scheme) is suggested through numerous visual and narrative motifs within the segment. And while the contrast of this realm with all

things Bangkok does not come to the forefront, it is implied through references to and brief images of the couple's children, who have long since moved to the central metropolis and become assimilated to its ways.

Thailand's spatial social dynamic is more present still in the narrative framework of the third story in *Home*, which concerns the wedding of a Chiang Mai native Preeya, who had moved to Bangkok after high school and now has returned to local home and family for her marriage to a prosperous southern Phuket native. Indeed, much of the humor in the segment derives from regionally based tensions among the characters as well as from confusion stemming from their different dialects. As it develops, the segment's key dramatic tension turns out to be Preeya's wavering between marriage to her at times cold and uncommunicative fiancé and an evidently more warmly comported old Chiang Mai flame. The segment's (and the film's) upbeat conclusion seems to affirm the engaged couple's decision to forgive one another's shortcomings and go on with their wedding, a gesture which within this narrative context uses the Chiang Mai setting to implicitly reinforce not only family but national bonds, positing Chiang Mai as a space in which the disparate parts of the Thai body politic can coexist, in which differences can be tolerated (and in this sense the film offers a more positive take on the same theme of Chiang Mai as a space of population flows that is present in *Ladda Land*).

The warmth of the segment derives not only from the feel-good conclusion, but also from the immersion in rural greenery and trees and flowers which we see throughout (the majority of scenes in the segment, as in fact in the entire film, have exterior settings). There is also some melancholy here, not only because of the couple's close brush with dissolution, but also because of yet another Chiang Mai connection with death, which in this case links the different sections of the film together. Towards the close of the third segment, we learn that one of the two main characters in the first segment died in a traffic accident and that it was his funeral Jan was attending, in a seeming narrative digression in the second segment. Among the attendees at the wedding are the surviving main protagonists of the earlier segments, bringing all three segments together as it were by a single death, the connection revealed to us through a series of (linear time transcending) edits.

As for the narrative of the first segment, while it is relatively slight, it is arguably thematically significant for the film. The segment simply details the developing friendship between two young men (one evidently gay, the other seemingly still exploring his sexuality) during a single night on a high school campus at the eve of graduation. Each of these two youths appears to be an outsider in his respective social group, but here, for a brief moment, they are able to find an emotional intimacy. That this is a vulnerable, transitional moment, a marginal and rarefied space of identity, is evident at several levels of this narratively simple and brief segment: the two men are about to be pulled away to Bangkok and to other pursuits in their lives, and one will

before long be dead in a traffic accident. But for the film, the moment's importance clearly transcends its brevity in linear time, articulating a notion that Chiang Mai, by its own peripheral nature, is better able to accommodate those who are outside the mainstream—and thus, in some sense, is more accommodative of Thai identity in its diverse totality.

To sum up, among the consistencies in the depictions of Chiang Mai in the Thai films discussed here are associations with home and family, with love and spirituality, with local and traditional Thai cultures, with nature and vitality, and with cyclical (or transcendent) conceptualizations of time—all articulated to some extent in contrast (spatially, conceptually, morally) to the projected characteristics of Bangkok. Also consistent across these films is a certain degree of ambivalence within these discourses, which might be readily associated with real-world ambivalences in Thai national culture more broadly: Chiang Mai is celebrated for its connections to Thainess while, simultaneously, located at a remove from the main center of the Thai polity (read Bangkok), and this engenders a certain uneasiness. Even as these films frame Chiang Mai as the space of Thai tradition, their narratives carry no rejection of economic globalization, nor deny any pride in Thailand succeeding as an Asian Tiger.

Ambivalence or paradox exists here not only vis-à-vis Thai modernity and global success, but also the very nature of Thai identity. These films hint at Chiang Mai being the seat of such identity, but *Ladda Land* and *Home* in particular also register this identity as hardly being homogenous, and recognize the existence of various identity groups (in terms of class, local region, nation, or sexuality). As such, I would suggest that these films partake in an albeit modest way in the reorientation of “Bangkok-centric projections of Thai cartography” that Noah Viernes (borrowing in turn from Thongchai Winichakul’s influential postulation of a cartographically driven conceptualization of a Thai national unity) attributes to a number of more radical Thai film productions.¹⁴ As commercial vehicles, the films discussed here do not seek to radically undermine the national cohesion of Thai space, though *Ladda Land* and *Home* in particular do highlight the diverse, complex and discontinuous nature of the Thai national space and articulate the potential interchange between outside and inside, margin and center.

One further, and perhaps even more fundamental, paradox that emerges in these films involves the status of Thai Buddhist cosmology and spirituality in a context of modernization and Westernization. Chiang Mai is a natural setting for such a tension to play out, being known for its rich Buddhist heritage, spatially embodied in the great number of historical *wat* (temples) and monasteries throughout the area, and at the same time a crossroads for all kinds of (modern) influences through the thick routes of migrant and tourist traffic. The tension comes to the fore in the narratives of these films because of their subject matter of death and, more specifically, their characters’ needs to find a proper way to come to terms with the mortality of their loved ones. The tendency in the films that deal with the theme most

explicitly is, as discussed, to move toward a Buddhistic apprehension of the cycles of life and death and a willingness to relinquish attachment, but the paradox, quite naturally, is that some attachment remains, and that these characters are modern subjects in a modern Thai reality wherein one is not necessarily encouraged always to forgo desire.

This essay has worked to highlight the functioning of a set of strikingly consistent discourses pertaining to Chiang Mai in a modest number of highly visible Thai commercial feature films that engage as well as contribute to popular understandings of certain articulations and differences within a larger Thai identity. The ambiguity that exists in the resolution of such differences speaks to the real-world complexity of that identity, as well as the nation's on-going and more immediately visible regionally-inflected political strife.

NOTES

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Amporn Jirattikorn and Adam Dedman for their kindly assistance during my research visit to Chiang Mai and their suggestions for this essay.

1. Rimmer and Dick describe Chiang Mai as a "second city," a terminology which puts particular emphasis on a relationship (usually involving some structural disadvantage) to a "first city," typically a national capital, as is Bangkok in this case; Peter J. Rimmer and Howard Dick, *The City in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 83–85. It should be noted that Chiang Mai is also the name of the province within which the city is located.
2. David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), chapter 6.
3. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 54.
4. Duongchan Apavatjirut Charoenmuang, *Sustainable Cities in Chiang Mai: A Case of a City in a Valley* (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 2007), 77; Howard Dick and Peter J. Rimmer, *Cities, Transport and Communications: The Integration of Southeast Asia since 1850* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), chapter 5.
5. See, for example, Baker and Pasuk, *History of Thailand*, chapter 6 and 212–20; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Boom and Bust* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), chapter 8.
6. See, for example, Amporn Jirattikorn's discussion of Shan migrant culture in Chiang Mai, "Living on Both Sides of the Border: Transnational Migrants, Pop Music and Nation of the Shan in Thailand," Working Paper Series No. 7, Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University (August 2007).
7. See, for example, Tyrell Haberkorn's book-length study *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); also Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 314–17.
8. The 2005 population for Chiang Mai municipality was 152,334 (Duongchan, *Sustainable Cities*, 106).

9. Tubtim Tubtim, "Migration to the Countryside: Class Encounters in Peri-urban Chiang Mai, Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, No. 1 (2012): 113–130.
10. The significance of the tree arguably involves not only its associations here with (Buddhist) rebirth, but also with local (especially Lanna-Chiang Mai) beliefs in spirits that exist in big trees; see Duongchan, *Sustainable Cities*, 19–36.
11. See, for example, Michael Kelly Connors, "Democracy and the Mainstreaming of Localism in Thailand," in *Southeast Asian Responses to Globalization: Restructuring Governance and Deepening Democracy*, Francis Loh Kok Wah and Joakim Öjendal, eds. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 259–86; Kevin Hewison, "Resisting Globalization: A Study of Localism in Thailand," *The Pacific Review* 13, No. 2 (2000): 279–96; and Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000), chapter 8.
12. In fact, a rise in such developments at the outskirts of the city was already noted as early as 1990; see Guy Lubeigt, "Traditional and Recent Aspects of the Urban Development of Chiang Mai, Thailand," in *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in Southeast Asia: Interpretative Essays*, Marc Askew and William S. Logan, eds. (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994), 122–3.
13. Anthropologist Andrew Alan Johnson, in describing *Ladda Land's* resonance with quite a few Chiang Mai migrant workers' ghost stories, quite concordantly notes, "In the film as well as in these stories, things that appear to be modern and full of prosperity are in fact tainted by foreign presences [. . .] Financial, moral, and supernatural crises intertwine." Johnson, "Progress and Its Ruins: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand," *Cultural Anthropology* 28, No. 2 (2013): 300.
14. Noah Viernes, "The Geo-body of Contemporary Thai Film," *South East Asia Research* 21, No. 2 (2013): 238; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

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- The Love of Siam (Rak haeng Siam)*. Directed by Chookiat Sakveerakul. 2007. Bangkok: Sahamongkol Film.

Imagined Space

7 The Superflat Space of Japanese Anime

Deborah Shamoon

Anime is perhaps Japan's most successful cultural export, with Japanese-produced animated films and television shows enjoying large, devoted audiences worldwide. As with the reception of Japanese cinema in the 1950s, anime offers viewers an alternative to an unvarying American visual style. But, whereas Noël Burch and other foreign critics praised Ozu Yasujirô and Mizoguchi Kenji for framing and editing techniques that varied only slightly from classical Hollywood conventions, anime presents a radically different scopic regime and use of space in the picture plane, compared to both live action film and the conventions of animation in the United States.¹ American animation, led by Disney, has historically aspired to mimetic representation in both movement and character design. Anime, on the other hand, has developed an iconic or symbolic style that rewards high levels of fan engagement. Attempting to read anime like mimetic film misunderstands how it is produced and consumed, why it looks the way it does and how fans watch, particularly the hardcore fans, or "*otaku*." This chapter will provide an overview of how anime creates meaning through its distinctive use of space, using the example of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2012), a recent hit that is fairly typical of anime's visual style.

SUPERFLAT

A key theoretical term to describe space in Japanese animation is "superflat," coined by fine artist Takashi Murakami in the same-titled exhibition he curated in Tokyo in 2000. "The Super Flat Manifesto" that opens the exhibition catalogue states provocatively: "The world of the future will be like Japan is today—Superflat."² Murakami uses the term to allude to the blending of high and low, Eastern and Western art styles, and also literally to describe the tendency towards a 2-D picture plane and rejection of three-point perspective in both classical Japanese art and contemporary Japanese animation. His catalogue essay lauds the distinctive style of Kanada Yoshinori, a key animator on many of the most popular TV anime series of the 1970s.³ Kanada used a sharply angular style in both character design and abstract images of explosions, or gun or laser fire, creating diagonal

patterns that produce a sense of dynamic movement on a flat plane rather than 3-D movement in depth.

Many scholars have adopted the term “superflat” and expanded or refined its meaning with regard to anime. Thomas Lamarre uses “superflat” to describe the depiction of movement with the limited animation techniques favored by anime styles.⁴ Rather than attempting to mimetically reproduce movement in depth, Japanese animators have tended to emphasize sideways 2-D motion. This technique originated in low-budget TV animation, and over time grew into a distinctive style. Even with the increased use of computer-generated imagery (CGI), many animators have still chosen to explore the aesthetic potential of a radically 2-D picture plane.

To understand the various interpretations of superflat, and how anime favors 2-D space, a brief overview of the history of anime is helpful. Although short animated films were produced in Japan as early as 1917 and feature-length animated films in the 1940s, the distinctive style indicated by the term “anime” was developed for TV, beginning with Tezuka Osamu’s *Tetsuwan Atomu* or *Astro Boy* (1963), the animation based on his manga of the same name. While the Disney ideal was to create increasingly realistic movement, particularly movement in depth using the multiplane camera, Tezuka, on the other hand, was constrained by TV’s low budgets and short production scheduling, and relied on viewers’ existing emotional engagement with the character to compensate for lack of movement or depth.⁵ As Steinberg argues, because the *Atomu* manga was already popular, even a small amount of movement was thrilling.⁶

Although Tezuka’s animation studio, Mushi Pro, did not become a major force, never fully recovering from bankruptcy in 1973, his model of production became the model for the industry. That is, rather than feature films, the majority of animation is still produced as weekly half-hour TV serials, created with cost-cutting limited animation techniques, including a low frame rate, flat backgrounds and no movement in depth. All character movement is simple, even abstracted, with banks of cels to simulate repeated movement such as walking or talking. To compensate for this lack of movement, anime developed an iconic style, instantly readable by informed fans. For instance, Kanada Yoshinori favored the extreme use of diagonals in both characters’ postures and in movement, which creates a sense of dynamism. Murakami praises the strobing, abstract patterns Kanada created in scenes of explosions, destruction or interstellar battles—jagged flashes of light that require few frames but create hypnotic patterns.⁷ The use of exaggerated character designs in hair, eyes and costumes is also a way to create visual interest with little movement.

Although not all animation produced in Japan can be termed “anime” or cultivates *otaku* audiences, this is still the dominant mode. CGI has not made movement in depth cheaper or easier to achieve. Some anime experiment with 3-D modeling or use movement in depth in some scenes, such as in *Tekkon Kinkreet* (2006), but many more use CGI to mimic hand-drawn

styles. Even Miyazaki Hayao, who uses the multiplane camera frequently, still prefers to avoid movement in depth.⁸ Movement in anime, even in Miyazaki films, tends to be sideways, relying on an iconic rather than mimetic animation style.

SUPERFLAT DESIRES

The superflat environment of anime encourages devoted fans, the *otaku*, to view all characters, stories and settings as points of information to be catalogued in a mental database. The pleasure in viewing is in recognizing iconic expressions and database elements, not in exploring the psychological interiority of the characters. Characters are also iconic or stereotypical rather than realistic. This also originates with the Mushi Pro model, as profits were driven not by broadcast fees but by character licensing, favoring easily marketed characters. Itō Gō argues that manga and anime are populated by *kyara* (*kyarakutā* or characters) that become independent of their narrative.⁹ Steinberg further explains how merchandizing separates characters from the narrative, turning them into mascots.¹⁰ These blank-faced *kyara*, untethered to a narrative, lack psychological depth; in a way, they are also superflat. Azuma Hiroki sees this separation as symptomatic of a larger societal shift, away from grand narratives and toward what he terms “database consumption,” arguing that *otaku* are less interested in the grand narrative of an anime series than in *moe* elements (affective elements of character design) that are reproduced in other characters.¹¹ This is why anime is filled with derivative works; the pleasure for the *otaku* is not in encountering a new narrative or character, but in recognizing which features have been reproduced.

The result of anime’s use of limited animation plus obsessive fan engagement is what Saitō Tamaki terms a “high-context medium,” far removed from live-action cinema.¹² Building on both Murakami’s and Azuma’s writings on superflat, Saitō writes: “[Superflat] indicates an imaginary space without depth or thickness, where even the eye of the camera does not exist. I would suggest that depth and the camera’s eye are replaced by another regulatory system, namely, the layered ‘contexts’ (of plot, of authorship, of publication and distribution),”¹³ in other words, the database. Saitō continues,

these high-context expressions are impoverished on the syntagmatic axis, even as they show such richness along the paradigmatic one. We see this in anime, where the almost excessive variation in setting and character combines with a tendency toward cookie-cutter storylines and ideas. It is for this reason that a high-context superflat space needs some stimulus from outside itself, to destabilize its internal context. Born in the boundary between modern art and *otaku* culture, the concept ‘superflat’ itself functions as a point at which to introduce that externality.¹⁴

Saitō uses the language of semiotics, with the syntagmatic axis representing the plot, diegesis and character design, and the paradigmatic axis representing the deep internal structure of anime as a whole. In other words, the paradigmatic axis is the information gleaned by long-term, highly engaged viewing of many anime series, what Azuma calls “the database.”

Saitō's larger argument, however, is not only to discuss anime itself but rather to analyze *otaku* sexuality, specifically to explain why *otaku* are attracted to images of sexualized fighting girls. Using Lacanian analysis, Saitō terms these characters “phallic girls” and not “real” people; that is, they lack realistic psychological development or interiority. Saitō contrasts these phallic girls to what he terms the “phallic mother,” the adult female fighting character who appears more frequently in Hollywood film. Although both fight, the phallic mother is motivated by some past trauma, while the phallic girl lacks clear motivation to fight.¹⁵ Saitō's example is Miyazaki's film *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), in which the adult female antagonist Kushana is driven to destroy the giant insect Ohmu because she was attacked by them, symbolically (or perhaps literally) raped. Nausicaa, the teenage protagonist, has diegetic motivation to save her village, but that is motivation in a mythic or epic register, not a feature of personal psychological development. Because phallic girls do not go through psychosexual stages of development, they are not human characters; they are flat, empty collections of *moe* (affective) characteristics that are coded as erotic. Saitō describes them as the “lures” that enliven the story by inflaming sexual desire in the viewer.¹⁶

Saitō views *otaku* fixation on the phallic girl not as pathological, but rather as a survival mechanism in a media-saturated world. He makes the link between phallic girls and superflat in an analysis of one of Murakami's art installations, which combines a transforming fighter jet with the body of a sexualized girl. This statue, he writes, “is truly stripped of any context: girl and mecha are arranged together *on the same plane*, producing a figure with its origins located unmistakably in *otaku* sexuality.”¹⁷ This is another intriguing way to think of superflat, as the merging of high-tech mecha with the body of the phallic girl.

This juxtaposition of mecha and the phallic girl is so common in anime that it has developed as a recognizable *mecha musume* or machine girl sub-genre. These titles either depict girls operating massive weapons such as gigantic body armor, or include fantastical mergers of girls' bodies with jets, robots, guns or even tanks. This level of abstraction of the girl's body and the addition of *moe* to inanimate weapons support Saitō's hypothesis that the phallic girl is not meant to be read as really human. Whatever emotions or personalities these characters display, it is all superflat, all at the level of *kyara*, and emerging from the *moe* database. To say that anime is superflat, then, refers both to the representation of physical space and to the way anime is understood by its fans. Even the occasional use of CGI modeling to achieve fleeting moments of the illusion of 3-D space, and the increasingly

common use of real places as models for backgrounds, do not add a third dimension to superflat.

MADOKA'S GENRES: MAGICAL GIRLS AND SEKAIKEI

Puella Magi Madoka Magica first aired in 2011 as a twelve-episode series on local stations in the late-night slot for anime aimed squarely at male *otaku*.¹⁸ Following the popularity of the TV series, it was edited for theatrical release in 2012 in two parts of two hours each. The film version is nearly identical to the TV version, and both parts were screened together.¹⁹ It is common practice for popular TV anime series to be re-edited as films to gain a wider audience. Before discussing the *Madoka* series specifically, it is crucial to understand the genres it derives from not only because of the high-context nature of anime, but because the series actively plays with genre expectations. *Madoka* belongs to the magical girl genre, and to a lesser extent to the *seikaikei* (literally “world type”), or apocalyptic genre.

The magical girl (*maho shōjo*) genre of TV anime began in the 1960s with *Mahōtsukai Sarī* (*Sally the Witch*, 1966), followed by *Himitsu no Akko-chan* (*Secret Akko-chan*, 1969), aimed at six- to twelve-year-old girls.²⁰ In these early series, the girl uses a magical object to access her powers, is accompanied or guided by magical animals or spirits and must keep her magic a secret: Sally uses her magic wand to grant wishes; Akko uses a magic mirror disguised as a compact to transform herself into anything she wants. The symbolism of a girl using a compact to physically transform or grow up is obvious, and many subsequent magical girl anime series foreground adolescent psychosexual anxieties and aspirations. For instance, Morisawa Yū, the main character in *Mahō no tenshi Kurīmi Mami* (*Magic Angel Creamy Mami*, 1983), uses a magic wand to transform from a ten-year-old into a sixteen-year-old, under the guidance of two magical cats. Other series, aimed at both boys and girls, play up the sexuality of the girl character, as in *Majōkko Megu-chan* (*Meg the Witch Girl*, 1974).

Takeuchi Naoko brought a measure of maturity and narrative sophistication to the genre with her manga series *Bishōjo senshi Sailor Moon* (*Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*, 1992), also made into a hugely popular anime series. Takeuchi combined the magical girl genre with the super *sentai* genre, creating a squad of color-coded magical girls.²¹ *Sailor Moon* features complex characters, romantic love and long, melodramatic story arcs that helped raise the target demographic from elementary-school ages to teenagers, with some passionate fans watching it well into adulthood. The first magical girl anime to gain a substantial international audience, *Sailor Moon* inspired numerous other anime series, with teams of girls fighting together in stories heavy on action and dramatic conflict but still aimed at teens, and with the understanding that good would eventually triumph over evil.

The magical girl genre was originally aimed at girls: series like *Sailor Moon* were first serialized in *shōjo manga* (girls' comics) magazines and contained many traits common to that genre.²² Anime and manga aimed at boys did not pick up the magical girl genre until 2004, with the series *Mahō shōjo ririkaru Nanoha* (*Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha*), which added *moe* elements to the character design. Nanoha's magical guardian is a ferret, which gives her a magic wand and sets her on a mission to collect the Jewel Seeds. After the success of *Nanoha*, magical girl anime have been popular with male fans as well. Magical girl anime for a male audience tend to feature more overtly sexualized character designs, "fan service" (gratuitous scenes of female characters in sexualized or revealing poses) and action, as opposed to the series aimed at girls, which emphasize friendship and romance.

At first, *Madoka* seems like a typical magical girl story aimed at a male audience, with plenty of *moe* elements and fan service. For instance, the opening sequence shows two of the main characters naked, pressing their breasts against each other. The story contains many familiar generic features, beginning with the appearance of the magical animal, Kyūbē, which resembles a cat or rabbit. Kyūbē offers to turn fourteen-year-old Madoka and her friend Sayaka into magical girls in order to fight witches, for which they will be granted one wish. While they are considering this offer, Madoka and Sayaka befriend a slightly older magical girl named Mami, who mentors them, while another magical girl, Homura, seems positioned to become their main antagonist. The magical item that is the source of their powers is called a Soul Gem, and the defeated witches surrender a Grief Seed, echoing the Jewel Seeds of *Nanoha*.

Madoka first signals its break with genre expectations and safe storytelling in the third episode, when Mami is killed by a witch. The image of a snake-like creature biting off Mami's head and leaving her headless body to drop to the ground is purposely shocking, and caused a sensation with fans who were thrilled at the prospect of a darker, adult take on the childish genre. Madoka and Sayaka soon learn that being a magical girl is not fun or glamorous (as in *Sailor Moon* or *Akko-chan*), and that they are expected to fight until they die. In fact, the magical girls are already dead, in a way: the Soul Gem actually contains their souls, which have been severed from their bodies. When Sayaka is temporarily separated from her Soul Gem, her body falls lifeless. Even worse, they discover that witches are former magical girls whose Soul Gems filled with despair and changed into Grief Seeds. Sayaka, realizing she is no more than an empty shell, transforms uncontrollably into a witch and is destroyed by Kyoko, another magical girl. The true nature of the magical item, and indeed the entire transformation into a magical girl, is revealed to be destructive.

The same is also true of the magical animal, Kyūbē. As in *Creamy Mami*, the magical creature is in fact an alien taking on a cute appearance, but unlike that earlier series, his purpose is not to help the magical girls, but to exploit them. Kyūbē's name is a shortened form of the English word "incubator"

(*inkyūbētā*), and his head resembles a uterus, with fallopian tube ears. His job is to collect the psychic energy released when magical girls transform into witches. The cuteness of Kyūbē's character design and voice acting contrast jarringly with his manipulative and dispassionate nature. The horror increases when Homura shoots him, creating large holes in his body, and he quickly regenerates without altering his blank expression. Kyūbē is a *kyara*, with more than a passing resemblance to Hello Kitty. His exploitation of the girls is perhaps a commentary on contemporary consumer culture and the uncanny nature of supposedly cute, blank-faced *kyara*.

The final revelation, however, is the most unsettling, as we learn that all the events seen thus far are only one of many alternate timelines that have been manipulated by Homura to prevent Madoka from becoming a magical girl. Homura, it turns out, is not the villain but the savior. In a fast montage, Homura reveals the original timeline, in which Madoka becomes a magical girl and is killed. Homura uses her own magical girl powers to reset the timeline and save Madoka, but fails repeatedly, each time with increasingly tragic consequences, until the witches' power threatens to destroy the world. In the end, Madoka sacrifices herself to avert apocalypse, using her wish to prevent any girls from ever contracting with Kyūbē. In doing so, Madoka ascends to godhood, erasing all trace of herself from the material world and living on only in Homura's memory. With this sudden shift, the story veers from the magical girl to the apocalyptic "world" genre, where the story typically begins with a simple love story between a wimpy, ineffectual boy and a strong-willed girl. The "world" at the start of the narrative is the private world of these two characters. But eventually it is revealed that the fate of the real world is in peril, and it is up to the girl, crucially aided by the boy, to prevent an apocalypse. Anime falling into this genre include the series *Suzumiya Haruhi no yūutsu* (*The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, 2006) and the film *Summer Wars* (2009).²³ *Madoka* subverts this by featuring a pair of girls, but the tonal shift is the same, from low-stakes stories to world-ending crisis that only the pair can solve together. It is in the visual style, and in particular the use of space, that these themes of teen angst are worked out, and where the connection between anime genre, themes and viewing practices are most clear.

SUPERFLAT SPACE

The visual style of *Madoka* is typical of anime's limited animation aesthetic, specifically, the aesthetic of shows aimed at a male *otaku* audience. The picture plane is relatively flat, movement is stylized, and character designs are ornate. There is very little use of CGI to create the illusion of movement into 3-D space. Instead, visual interest and a sense of dynamic movement are created by strobing patterns and diagonal, syncopated motion of the sort innovated by Kanada Yoshinori and other animators in the 1970s.²⁴ For



Figure 7.1 From right, Madoka holding Kyūbē, Mami and Sayaka. Art style reflects hand-drawn aesthetic with *moe* features (large eyes, small nose and mouth, large breasts, and school uniforms).

instance, in the transformation sequences typical of the magical girl genre, as the girls' attire magically changes from school uniforms to their magical persona outfits, the camera zooms in and out as their bodies arc gracefully on the diagonal.

Character designs are geared toward the *moe* elements that *otaku* find attractive: large heads on small bodies, exaggerated eyes, tiny noses, short skirts with thighs exposed. The magical outfits are frilly and lacy, conforming to the Lolita aesthetic. Each girl is color-coded (as in *Sailor Moon*), and their personality types also reflect *moe* characteristics, with Madoka as naïve and innocent, and Homura and Kyoko as variations on the *tsundere* type.²⁵

Like many current anime, despite extensive use of CGI, *Madoka's* aesthetics mimic hand-drawn animation. This can be seen not only in the reliance on limited animation techniques but also in the line work, particularly in the character designs (Figure 7.1).

The character designs are cartoonish, very far from the mimetic realism associated with some American CG animation, and the faces are rendered to mimic pencil sketches, particularly noticeable around the eyes. All of this adds to a feeling of warmth and familiarity, in contrast to the harsh, cold feel of overly realistic CG animation.

SPACE AND ANIMATION STYLE

There are two distinctive modes of animation in *Madoka*, associated with different types of spaces. One might be termed the animation of the “real” world—that is, depicting the everyday lives of the characters; although as

described above, this style is superflat, that is, not at all realistic. However, as it is the norm for anime of many genres, it reads as “real” within the diegesis. This “real” world is contrasted to the “magical” world, called a “barrier” (*kekka*), where the girls battle witches. This barrier realm is superflat with a vengeance, devoid of any perspective or depth. Backgrounds are symbolic rather than representational, and all objects, including the witches themselves, are made up of cut paper images using stop-motion animation reminiscent of mid-twentieth century Czech and Russian animation. The animation for the barrier sequences was produced by a different studio, Gekidan Inu Curry, to create a style that purposely contrasts with that of the main studio, SHAFT.

The imagery of each witch is symbolic of the girl she was before transformation, although that information is not shared within the diegesis but is left as one of many riddles and ellipses for fans to discover. For instance, when Mami fights the witch Gertrud, the main images are red roses, butterflies and handlebar moustaches, which all appear as stop-motion photograph collages (Figure 7.2).

Although the barriers do not use the typical diagonal movements of Kanada style anime, the surreal patterns still produce the strobing effects associated with superflat. Gertrud herself is a formless blob with a cutout of a rosebush for a head. The confrontation with Mami takes place in what appears to be an arena, with curved stripes reminiscent of balconies cycling behind them. The contrast between the more typical anime-styled Mami, including smooth planes and shading, with the flat paper cutouts, highlights the unreal nature of both styles and increases the sensation of superflatness. As Lamarre explains, this contrast is necessary to make anime not just flat, but superflat:



Figure 7.2 The witch Gertrud in her barrier.

Superflat implies that something is not simply flat but very, very flat—complexly flat. To make something look superflat, you have to begin with layers that introduce the possibility of depth and then crush it. . . . You achieve superflatness, however, only by having complex layers and making them all appear equally on the surface, and equally important visually. In other words, backgrounds or intermediate layers don't fade away, allowing themselves to be overlooked. On the contrary, they push to the fore. Oddly enough, very flat backgrounds—say, a background of a single color or one composed of speed lines—often appear as important as the figure that they highlight. Depth comes right to the surface even as it serves to direct attention to the character. Fore-ground and background become equally striking.²⁶

The clash of animation styles in this sequence, and in all the barrier sequences, heightens the superflat effect of the entire series.

REAL SPACES IN ANIME

The space of the real world also contributes to the superflat aesthetic. *Madoka* is set in the fictional town of Mitakihara, nominally located in Japan but incorporating an eclectic architectural style, from modern skyscrapers to European-style cobblestone streets. Noticeably absent is any traditional Japanese architecture, although this is not unusual in anime attempting to appear trendy and cosmopolitan. With a heavy emphasis on Russian and Czech styles of animation in the barrier sequences, and the many references to German folklore, the use of a generalized European setting enhances the fantasy element and is common to many magical girl anime series.²⁷

Madoka references real buildings in its backgrounds, which becomes another facet of fan research and interaction. On the most literal level, the fact that some settings in anime series are recognizable has led to anime tourism.²⁸ Identifying real locations and encouraging tourism to those spots is not limited to anime but happens frequently with live-action TV; both Tokyo and Seoul have been popular destinations for drama fans. However, the relationship between real locations and anime settings is more complex, as it lacks the indexicality of a location shoot—even if based on photos of a real location, the drawing or CG rendering always mediates.

In some instances, the settings of anime series are closely based on real locations within Japan, which then become tourist destinations for fans. For instance, in 2007, the fan magazine *New Type* listed the locations used for the settings in the anime series *Lucky Star* (2007). Most popular was the Washinomiya Shrine, which saw as many as 300,000 visitors over New Year's Day 2008; after the initial shock, the town embraced the *otaku* tourists as a welcome source of revenue.²⁹ The appeal for fans, some of whom *cosplay* as their favorite characters and declare their love on votive tablets

at the shrine, is the sense of intimacy through a real location. For fans of pop stars and actors, this imagined intimacy is much more easily achieved through attendance at live events or by following celebrity gossip. For fans of incorporeal characters, tourism is one means to connect with the anime in a concrete, physical way.

Lucky Star, like *Madoka*, is about a group of teenage girls whose characteristics are constructed from the *moe* database. Unlike *Madoka*, *Lucky Star*, originally a four-panel manga, is in the slice-of-life genre, meaning that there are no supernatural elements, and for the most part, no plot. The story follows the small incidents in daily lives of the characters. The appeal for fans is the combination of *moe* characters with humor and frequent parodic references to other manga and anime. For anime such as *Lucky Star* in the slice-of-life genre, real-life locations within Japan add to the sense of realism. The Washinomiya Shrine was not famous until the anime made it so, and being able to visit the location gives the anime an extradiegetic reality.

SUPERFLAT ARCHITECTURE

In *Madoka*, on the other hand, real locations are a collage of famous buildings worldwide. Well-known buildings that appear on the Mitakihara skyline in background shots or during the opening or closing credits include the Burj Khalifa, Princess Tower and Pentominium in Dubai, Russia Tower in Moscow, the Empire State Building in New York, Taipei 101 in Taipei, Commerzbank Tower in Frankfurt, and the National Art Center and Metropolitan Government Building in Tokyo (Figure 7.3).

Other well-known examples of modern and postmodern architecture appear as backdrops for incidental action in the story: A shopping mall the girls walk through resembles the Weldstadthaus in Cologne, a pedestrian bridge near the mall looks like the Helix Bridge in Singapore, a hallway in *Madoka*'s school is modeled on the observation deck of the Shanghai World Financial Center. Although fans of *Madoka*, like fans of *Lucky Star*, can enjoy the architectural detective work of identifying real locations, including some that appear only fleetingly, the larger effect on the use of space in the anime is different. In *Lucky Star*, the use of a location within Japan means that fans can easily visit. In *Madoka*, the jumble of international sites makes it highly unlikely that any one fan could visit them all; the ability to immerse oneself in the physical space of the anime is diminished.

Furthermore, the use of modern, impersonal structures of glass and steel reflects the sense of alienation and danger in the story. The girls live in a stylish future world, but one that is oddly depopulated, emptied of personal connections. Indeed, the central theme of the story at the end is the improbable, doomed friendship between Homura and Madoka. Although *Madoka*



Figure 7.3 Homura walks by a building resembling the Pentominium in Dubai.

succeeds in breaking the cycle of magical girls becoming witches, she disappears from the material world, along with all memory of her existence. As the teenage girl characters negotiate transitioning from school life to the larger world, personal struggles of love, friendship and sexual maturation take on literally earth-shattering dimensions.

The depopulated, modernist landscape of *Madoka* is an eerie dystopia. Kingsbury describes a similar use of space in live action science fiction films where “by ratcheting the staging of presence in a *mise en scène* through the usually secure geographic imaginaries, science fiction films can sacrificially plunge their lulled characters and viewers toward a *mise en abîme* of absurd geographical nightmares.”³⁰ Although the architecture in *Madoka* is drawn from real sources, the lack of human scale and absence of other characters creates the same nightmarish space as science fiction films, which

seek to radically trip up the contrived maintenance, through meta-physical assumptions grounded in presence, of everyday spaces that already presuppose ... pataphysical incursions. Thus, the supposed

alien that allegedly came from outer space, or from outside of space, already resides and permeates so-called everyday inner space.³¹

Madoka is more dark fantasy than science fiction, but the same holds true: The witches are not unknown Others, but the magical girls themselves who have become overwhelmed with anger and sadness, the negative outcome of adolescent psychological development at its most literal. The empty world of *Madoka* reflects this teenage milieu: No one exists except the main character and her friends.

CONCLUSION

While the themes of adolescent development are present in *Madoka*, it would be a mistake to read it as only a coming-of-age story. *Madoka* herself is a phallic girl of the sort Saitō describes. She lacks interiority or motivation; indeed, she never takes any decisive action until her final sacrifice, quite literally an apotheosis: she becomes a goddess. Although the story plays with the generic expectations of the magical girl genre by including darker elements and an apocalyptic ending, it does not transcend the superflat, database-driven aspect of anime.

In other words, in playing up *moe* elements, phallic girl characters and superflat spaces, *Madoka* remains firmly entrenched in the space of *otaku* expectations. By contrast, the potential of a groundbreaking series to not only subvert generic rules but also to include social critique can be seen in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), which deconstructed the giant robot genre. The final two episodes of the original TV series, through experimental, abstract animation, radically challenged the *otaku* audience to detach from their fantasies and go out into the real world. Fans despised this ending, and the studio, Gainax, and the director, Anno Hideaki, responded by creating film versions that gave the fans the ending they wanted—*otaku* criticism excised.

Jonathan Abel, writing on the anime film *Summer Wars*, argues that

we need to flatten the notion that the virtual fantasy is separate from the real, that the fantasy is not a transcendent wholly removed space, but only a transcendental, heterotopic threshold that allows us to fantasize about some impossible, entirely other space.³²

Anime, Saitō argues, is a way for *otaku* viewers to fend off alienation inherent in postmodern life, not by creating a fantasy space but by creating a contact point between the fan and an impossible other world. Despite the lack of innovation, *Madoka* is effective in providing this alternative space by deploying all the aspects of superflat so successfully. Storytelling across anime genres has shifted away from the anti-war, pro-environmental messages of the 1970s and 1980s to hinting at this kind of transcendent fantasy,

albeit always receding and in need of repetition because the superflat database always requires more entries rather than immersive fantasy worlds.

NOTES

1. Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (London: University of California Press, 1979).
2. Takashi Murakami, "The Super Flat Manifesto," in *Super Flat*, ed. Takashi Murakami (Tokyo: Madra, 2000), 5.
3. Murakami, "A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art," in *Super Flat*, 15.
4. Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
5. Lamarre, *Anime Machine*, 23–30.
6. Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 33–5.
7. Murakami, "A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art," in *Super Flat*, 13–15.
8. For an extended discussion of why Miyazaki is opposed to movement in depth, see Lamarre, *Anime Machine*, 43–60.
9. Itō Gō, *Tezuka izu deddo: hirakareta manga hyōgenron e* (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2009), 114–17.
10. Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 80–83.
11. Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 39–42.
12. Saitō Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 147.
13. Saitō Tamaki, "Otaku Sexuality," in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime*, Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., and Takayuki Tatsumi, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 243.
14. *Ibid.*, 245–247.
15. Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, 157–67. Saitō defines trauma as rape, one of the limitations of using Lacanian analysis.
16. *Ibid.*, 163.
17. Saitō, "Otaku Sexuality," 244.
18. Fujitsu Ryota, *Channeru wa itsu mo anime: zero nendai anime jihyō* (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2010), 186.
19. This essay refers only to the TV series of 2011 and to the two-part film of 2012. In 2013, a third film was released, which extended the story beyond the original TV series.
20. Sugawa Akiko, *Shōjo to mahō: gāru hīrō wa ikani juyō sareta no ka* (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2013), 80–102.
21. Super *sentai* (squadron) or *renjā* (ranger) series refers to live action special effects action TV shows for children, broadcast overseas as *Power Rangers*.
22. For details on the generic traits of shōjo manga, see Deborah Shamoon, *Pasionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012).
23. Jonathan Abel, "Can Cool Japan Save Post-Disaster Japan? On the Possibilities and Impossibilities of a Cool Japanology," *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 20 (2011): 59–72.
24. Murakami, "A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art," in *Super Flat*, 13.

25. *Tsundere* indicates a character (usually a girl) whose cold or aggressive exterior masks a warm, loving personality.
26. Lamarre, "The Multiplanar Image," *Mechademia* 1 (2006): 136.
27. Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, "Grotesque Cuteness of Shōjo: Representations of Goth-Loli in Japanese Contemporary TV Anime," in *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*, Masao Yokota and Tze-yue G. Hu, eds. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 207.
28. Rayna Denison, "Anime Tourism: Discursive Construction and Reception of the Studio Ghibli Art Museum," *Japan Forum* 22, Nos. 3–4 (Dec. 2010): 545–563.
29. Hiroko Tabuchi, "Popular Cartoon Series Makes Japanese Shrine a Magnet for Fans," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 2008. Accessed April 26, 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB121737740486095275>
30. Paul Kingsbury, "Science Fiction and Cinema: The Hysterical Materialism of Pataphysical Space," in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, Rob Kitchin and James Kneale, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 127.
31. *Ibid.*, 128.
32. Abel, "Can Cool Japan Save Post-Disaster Japan?" 70.

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8 Imagining Nanyang

Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in Wong Kar-wai Movies

Lai Chee Kien

In three of auteur Wong Kar-wai's movies, characters bearing the same names shuttle across them enough for scholars to suggest that they constitute a trilogy. They are, chronologically: *Days of Being Wild* (阿飛正傳, 1990, hereafter *DOBW*), *In the Mood for Love* (花樣年華, 2000, hereafter *ITMFL*) and *2046* (2004). One of the protagonists, So Lai-chun, was played by Maggie Cheung in the first two films and by Gong Li in the third. Though unnamed but appearing only in the end scene of the first movie, Chow Mo-wan, the journalist (played by Tony Leung), is the other key character in the subsequent two movies.

Although the trilogy mainly inscribed Hong Kong as the primary cinematic location, I would like to discuss it as comprising corollary constructions of the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora in the 1960s. I argue in this chapter that the three movies co-inscribed the spaces and circulations of the region together with Hong Kong for a specific duration of its colonial history. The attention to detail and narrative by the filmmaker in these movies also precipitated historical, geographical, social and spatial worlds through post-wwii cosmopolitan networks enabled by travel and movement of ideas, people and products across the South China Sea. Using Wong's trilogy and the extant literary and other media forms of the postwar period, I further argue the inextricability of Southeast Asia and Hong Kong for Chinese diaspora of that period.

THE CHINESE DIASPORA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (1998), a circular graphic titled "Symbolic Representation of Varieties of Chinese" was used to visually delineate the relationships between China and its diaspora range.¹ It comprises an internal circle representing China in the middle and three concentric rings around it. The ring encircling "China" is made up of four equal arc sections marked "Hong Kong," "Taiwan," "Aspiring Migrants" and "Students," whereas the outermost ring represents those assimilated into other places over the *longue durée*. In between the first and third rings is

a thick one marked with the term “Overseas Chinese,” suggesting a larger population size compared to the other two rings. Pairs of opposite arrows are marked between the second and third, as well as the first and second rings—to suggest movements and relationships between the different rings. There are no arrows between the core representing “China” and the first ring quadrants, suggesting “closer” relationships.

To a certain extent, the diagram clarifies the different categories of existing diaspora, instead of the oft-coalesced singular overseas Chinese identity used in most academic work. We need to note, however, that the graphic cannot capture and represent the different historical time periods when ring thicknesses fluctuated, nor periods when movement between certain areas became restricted. The ring indicated by “Overseas Chinese” is also not further graduated geographically because 80% of these individuals reside in only 10 countries that comprise Southeast Asia instead of in the 140 countries around the world.

Wong Kar-wai’s films ostensibly disrupt the easy readings of the above-mentioned graphic. From Hong Kong, his narratives intersect diaspora communities in Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Singapore and the United States. In the movie *Happy Together*, for example, the characters played by Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung are partners who negotiate and survive in Buenos Aires’ Chinatown, with Leung eventually visiting Taipei. In *Chungking Express*, we learn that the father of Ho Chi-woo (played by Takeshi Kaneshiro) is a Hokkien-speaking immigrant who manages Chungking Mansions. For the trilogy of *DOBW*, *ITMFL*, and *2046*, the diaspora is once again portrayed, but there are emphases on Southeast Asia. Two-thirds through the first two movies, the protagonists travel from Hong Kong to the Philippines or Singapore, respectively; and in the third movie, spaces were juxtaposed.

In *DOBW*, the character Yuddy, played by Leslie Cheung, drops everything in Hong Kong and heads for the Philippines upon discovering that his biological mother was residing there. After being denied a meeting with her, he retreats to Manila’s Chinatown, loses his belongings and dies in the Philippines. In *ITMFL*, the character Chow Mo-wan was a writer who sought alternative employment in Singapore. The reason for his departure from Hong Kong was to get away from increasing gossip about his marital status. In *2046*, the triangulation of narrative plots are confirmed through Chow: Chow meets Lulu, whose boyfriend was a Filipino Chinese who died young (*DOBW*) and reveals that he was once holed up in a hotel to write martial arts novels (*ITMFL*). Chow returns to Singapore in 1969 in search of another So Lai-chun, played by Gong Li.

On screen, Wong’s characters have little difficulty travelling to, settling into, and inhabiting these diasporic spaces. In *DOBW*, Tide, the sailor played by Andy Lau, arrives in Manila and speaks Mandarin to the receptionist of a hotel, one purportedly frequented by Hongkongers, when previously he

spoke only Cantonese in Hong Kong. In *ITMFL*, Chow Mo Wan finds a job with a Singapore press, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, through his connections, and resides in a walkup apartment from 1963–1966. He and his confidante Ah Ping are completely comfortable dining at roadside stalls and participating in the everyday life of the street. So Lai-chun, who travels to Singapore to visit Chow, was able to somehow locate him and even enter his apartment. The flows across these networks are thus fluent ones.

HONG KONG'S SOUTHEAST ASIA

Hong Kong is connected to Southeast Asia by its geographical location at the northern rim of the South China Sea. It is closest to the Philippines and is affected by typhoons and other climatic conditions that affect both locations.² Migrations of Filipinos to its shores had commenced early in history, and there are presently 140,000 Filipinos residing and working there. Filipino national hero José Rizal was exiled there in the nineteenth century, and the first Filipino national flag was designed and made in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is also connected to political histories of other Southeast Asian countries through its similar lengthy colonization by a European power and post-wwii economic conditions. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British, French and the United States colonized different parts of Southeast Asia. The “Malay world” became divided into the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia because of Spanish, British, Dutch and U.S. imperial interests. The processes of decolonization after 1945 led to independence and self-rule in these countries, but they were soon foregrounded by indigenous and transnational groups contesting for legitimacy to organize the nation form during the Cold War. Hong Kong, however, could not share such a fate with these countries, for its destinies were still tied to Britain before 1997, and then to China in 2047.

After 1949, Hong Kong's political, economic, social and intellectual spheres became intertwined with those of Southeast Asia when China became a communist republic. Two significant consequences ensued: first, the outmigration of various groups from China to Hong Kong and sites in East and Southeast Asia, and second, the commencement for a mutual search for Nanyang identities and subject matter both for overseas Chinese in Hong Kong and for those in Southeast Asia, since prior connections to China were variously strained, withdrawn or severed. The discovery, articulation or invention of the Nanyang Chinese identity in Hong Kong became useful for the making of a relational self-identity of Hongkongers, akin to how orientalism had delineated an identity for the West.³ For the second consequence, we may revisit explorations of this Nanyang identity occurring in post-1950 art, literature, music and cinema. The “Nanyang



Figure 8.1 Contemporary ointment case still listing distributed locations in Nan-yang (Singapore, Malaya, Vietnam and the Philippines), besides Taiwan.

(Source: Author)

art style,” for example, was named in Singapore after artists had travelled to Bali to formalize new perspectives on painting or subject matter treatment. During this period, the Nyonya woman as an indigenized, gendered, mixed-blood dweller in Southeast Asia, was stereotyped in Hong Kong films for different subjective articulations.⁴

Singapore’s movie industry in the 1950s was already connected to Hong Kong’s for two main reasons. First, the three major production houses—Shaw, Cathay and Kong Ngee—had bases in Singapore in the interwar years. Law Kar writes: “Loke Wan Tho, the Shaws and the Hos . . . were overseas Chinese. . . [and] true multinationals. . . For the next decade and beyond, Singaporean-Malayan involvement became a catalyst in the industrialization, modernization, and cultural diversification of Hong Kong cinema.”⁵ Second, when China closed its market to Hong Kong movies

in 1952, Southeast Asia became the key arena, besides Taiwan (see, for example, Figure 8.1). Singapore and Malaya became the primary areas of co-production and distribution because of their overseas Chinese populations, and also because rising nationalism in other Southeast Asian countries made those governments promote native languages and develop their own film industries.⁶

Stephen Teo noted that the Nanyang trilogy that Kong Ngee produced depicted “Nanyang” as practically synonymous with Singapore and Malaya, alluding to “this common experience of being ruled by Britain, of being parts of a network of British colonies with sizeable portions of Chinese migrants in their populations.”⁷ However, the local movie industries in Singapore and Malaysia went into decline from the late 1960s, with Shaw Brothers closing its Singapore studios in 1967 and Cathay-Keris receding business in 1973. Kong Ngee also reduced its Cantonese movies after the 1960s.

THE FRUITS OF TIME

To set the trilogy firmly in the turbulent 1960s, Wong spliced three documentary footages into his “fictive narratives” to paint a region still enrapt in the aftermath of prior colonialisms and the Cold War. In the closing frames of *ITMFL*, the clip of French president Charles de Gaulle visiting Phnom Penh in September 1966 was contrasted with journalist Chow, presumably there to cover the event, the latter whispering his secret into a hole at one of Angkor’s temple walls. De Gaulle made a famous speech there and then at Cambodia’s capital city to renounce U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, calling for withdrawal of its troops. In the early frames of *2046*, two riot scenes occurring in Hong Kong were inserted, both linked with colonial fragmentation. The Star Ferry riots in 1966 and the 1967 Pro-Leftist riots could both be traced to dissatisfaction of Hongkongers with colonial rule. Collectively, the three clips hint at unfinished political transitions around the South China Sea.

For urban Hong Kong audiences, what differentiated their cinematic spaces from Nanyang were the inscribed “tropical nature” and imagery found in the equatorial climate as well as the availability of its processed fruit and products. The jungles, plantations, gardens as well as tropical fruits such as the durian, coconut or the pineapple were invoked as alternate spaces or transition metaphors. In the movies from the 1950s, many titles or locational sites hinted at or portrayed fruit trees to suggest Nanyang.⁸ These metaphors returned uncannily in Wong’s trilogy: The opening title sequence of *DOBW* is a 50-second pan of coconut plantations viewed from a train carriage in slow motion, set to Los Indios Tabajaras’ “Always in My Heart.”⁹ The plantation form accessed by roads and railways is a remnant colonial space found throughout Southeast Asia, willed



Figure 8.2 A coconut tree silhouetted against the sky welcomes viewers to Singapore in *In the Mood for Love*.



Figure 8.3 Yuddy walks through the coconut plantation in *Days of Being Wild*.

previously by imperial ambition and need, but now implicated by their lingering geometries.

The coconut tree was referenced again in *ITMFL*. As the strains of the Javanese ditty “Bengawan Solo” accompanied a singular coconut tree

silhouetted against a blue sky, and an epigraphic intertitle with the words “Singapore, 1963,” the urban, equatorial city is introduced as Chow Mo-wan’s destination. In *ITMFL*, the eating of the durian, a tropical fruit, was captured: Wong filmed sequences of Tony Leung eating durians upon his arrival in Singapore, but they were subsequently edited out. The text that accompanied the scenes read:

It was the second week after his arrival in Singapore. He had gone into the outlying areas to visit a relative whose family managed a farm. He saw many durian trees there and heard stories about the fruit. They told him that the durian was the king of fruits: new immigrants (*sinkheh*) who found a taste for it would never return to China.¹⁰

Such ingestion of tropical fruits became synonymous with acclimatization in the Nanyang tropics. In Hong Kong, these fruits were popular in homes and eating establishments, in fresh or preserved forms. As Leung Man-Toe quipped, “In Hong Kong of yore, the cafes would sell kaya toast, and snacks at home would include coconut sweets.”¹¹ Wong had cited fruit previously: in *Chungking Express*, Cop 223 invested too much meaning into cans of soon-to-expire pineapples. One may argue that Wong’s invocations of tropical fruits and trees point to an earlier era of cognitive and corporeal relationships between Hong Kong and Nanyang (Figures 8.2–8.5).



Figure 8.4 Tropical fruits in Southeast Asia.

(Source: Postcard in author’s collection)



Figure 8.5 Coconut sweets used to be made in Malaya; shown here are contemporary ones from Hainan Island.

(Source: Author)

SHANGHAI—HONG KONG—SINGAPORE

While the trilogy presented and spatialized a network of locations across the Chinese diaspora, three cities are often hailed as closely connected: Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. Apart from human and economic traffic between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their alignments were reinforced by cultural and political circumstances. Shanghai was settled by Western powers after the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, whereas Hong Kong and Singapore became colonies of the British Empire in 1842 and 1824, respectively. Their reputations for cosmopolitanism, modernity and urbanity hinged upon their experimentation, co-option and co-production of Western and Asian cultures from those dates. Seen from East Asia, the proximate twinning of Shanghai and Hong Kong due to mutual influences and migrations is still being exhorted long after 1997, but to a lesser degree, the linkages of these two cities to Singapore. Financial institutions of the day would have major footholds in these three locations connected by frequent shipping and communication routes, and the establishment of transnational companies such as architectural firms.¹²

The mass migration and settlement of many Shanghainese to Hong Kong after 1949 strengthened the already strong connections between the two cities. Although many Shanghainese had elected to migrate to Singapore and other regional cities at that time, this was not as intensive as that to

Hong Kong from Shanghai. Botz-Bornstein suggested that Wong explicitly cultivated the Shanghai-Hong Kong link in *DOBW* and *ITMFL*.¹³ Rebecca (played by Rebecca Pan) was a key secondary figure from Shanghai in *DOBW*, and her reappearance as part of a larger community living in adjacent apartments to *ITMFL*'s main characters demonstrated this. In both, as well as in *2046*, the Shanghainese adorn the *cheongsam* that visually marked their status. In the trilogy, other cinematic strands were networked with South-east Asia: its textual connections with Singapore, and musical strands with the Philippines.

LITERARY NETWORKS

As Stephen Teo has suggested, textual references or adaptations abound in the conception of Wong's movies, such as Manuel Puig's *Heartbreak Tango*, Liu Yichang's *Intersection* and Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun*. In the space of the trilogy, a new text titled *2046* was created.¹⁴ Chow wrote it while occupying room number 2046 at the Oriental Hotel, and declared in the movie dialogue that, "It has excerpts from my life and I placed a lot of characters I met in the story."

Chow's role as a writer and journalist employed in both Hong Kong and Singapore was central to the latter two narratives. We may turn to Liu Yichang, the Shanghai-born journalist from Hong Kong who sojourned and worked in Singapore (*Ih Shih Pao*, 1952) and Kuala Lumpur (*Federation Daily News*, 1953–1957) for Chow's identity as both *2046* and *ITMFL* were based on Liu's novellas.¹⁵

The Chinese-language journalism and academic worlds of Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai were interconnected. Besides Liu, scores of journalists, including literary great Yu Dafu, arrived in Singapore to work for *Sin Chew Jit Poh* from 1938–1942. Khoo Seok Wan started newspapers in Singapore (*Thien Nan Shin Pao*, 1898) but also worked at the presses of Hong Kong and China.¹⁶ This connection continued up to the late 1960s, with Singapore's *Shin Min Daily News* established in 1967 by Hong Kong's Louis Cha and Leong Run Chee.

Chen Mong Hock, writing about the early newspapers in Singapore, noted that print material in the form of missionary periodicals were sent from Singapore to China since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, but this role was reversed when the island became the receiving end of modern Chinese journalism.¹⁷ The first newspaper, *Lat Pau*, established by See Ewe Lay in 1881, modeled itself on Chinese language newspapers in Shanghai and Hong Kong rather than contemporary local English newspapers. Part of the sources for printed news in *Lat Pau* were full or summarized feature articles from newspapers in Hong Kong, Shanghai and other Chinese cities. Subsequently, more Chinese language newspapers were established in

Singapore, as interest in Southeast Asian news translated into readership and subscription in China.

In the book *Three Months in Nanyang*, Cheng Kin Lo wrote about his three months spent travelling around various towns in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Sumatra and Java. He was tasked by his parent company, Chung Hwa Book Store, to survey the literary scene in these places and to assess market conditions. Cheng wrote that when he visited in 1933, his visit was reported in both major newspapers, *Nanyang Siang Pau* (established 1924) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (1929). His own parent company in Shanghai had set up a branch in Singapore by 1923, four years ahead of their Hong Kong branch. Its chief rival in Shanghai, The Commercial Press Book Store, had set up a Singapore branch earlier in 1912. Besides books and publications from China, both bookstores had assigned gallery spaces within the stores exhibiting paintings or prints from China. These stores were joined by local establishments like The Shanghai Book Store (1925) and The Popular Book Store (1936) during the interwar years, both having connections either to Shanghai and/or Hong Kong.

Sharon Carstens has suggested that twentieth-century publications in the Chinese language from Malaysia and Singapore may be divided into three time periods: 1900–1946, 1946–1966, and from 1966 to the 1980s.¹⁸ In the pre-wwii period, she noted the close intellectual, social and political connections between Singapore, Malaya and mainland Chinese cities. While there was a dearth of locally published periodicals, many publication types emerged during the post-wwii period, including leisure titles like *Saturday Review* and *Sin Chew Weekly* based on similar ones in Shanghai in terms of format, content and design. Juvenile literature, such as *Children's Paradise* (兒童樂園), *Nanyang Children* (南洋兒童) or *World Children Fortnightly* (世界兒童), were standard fare for young persons growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹ These were mainly published in Hong Kong, along with a variety of other magazines targeted at demographics like youth, ladies, movie fans and literary circles. Apart from monthly journals and magazines, Chinese-language textbooks, maps, and instructional material published in Hong Kong were directed at the Nanyang market and found their way into classrooms, offices and homes, and the quotidian lives of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.²⁰ A widely circulated monthly publication titled *Chronicles of Nanyang* (南洋文摘), published in Hong Kong from 1960 to 1973, collated every significant newspaper article, literary work or other writings about Nanyang for its readers.

Print capitalism, to cite Benedict Anderson, created the imagined communities in the press and literary world of the overseas Chinese. In this case, the scope exceeded the novels and newspapers to include a wider spectrum of popular and academic print media to connect diaspora. The links from Hong Kong to Singapore and Malaya were particularly strong in the postwar period, but the community was extended to include other cities in the region. For example, one could find student essays from Rangoon, Sarawak and

Hong Kong printed side by side on a juvenile magazine spread, announcements of movie quiz winners from different places, pen-pal search columns and so on. They affirmed the paper Nanyang community after WWII. The fibers of such a paper community were woven across a decolonizing South-east Asia and against the backdrop of their respective, emergent nationalisms during the Cold War. Nanyang print culture would, however, be weakened after the cementing of those very nationalisms. Carstens pointed to its decline after 1966 due to the changing national education policies in Singapore and Malaysia. The focus on English-medium education reduced enrolment in Chinese language schools in Singapore, while the changing policies in Malaysia eventually dwindled that number to only twelve per cent by 1983.²¹

MUSIC AND ENTERTAINMENT NETWORKS

Besides print, the Wong Kar-wai trilogy is also about the interconnectedness of the broader music and entertainment worlds between Hong Kong and South-east Asia. Key and secondary movie characters may be placed in this nexus, including Yuddy's foster mother, who is a "socialite"; Lulu the dance hostess; Ah Ping, who is in journalism, and later Bai Ling and Gong Li's So Lai-chun. Most of them were able to traverse across the space of Southeast Asia through those networks. In 2046, Chow checks into the Oriental Hotel, whose proprietor accepts him without hesitation upon discovering he was from the circle (文藝圈), and also because he himself was previously an operatic tenor.

In the notes to *ITMFL*, Michael Galasso, who composed the original music together with Shigeru Umebayashi, noted that the soundtrack was "creating a sound world of Hong Kong in the 1960s." This sound world had polyphonic identities and sources, ranging from Chinese operatic music, a developing Mandarin and Cantonese pop, transatlantic pop, to Latin American music. As another example of such imaginations, the medley from the 1959 movie *Spring Song* featured Grace Chang sequencing into one performance excerpts of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," "Rainbow Lass [虹彩妹妹]," "The Great Pretender," and "La Donna e Mobile," as a demonstrative collage of mediating different music genres from around the world. Yeh and Lake have suggested that the use of particular songs in Wong's movies "connect and bind dispersed geographies and distinct histories." They noted that "In Full Bloom," for example, was "an aural bridge to colonial Shanghai;" while the use of the song "Crescent Moon Shines on Nine Provinces" in Wong's Singapore scenes hinted at "the diffusion of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia."²² The Chinese title of *ITMFL* was in fact "In Full Bloom," the famous song sung by Zhou Xuan.

Latin American music and dance, in particular, were made popular in East and Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, with both Hong Kong and the Philippines as primary transducer locations. One need only file through Hong Kong movie soundtracks of that era to note the various translations of Latin music and songs that accompanied the dance fads, including the cha-cha,

flamenco, samba, calypso, mambo, tango and so on as inflections of transmitted cosmopolitanism and modernism. Wong quipped: “We had a lot of Western music in Hong Kong at that time, and most of the band musicians were from the Philippines, so there was a lot of Latin music.”²³ Orchestras like those of Xavier Cugat, Tito Puente and Los Indios Tabajaras produced standards like “Perfidia,” “El Cumbanchero” and “Quizas, Quizas, Quizas.” The end theme song of *DOBW*, for example, is *Jungle Drums* by Xavier Cugat, with lyrics translated as “是這樣的” (performed by Anita Mui).²⁴

Like journalist Chow’s transition to Singapore in *ITMFL*, Yuddy’s journey in search of his biological mother in *DOBW* takes him to the Philippines across the South Seas. Wong’s disclosure above, and his use of a song like “Always in My Heart” while Yuddy walked in slow motion in the movie, suggests the connections of music and the Philippines in the director’s constructed 1960s world. Filipino musicians were moving to and from Shanghai, Hong Kong and other parts of Southeast Asia over different periods of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their good reputation had earlier been established by the 1890s when they played in state and police bands in Malaya, and at the royal courts and nightclubs of Cambodia, and served as music teachers to the Vietnamese elite.²⁵ They had also been in Shanghai since the 1880s and in Hong Kong since the 1900s. Those in Shanghai would have performed at dance halls, foreign clubs and cafes. It was estimated that there were 143 Filipino musicians in Shanghai by 1942, and 120 in Hong Kong by 1958.²⁶

Filipino musicians who were working in Shanghai moved to Hong Kong or Taiwan after 1949 and their involvement effected content transformation in subsequent movies.²⁷ Prominent songwriter James Wong noted that movies produced from 1950 onwards had to discover new directions after political changes in China.²⁸ He opined that the introduction of the musical genre moved the industry forward, citing *Songs of the Peach Blossom River* as a front-runner. In that and later movies, the music scores were arranged by Filipino musicians, who later became standard bearers:

If the standard of these Filipino musicians and bands had dipped, the music scene [in Hong Kong] would not have been maintained. Filipino musicians are highly capable at sight-reading, and their styles of playing are suitable for American or Spanish [Latino] music. They are usually less inhibited when they play popular music, and are better than those trained in traditional music schools. Their arrangements are not that original, but they are flexible enough to smoothly render or accompany the tunes. Most of them are accomplished musicians in their own right, so a score for ten over instruments may be completed in two to three hours, and in this sense highly suitable for the Hong Kong scene.²⁹

This situation, however, would not last. As Watkins noted, their skills at composing and arranging would be esteemed right up till the third

quarter of the twentieth century.³⁰ The employment scene changed after that, with nightclubs and other employers preferring to hire “black and white musicians who are regarded as the original creators of the music.” Similar to literary connections between Hong Kong and Nanyang, these musical connections and formats with the Philippines would be weakened after the 1970s.

CONCLUSIONS

Wong Kar-wai’s “Hong Kong trilogy” reveals the selective travel destinations in Southeast Asia: Lulu goes to Singapore after the Philippines where she meets Chow, Maggie Cheung’s So Lai-chun is given a boat ticket by her boss to vacation in Singapore, Gong Li’s So Lai-chun travels from Phnom Penh to Singapore to establish herself as a gambler, and Bai Ling decides to leave for Singapore after her tryst with Chow.³¹ The motifs of print media, music, radio, trains, ships and airplanes were employed in the movies to connect people and places through encounters and fates as well as delineate a “world picture” for them. The German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger discussed such an enabled perception as tied to the emergence, availability and dissemination of technology, media and travel.³² In this instance, the connected “world” is that of the Chinese diaspora in East and Southeast Asia, but for a specific and limited period.

We may infer from the above that Hong Kong was an integral part of Nanyang in the 1950s and 1960s. With China largely absent, Southeast Asia became the *de facto* space for Hong Kong’s correlated identity formations. Hong Kong not only served as a space for cosmopolitan travel and migration for Nanyang, it also actively co-produced that constitutive network of relationships through print, musical and other media, including cinematic ones. The initial stereotyping and subsequent familiarization of objects, people, landscapes and the food of Nanyang graduated the degrees of these encounters and identities. The reappearance of Southeast Asian spaces in Wong’s trilogy is thus his memory and portrayal of those constructed proximities and endearments. The eventual loss of cinematic connections from the 1970s onwards, concomitant with the decline of the textual, aural and corporeal networks among the Chinese diaspora, led to the gradual isolation of Hong Kong from the region’s social and economic spheres.

Ackbar Abbas has argued that the range of New Hong Kong Cinema, especially the films of Wong Kar-wai, dealt with the uncanny concept of *déjà disparu*, or the grasping of clichés and memories that were essentially lost even as they were being contemplated.³³ Wong Kar-wai’s trilogy deals squarely with the disappearance of Hong Kong’s spaces and society as he imagined it in the 1960s, through perceptions and lenses of local and Shanghainese communities. I argue in this chapter that the strong and once inextricable ties between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia of the 1950s and 1960s

co-produced the idea and networks of Nanyang within overlapping spheres. In the *déjà disparu* of that period, then, the space and time of Southeast Asia were the collateral disappearances of Hong Kong, and vice versa.

NOTES

1. Lynn Pan, *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 1999), 14.
2. In *ITMFL*, So Lai-chun's office business was disrupted by typhoons in the Philippines.
3. As discussed in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1979).
4. These include *Nyonyah* (娘惹, 1952), *Nonya and Baba* (娘惹與峇峇, 1956), and *Love with a Malaysian Girl* (娘惹之戀, 1969).
5. Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A cross-cultural View* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 164.
6. Chu Yingchi, "Hong Kong Cinema as Chinese Diasporic Cinema, 1956–79), in *Hong Kong Cinema: Colonizer, Motherland, Self* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 22–41.
7. Stephen Teo, "Singapore Screen Memories: Kong Ngee's Nanyang Trilogy," in *The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2006), 145. In another movie, *Tropicana Interlude* (椰林春戀, 1969), protagonists travel to Johore, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Taiping, although the main plot took place in Singapore.
8. See, for example, *Love in Malaya* (馬來亞之戀, 1954); *Cinderella and her Little Angels* (雲裳艷后, 1959); *The Whispering Palms* (aka *Moon over Malaya*, 椰林月, 1957) or *When Durians Bloom* (榴蓮飄香, 1959).
9. This piece appears twice more in the movie, when Yuddy is shown walking in a plantation, and when he is near death inside the train carriage.
10. The text is attributed to Liu Yi-chang, whose book *Intersection* was adapted for *ITMFL*.
11. Leung Man-tao. "Nanyang Hong Kong," commentary on *Apple Daily News* (Jan. 25, 2013). Accessed April 15, 2013. www.commentshk.com/2013/01/blog-post_25.html. Kaya is an egg jam made from coconuts.
12. These include the architectural firms of Keys and Dowdeswell, and Palmer and Turner.
13. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Films and Dreams: Tarkovsky, Sokurov, Kubrick, and Wong Kar-wai* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 74–5. Botz-Bornstein also highlighted a late 1930s migration from Shanghai to Hong Kong due to Japanese Occupation.
14. Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-wai* (London: British Film Institute, 2005).
15. Liu Yichang (劉以鬯), the alias of Lau Cheong Ning (劉同譯) wrote the novel *Drunkard* (酒徒, 1963) and *Intersection* (*Tête-bêche* or 對倒, 1972) on which Wong's films were based. These works were semi-autobiographical of Liu's time in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.
16. Wong Hong Teng, "Khoo Seok Wan and The Chinese Mail of Hong Kong," in *Southeast Asian Chinese Literature and Culture* (東南亞華人文學与文化), Yeo Song Nian and Wong Hong Teng, eds. (Singapore: Singapore Association of Asian Studies, 1995), 73–4.
17. Chen Mong Hock, *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore 1881–1912*. (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967), 32–5.

18. Sharon Carstens, "Chinese Publications and the Transformation of Chinese Culture in Singapore and Malaysia," in *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II*, Jennifer Cushman and Wang Gungwu, eds. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988), 77–90.
19. *World Children Fortnightly* was started in Singapore, but later transferred production to Hong Kong.
20. Chen Mong Chee, "The History and Times of Shanghai Book Store." *Xuewen* 2 (2012): 69. Chen estimated that in the 1950s, 70% of the readership of Hong Kong pictorials and publications was in Malaya or Singapore.
21. Carstens, "Chinese Publications," 90. The Singapore government introduced simplified Chinese text characters in 1969 (1974, 1976), while Hong Kong and Taiwan maintained the classical form.
22. Emilie Yeh and Hu Lake Wang, *Transcultural Sounds: Music, Identity and the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai* (David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies Working Paper Series No. 89, 2007), 11–12.
23. Wong Kar-wai, "Director's Notes," accompanying soundtrack for *In the Mood for Love*.
24. The original tune had previously appeared in the movie *Our Sister Hedy* (1957) to suggest embrace of Western forms of music and dance.
25. Stephanie Ng, "Performing the 'Filipino' at the Crossroads: Filipino Bands in Five-Star Hotels Throughout Asia," *Modern Drama* 48, No. 2 (2005): 273–74.
26. Lee Watkins, "Minstrelsy and Mimesis in the South China Sea: Filipino Migrant Musicians, Chinese Hosts, and the Disciplining of Relations in Hong Kong," *Asian Music* 40, No. 2 (2009): 80; and Ng, "Performing the 'Filipino'," 274.
27. Watkins, "Minstrelsy and Mimesis," 80.
28. James Wong, "The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949–1997)" (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 2003), 49.
29. Wong, "The Rise and Decline," 49, translated by author.
30. Lee Watkins, "Brown, Black, Yellow, White: Filipino Musicianship in Hong Kong and their Hybridized Sociability," *Humanities Diliman* 7, No.1 (2010): 71.
31. In an edited scene from *ITMFL*, Chow dedicates "In Full Bloom" to So, through a Hong Kong radio program from Singapore.
32. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 115–54.
33. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 25–26 and 48–62.

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9 *Air Hostess* and Atmosphere

The Persistence of the Tableau

Charles Leary

Like many popular Mandarin films made in Hong Kong during the 1950s, the 1959 Motion Picture and General Investment Company Production *Air Hostess* (Kongzhong xiaojie), written and directed by Evan Yang (Yi Wen), stages tensions between traditional culture and contrary modes of behavior attendant to an embrace of modernity and modern life. Often, such conflict revolves around a woman's place in the family and in professional society. In the case of *Air Hostess*, Ge Lan (also known as Grace Chang) plays the main character Lin Keping, a recent graduate who yearns to get a job in the "most modern profession."¹ At the time, air travel was much more glamorous, cosmopolitan and attended by more ceremony than it is today.² As Michael Lam points out, air stewardess characters provided stereotypes of independence and elegance in films of the 1950s and 1960s, while Mary Wong has noted as well how *Air Hostess* both empowers and then subjugates women.³ First, the film stages women's control over space, and the power to leave the paternalistic family unit and cross international borders, having gained access to the most modern profession. But the women in the film are also ultimately subject to a corporate mechanism that requires them to eventually return to the restricted space of domestic life.

Air Hostess provides a telling example of the incarnation of the modern and modernist aesthetics that invites a reading of the modern as disciplinary and mechanical as well as liberating, because commercial air travel allowed women to escape traditional roles of domestic compliance. Yet, whereas the compact, aerodynamic space of the airplane connotes speed and the collapse of distances, the film rarely shows objects or people moving fast, except for one consequently significant dance sequence discussed below. I argue that although *Air Hostess* invokes the dynamic movement associated with Asian cinema since its beginnings (particularly apparent in the martial arts genre), the film also serves as a precursor to another aesthetic thread in Asian cinema: the persistence of a tableau-like form of stillness and stasis. *Air Hostess* invites the consideration of "atmosphere" as a spatial dimension defined not only as landscape but also anchored by the performance of "atmosphere," in the terminology for bit players or extras. What does this performance style and film practice tell us about the depiction of space

in Hong Kong film and across film cultures in Asia, when the atmosphere in the background is grounded and comes to a halt, but dreams of moving again?

The term “tableau” can be used in various ways in the field of film, and I will here use it to characterize the influence of the stage tableau and the theatrical mode of the *tableau vivant* in early cinema as a stylistic device that still persists. The tableau can refer, for one, to a scene during which the performers reach a pose and remain motionless for a short period, for dramatic emphasis in a pictorial style of acting. In the theater, such a gesture would occur at the end of an act or scene, this pose held as the curtain lowered. The classic tableau shot in early cinema would be a self-contained shot of a motionless figure, for dramatic effect.⁴ Many of these tableau shots are governed by long takes, to accentuate the stillness, or in the case of the distant shot, to allow time to absorb information in the frame. The result can be a sense of reflection by the characters on screen, either inwardly or in reference to the space he or she inhabits.

Tableau can also refer to a “tableau shot,” and the term has at certain points been used to refer to what one now would call a “shot.” Such a distinction is important to note as “tableau” can refer to this self-sustainable shot; that is, a single shot is also the scene, with no cut-ins to reveal details of the space. In early cinema, an entire film could take place in one single distant tableau. A type of tableau shot, which has often been used to describe a “tableau style” would be a static axial long shot, centered on an interior as if a stage set, with the frame bordered by left and right wings, as it were.⁵ The *mise-en-scène* of *Air Hostess* is persistently staged and framed in this manner, for example, when stewardesses undergo balance testing or during their classroom demonstration of the proper use of the inflatable lifejackets, or in the diagram of an airplane drawn on the chalkboard. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs write that such shots “lack dissection, or even alternative between simultaneous scenes. This has come to be called ‘tableau construction,’ though the term is also, unfortunately, used more loosely to refer to any film with slow cutting.”⁶ Thus, in the tableau shot of early cinema, many details might be found in the frame, but with the lack of a cut-in for a close-up or alternate angle, these might go unnoticed.

The Cathay films of the late 1950s often include two groups of still figures that largely go unnoticed, as they constitute simply “background,” while the lead players interact in the foreground. One group consists of the “atmosphere,” or bit players (extras), who people the space to achieve a semblance of realism, but then undermine this depiction with their immobility. Another group comprises inanimate objects like those that children dream of becoming animated, for example, toys and dolls, which become animated by human touch or imagination. A mechanical doll looms in the foreground of the frame in a few scenes in a toy shop in *Mambo Girl* (*Mambo nulang*; 1957), unsympathetic to the trials of the adopted daughter Kailing (also played by Ge Lan). In *Our Sister Hedy* (*Si jianjin*; 1957),

Heddy's suitor, challenged by Hedy's superior athletic skills, remains fixated on a figurine atop his nightstand. In *Air Hostess*, Soo Fung, grounded from flight service and relegated to working the ticket counter because of her shyness, stares longingly at a model airplane, turning the toy's propellers. The film brings this toy to life, cutting to a shot of real propellers starting on a plane that will take away some of her friends.

The opening credit sequence shows an airplane slowly gliding through the clouds, from left to right. At the close of the credits, a note highlights the special circumstances of production in the location shooting across East and Southeast Asia: Taipei, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore. Here, *Air Hostess* finds similarity with the *nuxia* (female knight-errant) characters of the new martial arts (*wuxia*) films of the 1960s, who not only leapt to great heights but also crossed borders and traveled throughout the *jianghu*, or martial arts world, a space often dominated by men.⁷ Indeed, Keping ultimately receives a martial arts nickname that reverberates throughout the Asian destinations of her airline. When she arrives in Taipei, for example, strangers who quickly fade into the background of a song and dance number have already heard of her as the Female Knight Errant of the Skies. This name is given to her by a co-pilot, Lei Daiying, played by Roy Chiao, who starred in a number of seminal martial arts films himself.

However, at the same time, this Female Knight Errant of the Skies is also progressively subjugated by the corporate machinery of the airline, particularly in the rigid training sequences preparing the body for work on the airplane.⁸ As Poshek Fu contextualizes *Air Hostess*, "Daiying and the airline function alike as metaphors for Fordist-Taylorist capitalism, demanding total dedication of the individual to the mass production regime of vigilance and discipline."⁹ Daiying, the male lead, explains his rude behavior at work as the result of already becoming indoctrinated by this machinery—once he steps into the cockpit, he explains, he loses all sense of affect and becomes part of the machine of the airplane, not to be emotionally distracted by even the most innocent social interference.

The camaraderie between the male and female lead never develops into any romance, although frequent moments in the film insist on this possibility. Much of the film is devoted to the training and work of the air hostesses, while a secondary innocent romance between two shy secondary characters in the film carries on in the background. The film resolves itself when Keping and Daiying break airline regulations to carry a package from a stranger, in a convoluted strategy to reveal that fake jewelry is being smuggled via air across international borders, and thus reaffirm Keping's dedication to the company. The romance between the lead characters remains speculative, while the love story of their two colleagues closes the film—the air hostess and dutiful pilot get married in the sky onboard an airplane. Strangely, the wedding guests are regular passengers (some of whom must be frequent fliers, as they have appeared in previous scenes as "atmosphere"). While the happy couple celebrate their union in their

airborne workplace with an audience of passengers, company regulations require the newlywed stewardess to quit her job (and presumably keep house for her pilot husband). The modern profession that promises an independent life with flights to international cosmopolitan sites ultimately returns the woman to her domestic role. The last line of *Air Hostess* is a promotional one: Keping tells a nervous passenger, and the film's audience, that it is safe and fun to fly.

The airline profession is introduced with a job interview session, which resembles a mass casting session, with a room full of nervous but eager young women. The three main stewardess characters are introduced via their job interviews, during which their body language and facial expressions are scrutinized. The first interview features Julie Yeh Feng as an obviously seductive character being taught how to smile—her first two attempts are deemed as not being demure enough. At the opposite spectrum, the nervous but intelligent second candidate (played by Dolly Soo Fung) is gently scolded for staring at the ground and being unable to maintain eye contact. Finally, Keping shows her educational background and international sensibility by being able to converse not only in Mandarin, Cantonese and English but also French and Thai.¹⁰ She also demonstrates her calling for customer service by passing a trick test when she sacrifices her interview appointment to help a fellow job applicant. She is the most polite, most gifted and potentially most cosmopolitan.

Then the stewardesses are put through physical checks during the hiring process, including having their body measurements taken and performing balance tests. They move in synchrony as a machine, and the procedures offer the occasion to examine part of this machine as a fragmented and objectified body, with a close-up of legs. Indeed, Ge Lan's first major commercial success and starring role, in *Mambo Girl*—which also was directed by Evan Yang and begins with an opening shot of a close-up of her legs—defined the type of roles she would continue to play. In many Cathay films of the period, characters are taught to participate in the modern culture of commodity consumption and to integrate their bodies within the Taylorist method of assembly-line production, with this instruction often occurring via dance sequences. In *Sister Long Legs* (*Zhang tui jiejie*; 1960), this didacticism is shown in an omniscient bird's eye view of precision, as the main character teaches school children via a dancing game in a school yard. *Air Hostess*, as already alluded to, is very much like an industrial training film itself, and it provides an image particularly reminiscent of one considered emblematic of modern life: that of the precision dance routines of the "Tiller Girls." As Siegfried Kracauer writes at the end of the 1920s in Berlin:

in the domain of body culture . . . tastes have been quietly changing. The process began with the Tiller Girls. These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics. As they

condense into figures in the revues, performances of the same geometric precision are taking place in what is always the same packed stadium. . . . One need only glance at the screen to learn that the ornaments are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits. The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.¹¹

For Kracauer, the synchronization of these bodies represented mass culture's impact on the urban citizen's body, and in *Air Hostess*, a similar spatial configuration of women in a line (not unlike a dancing line) occurs as the stewardesses are trained to walk gracefully, serving coffee while balancing a book on their heads. This image is echoed in a following scene, as the stewardesses, now "bathing beauties," casually congregate in a line along the edge of a swimming pool. Within the rational, Taylorist system executed in the example of Kracauer's analysis of the Tiller Girls, the human body is no longer a singular, unique entity but becomes fragmented, and body parts become interchangeable parts of a machine. Such a fragmentation of the body to greater engineer production, circulation and consumption can be visualized in the close-ups of women's legs in the dance segments of Cathay films. However, while Julie Yeh Feng's character is also successful at balancing a cup of coffee on her head while prancing down an aisle, she is scolded by her instructor for her sensual strut that calls attention to her curves—she must become a "sexless body" if she is to be incorporated into the machine.

Keping's performance in the first physical test is a triumph, and the film transitions from this scene back to a very quick scene at her home before returning to more training scenes for the stewardesses. In one of the most dynamic edits in the film, the camera zooms in on her pirouetting leg, transitioning to a dizzying euphoria as she dances by herself in her bedroom at home. This cut is all the more kinetic given that many insert cuts to close-ups of conversation do not follow an eyeline match, but favor a frontal, axial angle that seems omniscient and distant, and thus cold and mechanical. The corporate system of control is reinforced here by the film's depiction of spatial relationships in these didactic scenes.

Then, the framing of figures becomes obscured when moving from the office to the home, when the film cuts from Keping's training session to a conversation with her mother, who would rather she get married than pursue her career. Both mother and daughter are shown at the periphery of the frame, while the most central item is a photograph of a woman above Keping's bed: a glamorous pose, but captured as a photograph, she is still, not moving. This very brief shot is just a small example of the conflict between stillness and movement in the film, and between the animate and inanimate, which then gives itself over to what I would argue is an aesthetic of the tableau, which persists in many ways in various present-day Asian cinemas. This is not to suggest that the cinemas of Asia are devoid

of movement and lacking in dynamism. The bodies taking acrobatic flight through the air in the martial arts genre is just one example to the contrary, of course.¹² These moments of stillness, to paraphrase Laura Mulvey, delay the moving image and also highlight power of cinema to animate the inanimate, or to do the inverse.¹³

The movement of actual living people is represented by *Air Hostess* most obviously of course in its depiction of global movement via air travel. Some sections of the film that resemble training films, in particular the scene of the instructor lecturing a classroom full of new trainees on how to operate a lifejacket, also resemble the safety videos exhibited in the cabin before an airplane takes off. In this situation, the spectators, embarking on a journey, are rendered immobile—they become a de facto captive audience who are not allowed to move about the cabin but must remain buckled into their seats. At the same time, *Air Hostess* rehearses cinema's power to move throughout various spaces, and to take the spectator to exotic locations they could never otherwise visit, in its adoption of the travelogue genre at various moments that also arrest the narrative. The crew stays at the Grand Hotel in Taipei, then one of Taiwan's then most renowned hotels and a place for welcoming visiting dignitaries. Some of the footage on Singapore (borrowed from a Cathay-produced Malayan Film Unit documentary) highlights the crew's real corporate parent, the Cathay Organisation, with views of the iconic Cathay building.

Yet before these moving images of travel, *Air Hostess* begins with a dance sequence containing a haunting image of the living rendered still, while also evocative of primitive exotica. The tableau effect here coincides with connotations of the absurd and the grotesque. The first shot of the film fixates on balloons that have floated up to the ceiling. After lingering on these balloons, many decorated with cartoonish eyes and mouths to look like disembodied heads, the camera cranes down to reveal a parlor holding a crowd gathered around the singer, whose back is to the camera. The décor in the room includes a Western affectation of dead animals with deer's antlers ornamented with more balloons for the occasion. The location is not established with an exterior, nor do we see all the rooms in the house. The multiple rooms, including one with large windows looking out on a garden, seem to suggest it is a detached estate, and thus atypical of Hong Kong dwellings but consistent with those in many Cathay films of this period which depict a class wealthier than the majority of cinema audiences. This home presents a sense of verisimilitude but also a fantasy, reinforced by the colorful exotic images approaching the surreal that follow.

Air Hostess begins with a song and dance number at a costume ball. But instead of moving in to reveal the singer's face, the second shot plays on the crowd of partygoers adorned in masks of international provenance. A Beijing opera character is accompanied by a woman wearing a Western wedding gown, and another man is wearing a blue turban. A man and a woman in a *qipao* wear hideous masks of disfigured faces. Some wear masks

of exotic Asian animals, like a tiger or an elephant. Other attendees wear masks representing Disney characters, like Donald Duck and Goofy, while another is masked as a stereotypical Native American. We see a guest wearing a French foreign legion costume, and another man wearing a red fez, while also looking on is a man wearing the standard eyeglasses and mustache mask that evokes the face of the surrealist favorite Groucho Marx.

A dialectic of the archaic and the modern here suggests the rubric of orientalism and the critical discourse surrounding “self-orientalism,” as Rey Chow characterizes other texts, cueing familiar characters, both masked and unmasked, of *Air Hostess* and other Cathay films:

It would not be farfetched to say that modern Chinese literature turns ‘modern’ precisely by seizing upon the primitive that is the subaltern, the woman, and the child . . . like, elite, cultured intellectuals everywhere in the world, they find in the underprivileged a source of fascination that helps to renew, rejuvenate, and ‘modernize’ their own cultural production in terms both of subject matter and of form.¹⁴

The costume ball at the beginning of the film makes such fantastic associations in reference both to local and surrounding cultures as well as those farther away. “We are of the same heart,” the Shanghai-born Hong Kong resident Ge Lan, employed by a Singapore transnational corporation (Cathay), later sings to the Taiwan (Republic of China) business community, inscribing “Chineseness” as the streamlined air hostess (and the airline industry), the most modern profession, helps “shorten the distance between people and facilitate movement between nations,” as a promotional handbill for the film insisted.¹⁵

In the opening of *Air Hostess*, Keping, not yet revealed as a stewardess, sings a song called “Flying Up to the Sky,” dreaming of the freedom of movement through space. Those listening, the extras, barely sway to the music and hardly register as cognate, with their eyes hidden from view and the static expressions of their masks, as if denied the ability to look (though we do see one, who it later transpires has a minor narrative role, sneaking a peek). The masks become perverse or frightening in that they show blank expressions, suggesting a body deprived of a face. Two of Ge Lan’s co-stars, Julie Yeh Feng and Dolly Soo Fung, whose characters have yet to be introduced, actually serve as mask-wearing extras in this opening scene. Establishing her presence as the female protagonist, Keping sings and tries to dance in a space confined by the encircling crowd of extras that barely move, except for nodding their heads slightly. While she sings of flying away into the atmosphere, she is closely surrounded by a group of faceless, shuffling spectators who remain grounded.

The previously discussed photograph shown hanging above Keping’s bed is just one hint at the tableau effect at work in the very introduction of her character, and the introduction of the star of the film. For a further

explanation of the aesthetics of female stardom at work here in the opening dance scene that demand the moving picture star to stop moving, consider Mulvey's argument:

However energetic a star's movement might seem to be, behind it lies an intensely controlled stillness and an ability to pose for the camera. Reminiscent, figuratively, of the way that the illusion of movement is derived from still frames, so star performance depends on pose, moments of almost invisible stillness, in which the body is displayed for the spectator's visual pleasure through the mediation of the camera.¹⁶

Later, when Keping has become an air hostess, she is again stifled by a group of Taiwanese businessmen who urge her to sing a song, and she reluctantly does sing a slow tune lauding the achievements of the Kuomintang in bringing development to rural Taiwan. Only during a later flight to Singapore, when she befriends a musician who respects her singing and dancing, can she really fly away. Only then is Keping granted the space in which she can truly move dynamically, singing what has become the enduring pop song, "I Love Calypso" while she dances the frenetic Latin American dance, gliding through a ballroom. This scene also features a departure stylistically from the static camera more evocative of a corporate training film, in a more inventive and rich staging. Instead of a fixed frontal view of a bland classroom, the camera maintains a moving long take panning across the ballroom, while alternating a focus between Keping dancing in foreground and an image of her dancing reflected on a series of floor-to-ceiling mirrors in the background. In the following scene, she is then quickly scolded for this expressive movement though space by her jealous co-worker.

Returning to the opening of the film, the song about flights of fancy—dreaming of flying away through the blue skies—quickly ends, and the film returns to its diegesis. A man who has been sheepishly eyeing Keping takes her for a dance, and, in response to her desires, immediately voices his disapproval—he would like to domesticate her. This tension between a woman devoting herself to family and modern independent flights of fancy will reverberate throughout the film, finally concluding with the wedding in the sky. But Keping, as she later tells her mother, does not want to be a "caged canary." And in this opening scene, it appears that the male lead Daiying, here wearing as a costume that he wears everyday as part of the corporate machine—his pilot's uniform—agrees with this sentiment, and he pulls her away from the complaining boyfriend for some light scolding in an adjoining room.

Away from the party crowd, he begins a private chat with her, ignoring the presence of a few partygoers in this adjoining room as well. In the background comprising the atmosphere of the scene are a few other masked guests sitting around a table. While the extras in the dance sequence move very little, the ones in this scene remain absolutely motionless, arms

crossed and (since we cannot see their mouths) not talking, seemingly taking great lengths to make sure the atmosphere does not detract from the two main characters conversing in the foreground. But a closer look reveals that one of these figures in the background, of whom we only catch a quick glimpse, might not actually be a living human being. Is he a cardboard cutout? If one stops the film for a closer look at the few frames in which he appears, what may simply be a jacket and shirt, dresses the back of a chair, with a mask attached atop it. As the conversation between the two stars continues, these other guests sit motionless at the table and literally become just atmosphere, objects of décor instead of animate bodies, with perverse, grotesque expressions frozen on the masks they wear. While the cinema has the power to animate the inanimate, like dolls, toys, statues or the dead, as well as endow a sense of movement to figures standing still, it here also conducts the inverse. To refer again to Mulvey: “The still, inanimate, image is drained of movement, the commonly accepted sign of life.”¹⁷ As Keping meets the male lead and future co-worker, the background atmosphere becomes a haunting, possible foreshadowing of her corporate future after flying through the sky.

Indeed, later, Keping herself becomes incorporated as a cutout—when we see that in her boss’s office, in another fleeting glimpse of an object in the background, she has become the model for the cutout life-size advertisement (similar to the ones used today for example by Singapore Airlines and China Airlines).¹⁸ The boss glances admirably at the inanimate model of her favorite student, tearing up the damaging report of her minor indiscretion (personal tours while wearing a uniform, a report made by a jealous friend). This shot fades and transitions to another still image of Keping, this time a close-up of a photograph of her, again in uniform, in Bangkok. Later, when she thinks of quitting in her boss’s office, she walks toward the cutout, strikes a sentimental pose, and looks for guidance from the cutout of herself.

And while we may focus on the sentimental pose of Ge Lan the three-dimensional actor here, what of the pose of Ge Lan as Keping, the cardboard cutout? Does she not dream of being reanimated, looking back at the real Ge Lan for guidance as well? These moments of pause for reflection mirror examples of the tableau in more recent films from Hong Kong of a genre focused on action, not inaction. Consider, for example, Johnnie To’s *The Mission* (*Qianghuo*; 1999). Here, a gun pointed and held at another immobilizes a target. In the celebrated shopping mall gunfight sequence, the statuesque upright figures come to replicate the pillars in the mall, and thus also help define the space and orient our understanding of perspective. Another seminal Hong Kong action film, John Woo’s *The Killer* (*Diexue shuang xiong*; 1989), uses a freeze-frame in the middle of an action sequence to connote the tragic connection among the two lead characters.

But the tableau moment of reflection persists also in examples of what might be called the “art cinema” circuit of Asian cinema. In Hou Hsiao Hsien’s *Three Times* (*Zuihao de shiguang*; 2005), a young man stands

motionless on a small ferry as it moves slowly across the water. Royston Tan's short film *The Blind Trilogy* (2004) features three Singapore locations in 12 shots: the now closed Capitol Cinema, the repurposed Parliament House, and a public park. In the Capitol Cinema, the camera remains fixed, centered at the screen. A woman we can assume to be the janitor enters a row of seats, and then stands transfixed at the screen. Takeshi Kitano's films often feature the star in a moment of pause, staring at someone or something, often after explosive bursts of brutal violence. Much of these shots are governed by long takes, to accentuate the stillness, or in the case of the distant shot, to allow time to absorb information in the frame. Such moments also seem to echo two other artistic practices from Asia, one more traditional, one more modern. On the one hand, a pose held as in a tableau that resonates with a similar technique of holding a gesture in Chinese opera. For a more contemporary similarity, consider the disjointed movement in Japanese anime action sequences, when a blow is delivered and the figure remains frozen (sometimes in mid-air, defying gravity).

Kitano's films provide examples to ponder still moments of meditation or reflection when the face comes to dominate the screen. Consider in *Hana-bi* (1997), when Nishi (played by Kitano) sits, arms folded, at a bar, looking down at nothing in particular. A subtle facial tick signals that he awakens from deep thought, to nonchalantly stab two gangsters in the eyes with chopsticks. The camera remains fixed on the same axis as the figure, with a frontal framing similar to that mentioned in various scenes in *Air Hostess*, although here of a tighter scale. The emphasis on the face and frontal framing has been discussed by Stephen Teo, with reference to Indian aesthetics of *rasa*: "The Asian face, then, is the key to the soul of Asian Cinema, and there is an element of 'devotional engagement' (Nayar, 2010: 40) with the face in Indian cinema that we can draw on to address the face and its connotation of the soul."¹⁹ *Rasa* suggests an emotional engagement determined in part by clearly defined facial expressions and gestures which are accorded specific meanings.

Atmosphere can also signify the emotive quality of a certain place. In *Air Hostess*, the prevailing mood of the various locations is one of exuberant freedom from traditional norms and the cosmopolitan experience defined by air travel. Yet, the atmosphere in the film also hints at something else happening beneath this veneer of modern progress: that while modern invention can animate things and people at great speed, it can also slow them down to an inanimate pause. Hong Kong cinema, in particular, has been celebrated for its dynamic movement in action film genres, but *Air Hostess* is an example of another strand at work, which I call the persistence of a tableau effect of stillness and frontality, comparable to the dimension of *rasa* Teo finds in Asian cinemas.

Or, is stillness indicative of a slow pace in these films? What does it mean to call films slow, which can be pejorative for boring, to cite Jonathan Rosenbaum?²⁰ Definitely, characters in the aforementioned films are standing still

and rarely moving very fast—that is, the movement of bodies we see on screen in the above examples is much slower than, say, many martial arts films. If we are considering the pace of the film as measured by the rate of cutting, then one can argue that these films are indeed “slow” as evidenced by the average shot length, which in *The Blind Trilogy* is 50 seconds, *Three Times*, 29.5 seconds; *Hana-bi* over 10 seconds and *Air Hostess*, over 11 seconds. By comparison, the typical Hollywood film of today averages around 3–6 seconds per shot.²¹

Slowing down and moments of stillness erupt the flow of narrative for a meditation on space, and the changing atmosphere of that space. The disappearance and loss of certain spaces is definitely a theme in Tan’s *The Blind Trilogy*, including a now defunct picture palace in Singapore. The iconic Cathay Building no longer exists in the form it did when Keping flew over Singapore in *Air Hostess*. The site has been redeveloped as “The Cathay,” to include a shopping mall with the cineplex and apartment block. At the opening ceremony in 2006, Ge Lan was one of the ten guests of honor and made an appearance on a video she sent for the occasion, being unable to attend in person. The only part of the original Cathay Building (dating to 1939) that is retained, albeit as a reconstruction, is the art-deco façade, the image of which was used for the Cathay Organization’s logo. Images of that trademark building and Ge Lan, one of Cathay’s most popular stars, live on in a small gallery within the mall, which showcases the history and diverse achievements of the organization. Today’s visitors streaming into The Cathay might look up and glimpse the large tinted photographic portrait of Ge Lan—among images of other Cathay stars encircling the triple volume rotunda space of the entrance foyer—not unlike the photograph hanging over Keping’s bed in *Air Hostess*.

NOTES

1. *Air Hostess* Publicity Handbill (Hong Kong: Cathay Organisation, 1959). Hong Kong Film Archive Collection.
2. *Air Hostess* also shows that one has a chance to enter the glamorous world of the film industry when taking an airplane, as it features a brief cameo by Cathay actress Jeannette Lin Cui, in an unassuming role as just another passenger on her way to Bangkok for a vacation (Jeannette mentions she had previously flown there for shooting a film).
3. Michael Lam, “Strangers in Paradise,” in *The Cathay Story*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002), 210; Mary Wong, “Woman Who Cross Borders: MP&GI’s Modernity Programme,” in *The Cathay Story*, 166.
4. My understanding of the tableau in early cinema relies heavily on Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
5. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 104.

6. Brewster and Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*, 38.
7. Zhen Zhang notes the affinity of flight stewardesses and female knights-errant characters in crossing gender and geographic borders in her study of early martial arts films, including one featuring an air-hostess martial artist. See Zhang, "Bodies in the Air: The Magic of Science and the Fate of Early 'Martial Arts' Film in China," *Postscript* 20, Nos. 2–3 (2001): 43–60.
8. The corporate machinery of the film's production had ties with the airline industry as well. The film was produced by the Cathay Organisation's Motion Picture and General Investment Company (MP&GI). Loke Wan Tho, the chairman of Cathay, was also the chairman of Malayan Airlines.
9. Poshek Fu, "Modernity, Cold War, and Hong Kong Mandarin Cinema," in *The Cathay Story*, 73.
10. Ge Lan herself released records sung in Mandarin, English and Thai.
11. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levine (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–6.
12. Zhang, "Bodies in the Air", offers useful discussion of motion and flight in the martial arts genre, as well as tackling other issues.
13. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 8.
14. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 21.
15. *Air Hostess* Publicity Handbill.
16. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 162.
17. *Ibid.*, 22.
18. The cutout reappears in the background again at the airport.
19. Stephen Teo, *The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces, Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4. Here Teo cites Sheila J. Nayar, *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* (New York: Hampton Press, 2010).
20. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Is Ozu Slow?" *Senses of Cinema*, No. 4 (1998), accessed 5 May 2014, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/feature-articles/ozu-2>
21. David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 122.

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10 Space and Verisimilitude in the Films of Singapore's “Golden Age”

Timothy R. White

At least as early as Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, American film has recognized and largely tried to avoid the tension created by the juxtaposition of the realism of location shooting with the often less realistic look of shooting on a set. As Kristin Thompson has pointed out, the idea of verisimilitude has been important to the classical Hollywood cinema in terms primarily of the *mise-en-scène*; the principal consideration for the narrative itself, including the characters and relationships among them, is compositional unity, not necessarily realism.¹ To this end, Hollywood has striven not strictly for realism in the *mise-en-scène* of its films, but for *consistency* of *mise-en-scène*. For example, the *mise-en-scène* of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) is not realistic but is consistent within the segments in Kansas, and also within the segments in Oz, and there is narrative motivation for the difference (the portion of the film that takes place in Oz is a dream).

This consistency among settings and other elements of the *mise-en-scène* has not always been as important in other cinemas and at other points in film history as it has been in Hollywood cinema. For example, a lack of consistency among realistic and unrealistic parts of the *mise-en-scène* in the Malay-language films of Singapore persisted through the 1950s and into the 1960s. During these years, Singapore had a thriving film industry, producing a variety of films in a number of genres, especially horror films, comedies, romantic melodramas and historical dramas. These films share one outstanding feature: they are, by today's visual norms, generally unrealistic, especially in terms of the way they look. At the time of their production, however, they were considered believable. Hence, horror films that seemed quite frightening at the time of their release, when screened on TV or during theatrical revivals today might be regarded as camp, possibly even by older folk who watched these years ago. Instead of attributing the success and popularity of these films to the naïveté, or gullibility or even “primitiveness” of earlier audiences, we need to recognize that what actually happened is that one conception of realism was replaced by another, essentially Western idea of verisimilitude.

This chapter will look at this lack of verisimilitude in these Malay films of the 1950s and 60s, with special attention on the spaces depicted, and offer explanations for this, together with some reasons for the change in the perception of this lack. In order to more fully understand this situation, it is necessary to take a brief look at the history of Singaporean cinema.

In the mid-1930s, two film empires were founded in Singapore. The first of these was Loke Wan Tho's Cathay Productions. The second was the Shaw Brothers studio, founded by the legendary brothers Run Run and Runme, whose empire included film studios, distribution networks, and theatres.² Their films, heavily laden with song and dance numbers, proved quite popular with local audiences. Unfortunately, World War II cut short the success of Singapore's fledgling film studios.³

Within a few years of the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945, Singapore became the centre of Malay film production. The first postwar film studio, Malay Film Productions Ltd., was established by the Shaw Brothers in 1947. Cathay-Keris Productions, the result of a merger of Cathay Productions and Keris Productions, soon followed.⁴ These two companies produced almost all of the films made in Singapore until 1973.

I will look at four films from this era, each representing a different genre, to illustrate the extent of the inconsistency of the *mise-en-scène*.⁵ Two were made by Cathay-Keris: *Tun Fatimah* (Salleh Ghani, 1962), a historical drama drawn from Malay court narratives and genealogies and *Satay* (K. M. Basker, 1958), a comedy-drama. The other two were made by Malay Film Productions: *Anak Pontianak* (Ramon Estella, 1958), a horror film, and *Labu dan Labi* (P. Ramlee, 1962), a comedy.

TUN FATIMAH: SPACE, NARRATIVE, HISTORY

Tun Fatimah, directed by Salleh Ghani in 1962, is based on an episode from seventeenth century Malay court chronicles that have taken on the weight of historic mythology. It tells the story of Tun Fatimah (played by Maria Menado, who often played such strong female roles), the daughter of the Bendahara, or advisor, to the Sultan of Melaka in the sixteenth century. Besotted by her beauty at her wedding, the Sultan plots the execution of her husband Tun Ali, and the Bendahara and his sons, and takes Fatimah as his consort. By the film's end, Tun Fatimah forgives the Sultan for his sins.

As with other films drawn from court genealogies and chronicles, filmmakers clearly would have relied on the common knowledge of audiences to fill the gaps in the narrative. For example, Fatimah leads a group female warriors, whose fact of existence is not explained; nor is Fatimah's fighting prowess and her (apparently) secret role as a warrior, other than a passing reference to her father having taught her to fight. Because of the part played by the historical Tun Fatimah, as the Sultanah who mobilized the resistance against the invading Portuguese colonizers of Melaka, this role as a female

warrior is taken not necessarily literally but as a representation of her status as not just a leader, but a military leader.

A subplot involving Portuguese sailors is introduced but is later dropped with little explanation. However, there was in fact much conflict between the Portuguese and the Melakan court during this time, and the knowledge of this conflict was apparently deemed enough to satisfy the audience. Likewise, the abrupt departure of the Portuguese, with a vow to return with an army, would not have been seen as problematic by the filmmakers as audiences would know that the Portuguese did in fact return in later years.⁶

Tun Fatimah is filled with inconsistencies and narrative gaps that uninitiated audiences might find difficult to surmount. For example, Portuguese soldiers routed in a skirmish instantly recognize Tun Fatimah and her female warriors, but her husband, the Sultan, only does after he removes her *tanjak* (traditional male headwear). Just as the narrative is implausible, the acting is very stylized, especially in the musical numbers, which are only vaguely motivated by the narrative but serve to make important points about the characters and the story: the Malay characters are formal and serious; the Portuguese sailors are boisterous and unpredictable (and therefore dangerous).

What is important to understanding the ideas (not necessarily the narrative) the film is promoting is not the verisimilitude of the spaces in which the action takes place, or the consistency of realism (or the lack of consistency), but the *kinds* of spaces in which these actions are staged. The fact that the Malay court dances tend to be staged indoors is more important than is the fact that these interiors are stylized. Likewise the fact that the newly arrived Portuguese sailors' dances are staged outdoors is more important than is the fact that these location shots look more realistic. To historically-challenged audiences the lack of consistency would interfere with the narrative; for cognizant audiences, these spaces told them about the characters and their values.

Obviously, the presence of narrative gaps presented no problem for audiences at the time, who accepted the narrative cues regarding the various characters of the film presented through costume, musical numbers and acting. This acceptance extended to the spaces depicted in the film, which tend to vary in terms of verisimilitude. Malay films of this era feature four kinds of spaces: real exterior locations (usually in Singapore, or in neighboring Johor), recreated exterior spaces shot in a studio, interior spaces shot in a studio and, occasionally, interior spaces shot in real locations. All but the last of these are featured in *Tun Fatimah*, and the clash between the looks of the spaces and the tension these create are obvious. For example, the film opens with a musical number featuring Fatimah and some of her friends (and her sister warriors) singing in a field, where they are observed by a group of men. This location is clearly real; however, the following scene begins in the outer courtyard of the Bendahara's house, which is just as obviously shot in a studio. As is typical of such exterior

studio sets, the trees are potted (with the pots disguised by piles of coconuts), the outdoor ground is perfectly smooth, and the background (trees, clouds, etc.) is a painted flat. The lighting also reveals the space to be in a studio; although the natural (sun) lighting in the opening scenes is bright and flat, the exterior lighting of the Bendahara's home is more controlled and nuanced. The scene moves into the Bendahara's house, also shot in a studio but with enough decorations to signal to the audience that it is the home of an important person. The rest of the interiors, including the palace of the Sultan, are equally spare, including the props required to characterize these spaces (crossed *keris*, accessories for preparing betel nuts, and so on). Through the windows of these interiors painted backdrops are clearly visible, featuring clouds and sometimes trees.

SATAY: SPACE, NARRATIVE, MELODRAMA

Satay, a Cathay-Keris film directed by K. M. Basker and released in 1958, illustrates that a lack of verisimilitude was as prevalent in melodramas as it was in historical dramas. It features the story of a young man, Kamil, who is in love with Fatimah, a young woman who lives alone with her aunt. Fatimah's aunt forbids her to marry Kamil, who, she believes, has less than honorable intentions and wants her to marry an attractive and socially inept wealthier man instead. Kamil's father in turn, forbids him to marry Fatimah, intending instead to marry him to Zainon, the overweight and homely daughter of a wealthy man.

The bulk of the story involves Kamil trying to figure out a way to marry Fatimah, thwarted by not only their respective families but also by Satay, a three-year-old boy who sticks to him after his guardian tells him Kamil is his father.⁷ As Kamil seeks to rid himself of Satay (even abandoning him at a park at night), most of the other characters believe that Satay is, in fact, Kamil's son, increasing their negative feelings toward him. Little Satay finally wins the hearts of all, and his guardian explains why he told Satay that Kamil is his father. (Satay's parents were his tenants but died in an accident, leaving no one else to care for the child, and when he discovers he has tuberculosis, he randomly picked Kamil as someone having the means to care for Satay.) The union of Kamil and Fatimah is accepted by their families; they even have a son already in little Satay.

The film opens on location, as a group of friends picnic, singing and dancing by Singapore's MacRitchie Reservoir. This scene serves to introduce Kamil and Fatimah, who leave the park in Kamil's convertible (marking him as coming from a wealthy family) and drive through Singapore at night. The next scene takes place outside of the home of Fatimah and her aunt. As with *Tun Fatimah*, the difference between location shooting (Singapore at night) and studio shooting (the exterior of Fatimah's home) is striking. The interior of the house, obviously a set, is typical of these films in that it is

sparse, with enough props to mark it as a working class home; for example, Fatimah's aunt peeks through a broken window at Kamil and Fatimah kissing on the porch.

The film continues at the home of Kamil's family, which is upper middle class. The interior of the house (clearly a set) is larger than Fatimah's, has more decoration, furniture and even a refrigerator. A backdrop featuring clouds and tree branches is clearly visible through a window. Although they are indicated as somewhat wealthy (or *because* they are so marked) through this differentiated interior space, they want Kamil to "marry up" so that the family's wealth can increase.

After Kamil and Fatimah end their relationship, Kamil sinks into debauchery. This is made clear in a scene featuring a nightclub. Again, enough props are provided to properly identify the location (clearly another set), in this case as one of dubious repute. The singer, Rahimah, wears a strapless gown that hints at cleavage, beer bottles litter the tables, the patrons (wearing tight clothing) dance to rock and roll. Kamil drinks to forget Fatimah, and in a drunken state is tricked by the (Malay) night club owner, who takes a photograph of him kissing Rahimah; after he has gambled his way into debt, the photograph is consequently used to blackmail him.

The home of Zainon's family is the most heavily decorated and furnished of the interior spaces presented in the film, identifying it as the home of a wealthy family, although obviously a set. In contrast to this is the realistic look of the workshop of Satay's guardian (who is addressed by all as "Tok" or grandpa, in deference to his age), which also could be a set but is curiously inconsistent with the way settings are rendered through the film. For instance, this sense of realism is shattered by the set in the next scene when Satay's guardian visits a doctor's office, marked by medical posters on a wall that should resemble smooth concrete, but is actually covered with wrinkled wallpaper featuring a brick design (the same wallpaper is used in the hospital where he recovers). The home of Satay and his guardian is also obviously a set, and is the bleakest of the settings; it is a shadowy place, identified as a poor man's home by a few rags hanging on nails and mats to sleep on.

Although this film is not a musical, most Malay films feature musical numbers that have little or no narrative motivation, and *Satay* is no exception. The musical number in the nightclub is realistically motivated, but the film also features a song sung by a itinerant toy vendor that has little motivation (much like a street food vendor sings in *Anak Pontianak*, as mentioned later). The narrative purpose of this scene is merely to emphasize the fact that Satay wants toys but has no-one to buy them for him. Ironically enough, this completely unrealistic musical number is shot on location in a real kampung settlement in the urban fringe. Similar to other inconsistencies, the reality of the kampung location and the unmotivated musical number are absorbed into the film.

The film proceeds with alternations between real locations and those that obviously exist only on a set. In one notable scene, as Kamil drives Satay

through Singapore at night in his open convertible, among the sights are several Cathay theatres, as well as billboards advertising Cathay-Keris films. This sort of self-reference was not at all unusual in Singaporean films of this era; many of the films made by both studios used the occasion of driving around the city to advertise their theatres and movies.⁸ In one sense, this self-reference could be seen as realistic; after all, these landmarks did indeed exist in Singapore. However, any sense of realism they may add is countered by these references calling attention to the fact that the audience is watching a movie, which itself will most likely be “advertised” in other Cathay-Keris films. At the end of this ride, Kamil and Satay snack at a local coffee-shop, one of the very few real interior locations seen in a film from this era. This scene could be especially jarring to a contemporary audience who recognize this disparity as unintentional (not an example of postmodernism); however, such references to the space of the “real” Singapore, and the reminder to the audience that they are watching a construction (in terms of both space and narrative), seem to have been accepted easily by audiences at the time as completely unironic.

ANAK PONTIANAK: SPACE, NARRATIVE, FOLKLORE

The Malay Film Productions films display an even greater disregard for consistency of mise-en-scène than do the Cathay-Keris films, such as *Anak Pontianak*, directed by the Filipino director Ramon Estella in 1958. As it is a horror film, the viewer would expect a degree of unreality, but *Anak Pontianak* exceeds all expectations.

This film tells the story of the son of a female vampiric spirit (or *pontianak*). Before the story begins, painted title cards suggest the mood of the film, featuring sketches of a lone house in a desolate landscape with bare trees; however, of these scenes actually appears in the story itself. The story opens on a stereotypically “scary” scene—a dark night with (artificial) lightning and the exterior of a house, obviously in a studio, as is the interior which follows. This scene shows the birth of Petir, the titular *pontianak* child, and the death of his mother, Manis. We realize Manis is a *pontianak* when, as she is dying, she asks her husband to remove the nail at the back of her neck. (According to legend, a *pontianak* becomes a beautiful woman when a nail is inserted into the back of her neck.)⁹ He hesitantly complies, then watches in horror as Manis transforms first into an ugly woman, then into a hideous monster. Finally, she returns to her original state and dies.

The burial of Manis takes place in a graveyard so stylized it would not be out of place in a German Expressionist film, and so sparsely defined it would not seem incongruous in an Ed Wood movie. Manis comes back to life, kills her husband (who unfortunately has found another wife), and claims little Petir before setting their house on fire. As Manis, she begins a new life with Petir, lodging with a friendly man who lives alone in a shack by a lake.

The film proceeds to show Petir growing into a young man, with their benefactor sometimes seeing the shadows of monsters in Manis's bedroom but dismissing them, and Petir finding it increasingly difficult to control his anger. A subplot is introduced involving a mad scientist, Dr. Sulung, who is in love with Petir's sweetheart, Salimah. Sulung's laboratory is barely suggested by some test tubes, bubbling and emitting fumes, and piles of books. Salimah herself is introduced in a musical number set in front of her family's house. Although the interiors of the house are clearly shot in a studio, the exteriors are location shots of a real building and garden. It is at this point that we begin to get a striking contrast among the shots; some are brightly lit, seemingly taking place during the day, but are alternated with very dark shots seemingly taking place at night. We soon see Manis transform into the *pontianak*, confirming to us that the scene is, in fact, taking place at night, not because the shots look like they are taken at night, but because the *pontianak* can appear only at night. The "reality" of what we *see*—an alternation of bright and dark shots—is not as important as the "reality" of what is *suggested*—the presence of the *pontianak* marks the scene as taking place at night. Familiarity with Malay spirit lore bridges the gap in the realism in the spaces depicted in the film.

There are more examples in the film about the dominance of suggestion over literal, visual verisimilitude, not only regarding spaces but also the characters who occupy those spaces. For example, Salimah's family employs a servant, Ah Tee, portrayed by a Malay actor, but whose Chinese garb, name and clownish behavior are meant to mark him as Chinese, despite all visual evidence to the contrary. Another example of the convention of suggestion in the film occurs when Sulung transforms himself into a *polong*, a zombie-like creature whose intestines trail behind his severed torso.¹⁰ Until late in the film, we see this *polong* from only the waist up; the only reason the audience knows Sulung is a *polong* is because he says that he is, and when he appears before various characters, they refer to him as a *polong*. By the time we see his entire body (or what is left of it), the fact that it is entirely unconvincing is beside the point; he has been established as a *polong*, and therefore is construed as frightening. Even less convincing is the *hantu ular*, or "snake ghost," indicated by an actor wearing a vaguely snake-like mask and two gloves that resemble snake puppets. Petir, who is Manis's son, transforms, at moments of extreme anger, into a sort of werewolf-gorilla hybrid (suggested by a rubber mask) that apparently has no origin in Malay folklore.

As in *Satay*, a gratuitous musical number is included (as opposed to songs that tell us something about the characters); this number is even more arbitrarily inserted into the film than the toy vendor's in *Satay*. It is, however, indicative of a certain aspect of Malay films of this era. Musical numbers in these films often appear in genres and at moments that seem, to the Western viewer, inappropriate. It is not unusual for a perfectly serious Malay drama to include comic songs at the most dramatic moments. In this film, the

marketplace ‘*satay* man’ extols his *satay* in a self-titled song, with a chorus of kampung children. This number serves no purpose in terms of narrative cause and effect. Instead, it serves as a break for the audience, a moment at which tension is released, after which tension is once more heightened. This seems to be the result of the influence of *bangsawan* theatre (returned to later in this chapter), which would include this sort of musical number, not just to release tension but also to lengthen performances and give the stage crew time to change the sets. Although not needed for such practical purposes in films, it was what audiences expected during a dramatic performance. These expectations were based on experiences with a theatrical art form, not on experiences in the “real world.”

LABU DAN LABI: SPACE, NARRATIVE AND FANTASY

The last film is also the most extreme example of the inconsistency of mise-en-scène we see in these films. Released in 1962, it was directed by and starred P. Ramlee, the most popular Malay movie star of all time. As it is a film that features a series of dream fantasy sequences, we should not be surprised at an inconsistency of mise-en-scène. However, these inconsistencies are not as predictable as we might expect.

Labu dan Labi features a simple story. Haji Bakhil Kedekut (his name means “stingy” in Malay), a successful businessman, has a beautiful daughter, Manisah. Bakhil’s servants, Labu and Labi, are both in love with Manisah, and each secretly fantasizes about her. The film consists of this frame story and four fantasy/dream sequences, three of which have little direct reference to romance storyline. At the end of the film, there is no resolution to this storyline, and the situation remains as it did at the beginning of the film, with Labu and Labi still unmarried servants of Haji Bakhil.

This film immediately displays the tension between location and studio shooting we have seen in the other films cited here. It starts with stock footage of Singapore, featuring well-known Singapore city landmarks and street scenes. Following this footage (which is of generally poor quality), we are acquainted with the main characters, who address the audience in turn and tell us about themselves (this kind of direct address appears often in Ramlee’s films, inspired by Hollywood comedies of the 1930s). Each of these is shot in different interior settings except for the final introduction, that of Labi (played by Ramlee), who awakes from his nap in a parking lot (probably that of Malay Film Productions).

The alternation between realistic location shooting and highly artificial studio shooting would not be so remarkable if it consisted of realistic scenes in the frame story and more stylized scenes in the fantasy sequences. However, that is not the case; the film freely switches from one type to the other. For example, after the stock footage of Singapore followed by stylized interiors at the beginning of the film, we see the title and credit sequence, then Labi driving Haji Bakhil through the very real streets of Singapore. When they

arrive at his house, however, we are treated to an obviously set-bound exterior and garden, almost surreal in their artifice. Potted plants and trees dot the garden, with no attempt to hide their artificiality. An obviously painted backdrop features not just trees and clouds, but two very large colonial-style houses sitting atop hills, identifying the neighborhood as wealthy. The interior set of Bakhil's house is large by the standards of these films, but not large enough to successfully suggest the kind of wealth he is supposed to possess; such an extensive set would have been cost and space prohibitive. Instead, the painted neighboring homes and the props inside Bakhil's home (including a television) suggest his wealth, as do his two servants.

The first of the fantasy sequences features Labi's dream of being a wealthy man. After being driven through Singapore (again, the real Singapore), he arrives at a stylized nightclub, where he meets Labu, who dreams of being a doctor. They start talking in self-consciously fractured English, then switch to an exaggerated English-accented Malay in mockery of the colonial, educated and successful classes, but also confounding the waiter, none other than Haji Bakhil, with their order. This scene features a great deal of self-reflexivity, as the band is led by Ramlee (playing himself) and the singer is Saloma, Ramlee's wife. Labu makes rude comments about Ramlee and tells Labi that he wishes Ramlee would die, so he could marry Saloma.¹¹

This is followed by another fantasy sequence, in which Labu sees himself as the "Malayan Tarzan." The jungle setting for this sequence is appropriately stylized, as are the costumes. Haji Bakhil appears as his sidekick "Chita," and Labi appears as a tiger. Following this is a fantasy sequence in which Labu sees himself as "Jesse Labu," an outlaw in the old West, and the cousin of Jesse James. Labi sees himself as the sheriff (and the younger brother of Nat King Cole). This sequence takes place in a Western saloon with a Malay bartender (Haji Bakhil) and barmaid, patronized by Malay cowboys. Each of these two fantasy sequences takes place in one location only, on a set, and each is highly stylized, with obvious props indicating the kinds of locations they are meant to depict. For example, the Tarzan jungle features papier-mâché rocks and potted palms, and the Western sequence features "wanted" posters, and beer and whiskey bottles behind the bar, although Jesse Labu asks the bartender for milk (in a possible reference to *Destry Rides Again*; George Marshall, 1939).¹²

The concluding dream fantasy sequence is the most unusual, partly in that it is not based on any clear genre. It begins as a crime drama, as Labu, gathering firewood, finds a stash of money in the hideout of a criminal gang in a real forest (in stark contrast to the potted trees of Haji Bakhil's garden). Using this money to become a businessman, Labu asks for Manisah's hand in marriage, and is refused by Bakhil. Labu resorts to a *bomoh*,¹³ who puts a spell on Manisah, causing her to sleep. Labi, in turn, gets a magic rock from another *bomoh* that revives Manisah. In the ensuing confrontation, Labu tries to kill Labi with a hatchet. This sequence features not just an unusual alternation of tone—from slapstick comedy to violent drama—but also the most extensive alternation of realistic location shooting and artificial

studio shooting (especially stylized is the cave in which Labi, still dressed as a chef, receives the magic rock from the *bomoh*, who appears and disappears). The most outlandish of these alternations occurs when Labu, on a city street, blows magic powder at Haji Bakhil's house, which is in the outskirts of the city.

As we have seen, this sort of inconsistency is not unusual in 1950s and 60s Malay films. One obvious reason was that it was cheaper to use stock footage and location shooting on the streets, beaches and parks of Singapore than to match the look of this "reality" with studio sets and shooting. Likewise, the extensive use of props and the building of realistic sets was cost prohibitive, resulting in the use of sparse set decorations to indicate the kinds of spaces meant to be depicted.

There are also contending cultural practices that could explain the unremarked acceptance of this inconsistency on the part of past audiences. One prevailing influence was that of *bangsawan* (a popular urban operatic theatre form, often tagged as Malay opera) on the Singapore Malay film industry since many of the earliest actors appearing in Malay films had also been involved in bangsawan troupes and the two performance forms were not seen as radically different. Furthermore, as a theatrical form, bangsawan first appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the same time as silent films, which might also be accompanied by musicians.¹⁴ The use of musical numbers in Malay films could have been taken directly from bangsawan, apart from also being influenced by Indian cinemas. Bangsawan genres could be likened to the form (and entertainment) of Malay films of the 1950s and 60s, which characteristically included:

plots which are episodic and didactic, incorporating comical, farcical, melodramatic, and serious elements . . . the mixture of a number of media (such as dance, music and drama); strongly-typed characters; [and] non-realistic settings.¹⁵

We can go further, and argue that the acceptance of such an inconsistent portrayal of the *mise-en-scène* is indicative of a cultural practice that did not seek absolute, or literal, verisimilitude in the *mise-en-scène* or in its consistency, but which valued performance, or presentation, over "realistic" representation.¹⁶ The fact that the various monsters depicted in films such as those selected here look totally unrealistic, with their rubber masks, bad make-up, and unconvincing costumes, is beside the point. They represented supernatural entities, they did not depict them: they functioned as *signifieds* to their audiences, not as *referents*. Twenty-first century audiences, however, tend to be somewhat "signified-challenged" in comparison to the more imaginative and creative audiences of the early days of cinema. Likewise, the spaces presented in these films were not always, or even often, meant to look exactly like "real" spaces, nor was the inconsistency seen in the realism of location shooting and the artifice of studio shooting meant to be

meaningful or even noticed. Instead, these films present spaces in which a particular sort of theatricality was played out, and signs were presented to audiences to suggest ideas and concepts (real or imagined). As in bangsawan performances (which still draw the crowds as part of the Straits-born or Peranakan Chinese theatre scene even today) as well as a range of Chinese folk and classical operas, which also enjoyed robust followings at the time, the spaces depicted, whether locations or sets, realistic or stylised, were perfectly adequate for this purpose.

In late 1960s, the Shaw brothers closed the Singapore studio of Malay Film Productions, and Cathay-Keris folded in 1972, leaving Singapore a nation without a national cinema.¹⁷ At about the same time, television appeared in Singapore, and with it a profusion of Western ideas and images.¹⁸ Singaporeans had lived with Western ideas for decades, and Hollywood movies have always been popular. But with television, Western culture and media became widely accessible and came to occupy a much larger part of the cultural mix, and Western images of reality, ways of seeing reality, became normalized.

This can only have had an impact on the way audience expectations of reality depictions in movies, and in what is regarded as realistic. The adoption of visual norms, of values in production standards and styles of the Western-based industry is clearly seen in Singapore films produced today. It might also be true that the lens through which reality lies in the *mise-en-scène* and its consistency—what is visually present, what we *see*—and not so much in ideas, emotions, and relationships—what we *feel*, have been overly privileged as filmmaking becomes an increasingly professionalized industry. It is tempting to ask whether lost in this transition is a cultural practice that relied on the audience to participate in the creation of reality—a reality based not on verisimilitude but on imagination.

NOTES

1. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 175.
2. Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2–3; John Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 188; Timothy R. White, “When Singapore was Southeast Asia’s Hollywood,” *The Arts* 5 (December 1997): 21; and Timothy R. White, “*Pontianaks*, P. Ramlee, and Islam: The Cinema of Malaysia,” *The Arts* 4 (June 1997): 18–19.
3. Uhde and Uhde, 3–7; White, “When Singapore. . .,” 21–2. For more on cinema in Malaysia and Singapore during the Occupation, see Timothy R. White, “Historical Poetics, Malaysian Cinema, and the Japanese Occupation,” *Kinema* 6 (Fall, 1996): 15–25; and White, “*Pontianaks*, P. Ramlee, and Islam,” 18–19.
4. Uhde and Uhde, 7–9; White, “When Singapore. . .,” 21–2; and White, “*Pontianaks*, P. Ramlee, and Islam,” 19.

5. Considering the fact that one of these directors, K.M. Basker, was an Indian national, and Estella was Filipino, it would be interesting to research the obvious influence of both Indian and Filipino filmmaking on the industry in Singapore, including their lack of realism.
6. For an account of the Portuguese in Malacca, see Gilbert Khoo and Dorothy Lo, *Asian Transformation: A History of South-East, South and East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books [Asia] Ltd., 1977), 4–5, and D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1981), 225–27.
7. For his role as Satay, Aidi Ali won the award for Best Child Actor at the 6th Asia Film Festival in 1959. <http://www.filemkita.com/v2/movie/satay>
8. *Satay* goes one better, however, in terms of referencing itself; the little boy is named Satay (not a name for a person, but for a dish consisting of skewered and roasted meat), the film is named *Satay*, and Kamil is played by the well-known Wahid Satay—actually Abdul Wahid Haji Ahmad—who adopted this name after gaining fame for his comic role as a *satay* seller in first of the *Pontianak* trilogy produced by Cathay-Keris (1957; director B. N. Rao).
9. There are differing definitions of the *pontianak* among various accounts of Malay folklore; for example, K. M. Endicott describes the *pontianak* as the transformation of a still-born child (*An Analysis of Malay Magic* [Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991], 60–1). However, all accounts describe the *pontianak* as a frightening creature raised from the dead.
10. Here the film is loosely interpreting the legend of the *polong*. Although Dr. Sulung creates a chemical concoction that transforms him into a *polong*, that is not how they come to exist according to legend; according to legend, the *polong* is a tiny female spirit, and it is the *penanggalan*, also female, who drags its entrails across the floor. See Endicott, *An Analysis of Malay Magic*, 57–61.
11. In another example of self-reflexivity in this film, Labu pretends to have his eyes impaled by forks and refers to himself as Kassim Selemat, a character played by P. Ramlee who does in fact impale his own eyes with forks in Ramlee's *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962).
12. The actors and characters in the film are Muslim, after all, and would, at least publicly, refrain from drinking alcohol.
13. A *bomoh*, or *bomor*, is a Malay magician; for a fuller account of the *bomoh*, see Endicott, *An Analysis of Malay Magic*, 13–19.
14. Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8–34. For a discussion of the relationship between Malaysian films and *bangsawan*, see White, “Historical Poetics . . .,” 13–15.
15. Tan, *Bangsawan*, vii.
16. Another Asian culture in which this is seen is that of Japan, whose arts, including *kabuki*, *bunraku* and film, tend to emphasize performance over verisimilitude.
17. Lent, *The Asian Film Industry*, 190.
18. Mark Hukill, “Structures of Television in Singapore,” *Media Asia* 25, No. 1 (1998): 4.

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Contested Space

11 Performing the Multicultural Space in *Opera Jawa*

The Tension Between National and Transnational Stages

Ugoran Prasad and Intan Paramaditha

Opera Jawa, Garin Nugroho's film inspired by the *Ramayana* and combining traditional and contemporary Javanese music and dance in an opera setting, was a feted commission by the New Crowned Hope festival held in Vienna in 2006, as part of the commemorations of the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. Certainly this confirms Nugroho's prominence as a filmmaker in the international festival circuit. Nugroho's films have been praised for distinctive visual imagery while also offering political statements on contemporary Indonesia. The spaces in his films often reflect the irreconcilable gaps between local tradition and state-sponsored visions of modernity, exemplifying both his endeavor to interrogate the notion of the "Indonesianness" constructed by Suharto's New Order authoritarian regime, and to posit a critique on the centralization of Javanese culture within the national imagination.

In *Opera Jawa*, Nugroho collaborates with Indonesian contemporary performing and visual artists to foreground hybrid forms of aesthetics. In this chapter we examine how *Opera Jawa* operates on two different levels: On one level the film invites the national audience to challenge the historical construction of national culture through the reconstruction of the *Ramayana* story. On another level, as a work produced by, and circulating in, transnational space, *Opera Jawa* attempts to challenge the essentialized notion of "tradition" by proposing a framework of a "multicultural Java" for audiences abroad. We argue that the national and transnational stages in which *Opera Jawa* is situated produce tensions in the representation of such multicultural space in the film.

GARIN NUGROHO'S INTERROGATION OF NATIONAL CULTURE

Nugroho has been making films from the inception of the military-backed New Order (*Orde Baru*) regime (1965–1998), and notably the only filmmaker to remain active throughout the 1990s, when the Indonesian industry was dormant. He differed from his predecessors with his new visual idioms, narrative style and transnational orientation. Awards from international festivals preceded his reputation at home, even though his films are

preoccupied with national concerns. Through the use of symbols and metaphors, Nugroho posed questions about the state, nation, and the official national culture in a period constrained by censorship.

Starting out under the New Order, Nugroho witnessed the regime's constant vigilance and censorship to project a stable and coherent image of Indonesia by imposing film censorship and propaganda films, and costly investments in visual culture.¹ The best illustration of New Order extravagance in visual projection is Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (Beautiful Indonesia Miniature Park), a national theme park display of traditional houses from all over Indonesia that exemplifies the national motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika"—the "Unity in Diversity" of different cultures co-existing harmoniously. Much has been written about how Taman Mini constructs the ideal image of "Indonesia," for both Indonesian people and the world. Martin Roberts, writing on the IMAX film screened in Taman Mini, has pointed out that in order to project an "official" national identity, both the park and the film juxtapose images of regional diversity by juxtaposing historical cultural traditions such as the Javanese *wayang* or shadow puppetry theatre with images of skyscrapers and flyovers that signify modernity,² thereby erasing discrepancies such as uneven economic development and the fact that central Java "presides over a regional periphery."³

To challenge the New Order construction of national identity, Nugroho made the issue of multiculturalism his long-term investment. This can be seen in his documentary project in 1996, *Anak Seribu Pulau* (*Children of a Thousand Islands*), a series of 13 episodes aired on national television. The series aimed at increasing understanding and awareness of cultural difference and natural environmental diversity across the Indonesian archipelago, apprehended through the everyday experiences of children in different regions. While this intended to counter the hegemony of Java-infused national culture, the series showcases regional diversity as beautiful locales and unique traditions, which endorses the touristic rather than critical gaze of its audience. Referring to John Pemberton's notion of "cultural exhibitionism" as a strategy of the New Order regime, Karen Strassler argues that the multicultural everyday life in *Children of a Thousand Islands* is "a performance of culture" and echoes the New Order's concept of multiculturalism, in which differences are contained and depoliticized.⁴

This sanitized version of multiculturalism is perhaps produced by the constraints of censorship and the series' imagined audience. Television as a medium might have confined the series as "televisual 'show-and-tell' performed on a national stage."⁵ Nugroho explores the fractures and tensions of cultural difference more intensely in his film *Surat untuk Bidadari* (*Letter for an Angel*, 1994), which was targeted at adults rather than children. In this film, regional culture is not fixed, bounded or pure; "tradition" is permeable to global influences. According to Janet Hoskins, Sumba island, the setting of the film, becomes a site of encounters not only between the local and the global but also between the center and its margins. Hoskins concludes that the film "struggles against the forms of internal colonialism that

would try to form outer islands like Sumba into miniature versions of Java” while underlining the value of traditional custom, “even as it juxtaposes it to the plethora of Western and Indonesian elements of global culture.”⁶ For Nugroho, the representation of regional diversity in film and media has always been important to challenge the feudal Javanese cultural values endorsed by (Javanese) Suharto’s New Order. In his film *My Family, My Films and My Nation* (1998) he asserts: “For me, our communications have already betrayed the principles of multiculturalism, and what they present has become the dominant portrait of our nation”; against which his own positioning is unequivocal: “I was born into Javanese culture, but live in a multi-cultural society....which I call Indonesia.”⁷

In 2006, with *Opera Jawa*, Nugroho takes on the subject of Java-centered national culture in an allusion to the *Ramayana* epic, historically the most popular repertoire of Javanese wayang traditions. Conceived and produced after the end of New Order authoritarianism, and without the burden of catering to an imagined “national” audience, as was the case for *Children of a Thousand Islands*, its professed trajectory is transnational. Viewed in this perspective, we pose the critical question: what kind of Javanese culture is performed in *Opera Jawa*?

NEW ORDER JAVA AND THE REWRITING OF RAMAYANA

It is almost impossible to talk about Indonesianness, especially the constructions of the New Order regime, without examining the centrality of Javanese culture. The hierarchical political and social structure that constitute Javanese feudalism also served as one of the foundations of modern Indonesia. Former president Suharto’s “dynasty”—like the ruling clique of his predecessor Sukarno—has often been discussed as parallel to the world of the *ksatria* (warriors) of Javanese wayang mythology. Scholars focusing on Indonesia studies, such as Benedict Anderson and William Liddle, have argued that Suharto ruled like a traditional Javanese king; he was the central figure who made important political decisions and his ministers were perceived and performed as subordinates.⁸ The regime constantly alluded to wayang stories to justify its mantle of power and define the hierarchical relationships that should exist between the elites and the common people.

The *Ramayana* tale of the abduction of Sita, or Sinta in the Javanese version, by Rahwana/ Ravana and the struggle of Prince Rama to free his wife, is a well-rehearsed episode in the wayang repertoire, and much preferred to those from the *Mahabharata* epic in projections of New Order state culture. This is not surprising: the *Ramayana* highlights love and loyalty, and the victory of good over evil, whereas the somber *Mahabharata* ends with the death of all its characters after long-drawn-out political conflicts and bloodshed. Moreover, while the *Mahabharata*’s fraternal war evoked unpleasant memories of the 1965–1966 coup, the *Ramayana* story is more “optimistic” with its “happy ending.”⁹ There have been different versions of *Ramayana*

since ancient adoptions from India, but the celebrated telling of the abduction of Sinta portrayals under the New Order was the story of loyalty between husband and wife. This was in line with the regime's gender politics that situated the importance of the heteronormative family as the smallest unit of the state. Rama signifies an ideal type of masculinity; many Javanese still name their children Rama and use the name to refer to their fathers, their elders and Catholic priests. Both Rama and Sinta characters have appeared in the IMAX films in Taman Mini as markers of national culture and feature as a popular attraction in the Indonesian Fantasy World (Dunia Fantasi).

Suharto's heroism was also made parallel to that of Prince Rama as he overcomes the evils of Rahwana. In the biography by O.G. Roeder, Suharto is pictured with a painting of Hanoman, the monkey king who helps Rama save Sinta by fighting against the demon king.¹⁰ At the peak of the Asian economic crisis in 1998, Minister of Tourism Joop Ave organized a performance of the *Rama Tambak* story which focuses on the triumphant end of this war, observing that this tale was performed for Suharto at many difficult moments of his early presidency.¹¹ The performance aligned the crisis then embroiling the nation with that faced by Rama after the abduction of his wife Sinta, seen here as *Ibu Pertiwi*, the symbolic embodiment of motherland Indonesia.¹² The central Javanese Surakarta court extolled the *Rama Tambak* as enacting the philosophical concept of *manunggaling kawula lan gusti*, the unity of interests of the common people and their state, and was instructive for showing that to survive the crisis people must work together and with the New Order government.¹³

The state's appropriations of various tales from the *Ramayana* cycle was not without challenge, as theatre and literature in the New Order period were engaged with projects to rework the wayang, especially the *Ramayana* epic. In his analysis of some literary works alluding to the *Ramayana* in the late 1990s, Marshall Clark writes that these works are forms of "shadow boxing," imaging and foreshadowing struggles of the people and the subsequent overthrow of Suharto's tyrannical New Order regime.¹⁴ He refers to Barbara Hatley's argument that the reworking of wayang allows for "subversive renditions of traditional legends and comic caricatures of kings and courtiers."¹⁵ Within this trajectory, it could be argued that Garin Nugroho also challenged the official status accorded the *Ramayana* narrative by transposing the world of nobility into an ordinary village in Java, with more complex characterizations of Rama, Sinta, and Rahwana.

To tell his version of *Ramayana*, Nugroho employs the European opera form to stage traditional and contemporary forms of Javanese music and dance. The combination of "Opera" and "Jawa" in the title suggests hybridity, which translates into the encounters between cultures (East and West, traditional and contemporary, local and global) in the visual presentation that incorporates various art forms: opera, cinema, visual arts and performing arts. While the court setting in the wayang tradition is typically used to embody a natural relationship between the ruler and his subjects, *Opera*

Jawa uses the kampung (hamlet) setting which allows for the telling of the stories of ordinary people in a more open and sociable space.

As the kampung marketplace is the scene of likely daily encounters between small business operators, organized mobs and the police, the use of this space in *Opera Jawa* promises a more elaborate exploration and portrayal of a multicultural society. Nugroho transforms the story of Rama and Sinta into that of Setyo, a potter whose business is declining, and his wife Siti. The couple are also dancers and frequently perform in the roles of Rama and Sinta. When Setyo leaves town to peddle his wares elsewhere, Ludiyo, modelled on Rahwana and a rich and vicious butcher who proclaims himself as “the ruler of the world,” seduces Siti. Unlike Sinta, Siti, who begins to feel indifferent about her husband, eventually follows her desire and falls into the arms of Ludiyo (Figure 11.1).

The opening intertitle states that the film is a version of the *Sinta Obong* episode, Sinta’s trial by fire, from the sprawling Javanese narrative *Kakawin Ramayana*, which is widely used in the Javanese dance and wayang. The *Sinta Obong* begins after Rahwana’s death, when Sinta is accused of being unfaithful during the twelve years of her abduction. To prove her innocence, Sinta requests the trial by fire; Rama assents. When the gods protect Sinta from being burnt alive, it is proof of her purity. As “truth” prevails, this narrative is certainly about the return to order, yet, at the same time, the fire ordeal is also about Sinta’s agency in asserting herself as the purveyor of truth.



Figure 11.1 Siti is unable to resist the seduction of Ludiyo.
(Source: SET Film Workshop)

The shift from the court space occupied by noble subjects in the wayang story to the kampung space of common people allows *Opera Jawa* to create a distance from the idealized codes of honor, courage, justice and loyalty associated with princes and princesses. The film's spatial strategy enables a recontextualization of the narrative and therefore opens up spaces for interrogation, and even subversion. The figure of Sinta in Nugroho's film is not a passive victim kidnapped by Rahwana, as Siti's denial of desire transforms into her yielding to Ludiyo's advances. Setyo is not a powerful prince but a disturbed, romantic hero, helplessly struggling to keep his wife and business from the blood-sucking capitalist Ludiyo, who cunningly (and forcibly) takes over local businesses.

It could be argued that by shifting from noble tropes and court settings, *Opera Jawa* disassociates itself from the ideal versions of femininity and masculinity that constituted the New Order gender ideology. The loyalty of a wife, which signifies the true Javanese/Indonesian womanhood, is challenged in this film. In *Opera Jawa*, we do not see a wife's submission to ordeal by fire; instead, we see Siti's resistance towards her husband's definition of her as his wife. The film describes how Setyo pathetically attempts to "mold" his wife by covering her with clay while singing, "My love for you is like my love for the earth/you are the finest earth and so I have chosen you." Resisting this feminine ideal associated with Mother Earth, Siti replies, "I'm not mere earth but earth quickened with human life/I'm not earth infused with oil and I'm not earth that yields crops/Nor am I earth that is holy, not earth to be fought for in battle/I'm made as human who can think who has hands, who has feet!"

When jealous Setyo kills Ludiyo, Siti decides to wear her *Ramayana* dance costume, in which she assumes the role of Sinta. She stands inside a giant installation of gold lace fabric, the work *Vagina Brokat* (*Vagina Brocade*, 2005) created by artist Titarubi, which symbolizes both a vagina and a blazing fire. The scene could be interpreted as a stage for the fire ordeal. However, Siti is not there to prove her loyalty or purity; rather, she is there to dance, reenacting her performance as Sinta. Setyo stops by and enters the installation, proclaiming how much he misses her. Unmoved by Setyo's words, Siti keeps dancing. Setyo pulls out Siti's hairpins and stabs her (Figure 11.2).

If the film seems to give more agency to Siti by allowing her to express her own desire and refusal to be defined by her husband's expectations, then what do we make of her death at the end? Siti is killed not by a powerful Rama, which could have made this film a critique on patriarchal violence, but by a desperate husband who loses everything. Setyo is finally detained by the local police for killing the evil merchant and his own wife. It is not the heroism of overthrowing power that the film emphasizes. Blaming the hot weather for affecting his temper, Setyo remains helpless amid circumstances that are inexplicable, even to himself.

In the open kampung space, removed from the fictive confines of noble ideals and feudal hierarchy represented in the conventional wayang setting,



Figure 11.2 Siti and Setyo dance inside the Vagina Brocade before the climactic murder scene.

(Source: SET Film Workshop)

Setyo represents the inability of common people to make sense of their elusive space. Siti embodies the ideal, fixed, safe space (metaphorically defined as “earth”) that Setyo desires but cannot have; her “abduction” evokes fury—personal jealousy is intermingled with insecurity over a tenuous space threatened by Ludiro’s economic and political power. Nugroho has also said that his narrative is an allegory of the global conflict between the under-developed world (represented by Setyo) and the first world (embodied by Ludiro) in their fight for Mother Earth (Siti):

The character of Rawana is like a big rich country. He assumes he can just take what he wants. Rama, on the other hand, is more of a traditional, religious type. He is at odds with economic forces. He doesn’t know how to develop and becomes angry and possessive, which leads him to violence. The two males’ struggle over the female character

Sinta is also a struggle over earth. That's what Sinta means in Javanese: earth.¹⁶

Such contestations of masculine power are common in the wayang court settings, but manifests differently in the kampung community space where there is no law—as Setyo declares—thus Setyo decides to take justice into his own hands. *Opera Jawa*, in this sense, is a total reversal of the “order” narrative, though we will argue later that it eventually contradicts what Nugroho sets out to achieve.

Opera Jawa is not a narrative that ends in stability but the lack thereof, and the external situation that shapes the character is signified by the absence of authority. The representation of the state is seen when a local mob torch the police station, frustrated by failure of the police to control the damage done by Ludiyo. The absence of security here could be defined as the inability of the state to provide a sense of justice. Justice, as Setyo says, lies in the heart, but it cannot be located outside. Going back to the subversive reworkings of the *Ramayana* in the late 1990s, we see what Clark describes as “a desire for the mobilization of *Ramayana*’s ‘monkey masses’.”¹⁷ The monkeys are the “disenfranchised masses of Indonesia,” but the difference here is that the film is not about a war between citizens and the state but a war between poor people and those, like Ludiyo, who accumulate greater capital. The ideal wayang court state is absent, and its absence produces chaos: desperate and forced by circumstances, Setyo *has* to kill both the capitalist power (Ludiyo) and a polluted Mother Nature (Siti) with his own hands. Whereas the standard *Ramayana* versions proceed from chaos to order, *Opera Jawa* moves from chaos to chaos. It is not, however, a celebration of disorder. Ending with a sombre requiem following the acts of irreparable destruction, *Opera Jawa* imbues a lament of the absence of order, and a lament for the state to be present in the village to regulate the daily economy and the stability of domestic life, to mediate tensions among citizens, and to guarantee justice.

Opera Jawa is the first film that challenges the *Ramayana* narratives promulgated on national stages by the New Order regime. However, Nugroho’s subversion of this narrative is ambiguous because it simultaneously exists within an anxiety of disorder, which we discuss later in this chapter. *Opera Jawa*’s twist on the *Ramayana* engages with the discourse of nationhood at different levels: first, it challenges the New Order version of the *Ramayana* that exalted Sinta’s loyalty and Rama’s heroism in constructions of national culture; second, it provides a commentary on post-New Order social conflicts arising from unrestrained democratization and liberalization, which the state cannot resolve. The kampung space mirrors Indonesia’s contemporary political situation, where tensions among citizens easily result in violence and where people lose faith in the state. Despite such skepticism, which is not exclusively Nugroho’s, post-authoritarian Indonesia is

also characterized by increasingly heterogenous forms of cultural production that embrace both the local and the global. *Opera Jawa* demonstrates Nugroho's subscription to such experimentation that derives from, situates and performs this multicultural horizon.

PERFORMING "MULTICULTURAL JAVA"

Opera Jawa was conceived and successfully realized as a transnational project for worldwide exhibition, having been produced with financial support from the New Crowned Hope Festival, the Gothenburg Film Festival Fund and the Hubert Bals Fund of the International Film Festival Rotterdam. When the Yogyakarta Palace in 2009 honored Nugroho for his "dedication and efforts in making Javanese culture, especially from Yogyakarta, known to the wider world," he said that Javanese culture is now a global cultural phenomenon, and that because of cultural influences travelling along the routes of Javanese migrants to all parts of the archipelago as well as those of other groups in Java such as the Batak and Minang, "Java is now multicultural."¹⁸ It is precisely because of these two trajectories, of addressing national concerns for home audiences and of performing multiculturalism for audiences abroad, that the tension emerges.

The "Old Java" endorsed by the New Order regime is associated with the institutionalized high aesthetics of a few kraton (palaces), spatially centered in Solo and Yogyakarta. The high aesthetics is characterized by the preference for forms of arts defined as *halus* (refined), such as the *bedhaya* dance in the courts in contrast to folk dances considered "coarse" or "low culture" such as the *jathilan*.¹⁹ The polarity reflects the distinction upheld between the cultures of the noble elites and commoner folk cultures that has prevailed in Java since the seventeenth century, prior to Dutch colonization. Such polarity was expunged in the New Order performance of national culture for an international audiences. The cultural agenda of tourism deploys forms of Javanese high aesthetics in reproducing the mythology of Indonesia—a mysterious and exotic Indonesia. Returning to the Taman Mini example, the IMAX films combine elements of central Javanese culture (wayang, batik-making and gamelan music), which Martin Roberts call "staples of Indonesian tourism, with a long history in the pages of *National Geographic*, *Travel and Leisure* and innumerable coffee-table books," to project simultaneously a familiar image of Indonesia for Western audiences and "a kind of national identity kit" for Indonesian people.²⁰

The kampung setting for *Opera Jawa*, outside the performance realm of wayang court settings mimicking the Old Java of the central Javanese kraton, allows Nugroho a potential space to stage his idea of multicultural Java, and to engage with high and low aesthetics, with traditional and contemporary idioms, with the institutionalized and the excluded

and marginalized. The artistic partners Nugroho works with suggests that the collaboration itself was a conscious aesthetic and political decision to challenge the Old Java through a creation of a hybrid, multicultural space (Figure 11.3). These artists have indeed invested in the issue of multiculturalism by exploring low-brow Javanese culture and by acknowledging the influences of global aesthetics in their works.

The narrator in *Opera Jawa*, the late Slamet Gundono (d. January 2014, aged forty-seven), was one of the most innovative and radical *dalang* (puppet master) in contemporary Indonesia, whose many collaborations as a multidisciplinary artist won him international recognition. Gundono challenged the conventional wayang performance by consciously not using *wayang kulit* (leather puppetry). At the early stage of his career, he revived an old and forgotten wayang tradition called *wayang suket* (grass puppet)—the kind of wayang made as toys for children in the village. He later expanded wayang to puppets made out of anything—grass, bananas, *satay*, water, fire, etc. Most distinctively, Gundono used Banyumasan in all of his performances—a marginal Javanese dialect, often used in mockery of the elitism of central Javanese people. This differentiated Gundono's practice from the traditional narrations in high Javanese adopted by most *dalang*.

Some other well-known collaborators in *Opera Jawa* are Sahita Dance Theatre (who play market women), and the starred contemporary dancer-choreographers Eko Supriyanto (as Ludiyo), Jecko Siempo (as Anom), and visual artists like S. Teddy D. and Titarubi. Sahita was established in 2001, expressly to deconstruct and parody the stylized central Javanese court dance *srimpi*, traditionally performed by four female dancers before the king. Sahita make no attempt to epitomize the controlled stately ideals of *srimpi* performance; instead, their modified choreographies see them dance as old women. Eko Supriyanto, the choreographer, whose explorations of modern dance have taken him around the world, is an exponent of the central Javanese dance styles that he also performs in the film. Jecko Siempo, though known for his pioneering role in Papua dance, is also popular as the godfather of Indonesian hip-hop dancing. *Opera Jawa* also incorporates works by some leading visual artists, whose installation works, such as Titarubi's Vagina Brocade, interpret and amplify the specificity of the naturalistic kampung space, contributing largely to the visual hybridity in the film.

Nugroho's effort to represent and orchestrate different forms of aesthetics is however ironically confronted by the "multicultural" paradigm that operates in the presentation of the "new" Java. The differing political agendas of these collaborating artists seem to be aestheticized and merged into a spectacle of multiculturalism. Also, the fact that some of these artists play only minor roles in Nugroho's film begs the question of agency.

Gundono appears at the beginning of the film, introducing the story of Sinta, who has been the object of men's desire "since the beginning of time, from our ancestor Adam right up to Adam Smith." His comical remarks remind us of the roles of *punakawan* (court retainers) in wayang,



Figure 11.3 Opera Jawa incorporates works by Indonesian contemporary visual and performance artists.

(Source: SET Film Workshop)

the clowning servant characters who provide funny commentaries on the main story with references to current sociopolitical situations. Though often perceived as asides, their interventions and critiques sometimes allow the *punakawan* to add a carnivalesque dimension to the *wayang kulit*.²¹ In *Opera Jawa*, Gundono functions similarly as a storyteller, yet his role progressively diminishes towards the end of the story. To some Western viewers he signifies nothing but a bizarre spectacle: “A fat man with tits nearly as big and impressive as his voice,” leading “a Javanese honky tonk jam.”²²

The subversive potential of Gundono’s storytelling narrated in Banyuwasan clearly knocks the dominance of central Javanese court-centered cultural norms, widely held out as being more refined or “civilised” than the “coarse” dialects of coastal and marginal regions of Java. However, in the film, Gundono is the only one using “the other Javanese” language, whereas the rest of the film’s script is limited to the central Javanese dialect in varying degrees of utterance (*kromo* and *ngoko*).²³ The predominance of central Javanese language speech in a film called *Opera Jawa* conveys that, despite the push toward multiculturalism, the idea of “Java” is still confined to the dominant cultures of the two central kraton traditions (Solo and Yogya).

The film’s aim to challenge the norms of court-centered Java in the Indonesian cultural imaginary and to uphold female agency are questionable when Sahita’s appearance, as dancing market women, merely functions as a marker of the kampung space of commoners. Yet, in their own performances,

Sahita assert their identity to subvert the iconic grace and femininity of this court dance precisely through claiming space for their bodies with common “*kampung*” dress, language and behavior.²⁴ The film, however, provides no narrative context that allows the value of their subversive performance to be recognized, which, ironically, would have contributed to Nugroho’s endeavor to challenge Old Java through multiculturalism. Instead, appearing as a group of nameless village women who perform a dance as Setyo bids Siti farewell on leaving to sell his wares at another market, the performance of Sahita here is devoid of their cultural and political agenda.

The only interaction between Siti as the main female protagonist and the village women is in one scene where their leader, played by Wahyu Widayati, the founder of Sahita, laments the bleak prospect of the earthenware market to Siti and her husband. Wahyu uses the formal *kromo* language to perform feudal respect, implying the hierarchy in the relationship between her and the couple. Siti is not inspired by the working women around her; she is distinct among the crowd. Though not inhabiting a feudal court space, like Sinta, Siti remains a princess, maintaining her beauty and refined character. Unlike the village women played by Sahita Siti’s gestures are slow and graceful, a modified version of the court dance movement. This further reflects that the multicultural space in *Opera Jawa* privileges not only a particular language (central Javanese) but also *halus* or refined gestures, which when situated against coarser expressions of other villagers evoke the feudal hierarchy of Old Java.

Overall, despite modification and experimentation, the movements of the major characters largely reiterate the New Order fascination with the performative appeal of *halus* aesthetics, the high culture aesthetics that allows the visualization of violence and cruelty to creep underneath beauty. We could call it “smiling general” aesthetics, reminiscent of the performativity of Suharto—whose smile has been widely discussed within this *halus* aesthetics discourse: on the one hand the smile of a soft-spoken embracing father figure, and on the other hand, the smile that conceals the violence committed in the name of stability.²⁵ To illustrate, in the Vagina Brocade scene the dance of Siti and Setyo inside the installation is performed in slow movement. The slow pace serves as a contrast to its fast-paced climactic moment, when Setyo stabs Siti with her hairpins. The aestheticized murder cannot be performed in any other way; it mesmerizes us precisely because the refined movement allows us to participate in the revelation of the brutal within the beautiful.

In *Opera Jawa*, especially in the war scenes when Ludiro’s troops rampage through the village streets, the various dynamic movements and colorful costumes of popular aesthetics signify the presence of a public carnival. Yet, the film does not explore the subversive potentials of the carnivalesque dimension. The performances of low aesthetics are given a space in the film insofar that they serve the central narrative, which retains the “smiling general” aesthetics. By maintaining the central Javanese language in

most of the film and highlighting the aesthetics of the Javanese court dance, albeit contemporary derivations, *Opera Jawa* does not go far to challenge the power structures defining the current Indonesian sociopolitical situation. In this sense, the performance of Indonesia in the film echoes that of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, and also recalls Karen Strassler's early critical assessments of Nugroho's immensely successful TV documentary series *Children of a Thousand Islands* as performing a depoliticized and multicultural Indonesia for home audiences under the New Order. In much the same way, the performance in *Opera Jawa*, tailored for audiences on the transnational film circuit, entails the containment of difference.

REFLECTION

There is ample evidence that *Opera Jawa* elicited very strong responses among international audiences. Reviews of early screenings variously describe it as "a downright mind-boggling avant-garde masterpiece"²⁶ or "the Indonesian morality musical of the year" and "a radiant folk fantasia."²⁷ American critics have also acknowledged, though without fully grasping, Nugroho's effort to merge the "traditional" and the "contemporary," as delineated in a review in *Variety* magazine: "[*Opera Jawa*] plays within traditional forms while creating a work that feels equally contemporary."²⁸ With indistinct markers of cultural intervention or political subversion, the audience has little choice but to be immersed in the spectacularization of Javanese culture, an extravagance summarized with flair by a *New York Times* reviewer writing in the *Village Voice*:

a surrealist Indonesian pomo-folkloric/funkadelic musical-slash-avant-garde-pop-and-lock revolutionary romance-slash-Hindu song-and-dance-installation art extravaganza. . . a nonpareil *Ramayana* boogie-down gong drum with a *tembang* gamelan xylophone huzzah and super-tight moves on the *wayang orang* tip.²⁹

The performance of multiculturalism in *Opera Jawa* is, as suggested by the *Village Voice* reviewer, problematically a performance of mixture. Borrowing the more sympathetic tone of the *Variety* film critic, we could also see it as "the full range of Indonesia's multicultural rainbow." It acknowledges differences and darker hues, but it remains a rainbow, a coherent entity of different colors that is pleasing to the eye.

What Nugroho did not but could have done, as he decided to simultaneously rewrite the "official" dance and wayang narratives, and represent the growing multiculturalism in contemporary Java, is to question the definition of a "singular" Java in those narratives. This is not particularly a task for Nugroho alone, as many cultural producers in post-98 Indonesia share a similar agenda. The prior question that needs to be asked is: "what

constitutes the “New Order” Java?” We believe that, unfortunately, such a question was undermined (or perhaps never posed) by the film’s aesthetic logic. The spatial shift from the wayang court or kraton space for *Ramayana* stagings to the worldly setting of kampung space of ordinary folk enables Nugroho to critique Indonesian national culture and its contemporary political situation. However, his critique is situated within a performance of multiculturalism which, in general, still privileges the “Javanese” high aesthetics promoted as quintessentially Indonesian in New Order state performance. Notwithstanding the inclusion of contemporary elements, “Java” continues to be performed beautifully and cohesively for an international audience, and in such performances, low “folk” aesthetics are harmoniously merged into the aesthetics of Old Java that Nugroho from the start had set out to criticize.

NOTES

1. For a discussion on how the New Order obsession with stability manifested through censorship and institutionalization of cinema, see Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London: Zed Books, 1995).
2. Martin Roberts, “‘Indonesia: The Movie,’” in *Cinema and Nation*, Scott MacKenzie and Mette Hjort, eds. (London: Routledge, 2000), 177.
3. *Ibid.*, 174.
4. Karen Strassler, “Stories of Culture: Difference, Nation and Childhood in ‘Children of a Thousand Islands,’ an Indonesian Television Series,” *Sights—Visual Anthropology Forum 2006* (1996), <http://cc.joensuu.fi/sights/karens.htm>
5. *Ibid.*
6. Janet Hoskins, “Letter for an Angel: An Indonesian Film on the Ironies of Modernity in Marginal Areas,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 12, No. 1 (March 1, 1996): 67–73, doi:10.1525/var.1996.12.1.67.
7. David Hanan. “Political Documentaries and Essay Films by Garin Nugroho in late New Order and Post Reformasi Indonesia,” *Spectator* 24-2, (Fall 2004), 46, 45, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://cinema.usc.edu/assets/098/15838.pdf>
8. Marshall Clark, “Shadow Boxing: Indonesian Writers and the *Ramayana* in the New Order,” *Indonesia* 72 (October 1, 2001): 164. Open access at <http://cip.cornell.edu/seap.indo/1106940651>
9. Gertrudes Johan Resink, “From the Old Mahabharata to the New *Ramayana* Order,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde* 131, Nos. 2–3 (1975): 230.
10. Clark, “Shadow Boxing,” 163.
11. *Ibid.*, 168.
12. *Ibid.*, citing Solichin, chairman of Senawangi, the pro-government wayang shadow puppeteering organization.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 161.
15. *Ibid.*, 166.
16. Garin Nugroho, “The Thousand Voices of Garin Nugroho,” interview by Tom Redwood in *Realtime Arts Magazine* #80, August–September 2007, p. 29. <http://www.realtimearts.net/article/80/8636>

17. Clark, "Shadow Boxing," 162.
18. Slamet Susanto, "Yogyakarta Palace honors culture ambassadors," *Jakarta Post*, December 17, 2009. Accessed December 11, 2014, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/12/17/yogyakarta-palace-honors-culture-ambassadors.html>
19. *Bedhaya*, traditionally a ritual and solemn dance, is performed by women in the kraton of Yogyakarta and Surakarta. *Jathilan* is a popular folk dance and trance ritual performed by men.
20. Roberts, "'Indonesia: The Movie'," 179–80.
21. Helen Pausacker, "Presidents as Punakawan: Portrayal of National Leaders as Clown-Servants in Central Javanese Wayang," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, No. 02 (2004): 215, doi:10.1017/S0022463404000128.
22. Nathan Lee, "Freak Folk," *Village Voice*, posted January 8, 2008, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-01-08/film/freak-folk/full/>
23. In Javanese hierarchical speech levels, *kromo* is the most formal and respectful (associated with and used to address higher-ups and elders), and *ngoko* is informal or the least polite (implying familiarity or talking down).
24. Barbara Hatley, "Subverting the Stereotypes," *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 41, No. 2 (2007): 183.
25. The term "smiling general," deriving from the title of O.G. Roeder's biography of President Suharto, has become a widely used nickname in books and articles to emphasize his controlled finesse in the projection of power. See O. G. Roeder, *The Smiling General* (Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1969).
26. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The New York Times Returns to Its Philistine Roots," *Chicago Reader*, accessed April 27, 2014, www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2008/01/16/the-new-york-times-returns-to-its-philistine-roots
27. Lee, "Freak Folk."
28. Jay Weissberg, "Opera Jawa," *Variety*, accessed April 27, 2014, <http://variety.com/2006/film/reviews/opera-jawa-1200513610/>
29. Lee, "Freak Folk."

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12 Cinema as Ritual Space

O Meul's *Jiseul*

Sohl Lee

With the historical fiction *Jiseul* (2012), South Korean director O Meul set out to “conduct a funeral ritual.”¹ In more tangible terms, O intended this monochrome film as a ritual and homage to the victims of “Jeju 4.3”—or simply “4.3” as the long-suppressed national trauma inflicted by the post-WWII authoritarian state is known—referencing the flashpoint on April 3, 1948 in Korea’s Jeju Island that ignited an armed uprising against both U.S. Army occupation and the military regime this enabled, and triggered state-enacted campaigns of systematic massacre of Jeju islanders over many years.² Rather than any trenchant representation of the sociopolitical forces shaping this chronology, *Jiseul* (potatoes in Jeju dialect) takes its inspiration from a particular story within this larger history of oppression: that of a group of villagers in this southernmost Korean volcanic island who fled into hiding in a huge mid-mountain lava tube cave only to be discovered by troops and executed in December of 1948.³

The double promise of a ritual and a narrative of suppressed atrocities perpetrated under U.S. Army occupation of southern Korea, I argue, is at odds with itself, making *Jiseul* a unique cinematic inquiry into historical trauma and memory. *Jiseul*’s two-plot structure, which swings from scenes of displaced Jeju dialect-speaking villagers to scenes of the mainland-Korean troops dispatched to the island under shoot-to-kill orders, until the two groups meet in the grand mountain cave, does not distinguish good and evil: the soldiers are no simple villains; the villagers are no spirited heroes. Nuanced portrayals of young soldiers who resist the order to kill coexist with that of the hapless villagers, mostly defined by their quotidian and humorous conversations. *Jiseul* eschews didacticism for a poetic cognition of history, with aesthetically impeccable monochrome cinematography that at times seems to spectacularize the volcanic island landscape over its history of political and human trauma.⁴ Moments of prolonged theatrical performance-like conversations among the villagers without obvious purpose and of extreme long shots of wild nature that exude a primordial force over the human characters seem to defy the audience’s initial expectations of being pulled into a coherent narrative of victimization and the anguish of identifiable individual characters whose suffering cinema is anticipated to render.

After premiering and garnering four awards at the Busan International Film Festival in October 2012, *Jiseul* was applauded at the Sundance Film Festival (2013 Grand Jury Prize), the Vesoul Asian Film Festival (2013 Golden Wheel) and the Istanbul International Film Festival (2013 Special Jury Prize), as well as by record-breaking home audiences.⁵ If this critical acclaim implies concurrence with the relationship that O sets up between trauma (the historical event) and ritual (the act of mourning and memorializing the dead) as natural or ineluctable, I would go as far as to argue that *Jiseul* is thematically, structurally and cinematographically organized around the metaphor of ritual. It draws from a ritualistic *form*, as much as a ritualistic theme. Thus, O's quasi-manifesto of performing a ritual with the film, of going beyond a narrative-driven depiction of trauma, exhorts the audience to an engaged spectatorship that moves beyond simple witnessing.

O's affective construction of cinema as ritual space has multiple spectatorial implications which I explore, as O does, by putting aside the plotline of the historical tragedy and focusing instead on the particular moments in the film in which collective mourning could possibly erupt. This ritual space induces a "documentary consciousness," a moment of realism that jolts the audience out of the conventionally sutured narrative space of staged fiction.⁶ The effect of such a consciousness-raising implicates the audience *ethically* in the event occasioned by the performance of *chesa*, the rites of homage. Where South Korean national cinema of the past three decades has relied predominantly on psychoanalytic representations of trauma (typically, through flashbacks, stock characters of victimhood and posttraumatic stress disorders), *Jiseul* marks a new beginning in political cinema that sets up a space of affective response for the spectators.

ACTORS AS CINEMATIC SHAMANS

For director O, a native of Jeju, making a film about 4.3 posed the ethical dilemma of confronting many islanders who still have a hard time reconciling the pain of historical and personal remembering. Burdened by the double responsibility, for the living as well as the unjustly dead, O finally decided to stage the film as *chesa*, with the formality of these Confucian memorial rites recalled in four sequential chapters intertitled in Chinese characters: *sinwi* (神位), inviting the spirit to the world of the living; *sinmyo* (神廟), designating a place for the lingering spirit; *ũmbok* (飮福), sharing food offerings with the spirit; *sochi* (燒紙), burning spirit papers in farewell.⁷ In concluding the *sochi* chapter, the film literally captures the act of burning *chibang* (the spirit paper inked with the name of the dead) to appease and send off spirits. The camera revisits every single character whose death the audience has witnessed and a *chibang* is burnt for each one, but in reverse order of their deaths in the film. This turning back of the clock eventually returns

the audience to the film's beginning, the *mise-en-scène* with its chaotically arranged food-offering plates: this simultaneously ends the film, signaled by the loud post-production soundtrack of a violin quartet filling the theatre, and repositions the audience as participants in the completed ritual.

Thus, *chesa* conspicuously functions as a filmic trope through which *Jiseul*'s audiences (in the present moment) reconnect with the collective trauma (of the past). The term *chesa*—rites performed in ancestral memorials as homage to the (spirits of the) dead—is composed of two cognates, *che* and *sa* (written in Sino-Korean characters), which share the common radical *si*—to see and encounter. *Chesa* is also the funeral ritual through which the presence of the departed is welcomed in the terrain of the living, albeit temporarily. Yet, I instinctively reject many South Korean critics' acceptance of O's reference to *chesa*, rather straightforwardly, as a gesture of putting the dead to peaceful rest, which risks turning the film into a depoliticized fancy. Instead of selling the film short with a self-orientalist palette that rests on a certain atemporal primordiality, I analyze the funeral ritual in the light of shamanism as a performative medium, rather than a traditional belief system, to uncover how the mechanisms of identification and ritual space serve as an important semantic ground for *Jiseul*.⁸

Most commonly, *chesa* is a ritual imbued with ancient Confucian traditions of ancestral worship to preserve strong family relations through bloodline kinship, obligating descendants to congregate at the home of the patrilineal family elder on the occasions of Lunar New Year, Korean Thanksgiving Day, and the ancestors' birth or death anniversaries.⁹ But in *Jiseul*, and for O, what *chesa* connotes seems to bear elements of the shamanistic *kut*, composed of a range of observances for the dead, while seeking blessings for the living from heavenly god and spirit realms. In the blurring of *chesa* as *kut*, the ritual the film crew performed on the first day of shooting was as much for their work's successful completion and reception as it was to remember the victims of 4.3, the *chesa/kut* for the (Jeju) dead. Footage of the ritual conduct was incorporated during postproduction as the film's ending: a *chibang* burning on top of piled funeral offering plates. As noted by critic Kim Young-jin, the film as a whole serves as *ssitgim-kut* (shamanistic cleansing ritual) to remove or appease dolor, torment, or a curse surrounding the unjust death of a given person. Putting aside its therapeutic values and power of magical enchantment, the primary difference between a shamanistic *kut* and a Confucian *chesa* merits attention.

In the performance of *kut*, shamans as the hosts of rituals speak to, or on behalf of the dead. If the ancestral homage ritual *chesa* is seen as a unidirectional speech that initiates in the manner of customary worship and expects no dialogue with the spirit world, then *kut* provides a more dynamic and fluid stage for encounters between the dead and the living. Afflicted spirits speak through the shaman, who becomes the enunciator or re(en)actor breathing on behalf of the latter. And it is this dialogical and unstable exchange of gestural performance that manifests through *Jiseul*,

a film in which Jeju's residents of the contemporary moment act as proxies for their executed ancestors, becoming the vessels that hold the specter of someone else.¹⁰

To this end, the strange sense of documentary reenactment that arises in *Jiseul* is not dissimilar to the ways such an effect dominates René Allio's 1976 feature *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère . . .* (*I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister and my brother . . .*) adapted from Michel Foucault's eponymous book from 1973. Like *Jiseul*, Allio's historical drama reconstructs a past event, a nineteenth-century family murder and cannibalism in Normandy. What adds to the film's extraordinary mixture of documentary indexicality and failed realism is that the farmers of the same small town played their ancestors of 150 years prior.¹¹ Likewise, in *Jiseul*, when Jeju residents perform as their mothers, fathers and grandmothers who were victims and direct witnesses to the 4.3 atrocities, the intended effect is clear.¹² It is largely impossible to depict the inexplicable violent turns of history adopting the representational style emulated by conventional historical dramas. Hence, the scenes involving Jeju villagers (ordinary people untrained in acting speech delivery or pacing dialogue exchanges) lack realistic stylization; their conversations are quotidian but lack narrative value (like a scene when they are lost in search of the hideout cave, and stand talking too long on an empty road).¹³

In *Jiseul*, the sense of the safe time of now/the present is therefore established not through being cognizant of historical trauma as in the past but through the collapsing of the present and the past in the gestures and bodies of the actors who consciously "speak as if," "act as if," and are in a conspicuous but uncanny way, reenactments of the dead. Amid the self-conscious slippages between the actors and the ancestral subjects of trauma, I argue, arise the ethics of mimetic identification theorized by Tania Modleski. In her reading of Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman performance *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1993), where the black performer Deavere Smith performs all the races and classes of people involved in the 1992 Los Angeles riots (whom she interviewed for the script), Modleski envisions an identification in which the subject is fully aware of the difference between the subject (who is identifying) and the object (the identified). According to Modleski, Deavere Smith makes visible her inability to completely mimic or be the character in question (a Korean shop owner or a pregnant Latin American woman who got shot in her belly), thereby forming a "metaphoric equivalence" or "mimesis [that] identifies with, rather than identifying as [an object/an Other]."¹⁴ Likewise, in their reenactment, Jeju residents empathize but do not completely identify with the victims of 4.3. Yet, through their performances, the impossibility of complete identification and the possibilities of ethical identification are fully reinstated in the very bodies of the actors, who conjure what I would argue are the figures of "cinematic shamans" through which instances of such (dis)identification are ultimately manifested.

SHAMANISTIC RITUAL SPACE

One particular scene introduced at the beginning of the film exemplifies aspects of historical reenactment and performative (dis)identification, which I see as a defining moment where the audience might experience a sense of “documentary consciousness.” As theorized by Vivian Sobchack, this consciousness opens up an ethical space within fiction films in which the visceral effect of nonhuman deaths, such as those of animals, forces the audience to breach the institutional setting of the fiction film.¹⁵ The scene I discuss does not actually depict death (like the massacre, which is shot with a handheld camera and accompanied by a postproduction soundtrack performed by a violin quartet), nor allude to the act of killing (like in the film’s ending of a blank screen and the sound of gunshots). This scene is when the film startles the audience and beckons them into a ritualistic and ethical engagement with the dead by breaking the fictional bracketing. What is constructed is the “ritual space”—a space between the living and the dead, a space where the audience might see the film’s metatextuality as a documentation of a ritual.

The scene begins with a long shot of a foggy ground, slowly coming into vision as the fog dissipates. By this juncture it has been established that the villagers are subject to martial law dictates that anyone remaining beyond five kilometers of the coast would be deemed as “communist” rebels and executed on sight. The search for the mid-mountain cave takes longer than a day, so the villagers spend the night around a smaller nearby cave. Through the mist of dawn, a long shot locates them, zooming in slowly, almost imperceptibly, discerning the silhouettes of the sleeping villagers on the ground, covered under fallen leaves and merged into the natural environment. Only when the young villager Man-chöl excitedly announces, “I found the grand cave,” and starts shouting out their names to awaken them does their presence, twitching and squirming, materialize from the ground. This is when Kyŏng-jun rushes out of the warmth of the small cave and screams “*kkwang*” (bare bones in Jeju dialect) to alert the villagers of his sighting. The camera cuts violently to a shot from the cave’s dark interior, focusing on a pile of white bones in the foreground while several villagers duck to peek in from outside. It is the first cut made during this scene (Figure 12.1). “What kind of bones are they?”; “human bones or animal bones?” the villagers ask, and Kyŏng-jun can barely speculate “Maybe dog bones (*gaekkwang*)?” before the camera cuts away very abruptly to the next scene of soldiers occupying the shores, thereafter continuing the narrative oscillation between the villagers up in the mountains and the soldiers down by the village shore.

The all-too-sudden end of the brief encounter between the villagers and the nameless skeletons gains all the more affective significance because the cut disallows a narrative significance, and because in Jeju bones take on a special meaning. In the aftermath of Jeju 4.3, unmarked human remains were left unclaimed in the island’s wilderness, to be discovered much later,

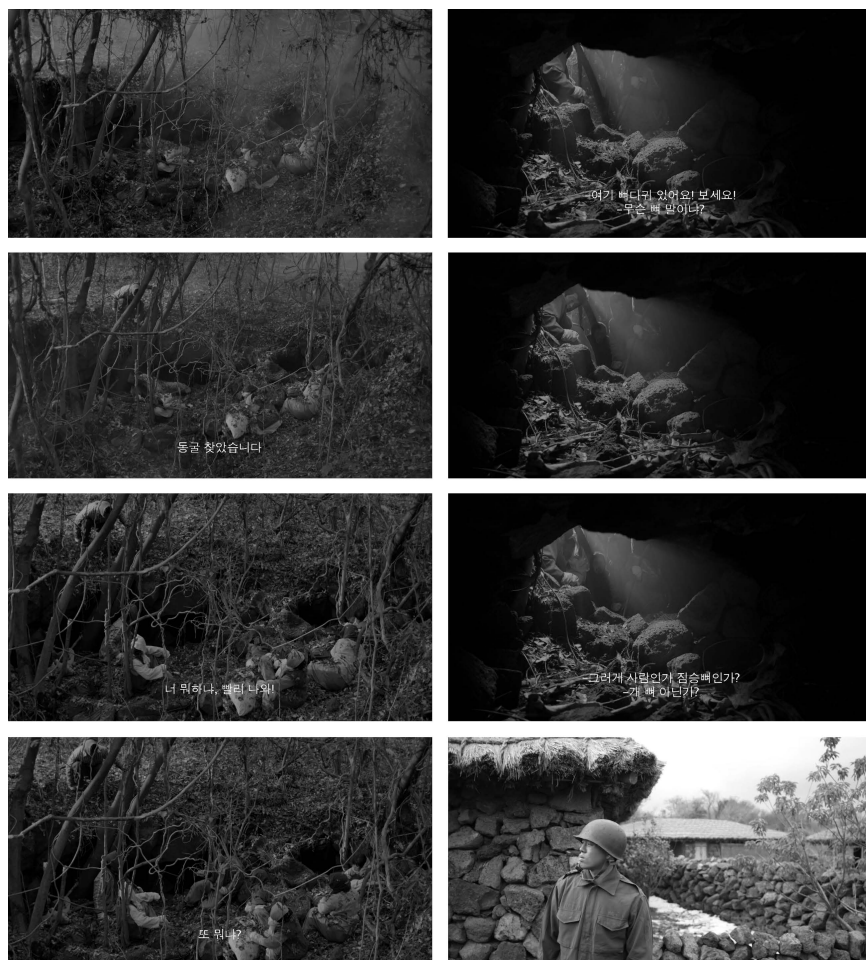


Figure 12.1 The unfolding scenes that reveal the villagers' sleeping bodies on the ground, then the sighting of human bones in the cave, before cutting to the soldiers occupying the village shores.

already disintegrated into bare bones. Historical accounts such as those retold in Hyŏn Ki-yŏng's acclaimed novel *Aunt Suni* (1979) describe villagers who survived the massacre continually stumbling upon human skeletons in rice fields or in the mountains: it was as if the materiality of death belatedly evoked unwanted memories of collective trauma. In this particular scene, then, the film elicits the audience's encounter with the residue of death (the skeletons) long before death occurs in the film's diegesis, as if time has been folded and perspectival space twisted.¹⁶

It is no coincidence that the gradual appearance of the villagers into the cinematic frame mimics the convention of horror films in which ghosts and

zombies enter into view and prepare the audience for a more horrible event to come; here even those without the extradiegetic knowledge about the unclaimed skeletons in Jeju are being prepared to witness the forthcoming scenes of unspeakable violence and morbidity. This scene also repositions the actors within a contemporary frame in the way it configures their ways of seeing and sensing. In the shot taken from the cave's interior, the position of actors mirrors that of the audience: we are looking at the skeletons together. This encounter collapses the moment of the past (circa 1948) depicted as a scene in the film and the moment of the present (circa 2012), instantiating a documentary consciousness for the audience, who are tertiary witnesses to the villagers crouching before the skeletal remains, as if paying homage to their absent bodies.

To reiterate, the ritual space produced here is decidedly a *space* that is constructed and performed, not a temporally bound one where stories are *taking place*. The traumatic events of 4.3 transpired some sixty years ago, so what is created in the film is a space without a clear narrative logic but one that assumes a facile identification with the villagers. If an identification between the villagers and the audience is at all possible, it is through the shared mourning for the victims. Then the only cut in the scene that establishes a version of shot-reverse-shot—from the villagers approaching the cave and cutting to a look outwards from inside the cave—is not suturing a narrative space but a non-place which holds both presence and absence.¹⁷ This non-place presents the missing bodies and their surrogates, the dead spirits and the cinematic shamans, all at the same time. This space of encounter thus constitutes a ritual space by doubling the bodies, where the absent bodies are always present even in their absence.

The treatment of soldiers lacks the play of the doubled body, a lack that is made up by a carefully crafted cinematography that renders disorienting the spatiotemporality of ritual space and contributes to a metatextual distance for the spectators. The first scene immediately following the opening credits, begins with a fixed, frontal shot onto a firmly closed, impregnable wooden door. The blocked view opens up only when a soldier (Sergeant Kim) unlocks the door and returns inside. After waiting a few seconds, the camera eye moves forward slowly and conjures a free-flowing extremely long take, as if floating in the air and absorbing the darkness that pervades the interior. It also slightly tilts to the left and pans up and down, but it does not follow the soldier's steps. It lingers the longest on a cluster of funerary wares (Figure 12.2). Designated with a certain autonomy, the camera wanders around, off to the side of the narrative that the scene might hint at—in this instance the monstrosity of the soldiers, which unravels when they casually indulge in a juicy pear in the presence of a dead woman's naked body, the heightened volume of their crunching compounding the abhorrent massacre.

More premeditated long takes, which stretch time and space extremely slowly, similar to the Hungarian auteur Béla Tarr's cinematography, are employed to break the conventional figure-ground relationship.¹⁸ A case in



Figure 12.2 The camera lingers the longest on a cluster of funerary wares.

point is the long frontal shot of a boiling pot in the middle of a courtyard occupied by the troops (Figure 12.3). Five soldiers come in and out of the frame. In the span of three minutes, while these soldiers haul a pig to the pot, insert more wood in the fire and so on, the camera eye elevates extremely slowly, gradually picking up pace until it is perpendicular to the ground, looking at the soldiers from above. It is only when the intoxicated Sergeant Kim pushes himself along the ground on his back into the frame from the lower right corner that the audience is likely to come to the realization of the break in the fourth wall and the construction of a new figure-ground relationship, both of which contribute little to the narrative (Figure 12.3). Instead, this scene offers an affective sense that the ritual space conjures, a space in which there is no such thing as a stable ground for either the dead victims and the soldiers (of 1948) or the actors and the viewers (of now) to stand on.

Jiseul's reliance on rhythmic cinematography to construct ritual space and the audience's metatextual engagement with the film cannot be over-emphasized. Throughout the film, the audience are invited to experience the undulating motion between extreme close-ups of grass and the extreme long shots of Jeju's spectacular curvy hills, filmed at a low angle. Overshadowed by the striking portrait of the landscape, nature and inanimate objects, the protagonists often enter the frame only as an afterthought (Figure 12.4).

If there is a single word that can describe such an extraordinary camera eye, it is "spectral." The specter that is returned to *chesa/kut* surrounds the protagonists at all times, but its omnipresence is without the will to be omniscient. As an indication of such a spectral presence, the camera stretches space and simultaneously compresses time, dislocating the narrative space only to rebuild a convoluted sense of space-time in which past memory rejoins the

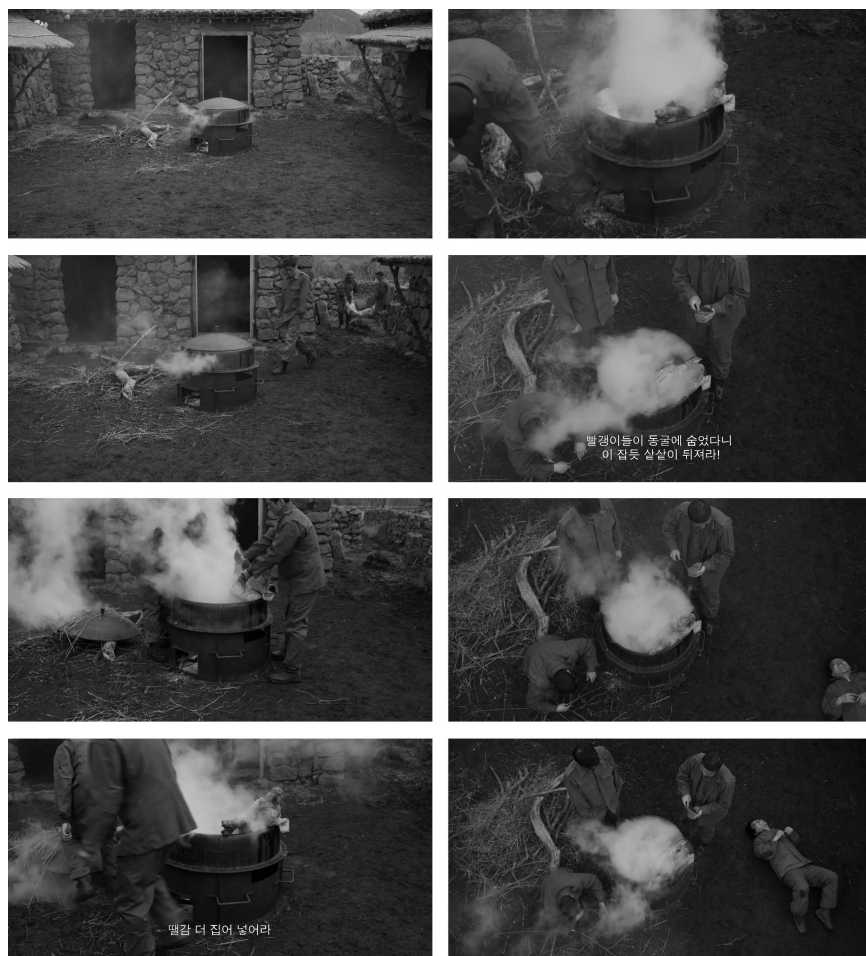


Figure 12.3 The extremely long take breaks a normative figure–ground relationship.

present moment in the form of a shamanistic ritual space. These multiple uninterrupted shots of inanimate beings and natural landscapes often slip into a presentation of Jeju Island as it is, as if restructuring the fictional space of the film *Jiseul* into a documentary one by delving into, as Sobchack writes, “a deep and embodied knowledge that posits existence latently and in general . . . of the real-world trees, sky, mountains, and [animals] that make them visible, give them substance, and thus substantiate them.”¹⁹ Hence, for Sobchack, the “charge of the real” that always subtends fiction films erupts to the surface through fixed, long takes of the natural environment. Our knowledge of existence is heightened when we see the soldiers heave what looks like a live pig into the cauldron of boiling water, especially when we have



Figure 12.4 The camera documents the landscape and natural beings of Jeju.

earlier seen how an elderly villager was willing to risk his life for the welfare of his pig, to him his only kin.

BEYOND POSTTRAUMATIC CINEMA

From the very beginning, *Jiseul* comments on the dilemma of representing collective trauma, opening with a silver gelatin photograph-like shot of silky, gently floating feather clouds that invite a voyeuristic peek through onto Jeju Island. This sequence, with no background sound, introduces the film's title, followed by two names: the late Kim Kyung-ryul as executive producer and O Meul as director. Placing the late Kim's name before his, O pays homage to the filmmaker who directed the first feature-length film about Jeju 4.3. Kim's film, *The Unending History* (2005), is set in 2003, the year South Korea's President Roh Mu-hyun enacted a 4.3 special law to compile current data on the dead and the survivors, and their respective families. Although official acknowledgment of suffering and losses focuses on compensation and remediation entitlements (rather than the political enquiry still called for by some), this recovery of Jeju 4.3 into national history has also meant resurrecting traumatic memory for those who ought to come forward with claims as bona fide victims, a group who might have chosen to remain silent forever.

In *The Unending History*, the main characters are forced to relive their experiences, which the audience witnesses as flashbacks. Suffering headaches and nightmares—and even a stroke in the case of a rebel turned informer, the distressed characters are presented as survivors and as testimonies of a historical trauma. After the film's completion, another tragic story unfolded. Director Kim had raised his sizeable budget of USD 150,000

from willing islanders, making it the first self-funded feature film about the island and the very first feature about Jeju 4.3. The film's failure to win critical reception, however, left Kim deeply self-reproachful and tormented, and before too long he died from a stroke at age forty-two. The struggle over the artistic as well as political representation of 4.3 ultimately "killed" Kim, as if he became another victim. By honoring Kim in the opening credits and subtitling *Jiseul* "The Unending History II," O makes an explicit paradiagnosis on the fraught history and politics that are inevitable in any project of (re)membering historical trauma, into which *Jiseul* also enters.²⁰

The Unending History seems to sit comfortably with the tendency in South Korean cinema since the 1990s to embody the anti-authoritarian politics of dissident filmmakers who excavate the stories of individuals among the generations oppressed under dictatorship. The protagonists in such feature films are both the symptom of the anti-democratic nation and the symbol of victimhood. In *A Petal* (1996) directed by Jang Sunwoo, for example, the main character is a teenage girl suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder after losing her family during the Gwangju Massacre of 1980, while *Peppermint Candy* (1999), directed by Lee Changdong, features a former policeman who is so wracked by guilt over abetting the accidental killing of an activist during a violent interrogation that he ends up committing suicide. As film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim argues, such filmic representations of the post-democratization era since the 1990s constitute an effort to recuperate a fragmented national subjectivity by portraying moments of traumatic history prior to democratization. These filmic representations thus make up a "posttraumatic cinema" in as much as they depict posttraumatic subjects.²¹ Setting the South Korean modern historical experience of occupation, massacre and military dictatorship as subject matter worthy of cinematic representation, films like *A Petal*, *Peppermint Candy* and *The Unending History* faithfully turn to a psychoanalytical understanding of the individual psyche, presenting an abundant resource for visualizing what is beyond representation. Here, the dominant cinematic tool with which to embed the past with the present is the Freudian psychoanalytic formula of trauma, in which the unreconciled past event is never fully understood by the subject (usually the main character), who repeatedly experiences the effects of the original trauma.

Ironically, it is easily seen in these films that the key site of irretrievable collective and political trauma resides within the scarred psyches of debilitated individuals, a singular emphasis which detracts from the long history of political resistance by many in Jeju, Gwangju and elsewhere in South Korea. In effect, the female protagonist in *A Petal* and the characters in *The Unending Story* become generalized as absolute victims of South Korean state violence: ultimately, a stereotyped cipher in South Korean modern history.²² By contrast, *Jiseul* proposes a framing of the dilemma in cinematically representing a collective trauma that neither resides entirely in the individual (who recounts history only in her speechlessness or death) nor converts easily to the level of the national (thereby succumbing to ethno-nationalistic generalization). Instead, O's film is about a collective political resistance

that walks the faultlines between the paradigms of the individual and the nation.

Jiseul lies beyond familiar cinematic translations of subjectivity as we know it. This is demonstrated in the film's refusal to build a coherent narrative space and, simultaneously, its emphasis on shamanistic doubling of bodies in the cinematic ritual space. *Jiseul* also makes explicit the difference between the tropes of flashback and mourning rituals precisely by incorporating the latter in the absence of the former, even though they both embrace a nonlinear temporality.²³ The psychoanalytic trope of a traumatic return reborn as cinematic flashbacks is decidedly literary, whereas *chesa/kut* belongs to the realm of performance.²⁴ These enactive as well as enunciative elements of *chesa/kut* lend themselves to the various tropes of desubjectivization and (dis)identification, which invite the audience into the cinematic space of historical trauma. As much as flashbacks catch us unawares, rituals are our *willing* return to the moment of rupture, affliction and wounding. In *Jiseul*'s ritual space, what is conflated with this willingness to return is the urgency to rethink the temporality of history outside the space of national cinema.

IN PLACE OF CONCLUSIONS: JEJU 4.3 AND SHAMANISM

In reenacting the 1948 state campaign of massacre in a cinematic language of shamanism (ritual space), *Jiseul* makes more than an aesthetic proposition. It poses the fundamental historical question of the genesis of the South Korean nation, which is a challenge to state-centered nationalism. Jeju 4.3 was not an isolated popular uprising against an oppressive state apparatus but historically contingent upon the crisis of legitimacy faced by the South Korean military regime immediately after liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945. But, this Korean "liberation" was not accomplished by the anticolonial resistance forces active in the Korean peninsula, as well as in China and the United States, but by the United States' dropping "Little Boy" on Japan and precipitating the division of the Korean peninsula into the northern half aligned with the Soviet Union bloc and the southern half under control of the U.S. Army Military Government of Korea.²⁵

The decision to hold separate elections in 1948 provoked protests across the Korean peninsula, with particularly resilient uprisings spreading in the southern province of Cholla and Jeju regions where severe economic deprivations and diseases like cholera were endemic. Therefore, the rebellion against Jeju's provincial government on April 3, 1948 was enmeshed with the history of global impositions justified by the so-called Cold War. Even after the southern Republic of Korea and the northern Democratic Republic of Korea were simultaneously recognized by and admitted to the United Nations General Assembly as sovereign nation-states in 1991, the presence of the "other" Korea in the north has posed a constant threat to the legitimacy

of South Korea's self-projections as "the" Korean "nation." Especially after the Korean War (1950–1953), the Korean (half)nation, the Republic of Korea, sought to emphasize its pedigree as a modern nation-state, adopting and institutionalizing a staunchly anticommunist national ethos and a teleological progressivism in industrial development policy. Consequently, through the latter half of the twentieth century, the South Korean nation was profoundly shaped by *suppressions* of traditional (pre-capitalist) practices and even of historical memory—of imaginations impeding the modern economic miraculous, most prominently, the ancient cosmological belief systems of shamanism.

Linking the Jeju 4.3 massacres—a war crime initiated under occupation and justified by Cold War rationality under military dictatorship—with traditional shamanism intensifies questionings of the (Korean) nation, nationalism and state power, now further provoked by official acknowledgment of the state campaigns of violence against civilians. Critics who problematize *Jiseul*'s aestheticization of the massacre via the presumed "apolitical" form of a ritual might rethink this connection between shamanism and the birth of the South Korean nation that lies at the crux of 4.3. The political meaning of *Jiseul* is firmly rooted in its historically-situated inquiry of the subjectivities of nationalism, national space, time and history.

NOTES

1. Son Hong-ju, "A hero when the film is good, a traitor when it is not (*Chal tchikŭmyŏn yŏng'ung mot tchikŭmyŏn yŏkchŏk*)," *Cine 21*, March 26, 2013, accessed July 1, 2014, www.cine21.com/news/view/mag_id/72926
2. For an overview of official responses to 4.3, see Hunjoon Kim, "Seeking Truth after 50 Years: The National Committee for Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju 4.3 Events," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* vol. 3 issue 3 (2009): 406–23.
3. On the politics of representation and reconciliation surrounding 4.3, see Seong-nae Kim, "Mourning Korean Modernity in the Memory of the Cheju April Third Incident," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* vol. 1 no. 3 (2000): 461–76.
4. *Jiseul*'s monochrome depiction of Jeju's volcanic island naturescape gives more agency to the land and its memory, differing from the full-color commodified tourism representations of Jeju that proliferate today's media. The concurrent rise of eco-tourism and militarization (including a proposed U.S. naval base) in Jeju and the continued "othering" of Jeju in South Korean national history are presented in *Jeju Prayer* (2012), a multifaceted documentary directed by Im Heung-soon.
5. *Jiseul*, which drew its modest budget and its actors from among Jeju residents, attracted national audiences of 100,000 just a month after release in March 2013. Subsequently selling 144,500 tickets to surpass the box-office record for an independent fiction film, *Jiseul* already marks a milestone in South Korean cinema history.
6. Vivian Sobchack, "The Charge of the Real: Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2004), 279.

7. Both *Unending History* (2005) and *Jiseul* (2012) were supported by donations from Jeju islanders. This repeated mobilization says at least two things: that the South Korean film industry was unable or unwilling to support such films; and that significant numbers of Jeju residents remain steadfast in their determination to support cinematic representations of the history recalled by Jeju 4.3.
8. As anthropologists like Laurel Kendall argue, the medium of the shaman's body contests the assumption that the tradition of shamanism is anchored in an atemporal premodernity. See Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).
9. Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli, *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1982); Laurel Kendall, *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).
10. Although many South Koreans disregard shamanism as ritual superstition, particularly after post-wwii state modernization efforts to eradicate such beliefs, many more accept the residues of shamanism with varying degrees of openness. I see the very idea of the director's conception or positioning of a film as a ritual, and the audience and critics' consuming it as such, as constituting this disseminated cultural practice. See Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*.
11. I thank film critic Yu Woon-sung for pointing out the connection between *Jiseul* and *Moi, Pierre Rivière*.
12. Notwithstanding that the involvement of Jeju natives was guided by language constraints, because hardly any mainland Korean actors speak Jeju dialect, and that budgetary constraints gave O further reason to cast his acquaintances and those who have previously worked on his projects as the Jeju characters in *Jiseul*.
13. According to the director, these conversations were staged but not necessarily scripted. Notionally based on a script, once the shooting began the director was careful to work with the "situation" (*sanghwang*), which privileged the spatial configuration of the setting (mostly out in nature's surroundings and within the actual site of caves in the mountains) and the general atmosphere of the scene over the word-to-word iteration of scripted lines.
14. Modleski citing from Drucilla Cornell's *Beyond Accommodation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 148. According to Modleski, the process of ethical (dis)identification seen in Deavere Smith's performance should not be viewed as a humanist approach to a politically charged situation, nor considered a female body/vessel that contains (natural) multitudes and contradictions in life. It is the process of creating "metaphoric equivalences" in the practice of mimesis. See Tania Modleski, "Doing Justice to the Subjects: Mimetic Art in a Multicultural Society: The Work of Anna Deavere Smith," in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997), 57–76. While the rape scene in *Jiseul*, with the victim's naked corpse slumped against a looming mountain afterwards, certainly deserves a feminist critique, I would also emphasize the ethics of (dis)identification, reenactment, and shamanistic ritual as foregrounding a nuanced feminist critique of the (neo)colonization experienced in Jeju.
15. Sobchack, "The Charge of the Real."
16. In Jacques Lacan's reading, the human remains in *Jiseul* function like the skull in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). For Lacan, the semantic significance of Holbein's skull lies in its skewed perspective, a vision that both coincides with and challenges the laborious development of the geometrical perspective in Europe. What Lacan calls the gaze or "*objet a*" is the very

- thing that alters our perspective, like the “annihilated subject” that the skull represents in the painting. Jacques Lacan, *Four Analysis*, 79–90, as cited in Slavoj Žižek, “Looking Awry,” *October* vol. 50 (Autumn 1989), 35.
17. Here I am inspired by Stephen Heath’s conceptualization of narrative space as manifesting spatiotemporal continuity maintained through suturing. See Heath, “Narrative Space,” *Screen* vol. 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1976), 79.
 18. Many experimental filmmakers, notably Michael Snow on *Wavelength* (1967), have attempted to alter the figure–ground relationship to express temporality, or what Deleuze theorizes as the “time-image.” See Damian Sutton, “Immanent Images: Photography after Mobility,” in *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze’s Film Philosophy*, ed. David N. Rodowick (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2010), 311–12.
 19. Sobchack, “The Charge of the Real,” 279–80.
 20. Son Hong-ju, “A hero when the film is good, a traitor when it is not.”
 21. Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remasculinization of South Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 80–1, 108.
 22. I would go as far as to argue that Jeju residents, treated as non-national subjects, could be valorized as “typical particulars,” as theorized by Sobchack—insofar as film might represent a group of particular beings on whom an act of state violence is enacted. Sobchack, “The Charge of the Real,” 281.
 23. Here, I mean the loops, spiral detours and cyclical repetitions that defy the supposedly “homogeneous empty time” of historical progress. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000). For the linearity of nationalism as an important trope in modernism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).
 24. In South Korean contemporary art practice, the resuscitation of “performative enactment” to render a political subject in the 1990s post-minjung period is signified as an aesthetic shift, coming after the increasing reluctance to present solid narratives in the 1980s minjung or peoples social movement era. In the independent filmmaking scene, this shift is represented by directors with an art background (like O) who are at the forefront of work to challenge and change perceptions and aesthetic conventions of politics. A notable recent example is Jung Yoon-suk’s documentary *Non-fiction Diary* (2013) on the topic of mass murder and the death penalty, which was lauded in South Korean critical circles and the international film festival circuit. On the diverse voices defining the post-minjung paradigm shift, also a focus in my own research and curatorial work, see the contributions in *Being Political Popular: South Korean Art at the Intersection of Popular Culture and Democracy, 1980–2010*, edited by Sohl Lee (Hyunsil Publishing, Seoul; Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2012).
 25. Chungmoo Choi, “The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea,” *positions* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 72–102.

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13 Counterperformance

The Heartland and Other Spaces in *Eating Air* and 15

Edna Lim

The history of Singapore's film industry is generally constituted by two distinct periods. The first is its golden age in the 1950s and 1960s, which saw the prolific outpouring of primarily Malay films. The second is its so-called rebirth in the 1990s, when film production was revived after petering out in the 1970s and ceasing to exist altogether in the 1980s. Just as the current constitution of the industry is not recognizable as a legacy inherited from the golden age, the films produced in each period are also very different. One of the most obvious differences is in the setting of these films, which reflect the changes that have taken place in Singapore's landscape since its independence in 1965. In tandem with the fledgling government's drive toward nation building in the 1970s and 1980s was an urgent push to redevelop Singapore to meet the housing needs of its population as well as quickly industrialize the country. Villages, or *kampung*, that used to dominate the island were systematically eradicated to make way for a more urban cityscape of skyscrapers, public housing apartment blocks and satellite towns. As such, whereas golden age films tended to depict Singapore's simpler *kampung* or rural past, revival films generally feature Singapore's new urban landscape instead, reflecting the country's development "From Third to First World," as declared by the title of Singapore's Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs.

PERFORMING SINGAPORE

The story of Singapore's success is a familiar one, constituted and reinforced by narratives and representations that perform Singapore as a successful, vibrant, accomplished and affluent nation. According to the *Visit Singapore* website run by the Singapore Tourism Board:¹

In just 150 years, Singapore has grown into a thriving centre of commerce and industry. . . . Singapore is the busiest port in the world. . . . [And o]ne of the world's major oil refining and distribution centres. . . . It has also become one of the most important financial centres of Asia. . . .

Singapore's strategic location, excellent facilities, fascinating cultural contrasts and tourist attractions contribute to its success as a leading destination for both business and pleasure.

The *Singapore Education* website, also administered by the Tourism Board, believes that Singapore is an ideal "Global Schoolhouse" because:²

the island state though small in size and population (4.8 million people) has become a reputable financial centre, a key regional trading centre, the world's busiest port, and a top location for investment. Often cited as a model for transparency, efficiency and political stability, Singapore has earned recognition from around the world.

Singapore has been rated first among 181 countries in terms of ease of doing business, in World Bank's Doing Business 2009 report. The Swiss-based World Economic Forum (WEF) also rated Singapore as the most competitive economy possessing great innovative ability and a solid macro economy in the world. Even in the recent global battle against SARS, Singapore's diligent and hands-on approach has won recognition from the World Health Organisation.

Adding to its argument "Why Study in Singapore," the website further states that Singapore's airport "has for many consecutive years been nominated as the best airport in the world." It also argues that Singapore is "often recognised for its quality and efficient land transport system" and is "ranked first in Asia for its quality of life in the Mercer Quality of Living global city ranking 2009, as well as world's first for city infrastructure in the same survey."³

While the veracity of these statements is not the issue here, it is important to note that these articulations do not express a prior identity that exists in the nation. Instead they constitute a narrativization of the country that serve to construct, brand, promote and circulate this particular view of Singapore *as Singapore*. Certainly, such narrativization is not unique. According to Ann Anagnost, the nation is, "an 'impossible unity' that must be narrated into being in both time and space." She further states that "the very impossibility of the nation as a unified subject means that this narrating activity is never final."⁴ Therefore, the nation is not merely constituted by narratives or "narrated into being," but a process of *being constituted*. As such, to extrapolate from Judith Butler's theorizing of gender, the nation "ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather [it] is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts."⁵ So, the narratives these websites construct, as well as those representations elsewhere that are too copious to include here, are performative gestures that perform *a Singapore*. Each site or citation becomes an act that is stylized and repeatable. These acts occur in a public space and, through their reiteration over time, become conventional ways of performing Singapore.

In so doing, these conventional gestures have come to constitute Singapore's identity as a nation.

However, as James Loxely reads Butler, "there always remains a chance within the performativity of identity for dissonant or disruptive gestures by that which such performativity produces as its outside" because "in producing the normal, it also produces the abnormal."⁶ Such performativity is a force that constitutes by exclusion. Thus, the nation state's performance of its Singapore also produces what it excludes—(an)other Singapore.

(AN)OTHER SINGAPORE

Indeed, the view of Singapore in films from the revival offer a different perspective and this chapter looks specifically at the choice of location or setting in two of these films: Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* (1999) and Royston Tan's *15* (2003). Of particular interest is the performance of the heartland in these films—those "[public housing] estates that cluster the island and form a significant part of not only the nation's landscape but also its performance of success."⁷ This chapter argues that the heartland and other spaces in these films function as more than the setting for the narrative. Instead, they operate as sites of performance, consistent with the way that films from the revival constitute a national cinema that counterperforms (an)other Singapore.

The narratives and characters of the post-1990s film industry tend to depict (an)other Singapore, spaces and identities of an already marginalized world. Among the forerunners, *Bugis Street—The Movie* (Yon Fan, 1995) was set in the 1960s, in the well-known red light precinct frequented by transsexuals and transvestites. In the same year, *Mee Pok Man* (Eric Khoo, 1995) delved into a sleazy Singapore populated by gangsters, prostitutes and pimps, and Western men.

This tendency to depict the underbelly is followed by the film, *12 Storeys* (Eric Khoo, 1997). The critical acclaim it received at international festivals has made this film a breakthrough of sorts for Singapore cinema. A brief discussion of this film is necessary as it not only drew attention to Singapore cinema but has, over the years, also become a landmark film that established a set of stylized acts disrupting the statist image of a disciplined, subservient and homogeneous society. It has since influenced, and continues to influence, subsequent films and filmmakers.

Unlike previous films, *12 Storeys* is not set in the underbelly but performs the heartland as underbelly. "These heartlands grew out of the country's urban development plans in the [1960s] to improve living conditions by providing adequate public housing for Singaporeans"⁸ as well as promote social cohesion and encourage home ownership.⁹ Under the auspices of the state's Housing and Development Board (HDB), public housing which began "as dark, small two-bedroom apartments in simply designed blocks [has]

since developed into full-grown estates with architectural features, gardens, town councils and facilities like swimming pools and community centers.”¹⁰ Currently, “about 85% of Singaporeans are living in government-built housing.”¹¹

According to the HDB website, “Singapore’s public housing program [is] one of the nation’s most renowned achievements.”¹² Reiterating the point, an issue of *Houseword*, the HDB corporate newsletter notes that what started as a gleam in the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s eye has “become the cornerstone of Singapore’s progress.” The newsletter also quotes Mr. Lee as saying that Singapore “would not have the stability, progress and prosperity that the stake in home ownership of a growing asset has made possible.”¹³ The success of Singapore’s public housing scheme is not only featured in the HDB’s own publications but also used prominently in the nation-state’s performance of successful Singapore. According to the website, www.sg, or *Your Official Guide to Singapore*.¹⁴

in the World Bank’s annual World Development Report 2009, Singapore was held up as a model of development and ‘effective urbanization,’ turning its rural slums into ‘one of the cleanest and most welcoming cities in the world’ in just 40 years.

However, although *12 Storeys* is located in the heartland, its narrative is a fragmented series of vignettes about several characters who live in the same block of flats but do not interact. Whereas the idealized objective of these housing projects was to foster social cohesion and communal living, what the film offers instead is a performance of the heartland as a fragmented space that alienates rather than unites, where proximity exists without reciprocation. This is clearly established in the opening credit sequence which features alternating shots of interior and exterior spaces of the heartland late at night, captured through rather long takes and still shots that are matched by low-key blue lighting and the melancholic strains of a solo violin (Figure 13.1).

Interior shots feature various public spaces within, like the corridor, stairwell and shops that are closed for the day. These are empty spaces that are devoid of people and activity and they alternate with exterior views of the block showing the neat rows and columns of apartments that are coherently organized and closely situated next to each other. As these images are mostly dark, what they emphasize are pockets of light that mark individual apartments. Together with the distance of the camera and melancholic music, these exterior shots of the heartland establish and emphasize the sad isolation of light and human presence. The images in this sequence are stark contrasts to the brightly lit pictures of the HDB living circulated in official discourse which tend to feature happy families and/or groups that are racially balanced; they are always smiling, interacting or engaging in some kind of activity together to showcase community, racial harmony and



Figure 13.1 Examples of shots from the opening sequence of *12 Storeys*.

social integration in the heartland. The apartment blocks and spaces within the heartland are usually shown as open and airy, with lots of sky and surrounded by greenery.

Clearly, the heartland of *12 Storeys* is not the same happy place generated by official discourse but a sterile environment filled with sadness and melancholy. The style that the film uses to capture the setting not only creates a different performance of the heartland but also causes it to perform differently. This is not a heartland that Singaporeans are used to seeing and experiencing. Instead, the film operates by defamiliarizing images that have become conventional and proceeds by contrasting that image with its performance of a different “reality.” In other words, the film shows that there is a stark disparity between image and “reality” by offering another articulation of the heartland as a counterperformative strategy. The film therefore undermines the accuracy of official articulations by performing (an)other Singapore.

This is reinforced by the stories that comprise its fragmented narrative. Although the setting identifies the characters as heartlanders, they are cast as disenfranchised individuals who are ultimately trapped by their

inability to achieve marital or familial bliss, which are idealized through the family portraits, wedding photos and public message commercials about the joys of marriage and family in the film as markers of success and happiness. These are depicted in stark contrast to the sad “reality” of the film’s disenfranchised characters, all of whom desire and strive for, but ultimately fail to achieve such ideals. For example, Ah Gu, the bucktoothed hawker, marries a woman from China in order to realize the marital bliss touted by images he sees. However, instead of a happy marriage, Ah Gu is left lonely and repressed as his wife is never at home and sexually rejects his sexual overtures. Also in the same block is San San, a single, overweight woman haunted by the verbally abusive ghost of her foster mother. San San is doomed to a life of silence and loneliness because she is not able to participate in the ideal of couplehood and happiness depicted in the romantic films and images she sees. The third story is about Meng, a school teacher who strives to be an ideal citizen but is sexually repressed and perversely obsessed with his sister’s virginity. These stories of pain and repression weave in and out of each other without clear narrative links, creating fragments that are only temporally and thematically connected, and bracketed by the forlorn images of these apartment buildings that open and end the film. Bookending the film with these images invites us to consider them more closely, and to see them as problematic—because “the film is about the disparity between image and reality, and while the image may be officially generated, the reality is quite different, and that difference is constituted by those ‘other’ people that are left out of Singapore’s success stories.”¹⁵

12 Storeys is perhaps the first film to have emphasized the heartland. This space has since been used in most Singapore films to locate narratives and identify characters as average or “typical” Singaporeans. However, like *12 Storeys*, the use of the heartland is more than simply a way of accessing the local and the everyday. It is also used as a site through which Other voices may be heard. In the case of *Eating Air* and *15*, these Other voices are those of teenagers and youths who have dropped out or been left out of Singapore’s performance of success.

THE LIMINALITY OF *EATING AIR*

Like *12 Storeys*, *Eating Air* also rejects the performance of the heartland as a welcoming, inclusive and familial space. Consistent with its narrative about restless youths and absent parents, the film offers a heartland that literally has no space for the main character, Boy, and his gang of friends. As the film begins, Boy wakes up to a house filled with the accoutrements of his parents’ catering business. The space is cluttered with food supplies and containers, establishing the house as a place of business rather than a home. The film does not call attention to the *mise-en-scène* and captures it as

matter of fact; the focus of the sequence is Boy and not the clutter. His parents, completely engrossed in cooking, are oblivious to his presence as he negotiates the tiny, cramped space of the flat. They are captured as part of the setting and the cooking sounds they create are simply background noise, suggesting that what we see and hear are routine, ordinary and unsurprising. Boy is unaffected by the space and the space is not affected by him. Perhaps that is why he is quick to transform it into a fantasy space where, in his imagination, he is a martial arts pugilist who skillfully fends off attacks from his angry parents and later vows to seek revenge when he imagines they have been murdered.

Boy's propensity to imagine martial arts inspired alternatives recur throughout the film, highlighting his restlessness and desire to rise above an otherwise ordinary existence through the heroic and the mythic. In stark contrast to "reality," his fantasy sequences are dramatic, marked by red tints and also feature drawings, elaborate costumes and/or dialogue consistent with the style of martial arts graphic novels. In these fantasy sequences, Boy is usually the hero, and they offer an alternative space over which he has control. However, this alternative fantasy space is ultimately only cinematic and therefore insubstantial, giving way rather quickly as the narrative returns to "reality."

Boy and his friends are dropouts, or what society would consider juvenile delinquents. They smoke, ride motorcycles they cannot afford, do not go to school and hold menial jobs. Boy, for instance, declares that "books don't read me and I don't read books." His occupation is to deliver food for his parent's catering business while his friend, Ah Gu, works at a coffee shop. These boys are clearly not role models but, while they may hover on the fringes of so-called mainstream society, they are also not hardened criminals or thugs. Compared to the real bad guys, the loan sharks and drug dealers in the film, these boys are seen as rebels without a cause, or youths at risk, whose actions are petty acts of rebellion that stem from naïveté, boredom and restlessness. This is established spatially in the opening credit sequence set in Singapore's Central Business District. According to the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore:

Located on the south bank of the Singapore River, the Central Business District (CBD) of Singapore is the Republic's financial and business hub. At the heart of the CBD is Raffles Place, Singapore's internationally renowned financial hub where most of the prestigious office developments are found. The area is populated largely by major local and international banks, stock broking companies, law firms, accountants and management consultants.¹⁶

As the country's "financial and business hub," this space is not only "internationally renowned." It is also the site of Singapore's economic

ambitions, prestige and success. This is usually a crowded, bustling space but, in the opening sequence of the film, the streets are empty as Boy weaves through them on his motorbike with a cigarette hanging from his lips and total disregard for lane markings or traffic rules. The sequence is also overlaid with a nondiegetic Hokkien music. This is significant because the use of dialects has been banned from television, radio and print media in Singapore since the 1980s when the state launched aggressive “Speak Mandarin” campaigns urging Singaporeans to “Speak Mandarin and not Dialects.” These campaigns were part of the state’s emphasis on a bilingual education system, where the first language is English and the second is Mandarin for the Chinese.¹⁷ Although dialects and songs “may be allowed provided the context justified [sic] usage and is [sic] sparingly used,”¹⁸ featuring Hokkien music at the start of the film can nonetheless be read as an act of defiance that corresponds with Boy’s figure behavior, his smoking and indifference to traffic rules. Together, sound and figure behavior constitute a performance that essentially mocks and undermines the importance and established space of the CBD, a common sight/site in Singapore’s performance of success. However, his presence there is only momentarily transgressive. This is not a space he or his friends actually occupy. Instead, these boys inhabit spaces like the gaming arcade, the rooftops of HDB flats and abandoned construction sites, creating a closed universe, (an)other Singapore of marginalized and/or empty spaces that are either usually unseen, unrepresented and/or undesirable.

When Boy meets Girl, the female protagonist in the film, their romance develops through rides in the tunnel of the expressway (Figure 13.2). While the emptiness of the tunnel, its stark concrete walls and the greenish tint of the lighting emphasize the artificiality of the setting, the music and intimate arrangement of the characters on the motorbike transform the utilitarian function of the space and cause us to see it as somewhat romantic. These scenes effectively cause the tunnel to perform differently simply because it is used and treated differently by the film’s style and narrative.

The tunnel is a recurring motif in the film, as it is not only the site for the developing romance but also the place where fights generally occur. After Boy leaves the CBD in the opening sequence, he is seen riding in the tunnel with Ah Gu. Provoked by a gang in a car, they cause an accident in the tunnel, only to be beaten up and left by the side of the road at the end of the sequence. This scene predicates the ending of the film where Girl finds Boy on the floor of the tunnel after a severe beating by a gang of loan sharks (Figure 13.3). As the upper part of his body is obscured by the motorbike, it is not clear whether Boy dies from the beating. However, the ending seems to suggest this possibility because Girl gathers his helmet and walks out of the tunnel in silence (Figure 13.4). The camera’s position in front of her as she walks out of the tunnel signals her departure; she is literally leaving the space and what it represents behind. However, we do not actually see her leave the tunnel or where she is headed, which also suggest that her destination and the future are unknown and uncertain.



Figure 13.2 Boy and girl riding in the tunnel.



Figure 13.3 Boy's body in the tunnel in the ending sequence.



Figure 13.4 Girl walking out of the tunnel at the end.

The tunnel, like Boy's presence in the CBD, the empty rooftops and construction sites, Boy's house as well as the figments of his imagination are essentially liminal spaces, borrowed only for the moment as the characters pass through. The liminality of the spaces in the film and the transitory nature of the tunnel as a passage along the expressway reflect the title of the film. In Mandarin, the title is 吃风(*chi feng*), although the common usage is the Hokkien pronunciation, *jiak hong*. Literally translated, it means "to eat air." Figuratively, it means to go on a joyride, a journey without a destination. The focus therefore is the journey itself and, as implied by the title, the characters in the film are likewise captured in transit. We never see them enter or emerge from the tunnel. They never arrive because they have nowhere to go. Similarly, as juvenile delinquents who have dropped out of the "mainstream" but are not quite hardened criminals, these characters are in a transitory phase in their lives and their story is literally presented to us *in medias res*. However, as the ending of the film shows, we may not know the outcome of the beating or where Girl will end up, but the possibilities look bleak as the characters converge in the tunnel and they never leave. Like the marginalized spaces they inhabit, Boy and his friends may be part of the landscape of Singapore, but they do not participate in Singapore's performance of success. They belong instead on the fringes of the "mainstream" and seem doomed to remain there.

IN THE SPACE OF A FISH BOWL

Unlike *Eating Air*, which posits its counterperformance of (an)other Singapore through liminality, *15* offers a more overt subversion of the heartland and other recognizable, public spaces. *15* is semi-documentary about two groups of fifteen-year-old boys who play themselves. They are also who society would consider juvenile delinquents. They are rebels, truants and gang members who extort money at playgrounds and indulge in fights, pornography, tattoos and piercings. The film forces us to look beyond the piercings and tattoos and false bravado to see their vulnerabilities as they encounter and navigate a society that does not (want to) understand them. As such, there seems to be a stark contrast between public and private spaces in the film. For both sets of boys, public spaces present particular difficulties and they engage these spaces differently.

In the first story, Melvyn and Vynn are more or less confined to public spaces associated with the heartland. Here, they are often dwarfed by the structures around them, like the HDB block of flats. In the first scene, the block is captured in a low angle shot, making it appear as a looming presence around the two boys as they sing a parody of the national anthem in their school uniforms (Figure 13.5). Later in the same scene, the film cuts from a series of shot/reverse shots of the boys talking to each other on their mobile phones to an establishing shot that shows them actually next to each

other on an empty basketball court. Although the cadence of the shots is funny, the stark contrast between the boys and their surroundings casts the heartland as cold, intimidating and empty, much like the barren landscape of the opening sequence (Figure 13.6). The opening sequence is allegorical, pitting the vulnerability of the topless boys against a harsh, desert-like environment that is as empty and futile as the heartland which follows. The coldness of the heartland is reinforced when a schoolgirl jumps and falls to her death in front the Melvyn and Vynn, stopping them in their tracks as they walk through the neighborhood. Likewise, when they are in a heartland playground, the image foregrounds the chain-link fence, creating a stark demarcation between us and the boys in the background who are literally confined within that space and look like they have no way out (Figure 13.7).

This sequence is captured in slow motion as the camera pans from Vynn to Melvyn and back again, accompanied by a layered soundtrack of muted background sounds of children playing against Melvyn's voiceover while he extorts money from a small boy. Mapping these elements of film style over an otherwise "real" space, foregrounds subjective experience against the objective "reality" of the location. The sense of entrapment that the boys feel is reflected in their experience of the space they occupy, transforming the playground from a site of innocence and play into an expression of private pain in a public space. Clearly once again, this is not the heartland advertised by the HDB and other public discourses. The film's style offers another articulation of the "reality" of the heartland that challenges prevailing performances of it as a space of community and social cohesion. Instead, *15* counterperforms the heartland as a cold, unsympathetic and futile place of lost innocence and private pain.

While Melvyn and Vynn are largely confined to spaces within the heartland, the boys in the second story, Shaun, Erick and Armani, venture further into other public locations in Singapore. The most obvious example of this is when the boys tour various landmarks around the island to help Armani find a perfect building from which to commit suicide. This sequence comprises a montage of images of famous places such as the City Hall, The Central Business District, the shophouses in Chinatown, the Tang Dynasty Village and the Guilin, all of which are rejected by Armani for various reasons (Figure 13.8).

At once dark and comic, this sequence directly challenges the prominence of these landmarks in official discourses, such as tourist literature which touts Singapore as successful and "unique." These landmarks have been used so frequently as part of official public discourse that they have become iconic images of Singapore's "fascinating cultural contrasts and tourist attractions [that] contribute to its success as a leading destination for both business and pleasure."¹⁹ Similarly, the images in the montage are captured to look like tourist pictures or postcards. Yet the presence of the three boys in the foreground and the cards pronouncing "I want to die" immediately undermine and displace the iconicity of these places as performative gestures



Figure 13.5 Melvyn and Vynn are dwarfed by surrounding buildings in the heartland.



Figure 13.6 The barren landscape of the opening sequence.



Figure 13.7 Melvyn and Vynn in the playground.



Figure 13.8 The boys in front of City Hall.



Figure 13.9 Catwalk in the public bus.

in official discourse, causing them to function instead as potential locations for teen suicide. Each place is deemed unsuitable, and the deadpan, theatrical cadence of the film's style calls attention to the lack of emotional connection that the boys have with these iconic sights/sites. This sequence highlights the distance and difference between official performances of Singapore and the boys' own experience of being Singaporean. This sequence is not an attempt to reclaim these spaces but rather to reject them.

The boys also transform other public spaces through their actions. For example, when the boys board a public bus, its aisle is subjectively transformed into a catwalk runway (Figure 13.9).

The scene splits the space into two planes of experience. The passengers on the bus exist and behave like regular commuters as they sit and stare blankly out the windows, almost oblivious to the machinations of the three boys in the aisle. Yet, at the same time, the aisle becomes a performative space for staging a frivolous subjective moment captured in jump shots as the three boys strut down the aisle, dance and pose like models on a runway.

Whereas catwalks are conventionally associated with the performances of glamour, fashion and beauty, the film's transformation of the bus aisle is ironic because these boys, with their tattoos and piercings, are clearly not manifestations of conventional standards of beauty and glamour. Doing so posits an alternative aesthetic and encourages us to view them differently. Shaun and Erick also flagrantly brandish a blow-up sex doll as they move through Orchard Road, Singapore's famous shopping district, and even go so far as to simulate sex with it at a traffic crossing. These scenes once again displace the way these settings have become conventional gestures that articulate Singapore's "quality and efficient land transport system" and the glamour of Orchard Road—both of which figure prominently in the performance of a successful Singapore. Again, these actions, while rebellious, are not attempts to claim or take over these spaces but to reject them, as evident when Shaun, Erick and Armani each glumly "flip a birdie" as the bus door closes and the vehicle moves on without them.

However, in contrast to the boys' interaction in and with public spaces, they are more honest, serious and intimate in the private space of the HDB flat, where interior space corresponds to the interiority of the scenes. This is where we get to see them beyond the tattoos and the piercings. Here, they sing gang chants that are choreographed and shot like music videos, have facials, clean each other's wounds and cut each other's hair (Figure 13.10).

These scenes are almost homoerotic, as the boys are usually topless and their gestures are physically intimate. This is where we see them cry, comfort and hug each other to sleep. The frequent use of tightly composed shots in these scenes reinforces the sense that we are given a closer, more intimate view of the boys. However, these shots also highlight the restricted space of the flat. It is essentially a small space and while the privacy of the setting enables them to be themselves as it were, that freedom is also ultimately limited and confined. As a result, these interior spaces of the flat are not unlike the entrapment of the fenced playground and the confines of the fish tank and fish bowl that figure prominently in the *mise-en-scène*. The fish tank and bowl are recurring motifs in the film that reflect not only the invisible barriers that restrict and entrap the boys, and which they cannot overcome, but also the way the film causes us to gaze at them from beyond a fourth wall that ultimately separates us and them. The world of *15* is effectively demarcated as an enclosed, confined and painful universe of (an)other Singapore.

CONCLUSION

By deliberately enacting a counterposition and a different reality, these films in turn highlight the performativity of the state's representation. Collectively, these films are prime examples of a Singapore cinema that exemplify those dissonant gestures Butler describes, disrupting the performativity of the state's own performance of the nation by the creation and repetition of (an)

other Singapore. Early revival films like *12 Storeys* established a set of stylized acts that, as a relational force and by virtue of their repetition and consumption through subsequent films like *Eating Air* and *15*, disrupt the state's performance of successful Singapore as a unified, homogenous national identity.

However, these acts of Singapore cinema's counterperformance have, over time and by virtue of their repetition, become normative. They have "become vulnerable in their repetition. They are in the end nothing but their repetition."²⁰ Yet, viewed performatively, national identity, like gender, is "an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate."²¹ Neither the state's performance nor cinema's counterperformance can fully address, depict or represent the nation. This is because, as Butler describes,

performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labour of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.²²

As such, Singapore cinema's counterperformance of state rhetoric is itself "not a 'pure' opposition." By exposing the performativity of the state's rhetoric, Singapore cinema also implicates and exposes itself as performance. Indeed, if national identity *is* "real only to the extent that it is performed,"²³ then such attempts at performing the nation can no longer be viewed as dialectics but as impure, implicated and interacting levels of performance that stage and re-stage the nation as process.



Figure 13.10 The boys in the interior of the flat.

NOTES

The first half of this chapter draws heavily on an earlier essay, "Coming Up For Air: Film and the Other Singaporean," *Kinema*, no. 28 (Fall 2007). I also cite the websites from that preliminary research as a representative sampling, though these are defunct or no longer provide the same content since last accessed in 2010, since identical texts are still widely circulating visitor information in the websites and media of diverse organizations in Singapore.

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3. Ibid. In current circulation, see for example "Singapore," The Princeton Review, accessed 19 December 2014, <http://missionstudyabroad.weebly.com/singapore.html>
4. Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation and Power in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.
5. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 179.
6. James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007), 137, 123.
7. Edna Lim. "Coming up for Air: Film and the Other Singaporean." *Kinema* No. 28 (Fall 2007), online: <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=384&feature>
8. Ibid.
9. According to the Housing and Development Board (HDB) website, "HDB was set up in 1960, at a time when a large number of people were still living in unhygienic, potentially hazardous slums and crowded squatter settlements packed in the city centers." HDB, "A Brief Background—HDB's Beginnings," accessed April 12, 2008, www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/WPDis/About%20UsA%20Brief%20Background%20-%20HDB's%20Beginnings?OpenDocument&SubMenu=A_Brief_Background
10. Lim, "Coming Up for Air."
11. "Why Study in Singapore?"
12. "Public Housing in Singapore," HDB, accessed February 17, 2010, www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10320p.nsf/w/AboutUsPublicHousing?OpenDocument
13. "A Stake in the nation," *Houseword*, accessed February 17, 2010, <http://houseword.sg/newsletter/201001/article.php?aid=31#A%20Stake%20in%20the%20Nation>
14. "Our History: Development," accessed February 17, 2010, <http://app.www.sg/who/40/Development.aspx>
15. Lim, "Coming Up for Air."
16. "Singapore's Central Business District and Raffles Place," accessed June 13, 2014, www.ur.gov.sg/sales/ndt26jun01/ndt26jun01details4.html
17. If one is Malay, one's second language is also Malay, and if one is Tamil then the second language is Tamil. A non-Tamil Indian may choose either Tamil, or another Indian language such as Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu.
18. "Free-to-Air Television Programme Code," Part 13.6, [www.mda.gov.sg](http://www.mda.gov.sg/Media_Development_Authority), Media Development Authority, accessed 20 December 2014, http://www.mda.gov.sg/RegulationsAndLicensing/ActsCodesOfPracticeAndGuidelines/Documents/Acts%2c%20Codes%20of%20Practice%20and%20Guidelines/Industry_TV_ContentGuidelines_FTATVProgCode.pdf
19. "Singapore Today."
20. Loxley, *Performativity*, 124.

21. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 231.
22. *Ibid.*, 241.
23. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 526 (1988).

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14 Ismene and Antigone in Sri Lanka's Black Cinema

Anoma Pieris

In Sophocles' tragedy, Antigone is thrust into a volatile public sphere as a figure of resistance to state authority, while her sister, Ismene, is contained within the limits of the private domain.¹ The resultant contest between kinship and the state produces a social crisis. Yet, in the Black Cinema of Sri Lanka, such boundaries between public and private space have become irrevocably blurred by the cooption of women into institutionalized violence, whether as members of state military forces or of the various extremist and separatist mobilizations and suicide squads. These changes, intrinsic to the struggle for territorial self-determination, underwrite nationalist struggles over urban territory, converting women into radical agents of change. The domestic sphere, associated with indigeneity and ethnic belonging, is destabilized. Whereas the cinema of the postcolonial period subscribed to the fledgling nation-state, twenty-first century productions question political authority.

Sri Lanka's Black Cinema, a genre of the Sinhala-language cinema that emerged during the early 2000s, exposes the militarization of everyday life and wartime corruption. Specific themes of sexual violence and abandonment are constructed around women's bodies, while also referencing absent soldiering bodies. Militarization, space and the gendered body are recurrent themes. Neloufer de Mel has theorized these portrayals in terms of the persistent (ethnically differentiated or gendered) body, and what she describes as explorations of "popular memory" in Third Cinema.² Their depictions of the economies of war, sexual violence and corporeality offer alternatives to militarized and official narratives, exposing, in her view, the mute, undifferentiated characteristics of the condition of "bare life."³ She refers here to Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, the subject abandoned by law.⁴ This condition further resonates with gendered censorship that excludes women's voices from political discourse, she argues.

This chapter scrutinizes the spatial effects that convey gendered figurations of disempowerment due to wartime violence in Sri Lanka. It explores how utopic representations of home, city and nation gave way to indeterminate interstitial spatialities, transforming the cinematic genre through Black Cinema's critical lens. The bare life exposed in these narratives is contextualized in pervasive border conditions that anticipate violent sociospatial

transformations. They prefigure Agamben's "spaces of exception," the camps and borderlands outside sovereignty that contain excluded subjects.⁵

As argued by de Mel, political or depoliticized bodies of women may fall outside legitimate sovereignty.⁶ The gendered metaphors of Sophocles' *Antigone* offer opportunities for their exploration in terms of public or private containments or spatial transgressions. In Tamil and Sinhala theatre, *Antigone* has been used quite explicitly to explore resistance to the state, to patriarchal authority and to the conditions of violence intrinsic to civil war. In cinema, the representations are embedded, but the characterizations of women and their conflicted choices evoke this familiar trope. The metaphorical analogy is useful for excavating Black Cinema's gendered polemics.

ON LOCATION

Prolonged through military advances and ceasefires, and punctuated by suicide bombings, Sri Lanka's twenty-six-year civil war (1983–2009) between government forces and, *inter alia*, those of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) came to a bloody end in 2009. This civil war produced a number of new gendered subjectivities; soldiers, militants and civilians whose relationship to home, village, territory and nation was reinscribed via the nationalist politics of various contenders, both political and militant. It also produced a new subject category of IDPs (internally displaced persons), who during the last stages of the war were enumerated in excess of 200,000 persons. Unlike the fitful ceasefires of an earlier era that made way for ineffective peace negotiations, the elimination of the LTTE leadership brought an end to military confrontations. Yet even as victory celebrations continued in the capital, Colombo, voices were raised on behalf of those internally displaced. In 2010, the sobering figure of 89,000 war widows was announced.⁷ Pacifist voices against the military solution were silenced by the general acceptance of postwar development, underscored by competing political lobbies focused on civilian casualties, human rights violations and continued militarization. The United Nations Human Rights Council's international inquiry into the war and its aftermath, and the government's resistance to this intervention took centre stage.⁸

The Sri Lankan ethnically-defined civil war, a territorial conflict over the bid by the LTTE to establish a separate state, Tamil Eelam, through a militant form of Tamil nationalism, was precipitated by the mounting legacy of postcolonial ethnocentric state policies favoring the Sinhala-Buddhist majority.⁹ The area described here as the war zone, and identified by the LTTE as demarcating Eelam, was located in the predominantly ethnically Tamil and Muslim northern and eastern parts of the country. The war progressed in three stages that are relevant for this chapter. The first, and overlapping period of continuing insurrections in the south, was marked from the 1983 anti-Tamil riots to the 2001 ceasefire, when connections to the war zone were resumed. The second was the ceasefire phase (2002–2008),

a period of failed peace negotiations and political mistrust. The final phase (2008–2009) was an all-out military offensive, which again segregated the war zone but brought an end to the war with enormous displacement and cost to civilian lives.

The Black Cinema of Sri Lanka, so-called following the release of Vimukthi Jayasundara's award winning *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* (*Forsaken Land*, 2005), identified a group of young writer-directors who critiqued the state, militarization and societal morality throughout the conflict.¹⁰ Jayasundara, Asoka Handagama, Prasanna Vithanage, Sathyajit Maitipe and Sudath Mahaadivulkwewa consequently attracted considerable criticism from senior officials in the armed forces, Buddhist clergy and the public media.¹¹ Their depictions of the brutality of war voiced dissenting positions at a time when both Tamil and Sinhala chauvinist lobbies favored a military solution. Illicit sex scenes with gratuitous sex and violence roused traditional patriarchal sentiments and provoked accusations of the genre's cultivation of Western audiences and accolades. Promiscuous females attracted similar criticism, conflating politics, morality and patriotism.

The rawness of this genre, the psychological dimension of the characters, and the deep social disjunctions implicit in the sexual narratives are new to Sri Lanka and, indeed, appealing to Western audiences. Jayasundara's receipt of the Camera d'Or at Cannes for *The Forsaken Land*, Vithanage's receipt of the Grand Prix at Amiens for *Purahanda Kaluwara* (*Death on a Full Moon Day*, 1999), and the recognition accorded to films of this genre in Asian film festivals testify to their broader appeal. Local audiences blanch at the interior ugliness, the societal corruption and sexual violence, realities that are typically suppressed through censorship in nationalist art forms.

The evolution of Sinhala cinema, like those of India, is closely linked to the project of mid-twentieth century modernity and nationalist ideology that equates women with traditional values.¹² The nation is spatialized as a communal village collective, the voter base for postcolonial politicians. In the case of Sri Lanka, this space is further insulated by its island geography and anthropomorphized as a motherland, domesticating the nation along traditional lines. The sociomythological postcolonial space of a fertile Mother Lanka is reconstructed against a paternalistic and urbane colonial past. Motherhood—the woman's body, its chastity and fecundity, and the territorial sovereignty of the nation are interlinked. Mainstream Sinhala cinema during the nation-building era (1940s–1970s) consequently idealized village life and was critical of urbane values. Within the constraints of this idealization, the entrapment of women in arranged marriages and class barriers to romantic love were persistent critical themes. Self-reflexive, psycho-analytical explorations were few.

While scenes reminiscent of Bollywood musical genres are deployed for romantic fantasies, the Sinhala film is firmly anchored in pristine representations of rivers, rice fields, traditional village huts, rural schools and Buddhist temples. While depicting the largely agrarian geography fairly accurately,

their sentimentalization suppresses the harsher realities of rural poverty and political vulnerability. In comparison, the language of Black Cinema is deconstructive, tearing down the idealized rural ontology. Depression, displacement and the rural impact of wartime poverty have replaced an earlier bucolic fecundity. Anticolonial tensions that vilified the city are no longer evident. Inspired by transnational influences facilitated by French and Japanese patronage, expressive techniques and visual framing have replaced familiar plots or storylines.¹³ These are artistic rather than popular works.

THE TERRORIST

This journey away from nationalistic representations is best expressed in a small coterie of Tamil and Sinhala films, which although conservative, explore critical sociospatial transformations. They instrumentalize female roles in addressing culturally difficult narratives. Lester James Peries, a veteran Sinhala film producer responsible for many investigations of village life, for example, depicts a mother driven to insanity when her soldier-son goes missing in *Ammawarune (Elegy for a Mother)* (2006). Although formulaic village settings recur in his narrative, they are disturbed by affective wartime pathologies.

Award-winning Tamil films by Indian filmmakers Mani Ratnam and Santosh Sivan have also explored the Sri Lankan conflict, focusing on the female combatant as a cultural enigma. Their heroines, whose violent re-inscription or extreme vulnerability constitutes a social critique, are located outside proper domesticity. The woman's insertion into public spaces and military battlegrounds, their politicization and exposure challenges patriarchal norms. The female Black Tiger (LTTE suicide squad cadre) emerges uncannily out of the urban crowd, becoming public through her self-immolation. She abandons traditional familial duties. Motherhood is further problematized.

For example, in the films *Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek)* (2002) and *Theeviravaathi (The Terrorist)* (1997) respectively, Ratnam and Sivan humanize the female protagonist, contrasting her violent liberationist ideology with her private self-sacrifice.¹⁴ Similarly, in *A Peck on the Cheek*, a female refugee, Shyama, abandons her child and joins the separatist cause. The plot is constructed around the child's search for her mother, positing her personal trauma against the more public political cause. In *The Terrorist*, Sivan bases his plot on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi (an attack on a sovereign figure) by a female suicide bomber and complicates the narrative by rendering this main character pregnant. Militant female characters are driven by political action while maternity is constructed as an alternative, pacifist moral ground.

When compared with the representations of chaste wives and loving mothers in the mythologized nation-space of conservative South Asian cinematography, Tamil Eelam's female Black Tigers are a troubling aberration

of feminine martyrdom. A crisis in nationalism is being figured in gendered themes. These are themes that have particular appeal for an anxious Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the target international audience for such Tamil-language releases. Yet, as evident in theatrical portrayals of Antigone, explored next in this chapter, the choice of death over other forms of civic morality, antithetical to the Tamil community's struggle for survival, is often confounding to audiences. The reasons for suicide, whether due to coercion, ideology or desperation trouble these narratives.

In their films, both Ratnam and Sivan reiterate the oft-heard justification from female combatants of stepping in to replace family members lost to the war.¹⁵ Similarly, Antigone's politicization replaces that of her brother. Death, mourning and burial are rites of passage for new recruits, exposing them to the harsh realities of warfare, revenge and eventual death. A culture of ritualized commemoration, burial and martyrdom was integral to LTTE's ideology as graveyards were claimed as homeland territory.¹⁶ As in the Sophoclean tragedy, where the burial rituals of Antigone are defiled on Creon's command, the razing of the LTTE's graveyards during the Sri Lankan army's final advance was an act of territorial erasure.¹⁷ Burial and commemoration played an exaggerated role in the Sri Lankan imagery of the war, as did the woman cadre's acceptance of her inevitable death.

There has been considerable feminist debate on the emancipation of the female Black Tiger as female soldier, mother warrior and tragic martyr to a patriarchal cause. Adele Balasingham (née Adele Ann Wilby), who set up the LTTE's women's wing, famously held these to be aspirational goals.¹⁸ The ambivalent question of the woman's agency or victimization is measured against her instrumental liberatory role.¹⁹ The documentary by Beate Arnestad, *My Daughter the Terrorist* (2007), aptly captures this ambivalence, a characteristic also embodied in the propaganda films of the Truth Tigers, the LTTE's media unit.

ANTIGONE'S AGGRESSION

The noisy dialectic of this uncanny embodiment can be compared with stories of female roles analogous to that of Antigone and Ismene in Greek drama. As articulated in the work of Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Hegel and Lacan, the trope is theorized through both feminism and politics. Sophocles' drama describes the crisis faced by sisters Antigone and Ismene, daughters of the ill-fated Oedipus. Their uncle Creon, ruler of Thebes, is guardian to both sisters. Their brothers Polynices and Eteocles attack the city, and Polynices is killed. Both religious law and kinship duties require his ritual burial so as to ensure safe passage to the underworld. Creon, representing state authority and authoritarian law, forbids the consecration of his enemy. Defying her uncle and the secular law of the emergent ethical order, Antigone buries her brother twice, crossing the threshold between kinship and the state. This crossing,

Judith Butler sums up, is seen by Hegel as the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal rule, by Irigaray as an example of anti-authoritarianism, and by Lacan as a symbol of transcendental desire or the pure ethical act.²⁰ Butler, however, argues against the implied division of kinship and the state, or of divine and secular law. She suggests instead that,

Antigone's power, to the extent that she still wields it for us, has to do with not only how kinship makes its claim within the language of the state but with *the social deformation of both idealized kinship and political sovereignty that emerges as a consequence of her act*.²¹

The recognition of divided loyalties and their imbrication in the delivery of sovereignty, whether for a geographic nation or an ethnic one, makes Antigone's struggle relevant to analyses of the Sri Lankan conflict. Indeed, the history of South Asian nationalism is underwritten by such conflicts between secular and religio-ethnic identities, spatialized in terms of "the home and the world." The dramatic analogy is familiar in Sinhala and Tamil theatre where the classics including Chekov, Shakespeare and Brecht have been translated. Cinematographers such as Vithanage entered cinematography via Sinhala theatre, translating and directing Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1986) and Dario Fo's *Raspberries and Trumpets* (1991).²² Ranjini Obeyesekere writes, "in spite of the anomie and social disruption, the theatre today has become the single most important vehicle of political discourse."²³ A Sinhala translation of *Antigone* was interpreted by the playwright Somalatha Subasinghe in 1993 as social critique, where the familial relationship between uncle and niece, so significant in the matriarchal Sri Lankan family, was explored within the equation of political power.²⁴ The most recent production was *Ade Vage Davasaka "Antigone" (A Day Like Today—Antigone)* by Priyankara Rathnayaka (2010). The importance of the theatre for sociopolitical commentary in a highly censored media environment, and the dependence of audiences on such expositions, is reiterated by Subasinghe. This is also true of Tamil language theatre, where practitioners, notably M. Ramasamy in 1984, have engaged versions of *Antigone* to refer directly to aspects of the Sri Lankan war.

Although the works of Euripides such as the *Trojan Women*, *Electra* or *Iphigenia* are better known for their proto feminist themes, Sophocles' *Antigone* has claimed several feminist intercultural adaptations to foreground varied political and cultural concerns. Helen Foley, noting that adaptations of Greek tragedy are internationally pervasive, identifies the example of "an Alaskan *Yup'ik Antigone* that toured Europe in 1985 [and] included a shaman Tiresias and tribal masks and music that enhanced the heroine's stirring defence of traditional mores."²⁵ Similarly, in 1984, director Suresh Awasthi used Indian theatre techniques in his Tamil interpretation of *Antigone*.²⁶ In their Hindi adaptation of the Brechtian retelling, Anuradha Kapur and Ein Lall's *The Antigone Project* (2003) used this tragedy to bear witness to the Gujarat riots of 2002.²⁷ Whereas post-wwII adaptations of *Antigone* were

“championed for its feminist possibilities,” in the late twentieth century, the play has been identified with struggles against repressive regimes, write Holledge and Tomkins.²⁸ This is evident, they observe, in parallel adaptations on the Indonesian, Sri Lankan and Argentine stage, most famously of *Antigona Furiosa* by Griselda Gambaro. In this intercultural production, the character gives voice to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who responded to the disappearance of over 30,000 citizens at the hands of military juntas.²⁹ Holledge and Tomkins point out that the classical dramatic tradition that is claimed for the exaltation of Western culture becomes available for appropriation and reinterpretation in very different cultural contexts.³⁰ This suggests the salience of discourses of power and resistance across historical periods and the ways in which feminism traverses cultural boundaries. These varied interpretations cross private and public spatial domains moving from resistance to patriarchy towards political resistance.

In its application to the Sri Lankan conflict, Antigone’s bereavement and displacement has come to thematically represent the interior landscapes of exile. Prasanna Ramasamy’s *Thiraikadalodi (Akam)? Territory (mindmines)*, a postmodernist theatre of dance to wordscapes, staged by her forum Paatini and Anita Ratnam’s Arangham Trust in Chennai, invoked the adage of the ancient Pandyan maritime era, “*Thiraikadal odi thiraviyam thedu*” (Cross the seas in search of treasure) to explore the discourse on diaspora.³¹ Yet, its twentieth-century equivalent of exile and hostility is viewed through *akam* or “the inner realm”, here of a woman’s world: of “home” that is defined by conditions of exile and displacement. The relevance of this interpretation for diasporic audiences reverberates in several other versions of *Antigone*, including one by Saqib Deshmukh for the Audio Visual and Performing Arts Centre (AVAPAC) at the Highfields Centre, Leicester. Set in Mankulam, a town in northern Sri Lanka, and in Rafah, a town in Gaza, and reflecting political struggles in Sri Lanka and Palestine, the play, which is about mourning and honoring the dead in the light of recent global violence, was preoccupied with questions like “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?”³² They reiterate Agamben’s theorization of bare life.

The politicization of women has resulted in radical cleavages in female roles across the public and private, social and spatial domains and the familiar theatrical analogy lends itself to cinematic themes. As metaphorical feminine figures, Antigone and Ismene unlock the distinctions between public and private violence. Their conflict is spatial, gendered and political. In the aftermath of armed conflict when civilian casualties are uppermost, Ismene’s claim becomes relevant.

ISMENE’S INERTIA

As represented in these examples, Antigone is the woman who is politicized through circumstance. Her age, traditional upbringing and her familial

responsibilities constrain her until her internal conflict forces her into the public sphere. In contrast, Ismene, the homebound sister, whose sympathies extend beyond its boundaries but whose loyalties are contained by the law, describes the civilian predicament. For example, Helene Klodawsky's *No More Tears Sister* (2004), co-produced with Dharmasena Pathiraja, on the life of Tamil feminist and University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) activist Rajani Thiranagama, is titled after her chapter in *The Broken Palmyra*, a compilation by four senior Jaffna University academics documenting the experience of the Tamils in Jaffna after the 1987 Indian Army intervention to quell the LTTE.³³ The experiences of the Sinhalese women domiciled in border villages fringing this war zone are depicted in the Black Cinema. The public sphere invades and irrevocably alters their private lives.

Ismene's socially ascribed vulnerability and depoliticization, her effective silencing by her sister's politics, is less theorized, whereas Antigone's wilful assumption of male authority has been debated in feminist scholarship.³⁴ Ismene is unwilling to act against Creon but offers to share Antigone's guilt; an offer which is disdainfully rejected by her sister. Their conflict, internalized in the lives of women, is more complex than the easy polemic between civilian and combatant played out in diverse media. These divergent subjectivities are evident in the Sri Lankan civil war context where the female combatant wore battle fatigues, cut her hair short and vowed celibacy. Dushyanti Hoole has pointed out that when increasing numbers of men were lost to the conflict and Tamil civilians came to depend on female militants to perform certain roles, Tamil civilian women were subjected to "cultural" norms of dress and behavior to conspicuously differentiate them from militant cadres.³⁵

The distinction between Ismene and Antigone not only constituted a form of gendering but also demarcated tradition from modernity, and religious law from secular law. In Sri Lanka, the reconstruction of Tamil women's roles similarly broke down the strictures of a caste-based society while simultaneously rescripting female martyrdom. However, the underlying patriarchy of the LTTE limits its theorization for feminism. In contrast, Ismene's inertia offers a range of ethnic subjectivities pertinent to Sri Lanka through which socially divisive militarization can be read. They include the conditions of physical displacement and dispossession, and the attendant psychoses.

ALIENATION AND DISPLACEMENT

The new wave of Sinhalese cinematographers identified by Black Cinema shifted away from triumphant nationalistic themes to bleak alternatives. They spatialized a period of ceasefire when the morality of war was under dispute (2002–2008). They depicted the destruction of the idealized village home. Their focus was on the unhomely spaces of border villages, in the zone in between contesting brands of ethno-nationalism where sporadic

battles, distant from the center, were excessively violent. In such liminal zones, the promise of spatial security projected by nationalism is abandoned. No boundary is sacred, not of the home or of marriage, and violator and violated are entangled in the madness of conflict. Jayasundara is quoted as saying,

If *Forsaken Land* has something to do with my country's history, it is especially through its conveyance of the suspended state of being simultaneously without war and without peace—in between the two. I wanted to capture this strange atmosphere. For me, film making is an ideal vehicle for expression of the mental stress people experience as a result of the emptiness and indecisiveness they feel in their lives. With the film, I wanted to examine emotional isolation in a world where war, peace and god have become abstract notions.³⁶

In this film, Jayasundara sets his scene in a border village in the vicinity of an army camp. The skeleton of a house perched in the middle of a windswept hillside embodies isolation. The householder, Anura, is a homeguard serviceman who is humiliated by his soldier comrades in the opening sequence and later forced to club an unknown captive to death. The women in the household include his unfaithful wife Lata and his unmarried and dependent sister Soma, who is trapped in this isolated outback. A vagrant young girl, Batti, befriends Soma and weaves in and out of her reality, evoking her maternal instincts. The winds that blow through the home illustrate the fleeting and insubstantial loyalties that bind its occupants. The exploitation of the homeguard, the desperation of the sister and the illicit and abandoned sex of the wife suggests how the characters have become unhinged. Soma ultimately acts out this alienation through suicide.

Jayasundara's imagery counters received notions of cultural emplacement through the familial domestic rituals of an ordinary village. Isolation and alienation preface psychological vulnerability. These mythico-cultural limits are written into folk beliefs and practices that have marked the space of gender within the home. But beyond these immediate and private spatial domains, the idealization of the village home is a significant political trope symbolizing the indigenization of cultural values. In an agrarian society, the village, nation and ethnic identity are interlinked. Similarly, riots, bombardment, war and evacuation have emptied out ethnically differentiated spaces at the borders of the conflict, signaling their liminality for the project of nationhood. By subverting the spatial themes that are central to national belonging, Jayasundara exposes how militarization has effaced their inherent values.

Asoka Handagama's approach in *Me Magey Sandai (This Is My Moon, 2000)* is more brutal. His storyline begins with a frightened Tamil woman wandering into a bunker, where a Sinhalese soldier rapes her. Disoriented, she follows him as he deserts the army and makes his way to his home village near the war zone. Through the shared predicament of the deserter,

the abandoned woman, the ethnic other, and his disaffected family, we see the perversity of village life under conditions of military conflict. The inhabitants of the border village are fully imbricated in the economies of war, such as military salaries, compensations and pensions, inaccessible to deserters (and their families). The corruption of the village Buddhist clergy, the avariciousness of family members and the desperate edge of soldiering are exposed. When the woman becomes pregnant, the village offers as little safety as the jungle bunker.

The sexual objectification of the Tamil woman and her rape by other villagers has invited critique.³⁷ The cinematographer instrumentalizes her in expressing broader landscapes of moral degradation, evidenced in the perverse sexual and other economies of war. Similarly, Handagama's cinematography, as with Jayasundara's, focuses on the parched earthy environment of the dry zone—a metaphor for the drying up of human values. Handagama uses an extended horizontal frame, imitating temple frescoes, to convey the sense that the landscape extends beyond the cinema screen and characters walk in or out of it. A fixed frame reiterates this sensation.

All these films explore conditions of alienation outside proper familial sites of belonging. Yet whereas the South Indian films of Ratnam and Sivan depict empowered female combatants, the civilian woman protagonists in Sri Lanka's Black Cinema appear destitute and disempowered. Suicide linked with martyrdom is contrasted with a more desperate suicide.

If Jayasundara and Handagama depend on the static frame, then cinematographer, Prasanna Vithanage's *Ira Madiyama* (*August Sun*, 2003) investigates perpetual spatial transience. Three vignettes are presented, of a Sinhalese woman searching for her lover, a pilot, who is captured by the LTTE; a Sinhalese soldier who visits a brothel during rest and recreation (R&R) at Anuradhapura; and a Muslim boy whose family and village are being expelled by the LTTE. The most compelling story from among these is of the soldier who discovers his sister has become a prostitute. The social life of war, the transformation of the sacred city of Anuradhapura by military presence (Buddhist stupas as a permanent backdrop to sleazy brothels) and the poverty that exposes women to sexual violence is revealed.

GENDER, SPACE AND POLITICS

By bringing the war zone to national audiences, Sri Lanka's Black Cinema boldly conveys the economic and psychic poverty that accompanies militarization. These cinematographers' messages are not explicitly political but work from within the inner conflicts of the disaffected and employ affective spatial metaphors with a similar rigor to the work of their nationalist counterparts. Yet, if the latter produce images that project a nation's fulfilment, these new wave artists expose its failures. Desolate landscapes buffeted by the dry winds of the northeast, holding little hope of redemption,

are familiarized in their works. Women are frequent targets of violence and lack the agency to fight back. The metaphor of Ismene prevails.

Butler has observed that as a figure for politics, Antigone points to “that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed.”³⁸ Ismene, in contrast, is a symbol of social repression activated in numerous ways across the body politic. She is the compliant citizen, but also the compassionate one in Sophocles’ interpretation. Ismene, by maintaining her pre-political position is the vulnerable subject who must necessarily live out her trauma.

So what is achieved by the unrelenting exposition of female entrapment in Sri Lankan Black Cinema? What messages do they bear beyond critiquing state violence against (and implicating) civilians? What have we learned from those troubling spatial transformations presaged in their representations of nation? If narratives of the civil war spatialize violent conditions of liminality, how then might postwar reconstruction be imagined?

Handagama’s first Tamil-language film is *Ini Avan* (*Him, Here After*, 2012), which was selected for ACID Cannes 2012 (Association du Cinéma Indépendant pour sa Diffusion). The storyline is of the difficult social reintegration facing an ex-militant when he returns to his village after the war. It sets the stage for the next thematic phase of Sri Lankan cinema, with explorations across the former ethno-linguistic divide. Yet the realities of present-day reconstruction suggest the expansion of border conditions, of the militarization, unsettlement and damaged sovereignty already explored.

In the aftermath of the war, the cumulative realities of mass human displacements numerically outweigh the relevance of political discourses that justified militarization in the past. In February 2014, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre cited 90,000 living in internal displacement, many of them with host communities, and 480,000 registered as having returned to their place of origin, albeit to devastated landscapes.³⁹ Scholars, activist groups and relief agencies struggle to give them visibility, as evident in the women’s groups and archival projects documented by de Mel.⁴⁰ The work of anthropologist Sharika Thiranagama, *In my Mother’s House*, and artist/art historian, T. Shanaathanan’s *Incomplete Thombu*, are particularly significant for spatializing this human trauma from the minority perspective.⁴¹ The marginal spaces conveyed through the cinematic medium have expanded exponentially in the postwar period, producing complex spatial taxonomies of displacement. Camps, cantonments and welfare villages are central to new ethnically inscribed discourses on sovereignty. Yet, sympathetic efforts at expressing civilian traumas are perpetually dwarfed by public and media controversies stirred by political positions and ethnically-framed antagonisms such as those surrounding Niromi de Soya’s autobiography *Tamil Tigress*.⁴² They reiterate Antigone’s claim.

The pacifist narratives and spatial liminalities identified by Sri Lanka’s Black Cinema are lost in the melee of postwar sentiments: of military triumphalism versus diasporic hostilities. They diminish alternative empathetic

dialogues raised by grounded civilian lobbies and capsize postwar reconciliatory efforts. They divert attention from the abject landscapes produced by mutual militarization, presenting the territory as a tabula rasa for new political habitations. Cultural authority is advanced as the victor's prerogative. Martyred combatants, suicide bombers or soldier-heroes, commemorated in public or in private, in real or virtual space, are attributed with degrees of agency that valorize military action. In contrast, the cumulative social suffering of a war-torn generation is muffled by the cruelty of everyday life. Whereas Antigone's courage is historically immortalized, the pacifist dialectic of Ismene is often marked by silences, mired in the political exigencies of moving on. In the post-2009 period, as fragmented families are housed in resettlement villages even the most private spaces of her former fragile agency are rescripted.

NOTES

1. The play is believed to have been written in or before 441 BCE Robert Fagles, trans., *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays* (New York: Penguin Classics 1984), 35.
2. Neloufer de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications 2007), 221. In reference to a conference on Third Cinema at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 1986, suggesting a new deconstructive approach in cinematography that moved beyond established binaries.
3. *Ibid.*, 227.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen trans (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 1998).
5. Giorgio Agamben, "The Camp as Nomos of the Modern," Daniel Heller-Roazen trans. in *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination*, Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds. (Stanford: Stanford UP 1997), 106–18.
6. de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*, 219, 227.
7. Subash Somachandran, "Sri Lanka: War Widows Left in Poverty," World Socialist Website, October 27, 2010, accessed January 5, 2013, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2010/10/sriw-o27.html. He quotes the Deputy Minister for Women's Affairs and Child Development.
8. "UN rights council approves inquiry into alleged abuses in Sri Lankan war," UN News Centre, March 27, 2014, accessed July 8, 2014, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47447#.U7vc7jZ-cw
9. See, for example, Kingsley M. De Silva, *Sri Lanka and the Defeat of the LTTE*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011 and Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadry Ismail, *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, New York: South Focus Press, 2009.
10. Shamindra Fernando, "Govt. Contemplates Censorship, Jackson Slams *Sulanga Enu Pinisa*," *The Island*, October 5, 2005, from *The Island*, online edition, accessed October 1, 2014, <http://www.island.lk/2005/10/05/features6.html> and Shamindra Fernando, "Sulanga Enu Pinisa: Terrorism, Black Cinema and the Soldier," *The Island*, September 10, 2005.
11. *Death on a Full Moon Day* was banned in July 2000 by cabinet minister Sarath Amunugama, who claimed that it would undermine army morale. The ban was overturned by the Supreme Court on August 2, 2001. Waruna

- Alahakoon, "Sri Lankan Court Orders Release of Banned Film," *World Socialist Web*, September 25, 2001, accessed September 21, 2009, www.wsws.org/articles/2001/mar2001/srif-m20.shtml. See also de Mel, *Militarising Sri Lanka*, 228–241.
12. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* (India: Orient Longman 1998).
 13. For example, Jayasundara, who is influenced by the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, studied at Le Fresnoy and is resident in France.
 14. *The Terrorist* is not distributed in Sri Lanka, but obtained international distribution in 2000 under the patronage of John Malkovich and has gained considerable acclaim.
 15. Dexter Filkins, "Women become Tigers in Civil War," *San Jose Mercury News*, March 19, 2000, 6AA.
 16. Michael Roberts, "Tamil Tiger 'Martyrs': Regenerating Divine Potency?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28 (2005): 493–514.
 17. Tamil Sydney, "Sri Lankan Military Desecrates War Cemeteries in Captured Tamil Capital Kilinochchi," from *Tamilsydney.com*, accessed January 12, 2009, www.tamilsydney.com/content/view/1686/37/
 18. Adele Balasingham, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, Jaffna: Thasan Printers, 1993; Balasingham, *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance* (Mitcham: Fairmax, 2003).
 19. Neloufer de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
 20. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
 21. *Ibid.*, 6.
 22. Prasanna Vithanage, official website, accessed September 21, 2009, www.vithanage.com/html/pv_about.html
 23. Ranjini Obeyesekere, "The Sinhala Theatre of Sri Lanka: A Form of Political Discourse," *TDR The Drama Review* (1988-) 36, No. 2 (1992): 126–37.
 24. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins, *Women's Intercultural Performance* (London: Routledge 2000), 188, fn16 and Holledge Tompkins eds., *Performing Women/Performing Feminisms: Interviews with International Women Playwrights* (St. Lucia, Brisbane: Australian Drama Studies Association Texts, 1997), 50–53.
 25. Helene Foley, "Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy," presidential address, American Philological Association, Washington D.C., 1998, accessed September 2, 2009, www.apaclassics.org/Publications/PresTalks/FOLEY98.html
 26. Suresh Awasthi, "Greek Drama in performance in India," proceedings of "Ancient Greek Drama in the contemporary world" Delphi, June 10–15, 1985, resource folder, 117–23. On: E. Alkazi *Oedipus* (1963), *Trojan Women* (1965); Sombhu Mitra, *Oedipus* (1964); M. Ramasamy, *Antigone* (1984); Kartik Awasthi, *Antigone* (1984).
 27. Gowri Ramnarayan, "Reality through Haunting Grimness," *The Hindu*, January 30, 2004, accessed September 2, 2009, www.thehindu.com/thehindu/fr/2004/01/30/stories/2004013001760600.htm
 28. Holledge and Tompkins, *Women's Intercultural Performance*, 45.
 29. *Ibid.*, 46–47.
 30. *Ibid.*, 43.
 31. Chennaionline, Cityscape, "A Choreo Play about War Violence and Women," July 25, 2002, accessed September 2, 2009, www.archives.chennaionline.com/events/2002/choreo.asp and Kausalya Santhanam, "Theatre of a Different Kind," *The Hindu*, July 29, 2002; Santhanam, "Collage of Inner Emotions." *The Hindu*, August 9, 2002.

32. Saqib Deshmukh, *Antigone*, for the Audio Visual & Performing Arts Centre (AVAPAC) at the Highfields Centre, Leicester, 2009, accessed September 2, 2009, www.highfieldscentre.ac.uk/leicester/antigone.html
33. "‘No More Tears Sister’: Experiences of Women–War of October 1987," in *The Broken Palmyra*, Rajan Hoole et al. (Claremont, CA: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute, 1990), 305–30.
34. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 6.
35. Dushyanthi Hoole, "Suppression of Tamil Women's Narratives in Sri Lanka," *Critical Half* 5, No. 2 (2007): 26–31, 28.
36. *Festival de Cannes, Camera D'Or*, dossier (Paris: International Press 2005), accessed September 21, 2009, www.unlimited-films.net/dossiers/21.pdf
37. Malinda Seneviratne, "Me Mage Sandai: What It Is and Is Not," *Sunday Island*, Colombo, 16 September 16, 2001, p. 13, accessed July 8, 2014, www.island.lk/2001/09/16/featur05.html
38. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 2.
39. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Sri Lanka: Almost Five Years of Peace but Tens of Thousands of War-Displaced Still without Solution," February 4, 2014, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/south-and-south-east-asia/sri-lanka/2014/almost-five-years-of-peace-but-tens-of-thousands-of-war-displaced-still-without-solution>.
40. de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*, 271.
41. Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); T. Shanaathanan, *The Incomplete Thombu* (Sri Lanka: Raking Leaves, 2011).
42. Niromi De Soya, *Tamil Tigress* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

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