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Slang Images: On the 'Foreignness' of Contemporary Singaporean Films

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Slang Images: On the 'Foreignness' of Contemporary Singaporean Films

In Singapore, fun is serious business.¹ Having achieved a desirable state of economic prosperity and stability, since the 1990s Singapore has been looking towards the arts and culture to provide its citizens with the fun and leisure they can now afford.² The Singapore government has committed itself to developing the arts with a similar verve to its pursuit of economic modernization since the mid-1960s.³ More recently, Singapore's vision of itself as a 'Global Media City' has been enshrined in a government policy entitled "Media 21" that aims to increase the GDP contribution of Singapore's media cluster from 1.56 per cent to 3 per cent in ten years. This ambitious plan, reading culture primarily in economic terms, was unveiled at an industry forum by the Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, Dr. Lee Boon Yang, in July 2003.⁴ Underlying the Media 21 policy is a strategy to develop what has been termed "Made-by-

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¹ Singapore's former Minister for Information and the Arts (from 1991-1999) and current Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo is well-known for having said: "It may seem odd but we have to pursue the subject of fun very seriously if we want to stay competitive in the twenty-first century;" cit. Koolhaas, 1077. This idea of "serious fun" was reiterated by Mr Yeo's successor to the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, Khaw Boon Wan: "We are ... in a serious fun business. To deliver fun, we must be fun-lovers ourselves." Khaw.

² A visible manifestation of Singapore's new commitment to the arts was the delivery of the national performing arts center—the Esplanade—at Marina Bay in October 2002.

³ Singapore gained independence from Malaysia in 1965. At the time of independence, Singapore was a poor island country, lacking in natural resources.

⁴ Dr. Lee's speech is available at: http://www.mita.gov.sg/pressroom/press_030708.html.

Singapore” content. The CEO of the Media Development Authority (MDA), Lim Hock Chuan, explains the significance of this term: “We mean content that is made with Singapore talent, financing, expertise, but not necessarily made in Singapore entirely, or made for the Singapore audience only. Singapore’s market size is small and we need to develop ‘Made-by-Singapore’ content that has the potential to travel outside Singapore.”⁵ In the realm of filmmaking, it has been recognised that many Singaporean films are too ‘local,’ too ‘colloquial,’ and ‘content development’ has been identified as a key area in need of immediate financial support from the government.⁶ One method of dealing with the question of ‘content’ has been to position Singapore as a place of ‘contentless’ or ‘content-free’ production. Raintree Pictures, the film-making arm of the State-run MediaCorp, has a production agenda whose aim is “to make truly international and ‘borderless’ movies ... [that would raise] the profile of the company in the region” and “travel beyond Asia.”⁷ Straddling an official (State-sponsored) discourse of export and internationalisation, media practitioners within Singapore are also attempting to build and sustain local cultures and communities. The recent initiatives encapsulated by the Media 21 policy come at the end of a decade-long cultural revival that has been gathering momentum in recent years. It is this local cultural renaissance that is providing the heart and soul to Singapore’s ambition to transform itself into a global media city. Rather than exploring ‘content-free’ productions, I am therefore more interested in those that actively work to produce a certain vision or version of the local. I argue that certain productions of the local can simultaneously also manufacture a particular brand of ‘foreignness’ for

⁵ Tan, “Media 21.”

⁶ The Singapore Film Commission has set aside S\$25 million for this purpose alone. Tan, “Media 21.”

⁷ Cited in Tan et.al, “Contemporary Singapore Filmmaking,” note 45.

the international audiences the country is so keen to capture. It is these local (slang) images that can be used to develop a theory of ‘foreignness’ applicable to the recent global circulation of films from South East and East Asia.

It is easy to say, as Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour do, that “all films are foreign films, foreign to some other audience.”⁸ What is significant, however, are the gradations between the levels of ‘foreignness,’ the hierarchies and relations of viewing that are inscribed in the reception of different kinds of ‘foreign’ films. Egoyan and Balfour’s recent collection, *Subtitles*, is a glossy, cinephilic embrace of the so-called ‘foreign film’ and the practice of subtitling, yet precisely what constitutes the ‘foreignness’ of a film is not elaborated upon. Is it merely that a film is subtitled, spoken in a language different from one’s own?⁹ Do some languages circulate with more currency than others on the international film festival circuit? Given the existence of these questions and the divergent practices of subtitling within different film industries, it is desirable to avoid a purely linguistic argument by concentrating on the image rather than on any text that might appear below it. My question is whether it is possible to represent foreignness through a particular kind of image—one that in producing the local simultaneously also manufactures a brand of foreignness that is assimilable and ‘recognisable’ by outside audiences. Singapore is a unique place to regard these issues of localness and foreignness (much like Hong Kong was for a previous generation of film scholars); as an ‘Asian’

⁸ Egoyan and Balfour, 21.

⁹ Some countries, such as Malaysia and Hong Kong, have a practice of subtitling almost all films to cater for their linguistically diverse local audiences. Thus not all subtitled films can automatically be regarded as ‘foreign.’ The semiotics of subtitling, while intriguing, falls outside the scope of this paper.

country, Singapore is still foreign to Westerners at the same time as it is also comfortable, understandable, navigable, because so much of the population speaks English there.

Ethnically, Singapore has a majority Chinese population which the films reflect, but historically, this Chineseness has been linguistically fractured. In an attempt to cohere its diverse Chinese population, former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew sought to unify the various Chinese dialect groups through the common language of Mandarin. The “Speak Mandarin Campaign,” launched in 1979, was reinvigorated with the “Hua Yu, Cool” slogan in 2004, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the policy. Representing Singapore’s commitment to bilingualism, the “Speak Good English Movement” was also launched in 2000 to promote the use of standard English and discourage the use of Singlish.¹⁰ This linguistic diversity (and anxiety) exists alongside a cultural diversity that is somewhat lacking in Singapore’s contemporary cinema, which is made almost entirely by Chinese-Singaporeans about Chinese-Singaporeans. Despite majority Chineseness in the ethnic make-up of its population, officially, Singapore positions itself as a modern *Asian* nation, with tourist slogans promoting it as “New Asia.” Strategically, Singapore has self-consciously represented itself as a modern ‘Asian’ nation that is now in the process of ‘opening up’ further to the rest of the world.¹¹ This rhetoric of ‘opening up’ was initially

¹⁰ 77% of the population is ethnically Chinese; however, Singapore records four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English. English is the language of business and administration. ‘Singlish’ or ‘Singaporean English’ is colloquial English consisting of words borrowed from the local Chinese and Malay dialects. The “Speak Good English Movement” website can be found at: <http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/SGEM/>.

¹¹ In order to position Singapore within a rapidly modernising world, and to find a way to control its population during this time of rapid growth, the government had to forge new notions of national identity. In particular, it “assert[ed] itself as ‘Asian,’ in the face of a morally bankrupt West.” (Birch, 205).

expounded by Singapore's second Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, and carried even further by his successor, Lee Hsien Loong, on several policy fronts, although my interest is in the realm of film and media policy.¹² I will not be addressing the issue of censorship here; others, such as David Birch, have explored that in detail, although 'opening up' also entails a loosening of censorship rules since strict censorship makes it difficult to produce the kinds of films that will travel widely.¹³ What is more interesting to me are how other developments in Singapore's media policy will inevitably lead to exposure to new markets, to outside audiences, and for the first time in several decades the need to position and articulate Singaporean films as a particular kind of 'foreign' product.

"Singaporeans can no longer be treated as uneducated children requiring paternal guidance and control, a system which had operated for years under Lee Kuan Yew—a newer strategy of control was required, and for the most part, this has rested upon 'Asianising' Singapore so that its citizens can self-reflexively assert themselves as Asians in a rapidly modernizing/liberalizing world, but in fact be subtly controlled by the very nature of that 'Asianness.'" (Birch, 200). According to Birch, censorship is one strategy used to maintain control of the population in Singapore in conjunction with a discourse of modernisation as Asianisation.

¹² At his swearing-in ceremony on 12 August 2004, Lee Hsien Loong articulated his vision of Singapore as an "open" and "inclusive" society whose members "should feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply be different." Loong, 6 (paragraph 26). In recent years Singapore has revisited a number of key policies: homosexuals are now allowed into the public service, permits have been granted to bars and clubs allowing 'bar-top' dancing, and soon a decision will be made on whether or not to allow a casino to open on the island.

¹³ Film classification was introduced in Singapore in 1991. Although there has been some relaxation of censorship rules in recent years with the creation of new categories of film classification, Singapore remains a highly conservative society on this matter.

As I have already outlined, the Singaporean film industry, at least in the contemporary period, is an emergent film industry. After having lain dormant for some twenty years during the period 1973 to 1991, when not a single feature film was recorded as having been made on the island, the Singaporean film industry is experiencing something of a (re)birth or a “revival,” as it has been termed. Between the period 1991 and 2004, at least forty-five features have been made in and ‘by’ Singapore.

The Singaporean film industry was kick-started in the early 1990s by a series of coincident private and public initiatives. State initiatives to promote the local film industry include scholarships to Singaporeans to study film abroad, funding for training at local polytechnics, and the establishment of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC) and Raintree Pictures both in 1998. Although in recent years it has been Singapore’s short films that have been particularly successful at international film festivals, this paper will focus predominantly on developments in the country’s nascent feature film production.¹⁴

These two factors: an emergent cinematic modernity and the rhetoric of an Asianised modernity poised to further ‘open up,’ make Singaporean films interesting to analyse at this point in their development. This paper will examine how a linguistic and cultural diversity that very much represents the ‘local’ in Singapore becomes translated into a

¹⁴ There is a vibrant short film culture in Singapore; approximately 100 short films are made each year. There are monthly screenings of local short films at the Substation and the “Singapore Short Cuts” film festival is now in its second year. The Singapore International Film Festival also has a short film program that regularly screens local shorts.

particular brand of ‘foreignness’ for international audiences. Framing this study are two additional contexts that are worth exploring when considering the specificity of the Singaporean situation: the consolidation of the international film festival circuit and the institutionalisation of film studies programs focussed on world cinema.

The Foreignness of Films

The outspoken film critic and champion of American cinema, Andrew Sarris, opines that the new generation of spectators “can’t be bothered with the foreignness of foreign films.”¹⁵ Sarris is referring to one particular type of (American) audience, too lazy to read subtitles. However, it is my contention that the ‘foreign film’ is making a comeback, or rather, a stronger than ever appearance, in the Euro-American imagination.

International film festivals are growing in number and significance, as is the role they are playing in the exhibition and distribution of films from around the globe. Julian Stringer observes, “[a]s theatrical markets for movies have shrunk around the world, festivals are now often the sole formal exhibition site for many new titles.”¹⁶ As an emergent film industry, one of the few avenues for Singaporean films to join the global traffic in cinema is through the international film festival circuit.¹⁷ Like Korean cinema and the New Chinese cinemas before them, South East Asian cinemas (from Thailand, Vietnam and

¹⁵ Cited in Egoyan and Balfour, 30.

¹⁶ Stringer, 134.

¹⁷ For the first time in 2003, Singapore set up a booth at the Marché du Film, the market event of the Cannes film festival, to demonstrate that it was a serious film-producing country.

Malaysia for instance) are gradually being ‘discovered’ at international film festivals.¹⁸ Film festivals both establish and maintain cross-cultural looking relations; Philip Cheah, the director of the Singapore International Film Festival, comments, “Singaporeans have to travel westwards to see their own cinema.” He adds, “South East Asia is as alien to fellow South East Asians as it is to foreigners. We spend a lot of time looking at each other and wonder what the other is thinking. For that reason, South East Asian cinema tends to get recognised first in other countries than in their homelands.”¹⁹ Over time, this imbalance tends to be edifying. As Julian Stringer adds, film festivals play an often under-acknowledged role in the construction of film history since the films that are distributed through this circuit become those that critics and academics are likely to gain access to and thus to recirculate.²⁰

Compounding this situation is the growth in, and entrenchment of, courses on what has been termed “world cinema” in film studies programs within Euro-American academia (with the new South East Asian cinemas gathering a fair share of interest of late). The ‘modernity’ of Asian cinemas has arrived, but for the most part this has been achieved by films that critique the processes of economic modernization that got them there in the first place. I will return to this point later. The broader theoretical question I would like to explore is: how are we to deal with these local(ised) critiques of Asian modernity and at

¹⁸ This seems to suggest that their national industries did not exist prior to their entry into film festivals. This is the *distribution* history of world cinema masquerading as *production* history, Stringer, 135.

¹⁹ Cheah.

²⁰ Stringer, 134.

the same time with a growing interest in films ‘foreign’ to the Euro-American tradition and canon?

In a convincingly erudite, though still preliminary, rumination, Paul Willeman has recently argued for a “comparative film studies” that uses the “comparative literature” model as a point of interest and divergence. Willeman suggests that the major problem underlying a comparative practice of film studies is “how do cinemas emerging from within different socio-historical formations negotiate the encounter between capitalist modernization and whatever mode of social-economic regulation and (re)production that preceded that encounter?”²¹ Willeman observes that in the poorest examples, this ‘negotiation’ manifests itself in the form of an *emulation* of Hollywood productions in an attempt to gain success by conforming to often misguided ideas about how Hollywood films function. However, Willeman adds, “In the more interesting cases, the cinematic narrativization of local social experience bears the stamp of its encounter with the forces that shape and energize the industrialization of culture locally. How the differences between those alternatives can be read and assessed constitutes one of the challenges that a comparative theory of cinema will have to meet.”²² From Willeman’s perspective ‘foreign’ means ‘American,’ rather than ‘outside America’ as is usually the case (he is writing from Northern Ireland after all). In such a model, “[w]hat is unstable is ... not the compromise between local material and foreign form, but between local material and the transformative power and impact of industrialization itself, which is never simply

²¹ Willeman, 99.

²² Willeman, 102-3.

‘foreign.’”²³ Such an argument, which posits the equivalence of (or at least a sympathy between) ‘alternative modernities,’ attempts to understand how cultural forms (including a heavily industrialized form like the cinema) express modernisation within locally specific environments; that is, how a locally specific encounter with capitalism and industrialisation can be rendered cinematically diverse, rather than merely a simulation of the way such an encounter turned out in the United States.²⁴ In order to begin this comparative work towards thinking about the ‘foreignness’ of films using the Singaporean example, it is first necessary to outline and delineate the films in question.

Films from the Revival Period (1991-2004)

Of the forty or so films produced during the revival period (1991-2004), it is possible to identify two major kinds of films that have very distinct relationships to a vernacular representation of economic modernisation.

1) Highly localised films, which I will call ‘local content films.’ The main examples in this category are the comedies either starring, written or directed by popular local comedian Jack Neo such as *Money No Enough*, *That One Not Enough* and *Liang Po Po*. These films have little or no success in foreign markets (with the possible exception of Malaysia): they are too localised, too colloquial, to be exportable or consumable further afield, although domestically some have done very well.

²³ Willeman, 103.

²⁴ Willeman, 103.

2) The second category consists of films that on the surface also appear to be very localised, but have in fact been successful overseas, mainly on the international film festival circuit. The main examples here are the films of Eric Khoo (*Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*), Royston Tan's *15*, and to a lesser extent Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air*.

While the films in the first group consist mainly of comedies, those in the second category tend to be dramas, told almost in a documentary style although still highly stylised. These films represent the darker side of Singapore's economic modernisation; the dispossession and discontent, exploitation and alienation felt by those marginalised by the modernising process (for example, the working class, or the youth). The filmic images of this second category enact the failed processes of an Asianised modernity at a vernacular or everyday level and in doing so represent the *artistic* modernity of contemporary Singaporean films.

For the purposes of this paper, I will put aside the issue of co-productions, and Singapore's drive towards 'content-free' media production and exchange.²⁵ Rather, I am interested in the production of images of 'Singaporean-ness'—of a unique local identity and a vernacular for (contemporary) Singaporean life that becomes assimilable into a particular brand of 'foreignness' by international audiences. Thus, I am more interested in

²⁵ Between the years of 1991 and 2003, a number of co-productions have been made with Hong Kong companies, such as *Turn Left, Turn Right*, *Infernal Affairs II*, *The Eye*, *Nothing to Lose*, *The Truth About Jane and Sam*, *The Mirror*, and *2000AD*. There has been one co-production with Vietnam, *Song of the Stork*, one with Thailand, *Last Life in the Universe*, and one with America, *Miss Wonton*.

the second type of film, Singapore's international film festival entries. I do not wish to suggest that overseas success is any indicator of the 'foreignness' of a film but it is interesting to see what becomes valued as a 'foreign' product by a particular type of audiences (festival-goers and critics).

To explore the relationship between the local and the foreign in contemporary Singapore films, I will employ the notion of 'slang'—a highly localised and colloquial form which is not entirely understandable (and thus somewhat 'foreign') to those outside its narrow linguistic system (though they may share a larger system of communication). I suggest that the notion of a slang image can be used to characterise the production a certain vision or version of the local that can simultaneously also manufacture foreignness for outside audiences. This visual transfer is, of course, medium specific. Linguistically, slang has been defined as “a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech.”²⁶ Despite censorship rules and other constraints such as the discouragement of the use of Singlish or the ban on dialects in the broadcast media, these kinds of “vagabond” expressions continue to make their appearance in contemporary Singaporean films, representing one reality of everyday life in Singapore. By an extension of this linguistic vernacularism, however, it is also possible to consider an aesthetic vernacular, or a slang image, that can translate the local into a particular brand of foreignness. The key point to note is that this is a 'foreignness' that can be assimilated and understood since it articulates a common experience of economic modernization in order to produce a cinematic modernity. Despite their seeming exclusivity, slang images

²⁶ Partridge, 2.

can also circulate in, and be taken up by, other vernaculars. To this end, this paper will also provide some broader speculations on the regionalisation of cinema, and in particular Asian cinema. I will argue that it is possible to think of slang images as a mode of cinematic narration that negotiates and articulates Asian modernities on a vernacular level against the vision we are presented with in official discourses.

Slang Images

The possibility of a ‘slang image’ initially came to me while I was watching a Jane Campion film, *In the Cut*, a couple of years ago. The status of this film as an Australian film is somewhat dubious. It is financed by Australian, British, and American money, its stars are for the most part American, its cinematographer, Dion Beebe, is Australian, and its director is a New Zealander who was trained in Sydney at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School and is thus often claimed as an Australian as well. Narratively, however, the film is completely removed from Australia. It is based on Susanna Moore’s novel of the same name, set in New York. I hadn’t read Moore’s book but I had seen enough publicity material to know that the film was a kind of slasher thriller, in which characters would inevitably meet with gruesome endings. This is not the kind of film I would ever choose to see if I could help it. I went on the basis that it is a ‘Jane Campion’ film, hoping to at least appreciate it on an authorial level, and expecting that it would contain some of Campion’s stylistic signatures, some rendering of her spookily dismembered images of suburban (Australian) alienation. Instead, she offered us a protagonist in the form of Meg Ryan, playing Frannie Avery, a New York English teacher who is writing a book on street slang (particularly sexual and violent street

vernacular). At the beginning of the film, she arranges to meet one of her students, Cornelius Webb (Sharrieff Pugh), in a dingy bar in the East Village because he says he has found some new slang for her (which turns out to be, obscurely, the word “Miao”). Shortly after, a horrible murder occurs; a woman is found “disarticulated”—her throat slashed—after Avery comes across her performing oral sex on a tattooed man in the basement of the bar. This may seem a long way off from contemporary Singaporean films, but the point of interest for me, triggered by *In the Cut*, had to do with the question of audience, and how audiences receive and read films they recognise as being their own (an ‘Australian film’), and then, sometimes rather uncannily, *no longer* their own, being written in a different kind of ‘slang.’ I am not referring to a different spoken language (here, English is shared), but to a different way of telling stories through images. My interest is therefore in the question of what makes a film ‘foreign’ to an(other) audience in its attempt to provide a narrative and filmic vernacular; that is, precisely the “disarticulation” between the production of the local and the foreign.

Across the two types of films that I identified during the revival period, there are two major impulses characterising slang images that highlight the disarticulation between the local and the foreign. Firstly, there is a concern with authenticity, and with establishing an authentic ‘social reality.’ This authenticity impulse results from the fact that Singaporean films are still defining their identity to the rest of the world (their ‘foreign film identity’ if you will). The architect Rem Koolhaas criticised Singapore as being only

surface—all foreground, no background (or history) and hence having no authenticity.²⁷ However, in the films of the contemporary period, there is a counter-preoccupation. Just as slang is speech that is regarded as being *not* legitimate, slang images portray the socially marginalized as *the* legitimate representation. It is social marginalisation told through the failures of the modernizing project that becomes considered authentic cultural production. These are images of Singapore you won't see represented by any official discourse—disaffected youth, the socially unassimilated, prostitutes and pimps—in an attempt to (re)write the history of Singapore against a dominant portrayal of it as a capitalist success. One example of such a film is Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys*, Singapore's first entry into the Cannes film festival in 1997. The film revolves around the private lives of four families who live in the same HDB (Housing Development Board) estate, and begins with the suicide of a young man from one of those families. Approximately 85% of Singaporeans live in State-subsidised housing; there is a clear class divide between an elite minority and the rest of Singapore's population despite the official rhetoric of the nation's economic successes. The pun on the word "story/storey" within the film's title therefore suggests other points of view that never get aired, although the film is unambiguous about what it regards as the 'real story' of Singapore's economic modernization, its vision of the 'truth.' The credits on the back cover of the *12 Storeys* DVD (and reproduced on the Zhao Wei (production) website) are entirely concerned with establishing the film's authenticity credentials: "*12 Storeys* is the truest Singaporean film

²⁷ Koolhaas, 1075. Koolhaas suggests that Singapore "represents a unique *ecology of the contemporary*" (1011; original emphasis). This newness has been met with derision, as though Singapore has no history and thus must invent one. Almost all of the films of the revival period have been set in, or concern the present day or the contemporary (with the exception of Jack Neo's *Homerun* which is set in the year of Singapore's independence, 1965).

of all time”; “It’s so truthful it hurts.”²⁸ The implication is that the local tales in *12 Storeys* represent an alternative vision to the familiar (outside or ‘foreign’) perception of Singapore. Royston Tan’s *15*, produced by Eric Khoo’s Zhao Wei productions, takes authenticity production to another level in its blurring of documentary and fictional aesthetics and its deployment of real-life street kids in the lead roles.²⁹

Secondly, slang images are characterised by a certain self-consciousness. There is a rebelliousness or a defiance to slang that translates into a self-conscious image. At one level, the images (especially of the first category of films) are self-conscious because they are not necessarily very sophisticated. The highly localised nature of films from the first category—the ‘local content’ films—results in a use of slang that is obvious both on a linguistic, as well as filmic, level. For example, there is a particular kind of slang (or ‘shorthand’) image, which is the frequent use of the standard ‘HDB shot’—one static shot or pan upwards of the HDB high-rise estates and then a quick cut inside. Local audiences know instantly what this shot means and what it stands for in class terms. It appears in films such as *One Leg Kicking* and at the beginning of *Army Daze*, among several others.

²⁸ Other films concerned with a similar authenticity production include *The Truth About Jane and Sam* which begins with Sam’s voice-over introduction. “I believe in true love, I believe in true reporting.” Sam is watching Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* in a theatre where he meets Jane and says, “even the smoke looks real.” On *Liang Po Po*, Daniel Yun, CEO of Raintree Pictures said “We want to use her to uncover the truths about Singaporean life—gangs, speaking in dialects, anti-piracy problems, and a funny depiction about engaging consultants. It will also emphasise to audiences the need for elderly people to be respected, and for them to have friends.” (cited in Uhde & Uhde, 137). Jack Neo says, “As a director, I like real [sic]. Everything in my movies is real.” (Walsh, 13).

²⁹ Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng’s *Eating Air* also uses non-professional (first-time) actors in lead roles.

The films of the 1990s also employ ample use of direct address, as well as the technique of the voice-over (in first person pronoun), in films such as *I Not Stupid*, *Army Daze*, *Teenage Textbook Movie*, *Angel Heart* and *City Sharks*. The strategy of direct address is used in order to establish familiarity or comfort with an audience (that is, about not appearing too ‘foreign’), just as it alienates them at the same time.

A reflexive self-consciousness also pertains to how Singaporean films reference one another (Jack Neo’s comedies are repetitions with a difference, consisting of constant self-quotations), and slang images are representative not only of ‘local slang’ but of the regional and global vernaculars they come up against, and from which they borrow and incorporate. *Liang Po Po*, for example, features a particularly comical sequence in which a local Singaporean gang hires ‘consultants’ in the form of Hong Kong triad members (played by well-known stars Eric Tsang and Shereen Tang), to ‘make-over’ their image.

The ‘local content’ films are aesthetically not very developed, and not that interesting to me filmically, although they are of value on a local cultural/political level. The deployment of Singlish in these films is also worthy of attention when regarding the issue of localisation although my focus on the image precludes a lengthier engagement with this topic. Rather than examine these films as examples of a counter-discourse to the official Singaporean discourse (particularly of the success story of State-provided housing), I am more interested in how Singapore’s internationally successful films localise the Singaporean encounter with economic modernisation in order to produce a cinematic modernity for Singapore.

In films from the second category—the internationally successful local films—the images of ‘authenticity’ used are also self-conscious. While it may seem as though authenticity is at odds with a self-conscious image, it is the earnestness of these images (to establish a certain kind of ‘social reality’) that makes them appear self-conscious. Chua Beng Huat and Yeo Wei-Wei note that some Singaporean films strive so hard for authenticity that they appear forced, almost painful to watch. Chua and Yeo refer to the *kopitiam* (coffee shop) scenes in their example.³⁰ *Kopitiam* are gathering places for locals and scenes shot in this setting appear in many contemporary Singaporean films, from Neo’s to Khoo’s. The discussions that take place in the *kopitiam*, however, appear stilted and staged, so concerned are they to manufacture an ‘authentic’ local existence through setting and dialogue. Another example of self-consciousness in a film from the second category is Royston Tan’s *15*, which is a mix of both detached (documentary-style) ethnography and stylistic self-consciousness. Protagonists played by real-life fifteen year old street kids rap directly to the camera (and to spectators). The film is also highly stylized in its use of cartoons, computer graphics and text on screen; a blurring of documentary and fiction that results in a self-conscious image.

These examples illustrate that some images made to address a local audience (which they recognize as being ‘their own’) are viewed very differently by outside audiences. The key point, however, is that not all of the elements in a film will be significant in this way. It is only the production of a *particular* vision or version of the local that can simultaneously also produce a brand of foreignness assimilable to outside audiences. In particular, I

³⁰ Chua and Yeo, 120.

argue that it is those images purporting to represent the ‘authenticity’ of one particular social reality for Singapore—the nation’s darker, more desperate side—that occupy this function. This is not unique to Singaporean films, but it is significant if we return to Paul Willeman’s call for a comparative film studies attuned to local manifestations of the encounter with industrial and economic modernization. This is especially true in the consideration of Asian modernities. There are political implications to this authenticity production, of (re)producing Asia as perennially poor and downtrodden, especially when choosing to make an example of a wealthy nation like Singapore. The version of ‘localness’ that becomes viewed ‘successfully’ overseas is not the Singaporean/Asian success story that several of the ‘local content’ films are interested in exploring (for example, *Money No Enough* and *The Best Bet*). Rather, the films that are internationally successful represent the failures of Singapore’s modernization process. By going ‘backwards’ in its representation, Singaporean films are able to travel to new audiences and open up new spaces as desired by the government’s media policies.

This visualization of the local in turn produces a particular brand of foreignness that can be assimilated by international audiences with a shared experience of the processes of economic modernization. However, the films’ deployment of the *failures* of economic modernization produce a cinematic modernity that we must regard distinctly from both Willeman’s quest towards a framework of ‘comparative’ equivalence and from Miriam Hansen’s theory of vernacular modernism.

Vernacular Modernism

Hansen's notion of vernacular modernism focuses on the period of the 1920s to the 1950s in America—when the modernity of mass production and consumption witnessed the emergence of a particular kind of cinema—classical Hollywood. She wants to investigate how and why an aesthetic idiom ('classical cinema') developed in one country, could achieve transnational and global currency. Hansen is not interested in discovering a "universal language" in film or in explaining how the American film industry secured dominance over foreign markets through distribution and exhibition strategies. Rather, she is interested in the fact that these films offered the "first global vernacular" with "transnational and translatable resonance."³¹ Hansen suggests that these films were able to "provide, to mass audiences both at home and abroad, a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity."³² That is, they "globalised a particular historical experience"—that of modernity and modernization.³³

For Hansen, classical Hollywood cinema was able to succeed globally not because of a presumed universal narrative form "but because it meant different things to different people and publics, both at home and abroad."³⁴ It is obvious that films are consumed in locally specific ways, in different conditions and contexts of reception, but this still begs the question of just what exactly constitutes the 'foreignness' of a film if it is anything but the global vernacular of Hollywood cinema? How, in striving to produce the 'local,'

³¹ Hansen, "Mass Production," 68.

³² Hansen, "Fallen Women," 10.

³³ Hansen, "Mass Production," 68.

³⁴ Hansen, "Mass Production," 68.

does a film also stumble upon or contrive ways of producing a successful (because assimilable) form of ‘foreignness’? Or, to put it another way, how does an industry become conscious that it is producing a product for some other (regional or international) audience? Hollywood achieved this success very early on but can we see the same thing occurring for any Asian film industries?

For me, the key point about Hansen’s argument is that it is not about narrative (a universal narrative idiom) but rather about a “global sensory vernacular.”³⁵ There seems to be an argument about ‘feeling’ that perhaps slang can capture, something in the image that we can sense, and feel, that is privileged over narrative, and which occurs in and of a shared vernacular. The ‘vernacular’ in Hansen’s argument relates to the everyday aesthetics produced by modernisation and its products (this is in contrast to the notion of the ‘popular,’ which, as she notes, is ideologically over determined).³⁶ Can we have a filmic vernacular that does not privilege a dominant Western idiom but rather is situated within Willeman’s project of locally specific encounters with industrial and economic modernisation?

Hansen does acknowledge that for her theory to have any efficacy, it should also be possible to identify other types of vernacular modernisms. She makes a claim for Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 30s as another instance of vernacular modernism, and also makes a throwaway reference to Hong Kong cinema of the 1970s and 80s, which

³⁵ Hansen, “Mass Production,” 68.

³⁶ Hansen, “Mass Production,” 60.

achieved popularity on an even more global scale than Shanghai cinema of the earlier period.³⁷

I do not wish to add Singaporean films of the 1990s as simply another example of vernacular modernism, and I have already pointed out how they are very different since if some kind of global (or even domestic) popularity is a prerequisite for vernacular modernism, Singaporean films certainly don't have it (yet). That is, while Hansen's vernacular modernism is, to some extent, *globally* popular—a successful kind of 'foreign' film that becomes translatable, assimilable, by non-domestic audiences, Singaporean films cannot yet be considered along these lines. Rather, as I have argued, there is a distinct cinematic modernity represented by Singaporean films of the 1990s, but rather than a "vernacular modernism," they are characterised by slang images that self-consciously participate at once in the creation of their radical otherness (their 'foreignness' as 'foreign films')—to an international audience—at the same time as they are resolutely local (culturally and linguistically specific).

The International Fraternity of the Lost

Perhaps it is possible to instead consider the tension between the local and the foreign within Singaporean films in the terms by which the critic A.O. Scott has argued. While Hansen was concerned with audiences outside America consuming films from Hollywood, Scott is looking from the perspective of American audiences.

³⁷ Hansen, "Fallen Women," 13.

For a special film edition of the New York Times Magazine, Scott recently wrote an article entitled “What is a Foreign Movie Now?” which, despite its enticing title, does not really answer the question it posits. The article is predominantly a review of Jia Zhangke’s new film *The World*. Scott says about the film, “It is not just the setting and content of a movie like *The World* that may seem foreign but also its visual strategy and storytelling methods, and above all its unsentimental commitment to the depiction of ordinary life, to a kind of realism that is in some ways more alien to us than the reality it construes.”³⁸ For Scott, it is the realistic presentation of “ordinary life” that appears foreign.

Scott makes reference to two kinds of cinematic impulses that he says never quite took root in the United States, which could perhaps account for the ‘foreignness’ of a film such as Jia’s to American audiences. These two impulses are humanism and modernism. Although often associated with European cinema, as far as early, canonical film criticism goes, Scott notes that “the modernist and humanist impulses are both alive and well, flourishing and cross-pollinating on every continent and in new, transnational formations.”³⁹ Scott sees the films of Tsai Ming-liang, Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao Hsien and Kim Ki-duk, among other Asian directors, as representing the modernist impulse within what he calls an “international fraternity of the lost.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Scott, 79.

³⁹ Scott, 79.

⁴⁰ Scott suggests that directors from the PRC represent the humanist strain although he recognises that the humanist and the modernist have begun to mix more and more in the work of several of these directors.

For Scott, this “international fraternity of the lost” seems to function as something of a global vernacular *for the foreign film*. That is, these films (mainly from Asia in his examples) portray the loneliness, emptiness and alienation felt by urban dwellers (in Asia), thereby rendering them the equivalent of ‘global citizens’ of the world. Yet this is something that is able to translate meaningfully to American audiences. Scott writes, “There may be a measure of comfort in joining the international fraternity of the lost—at least for audiences. The experience of dwelling in these movies is replicated, and to some extent redeemed, by the experience of watching them, of feeling estrangement and disorientation not only vicariously through the characters but also in relation to them as well.”⁴¹ Scott’s argument is not entirely clear but it seems to suggest that (Asian) films today form part of an international fraternity and this provides some measure of comfort to American audiences who can understand this alienation and dispossession because they are experiencing their own version of this. (Sophia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* is a recent example of the very same phenomenon portrayed from within). For me, this still reads as Western chauvinism.

The glaring silence in this paper so far has been the issue of *gender*—which appears especially obvious in Scott’s choice of the word ‘fraternity’ (and in the fact that all of the directors he names are male). Modernity (as it affects both class and ethnicity) is collapsed onto the figure of the woman whereby woman is again taken to represent all of modernity’s contradictions and instabilities. For instance, *Mee Pok Man* and *15* are both marked by the absence or death of women, otherwise their clichéd appearance as

⁴¹ Scott, 79.

prostitutes.⁴² By employing shared themes and images, certain Singaporean films also participate in the engendering of this particular brand of ‘foreignness.’ Therefore, if we cannot say that there is necessarily another “global vernacular” like classical Hollywood cinema, can we see some other form of globalised vernacular for the ‘foreign film’ representing shared themes of (‘masculinised’) discontent and urban alienation?

Perhaps it is possible to suggest that Singaporean films like Khoo’s and Tan’s are still enticingly ‘foreign’ to an international festival audience, but they are also to a large degree assimilable and understandable because they utilise slang images for what a ‘foreign’ film (especially a foreign ‘Asian’ film) should be.⁴³ There are, obviously, political implications to this reproduction of an aesthetics of the poor in Asian cinema for the pleasure of international film festival audiences. It appears almost impossible to remove the stain of Asia’s ‘third-worldism’ in the cinema or to recognize either its economic or filmic modernities.

⁴² Early on in *15* there is a suicide of an anonymous girl who has jumped from an HDB building. The only other appearances by women in *15* are brief—they are objects of abuse from Erick on public transport or, in another case, represented by a plastic blow-up doll that the boys carry around town. The suicide in *15* also echoes the opening of Fruit Chan’s *Made in Hong Kong* which also begins with the suicide of a teenage girl, Susan, jumping from the roof of a building.

⁴³ Eric Khoo received an international training in film (in Sydney, Australia) and thus is aesthetically savvy, with a knowledge of the kinds of films will appeal to an international (film festival and film studies) audience.

Conclusion: Towards a Regional Filmic Vernacular

This paper has been gesturing towards an argument for the regionalisation of cinema against a general tendency towards either the globalisation of film or falling into the trap of the incredibly tenacious but ultimately inadequate category of ‘national cinema.’ Singapore is keen both to build and yet disperse the notion of a national cinema in order to become a regional hub and a site of *global* media exchange. Contemporary Singaporean cinema is unlike Hollywood—a domestic idiom that has become a global vernacular; it is instead becoming initiated into a ‘fraternity’ that is more regional than internationally defined (albeit from the outside), despite A.O. Scott’s label of an “international fraternity” suggesting larger aspirations. Given Singapore’s media policy negotiating between a desire to pour millions of dollars into ‘developing local content’ and at the same time wanting to become a ‘global media city,’ ‘content-free,’ can we see in *regionalised* slang images a way of expressing these tensions? Although slang is localised as a particular kind of vernacular, it can also cross borders and be taken up, borrowed, or assimilated into another culture’s vernacular. Singaporean slang images utilise images from a regional vernacular that portray emerging Asian modernities. This kind of slang, like linguistic slang in Singapore, is more a case of borrowing, rather than mixing, importing aesthetic elements, shared themes and narratives, and of making the strange familiar. Contemporary films from Singapore do this in two senses: by assimilating Western influences, and by the fact that in the production of a certain kind of ‘locality,’ Western audiences are able to understand Singaporean films as a particular type of ‘foreign’ film.

It becomes necessary to ask whether it is possible, or indeed desirable, to work towards a South East Asian film idiom, and what the purpose of that might be. Perhaps one political efficacy of creating a category called ‘Asian cinema’ or ‘South East Asian cinema’ is to provide parameters for, and at the same time the connections between, the alternative modernities they represent.⁴⁴ As Philip Cheah notes, “... filmmakers in South East Asia are caught in a dilemma. They are constantly reminded that they have to exist in the marketplace. But the interesting directors know that their works have no place there. This market obsession explains the other characteristic of current South East Asian film, that of the dark underbelly”—so as not to be regarded as merely a tourist postcard.⁴⁵ Thus, to return to my question of what makes a film ‘foreign’ (if in fact, as Egoyan and Balfour say, “all films are foreign films—foreign to some other audience...”), the slang images that I have attempted to describe are also *sensory* images, as they are in Hansen’s vernacular modernism, but they are more about a *regional* sensory vernacular, a way of “feeling Asian modernities,” to borrow the title of Koichi Iwabuchi’s latest book.

There is, in this sensory definition, something about the issue of class which is medium specific. Iwabuchi’s collection is specifically about how television dramas serials in Asia participate in building a regional imaginary. The issue of medium specificity is very important because unlike films, TV drama serials (particularly those set in the contemporary period) do not focus on images on the poor but rather on the middle class. That is, in TV dramas from the region, the vernacular for Asian modernities is inscribed

⁴⁴ Rem Koolhaas ends his scathing critique of Singapore’s urban renewal by saying that Singapore, “one of the most ideological of all urban conditions, is now poised to metastasise across Asia” (1087).

⁴⁵ Cheah.

on success, not on failure. On the whole, these serials are also produced for a domestic or regional market (and for an aspiring middle class wanting to gain entry into such a lifestyle). Contemporary films from South East Asia, however, are not necessarily made for regional promotion. More often than not they aim for international distribution and success much further afield.

In conclusion, I would argue that in the case of Singaporean film (and perhaps this argument might extend to other nascent industries in the South East Asian region), we can see a new kind of self-conscious image, a slang image. Because such an image is currently in formation, it still registers itself self-consciously as slang. Singaporean films employ images that are “vagabond” in their postcolonial insecurity, conscious of the fact that Singapore is still in the process of asserting its artistic identity to the rest of the world. Therefore, rather than a vernacular modernism, or a global vernacular that travels to the rest of the world, the majority of Singaporean films don’t yet travel because they utilize a new idiom (which comes across as slang) for the purpose of localizing a filmic identity at this moment of its emergence. Rather, the only films that do travel are those that constitute their ‘foreignness’ by joining an international (or perhaps more accurately, a regional) “fraternity of the lost”—utilizing a shared, *regional* vernacular reflexivity to invoke the everyday particularities of “feeling Asian modernities.”

This paper has sought to outline a particular kind of vernacularism in film aesthetics—a film idiom, if you will, that can illuminate larger issues concerning how images are able to translate the cultural and aesthetic values of a nation. It is my hope that these observations will further expand discussions about film in Singapore, and in particular

the emergent relationships between cinema, the government's new media policies, and the burgeoning intra-regional filmmaking co-operatives across South East Asia.

Filmography

12 Storeys (Eric Khoo, 1997)

15 (Royston Tan, 2003)

Army Daze (Ong Keng Sen, 1996)

Chicken Rice War (Chee Kong Cheah, 2000)

City Sharks (Esan Sivalingam, 2003)

Eating Air (Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng, 1999)

Eye, The (Oxide Pang Chun and Danny Pang, 2002)

Homerun (Jack Neo, 2003)

I Not Stupid (Jack Neo, 2002)

In the Cut (Jane Campion, 2003)

Liang Po Po: The Movie (Bee Lian Teng, 1999)

Lost in Translation (Sophia Coppola, 2003)

Made in Hong Kong (Fruit Chan, 1997)

Mee Pok Man (Eric Khoo, 1995)

Money No Enough (T. L. Tay, 1998)

One Leg Kicking (Eric Khoo and Wei Koh, 2001)

Song of the Stork (Jonathan Foo and Phan Quang Binh Nguyen, 2003)

Teenage Textbook Movie (Philip Lim, 1998)

That One No Enough (Jack Neo, 1999)

Tiger's Whip (Victor Khoo, 1998)

Truth About Jane and Sam, The (Derek Yee, 1999)

World, The (Jia Zhang-ke, 2004)

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