Asia Research Institute

Working Paper Series

No. 55

Nomadic Trajectories: Mapping Short Film Production in Singapore

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January 2006

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In the same way as the contemporary mainstream filmmaking, the alternative film culture rose in 1997 when the first short film competition was inaugurated by Thai Film Foundation...[i]
--Anchalee Chaiworaporn, Film Critic / Scholar (Thailand)

A short film is anything less than an hour, and so they are about concision...Since they don't cost so much, there is less pressure to conform to this vague monolithic entity called "the mass audience.[ii] --Amir Muhammad, Film Critic / Filmmaker (Malaysia)

Boemboe was founded in the beginning of 2003...Boemboe is an organization focusing on creating "a space to breath" for the Indonesian short film everywhere in the world...[iii]
--Lulu Ratna and Amin Shabana, Founders of Boemboe (Indonesia)

Mini Cinema
A Nation's Cinema Starts With Shorts.[iv]
--Juan Foo, Independent Producer (Singapore)

Such emic expressions from film critics and filmmakers in Southeast Asia eloquently express the heterogeneity of both form and function within short film production. Chaiworaporn recognizes that short film production in Thailand was instrumental in shaping an alternative film culture. Muhammad underscores the cultural and political economy of the short film form in Malaysia. Ratna and Shabana inflect the short film in Indonesia with local, regional, and global currents while Foo argues for the importance of the short film in nurturing the growth of a nascent film industry in Singapore. The short film in Southeast Asia is therefore a potent form of cultural production and one that contributes compellingly to the development and continued growth of the region's moving image culture.

In this essay I provide a preliminary theoretical framework within which to map the intricacies of the short film within Southeast Asia and offer a case study of short film production in Singapore.[v] Singapore resonates as a particularly interesting case study because more short films are produced in Singapore on an annual basis (approximately eighty)[vi] than feature films (approximately six).[vii] This opens a productive and fertile field to chart the place and impact of the short in Singapore's evolving moving image culture.[viii]

Nomadic Topographies: Mode of Production, Object, Text, Trace

I adopt a polymorphous understanding of the short film and in examining its specificity as a medium, I define the short film by what it is not:

- ■ I take the general working definition of running time for a short film from film festival curators. A film is considered "short" if the running time is under sixty minutes. Most short films tend to be thirty minutes or less in length.

■ The short film is not dependent on a specific format. A short film can be shot on film (Super-8mm, for example) or incorporate new technologies such as digital video, high definition video or mobile phones with camera capabilities.

The short film in Southeast Asia appears to engage in four topographic spheres of activity: modes of production, object, text, and trace. I term theses spheres of *activity* because I do not view them as mutually exclusive or static. Rather, these spheres interact dialogically and function diachronically, responding to particular socio-cultural-political-economic-technological moments or shifts.[ix] *Modes of production* involve formats (Super-8mm, 16mm, 35mm, digital video etc) and take into account the context and history of the production process, from pre-production to post-production. This would include how the film was made and financed, as well as when and why. *Object* situates the short film as an artifact which gains multiple resonances as it travels both within and beyond the borders and boundaries of the nation-state, circulating through a varied constellation of alternative exhibition and distribution spaces. Alternative exhibition spaces include, but are certainly not limited to the following: a film festival / film festival circuits, an ad-hoc film program (which may run for only one day), an archive screening, a film class, university screenings, a cine-club screening in one's home (private space) or community centre (public space), a television special, in cyberspace via the Internet (pod casting), over the mobile phone or in mobile screening spaces such as buses and ferries. A short film can conflate distribution and exhibition spaces when it travels through exhibition spaces like the film festival circuit. Through a reiterative process of exhibition, this circuit can become the distribution channel for the short film. *Text(s)* refers to a particular short film(s) and offers a site and space for critical analysis and engagement.

These topographic spheres of activity suggest a certain nomadic quality to the short film. A short film's mode of production (pre-production to post-production) can be a day long process. A short film can incorporate and play with multiple formats by mixing Super-8mm and digital video or its screen longevity can be nurtured as part of a traveling showcase. Some short films burst onto screens at one minute in length, others may linger for fifty minutes, while some never escape the confines of domestic space. Experimental shorts, animated shorts, fiction, and / or non-fiction shorts populate and circulate through these exhibition and distribution spaces. These topographic spheres of activity hint at the ephemeral and idiosyncratic qualities of the short film, its transient mobility and fleeting presence within a country's cinescape.

Trace is the fourth topographic sphere of activity that attempts to grapple with the idiosyncratic qualities of these *texts*. The challenge is to accommodate the mobility and play of such a nomadic form without ironically calcifying or immobilizing it. Genre seems too bounded of a conceptual category while theme suggests a certain level of fixed-ness. I argue that trace as a "barely perceivable indication" provides a more productive point of entry.[x] Trace embodies mobility as it moves through time-space and it embraces the fragility and evanescent qualities of short film texts. Trace allows for a typology without losing its capacity to accommodate the polymorphous characteristics of the short film. A short film text may (1) contain one or more traces, and / or (2) may share traces with other short film texts, both within and beyond the borders of the nation-state, thereby engaging in a dialogic process. I prefer to think of trace as a conceptual category that is soft and leaky. I examine trace and these other topographic spheres of activity (modes of production, object, and text) in my discussion of short film production in Singapore.

Re(frame)ing Short Film Production in Singapore

> The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of *different ways*, so as to provide *different interpretations* of those events and to endow them with *different meanings.*[xi]
> (Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*. Italics are my emphasis)

The title of Juan Foo's essay, "Mini Cinema: A Nation's Cinema Starts With Shorts" is prescient, perspicacious, and underscores the importance of White's argument about the mutability and malleability of conceptualizing history narratives. Foo's essay calls for a re(frame)ing of Singapore's moving image culture that recognizes the relevance and importance of short film production in Singapore. I argue similarly for a narrative of Singapore's film industry that engages with the heterogeneity of Singapore's image production and one that serves as an alternative to the canonical disjunctural narrative of Singapore film history that continues to be reproduced and reiterated by media scholars of Singapore cinema. This disjunctural narrative posits the slow death of the industry in the late 1960s, followed by a spate of sporadic independent productions in the 1970s.

The narrative continues, painting the 1980s as a period of stagnation and inertia, and triumphantly ends with a resounding explosion of works by Singapore filmmakers in the 1990s. The narrative that I construct redefines the term "film industry" to adopt a more fluid understanding of production by incorporating non-studio or non-institutional modes of filmmaking. Production, as I define the term, encompasses three areas of filmmaking: institutional (studio), independent features, and grassroots. I want to stress that these areas of production are dynamic as they fluctuate in content and form across various socio-cultural-political-economic moments. While I examine this alternative form of history in greater detail in my book *Screening Singapore: City-Cinema and the Urban Imagination,* in this essay I would like to concentrate on *moments* within the grassroots spheres of the 1980s (which the disjunctural narrative elides) and the 1990s (in which the short film becomes legitimized as a cultural art form by the Singapore International Film Festival) in order to contextualize developments in contemporary short film production (2000 – 2005).

1980s Mode of Production: People Pictures

Short film production in the 1980s arose within a mediascape in which the two main studio players of feature film production, Shaw and Cathay, had closed their doors. State rhetoric about the viability of reviving the atrophying film industry in Singapore further infused this mediascape. The Singapore Cine Club (SCC) proved to be a vital participant in the mode of production that gained resonance in the 1980s; grassroots filmmaking.   Its outreach programming sought to extend film appreciation and production beyond the confines of SCC membership to the larger Singaporean public. The SCC, for the most part, soon abandoned its Super 8 and 16 mm formats in favor of video, which proved to be a far more accessible platform. The SCC changed its name to the Singapore Cine and Video Club (SCVC) because of video's growing popularity as a shooting format.

The impact and proliferation of video technology in Singapore in the 1980s cannot be underestimated. One in five households owned a VCR with almost six million blank tapes

imported during the first nine months of 1982. By 1984, approximately 500 video cameras and 350 VCRs were being sold on a monthly basis and Singapore proved to be "among the world's biggest buyers of video recorders."[xii]

In 1983 the SCVC joined forces with the People's Association (PA) to conduct video workshops and to jointly organize an annual video competition. The People's Association (PA), an organization founded by the state to foster ties with Singaporeans, administered community centers throughout the island. These community centers organized social activities, provided access to recreational facilities, and in the 1980s, offered video production courses as part of its community outreach programming.[xiii]

The first course offered in 1982, comprised four sessions with forty people attending each session. Short films, some of which were made by SCVC members were screened in the first session. A workshop and discussion detailing the differences between film and video production comprised session two. In addition to other subjects, session three outlined the importance of pre-planning, storyboarding, and use of camera angles, while the last session highlighted the intricacies behind the craft of sound and editing.[xiv] The course proved to be very popular and in 1983, the workshop encompassed ten sessions of film and video production instruction. Advertisements for the video production course in 1984 stated that "…participants…learn…how special occasions like stage performances and weddings can be…recorded and made into *artistic home movies*…"[xv] In this particular mode of grassroots filmmaking, the SCVC coupled its technical and aesthetic expertise with the desire to encourage Singaporeans to use video as a viable means of personal and cultural expression.

The first annual competition for amateur filmmakers followed in 1983 with no thematic restrictions on films for submission. Hagemeyer Electronics, agents for National, Panasonic, and Technics video products donated S$25,000 worth of prizes. The categories of competition reflected both the grassroots mode of production and nationalist sentiments as only Singapore citizens and permanent residents could compete in the open section while students enrolled in schools, tertiary institutions, and colleges were eligible to enter the student section.[xvi] The partnership between the PA and the SCVC and the genesis of the video competition were vital in disseminating the tools and techniques of video production to the Singapore public.

What is particularly vexing about researching short film production in this period is the scarcity of short films available for viewing. Faced with this methodological dilemma, I relied primarily on newspaper articles and memos to obtain a sense of what kinds of short films were produced. For example, *The Old Days of Chinatown* by Tan Bee Hong garnered second place in 1983. According to a review, the film captured the "…old charms of vanishing scenes in Chinatown…with Chinese classical music…"[xvii] In this methodological context, the most useful topographic spheres of activity to examine short film production in the 1980s are modes of production (grassroots).

The PA-SCVC workshops and the Singapore Video Competition not only fostered the growth of grassroots filmmaking in Singapore but also echoed the rich potential of video as a medium to participate in constructing alternative stories and personal narratives within the fabric of the city-nation.[xviii] Moving from a trajectory of an institutionalized, vertically integrated form of studio production in the 1950s and early 1960s, the 1980s' mode of production was more personal, participatory, and civic in nature.

1990s Modes of Production: Media Hub and Grassroots Webs

The topographic spheres of activity for short film production in the 1990s operated within a dense media hub of multinational and local media companies, cable, independent feature film productions and an occasional foray into feature film production by Cathay Organisation (*Army Daze*, 1996).   By 1993, the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) had begun to position Singapore as a hub for the production, distribution, and sourcing of films and television programming by offering pioneer tax incentives and by agreeing to review regulations that might inhibit Singapore's growth as a media hub.[xix] In 1995, Singapore played host to CineAsia, a cinema convention held for the first time outside North America and Europe.   The first foreign media company to plant its regional roots in Singapore was HBO in 1992.   This signaled an intense six-year media boom in which approximately 25 media companies set up their regional headquarters in Singapore.

The development of this dense media hub stemmed from the concerted efforts of the Economic Development Board, which over a two-year period lured many media companies to Singapore with glimpses of Singapore's extensive infrastructure featuring an efficient and educated workforce, an extremely stable political and social environment, and the existence of well-managed post-production facilities.[xx]   The introduction of cable television in 1997 further contributed to this proliferating media hub.[xxi]

Short film production continued to operate amidst this mediascape in a complex web of grassroots production that included the Singapore Video Competition, the Singapore International Film Festival, and the Substation.[xxii] The Singapore Video Competition maintained its productive presence within this web until 1996. During the 1990s, the Singapore Video Competition continued to build upon its categories of competition. For example, the Video 90 Awards for the Sixth Singapore Video Competition featured two new categories of entry.[xxiii] To commemorate Singapore's 25 years of independence and the PA's 30th anniversary, special merit awards were given to those films that best expressed either the theme of Singapore as home / nation or the PA's contributions to Singapore's sense of community and belonging. Themes at subsequent Singapore Video Competitions included the "My Singapore" Award that was designed to "…instill a sense of community feeling and nationhood among Singaporeans…" and the 8th Panasonic Video Awards – Singapore Video Competition encouraged student participation (who already constituted 30% of past entrants) by introducing the "Best Student Entry" award.[xxiv]

The Singapore Video Competition not only provided a public platform within which Singaporeans could express their cultural, personal, and national sentiments in visual terms but the competition proved to be an invaluable training ground for filmmakers hoping to receive funding, experience, and recognition in their preparations for the transition to feature film

projects. Royston Tan, a provocative filmmaker known for his compelling short films and his feature film debut *15,* won a second prize for his music video *Erase* at the 9th Panasonic Video Awards (1996). Seminal Singapore feature filmmaker Eric Khoo received a $500 merit prize for his short film *A Question of Lust* at the 1988 Singapore Video Competition. Khoo's next short film, a very raw and vibrant *Barbie Digs Joe* garnered first prize in the open section of the 1990 Singapore Video Competition.   Building on his track record at the Singapore Video Competitions, Eric Khoo began to submit his short films to the Best Singapore Short Film category at the Singapore International Film Festival.

Founded in 1987, the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) primarily screened feature films from various Asian countries and showcased works from American, European, African, and Middle-Eastern directors. However, the SIFF soon recognized the potential contribution short film production could make to the nascent and evolving local cinema scene and established the Best Singapore Short Film category at the 1991 SIFF. While the Singapore Video Competition showcased works within the boundaries of the city-nation, the SIFF Best Short Film category marked the opportunity for voices from the fledgling Singapore film community to be heard within a nodal point of the global film festival circuit. Singapore feature directors like Eric Khoo and CheeK continued to submit entries to the SIFF. Eric Khoo's *August* won the inaugural Best Singapore Short Film award in 1991. Eric Khoo then followed with entries *Carcass* (1992), *Symphony 92.4* (1993) and *Pain* (1994). CheeK, who directed feature film *Chicken Rice War* (2001), submitted shorts *Married* (1994) and *Beansprouts and Salted Fish* (1997) both of which won Best Singapore Short Film awards. Entries within this category have continued to grow with 60 received in 2003 and 70 in 2005.

Unlike the SIFF, with its exclusive focus on cinema, the Substation was founded in 1990 as a non-profit independent centre for the arts that offered a "…small, nimble, free and open space – *outside of the official arts institutions*…"[xxv] Apart from sponsoring and organizing a variety of arts related activities (like, dance, sculpture, photography etc), the Substation launched Moving Images in 1997. In the 1990s, Moving Images performed a variety of roles ranging from film pedagogy to offering its site as an alternative exhibition space for Singapore filmmakers. One film pedagogy workshop in particular advocated a mode of production called "poor man's filmmaking." The Guerrilla Filmmaking Workshop espoused:

> …you don't need fanciful stuff, just a 16mm film camera and radical ideas…Like a guerilla, you hit and run…Subvert the system, dominate, control and destroy…"[xxvi]

A different pedagogic agenda infused this mode of production when compared to the SCVC-PA (state) sponsored workshops. The Guerrilla Filmmaking Workshop introduced its 36 participants in 1997 to the notion of film as a powerful art form and *weapon* for social commentary and artistic expression.[xxvii] The goal behind such workshops and Moving Images was to nurture and foster the growth of a Singapore film culture and to establish a network between members of the film industry, independent filmmakers, and the general Singaporean public.[xxviii]   As players within this grassroots web, the Singapore Video Competition, the Singapore International Film Festival, and the Substation provided the impetus for short film production across the population demographic with students, aspiring feature filmmakers, and ordinary citizens engaging with the socio-cultural fabric of life in Singapore.

2000 – 2005: New Media and Grassroots Webs

Contemporary short film production continues to proliferate in a mediascape populated by cable companies, satellite networks, feature film production / co-productions, post production houses, distribution giants (Shaw, Cathay, Golden Village etc), international and domestic production companies, state organizations like the Media Development Authority (formed by a merger with the Singapore Broadcasting Authority, the Films and Publications Department, and Singapore Film Commission in 2003), and pedagogical institutions like Ngee Ann Polytechnic (whose Diploma in Film, Sound, and Video was first offered in 1992).   In this preliminary discussion of recent short film production, I focus on two topographic spheres of activity that are of particular interest in grappling with evolving short film production scene: mode of production and object.

In the 1980s, the grassroots mode of production grew from one dominated by the PA-SCVC to one which incorporated efforts by non-state players like the Singapore International Film Festival and the Substation (1990s).   This heterogeneous grassroots web becomes increasingly more intricate in contemporary short film production with the emergence of alternative exhibition spaces like TVMobile and other centers for filmmaking like Objectifs established in 2003. In 2003 TVMobile collaborated with Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Film and Media Studies to produce the TV Mobile Local Talent Showcase.   Student and graduate work would be screened on its mobile TV programming networks of 1,500 SBS Transit Air-con busses, Bintan Resort ferries, food courts, and shopping malls with an estimated audience of 1.5 million.[xxix]

Objectifs is co-organizer of the Fly By Night Video Challenge, which was established in 2003.[xxx]   The Fly By Night Video Challenge is open to forty teams who must produce a short film (five minutes or less) according to a particular theme and within 40 hours. This challenge extends the participatory ethos of the PA-SCVC competitions by looking for entries across lines of race, class, nationality, age, and levels of experience. Perhaps of most interest in this evolving grassroots mode of production is the shift from 1980s video technology and 1990s digital video technology to experimentations with new media such as the mobile phone-camera and the Internet. Fly By Night, for example, encourages its participants to produce these short films using their mobile phone-cameras.

As a topographic sphere of activity, the short film as polymorphous object can travel along nomadic and myriad trajectories of the Internet and the film festival/ film festival circuits. With the Internet, the short film as object has the potential to confound and circumnavigate state censors. A most recent case in point is Martyn See's *Singapore Rebel* (2005) a 26-minute documentary on Singapore opposition leader Chee Soon Juan.   Charged with contravening Singapore's Film Act with its ban on "party political films," Martyn See was forced to withdraw his film from the 2005 Singapore International Film Festival and now faces a potential fine "not exceeding S$100,000" or imprisonment "for a term not exceeding 2 years."[xxxi]   Martyn See's case is pending as of October 2005. Despite its local ban, *Singapore Rebel* has been roaming the Internet, finding brief homes on various websites that soon disappear. This itinerant traveler rests ever so briefly on a user's computer as a series of downloads after which a click of the mouse expunges the trails and tales of its travels and *Singapore Rebel* continues its nomadic journeys through cyberspace.

A regional dynamic is also developing within short film production in Southeast Asia. Moving Images established the Asian Film Showcase (now Asian Film Symposium) in 2001. In 2002 the Asian Film Symposium introduced S-Express, a regional collaboration between curators Amir Muhammad (Malaysia), Chalida Uabumrungjit (Thailand), and Yuni Hadi (Singapore). The S-Express is a *traveling* exhibition of short films that are showcased as a package at a film festival in each participating country. S-Express screened in Singapore (as part of the Asian Film Forum), in Penang (Malaysia), and in Bangkok (Thailand) during its first year. The S-Express initiative signals a provocative shift from short films that travel the festival circuit as individual objects to one in which short films travel as a collective, infusing each country's short films with a regional (Southeast Asian) identity. S-Express continues to shape the regional and global imaginary geographies of the short film with the addition of Indonesia in 2004 and China and the Philippines in 2005.[xxxii]

Throughout this essay I have examined short film production through the topographic spheres of modes of production and as object. I now engage with the topographic spheres of text and trace in relation to contemporary short film production (2000 – 2005). *9:30* and *Singapore Gaga* are two particularly compelling texts that respectively evoke the traces of what I call **merantau** and **motley urbanisms**, traces that speak to the complexity of life within a city-nation. I argue that these traces engage each other dialogically to produce a complex engagement with Singapore's cultural landscape and moving image culture.

Trace: Merantau

Merantau is a form of mobility traditionally employed by the Minangkabau in Western Sumatra, Indonesia. In his working paper on the Indonesian country and cities, historian Adrian Vickers provides a succinct definition of merantau. He writes that merantau is "traveling to gain experience" and that rantau:

> …originally referred to the coast or shore to which people traveled from the hinterland, but acquired meanings of sailing upriver, *studying abroad*, wandering, and migration in general (italics are my emphasis).[xxxiii]

What seems engaging about this form of mobility is precisely its mutability and its play with the individual. Merantau is an omni-directional mobility as individuals may migrate permanently or enjoy a sojourn abroad (of varying degrees of length) and then return. As trace, merantau opens a space to explore short films made by a certain wave of Singaporean filmmakers *while they were abroad* to study film production (either on a government scholarship or through private means). Such film texts include: *La Conquista* (2000), *While You Sleep* (2002), and *9:30* (2003).

These short films offer indeterminate iconographies of space, time, and place. In terms of their modes of productions, Ngee Ann Film and Video graduate Bertrand Lee's *La Conquista* (2000) was shot in Spain and in Spanish while he received his director's training at the Escola Superior de Cinema i Audiovisuals de Catalunya, Barcelona (ESCAC). *La Conquista* focuses on interior spaces such as the domestic realm of the bedroom, the social sphere of the bar, and the industrial site of the office; the only anchor to Spain as place is the Spanish language. *While You Sleep* (2002) by Eva Tang was shot on location in London and entirely in Japanese while she

pursued studies in film production in the United Kingdom.[xxxiv] *While You Sleep*, shot in black and white, highlights interior spaces of the domestic (home, bedroom) and clinical (hospital), with exterior moments in a non-descript alley and a final shot of an indeterminate bleak and graded landscape. Tang's choice of the Japanese language further disorients and destabilizes any anchoring of place.

9:30 (2003), a University of Southern California thesis film directed by Yong Mun Chee perhaps best evokes this indeterminacy. *9:30* centers on Chan Kin Fai who travels to Los Angeles in an attempt to forget his old flame in Singapore. Struggling with jet lag and a conflicted heart, Chan Kin Fai engages in a ritual of speaking to his Singapore love via a public payphone. The viewer only hears the voice of Chan Kin Fai; neither his lover's voice nor her body is visible. I position *9:30* as a psycho-geographical chronotope in which the indeterminacies of space, time, and place both shape and are shaped by Chan Kin Fai's subjective state of mind.[xxxv]   Bakhtin defines the chronotope as "literally time space" to underscore the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships." He suggests both the haptic and visceral qualities of the chronotope in which:

> Time, as it were, *thickens*, takes on *flesh*, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes *charged* and *responsive* to the *movements* of time, plot and history[xxxvi]

9:30's recurring aural motif in the form of Chan Kin Fai's voice-over serves as the structuring principle of the film and the embodiment of the psycho-geographical chronotope: "they say intensity is inversely proportionate to the square of distance."

Chan Kin Fai feels most emotionally removed when he shares the most intimate of spaces with his traveler-tourist roommates. In a poignant scene, Chan Kin Fai's German roommate Klaus attempts to strike up a conversation as Chan Kin Fai enters the living room with a bowl of cereal. Klaus sits on the opposite sofa watching porn on television and is disgruntled with the poor quality of the show. Despite sharing spaces of community and social interaction (the domestic space of the living room) and communal activities (eating and watching television), Chan Kin Fai remains impervious to Klaus' entreaties to engage in conversation. This sense of distance is compounded by the cuts to porn images on the television screen. Sexual intercourse that most physically intimate of encounters between individuals is rendered as an act without passion. These bodies are not in the throes of ecstasy but rather writhe in robotic gyrations.

Chan Kin Fai tries to change his watch to Los Angeles time but cannot bring himself to do so. In a conversation with his girlfriend, Chan Kin Fai laments, "I haven't adjusted my watch. You're right. I am still living in Singapore. Your voice is so clear. It's like you're in the next room…" In this conversation Chan Kin Fai experiences his most emotionally intense moments when he and his lover are 14092.2 km apart. Their distance and her absence takes on an almost palpable presence when he feels that she shares his physical space by occupying a place close to him (in the next room). During this conversation, the camera frames Chan Kin Fai in a close-up, deliberately blurring the background behind him as sounds of the city interweave with his monologue. In this frame, space becomes a verb, an action that speaks to Chan Kin Fai's isolation and anomie.[xxxvii] His inability to conform to a chronographic time (Los Angeles or Singapore) further thrusts him into a temporal and spatial liminality that he can never escape.

This time space liminality is poly-temporal and poly-spatial and includes forms of chronographic time (watch), psychic time (jet lag), organic time (day or night), mutable space (as both absence / presence), and proxemic space (the physical distance between individuals).[xxxviii]   In this psycho-geographical chronotope time does indeed thicken and take on flesh while space does become charged and responsive.

9:30's indeterminacy of place manifests itself through a shifting cartography of urban iconographies in Los Angeles. This cartography is densely layered with icons of varying visibility and only those intimate with the textures of the city are familiar with them: for Los Angelinos (Tommy Burger), for tourists (the stars on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame), and for that most rare breed of all the Los Angelino who uses public transportation (the subway). Other locations featured have more generic attributes such as pedestrians strolling on a sidewalk and clothing shops with garish fluorescent lights. Chan Kin Fai floats through these points in an attempt to cultivate a sense of belonging or fixed-ness to his dislocation.

Just as time space cannot be separated in the chronotope neither can Chan Kin Fai's subjectivity be disengaged from his geographical environment (self-place). In this psycho-geographical chronotope, Chan Kin Fai transforms points of visibility (Tommy Burger, Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame, and the subway) into indeterminacies of place. The film offers no signage to indicate that Chan Kin Fai and Klaus are dining at Tommy Burger. Only Los Angelinos would be able to decode the hieroglyphs of counters and stands. The only close-up of a star (Jim Carrey) on the Hollywood Boulevard Walk of Fame is softly lit and almost impossible to read. The subway is an extremely disorienting urban marker, as Los Angeles is known more for its urban sprawl than its subway system. In all instances, only Chan Kin Fai's voice-over provides any orientation to contextualize what is shown on-screen. The voice-over (sound) and the amorphous locations on-screen (images) exist almost at a counterpoint with each other disrupting any seamless recognition of place. I argue that these indeterminacies of time, space, and place through the psycho-geographical chronotope be read allegorically as an ambivalent meditation and mediation of the fleeting and fragile sense of Singapore as home.

Most recently, Ngee Ann Film and Video alum Boo Junfeng's *A Family Portrait* (2004) won the 2005 Singapore International Film Festival Best Short Film Award. *Family Portrait* was shot in Spain when he was there on an exchange program. Its win (as a merantau trace) certainly raises a productive set of questions: What exactly constitutes a "Singapore" film? How do Singaporean filmmakers living abroad articulate their "Singapore" identity? How do short films contribute to these cultural and national dialogues?

Trace: Motley Urbanisms

I suggest that motley urbanisms as a trace is concerned with the multiple, varied and often contradictory ways filmmakers explore the thickness of everyday life within Singapore as city-nation. Such explorations include short films submitted to the Fly By Night Video challenges or *15* a short film by Royston Tan about disaffected youth in Singapore. *Singapore Gaga* (2004) an extended short by Singapore filmmaker Tan Pin Pin exemplifies this trace to

wonderful effect. The film painstakingly stitches and weaves together complex soundscapes and profiles individuals who form the fragile socio-cultural fabric of Singapore. It celebrates performative subjects of this city-nation through heteroglossia of which Bakhtin writes with reference to the novel:

> Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)…[xxxix]

In *Singapore Gaga* street sounds of traffic mingle with music from noted harmonica player Yew Hong Chow; spoken English and Singlish (Singapore Colloquial English) engage in playful dialogues with Mandarin, Arabic, and disappearing Chinese dialects like Teochew and Hakka; voices from the past circulate with voices from the present; nostalgia weeps alongside the exuberance of the here-and-now. For the purposes of this essay, I would like to approach *Singapore Gaga* through two of its characters: Singaporeans Margaret Leng Tan, an avant-garde pianist and Ying, a street performer. Both characters enact a series of tactical practices as they move through a socio-cultural landscape heavily contoured by the state. These tactical practices take place in the void deck of a public housing estate (Ang Mo Kio)[xl] and in the thoroughfare of the MRT (subway station). For de Certeau, a tactic:

> …insinuates itself into the other's place, to keep it at a distance…A tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to run them into 'opportunities'…[xli]

The camera chronicles Margaret Leng Tan's performance of John Cage's 4'33" in one long take. In this signature piece, Margaret Leng Tan enters a void deck, sets up her toy piano, carefully assumes her position, and commences with her rendition. Robbie Goh in his article "Things to a Void: Utopian Discourse, Communality and Constructed Interstices in Singapore Public Housing" writes that a void deck:

> …is an architectural feature in public housing in Singapore…In addition, the structure of the void deck, with its openness unobstructed except for interspersed load-bearing walls, facilitates both ventilation and surveillance…[xlii]

Here, Margaret Leng Tan literally insinuates herself into the alienated space of the void deck with her toy piano and stopwatch. According to Leng Tan, 4'33" (four minutes, thirty-three seconds) allows the listener to just concentrate and linger on sounds that would normally recede into the background and be rendered inaudible. In the long take, four minutes and thirty-three seconds pass with only ambient sounds infusing the soundtrack. Time beats to the cadence of traffic while space flows with the cacophony of sounds of everyday life. A man peers curiously at Leng Tan from the top left corner of the frame, recognizing her alien presence but mesmerized nonetheless.[xliii] Leng Tan has succeeded, if for a brief moment, to disrupt this individual's sense

of time and space by forcing him to furtively engage with sounds that are fleeting yet integral to his experience of the world around him.

Ying is a street performer whose tactical performance site is the panoptic space of the MRT (subway station).   Ying, a self-proclaimed "national treasure" juggles while playing the harmonica and provides his own percussive accompaniment by tapping his clogs on the ground. Indeed, Ying literally marches to the beat of his own drum. Ying further insinuates himself intimately into this panoptic space through carefully selected material objects. He hangs a picture of himself on the wall (an act of domesticity) and places a bucket for donations by his feet (a signifier of his presence and purpose). His kinetic yet slow shuffled movements suggest an itinerant mobility that redirects the seemingly efficient flow of commuters as they rush about their business. Ying tries his best to prolong his performance, but he is forced to leave on two occasions. On the second occasion, he is asked whether he has a license to perform. Ying replies that he received one from the National Arts Council, but the woman, a bystander, seems confused and refuses to believe that Ying did indeed procure such a license. Unable to convince her otherwise, Ying packs up and gingerly creeps up the stairs. While *Singapore Gaga* revels in such performative subjects of the city-nation, the film seems ambivalent about the impact and role of the state as a force that shapes both Singapore and Singaporeans as pedagogical objects of the city-state.[xliv]

This essay offers an examination of merantau and motley urbanisms as two traces in contemporary Singapore short film production. These are by no means the only traces circulating within and among Singapore short film texts. I have chosen these specific traces because taken dialogically, merantau and motley urbanisms offer a compelling space to engage with the imaginaries and discourses of the local-global and the (trans) national. Traces such as merantau or motley urbanisms may not be unique to Singapore as filmmakers from other Southeast Asian countries may have studied film production abroad or may be engaging with the urban in their respective countries.[xlv]   Unlike every other country in Southeast Asia however, Singapore as a city-state does not possess a rural hinterland. Singapore's distinctive urban landscape therefore inflects motley urbanisms as a trace in a particular way. Similar traces may circulate between national boundaries in Southeast Asia but what they evoke depends upon a particular country's socio-cultural-political-economic dynamics.

Re (framing) Short Film Production in Southeast Asia: Preliminary Observations

In conclusion, the nomadic and polymorphous attributes of the short film make it a potent form of artistic expression and cultural production in Southeast Asia. Unlike feature film production which is capital intensive (although this is changing with the introduction of digital video) and requires some semblance of funding infrastructure, whether at the state level (film commissions) or through private means (equity financing, co-productions), short film production can be less labor and capital intensive and therefore more accessible to a larger segment of the filmmaking community in Southeast Asia. A filmmaker, using digital video, may produce an extensive body of short films, thereby honing his/her cinematic voice.

Short films, depending on their exhibition and distribution spaces and strategies, may also be able to evade state censors with greater ease.[xlvi] Short film production offers Southeast Asian filmmakers an itinerant mode of engaging with the socio-cultural fabric of their respective countries. However, as these short films travel through the film festival circuits and circulate internationally as objects, a productive tension builds between imaginaries of the national and logics of the trans(national). Here, short films enter the global cultural flow of what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes as mediascapes.[xlvii]

Each country in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Brunei, and East Timor-Timor Leste) possesses its own film history that operates within a particular nexus of socio-cultural-political-economic concerns. This essay recognizes this heterogeneity and specificity and maps a preliminary framework of topographic spheres of activity that shape and are shaped by the particular politics, place, and poetics of each country's moving image culture.

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[i] Anchalee Chaiworaporn, "The Alternatives,"
http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail_en.asp?id=33

[ii] Amir Muhammad, "Smorgasbord: Shorts," *Kakiseni.com*, January 14, 2002, http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/columns/MDEwOQ.html

[iii] Amin Shabana and Lulu Ratna founded Bomboe, http://www.boemboe.org/about.html

[iv] Juan Foo, "A Nation's Cinema Starts With Shorts," *Arts Magazine*, December 2002, http://www.filmsasia.net/gpage77.html. Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde use this quote as well. See, "Singapore Cinema: The Importance of Being Short," (Anthology on Singapore cinema edited by Sophia Siddique Harvey – in progress), 1. Uhde and Ng Uhde offer a comprehensive account of short film production in Singapore in this forthcoming article. Their profiles of filmmakers are especially informative and detailed.

[v] Patricia R. Zimmerman's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* and James M. Moran's *There's No Place Like Home Video* situate the short film within such conceptual categories as amateur – professional-avant garde and / or domestic spheres of image production. These paradigms while constructive when contextualized within the complex mediascape of the United States do not seem adequate enough to address the elusive politics, place, and poetics of short film production in Southeast Asia. Patricia R. Zimmerman for example, defines *amateur film* as "…the complex power relations defining amateur filmmaking…" while she designates *home movies* as the film texts themselves. This engages with two topographic spheres of activity that I discuss in the paper: mode of production and object. See, Patricia R. Zimmerman, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), x. James M. Moran in *There's No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) further breaks down home video into three modes: the home mode, event videography, and the Avant-Garde. See, Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, xviii.

[vi] Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, "Singapore Cinema," (Anthology on Singapore cinema edited by Sophia Siddique Harvey – in progress), 3.

[vii] Uhde and Ng Uhde, "Singapore Cinema," 2. This is due largely to Singapore's small domestic film market and its relatively underdeveloped film funding infrastructure.

[viii] My framework could be used to examine short film production in countries other than Southeast Asia but I am restricting myself to this particular region for the purposes of this essay.

[ix] I mean dialogically in the Bakhtinian sense of the word in which there is a "…constant interaction between meanings…" See, M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist , trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1981), 426.

[x] http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=trace (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000).

[xi] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 84 – 85.

[xii] Bertilla Pereira, "Singapore is among the world's biggest buyers of video recorders," *Sunday Monitor*, August 19, 1984. According to an article by Gandhi Ambalam, one in five households in Singapore owned a VCR, with almost six million blank tapes imported for the first nine months of 1982. See, Gandhi Ambalam, "Closing more cinemas," *Singapore Monitor*, January 27, 1983.

[xiii] C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore: 1819 – 1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), 307 – 308.

[xiv] Yoke Meng Lee, "Movie-making course for eager amateurs," *The Straits Times*, August 23, 1982.

[xv] "Learn how to make your own video," *Singapore Monitor*, May 8, 1984.

[xvi] Chee Eng To, "Contest to bring the Spielberg out of you," *Singapore Monitor*, August 3, 1983.

[xvii] Peter Ooi, "Roll'em! It's easy," *Singapore Monitor*, March 5, 1984.

[xviii] I use city-nation as a discursive construct that takes into account performative explorations of life within Singapore as opposed to the city-state in which rituals of citizenship are enacted by the state (national anthem, national flag, national day celebrations).   I am still teasing out the implications of this term and explore it in greater detail in my forthcoming book *Screening Singapore: City-Cinema and the Urban Imagination*.

[xix] See, "Singapore to compete to be TV and film centre," *The Straits Times*, February 26, 1993, "Government plans to make Singapore a film centre," *Business Times*, February 26, 1993 and "Tax incentives to boost Singapore's filmmaking industry," *The Straits Times*, April 22, 1993.

[xx] Rebecca Lim, "I want my, I want my, MTV, from Singapore," *The Straits Time: Life Section*, September 12 1998, 2. This advertisement for political stability fed into the anxieties and uncertainties surrounding Hong Kong's return to China in 1997.

[xxi] At the time of the newspaper article's release in March 1997, all HDB housing estates were in the process of being wired for cable. SCV had hoped to wire 90% of all the 800,000 homes by the end of 1998. See, Tan Yi-Ling, "Soon, 70 movies a month on new cable TV channel," *The Straits Times: Life At Large*, March 20, 1997, L3.

[xxii] For a detailed discussion of the Substation, please refer to page six of this essay.

[xxiii] There were no winning entries for either "Best Video Featuring Singapore" or "Best Video Featuring the People's Association," See, internal memo, "Summary of Video 90 Awards – Sixth Singapore Video Competition," ce/vcp/v90-rep 1990.

[xxiv] For details on the "My Singapore" Award, see Press Release on the Panasonic Video Awards – The Seventh Singapore Video Competition, November 20, 1991. Approved by Mr. Douglas Koh, Director PA (Programmes). The Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema also co-sponsored 8th Singapore Video Competition.. See, Press Briefing by Mr. Goh Chim Khim, Deputy Director (Programmes), July 29, 1993.

[xxv] *The Substation Brochure*, 1996.

[xxvi] Siew Fern Yong, "Introducing poor man's filmmaking," *The New Paper*, January 19, 1998, 25.

xxvii The Guerilla Filmmaking Workshop echoes Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's call for a third cinema in Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," in *Movies and Methods V. 1*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 44 – 64.

xxviii Elisabeth Gwee, "Next change: a movie feast," *The Straits Times*, March 24, 1997, L7.

xxix   Press release, "TVMobile Showcases Ngee Ann Polytechnic Students' Short Films," http://www.np.edu.sg/corpcomm/media_newsrm/release_jul2003.html#news7

xxx The other organizers are Fly By Night (filmmaker Tan Pin Pin and curator Yuni Hadi). For more information on Fly By Night, see http://www.fly-by-night.org/

xxxi Singapore Films Act, http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/html/homepage.html

32 I spoke about S-Express with Zhang Wenjie, curator of the Moving Images Programme at the Substation (personal communication, September 30, 2005).

xxxiii Adrian Vickers, "The Country and the Cities," (Working Paper 56, Southeast Asia Research Centre of the City University of Hong Kong, December 2003), 2.

xxxiv Tan Bee Thiam and Yannling Lim, "Introduction," *While You Sleep*, special compilation of *Singapore Shorts* DVD from the Asian Film Archive Collection. Directed by Eva Tang. London, England: 2002.

xxxv I borrow the term psychogeography and psychogeographical from Guy Debord who writes:

"Psychogeography could set for itself the study of […] specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."

See, Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," *Les Levres Nues* #6, 1955, http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/en/display/2

xxxvi M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1981), 84.

xxxvii Marcus Doel discusses space as a verb in: "Un-Glunking Geography: Spatial science after Dr. Seuss and Gilles Deleuze," in *Thinking Space*, ed. Mike Craig and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 2000), 125.

xxxviii For a discussion of proxemics refer to Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966).

xxxix M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1981), 263.

xl A void deck is the open area on what should be the ground floor of a block of flats. Approximately 85% of Singaporeans live in these public housing estates.

xli Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix.

xlii Robbie B. H. Goh, "Things to a Void: Utopian Discourse, Communality and Constructed Interstices in Singapore Public Housing," in *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text*, ed. Robbie B. H. Goh and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2003), 53.

xliii Other individuals stroll past the frame but this is the only person who stops for any length of time.

xliv For a discussion of the pedagogical and performative, see Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 291 - 322.

xlv *Father* (13 min, 2002) and *My Country* (3.5 min, 2002). Both directed by Shamyl Othman while he studied at the Victoria College of the Arts in Australia. My thanks to Khoo Gaik Cheng for drawing my attention to this merantau trace in Malaysia.

xlvi In the case of Singapore, all films (shorts and features) must be submitted to the censor if they are to be exhibited to the public. See also, Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, "Singapore Cinema," (Anthology on Singapore cinema edited by Sophia Siddique Harvey – in progress), 4.

xlvii Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Modernity* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 35.