



YOUTH CRITICS
PROGRAMME

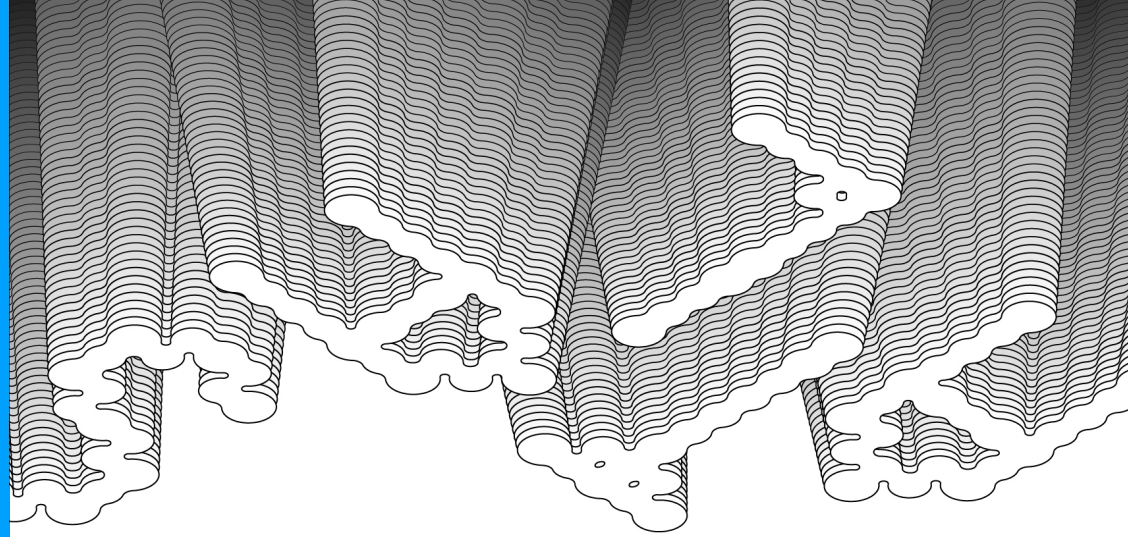
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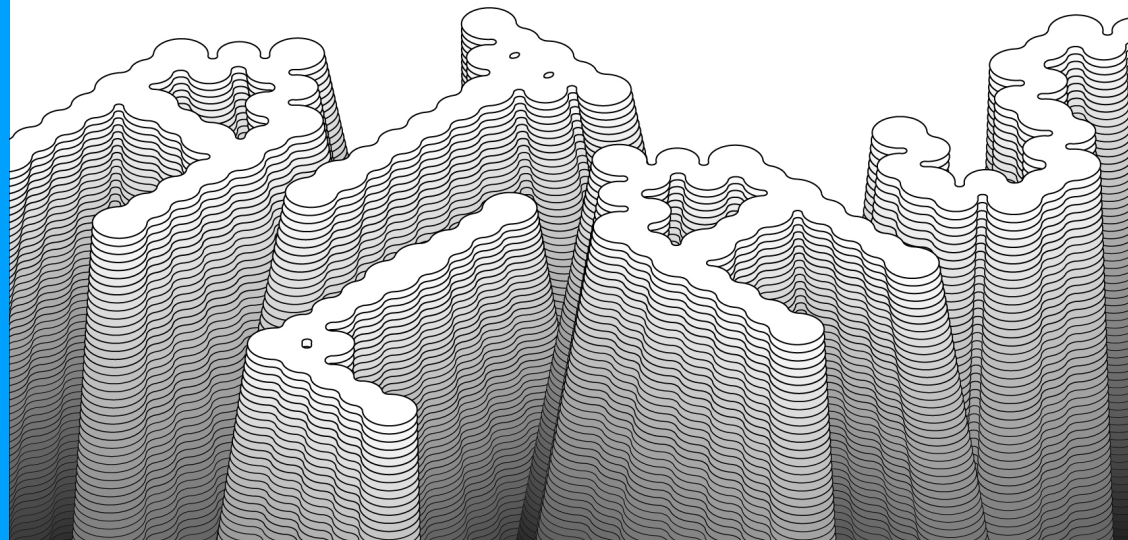
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Atlas



Atlas VOL. 1





Editor's Note

Dear readers,

We live in a world of 280-character flash reviews. You've read them – fiery, funny, fast –, likely written a few, and perhaps even contemplated a secret life as an anonymous internet wit. The allure is undeniable and I am sometimes left to wonder if there is still a place for the practice of long-form film criticism.

My uncertainty was laid to rest by the programming team of the Singapore International Film Festival. With the annual Youth Critics Programme entering its 9th year, the festival commissioned this publication to showcase and celebrate both filmmaking and film writing across Asia.

I am thrilled to present to you the inaugural issue of *Atlas*. Here, each essay is a coordinate on the filmic map, orienting the reader's spectatorial gaze, and pointing them in meaningful analytical directions in the hope that readers may themselves explore and traverse the exciting terrain of Asian cinema.

This first issue features 19 articles written by the 10 promising film critics selected for this year's Youth Critics Programme. Throughout the festival, these young critics engaged in conversations and debates with each other and other festival attendees. Writing in diverse formats – ranging from essays on fighters and resistance, critical reflections on histories of trauma, interviews with film practitioners, and personal letters recalling quiet epiphanies –, they explore film criticism in its most expansive definition. The resulting collection offers something for everyone, whether you are a long-time resident of the cinematic world or a tourist wandering through.



I hope that you will enjoy reading *Atlas* as much as the festival team, the film critics, and I have enjoyed bringing it to you. As the formal practice of film criticism and the film writing community in Singapore continue to grow, there is much to learn – especially from our neighbours across Asia – and more to be excited about.

Thank you for reading. See you at the 34th SGIFF.

Phoebe Pua
Editor & Mentor
Youth Critics Programme 2022

Special thanks to this year's wonderful and generous Youth Critics Programme guest speakers: Patrick Campos from the University of the Philippines Film Institute; Moe Myat May Zarchi, filmmaker and editorial director of Myanmar's 3-ACT Cinema Magazine; Davide Cazzaro, publisher and editor of NANG, and Nabilah Said, playwright, arts writer, and editor of Kontinentalist.





Programme Director's Note

Any healthy film culture needs to be chiseled and polished by robust film criticism. At the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF), how we cultivate thoughtfulness behind a piece of film criticism and what we choose to platform as an institution becomes ever more vital in this process.

After a thorough review of past editions of the Youth Jury and Critics Programme, we have decided to streamline it into the Youth Critics Programme by inculcating a stronger emphasis on writing mentorship and critical thinking in our curriculum. Participants are encouraged to express their opinions through varying textual forms and given the opportunity to respond to a wider remit of our Asian film programming. These efforts over the last few months have since culminated in this inaugural issue of the Youth Critics Programme publication, hereby entitled as *Atlas*.



Under my direction, the festival programming has been envisioned as an inviting terrain, designed with distinct signposts of public interests, and not limited by the usual geographical markers. This post-festival publication becomes an important avenue to collate the reflections from a group of emerging film critics and present a valuable perspective to our world-building exercise. Hence, it is with every hope that the advent of *Atlas* can help the reader and our festival goers navigate what we have proffered with more consideration and clarity.

This issue would not be possible without the dedication of our 10 film critics and the mentor of our 2022's Youth Critics Programme, Phoebe Pua, and I can only express my utmost gratitude to everyone involved for embarking on this journey with SGIFF. I sincerely believe that *Atlas* can serve as not only a snapshot of a year's worth of film conversations, but a generation's interests and aspirations about cinema.

Thong Kay Wee
Programme Director
Singapore International Film Festival 2022



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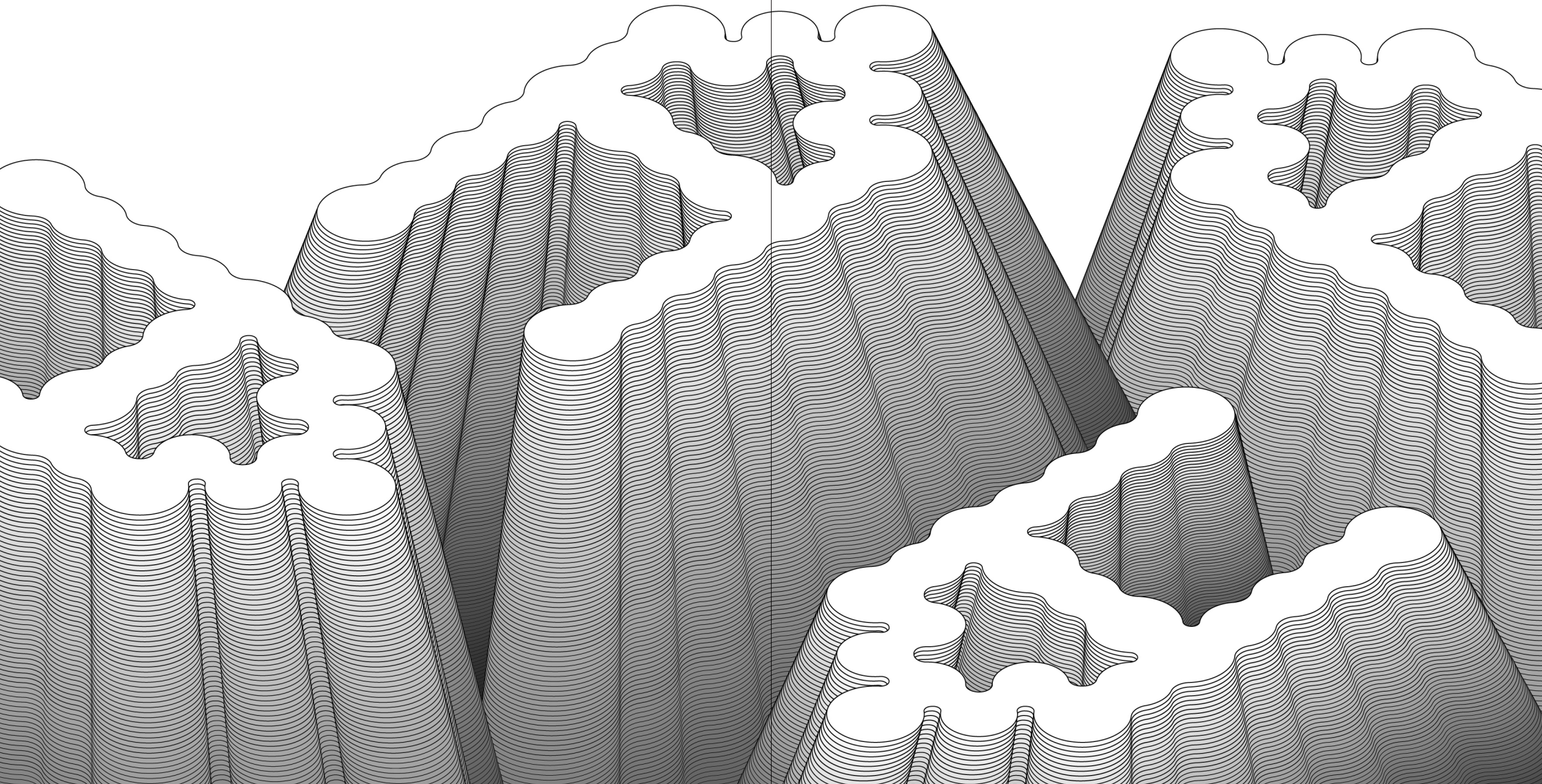
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[A]

Cartographies

of

Resistance



What is Resistance? Reading *Foragers* with *We Don't Dance for Nothing*

BY CHRISTIAN YEO



Foragers, 2022. Image from Jumana Manna.

A Palestinian forager looks straight ahead, staring at the unseen Israeli official who will soon decide what penalties to mete out, and shows no sign of remorse. This scene from Jumana Manna's *Foragers* (2022) has stuck with me since I saw the hybrid documentary at the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival. There is pride in his dangerous belligerence and grace in the stiffening of his backbone: a sign that to simply go on can sometimes be resistance enough.

When one thinks of resistance, it is easy to default to Michel Foucault's understanding of power and resistance as co-constitutive. From this argument – that power can be diffuse, or democratised – we might contour resistance as necessarily deconstructed in the same way. Sherry Ortner, however, argues that one needs a deep understanding of the broader political, cultural, and economic contexts in which cultures of resistance emerge. It is crucial then that *Foragers* is really about the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Manna's hybrid documentary observes the Palestinians' foraging of wild za'atar and akkoub, an age-old cultural practice, despite the threat of fines and imprisonment.

Stefanos Tai's *We Don't Dance for Nothing* offers a different glimpse of resistance from another part of the world. The protagonist of this montage film is H, a Filipino domestic worker who dances in the streets of Hong Kong during her

day off. Here, resistance takes two forms. The first is H's nearly realised desire to leave her employer and breaking away from the late capitalist neocolonial nightmare she is trapped in. The second is the vibrant style of the film in capturing the dance sequences, using a mixture of live action sequences and montages of freeze frames with voiceover dialogue. The high-saturation composition and kinetic expansiveness of the connected stills calls Wong Kar Wai's filmography to mind. These scenes of joy are so unabashed that they are no longer even really disguised by the film's experimental style, outrightly challenging the audience not to witness the exuberance it captures.

The types of resistance being portrayed in both *Foragers* and *We Don't Dance for Nothing* are fundamentally different because of their differing film styles. In *Foragers*, the use of intimate close-ups and slow, lingering shots doesn't flinch from the subject's rawness, providing a real sense of the quotidian. In one scene, a long focal lens captures a woman picking her way gingerly through a field, foraging. In another, a man picks up the fruits of his labour he was forced to throw, and then tucks himself into bed. In coming alongside the central characters, intimacy is palpable.

This style of filmmaking possesses fidelity in abundance, through attention to movement and micro-gestures. The resistance here is a grim, gritty look at the reality of what these Palestinians go through on a daily basis to continue living as they were taught. Seeking to carry on as 'normal' is radical in the upside-down world dictated by Israeli settler colonialism. It is precisely the everyday rituals of walking, or gazing, or plucking herbs for cooking that is most crucial to the intimacy. This perhaps can be read in line with a broader reservoir of Palestinian cultural media, such as the work of the late Mahmoud Darwish, who always foregrounded intimacy and the everyday in his poetry. Perhaps it is trite to say: even the mundane can be resistance.

What, then, of *We Don't Dance for Nothing*? As an observer fully cognisant of his position outside the community being portrayed, Tai walks a tightrope between celebration and romanticisation. Given this balancing act, my reservation is that the resistance of the filmmaking in *We Don't Dance for Nothing* may be part of a project that complements problematisations of late capitalist violence against overseas Filipino workers. Added to this is the high-saturation gloss of the filmmaking. Part of the way in which both filmmakers and audiences are to be accountable to the stories on-

screen is to represent the grit and reality that undergirds these stories. On this view, could the film be an incomplete attempt at resistance?



We Don't Dance for Nothing, 2022. Image from KIPOS Films.

I had the pleasure of chatting with Tai and two members of the cast, Xyza Cada and Miles Sible. Tai shared that, given the surfeit of literature and films concerning the plight of overseas Filipino workers, he thought it would be more fruitful to celebrate the public dancing of Filipino workers as something beautiful. Cada and Sible agreed, sharing that representation didn't necessarily have to take on a specific form in order to qualify as telling a truthful story. Importantly, the exploration of H's coming-of-age and her nascent attraction to women on the protagonist's part was part of this approach, as was the perforation of her fantasy of running away to Rome. On reflection, I found this to be thoughtful.

Another way that Tripp suggests art can do political labour is in creating a shared body of imagery that might challenge established hegemonic narratives. It is incumbent on culture-makers and discursive-interlocutors to problematise and draw attention to systemic issues – in this case, systemic abuse and barely-waged labour – but it may be argued that it is equally a part of our shared creative space to tell stories that refuse an essentialising force. In other words, it is possible to put as much of a spotlight on individual stories

The personal is political, and in both *Foragers* and *We Don't Dance for Nothing* the personal is foregrounded in such a way that resistance (though differently deployed in both films) is paramount and, in fact, in ownership of the capacity to transform.

of people in groups we might consider to be marginalised in one way or other as we might accord to our personal friends or family. It may equally push back against the attendant cultural imaginaries around such workers by attesting to the colourful edges and shades of their humanity, of their womanhood.

What, then, of the speculative final scene of *We Don't Dance for Nothing*, in which the protagonist decides not to run away after all and instead returns to her employer's family out of a loyalty which she earlier eschewed as a sort of internalised subservience? Is this a statement on the prison-like labour system that traps overseas Filipino workers in inhumane conditions? Is it an "I-told-you-so" moment of crystallisation for the protagonist? What do we make of the final sequence with the protagonist lying on the beach, an image that appears simultaneously as to capture despondence, joy, and defeat? Is it a homage to the protagonist's interiority as culminating in her exercising of agency to return to her employer's family? The open-endedness of this final montage provides a sort of sprawling, uneasy mirror to the erstwhile semiotic irresolution present. Yet, it seems to me that this is not a stillborn attempt to deliver resistance. Representation for its own sake is certainly not an a priori good, but celebration might well be. Tai's full-length feature debut shows a measure of rawness – if celebration is to be deliberately privileged over problematisation, it should be foregrounded and made clearer – but joy is not, and should not be, precluded by structural oppression.

Resistance at the level of the stories we tell is a crucial question to investigate. Perhaps not everything is political; a category may not be epistemically useful if it is so broad

as to be ultimately meaningless. But the personal is political, and in both *Foragers* and *We Don't Dance for Nothing*, the personal is foregrounded in such a way that resistance is paramount and, in fact, in ownership of the capacity to transform the oppressions to which we are forced to face up to.



Silence is Profane

BY SASHA HAN



A silence emanates from Thailand's cinemas, and it is not that of an empty theatre. Instead, the striking totality of the silence lies in the growing number of audiences who refuse to respond to the call to rise at the royal anthem, "Sansoen Phra Barami" (English: Glorify His Prestige) and the accompanying larger than life portraits of the King. To speak directly against the crown is to risk severe persecution under *lese-majeste* and seditions laws. But, since 2010, when the courts repealed a legal provision which made it illegal to sit during the royal anthem, cinema has emerged as a site of resistance where dissent can be expressed without prosecution. Yet, the act of looking at the King's portrait displayed on the giant screen is already an act of looking up at the King "enthroned in a position of revered worship". It is through these images intended for veneration that Prapat Jiwarangsan's abstract short film *Parasite Family* (2022) enacts its defacement.

A silence emanates from Thailand's cinemas,
and it is not that of an empty theatre.

Composed of photographic material found in an out-of-business film lab, Jiwarangsan cuts, layers, and consolidates portraits of affluent individuals and families in military uniforms, harkening affiliations to an institution that has enjoyed long-lasting ties with the royal family. The collages are then animated with an artificial intelligence (AI) art generator, bringing to life the parasitic monsters that reside beneath the formal make-up of studio portraiture. Though accompanied by camera shutters and the sound of film rewinding, the short film descends to a deafening silence devoid of human sounds.

If the profane is associated with verbalisation of obscenities to draw attention to the act of blasphemy, Jiwarangsan departs from such conventions out of necessity to avoid prosecution in the same way that audiences in Thailand do. At the closing ceremony of the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival, Jiwarangsan and his producer Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn confirm this, telling me that speaking out must be done indirectly in Thailand. In place of stifled suppression, the convergence of silent Thai audiences is so stark it takes on a density not unlike an anechoic chamber to absorb and contain the influence of the monarchy. No insignificant fact, given the prodigious success of its consolidation of



power.¹ The effect is multitudinous: a presentation of decentralised resistance, one centred on the obfuscation of a singular source in favour of raucous visual entanglement. At the same time, it illuminates the fragility of the monarchy who must hide behind proxies and adjacents – aristocrats comprised of military personnel with ties to the royal family – to protect its image.

Black Box

Though AI art generators and the ethics of its use in art production has ignited ferocious debate over the lack of infrastructure to properly credit creators of the original work, Jiwangsan embraces this instability to obscure the original vandal of the images, crediting both himself and AI in the closing credits. We know nothing about the AI used or its algorithms, making his chosen collaborative tool somewhat of a black box he can easily deflect blame on should the occasion arise. Further, AI art generators generally require text prompts or filter selection to produce an effect, the initial choice here withheld from the audience. In short, the incantations of profanities are conducted in silence; the legibility of the source is several times removed.

If, like the film processing lab where their images were abandoned, the aristocrats were momentarily forgotten and remained silent for their complicity in creating economic disparities, Jiwangsan hauls them from the past into the present. He distorts the purpose of portraits – to assert identity and present an ideal image of oneself to the world – by combining, rearranging and literally carving into the photograph several cut-outs and outlines of profiles across gender, age and attire splicing to form a new type of face complete with eyes. In so doing, he robs them of any singular assertion of identity. Instead of any one particular image being assigned blame for absorbing the wealth of a nation, the multi-layered faces and their many eyes “blink” back at the audience as a reminder that there is an ecosystem of parasites in place that allow for the aberration. The mechanical shutters clicking and its film rewinding lend weight to the idea of a machine that ensures the efficiency of such a system. As the film crescendos with an overwhelming cacophony of machines at work, its sudden descent into complete silence forces a confrontation with the silence, drawing attention to the absence of the human voice.

Frankenstein's Monster

Machines meet their inevitable end for reasons ranging from wear and tear to the gradual phasing out of a particular technology. What Jiwangsan does when he overhauls the trove of abandoned material is address the problem of sustainability by recycling discarded material and repurposing it as feed for the AI art generator. This is particularly resonant in a series of sequences in the middle that involve an increasing frenzy of images in varying degrees of colour inversion being streaked across the screen, bleeding and warping into other faces. On one level, the sheer amount of material ingested and consequently churned out by the AI generator seems more in line with contemporary proliferation of images than the scarcity associated with expensive film processes accessible only to a certain class. More importantly, the excesses of our times reduce the value of the images from a position of the sacred to simple churn, neutralising the prestige of certain images over others.

In the closing sequence of *Parasite Family*, a single face takes centre stage. But the figure convulses, eyes bulging, and any possibility of recognition is quickly disrupted. Its image recedes into its hairline and the orifice of the eye to momentarily take on the image of a monk in meditation then to a figure sporting a short cut, then seems to fade to negative space. The face resets and the features of a baby's face quickly appears to disintegrate into a wrinkly interface whose ghoulish gaze rapidly breaks into a smile so wide its eyes disappear. The final silhouette resembles a face bearing physical features characteristic of royal intermarriage and premature death; an end to lineage and dynasty.

The face is more than animated. Its unrelenting contortion threatens to emerge from the flat silver screen to deeply unsettling effect, the anticipation of what might finally be revealed sustaining the rubbernecking of the spectacle unfolding. Looking up at it in the silence of the cinema, one asks: When the face of the monarchy finally shows itself, what would it look like?

ENDNOTES

- 1 According to reports published in Reuters, in the course of his reign, the King seized control of the Crown Property Bureau, a sovereign wealth fund, to become the richest monarch in the world. He also ordered the release of two army units to his control. See “Assets registered to Thai Crown Property Bureau to be held under king's name” (2018), “Thailand's king takes personal control of two key army units” (2019).

Arnold is a Model Student: Between Privilege and Dissent

BY EPOY DEYTO



Arnold is a Model Student, 2022. Image from Minimal Animal.

Sorayos Prapapan's debut feature *Arnold Is a Model Student* (งานเป็นนักเรียนตัวอย่าง, 2022) is fundamentally about power in its most blatant manifestation: dominance. As in most of Prapapan's short films, the titular protagonist, Arnold (Korndanai Marc Dautzenberg), is a subject under power. In school, Arnold is a favored student who enjoys privileges and replicates the structures of institutional power. But such a character is tricky considering the disquieting social context from which the film has emerged and Prapapan has a dilemma: in a time of unrest, why depict the lives of the privileged?

Prapapan's focus on the privileged in *Arnold Is A Model Students* bring a new dimension to his works. In earlier short films, his protagonists are those who exist at the peripheries of power, like the two chubby schoolboys who struggle with a fitness test in *Fat Boy Never Slim* (2016) or the filmmakers who are consistently denied funding for their projects in *The Dossier of "The Dossier"* (2019). Arnold here is a schoolyard celebrity; he is favored by the headmaster, popular among classmates, and even – or perhaps expectedly – an occasional bully. But as a subject to the school's power, Arnold's privilege is dangerously mixed with vulnerability. The film establishes Arnold's personality with a kind of hero's welcome mounted for him by the school for competing for a mathematics competition in the United States. From this instance, Arnold is depicted as a smug and condescending brat who untowardly treats not just his fellow classmates, but also his teachers.

Prapapan has a dilemma: in a time of unrest, why depict the lives of the privileged?

This character of Arnold might depict him having a great degree of freedom from control. But gaining the favor of the headmaster, who lets Arnold off in several situations, makes it clear that whatever it is that Arnold has done, he has been able to do because he was allowed. The danger of going towards this approach is for the movie to be misunderstood as pandering to the privileged or being unsympathetic to those who are struggling. But repeated depictions

of Arnold being let off the hook in critical situations, both in school and outside, makes clear how much Arnold's actions are products of institutional power's domination over his choices.

At first, Arnold takes pleasure in his status as a school celebrity, but as graduation draws close, the question of what he should do after high school becomes a question which answers are intervened by others. As such, Arnold attempts to rebel against these interventions and undo his status as a model student by working as a fraud. But his attempt at subversion is sublated by his fraudulent boss who offers Arnold a full-time position. It is easy to see from where Arnold stands that resistance is frustrating especially if faced with power beyond his means. This theme, again, is not new for Prapapan. In his earlier works, dominance of power is reflected in different ways but often portrayed in the form of arrested enjoyment. For example, in *Auntie Mam Has Never Had A Passport* (2014), the titular character, Auntie Mam faces the layers of challenges of applying for a passport for the first time, only to be frustrated by the fact that foreigners can get their Thai passports easier than the locals. This recurs in *The Dossier of "The Dossier"* where filmmakers come to the realization that their film pitches are selected on the merit of their projects but the foreign selection committee's perceptions about current political concerns. In these works, power lies on the outside of the characters' present contexts in the sense that they do not have the same capabilities to enact such possibilities for themselves.

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Prapapan illustrates the violent force of such power in two ways: first, by situating Arnold's life at the moment within the 2020-2021 student protests in Thailand, of which documentary footage is used as though being captured from Arnold's

point-of-view, and the dissent of Arnold's classmates against their tyrannical Ethics teacher. Being witness to both does not seem to affect Arnold; he may have seen how violent their school can be, but given that he is favored by the headmaster, he can easily turn his head around. In contrast with *Auntie Mam Has Never Had A Passport* where the film placed blame on the protesters for the stoppage of passport processing, *Arnold is a Model Student* presents what may be Prapapan's more mature take on collective struggle. In Arnold's story, at least, there is a more sympathetic view of the protesters even if the film does not fully represent the gravity and scale of the real violence that Thai protesters faced. In this instance, dissent is given enough space for consideration as a response to power's domination over oneself and not dismissed altogether as futile.

It may be said that *Arnold Is A Model Student* does not present any new or radical perspectives on power. The film often risks becoming an exercise in cynicism smoothed over with "human" moments, such as when Arnold's non-participation of the protest is superseded by the drama of leaving his mother to study abroad. Perhaps some may interpret this as a touching epiphany since Arnold is not being happy in spite of the recognition he receives from his school. But, while the film's resolution situation may not depict the consequences of Arnold's life as a victory, it is not a defeat either. Ultimately, the cycle of power simply replicates itself.

The question now is how one would take this cynicism. There are two possible conclusions: those who come from similar backgrounds as Arnold may empathise with him and see themselves in the emotional aspects of the human drama; on the other hand, those who come from other backgrounds will find him disappointing, or worse, will have never expected much from him in the first place. To find resonance in one of these two conclusion, one must first expose oneself to the contradiction between power and the dissent that it produces. This space for speculation is a space provided for by *Arnold is a Model Student's* non-positionality between subjection and dissent, but it is also its limit. Part of Prapapan's political maturity here is knowing when to stop commenting against those who dissent, while exposing the extent of power's domination by navigating the character of the privileged.

I Didn't Hear No Bell: *Small, Slow but Steady* Triumphs and Missteps in Deaf Representation

BY BENJAMIN YAP



Small, Slow but Steady, 2022. Image from Nagoya Broadcasting Network.

Amidst other recent prominent films about deaf experiences such as the Academy Award Best Picture winner *CODA* (2021) and Criterion-anointed *Sound of Metal* (2019), comes a quiet new contender: *Small, Slow but Steady* (ケイコ目を澄ませて, 2022). The film is the fifth narrative feature by Japanese director Shō Miyake, and is based on the autobiographical book *Makenaide* (2011) written by Keiko Ogasawara, Japan's first deaf female pro-boxer. Miyake approaches the biopic as a slice of life story, setting the film amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Tokyo. Between training sessions and boxing bouts, *Small, Slow But Steady* explores Keiko's life outside the ring and parallels her character's arc with the deteriorating health of her boxing gym's chairman.

When a new film comes onto the scene with a central hearing-impaired character, issues of accurate and sensitive representation naturally arise. Cinema is a medium characterised by two sensory elements, sight and sound, and most filmmakers have unencumbered access to both senses. *Small, Slow But Steady* being directed by and having its deaf protagonist played by hearing persons inherently raises questions as to whether they will approach their subject with sufficient care.

Driven by Miyake's confident directing and lead actress Yukino Keishii's subtle and expressive performance, Miyake's film largely avoids the pitfalls of other films with regard to deaf representation. Eschewing heavy dramatics and the high professional or personal stakes that other boxing films might build, the film's stripped back approach is empathetic and affirming. It generates sympathy for Keiko without sensationalising her deafness.

Miyake is careful to depict Keiko as a boxer who simply happens to be deaf, not one who must specifically overcome the difficulties of deafness in her boxing career. The central conflict for Keiko arises from her sudden wish to quit boxing, a decision she mulls over and finds difficult to discuss with the chairman of the boxing gym. This conflict is, notably, not inherently tied to her deafness. Keiko's interior struggles are presented as universally relatable, irrespective of one's ability to hear. She searches for validation from her mother and wishes to be left alone yet also desires to feel less alone. She embodies the contradictions of being human and is wonderfully realised. Ultimately, she is the underdog all of us want to root for, and Keishii plays her beautifully.

Keiko's interior struggles are presented as universally relatable, irrespective of one's ability to hear.

In reaction shots, Keiko's facial expressions give remarkable access to her underlying emotional states. The moments where her bright smile breaks through her steely exterior are some of the film's most heartwarming moments and when tears well up in her eyes you feel so close to her even without fully knowing what she's thinking. When the film does finally grant access into Keiko's interior life, it comes through in the form of the chairman's wife reading out Keiko's journals in voiceover. While the content of these journals is largely the mundane and methodical records of her daily training, having that direct access is profoundly moving. It is a window into her passion for boxing, and the sense of purpose and belonging it gives her.

When it comes to specifically representing the effects of deafness on Keiko's daily life, Miyake's approach is observant without over-emphasising differences. Keiko is frequently the only hearing-impaired individual in scenes. Thus, the film finds Keiko communicating with others through simple, universally understood hand gestures.

These interactions are presented as mundane, as a fact of Keiko's daily life and how she would operate within a hearing world that does not always cater to those who are hearing-impaired. They are daily difficulties, but not insurmountable obstacles. They are presented as matter-of-factly as the soundless devices Keiko must rely on, such as an alarm clock fan or a blinking light in lieu of a doorbell.

By embracing the need to communicate with non-verbal actions throughout the film, Miyake together with cinematographer Yūta Tsukinaga, and editor Keiko Okawa, allow this plain and understated approach to frame Keiko's boxing training sessions. With longer takes and wider shot choices, training sequences become wonderfully engaging choreographed dances of jabs, hooks, and uppercuts, steadily building percussive rhythm and speed. If the film reminds me of any boxing film, it most resembles Frederick Wiseman's documentary *Boxing Gym* (2010). Miyake builds up a snapshot of a gym and its people, just as Wiseman does, creating a sense of camaraderie among the boxers and trainers. Even if Keiko is the protagonist, she is a crucial part of their community, and it makes her feel less alone. Keiko is neither constrained by or needs to dramatically overcome her deafness, she merely lives from day to day among family and friends. It is in this patient and sensitive portrait that I find *Small, Slow But Steady*, a resounding success in representing a deaf character in a considered manner.

However, *Small, Slow but Steady* still makes small and specific choices that have inadvertently marginalised Keiko. In the few instances that she communicates with others who share her knowledge of Japanese Sign Language (JSL), the film falters and begins to treat this mode of communication as a novelty, consequently othering and objectifying the experience of deafness. While a deaf audience might have different concerns regarding the film's representation, or even none at all, as a hearing individual the effects and implications of these directorial choices nevertheless feel apparent to me.

The most straightforward way to incorporate sign language in a film when one expects it to be mostly watched by hearing audiences is to use subtitles. Subtitles are a simple tool for broadening access to films, most notably in the realm of spoken languages. Filmmakers have lamented that the “one-inch barrier of subtitles”¹ seems to be a deterrent for audiences. Some might say they are less a filmmaker’s choice but rather an aspect of exhibition. In home-video settings for example, subtitles are a viewer’s choice, either out of necessity or preference. In *Small, Slow But Steady* however, Miyake boldly makes the choice of subtitling into a directorial one which foregrounds and complicates the ways JSL is included and decoded in his film.

When Keiko communicates with others in JSL, subtitles are typically used, such as in casual small talk with a co-worker. In using subtitles, JSL is presented as simply another language, much in the same way that I, as a non-Japanese speaker, must use subtitles to understand every line of dialogue. In these instances, JSL is presented on equal terms with the spoken language as simply another mode of communication. If this were the case throughout the film, subtitles would seem unremarkable. However, Miyake throws a peculiar choice into the mix: intertitles.

In the very first instance of JSL in the film, Keiko taps her brother on the shoulder and signs with no accompanying subtitles. Immediately after, the scene cuts to white text over black translating her message. The rest of their conversation cuts between signing and intertitles. The effect is jarring, interrupting the moving image, and emphatically highlights Keiko’s seemingly ‘different’ mode of communication. This is further complicated by a later scene in which Keiko is out to lunch with two friends. Notably, their entire conversation over brunch is signed completely through JSL with the glaring absence of subtitles.

When asked about that choice, Miyake justifies that “if subtitles were added, [he’s] sure that the beauty of the hand movements would be lost.”² Knowing Miyake’s reasons for omitting subtitles for this scene, we can infer his intentions for using intertitles. Intertitles translate sign language asynchronously. We can thus appreciate the expressiveness of JSL without the distraction of subtitles, and still understand what is being communicated after. By omitting subtitles, Miyake wishes for us to focus on the expressiveness of JSL and not on the actual

information being communicated. While I agree that there is beauty to the hand movements of JSL, it is unfortunate that when we see Keiko at her most relaxed is when we least understand her

Unintentionally, Miyake has turned sign language into a novel spectacle.

In the second and final appearance of intertitles, Keiko’s brother tries to get Keiko to open up about her feelings. The choice of intertitles here has some merit if we consider Miyake’s concerns. He wants us to closely observe Keiko’s expressions in one of the few scenes where she opens up about herself, but he still wants us to understand her. It is in line with his observational approach. I find the use of intertitles to be a double-edged choice that only confers a benefit for hearing audiences at the expense of foregrounding Keiko’s deafness. The interruption of the moving image also results in the loss of the reaction shot to make room for intertitles. By pushing focus onto sign language, we lose sight of how Keiko perceives and reacts to her brother’s questions. The benefit is detrimental, especially since subtitles would have sufficed.

Unintentionally, Miyake has turned sign language into a novel spectacle. By focusing only on the visual beauty of sign-language movements, it objectifies the method that signing individuals communicate with one another and robs Keiko and her hearing-impaired friends from being understood on their terms. Who says sign-language cannot be beautiful while being understood? Here, it seems that Miyake is equally afraid of the one-inch barrier, and his fear has resulted in othering the experiences of the deaf.

Furthermore, the scene which most betrays the curtailed limitations of deaf representation in *Small, Slow But Steady* is a seemingly minor moment between Keiko and the chairman. In an early scene speaking with a reporter, the chairman mentions the first time he heard Keiko’s voice out loud is her verbally saying “yes” to wanting to go pro. This sets up



a payoff moment in a later conversation where the chairman implores Keiko to rediscover her will to fight in the ring. She mutters, “yes.” He tells her to say it again, louder.

Using Keiko’s speaking voice for the only time in the film in a critical scene that solidifies the bond between mentor and student is suspect. It implies that audibly asserting herself is somehow a more emphatic expression on Keiko’s part compared to her non-verbal communication. To set up a motif of Keiko’s determination with her infrequent participation in a hearing world feels insensitive when we have seen it in her training, in her fights, and in the ways she reaches out to the world around her in spite of her introverted nature.

Despite my misgivings on some of the film’s choices, *Small, Slow but Steady* remains, as a whole, a remarkably well-made film. Miyake’s film tells Keiko’s story with considerable grace by avoiding sensationalism, prioritising Keiko’s perspective, and giving her a rich interior life. While it may have been more enriching for the film to have cast a deaf actor in the lead role in terms of representation, Miyake’s empathetic approach is still commendable and quietly generates considerable emotional power. Coupled with Keishii’s tender portrayal of Keiko, now that’s still a heck of a one-two punch.

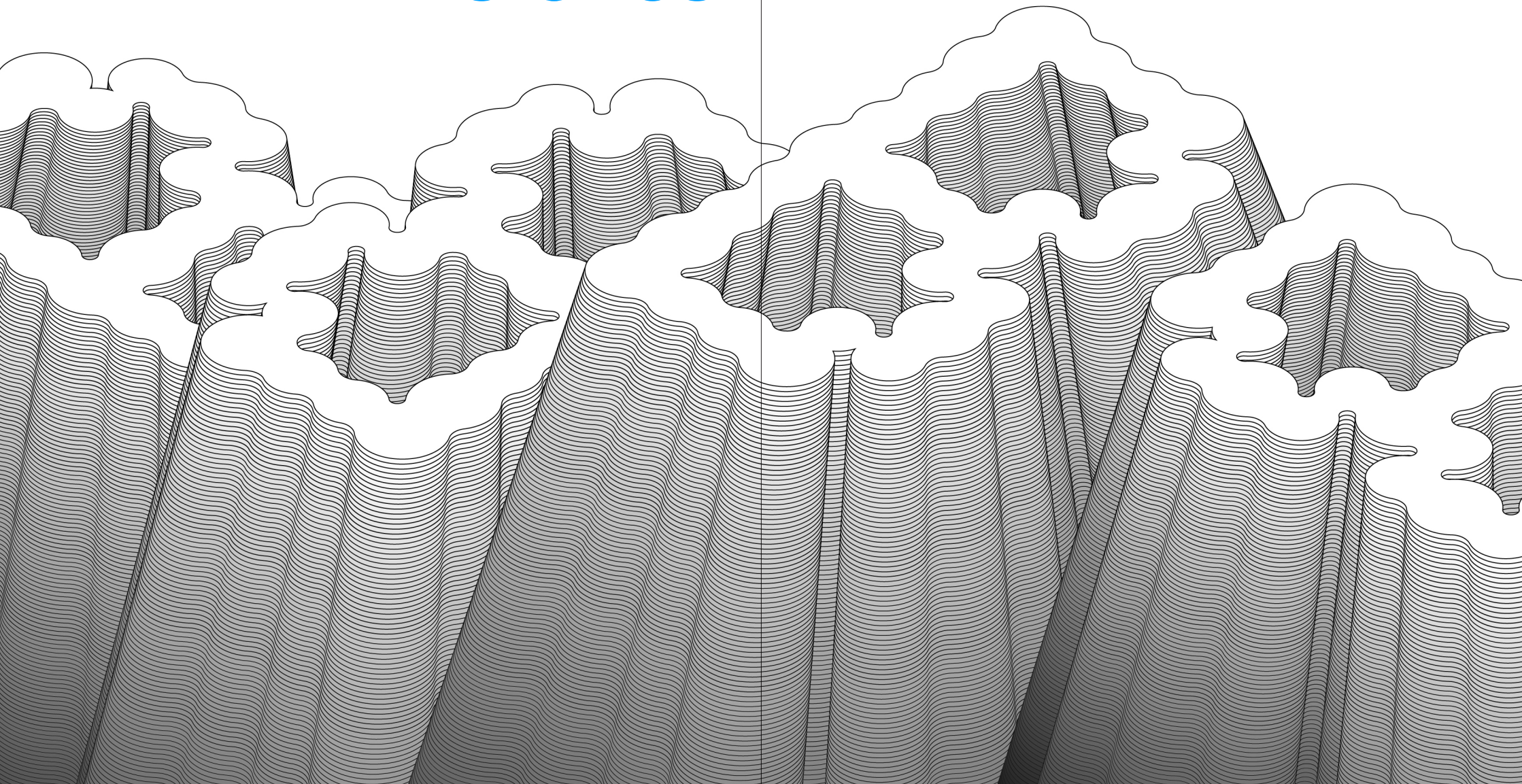
ENDNOTES

- 1 As alluded to by director Bong Joon-ho in his acceptance speech for *Parasite*’s Best Picture win at the 92nd Academy Awards.
- 2 From an interview with Shō Miyake at the 2022 Cinema Jove International Film Festival.



[B] Minor Histories

Major Trauma of





Her Sea and Her Memory

BY SENG SAVUNTHARA



In the sea, we find memories long buried: undredged tales that have either withered away by constant ebbing or waged forward through the archaeological reprisal of new witnesses. Notwithstanding, the sea is the Other, a history fragment and a critical endpoint through which Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi's *Into the Violet Belly* emerges. Buoyed by her affinity to the maternal and with her mother, Thuy-Han unearths history through microcosmic digital seams and the relationships between datapoints and memories. By drawing from the fear of the horizonless, the film sneaks us into the intersection of human and film memory through poetic rhetoric as elusive as its form.

Thuy-Han unearths history through microcosmic digital seams and the relationships between datapoints and memories.

The water is cold, its belly is warm – Thuy-Han transports us out the nether via the tactile fervor of an endangered flight. During the Vietnam War, Thuyen Hoa, her mother, escaped the country on a perilous sea journey and migrated to Germany. We are enabled only to hear fragments, speech reenactments, and a mental excursion to the mythical land of the Dragon Prince conjured by the Zen master, Thích Nhất Hạnh. There is an unbound freedom here to a recollection tapping into sprawling tangents, the aural confluence of non-diegetic soundscape and voices over the sea. By ways of a mutually enhancing interplay between a mother and daughter self-defining memories, it heralds a resonance distinct from what the hegemonic narrative in film has long instilled. As such, our perception of her survival registers an authentic history clustered by unspoken traumas, and by extension, we circumvent the contrivances used to undermine the self and the history of trauma formulated by the Other.

The virtuality and the tangibility of memories, instrumentalized by emotional recollections, foster a metaphor that remediates the temporal in-betweens. Memory as such depends on the gap between the materiality of the mother's memory composites and the immateriality of the child's recuperative power. In the film





Thuy-Han credits her mother as a collaborator, embedding her in the nostalgia of collective labor of listening, remembrance and solace. She internalizes an outlaw emotion the same way a child probes a weeping mother. The film embraces the impermanence of their grief and the equilibrium of their kinship. In designating her mother as co-author, Thuy-Han recalibrates her working relationships not just between her mother, but also her film materials, sea migration and the history of war-torn Vietnam. She is a crucial witness that pairs as a vessel of recollection for her mother.

The film opens how a homebound viewer would begin their film-watching ritual: by pressing play. Flickering lights from the projector and the impassive sphere frame the scene. Cinched by four corners of the laptop screen, the sea glides glacially, presenting the waves as remote and alien as they collapse over one another. As spectators, we are cognitively aware of watching something that is watched by someone else. Then, over this self-conscious cybertronic *weltschmerz*, a young, disembodied voice tells us that she sympathizes with someone over the loss of stolen hard drives containing materials for a graduation project – a familiar tragedy to many. The deixis of “she” is the daughter, voiced by herself in lieu of the logical utterance of her mother. By proxy, Thuy-Han speaks for herself through the allusions to the maternal image, similar to the deconstructive provocation raised by Gayatri Spivak that “It’s not about critical distance, but intimate distance.”

Conflicts found in diasporic family create a sort of intergenerational antagonism, the kind of swift demotion by the parent of the child’s hardship. Thuy-Han consoles personal loss by performing as her mother. Her performative memory sublimates their current status to a single particle. Even though the hardships she experienced when fleeing war far outweighs Thuy-Han’s loss of her hard drives, the intention is not to dismiss the child’s struggle. Yet how a possibility of mediation is communicated, affected by the tension, is always muddled, near lost. Thuy-Han seeks consolation through digital osmosis, exemplary in her creation of a digital memory, by way of embalming the past from a new film via a new hard drive. Her now-lost film and the expulsion of her mother from her homeland are terminated dreams that have persisted long enough to be recovered and reconciled in the present. The aria-adaptation from Quỳên Nguyễn-Hoàng’s poem, “Learning Late Letters”, haunts the piece as follows:



*“Die falling. Die swooning.
Die tense. Die loose.
Die now. Die spinning.
Die quashed. Die quelled.”*

To that effect, *Into the Violet Belly* forms an erratic link between imperfect screens, compounded by eroding textures in the missing transferences of image. In other words, the distorted image is a palimpsest and what we are witnessing is the lost film itself, the invisible trace of the stolen hard drives.

the distorted image is a palimpsest and
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Through privileging the abstractions of technology and the poetic constructions of epistemes, Thuy-Han eschews documentary categorizations, which has long been polemicized by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Reversing the dominant discourse on categorizations Minh-ha stipulated in FRIEZE interview that documentary or film art, the life and words therein, compose “fluid, interacting movements.” Thuy-Han does not intellectualize her inner being, the space between herself and unbounded vastness of the unknown. In a solemn, deeply poetic and diaristic film, Derek Jarman asks, “what need of so much news from abroad while all that concerns either life or death is all transacting and at work within me.” Thuy-Han is no stranger to Jarman-blue and movements that imbibe the schema of her film constructions since “*To Take Roots Among the Stars*” to “*Syncretism, movement I*”.

The abreaction provided by the form of film-poems is Thuy-Han’s credo. It spurs intersubjective queries – “What are your thoughts when you look at this footage?” Thuy-Han raises a question that reorients not only her mother, but also us to a visual duel. **Do I see what the mother sees?** Similar to the beginning where things fall short of completion, we stand witness to something unbearably real. It is a kind of eulogy taking place inside a post-production studio.





Into the Violet Belly, 2022. Image from Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi.

“How did you feel when you were underwater?” is poised for an answer. Here the question becomes a clear impetus to engage her mother largely for the admixture of storytelling presence and living loss; blur and blue; the digital sea and the sea her mother jumped in and could not swim through. In a quandary, the alternative to stay aboard was a sexual assault befalling her. Viewing the image of the sea on screen, the mother ruminates, “I chose death, but in fact, by jumping, I was searching for life.” This wound of history emboldens their harmony through the acknowledgement of loss solidifying loss and connects a mother-to-daughter-to-mother tissue of solace ad infinitum.

The mother’s memory anchors the memory of the film. Oral recollection on film is analogous to a double exposure – the thing over itself for itself. *Into the Violet Belly* functions similarly to how memory permeates the psyche of a film-poem. Thuy-Han disallows the film to even feel like a film. By extension of including the directorial “1, 2, 3” or “wait seconds before you speak” imperatives, she constructs a film memory based on deconstruction. One evades solipsism from such a complex centering and exposes the gaps between human and animal,



the living and the supposed dead and the symbiosis of these visual bonds. Thus, the film resists us. It eludes our memory and our conception of memory. It germinates exclusive of us. The full definition, regardless of how we name or define it, lay latent for all to observe. We are thrust once too often in the twenty-minute cyberscape. Digital memory disperses, fragments and lives through the crevice of real memories. Seas of the past and seas on our screen do not co-exist so much as one plane of existence lives through the other. The unused prose from Quỳên Nguyễn-Hoàng’s hybrid-poem testifies to this:

“The letters of the dead burn me, urge me to speak to them, speak them, have them speak me, even in my sleep”.

We must not mistake a rebirth for a genesis. Such is the artistic necessity, emblematic of the filmic gestalt of the co-directorship. Thuyen Hoa is the mother and Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi is her daughter. The breast of the violet nestles the luminescence that orients our focus amid chaos. The real test for how to grapple with history is through the prism of the unseen.





To Forget Nobody: The Body as Counter- archive

BY JOLIE FAN



With every war, there is a litany of photographs and footage that have changed, stunned, and shocked the world. Stored in the archives and often re-employed in contemporary films as anti-war rhetoric in the global public consciousness, they offer a potent entry point into the tangled constructions of national memory and trauma. Yet, these images are far from innocent in their portrayal of truth, perception, and representation. In her collection of essays *On Photography*, Susan Sontag allegorizes the camera to that of a gun, every shutter performing “a sublimated murder – a soft murder”.¹ In other words, the recorded body in war, regardless of consent, is disseminated, reduced, and abstracted to representations and symbols of warfare. The calamitous body on-screen becomes sensationalised as “living room sights and sounds”.²

In Thai artist-filmmaker Chanasorn Chaikitiporn’s docufiction short *All The Things You Leave Behind* (2022) and Vietnamese moving image artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen’s experimental feature *The Unburied Sounds of A Troubled Horizon* (2022), scarred bodies and landscapes remind the audience of the very lived reality behind the abstraction of pictures, moving image and news bulletins in state-sponsored archives. Through creatively reconfiguring archival materials, objects, oral history, and acoustic traditions of sound therapy, both films challenge institutionalized forms of memory dictated by national archives. They unearth the imperialistic tendencies that erase catastrophic memories of war imposed on South-east Asia and render experiences of profound devastation marginalized, distanced, and thereby forgotten.

both narratives question the “forgetfulness” of the archive but differ in their responses to their nation’s past and present-day milieu.

Screened as a double bill at the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival, *All The Things and Unburied Sounds* can be read as a shot/reverse shot of contrasting potentialities. Structured as a dialogue between one Southeast Asian film to another, both narratives question the “forgetfulness” of the archive but differ in their responses to their nation’s past and present-day milieu. One dismantles to



reveal while the other builds to heal. The first materially deconstructs the hidden implications of U.S. imperialism on Thailand's national psyche and interrogates the credibility of official archives. The second repairs and reads as a palliative to the scars of Quang Tri's war-stricken and heavily-bombed landscape, exploring how reparative and reconciliatory rituals arise even from death and destruction – the act of loving and attending to an object that is determined to destroy humanity.

Primarily operating in moving image and contemporary art, Chaikitiporn and Nguyen intersect the medium of film with experiments of sound, sculpture, and collage to accentuate the abundance of visual and audio data not easily contained or controlled by the archive, and as such, exist as *counter*-archives. Tying together the films' disparate histories, timelines, and experimental form, an overarching question permeates my analysis of the double bill: To what extent does the body in these two films make ingress into the dialogue of war as counter-archives? Even though the films speak for themselves in isolation, the choice to pair them as a double feature pries open unexpected points of contact and fission in their critique of archival truth and contradiction of master narratives.



Three Thai figures huddled around timber logs.
All The Things We Leave Behind, 2022. Image from *We Wide Wave Productions*.

The Crisis of Historical Amnesia: The 'Forgetfulness' of the Archive

The Vietnam War was a transnational crisis that directly and heavily involved Thailand and Vietnam, among many others. National histories and memories were collectively drawn and redrawn, occupied and contested, disputed and defended, forgotten and remembered. In a concerted effort to reveal the archive's will to forget, *All the Things* confronts how Western and national state archives reify imperialistic power and efface alternative narratives while reinforcing state-based narratives. *Unburied Sounds*, in a different orbit, charts the archive's forgetfulness within an individual's traumatised psyche as an allegory to a collective nation's desire to forget.

All The Things begins with an excerpt of a report on U.S. foreign aid and communist infiltration in Thailand, originally narrated by American newsmen for ABC Scope's documentary *Thailand, Counterattack* (1967) that was broadcasted daily on national satellite television throughout the mid-to-late 1960s for the American public.³ Two English-speaking androids, whose robotic vocal inflexions and cadence betray their un-humanness, replaces the original voice-overs on the aerial shots of Bangkok's busy highways, skyscrapers, and traditional palaces. Artificially generated voiceovers are crucial in Chaikitiporn's critique of the archive's objectivity – the impersonal disembodied commentators ostensibly act as neutral observers, but in many instances reflect a pro-American and anti-communist zeitgeist. The archival footage of Bangkok – first used by ABC News, then recycled and cut by Chaikitiporn – evoke Orientalist travelogues in their romantic and homogenizing descriptions of Thailand, couching the capital city as the "Venice of the East" and occluding visibility to the underdeveloped countrysides. Evidently, archival footage are not merely traces of the past but selections intended to shape fascination for an international audience.

In this vein, Chaikitiporn demonstrates that the state-sponsored archives preserve as much as they destroy cultural knowledge and memory by privileging what is stored and discarded. Through collecting records of native lands and imposing Western epistemologies of interpretation, the archive is already a reconstruction, documenting memory and consciousness from a privileged perspective while forgetting the rest.⁴ Chaikitiporn further counters the archival instinct and its claim to truth by drawing attention to the image as an alterable and malleable

object. By stripping source images taken from the U.S. archive to their negatives, manipulating their scale and proportions, and repeatedly superimposing scanned documents over one another, the resulting montage is unintelligible, unidentifiable, and visually confusing. The montage's counter-archival potential, as asserted by Lebanese film academic Paula Amad, lies in the "endless chronicle [of] unmanageable detail, unhealthy curiosity and a pathological surfeit of memory".⁵ As such, the artist's montage is less invested in the archival image's representational totality and source integrity than its mnemonic capability to be obscured and obfuscated. The audience is deprived of an orderly record of reality. Chaikitiporn's multi-sensorial bricolage, therefore, subverts the state archive's myth of totality and integrity, and foregrounds its ability to obliviate.

If *All The Things* functions as an excavation site that brings to the fore bodies lost, dispossessed, and forgotten, *Unburied Sounds* serves as a site of construction that attempts to suture past trauma and present recovery, suffering and healing, amnesia and remembrance.

Working as a filmmaker and sculptor, Nguyễn's practice explores how corporeal bodies and material objects retain the agency to reconstruct buried memories and facilitate healing from a traumatic past. Nguyễn grasped the potential of the found object as means of plumbing the lingering ruptures of the Vietnam War on Vietnamese landscapes and bodies. Quảng Trị, having been one of the most heavily bombed areas during the Vietnam War, takes the centre stage in *Unburied Sounds*. This lethal landscape harbours tens and thousands of unexploded ordnance (UXO), mines and bombs and continues to devastate present-day Vietnamese lives. For the film's fiercely independent protagonist Nguyệt, these excavated bombs and mines take on a new life and functionality in her scrapyard. She turns towards these objects to generate new ways of thinking through historical events, private history and public memory. Previously weapons of death and destruction, the artillery shells now shape Nguyệt's wire-frame sculptures, pots and everyday paraphernalia. Yet, this process causes immense pain for Nguyệt's mother who wishes to forget the effects of war and the objects of violence that perpetuate it:

"We're surrounded by objects of death. Unbearable, useless dead objects. And you have the nerve to use those bombs to make your strange, cursed, voodoo concoctions. They were buried deep, and you hang them up to spite me,"

For Nguyệt's mother beleaguered by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), reminders of the past thwarts her desire to forget. Memories of pain and loss have

crippled her ability to leave her place of residence, a result of war-time trauma which surely resonates with veterans, families, and refugees from Vietnam and elsewhere. Once again, the past continues to haunt present bodies and psyches in the Vietnamese collective imagination.



Nguyệt's mother listens to the reverberations of her daughter's sculptures.
The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon, 2022. Image from Tuan Andrew Nguyen.

The Body's Refusal to Forget

Archives may forget but bodies do not – even in its absence or incompleteness. In face of a mnemonic impulse to remember, the connective tissue between the double feature is the body's unwillingness to forget – holding on to indelible physical and psychological scars left behind in the wake of war. Just as how one archive's collection can respond to, intersect with, and contradict another archive's repository, screening *All the Things* before *Unburied Sounds* reflects the pluralistic and collaborative nature of creatively employing found materials and ready-mades in broaching difficult histories and collective memories. Instead of treating each film as a closed monolithic response to national trauma, the double bill demonstrates two different interpretations of the body as counter-archive and opens up the conversation to regional reorientations of shared post-war realities between Thailand and Vietnam.

Much like *All the Things* that recycle and manipulate archival fragments, *Unburied Sounds* accentuate the ready-made's aesthetic qualia such as surface reflection, sound and acoustics to demonstrate the body's psychological resilience and refusal to be destroyed. Nguyệt's wireframe artwork made from bombshells evokes the kinetic mobile sculptures of American modern artist Alexander Calder who was a staunch

activist for the anti-war movement in the 1960s. Departing from Calder's emphasis on movement by amplifying the element of sound, Nguyệt discovers the recuperative acoustics emitted by her refashioned sculptures, tuned to a frequency that heals those struggling with PTSD. Here, the present collides with the past, turning the belatedness of healing into the becomingness of a new body. The ringing of metal from an UXO ironically restores Nguyệt's convalescent mother to better health. As the camera frames her frail and fragile figure in front of the coruscating metal plates, the destructive origins of Nguyệt's wireframe begin to fade.

The film's wounded bodies exemplified by bomb survivor Hồ Văn Lai, Quang Tri's monks and Nguyệt's mother pulses with counter-archival potential infused with stories and oral histories beyond official archived narratives. Like Chaikitiporn, Nguyen addresses the archive's amnesic will to forget and the body's resistance to be forgotten. Cultural theorist Caterina Albano writes on the structural fracture between collective memory and the archive, "The archive – not unlike the unconscious – is governed by loss, by something that has been forgotten but whose amnesia is however haunting".⁶ Indeed, Nguyen's bodies unearth invisible experiences, suppressed by unspeakable loss and devastation. Having survived a cluster munition, Văn Lai's scarred body represents Vietnamese resilience in the face of a troubled past. Most of all, they embody a counter-archival instinct that refuse to be left behind against dominant strands of history, reifying its unburied locus ossified in national memory.

The same haunting visibility permeates Chaikitiporn's *All the Things*. Thai bodies, faces and landscapes are obscured and muted in the film's collage. Insofar as bodies do appear in the profilmic space, they often assume a ghoulish countenance that underscores their anonymity and unknowability. Herein, the absence of body precludes the absence of voice. The subtitles read, "I can't remember who I am, my face or even my voice ... My body is gone. My voice is gone. My name is gone". In response to the gradual effacement of the massacre from national memory, Chaikitiporn, like Nguyen, turns to oral history as a form of countering and refusing the archive's status as indexical evidence.

Communicating with the spectral resurrection of a victim at the Thammasat University on 6 October 1976, the series of photographs Chaikitiporn selects and leaves unaltered are Thai citizens of different occupations, hand outstretched

pointing at varied objects: police officers, civilians, photographers, and journalists. Yet, none of them depicts the university's wounded students or the military's brutality in question. The invisibility of these bodies signifies the nation's amnesia – a condition encouraged by official narratives. Did the archive forget? Has the massacre been omitted from the archives as it has from the national curriculum?

Confronting his nation's past that has been heavily suppressed by bringing to the surface buried bodies, Chaikitiporn probes at the layers of his country's violent past to reimagine what remains in the present and to rescue these victim's legacies from the failure of cultural memory. In the intervening four decades since 1976, graphic representations of the Thammasat University killings in films and newspapers have been censored and photographs of hanged bodies were seized. Notably, Chaikitiporn's appropriation of government documents on October 6 together with the contrapuntal narration forces audiences to contend with conflicting versions of the same events. Chaikitiporn's decision to employ muted bodies, voices, and fragments of archival material in his docu-fiction resembles what Hal Foster calls in his essay *An Archival Impulse*, "obscure traces... unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again".⁷



An anonymous hand pointing at the back of someone's head.
All The Things We Leave Behind, 2022. Image from We Wide Wave Productions.



An (Counter-)Archival Impulse

Archives, as infrastructures of power and knowledge production in Foucauldian construct, perpetuate hegemonic histories. At the same time, the archival document provides a wellspring of resources and methods for engaging the past with contemporary approaches and new epistemological processes.

All The Things and Unburied Sounds seeks to do just that – re-surfacing displaced or dispossessed historical information and contending the authority of the past. Through extractions of witness accounts, found objects, oral history, and sound design, both artists gravitate towards disclosing an alternative knowledge and counter-memory against the contested history dominated by Western archives or repressed by state-sanctioned archives. Despite their commitment to revealing the mnemonic traces of marginalized figures, the pair of films operate on two kinds of experimental practice that, when screened in a double feature, becomes apparent. Chaikitiporn’s multi-sensorial montage challenges the state archive’s myth of totality and truth. Nguyen’s recuperative drama spotlights resilient bodies of memory that survive the failure of archival memory.

To this end, against the archival tendency to taxonomize and totalize, the counter-archival in these two films serves as a crucial act of remembrance and refusal, bridging the past and the present, the event and the image, the buried and the unburied.



ENDNOTES

1. Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Vol. 48. Macmillan, 2001.
2. Ibid.
3. The ABC Scope documentary can be found on YouTube, stored within the archives of the U.S. National Security Council.
4. Dominick LaCapra warns of the dangers of seeing “archives as fetish” in which the archive substitutes the fabric of reality of past events “which is ‘always already’ lost for the historian” and cannot provide transparent access to the historic event. See LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Criticism*. Cornell University Press, 1985.
5. Amad, Paula. *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn’s Archives de la Plan te*. Columbia University Press, 2010.
6. Albano, Caterina. *Memory, forgetting and the moving image*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.
7. Foster, Hal. “An archival impulse.” *October 110* (2004): 3-22.





Lost Without a Home

BY RYAN-ASHLEIGH BOEY



Fix Anything, 2022. Image from ever rolling films.

Lê Liêm Viên's *Fix Anything* (*Gì CŨNG SỬA*, 2022) is, at its core, a film powered by cognition, re-cognition, and recognition, a film that tickles and fibs only to poke and prod, to tug at one's heartstrings, and, in the extremity of its generic, affective, and narrative dithering, a film that raises eyebrows. What has *bánh mì* to do with the ability to locate home? Is *Fix Anything* ultimately a comedy intended to entertain or is that understanding of the film simply the tip of the proverbial interpretive iceberg? What place has the ruminative interrogative "home?" in a film wrought from ludicrous lawbreaking machinations and zany characters? If not harass audiences, these questions must at least linger at the back of their minds, compelling them to revisit the film's (re)presentation of certain visual objects, including the van, the roadside scrawls, and, perhaps, most of all, the memory-erasing contraption.

If all things should come to the question of "home", perhaps, *Fix Anything* figures as an attempt to identify the national trauma afflicting a post-war Vietnam, and an attendant longing for that which feels safe, that which comforts, and, certainly – if Madan Sarup is right in claiming that the concept of home is associated with "the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story others tell of us" – a longing for identity and rootedness.¹ Accordingly, *Fix Anything* might offer an outlook on the feasibility of ever gratifying such a longing for "home", though what this outlook ultimately





constitutes remains to be discovered. For sure, given the ambiguity of the film's conclusion, audiences might find themselves in disagreement over what *Fix Anything* essentially intimates about the way ahead for a post-war Vietnam. As regards resolving this disagreement, the remark "I do want to know what happens next"², which Lê had rendered in a cheeky fashion, not incommensurate with his playful, fun-loving disposition, might seem of little use, but it does gesture towards one thing – that is, an open-endedness that legitimises a whole gamut of interpretations to the film. My interpretation of *Fix Anything* consists in decoding the (at least mildly) ironic statement it stakes about the unfixable "home" – a fractured concept that has long since become the ghost of a distant pre-war past.

the unfixable "home" – a fractured
concept that has long since become the
ghost of a distant pre-war past

Cognition, or A Tale of Two *Bánh Mì* Thieves

As *Fix Anything* opens, it pulls its audiences in with jaunty comedy. The peculiar mad-scientist-esque presence of an eccentrically-mannered, large-lobed character, sporting a pair of imposing steampunk goggles, against an otherwise dishevelled dress, stands as one of the film's highlights. Played by the oft-jocular Lê Hồng Giang – the late television comedian endearingly known among local audiences as Giang Còi (Skinny Giang) – this character becomes an incontrovertible figuration of such comedy. Pithy jokes aside, *Fix Anything's* employment of upbeat music accompaniment renders its presentation of thievery undoubtedly facetious. It is especially worth mentioning that the line "It is just like a hangover, son" is made soon after a bright, funky track kicks in at the close of the *bánh-mì* thieving sequence. This pairing creates a sort of marriage between diegetic dialogue and non-diegetic music that draws out the flippancy of the father's remark in order to compound the humour produced at the end of the scene.

As *Fix Anything* leans into an application of slapstick comedy in its rising action, this humour is only intensified. Emerg-



ing, *inter alia*, in the first altercation between the father and the burly landlord, slapstick comedy renders the abduction scene as hilarious as it is panic-inducing. From the perturbed expression coming over Minh's face, when he notices his father surreptitiously inching up behind the landlord, to his father's breathless plea for aid in a half-baked attempt to subdue the said landlord with nothing but a thin piece of fabric, to the landlord's own muffled screams, and the melodramatic background music playing as the sequence unfolds, the abduction scene only becomes more farcical with each successive event, correlative with which humour in the film consistently burgeons. Thus, to all intents and purposes, it would only seem logical to conclude, at least, thus far, that *Fix Anything* constitutes the quintessential feel-good science-fiction comedy film.

Re-cognition, or In Search of Lost Time

Yet, all at once, such an impression of the film is disrupted by a hard-hitting revelation. As he regains consciousness, the landlord begins to struggle against the leather straps by which he had been bound. It is in a bid to contain him that Minh falls victim to a stray kick and is rudely flung onto the tarmac road.

Disoriented, Minh stands back up, still battling a concussive dizziness which is simulated by the vertiginous canting of the camera angle and the shrill ringing in the background. Immediately after, he stumbles upon a wall, whereon his name had been scrawled umpteen times, and the outlines of a shoe chalked on the ground, both of which are reminiscent of the scrawls pictured in *Fix Anything's* opening scene; for Minh had been responsible for the scrawls therein, it would only seem reasonable to conjecture that Minh was similarly responsible for these newly observed scrawls. However, audiences are, soon after, made to realise that Minh ironically bears no recollection of having performed the scrawling in question, judging from the confused frown scribbled across his forehead as well as the look of throbbing exasperation he wears as he subsequently charges towards his father in a paroxysm of enraged questioning. In their emulation of thumping palpitations, the staccato drum-beats concurrently permeating the scene additionally reinforce this seething rage with which Minh is presently portrayed to be overwhelmed.





does the father really only personage the crazed but harmless mad-scientist character?

As Minh exclaims “Dad! What is this place?”, audiences are shocked into the horrific realisation that Minh is, too, a victim of his father’s memory-erasing experiments, and the concomitant awakening that the film presents more than just fun and games. All seeming conclusions the film might have perpetuated of Minh and his father being as thick as (literal) thieves ostensibly lose their tenability, and a moment of re-cognition proceeds, during which audiences ask: does the father really only personate the crazed but harmless mad-scientist character of a feel-good science-fiction film, or is he more sinister of a character? Could the father turn out to be the archetypal Machiavellian villain of a different sort of film – one whose plot is riddled with unexpected betrayal and wicked scheming? Is the film, then, really a tragic drama about familial crisis, in spite of its comic valences?

These questions form as quickly as Minh confronts his father. Yet, just as quickly as he confronts his father, the biting tension of the scene promptly re-transitions into risible action as the landlord lands a stranglehold on his father. Both characters are concomitantly thrust into a physical struggle, which ends up by-producing a momentum that causes the van to tumble downslope. It is at this juncture that Minh decides to assist his father in re-obtaining control over the van, on account of which his relationship with his father no longer seems justifiably generalisable as an iteration of the inimical hero-villain rivalry fundamental to any run-of-the-mill science-fiction adventure film, much as it might still contain traces of antagonism. What is more, the father’s checking on Minh as the van teeters to a stop, moments before the film ends, suggests a genuine sense of parental concern that underpins this conclusion. If anything, then, the father can only constitute a “liminal villain” – and, indeed, as it will soon become indisputable, a “liminal hero”.³ Likewise, *Fix Anything* can, if anything, only constitute part-tragic.

By the end of the film, the tensions between remembering and forgetting, inscription and erasure, and comedy and severity inevitably foist themselves on audiences as unresolvable, if not incomprehensible, binaries, not to mention the disconcertedly-phrased interrogative “home?”, which jars on the mind, especially



when incongruously accompanied by the same bright, rhythmic track sounded in the *bánh-mì* thieving sequence. Faced with a film that professes to be a light, fun-loving tale of two *bánh-mì* thieves, but which evolves into a graver tale about a character in search of lost time, puzzlement prevails over all other sentiments. One thing, however, stands clear – that is, the fact that *Fix Anything* is fundamentally concerned with anything but furnishing answers. In fact, Lê, himself, mentioned he had deliberately ended *Fix Anything* on a cliff-hanger to “open up a door for a more detailed story”². The question, then, is this: what more detailed story does *Fix Anything* tell? More importantly, in line with Lê’s intention for interpretive autonomy, I ask “what more detailed story can I tell with *Fix Anything*?”.

Recognition, or Lost Without a Home

The “more detailed story” I offer concerns itself with the “postmemory” of the Vietnam war.⁴ Being part of what might be called a “postgeneration”, Lê possesses the ethico-political impetus to address the conditions of an aftermath – a Vietnam that had been indelibly scarred – by virtue of which his film might, as I argue, be read as allegory.

The “more detailed story” I offer emphasises the question of “home”. In this story, Minh would figure as a postgenerational occupant of a post-war Vietnam, and what is ventriloquised through him is a yearning for home – a space safe from the effects of post-war trauma. Regrettably, he never achieves to locate any such space throughout the film. As it is, both Minh’s journey in the van and audiences’ journey with *Fix Anything* end, quite literally, in the middle of nowhere, which, in context, symbolises a futility to any quest for homecoming. Had Lê gone through with his initial conception of ending *Fix Anything* on the highway, back where it had started, a similar signification would have proceeded, namely regarding the “non-startability” of such a homeward quest – the impossibility of even leaving the proverbial starting point to begin one’s journey.⁵ Having said that, while the setting of the first scene does not see itself returning in the final scene, the background track played therein does. This choice of repetition, itself, insinuates a sense of cyclical interminability about Minh’s journey that renders the already poignant mood and atmosphere of the final scene exponentially more tragic.

Where does the fraught father-son relationship fit in all of this? Following this story, the father’s erasure of Minh’s memory would metaphorise an attempt of





the war-torn generation of Vietnamese to balk any intergenerational transfer of trauma by leaving stories of wartime memory untold. Presumably, they might have done this to render subsequent generations oblivious, and, thus, immune, to the pain psycho-geographically inscribed upon Vietnam. In other words, this response of contrived amnesia might have been designed to preserve a sense of “homeliness” – even if only accessible to subsequent generations – under the conditions of which it would become possible to (re-)develop a robust sense of identity. However, it is, ironically, this very attempt to enact a national amnesia that leaves the postgeneration with a head-splitting cultural anxiety, as Minh’s confusion after his fall so consummately allegorises. It is, in turn, this anxiety that drives not simply an incapacity to locate “home” – and, therewith, identity – but also a frustration directed at the preceding generation for obscuring such a significant phase of cultural memory, regardless of its intentions for having so done.

Importantly, this questions now stands: might “homeliness” have been more sustainably reconstituted, if at all? A possible answer lies in Lê’s apparently incompatible evocation of a comic affect in a film, which presents itself as tragedy, narrative-wise. Granted, he might have done this to construct an ambience ripe for satirising the absurdity of any quest for “home” or any attempt to suppress trauma, or, perhaps, to mitigate the disturbing effects of tragedy in order to broach the topic of post-war “unhomeliness” more palatably, but there may be more to this marked interplay between comedy and tragedy. Owing to its generic hybridity – which manifests as an “unboundedness” or fragmentation in affective composition – *Fix Anything* is, itself, established as a cinematic surrogate of “home”, a fractured and unbounded concept. Accordingly, its capacity to function coherently as a political response to the Vietnam war might, after all, intimate the possibility of recuperating the concept of “home”, irreversibly fractured though it might be. Of course, such a possibility remains, as yet, an uncertain tiding. In discussion, Lê mentioned that he was investigating the possibility of developing *Fix Anything* into a feature film, in which he hopes to explore a greater scale of plot and character development. Whether “home”, once lost, can be found, only time (and Lê’s upcoming feature film) will tell.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Madan Sarup, ‘Home and Identity’, in Jon Bird et al. (eds.), *Travellers’ Tale: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, Routledge, 1994
- 2 Lê Liêm Viên, in discussion with the director. 28 November 2022.
- 3 See Christopher Poulos, ‘The Liminal Hero’, *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 12(6), 2012
- 4 “Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.” See Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 2008.
- 5 Lê Liêm Viên, in discussion with the director. 28 November 2022.





Taking Politics Personally: Makbul Mubarak's *Autobiography* (2022)

BY BENJAMIN YAP



Autobiography, 2022. Image from KawanKawan Media.

Before conferring the award for Best Asian Feature Film to Makbul Mubarak's *Autobiography* (2022) for the 33rd edition of the Singapore International Film Festival, legendary Filipino director and bonafide rockstar filmmaker Lav Diaz defiantly declared, "We celebrate cinema tonight despite motherfucker Putin, motherfucker Xi Jinping, motherfucker Donald Trump!" With this unexpected political proclamation, Diaz set the tone for the prize he was going to award: Films can be political; hell, maybe all of them should be.

Mubarak's *Autobiography* presents one way of bringing together counter-politics and cinema. By embedding it within excitement and high emotion, the film takes on the guise of a slow-burn psychological thriller between Rakib, a young housekeeper and personal chauffeur, and his employer Purna, a retired army general who has returned to their hometown to run for mayor in the local election. With Rakib's father in jail for standing up against the state which has taken his land, Purna's relationship with Rakib slowly and insidiously takes on a paternal dimension.

While the backdrop of the film, with its electoral campaign posters and speeches, is explicitly about politics, the film's story is largely rooted in Rakib's perspective, and the conflict is chiefly centred on his relationship with Purna. By mapping the political dimension of the film onto a personal plane, *Autobiography* tells a story that is readily engaging and accessible to a global audience. However, by embracing genre conventions that allow its allegory on political and social power to transcend national borders, the moral conflict at its centre comes off a touch too rudimentary.





At its core, *Autobiography* shows how, on a psychological level, the younger generation in Indonesia can still be seduced and become complicit in a system perpetuating inequality and corruption. The relationship between Rakib and Purna, and the way in which their relationship develops, function as a broad allegory of Indonesia's current political climate which is still fighting to get away from the corruption and cronyism of Suharto's authoritarian regime.

Arswendi Nasution's snake-eyed Purna projects power in intimate and familial ways, cultivating close relationships and dependencies in close quarters through tight handshakes and karaoke sessions. Purna's power, over his military underlings and Rakib, is derived from a network of patriarchal loyalty propagated by the difficulties of class mobility. Rakib's father and his father's father, have all been in service of Purna's family, but it is Rakib who sees the opportunity to take advantage of this relationship to transcend his lower socio-economic class.

Mubarak's writing is cohesive, polished, and razor-sharp in its thematic focus. Every plot beat and conversation explores the nuances of the central relationship: the way power is borrowed from authoritative father-figure to impressionable surrogate son, and how performative kindness and familiarity is used to assert authority and control. When Rakib puts on Purna's old army uniform, he is immediately transformed by the promise of power; everything from the way he carries himself, to how he walks, and how he smokes a cigarette visibly changes. He casually bestows bribes and debt forgiveness on his friend Andri in return for information, as if he has done it all before. However, you can also see the naiveté and childishness of his roleplay, which lacks the assured confidence of the level-headed Purna. When Rakib confronts Agus, a young man who has defaced the campaign posters of Purna, he feigns kindness and spews learned aphorisms with all the bluster of an insecure teenager.

By largely locking the audience in close-up onto an impressive performance from Kevin Ardilova as Rakib, Mubarak places his lead character's psychological state to the forefront, creating a suffocating and ominous atmosphere. This is a film about how power can seduce and scare us, seen and felt through the eyes of one young man in over his head.



Although Mubarak's skillful direction ensures the film is always engaging, I wonder if *Autobiography's* exploration of its small-town politics is constrained by the hermetic nature of its drama which is focused on the moral reckoning between its two lead characters. While the film sets up Purna's campaign goal to build a hydropower plant on top of the land of local villagers, the film does not explore the broader implications of this plan and the plot point mostly functions as a way to bring Agus into direct opposition with the General. We only see the ways in which Purna flexes his influence in interpersonal situations, but not in the larger implications of his choices and his allegiances.

The turning point for Rakib's estimation of Purna is the General's use of violence against Agus which sends Rakib into moral panic, no longer blindly subservient to the authority he once respected. This is not violence that Purna commands by proxy; he gets his own hands dirty, violently intimidating Agus with fatal consequences. By focusing the central conflict onto physical violence that is an easy moral and emotional trigger for the audience, one could arguably sink into the film's tensely wrought drama without paying attention to its political commentary. Purna is a very bad man who must be stopped, so Rakib, with nowhere to run, must pick up Chekov's gun. There is a comforting generic thriller structure to *Autobiography* that makes the film eminently watchable, but with the consequence of oversimplifying its moral code. It strays away from the possibilities of investigating the other underhanded ways a character like Purna might exploit his power for personal gain. Here, all he does is get away with murder. Well, nearly.

But, maybe that is okay. Maybe the universality and accessibility of *Autobiography's* themes is to its benefit, making the stories and political concerns of Indonesia and the region easily accessible and universally understood. After all, power corrupts absolutely, everywhere, and all the same. Maybe when *Autobiography* boils down complex systems of oppression and systematic corruption into intimate vicious violence, it suggests that the ways inequality pervades, regardless of geography, is rooted in primal emotions like rage, fear, and greed. On some fundamental level, I find myself in agreement. Maybe we should see Purna, and the figures he is inspired by as pure evil, and, if I may borrow from the concise Lav Diaz once again, "fuck them."



Rebirth, Repair, Recycle: A Scrap- Collector's Guide to Healing

BY TAN MEI QI



The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon, 2022. Image from Tuan Andrew Nguyen.

In Quảng Trị, a province off the North Central Coast of Vietnam, Nguyệt (Nguyen Kim Oanh) makes a living buying and selling junk. Like many adults still living with their parents, she has a hobby her mother (Truong Thuong Huyen) disapproves of – making delicate, abstract mobiles out of scavenged remnants of the protracted, bloody conflict that was the Vietnam War. Her mother's disapproval is not without reason as these weapons are painful reminders of Nguyệt's late father and brother, whose deaths left her mother with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) so debilitating that stepping out of the house has become impossible.

When Nguyệt unexpectedly chances upon a magazine feature of American sculptor Alexander Calder, she is stunned by the uncanny resemblance between their creations. She discovers that she is born 49 days after Calder's death and believes that with their shared affinity – having spoken strange, incomprehensible languages as a child and now making almost equally incomprehensible art – she must be Calder reincarnated.

It is here that Tuan Andrew Nguyen's *The Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon* (2022) explores its central ideas of return, coming full circle, and blurring boundaries between life and death. The artist is reborn as a scrap collector and scraps are reborn as art itself. When Nguyệt rejects a couple's lowball offer for a wheelchair and a bike, the man questions her impulses to hold onto "these worthless things". Tersely, she replies, "It's how we make a living." In the art of scrap collection, dead objects create life. The opening of the film, which foregrounds a unexploded ordnance (UXO) shell repurposed as a flowerpot, starkly parallels that of Nguyệt with her head inside the temple's bell, made too, out of a UXO shell tuned to a frequency for healing. The potential for and memories of



devastating destruction contained in these weapons are transformed into one that holds life, and nurtures the possibility of recuperation. In a world where material commodities are simultaneously fetishised yet easily discarded, the creativity exercised in the rebirth of objects is not a mere artistic act, but a political one. Beyond a gesture geared towards the healing of past trauma, by infusing objects seen as trash with irreplaceable significance, it extends its hand to repair the broken way in which we relate with our past and present. “She won’t use it for long,” the man says of the wheelchair sold against Nguyệt’s will. It is a premonition as ominous as it is hopeful – even as a symbol of decay, of imminent death, it returns again at the end of the film to serve as Nguyệt’s mother’s legs to carry her on the journey of recovery. Life and death, seemingly on opposing ends, are brought together again and again, replicating the cycle of reincarnation. Rather than newness or escape, catharsis is made possible through counter memory and rebirth.

With the rebirth of objects and people, the film charts the path towards healing not as a linear one, but one that is circular, that will be undone, will recur. At first, the camera moves minimally, trudging slowly forward and retreating backwards. Creeping towards the mother’s back as she shakes uncontrollably in the throes of a PTSD attack, the shot cuts abruptly to her slippers, an object of movement pinned in place by a static shot. The interruption of the forward camera movement by the sudden stillness of the next shot, as well as the forward-facing slippers within the aforementioned shot underscores how the desire for a linear path towards healing brings only stasis. However, as Nguyệt realises the possibility of her reincarnation and uses that to begin repairing her familial relationships and her mother’s trauma, the camera begins to move differently, making semi-circular arcs. These are completed in the last scene with a slow, full circle around the figure of Hồ Văn Lai, whose body is not only a map for the scars of the war, but one that has become imbued with hope as he relieves its story repeatedly to educate children about the dangers of UXO. In the midst of its circular waltz, the camera lingers on the concentric ripples on the pond surface. A motif throughout the film, water is presented as an object with many lives; an emblem of restoration, purification and metamorphosis. The water cycle, in itself, is a process of rebirth, of life giving life. However, when viewed against Vietnam’s war-torn



history, water also represents death - it holds the bodies of refugees who lost their lives trying to flee the destruction of their homes. Again, like Nguyệt’s reincarnation, both the circular movement of the shot and water motif capture a path to healing that is defined by cyclicity.

Initially produced as a video installation in an art exhibition held at James Cohan Gallery, *The Unburied Sounds* is presented as part of an open-space exhibition with hanging mobiles and pieces such as “Singing Bowl from Brass Shells” tuned to vibrate at a healing frequency. Although the expansiveness of the exhibition is lost when *The Unburied Sounds* is screened as a feature film, as it was at the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival, much of its sonic richness remains. The lilting musicality of the Quảng Trị-accented dialogue and the two well-known anti-war songs, “*Một ngày như mọi ngày*” (*A day just like any other day*) and “*Đài Bác Ru Đêm*” (*Lullaby of Cannons for the Night*), invite viewers to conceive of a form of cinematic healing ruled not by images, but sound.

Such an invitation carries great weight when examined against other onscreen images of the war in Vietnam. In Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 war epic, *Apocalypse Now*, soundtracks become repositories of trauma; the film famously highlights the aggressive whoops of the helicopter rotor and the panic-stricken (and notably unsubtitled) voices of the Vietnamese as sites of traumatic memory.¹ Nguyen’s spotlighting of the Vietnamese language, and more specifically the Quảng Trị accent which is rarely represented even in local media, then, is a rebirth and reappropriation of the role played by Vietnamese voices in films about the war fought on their land. In its most illuminating move, *The Unburied Sounds* entirely overturns the use of soundtracks as repositories of trauma and instead presents them as its solution. The sounds of the bell used in PTSD treatment first appear as a non-diegetic accompaniment to the montages of Nguyệt making her intricate hanging mobiles, emerging as a kind of a sonic fantasy only the audience can hear. As the monk tolls the bell for Nguyệt at the temple, and when Nguyệt, in turn, knocks gently on the repurposed UXO for her mother, what initially appeared as non-diegetic evolves into diegetic sound. This transition brings with it a feeling of groundedness, rooting recovery and repair, once seen as almost fantastical impossibility, to the characters’ reality. The





bells become a refrain that comes and goes as traumatic flashbacks so often do, but it returns not as a sound fraught with pain, but one that promises a futurity of healing.

By honouring the repeated plowing through the fields of one's grief and pain, *The Unburied Sounds* creates a space that acknowledges the difficult, often imperfect process of healing.

As much as it reprises themes familiar to Vietnamese postwar cinema, *The Unburied Sounds* is somewhat of a stranger in the contemporary filmic landscape of the country. Post Đổi Mới, the film industry has seen diminishing state subsidy for production, putting it in the hands of private capital whose primary interest is in driving profit through producing commercially lucrative popular entertainment.² Over the years, access to state capital has also been made difficult by a complicated application process and much of the development of the Vietnamese film industry has been driven by foreign investment.³ With the influx of foreign investment and, consequently, the opening up of local cinemas to foreign movies, the longstanding Vietnamese cinematic themes of rural life, war and post-war reconstruction lose their appeal and appear formulaic, especially in the eyes of younger audiences. Having grown up with Hollywood blockbusters, the emerging wave of younger directors combine these filmmaking styles with personal responses to more contemporary concerns of socio-cultural and environmental contradictions created by Vietnam's transit towards globalised capital and commodity flows.⁴ This is evident in films produced in the 2000s, such as *Cánh Đồng Bất Tận/The Floating Lives* (2010), *Trái Tim Bé Bông/The Little Heart* (2007) and *Ròm/Rom* (2019), which depict poverty and the difficulty of keeping up with the pace of the city's development. Nguyệt, therefore, serves as a stand-in for their fading interest in the themes of war and mourning. As her aunt regales her with a story of two brothers, one involved in the revolution in the North and the other in the army in the South, and ghostly homecomings, all of which are well-worn tropes in Vietnamese cinema, Nguyệt scoffs, "The war that never ends, eh?" In a way, *The Unburied Sounds* feels like it is picking at old wounds which the nation has already tried to let scab over. But the point is precisely that there can be no healing without allowing for painful returns. The first step of repair and recovery is to acknowledge this.



By honouring the repeated plowing through the fields of one's grief and pain, *The Unburied Sounds* creates a space that acknowledges the difficult, often imperfect process of healing. It is a reminder that this cycle of return is no doomed Sisyphean tale, but one imbued with the hope and knowledge that each time, the journey can be and will be different.

ENDNOTES

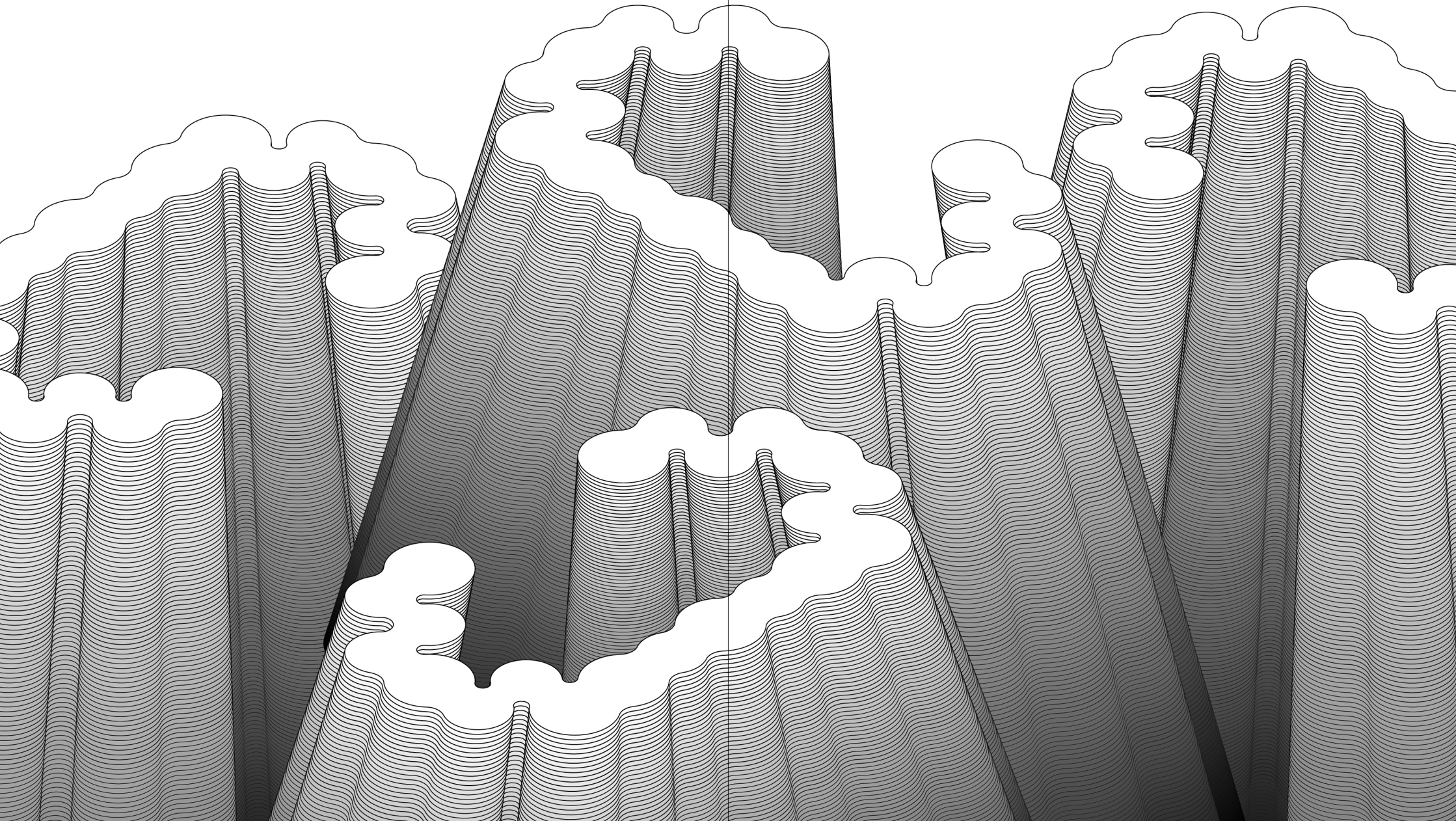
- 1 Greer discusses in "'This is the End, My Friend': Aural Focalizations of Trauma in *Apocalypse Now*" how films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Platoon* (1986) turn the voices of the Vietnamese into the voice of the Other, often presenting them as a unified, chaotic, collective sound that is never allowed individual expression, unlike that of the American soldiers who are given individual voices to speak about their traumatic experiences.
- 2 In *A Quick Look at Vietnamese Cinema in the Era of Renovated Economy (Đổi Mới)*, Nguyen explains how before 1986, under a socialist system, production fees were entirely subsidised by the state, freeing many filmmakers and producers from mundane concerns of financing and profitability and allowing them to focus instead on the artistic quality of their films.
- 3 The recent Vietnam Entertainment Fund (VEF) established in 2018 is a national effort funded by a combination of local and foreign investors such as Vietnam's Yeah1CMG, the country's leading movie production platform, the US-based news producer the R&B Capital Group and TV program producer MBC Studio, a joint venture between Vietnam's MCV Corp and Japan's Asahi Broadcasting Group Holdings. See "Film industry in need of greater investment", DTI News, 9 October 2018.
- 4 Against the backdrop of censorship, emerging New Wave Vietnamese directors tell stories that spotlight a wider spectrum of contemporary social issues in Vietnam including outdated traditions, wealth inequality, gender and sexuality politics and state surveillance. Other examples of such films include *Chuyện Của Pao/Pao's Story* (Ngô Quang Hải, 2006), *Chơi Vơi/Adrift* (Bùi Thạc Chuyên, 2009), *Cha và Con và.../Big Father, Small Father and Other Stories* (Phan Đăng Di, 2015). See "The 'New Wave' filmmakers challenging Vietnamese society", Nikkei Asia, 7 July 2021.



[C]

Critical

Conversations





Projectionists

BY SASHA HAN



When a projectionist enters the control room of the cinema, the first thing they do is switch the vents on. This directs the heat from the projectors out of the booth, preventing the premises from getting too humid and protecting the equipment. Even so, the booths are almost too warm each time I enter one to shadow the projectionists of the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival. If the blizzard-like conditions of the cinema encourage a suspension of disbelief in Singapore's relentless heat, the warmth in the projection booth is conditioned for work.

The principle remains the same: protect the diegesis of the world onscreen, keep the work of your hand unseen.

The projectionists I spoke to – Bernard Yap, Rahim bin Rahmat, and Han Feng Yu – see themselves as a part of the cinema. From where they sit, the booth separating them from the audience is far more permeable than I had initially assumed, perhaps because to do this job well, the projectionist must obscure their work. Even if the rituals of the job have been streamlined by automation and remote cues, it is no less orchestrated than it was a decade ago. The principle remains the same: protect the diegesis of the world onscreen, keep the work of your hand unseen.

Cinema is centred on the act of looking, of re-presentation, of reifying emotion on screen in the hopes that it expands perception. To that effect, I wanted not only to speak to projectionists but to also see what they notice at work. Many of the pictures included were taken and captioned by them.

DATE: 24 Nov 2022, Opening Night of the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival
LOCATION: Projector X: Picturehouse
SCREENING: *Assault*, 8.00pm

At a little over an hour before the screening, it is surprising how calm the atmosphere of Projector X: Picturehouse is on the evening of the most important media event of the year. Outside, the gentle roar of the festival was coming back to



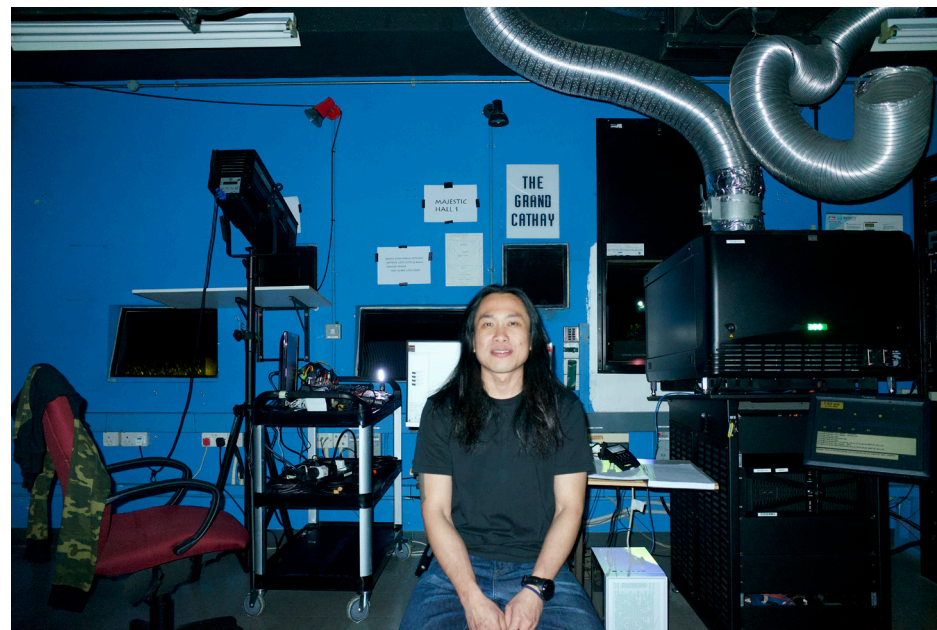


life as the festival returns to pre-pandemic heights to bring audiences, celebrities and industry folks back to the cinemas. Past the camera flashes and the generous red carpet, I meet my friend Deepagcharan Chandran who takes me up to the T-shape projection booth located 7 floors above the cacophony below. Deepag is a projectionist, but he is not working this screening; we are to meet Bernard who will be at the helm tonight.

When Bernard returns from the back-of-house of the theatre bar – which he also manages – he walks me to the control station for the 590-seat Majestic Theatre where the opening film, Adilkhan Yerzhanov's *Assault* (2022), will premiere in Southeast Asia. At this point, there isn't much left to set up: the projector is already warmed up, the last film test was completed earlier in the day, the AV system is rigged up, and the playlist is primed to play when doors open. The only thing left to do is wait for the signal to begin the screening.



Down the corridor of joy. This space gives life to the projectors and sound system. It acts as the nervous system for the cinema, hence it is a space of happiness for me. (Photo and caption by Bernard)



Bernard at the Projection Booth of Majestic Theatre, previously The Grand Cathay.

Bernard's decade-long career began at Universal Studios Singapore where he maintained attractions that relied heavily on screens and audio systems, regularly switching out the lamps and lenses for the *Transformers*, *Madagascar* and *Shrek* rides. He has been with The Projector since 2017 where he was stationed as the projectionist at Golden Mile Tower. When he is working, he senses something special about large, dedicated arenas for communal experiences. "It's absorbing [for the audience]. We're backstage, we do everything nicely for other people. People come in, sit down, have the time of their lives for 3 hours. Escapism. [From up here,] you can sense the vibe of people resonating with the film." When our conversation inevitably turns to the threatening dominance of streaming platforms, Bernard seemed unconcerned and answers, "I feel like people will still come to the cinema for the cinema experience."

The cinema comes into its own past 8pm, at which point Bernard tunes into the speeches on the intercom and adjusts knobs, focused on ensuring the audio is as crisp as possible. At one point, he surfaces from the soundboard to quip that





Through the pothole. (Photo and caption by Bernard)

festival's master of ceremonies, long-time comedian Hossan Leong, "is really good at this!" Before long, he switches the microphones off and engages the cues. The lights dim and the festival begins.

DATE: 27 Nov 2022, Day 4
LOCATION: Oldham Theatre
SCREENINGS: *A Tale of Filipino Violence*, 12.00pm
Hanging Gardens, 9.00pm

Past the half-way mark of Lav Diaz's 7-hour *A Tale of Filipino Violence* (2022), I slip into the right side of the control room in the Oldham Theatre with Rahim, who is taking over from the projectionist in the earlier shift. In place of the potholes that occupy the left side of the booth are three screens. Instead of having to stand and walk to the pothole on the other end, he checks at the live footage of the cinema on his monitor, glancing up from the anime he prefers to watch while waiting for screenings to end. "I look up every 2 to 3 minutes to see if everything is in session, that the subtitles and picture are running." It was also how he made sure everyone wore their masks during the pandemic.



Monitor showing live footage from the cinema. (Photo and caption by Rahim)

Rahim is a long way from the dynamism of film projection in the early part of his near 20-year career. After his National Service, he traded his military dress for usher uniforms at United Artists. He recalls that as he cleaned the hall, he often peeked through the pothole "to see how they thread the film through the roller". Rahim's desire to work as a projectionist brought him to the booths of Studio City, Golden Village, Cathay, Shaw, Eng Wah, Filmgarde and now Oldham Theatre under the employment of the Asian Film Archive. He remembers the transition from film to digital projection that occurred during his tenure at Cathay, coinciding with the release of James Cameron's science-fiction epic *Avatar* (2009). Suddenly, he and his fellow projectionists found their job scope expanded to include the duties of managers and ushers. Away from the manual change of bulbs and belt, and oiling and servicing machines, Rahim had to don a smart uniform again but, "That wasn't me, so I left."

His current job allows him to wear whatever he wants, though he asserts, "I'm no longer a projectionist. My title is a Theatre Service Technician." He is at ease with the loss of film projection now, noting "[It used to be that] lamps would have to be changed every 3 to 4 months. With laser projectors, it only has to be changed in 4 or 5 years. This is the good thing; there are pros and cons." Rahim maintains



that for him, the word ‘projectionist’ is reserved for those who handle film in their 16mm, 35mm, IMAX 70mm forms. “These are actual projectionists, even if they are obsolete.”

When I ask if there anything he want people to know about his job, Rahim replies:

“Without projectionists, there would be no show. People should be aware that someone up here is projecting the movie. When a breakdown occurs, movie patrons tend to scold us, but when everything is smooth, they don’t care. It’s only when there’s a problem that people know someone is fixing it.”



Rahim at his desk.

DATE: 1 Dec 2022, Day 8
LOCATION: Oldham Theatre
SCREENINGS: Southeast Asian Short Film Competition - Programme 1, 6.30pm
Gaga, 9.00pm

When Feng Yu opens the door to the control room and greets me at 2.46pm, he is in the middle of a test screening for another film programme. This time, the file is in MP4



format and plays directly from the iMac control station. He explains that when the film is screened in mp4 format, the present video and audio feedback loop allows for audio projection in the booth so he can sit at the desk to watch the films directly on the monitor. Otherwise, in the industry standard DCP (Digital Cinema Package) format, he opens the windows at what he calls the “eyes” of the projection booth and stands by them to tune into the audio of the films.



The left and right eyes of the projection booth. (Photo and caption by Feng Yu)

He keeps the windows open during his shifts in the time leading up to and during the screening. It is also the area he values most in the projection booth. “I watch every single [film he screens]. It is both my job to watch out for anything in case something happens, and I personally enjoy watching films.” I ask if he sees a separation between himself and the audience – he is, after all, at work. But it seems that Feng Yu sees the physical demarcation of the projection booth from the audience seated below as so porous that it borders on decorative, an illusion of division. “As long as your eyes are trained on a film, you become an audience by default,” he says. “Getting paid to watch a film is really quite good for me.”

We get to talking about the festival’s diverse line-up at Oldham Theatre and which ones stood out to him. He liked Laha Mebow’s *Gaga* (2022) for its succinct evocation of the “specific Taiwanese ‘mono no aware’”. Zhang Wenqian’s *Long Journey Home* (2022) reminded him of one of his favourite documentaries *Oxhide* (2005), while Woo Ming Jin’s *Stone Turtle* (2022) seemed to him a combination of *Groundhog Day* and mysticism, “a Southeast Asian revenge film grounded in its folklores and traditions”. He also found Alvin Lee’s *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (2022), winner of Best Singapore Short, “funny and confident”, reminding him of





pioneer theatremaker Kuo Pao Kun's writings while *Bambang* (2022) by Yusron Faudi simple "talkie" set-up with two great actors "impressive in its form".

Resisting attempts to identify stylistic and thematic similarities between the films he mentions, Feng Yu is more interested in the visual grammar of films. "When it comes to communication, I don't think we need similarities to be able to listen or speak to one another. It is because we are different that we communicate." There is a generosity in his approach to watching films derived from his directorial practice spanning the lauded *Last Trip Home* (2014) to assistant directing in *Wet Season* (2019). "Film is a language and watching other directors' works is to listen to what others are [doing] with this language. It's communication between different folks who use the same language, no? Sometimes you listen, sometimes you express."



Feng Yu at the left eye of the projection booth, a position he assumes during screenings. On the right is a 35mm film projector.



Acknowledgements:

I would like to express my gratitude to Bernard, Prashant, and Deepag at The Projector as well as Rahim, Feng Yu, Michelle, and Diane at the Asian Film Archive for their generosity in coordinating and facilitating my visits to their workplace.



Delicate Humour and Why It Is Important

BY SHELBY KHO

Gabriela Serrano's debut short film *DIKIT* (2022) reimagines the *manananggal*, a familiar creature from Philippine folklore. Believed to be a grotesque creature of the night capable of splitting her body in two and eating unborn fetus out of pregnant women, *DIKIT's* *manananggal* is a young woman, M. She has the same feral impulses but now possesses a new desire to escape her body. She longs for human connection and to be normal.



Art from *DIKIT's* zine by Gabriela Serrano

DIKIT utilizes a split screen to present both M's perspective as well as that of the young woman living next door who is unaware that M furtively watches her. The film is sombre and spotlights themes relating to the female body and feminine urges. These are topics of considerable weight but here they are addressed skilfully with gentle humour.

DIKIT is written by Serrano and her sister, Mariana 'Sam' Serrano, when the two were living together and sharing a room. When I met them for an interview at the 33rd Singa-



To Film *Breaking* News

BY CHRISTIAN YEO



Directed by Jessica Heng, *Breaking News* is a 30-minute narrative film concerning an unexpected pregnancy, or as Heng it, “that seismic accident that interrupts your timeline”. The short film premiered at the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival where I was able to speak with Heng, Head of Production Bambby Cheuk, and Director of Photography Reynard Lee. We talked about cinema, the practice of care in filmmaking, and recalled moments behind the scenes captured in the short documentary *To Film A Film*, directed by Cho Jung-Min and Esther Boey, which chronicled the process of making *Breaking News*.

What
on earth
is liminality?
You watch *Breaking News* for the first time
in the middle of your life.
Sitting on your bed, reverse-
engineering *To Film A Film*. It
tatters you, though it is unclear
why. Then you realise: it isn't about
you, was never about you, empathy
akin to a shadow, how it points to
an object but not the plasma of
its form. So love is stored in
the hands. Opening doors,
brushing, cutting hair.
Holding a baby, a
packet of food,
a durian, a
camera.



Breaking News, 2022. Image from Jessica Heng.



Breaking News, 2022. Image from Jessica Heng.



Q. What were your intentions with the film?

JESS. I started off engaging with this story because I met women who had been through post-abortive experiences. Abortion tends to be a polarizing topic. You're either pro-choice or pro-life, and both camps are very angry at each other... we forget the person in the centre, which is a young girl.



Breaking News, 2022. Image from Jessica Heng.

“When I watch the film, I can see everyone’s handprints”

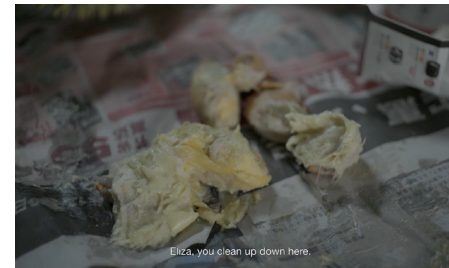
— Jessica Heng

BAMBBY. I think one thing that Jess did, because she had contacts from women who went through abortions, was to invite one of them into our pre-production meetings. Which is really random; normally you don't have your gaffer sitting there talking to the research subject.

Q. How did this desire to do right by these women affect the way that you shot, if at all?

REY. Every shot we were shooting, I was thinking, can it progress the story? ... How do we progress the emotions? Some of the shots were pretty long and we didn't always need to cut. Sometimes it's nice to just stay on that shot and let the whole scene unravel. It was really just a feeling. *[Everyone laughs]*

JESS. Just quote him! Just use that line.



Breaking News, 2022. Image from Jessica Heng.

JESS. There is the centrality of the main protagonist, but I wanted to extend this to the idea of womanhood in general, and the burden of care upon women as well. It's not just her but also her mom, and what kind of responsibilities she has inherited inevitably.

Q. To my mind, I immediately thought of the kitchen scene, how it's only Eliza and her mother in the kitchen and their entire interaction is framed by the kitchen.

BAMBBY. Even the guy who switches on the light switch knows, “there's a reason why I'm doing this, I'm not just fulfilling someone's fantasy of making a short film”. We're actually doing it for real people who go through these real issues.

JESS. That is one way in which we do the care work, because we know ... our community. I think this film is truly collaborative. When I watch the film, I can see everyone's handprints.



Breaking News, 2022. Image from Jessica Heng.



Q. How was your first experience making a short film? What were you trying to achieve?

JUNG-MIN. Our starting point was always care. We wanted to make something that we care about, full stop... It was my crew who reminded me of the starting point of caring throughout.



To Film A Film, 2022. Image from Cho Jung Min.

Q. That makes me think about things like using a long focal lens. For instance if you film hands and you render hands or facial expressions in very granular detail it might not actually be very evident to the crew because you're not that physically close. What made you arrive at the technical decisions you made, or was that just a matter of editing, what was that process like?

ESTHER. Reflecting on this process, I feel like film is a good teacher but it is also a very good companion, a very good healer. I feel like sometimes film as an art, as a medium, as whatever you call it as it exists in this world, the polarity of its reception scares me sometimes, how people can throw decades of their life into film working tirelessly for love of film, whereas people on the other side of the country just don't care at all...



JUNG-MIN. Me and Val (Val is the DP, so she was holding the camera most of the time) talked about this. She was frustrated with me because I didn't exactly know what I wanted to shoot at any point in time. But... you just feel like it's a semi-conscious thing, that you just know what to film.

ESTHER. I think I'm very convicted that we had the right heart of honouring our profile and wanting to use our profile to love the people around us also. I'm thankful that... people also told us that they could feel the sincerity and tenderness that came up in the film.



To Film A Film, 2022. Image from Cho Jung Min.



To Film A Film, 2022. Image from Cho Jung Min.





BAMBBY. Even before this Jess was just saying, I still have that dream that somebody in the audience is going through this situation and she finds some comfort in it. That's why she ends the film with a dedication to "to every girl in the audience".

Maybe
part of it,
care work, is
actually just
saying: hey, I see
you. I hear you. I feel
you. I smell you. I bear
witness to you. I bear witness
to the totality, the *total grayness*
of your being. Come alongside me.
Let me come alongside you. You exist,
I exist. That's enough. Hey! Hey. Tell
me your story. Take me to the edge
of the water. No, I want you not to
let go of my hand. Let's build
a boat together. Yeah, here.
Right now. We'll cross it;
see me now, *really see*
me, this legible,
raining light.

BAMBBY. I want this film to meet people where they are, and that everybody who goes through the process of the film – the people making it, the people watching it – are transformed by it.

REY. That the people that watch this film can remember how these characters make them feel... and so be more sensitive in how they approach the subject.

"I want this film to meet
people where they are"

— Bamby Cheuk

JESS. Many of these women go through the experience alone, without any real support ecosystems. I wanted to talk about the now and the not-yet, the in-between before something major happens. In this moment of tension and transition, what are some of the things that can influence this girl's decision? What are some things that the community tends to forget, or that we can be more aware and can influence?





On Violence: A Conversation with the Sine Olivia Pilipinas Collective

BY EPOY DEYTO



Sitting in their new hangout place, a newly opened coffee shop near his home, Lav Diaz, writer-director for Sine Olivia Pilipinas, told a short anecdote: “it is also around here back in the late 2000s when I heard two gentlemen talking about a typhoon coming. Their conversation sparked the inspiration to create *Siglo ng Pagluluwal* (Century of Birthing, 2010).” Diaz recalled calling up actors Hazel Orencio and Perry Dizon, who were the leads for *Siglo*, if they are available to follow that typhoon. The shop attendants see the Sine Olivia Pilipinas collective – Diaz, Orencio, and sound recordist/production assistant Cecil Buban as regulars. Diaz told the anecdote before we start the conversation while waiting for his usual coffee. Diaz recalled the process of that film: following the eye of the storm opened a really violent approach to filmmaking.

The theme of violence, coffee, and the arrival of their other close collaborator, actor John Lloyd Cruz, marked the beginning of our conversation, which aims to engage the collective conceptually on the relationship between cinema and violence, to which, the films Sine Olivia produces are not a stranger to.



Hazel Orencio. Image by Francis Jeremiah Manaog.

Beginning with the 1994 production of *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, released in 2004), the Sine Olivia Pilipinas film collective engaged with the contemporary history of the Philippines. To them, this is a history of violence – “our collective baggage,” Diaz describes – unfolding over 400 years of Spanish, American, and Japanese colonialist plunder with almost a



century of American imperialism abetting the continuing feudal and bureaucratic backwardness of elitist economics, and political corruption. The films *Sine Olivia Pilipinas* made engaged not just with presenting these historical conditions, but more importantly, the ramifications of hundreds of years of various revolutions, dissent, and insurrections that were challenged by imperialist-backed reactionary counterrevolutions and anti-insurgency campaigns. This marked *Sine Olivia Pilipinas'* films as unique forms of engagement with history which marked their presence in a national cinema which has been around for as long as the history of cinema itself.

History informs the scriptwriting process of writer-director Lav Diaz, along with the violence he perceives from his home country. “Whenever we start making a movie, we make sure that it also becomes an opportunity for everybody to study the towns where we’ll set our location,” said Diaz.

“Unlike in the [mainstream] industry, we don’t have location managers,” added Orencio, an actress, producer, and sound recordist who is also Diaz’ longest collaborator to date. “With Lav’s works, it is important that we just don’t get a feel of the town, but actually experience living there.”

“Everybody in the crew walks around to get a feel of the town,” Buban chipped in. Buban started collaborating with *Sine Olivia Pilipinas* in 2016, first as a production assistant, then as a sound recordist.

“It’s a different way of doing things,” Diaz noted. “I came from Regal [Films], the [location] set is safe. But in our approach, we try to consider the nature element.”

“We get flooded, or be rounded by snakes, we proceed,” Buban added.

The on-the-ground methods of *Sine Olivia Pilipinas* turns filmmaking into a practice of social investigation. “There were many neglected towns which shared similar situations,” Diaz recalled. “We stayed at Abulug [in Cagayan province] when we were shooting *From What is Before* (2014). The town was nice, but you can see from where we stay, the locality of San Julian, that it was neglected. No connecting roads, the schools were dilapidating. Even their houses are getting torn down. When we asked the residents why their condition is like that, they frankly told us that it was because they are not Ilocanos. [...] The LGU (Local Government Unit) there concentrate their services to Ilocanos, and never extend them to other indigenous groups, like the Aetas.”

The reality of these places is faithfully reflected in the films produced by the collective. In *Isang Salaysay ng Karahasang Pilipino (A Tale of Filipino Violence, 2022)*, for instance, the town’s regressive governance and the complicity of its corrupt local elites forces the townspeople into lives of desperate poverty. The effects such filmmaking reverberates through the crew and cast. “[The team’s] filmmaking process saved me,” says actor John Lloyd Cruz who plays all three protagonists Servando, Hector, and Heidi in *A Tale of Filipino Violence*. “There’s a tendency given my background [in the mainstream film and television industry] that when you are being fed with privilege by corporations, chances are you see these things in a plain manner. That there are rich people, and poor people, and that’s it. My experiences from our director’s approach, his process, and the places we’ve been, taught me the value of struggle. That it is with struggle alone that one’s humanity can be found.”



Lav Diaz. Image by Francis Jerimiah Manaoag.

Perhaps as an expected consequence, the threat of violence is always looming over *Sine Olivia Pilipinas*. “There are always dangers in every shoot,” Orencio recalls, “one time someone was shot dead near where we were making a movie.” Diaz nods and confirms that the victims were a father and his child, “there’s always danger because we are not on a production set. We did not create the circumstances”.

The dangers they face do not just come from the places they visit. The Sine Olivia Pilipinas team noted how the past six years pushed them to be more conscious of their political leanings and to be more organized in their anti-fascist efforts after Rodrigo Duterte's presidency began in 2016. "We discussed things during the shoot, especially Duterte." Diaz said. "We even become selective of who will be part of our production . . . and made it clear that the production is political. [...] The time is critical that we need to stand up."

Often, Buban performed background checks, asking people who wanted to join their productions to take note of anything that might stick out. She firmly declares, "if they don't really care since they are not affected, we cross them out."

Despite their openness with each other about their political dispositions, the team still took care not to speak loudly, especially outside and among others. Buban recalls, "it was a scary time."



Cecil Buban. Image by Francis Jerimiah Manaog.

The years that accompanied the bloody regime of Rodrigo Duterte passed by very few interventions from more widely distributed Filipino films. It's as if the mainstream popular culture made a pass from this and made the transition from one president to another smoothly.

Diaz calls it "a culture of denial". "The Filipinos have a culture of denial. Too many lies surface." The May 2021 report from the International Criminal Court, citing varied sources from case reports, police records, news reports, and NGOs, estimates between 12,000 to 30,000 fatalities from the Duterte administration's War on Drugs since 2016. "That's

mass murder!" Diaz exclaimed. "A Filipino Holocaust! And we don't think of it that way until now, as if nothing has happened in the past six years."



John Lloyd Cruz. Image by Francis Jerimiah Manaog.

How did we reach this point of numbness? Diaz is convinced that there is an institutional problem. Cinema venues and government, both chiefly concerned with profit margins, are "not protecting real Filipino cinema". Cruz, himself a seasoned television actor, agrees that the mainstream media has much to do with all of this. "If they see that you're trying to break the façade, they will get you," adds Cruz as Diaz nods along, "as a Filipino. I want to comprehend what is happening, and where I am in all of these. But [in the commercial industry] if you express such sentiments of wanting a deeper understanding, you're the strange one."

Cruz's contemplations on his place in the world of Filipino media often slips into melancholia. He thinks of his history in commercial television as a time of being "blinded by things" and having worked long hours without "knowing [his] role in the bigger picture. "As such, his transition between the two worlds of commercial television and Sine Olivia Pilipinas has thus far been a kind of traumatic enlightenment. "When it was revealed to me how [the industry] operated and what has been my role there for the past 20 years," he reflects, "I was so shocked I couldn't function." It is almost as though he sees himself as a character in a Sine Olivia Pilipinas pic-



ture who is emerging from fractures or, as Diaz puts it, “like the struggle of the nation, waking up as an insider feeling your own alienation.”

As our conversation draws to a close, Cruz reveals what he has come to realize about working with Diaz and says, “Direk (a common shortened affectionate term for “Director”) seems to be making open letters for the nation, hoping that it might be read by the future generations, even when we’re not around.”

Orencio chimes in with some of her own, “People are asking about Cruz’ silence on social issues. The fact that he (Cruz) is with us is a statement in itself. The fact that he embraces his roles means that he stands for what we stand for too.”

“I came from a place where we talk a lot, and nonstop: ‘this is my latest offering’, ‘please buy this and that,’” added Cruz. “This time, I’d like the work to speak for itself without interruption.”

But interruptions also do come in various ways. Diaz hinted that they might be facing trouble distributing *Isang Salaysay*, despite the compromise that it will get released as a mini-series. Orencio thought it might be because “it’s a direct assault against [President] Marcos, Jr.” Platforms denying engagement with history only confirms Diaz’ point of culture of denial. Philippine cinema, despite not being a stranger to its own history of violence, is more familiar of these very mechanisms of denial. From the denial of cinematic violence in popular screens to the denial of depictions of history, a long struggle waits for those who dare challenge and represent the true condition of the contemporary Filipino. “We don’t have representation,” Diaz claims, “even in our own cinema screens.”

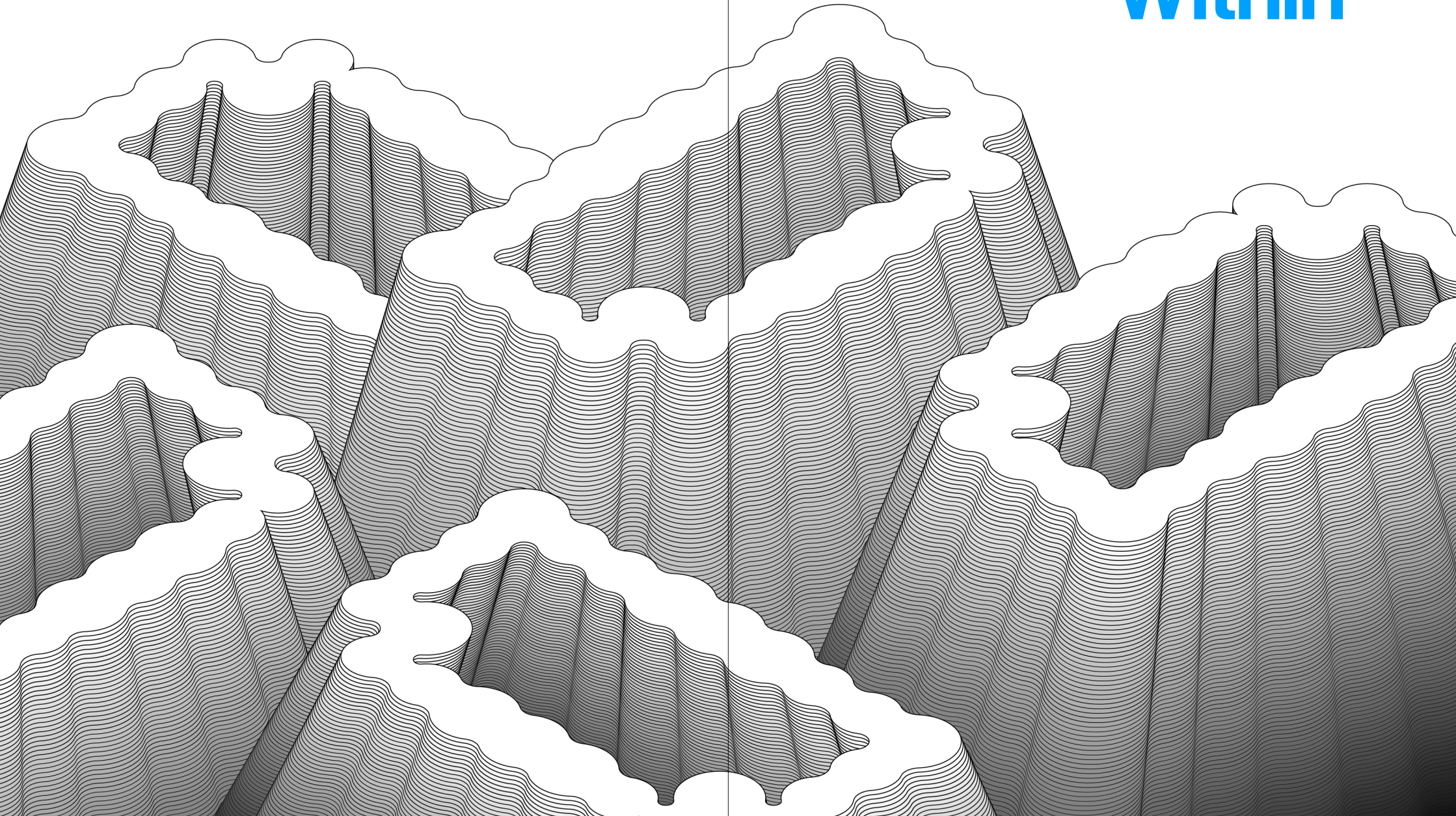


A Tale of Filipino Violence, 2022. Image from *Diversion*.



[D] Letters

from Within





What *Baby Queen* Taught Me About Being So F**king Woman

BY TAN MEI QI



Baby Queen, 2022. Image from Tiger Tiger Pictures.

One of the oldest photos of myself is a family portrait. Sandwiched among my grandmother, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, I pose with a smile so stiff that it looks almost painful. I am dressed in a silky vermilion cheongsam and a pair of gaudy Mickey Mouse heels with transparent lifts adorned with multicoloured beads. Like many of the battles I fought as a child with my parents about wearing dresses, this outfit was another defeat.

The first time someone asked me what my pronouns were, I was baffled. No one ever told me before that I had a choice. I thought gender was something that happened to you, like being born. I thought it was a responsibility to be fulfilled. For the longest time, I believed femininity was a red cheongsam and heels you were made to wear no matter how viciously and self-righteously you fought against it. I thought femininity was suffering and discomfort.

In the Singaporean documentary *Baby Queen* (2022), femininity isn't suffering and discomfort. Maybe it is, just a little. "Having your balls and dick tucked hurts", the film's star, drag performer Opera Tang, opines as she dons her glamorous stage outfits. Fellow queen Ada Heart quips, "See? Don't be a drag queen. Too





much work.” But despite the similarities between the many rituals that people assigned female at birth are expected to practise and the routine of a drag queen getting ready to go onstage, the queens somehow make the process look fun. They transform a common understanding of femininity into a mode of expression, and a way of being that embraces fluidity and freedom.

Drag is the vehicle that allows for all of this, and this is most evident in performance. Like the audiences at the drag shows, I was drawn to and enthralled by the bright and bold expansiveness of the queens’ presences. The film also often frames them, in full drag, against mundane settings of a HDB void decks or a dining table at home. The stark contrast between the dark blacks and soft pinks of their artfully-designed fashion against the drab colours of daily life draws attention to how drag isn’t simply nice to look at – it is a performative strategy that challenges the expectations, rules, and norms of its environment.

When considering the way performance defines a drag queen’s career and the life of queer people in Singapore, where one may constantly have to perform identities desired of them, I thought too, about film as a performance. But this time, Opera isn’t really performing. A loud, flamboyant stage in which she coyly wraps a feather boa around the neck of a clearly charmed audience member abruptly cuts to her in the silence of a taxi, taking off her makeup and letting down her hair. The quietude of the scene touched me. *Baby Queen* offers its star a space to be all that she is, at once a ravishing queen and just another weary Singaporean in a long queue for something. Opera’s presence is not in any way diminished when she is out of drag; in fact, it is heightened as the film follows her about while she performs the mundane chores of daily life – working, attending to religious and familial obligations, basking in the wonderful, peaceful solitude of having lunch alone by the Singapore River. In these moments, the fierce confidence that often emerges on the stage falls away to reveal beautiful and vulnerable humanness.

The openness with which *Baby Queen* embraces all of these sides of Opera felt like an embrace for me too.



In a conversation on the way to another performance, Ada asks Opera if she’s planning to come out, and Opera quietly admits, “I’m not sure what I am yet.” These brief but intimate reflections of a journey towards trying to figure out where you fit, in what was initially imagined to be a binary but turned out to be a rainbow-like spectrum, spoke deeply to my confusion, past and present, about who I thought I was or can be. The openness with which *Baby Queen* embraces all of these sides of Opera felt like an embrace for me too. It was a cocoon of safety I could curl up in knowing that I have my whole life to experiment and figure things out.

Beyond self-expression, Opera turns drag into a love language, dressing up the people she loves – her grandmother in a glitzy reimagining of the Samsui woman’s traditional dark blue blouse and trousers, complete with the trademark crimson headgear, her mother in her first chiffon ball gown, and her boyfriend in makeup reminiscent of a sunset in summer. And in those moments, drag reveals itself to be a transformative device that can be shaped to your will, whether you want to be a woman or even time travel, back to a time when you were younger, and lighter on your feet. Each of the people Opera dresses up immediately find themselves dancing, swaying gently on the spot, doing little waltz across their living room floor, or crooning an old tune familiar to them.

As a child, I often grooved enthusiastically in front of television sets to China Dolls, a famed early 2000s Thai pop duo. There are no videos of that, but in my mind’s eye I imagine a tiny figure moving, free of embarrassment or unease and filled only with the impulsive and immediate desire to make known how the music made her feel. As I got older, those awkward shuffles were no longer cute, and my lack of rhythm and coordination became something to be ashamed of. I never picked up dancing again. With such a fractured relationship to dance, I found something wonderfully tender about witnessing those moments in *Baby Queen* where self-consciousness is abandoned for the pure joy of inhabiting one’s own body. I loved seeing the way drag made someone young again and the way they stared, mesmerised, at a reflection of themselves on which wrinkles and time were both rendered non-existent.





Perhaps this transformative power is the magic of drag, but I think it was also the magic of Opera as a person. Speaking to her at the closing party of the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival, I was touched by the sensitivity, empathy, and understanding with which she approached my questions that were as much about her as about myself. Like her grandmother and mother, I felt young again, childlike even. Our conversation felt like a drag of sorts, allowing me to slip into it and abandon the cloak of shame which often accompanied me as a bumbling adult learning to grow into herself. I did not break into my three-year-old China Dolls boogie, but inside my soul was dancing, held and regarded so safely and warmly by Opera's wisdom, strength, and confidence. (The journal entry I penned when I got home reads: *The only thing bigger than the drag queens' personalities are their hearts.*)

Reflecting on what she has managed to achieve against all odds, she beamed with pride and told me, "I could die happy right now."

In a sobering scene, one of the last few in *Baby Queen*, Opera is dressed in her military uniform in preparation for mandatory reservist. She cuts a small figure against a larger-than-life poster of four members of Singapore's parliament poised godlike and benevolently above her. The image brings to mind the recent repeal of Section 377A – a welcome move for sure, but also one which reminds the local LGBTQ+ community that their rights are always up for debate, rather than guaranteed, at the mercy of those who have little to no stake in the issue. In such a political climate, Opera's journey, filled with the abject loneliness of rejection, bullying, and coming to radical self-acceptance, may have no clear end in sight. Even so, it speaks to me as a testament of her sheer determination to exist as she is in a world that continually seeks to deny, erase, and shame her. Near the end of our conversation, she beamed with pride and told me, "I could die happy right now."



As I watched *Baby Queen's* ending credits roll on the screen I thought of her, the girl I was at 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and how much she would have loved to see this. This film soothed that hurt and confused child who didn't get to see femininity as anything more than a box bounded on all sides by strange laws no one could quite explain to her beyond saying, "this is what girls do". I wish she could've known that there were so many ways of being, that she could have explored, that she had a choice. I wish she could've known that there are no rules except for the ones she makes for herself. I wish she could've known that femininity isn't suffering and discomfort, but that it can instead take the shape of nothing else but joy, wonder, and the desire to be yourself. I wish she could've known that she would one day be able to see, onscreen, the people who inhabit femininity in this very way, and because of that imagine possibilities she'd never before dreamt for herself.

I think that girl still exists. And now, she knows.





To Sprinkle a Slice of Lotus Root Red

BY RYAN-ASHLEIGH BOEY



But what, you may ask, has a slice of edible rhizome to do with Park Syeyoung's latest brainchild *The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra* (다섯 번째 홍추, 2022)? As an experimental fantasy feature film, wrought from the disparate elements of surrealism, body horror, and affective drama – which consistently interact across an episodic plot line, comprising four equally poignant stories of loss and loneliness – it should come as no wonder that the prominence of the film's narrativity pales in comparison to that of its cinematography; for all that a reading of its plot might offer, a reading of its imagery offers more. In addition, given the intricacy and complexity of each of its images, constructed from a menagerie of everyday objects, for all that a survey of *The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra's* visual motifs, effects, and idiosyncrasies may achieve, a focused analysis of any one of its component parts would, in its precision and detail, achieve much more, not to mention do justice to the painstaking diligence Park must have invested into storyboarding each of these images. Ultimately, it is such a slice of lotus root that captured, in all its uncanniness, the heart, mind, and eye of this essay and this writer.

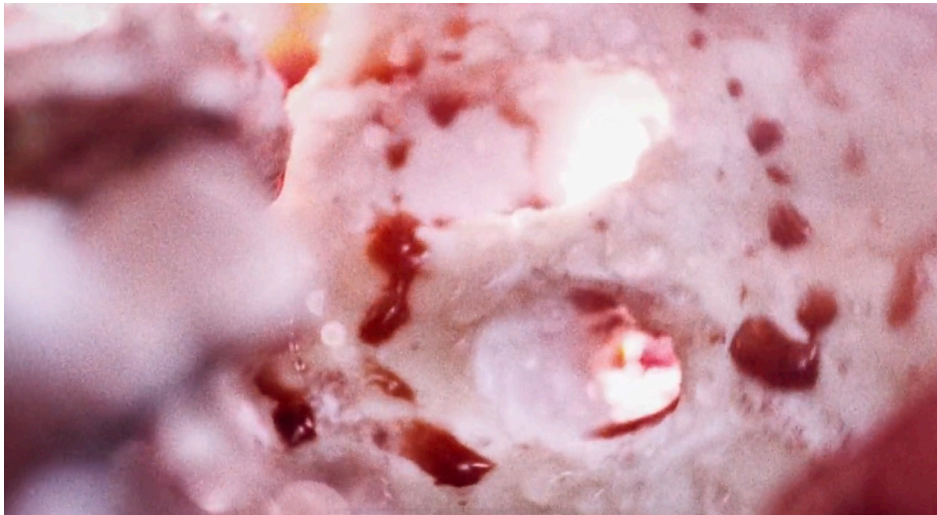
But why, you may then ask, a slice of lotus root? And so what if it is sprinkled red? This question, I can only answer by recounting my hour-long interaction with *The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra*. I only hope the words I enlist to do so can hold at least a third of a candle to the magnetism of the film's own arresting visuals.

There I was, on a Saturday night, with a bottle of Garrett's caramel popcorn in hand, ready to experience the “electric visuals, twitchy creature effects and quirky synth music”, which, the film synopsis in the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival's catalog rightfully claims, “will surprise even the most sophisticated genre fan”. Having said that, I will admit that my initial appraisal of the film was not quite as cheery. As *The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra* opened, a biological overview of fungi appeared on the screen, much like the bite-size summaries scholastic documentaries are so fond of utilising, conjuring up several less-than-pleasant memories of a primary-school science lesson on macroscopic organisms. Thankfully, the uncouth question “Where the hell are you?”, vociferated twenty seconds after, reangled the film in a more palatable generic direction, drawing, as it did, a huge sigh of relief from me. Had I the luxury of more words, I might have narrated a little more about the peevish deliverymen as well as the lackadaisical Yoon (played by Haam Seokyoung) and his fortunately hardier girlfriend Gyeol (played by Moon Hyein), who, in one scene, single-handedly heaves a set of furniture into what can only be their new apartment, judging from its unfurnished state, but what I will draw my reader's attention to is the label “a fantastic combination of sleeping science and human engineering”, plastered across the screen as the said heaving was underway. “A comment about the workings of



non-realist filmmaking, this must be! And if not so, a comment I shall fashion it to be!”, I thought to myself, excited at having discovered such a maxim, as I continued to scour the film eagle-eyed, in search of an essay topic that this maxim may well complement.

Luckily for me, this topic made its entrance a short ten minutes after, in one of the images Park employed to represent the life cycle of the fungal creature, whose metamorphosis the film explores. In it, one finds a slice of lotus root, presumably sprinkled with a mixture of corn syrup and food colouring, and then, photographically emphasised through selective focus, and with it, all the creative pieces were in my possession. I had only to find a way to complete the puzzle.



A slice of lotus root, sprinkled red.
The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra, 2022. Image from Park Syeyoung.

If the “sleeping science and human engineering” label were, as I personally believe it to be, indeed, a self-reflexive comment, it certainly would not seem preposterous to argue that the film presents itself as a manifesto, detailing an aesthetics of non-realist filmmaking. At any rate, the lotus-root shot clearly presents – at least, to my (un)clear eyes – as a manifesto of such. The only question is what it illustrates.

In case it is not evident, it illustrates that to make the non-realist film is to sprinkle a slice of lotus root red. For what

reason/s, you may ask? First, for the use of such a slice of lotus root is whimsical and ingenious like a non-realist film ought to be. This is true, for, above all, filmmaking demands a creativity in its “making” and what can be more creative than transmogrifying a slice of lotus root with homemade red dye to have it image fungal growth? Besides, the use of such a slice of lotus root is expedient in world-building. This is true as well, for how else might an independent filmmaker, like Park, have more efficiently substituted the need to adopt extensive computer-generated imagery, and the concomitant need to bear exorbitant production costs?

simply ask yourself if you are
sprinkling for the sake of sprinkling or
sprinkling for the sake of making

Unsurprisingly, the naysayers must, by now, be itching to attempt poking a hole or two in my account of this lotus-root image. If, they may ask, the image truly operates as a manifesto, it ought to define a list of criteria delineating when its proposed approach at filmmaking should be mobilised and when it should not, but does it? And if so, what are these criteria? In response to such a concern, the over-zealous writer might rush to retort, “Well, such is too straightforward a matter to warrant introduction. Simply ask yourself if you are sprinkling for the sake of *sprinkling* or sprinkling for the sake of *making*.”

I prefer to let the lotus-root image do its own talking – which, it does. Granted, the naysayers may be right in insinuating that the image does not appear to define any criteria, but it is precisely in its non-definition that a definition is achieved. There can be no gatekeeping as to when to sprinkle since pinpointing the exact filmic coordinates for that would only open too big a can of worms. Notice that observing the aforesaid writer’s paradigm – which would certainly seem the most rational of suggestions – would have invariably meant invalidating art for art’s sake. This would, in turn, mean invalidating a perfectly sound reason for artistic creation – for filmmaking. The conclusion, then? There is



no criterion for sprinkling but personal discretion or, more accurately put, desire; desire to sprinkle is, and should be, itself, justification enough to sprinkle.

By and by, *The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra* was drawing to its enigmatic, if not provocative, conclusion, on the admonition “think of the things that happened today, again and again, look forward to tomorrow, it will be worth it”. As my recount ends, I ask, too, of my readers to think of what I have said today, again and again...

one needs only a wandering mind,
an unafraid hand, and fresh produce
to make the non-realist film

At the end of the day, the non-realist film is “a fantastic combination of sleeping science and human engineering”. For all the wondrous preternatural figments it may portray, it is, nonetheless, formed from “sleeping science” – a suspension of disbelief (or, as one might say, the going-to-sleep of one’s reality-testing impulses) – and “human engineering” – a systematic transmogrification of the ordinary. In truth, one only needs a wandering mind, an unafraid hand, and fresh produce to make the non-realist film; to make the non-realist film, one only needs to sprinkle a slice of lotus root red.





To Singaporean Cinema, With Love

BY JOLIE FAN



Dear Jolie,

At its most rapturous, Singaporean cinema takes on refreshingly bold approaches to storytelling, navigating complex skeins of socially sensitive issues revolving around class, race, identity and sexuality. Wrestling against the currents of national economic and political anxieties, conservative social norms, urban redevelopment clean-ups, and international competitors, Singaporean films convey a kind of liminal experience that I found myself inexplicably steeped in – never attempting to fit into a definitive label nor force a singular unity but continually straddling palimpsests of heterogenous identities and relations.

This is what attending the “Singapore Panorama: Mildly Offensive, Sometimes Accurate” forum, held at the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival, feels like. For the first time, assumptions and speculations are laid bare, interrogated, and hung out for display. Whether it was banter exchanged vexedly on a production set or internalized prejudices acquired, it is at this forum where the floodgates of repressed sentiments and grievances about the local film industry grapple with long-standing myths and half-truths.

Far from a didactic one-sided lecture proselytising Singaporean cinema, topics broached at the forum were collectively dissected by audience members consisting of various factions of artists, programmers, critics, filmmakers and cultural workers. Contradictions are welcome and co-existence is encouraged. On the floor were two axes plotted according to accuracy and offensiveness. Audiences voted while panelists, like coordinates, moved across the quadrants to indicate their stance and valence towards controversial statements heard about Singapore’s film and media industry.

Hosted by stage actor Hossan Leong, the forum’s audiences heard from veteran and emerging voices including theatre practitioners Jalyn Han and Wendy Toh, directors He Shuming and Kris Ong, actors Sivakumar Palakrishnan and Cassandra Spykerman and casting director Koo Chia Meng.

As the forum’s title suggests, the aim was not to take an absolute or deterministic stance to truth but to reveal the plurality of influences at play precipitating in various inflexions of inferiority, prejudice and self-censorship. For nearly two hours, the forum transformed into a gathering of artists, creatives, students, and laymen, each with different experiences, perceptions, and beliefs – however misplaced or misdirected – who are nevertheless bound by a shared commitment to local cinema.



It struck me then that Singapore is mostly known to the world for being orderly, productive, and glossy – not pioneering creative visions nor making cinematic new waves. As I sit in the audience of the forum, a cardinal question arises uncomfortably: how much of this paucity is attributable to state restrictions on cultural policy and funding and how much is internal, arising from artistic merit, ethnicity, gender, and class privilege?

Here, my central preoccupation revolves around two key complicated axioms that I, as a Singaporean film critic and programmer, struggled to come to terms with:

Assumption #1: Singaporean films are too safe.



Singapore Panorama: Mildly Offensive, Sometimes Accurate. Image from Singapore International Film Festival.

In 2018, the Asia Times published the article “Singapore Swings and Misses at the Arts” attributing the perceived scarcity of an organic and vibrant local arts scene to the city-state’s strict media censorship and cultural conservatism. Singapore’s censorship system is a unique one, shaped by ever-changing social relations and subjectivities between an unpredictable public and a continually anxious city-state.¹ Excessive rules and regulations prohibit artistic expression that threatened the public’s “Asian Values”, leaving little room for boundary-pushing, challenging the status quo and experimentation that were necessary for artistic excitement and conducive for discourse.²

how much of this paucity is attributable to state restrictions on cultural policy and funding and how much is internal, arising from artistic merit, ethnicity, gender, and class privilege?

Furthermore, the revision of the Films Act enacted by the Singapore Parliament in 1998 incriminated the distribution, production or exhibition of “party political films” directed towards influencing political agenda or threatening national security. In the past, Martyn See’s *Singapore Rebel* (2006) and Zahari’s *Seventeen Years* (2007) were prohibited because they were deemed too political for featuring outspoken critics of the Singaporean government.

For local films that are not overtly political, socially perceptive films still often receive M18 and R21 ratings which have restricted their reach, e.g., *Apprentice* (2016) by Boo Jun Feng, *A Yellow Bird* (2016) by K Rajagopal, and *Sex. Violence. Family Values* (2013) by Ken Kwek. This year, Kwek’s new film *#LookAtMe* was denied classification by the Infocomm Media Development Authority on the grounds that it had “the potential to cause enmity and social division in Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious society”.³ As such, censorship processes that are contingent on the imaginations of the unknowability and unpredictability of public reaction have serious implications for filmmakers who want their films to be seen.

Notably, this first assumption (turned general axiom) elicited an assenting buzz around the room. “Sometimes, I try to codify certain things to make sure that there will be a general audience that will accept it,” says *Ajumma* director He Shuming, a panellist on the forum, “It’s just the way we are trained . . . and it’s trickled down to my filmmaking.” In other words, filmmakers in Singapore have learnt to play safe, internalizing the boundaries known to them while at the same time testing the water in accordance to changing social mores. Audience members fervently agreed as the votes skew towards accurate and non-offensive and Leong affirmatively declares, “we want our films screened”.



Assumption #2: Singaporean talents can't rival overseas talents.

The discomfort in the room was palpable. You read the arresting assertion on screen and feel a sense of swelling indignance. You recall applying to study overseas because you too had adamantly believed that there was little room for artists, gallerists and curators in Singapore. The panelists mostly agreed with this belief. He again remarked:

“The training that we have here is a little limited than actors in other ecosystems possess. When I shot in Korea, the actors there come from acting schools and work their way into it. You need the opportunity to keep working on your craft, and I think we don't have that.”

The audience quietly nodded along.

Many of Singapore's cultural initiatives materialize from top-down ambitions – take *The Esplanade*, for example, Singapore's largest arts development project that is extolled as a modern tourist cynosure built to host top international performers. With its pricey rentals, access is often prohibitively expensive for local theatre practitioners, media festivals and performing groups. The megastructure of the Esplanade triggered several concerns over its utility for small performing groups, catering instead to bigger foreign productions from Broadway. You have also heard remarks labelling the building ‘soulless’ due to the absence of resident artists.⁴

Singapore's cultural landscape risks being ‘borrowed’, in the words of Chang Tou Chuang in *Renaissance Revisited*. It features as merely a pitstop cycled through by top international artists but impotent to export its own talent base into the global cultural sphere. In a similar vein, Huraya Entertainment's Anthony Huray explained the necessity to involve local manpower in “imported mega-events” such that Singapore is not simply cycled through: “Instead, you should bring in a show that has residual value for Singapore... You can also bring in Singaporeans to work on the lighting and sound system. Some of the stars should also be locals, and this will appeal to Singaporeans. This is the idea of a ‘fusion’. You bring Singapore's status up, you bring the costs down, and slowly you will have a critical mass of Singaporean expertise.”



The truth: The local film industry needs the support of a local audience to flourish.

As such, far from attaining the robust cultural enclaves of Edinburgh, New York, and Seoul, Singapore's rigid business-orientated ideology compounded with straitjacket censorship of alternative opinions erodes the city-state's image as a genuine cultural and creative hub with homegrown talents that have the opportunity to learn, train and work on their craft.

So, what then? Do local creatives resign to being overshadowed by their international counterparts?

Departing from this cynicism, actor Palakrishnan posits a different paradigm: to look at Singaporean identities in terms of their strengths rather than the lack thereof. “I'm not in favour of comparing,” he comments. “We should sell *us*. Look at *us*. Here, I feel we are always being compared to talents overseas. I don't want to be George Clooney. I don't want to be Denzel. I am Sivakumar Palakrishnan. That's *me*.”

Indeed, by whose standard are we measuring the success of our local talents? The commercial yardsticks of net worth, investment, and box-office success are not representative of the formidable and profound merit that Singaporeans possess. Responding to the fallacy of equating lack of commercial breakthroughs with the decline of Singapore's film scene and talents, writer and filmmaker Kris Ong shares, “I don't think we lack any innate talent whatsoever. But, our industry do not have the temples in place for the sort of rigour and professionalism seen elsewhere. In that sense, it is very hard for us to rival certain industries.”

Faced with a lack of opportunity but an abundance of artistic merit, what can we, as audience members, do?

The truth: The local film industry needs the support of a local audience to flourish.





Singapore Panorama: Mildly Offensive, Sometimes Accurate. Image from Singapore International Film Festival.

The forum’s closing statement was its only unanimous one. As oft quoted as it is, this statement is not often practised. To be sure, structural barriers such as funding, training, and censorship play an instrumental role in increasing the cultural output of Singapore’s film industry both nationally and globally.⁵ Yet, these systemic limitations are not enough to justify dwindling audience numbers.⁶ As audiences emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, cinema-going has lost its momentum, declining from an attendance of 18.5 million in 2019 to 4.7 million in 2020.⁷ To contend with Hollywood blockbusters and the Marvel superhero franchises now seem absurd; and with the rise of streaming platforms, the outlook of local interest in homegrown films seems worrying.

“When you go to other countries and you see their audience watch and react to a Singaporean film – they laugh, they cry – they are so appreciative of you coming over to screen your film to them,” says He on *Ajumma*’s tours across Southeast Asia and beyond.

The forum comes close to an answer on how one can support the local film industry. It is not simply buying tickets to watch the next film made in Singapore, but identifying external and internal hurdles, altering deep-seated misperceptions and inferiority complexes surrounding homegrown films, and nurturing a community that appreciates the unique strengths and accents that highlight local culture. Notably, TheatreWorks’ Ong Keng Sen and Drama Box’s Kok Heng Leun quipped that “renaissance cannot be legislated but has to be expressed



Singapore Panorama: Mildly Offensive, Sometimes Accurate. Image from Singapore International Film Festival.

by the people of Singapore” and that “art must penetrate all levels of [Singapore’s] society”, reaching artists, filmmakers, cultural curators, gallerists, academics, critics, and the everyday person.

Yours,
Jolie

ENDNOTES

1. See Fong, Siao Yuong. “Imagining film censorship in Singapore: The case of Sex. Violence. FamilyValues.” *Asian Cinema* 31, no. 1 (2020): 77-98.
2. Protecting the public’s social mores is often cited by a government, referring to the White Paper of ‘a set of Shared Values which Singaporeans of all races and faiths can subscribe to and live by’ based on ‘traditional Asian ideas’. See, Singapore (1991). *Shared Values*, Singapore. *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, Parliament of Singapore. Accessed https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_542_2004-12-18.html Also see Kong, Lily. “Ambitions of a global city: Arts, culture and creative economy in ‘post-crisis’ Singapore.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 18, no. 3 (2012): 279-294.
3. The country’s Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) released a joint statement about the NAR classification for Ken Kwek’s latest feature. See Chew, Hui Min. “Local film #LookAtMe barred from screening in Singapore over potential to cause social division.” *Channel News Asia*. October 17, 2022. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/film-lookatme-ken-kwek-religion-homosexuality-pastor-barred-screening-3011331>
4. See Chang, Tou Chuang, and Wai Kin Lee. “Renaissance City Singapore: a study of arts spaces.” *Area* 35, no. 2 (2003): 128-141.
5. The hegemony of the technocratic Singapore government is founded on: pragmatism and meritocracy. See Ooi, Can Seng. “Political pragmatism and the creative economy: Singapore as a city for the arts.” *International journal of cultural policy* 16, no. 4 (2010): 403-417 and Tan, Kenneth Paul. ‘The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-Liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore’. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, 1 (2012): 67- 92.
6. See Tang, See Kit. “Hit by streaming services and COVID-19, cinemas may see further consolidation, analysts say.” *Channel News Asia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/cinemas-filmgarde-closing-down-streaming-services-netflix-covid-19-2435476>
7. *Ibid.*



Altar: An Anatomy of Loneliness

BY TARINI BENGANI



Altar, 2022. Image from Vikneshwaran Silva.

The pandemic left us longing for a sense of connection. Longing for the next time we could meet a loved one in person or catch a movie with a friend. As my grandparents become more forlorn, confined within the four walls of their home during India's repeated pandemic lockdowns, I came to see how much more deeply social isolation affected seniors. It was this realisation which drew me to Vikneshwaran Silva's short film *Altar* (2022) at the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival. *Altar* is a moving portrayal of loneliness and financial struggles amongst older people in Singapore, a fitting follow-up to Silva's earlier work like the award-winning short film *Dark Light* which explored the struggles of an Indian-born migrant worker in Singapore.

In the opening scene of *Altar*, audiences are introduced to the film's headstrong protagonist Gopal (A. Panneerchelvam) as he prays "Lord please give me something today at least this time", hoping to win 'TOTO', a local lottery game. This is an encapsulation of Gopal's twin refuges – God and money – though perhaps one is more misguided than the other. Unfortunately, not everything that one wishes for comes true. Gopal faces insurmountable challenges when his frenzied coughing and unexplained fainting finally leads to a lung cancer diagnosis. His neglectful son Naveen (Mageswaran Nethagi) urges him to delay cancer treatment as the young man is in dire need of money. *Altar's* well-craft-





ed father-son dynamic is especially heart-breaking since Naveen is always seen speaking disrespectfully to his sick father, scarcely calls, and only visits when it best suits his own interest. Contrastingly, Gopal goes out of his way to support Naveen, even if that means making personal sacrifices. As the days go on, Gopal's misfortune compounds culminating in being fired from his job as a night security guard and losing his sole source of income.

Altar's well-crafted father-son dynamic is especially heart-breaking to witness

In my interview with Silva, he explained that *Altar* was loosely inspired by his late uncle who passed away in 2021. His uncle was a 68-year-old security officer, much like the film's protagonist. He had liver cirrhosis, but he couldn't retire. "And he was someone who was always on his own. He was very independent and strong minded. It was like even if he needed help and you wanted to ask, he wanted to only do it himself." Silva shared that when he developed *Altar's* story, he knew that he wanted to cast local veteran actor A. Panneerchelvam as Gopal, convinced that "only he could pull it off". Indeed, Panneerchelvam's consummate acting brings the character to life as every stern word and rigid gesture brings out Gopal's obstinacy, such as when he abruptly asks a visiting healthcare worker to leave, and every teary plea to God at the altar amplifies his vulnerability.

Gopal stares straight at the audience forcing us to reflect on what life ultimately means

Despite the tight two-day production and lean seven-person crew, *Altar's* bold vision is communicated through its innovative visual storytelling. All eight of *Altar's* scenes are shot from God's omniscient yet unmoving point of view. Yet, instead of using the classic high angle shot, Silva chooses to frame the entire film through the all-seeing "eyes" of



the miniature statue on Gopal's altar. The resultant shot is a straight-on, wide angle view that captures all the action and emptiness in Gopal's house. This interestingly creates an element of confrontation. When Gopal faces the altar in between bursts of coughs and cries, asking God questions like "what else can I do?" and "are you happy now?", he breaks the fourth wall. Gopal stares straight at the audience forcing us to reflect on what life ultimately means and, perhaps more profoundly, compels us to reconsider our relationships with elderly people in our lives. Have we left them to fend for themselves?

In one visually striking scene, the film overlays multiple scenes of Gopal in a single frame as he goes about cleaning his small flat, reading newspapers, and talking to the mirror. Although there are "many Gopals", his abode feels hollow and lonely. Meanwhile, Silva's stylistic use of jarring cuts quickens the rhythm of the film, illustrating how the quick pace of life leaves individuals feeling left behind and disconnected. This idea of life swiftly passing by is also conveyed more subtly by the faint sound of a clock ticking that can be heard throughout *Altar*. All these techniques coming together create complex layers of loneliness in *Altar* and illustrate Silva's principal message of actively appreciating those whom we love and who love us as our time on earth is short.

Although Silva was initially apprehensive that experimenting with storytelling techniques like lapses in time and static camera shots might alienate his audience, the gamble has clearly paid off. *Altar* was not only selected for the Singapore International Film Festival's Singapore Panorama programme, but also won Silva the 'Best Director Award' at the 2022 National Youth Film Awards. More importantly, the film has deeply resonated with Singapore's senior citizens. Beaming with pride, Silva tells me that, after showing *Altar* to his friends' mothers, they have asked him to continue making films like this to teach younger generations about the lives, loves, and losses of the elderly. Ultimately, Silva's unconventional methods have elevated a moving yet conventional narrative and thus has put a spotlight on the loneliness of Singapore's silver generation in a poignant way.





Have you ever thought, “I want to go home” but you’re already in your room?

BY SHELBY KHO



Tanakit Kitsanayunyong's *There Are Fish in The Water and Rice in The Fields* isn't shy about carrying grief and resentment. The film arcs like a horizontal pregnant belly, it rises up a hill and slowly falls. Symmetrical. It begins with disembodied interviews with Thai citizens on what home means to each of them, accompanied by a discordant mix of calm, ominous music and frenzied cursor-click trip through a black-and-white Google Street View of Pratunam. With each click, the film moves forward, cruising through the onward arrows and, lurching across pixelated roads lined with blurry buildings. There is dissatisfaction in their voices – non-accusatory, almost resigned – coming from explicit sentiments regarding their places of residence. Sometimes, one shares an anecdote about feelings distant from their physical homes, while another says they have never really felt at home, that they were simply occupying space.

A woman said that she had never looked at the sky because she tripped when she was young and is afraid of tripping again, so she's always looking down. This film isn't an unbiased reflection of what Thai citizens really feel – it is guilty of direction, a crafted truth. The woman's anecdote is an event that birthed underlying pain in the rest of her living, speaking not directly about physical conditions of home, but something that influences it. Trauma comes from experiences, and these very experiences happens at the place where a person lives, and these experiences that happens at the place where a person lives, affects the living at these said places forever. By presenting feelings that seem apart from the topic at hand – What is home? – the filmmaker constructs an emotional core that embraces the way young Thai citizens view home, be it their place of residence or their heart.

Couldn't the sky be an invitation to take deeper breaths and open up to new ideas, a peaceful space and sight, a reminder that the vast world moves but never in a rush? The woman never looked at the sky. Breaths are shallower, world narrower, things are still and coarse.

By conjugating various expressions of discontent, the film successfully evokes a primary feeling: a mixture of loss, displeasure, and a mild grudge.

An interviewee says that “Home” is more than just a place to sleep in, that it's a presentation of human dignity, and that it's a basic need.





Soon follows varying thoughts on the places that once were - such as a mall that's been renovated and no longer retains their antique charm, or a waterpark that built new slides that aren't as pretty, the roads get worn daily – and then the desires of some to leave the country –

“I don't want to live and die in Bangkok.”
“I don't feel like I exist here.”

One said that it's too far-fetched to hope that their country could improve and decided that moving is the achievable alternative. Particularly to Japan. This sentiment seemed to resonate with many others. An emptiness is established.

A man saw his whole life at a bridge – walking past it every day throughout primary school, high school, and then university, and inspired memories of when he wanted to jump off the bridge. He said he was afraid of the future. Everything could happen in one place – birth, life, and death. The curve of a pregnant belly. Escape seems the only way.

Then follows uncertainties –

“I'm not sure if buying a house or moving abroad to build a house will be what I want.”
“It's just moving from one space to another.”

Kitsananyunyong uses uncomplicated techniques whilst talking about something difficult. Just like how the simplest way to someone's heart is to let them know how you feel, candidness proved an asset in relaying emotions in *There Are Fish in The Water and Rice in The Fields*. A double quotation mark in everything was established early, but also the sentiment that viewers can trust the film and the people involved, or at least trust that although these may not be ultimate truths, these were true to them, a hundred per cent and with a megaphone. Through this film, deliberations are inspired in the people interviewed and in viewers, and it can be limitless. This is what poetry feels like. Truth in emotions, intensity growing with layers. While roving through the streets aimlessly, a sensation of resignation is evoked. The film is a compilation of the desperate search for home, and through the different phases of emotions – the pattern of human emotional deliberation - that are threaded in the structure of the film, audiences witness the pessimism in this pursuit for certainty.

Like everything else, a thing can mean a billion different things to a billion different people, but there is a consist-



ency here – there is an uncertainty paired with the primary feeling. Nobody said, “I don't know what home is,” but instead attempt to define it as best as they can, sometimes accompanied with a dismissive chuckle. The choice of an interview, the casual nature of these conversations allowed people to be comfortable with being incorrect, with presenting their maybes. Things are being figured out, and the different interviewees create a chart of different phases of figuring things out – some are in the stage of blaming the environment or place of residence, some on self, some are already doing emotional calculations and ruminating pain thresholds, some are questioning their beliefs and belief origins, and some had taken a break from figuring things out, but there is a certainty that their views are uncertain and impermanent.

Sometimes, discomforts in occupying one's own being is a life-long crisis.





Through Gaze, I Feel the Censored Touch

BY SENG SAVUNTHARA



How does one encapsulate the many dimensions of Iranian artist-filmmaker Maryam Tafakory's feelings about her country's cinema in the experimental essay film, *'Nazarbazi'*? Upon finishing the film, the feeling of things left unsaid expands to other senses of incompleteness. Interspliced images and texts, everything lays covert despite their best efforts to appear cohesive. The essay film settles with mostly the gestures of people in dusty forgotten films, of non-canonical Iranian cinema unrecognizable in all facets. I left the film still with a limited understanding; the conditions that have limited the film as it was presented are not anyone's fault.

On the surface, the montage appears as a dressing for a film-history showreel, the cuts intentional, quick and practical. Under the collage of Iranian films dated from 1980's to the 2000's, everything crackles under the compression of images, the missing transference of sounds, and the sources derived to the conclusion I viewed it in. In a figurative sense, meaning also crackles and the physical touch was distorted to mean indecency after the Iranian revolution in 1979. Gleaning scenes from 87 films, Tafakory reconstructs Iranian cinema in post-Revolutionary period as a capsule of yearning.



Nazarbazi, 2022. Image from Maryam Tafakory.

Iranian movie-goers were robbed of physicality in films, not of action sequences but the sensuality of a lover's touch, where intimacy was one of a bygone age.



Tafakory put each brief scene together to insinuate this lack. Fingers tremble as the arms half-extend. All scenes share non-touch as a concept, brewed under censorship where individual will have been imposed.

This interruption mirrors Tafakory's choices, with characters' mental breakdowns to objects literally breaking. At such cost, the images of curtains fluttering suffuse the sense of longing, becoming a symbolic surrogate for fidelity not just between two people, but also between the spectator themselves and cinema.



Nazarbazi, 2022. Image from Maryam Tafakory.

Under the Farsi, the English text discloses, “We were informed from the outset of how this journey would conclude,” and to inform us as such, the film forecloses the abilities to formulate arguments or to organize opposition writ large against a system of words and images. Tafakory draws from eclectic sources, the texts themselves take hold the aura of archival purity as the image. Their mutual necessity propels the essay, and when taken in totality they become an annotative resistance against the regime's prohibition.

When touching in films emerged as a cultural matter of the post-revolutionary policy, romance dissolves into the background of an institutional agenda, and tension reappears in another form to intensify between silences. Thus, the images

stagger on the cusp of “occurrence,” scenes intercutting one another allows the reckoning of nature to intrude. The invisible state power surveils over, as the actors struggle to visualize the vestigial gestures of romance left within them.

Tafakory interweaves poetry, critical texts and her own writings over the editor's conceit of visual techniques – binding found materials as way of personalization. And I, in turn, intently write to steal from these extracts and phrases, from Tafakory's select array of words and truncated phrases from authors, critical theorists, and poets. Disparate and dated apart, the films and words strung unite as a tapestry revelatory as a personal journal, and a repository for something brazen and new. That is why her rigorous parsing of 417 films before the final cut strikes as a simultaneous dedication to apprehend history and herself within it.

The first question Derrida poses in his essay ‘On Touching’ is this: when our eyes touch, is it day or night?

This question refers to the way we look at one another; through our eyes, the sensation derived from our glances renders the untouchable felt. *Nazarbazi* is translated into the English phrase, “play of the glances,” and through it Tafakory animates the visibility of romance in post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema through the haptics of gaze. Actors are conscious of what they cannot do, they are instructed not to achieve something.



Nazarbazi, 2022. Image from Maryam Tafakory.



With cinema facing such a romantic crisis, a near-touch became a reactionary attempt.

Recurring scenes of women sobbing, or a face soaking in a glass bowl have the point-of-view shots as a common exchange between a camera and a gaze. As such, where the miasma of the oppressive regime has the onscreen physical touch thwarted, belied were solitary reaches or hesitant signs of affection, which have now served as a politico-sexual innuendo of resistance.

What the camera can achieve are through these vibrations, the infinitude of unachieved caresses. With cinema facing such a romantic crisis, a near-touch became a reactionary attempt. By touch as a way to accentuate a duality of form, a credence to phenomenology, Tafakory exposes the barring that imperatively erases “the line between feeling and being felt.”

Morphing images to a heavy-scented kaleidoscope, the experimental form redefines the space, its own censor; for instance, if one touches, one will inevitably touch oneself. The woman closes her eyes in anticipation, but touch has subsumed under the morality law, then the raw nerves of the lack of physicality is at full throttle. Now, gaze shifts to a sensorial apprentice of touch, it evades the literal cutaneous connection to the soul, we see the non-physical and the untouchable simmer.

Derrida describes gaze as “inapparent” and an exchange of look as the touching of the eyes, and so we can recognize in Iranian cinema that the gaze bestowed as a touch disrupted. Before the revolution, FilmFarsi dominated the mainstream Iranian film industry, filling theaters with actors engaging in softcore intimacy, lovey-dovey, affectionate kiss and touch. After the revolution, actors and screenwriters were either ousted from their trade or exiled. Now, the task of a sensorial predicament which Tafakory wades through the thick of post-FilmFarsi cinema is to embrace the ghostly unhappening. In this expanse where the harmony of tension overbrims, the textual circuits goad us to meditate on the human and natural gestures that never seem to consummate.

Considered a trailblazer for Iranian poetry and cinema, Forugh Farrokhzad’s verse appearing in the film no longer



matters whether it has been nudged out of place or placed precisely, for text is non-text and image is non-image in the virtual inhabitation of censorship. Tafakory shields from the colliding impact between her commentary and the text, too. The texts are impervious to the images, they had already been founded as a commentary on themselves. So perhaps, the recycling of words parallel the sounds and images as recycled and exponentially passed on before they reached Tafakory.

Even after research, the history becomes vast, tallied by authors, methodologies and national laws. The collage turns on itself, shaped into its own presupposition by the hands that know best. *Nazarbazi* insinuates the rhetoric of resistance against censorship in a manner seemingly arduous and obfuscating, scathing by the sheer power of filmic epistemology, that it falls far from reach.

It is a tale of two sad stories if we consider the dominant distaste towards FilmFarsi, coined by an Iranian film critic, Houshang Kavousi to dismiss Iranian films during the 60’s for their lack of flair and co-opted Hindi and Egyptian aesthetic and stories. If we consider the pre-Revolutionary onscreen touch as a cliché accessory, then the post-Revolutionary yearning for it to reappear is a cliché nostalgia.

Personally, this essay has a dysfunctional hotline to *Nazarbazi*; an essay on another (video) essay seems obtuse and needlessly complicated. Who evaluates who, after all? Writing afar, it feels like an oppressive dream to amount to a lot. I have not covered everything required and I never will. I feel a loss of sense of touch. Perhaps, Tafakory feels the same way, traversing and writing from and between London and Shiraz. Tafakory watches films on loop and many to count; I do not – besides hers. I stare into the screen and rearrange paragraphs how I would imagine Tafakory to parse through hundreds of Iranian films. It is a matter of distance.

From these dimensions, we are midway seeing eyes to eyes. Let us connect through this disjointedness. The British-Iranian film producer Elhum Shakerifar calls Tafakory a “film-weaver”. We are all writing on the fraying of history, imparted by the next cycle of medium replaced, visual distorted, and text embroidered. If Tafakory’s film does not clue us in on the historical journey of Iranian film censorship directly, at the very least, it has successfully shared with us the best attributes of a love letter to cinema.





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