

**Cinémathèque Quarterly**  
**Vol. 1: January\_March 2017**

#### About National Museum of Singapore Cinémathèque

The National Museum of Singapore Cinémathèque focuses on the presentation of film in its historical, cultural and aesthetic contexts, with a strong emphasis on local and regional cinema. Housed in the museum's 247-seat Gallery Theatre, the National Museum of Singapore Cinémathèque offers new perspectives on film through a year-round series of screenings, thematic showcases, and retrospectives.

**The National Museum of Singapore Cinémathèque would like to thank all of its partners as well as Zhang Wenjie of SGIFF for his support and assistance in realising this first issue of *Cinémathèque Quarterly* 2017.**

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Design: Studio Vanessa Ban, Kong Wen Da  
Printer: Pixel Tech Pte Ltd

Distributed by the National Museum of Singapore

NMS Cinémathèque: Wong Hong Suen, Kathleen Ditzig, Warren Sin, Olivia Lim

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ISSN 2251-2993

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Published by

N S M  
National Museum  
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Cinémathèque

An institution of

 National  
Heritage  
Board

Supported by

 MCCY  
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

 Singapore Film  
Commission

## Director's Note

When the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) first launched the *Cinémathèque Quarterly* in 2011, it was one of Singapore's first print platforms for critical film discourse. We were humbled and encouraged by the enthusiastic responses we received, from local film students to established film institutions alike.

After a hiatus, we are back with a refreshed mandate to tell the stories of Singapore culture through film, and to invite you to discover the space where a national museum and cinémathèque converge. In each issue, we invite industry experts from the fields of design, art, literature and food to contribute to film discourse and to engage in a conversation about how we understand our histories and ourselves.

The NMS Cinémathèque has a long legacy of film programming that dates back to 1976. Film in the museum, whether presented in our purpose-built cinémathèque theatre, or woven into the narrative of our exhibitions, helps us to imagine the past, the present and the future. The museum's film programmes have supported our exhibitions by presenting film heritage alongside material culture and our social histories. Its programming has also provided platforms and opportunities to grow Singapore's film scene. In its first year, the NMS *Cinémathèque Quarterly* was the first to feature some of today's prominent local editors, film critics and emerging film-makers.

Our first four issues this year are the result of a new collaboration with the Singapore Film Commission (SFC) of the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA). This collaboration will enable the presentation of *Cinémathèque Selects*, a new monthly programme of double-billed screenings that highlight the people and inspiration behind some of Singapore's canonical films, as well as the return of Cinémathèque programmes such as the *Singapore Cinema Heritage Retrospective* and *International Cinema Retrospective*. This issue also marks the first print collaboration between the NMS Cinémathèque and Asian Film Archive. Each issue of the *Cinémathèque Quarterly* will feature an article by the Asian Film Archive on inspirational archival material or pressing issues that face film archives today.

We hope that you enjoy reading the first issue of *Cinémathèque Quarterly* as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. We are very grateful to our partners, especially SFC, as well as the community of institutions, individuals and readers such as yourself for your continued support. This Quarterly would not have been possible without all of you.

**Angelita Teo**  
**Director, National Museum of Singapore**  
**National Heritage Board**

## Editor's Note

It is perhaps endemic to a fairly young cultural canon that we tend to speak more of moments rather than movements; of triumphs rather than processes.

Anyone who has had their pulse on Singapore film in recent years will certainly be able to reel off titular moments and triumphs: Anthony Chen's 2013 *Caméra d'Or* win for *Ilo Ilo*, the simultaneous debuts of Boo Junfeng and K. Rajagopal's *Apprentice* and *A Yellow Bird* at Cannes last year, Kirsten Tan's Best Screenplay win at Sundance this year for *POP AYE*.

But behind these tinsel moments of strong validation by the international film festival circuit, is there room to consider candidly the toil of the hours—the years—of craft it took for these film-makers and films to get there? Where can we locate and understand them in cinematic trajectories and social histories? What of the local and regional domains they exist in?

I am grateful for the opportunity to work with the National Museum's Cinémathèque on the first issue of its relaunched *Quarterly*, which has provided room, in print, for presenting the different registers through which we as individuals, communities and institutions value film in the past and present as well as for the future.

Each issue will feature essays on film culture, '5 x 5', an interview format of 5 questions between film professionals, youth writing developed in partnership with educational programmes and a

transdisciplinary commission that responds to film. In addition to these recurrent formats, this issue includes a specially initiated conversation between a young film-maker and film programmers.

In this first issue, we are privy to a range of ongoing conversations: If Boo Junfeng and K. Rajagopal could ask each other five questions, what would they be? What do SGIFF's youth-writers honestly think of *Apprentice* and *A Yellow Bird*? How are our film institutions, like Cinémathèque or the Asian Film Archive, evolving with the times? Who is the maverick behind obscure '80s Singaporean B-films about the Adrian Lim murders and the search for a tiger's phallus? What kinds of short film submissions make the short film programmers of the Singapore International Film Festival sit up and pay attention? Remember the 1999 movie *Eating Air*, on the cusp of the turn of the century? Where are we now?

*Cinémathèque Quarterly* opens up room for intimate conversations between diverse segments of the film-making ecosystem to happen, and also for the language of critical film discourse to develop in Singapore. In a time of nanosecond-shifting newsfeeds and clickbait headlines, *Cinémathèque Quarterly* looks set to be a space for local cinema and its attendant issues, personalities, histories and futures to breathe long-form and connect with its publics—for cinema cannot and does not exist in a vacuum.

**Amanda Lee Koe**  
**Editor, *Cinémathèque Quarterly***

# The NMS Cinémathèque in Context:

## A History of Film Programming at Singapore's Social History Museum

Kathleen Ditzig

Camera and event. Since its invention, film has seemed destined to make history visible. It has been able to portray the past and to stage the present. We have seen Napoleon on horseback and Lenin on the train. Film was possible because there was history. Almost imperceptibly, like moving forward on a Mobius strip, the side was flipped. We look on and have to think: if film is possible then history, too, is possible.

–Harun Farocki and Adrei Ujica,  
*Videograms of a Revolution*<sup>1</sup>

Used as an exhibitionary medium to educate audiences about Singapore's rich history, and as a lens onto the international world, film has not only been used to re-stage the past but also to consider its significance in the present.<sup>2</sup> Since it built its first theatrette in 1976, the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) has been using film to support its exhibitions, making local and international cultural history accessible to broad and diverse audiences. The museum's legacy of film programming is increasingly important in today's cultural landscape. With a proliferation of screens—whether big, small, hand-held and mobile, or immersive—and increasingly more film venues and genres showing a diverse range of trans-disciplinary and independent films and film installations, film programming at NMS has taken on new and expanded roles in the cultural ecology of Singapore film, as well as in making historical knowledge accessible and important to new generations of audiences.

### THE NATIONAL MUSEUM'S FIRST FILM SCREENINGS

1976 was a big year for NMS. With a new mandate to be culturally educational and entertaining for everyone, the museum's zoology collection was transferred out and a donation of \$1.4 million from the Singapore Arts Council paved the way for the development of Singapore's first art gallery and a new multi-purpose theatrette within the museum.

In contrast, outside the museum, the 1970s was a particularly dim period for film. While the studios had produced 15 to 20 films a year during their heyday, this dropped to just seven films between 1973 to 1978. For an entire 12-year period from 1979 to 1990, not a single Singapore feature film was made, spelling the end of Singapore's studio film era.<sup>3</sup> In this context of a declining film industry, the museum's theatrette was an unusual counter-trajectory for film, providing screenings of new and eclectic films for what seemed to be, at the time, a form of cultural production that was on the wane.



Image of multi-purpose theatrette 1976, image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore

- 1 Lutticken, Sven. "Interesting Times." Introduction. *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2013. 1. Print. See also *Videograms of a Revolution*. Dir. Harun Farocki and Adrei Ujica. 1992. Documentary based on Found Footage.
- 2 Tan, Kenneth Paul. "Cinema as a Language of History: Explorations into Two Related Worlds." *Film as a Language of History: ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2012*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2012. 16. Print.
- 3 Zhang, Wenjie. "The Bigger Picture: Film and the National Museum Cinémathèque." *Film as a Language of History: ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2012*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2012. 62-79. Print.

As early as 1976, film programming played an unusual and important role both for the museum in and of itself. Its nascent film programme featured operas, films on ethnographic surveys of festivals, and short films from other cultures. These impressionistic films provided an insight into the world outside of Singapore and supported the museum's programmes, which included international art shows. An exceptional example of the international films presented by the museum is *Tsar and the Carpenter*, a 1956 East German musical comedy film directed by Hans Müller, that was screened in 1979. East Germany at the time was a socialist state and often described as a satellite state of Soviet Russia. In that same year, the museum also screened the *Marriage of Figaro*, a West German production presented by the Goethe-Institut alongside *Tsar and Carpenter*, effectively presenting films from both sides of the cultural bloc in Germany and demonstrating the pluralism of early film programming at NMS.<sup>4</sup>



*Tsar and Carpenter*, 1956. Image courtesy of DEFA-Stiftung, Heinz Wenzel

## THE INTERIM YEARS AT RIVERSIDE POINT (2003–2006)

NMS' film programming continued its supportive role to the museum's programmes up into the early 2000s, when a change in the museum's infrastructure and the evolution of exhibitionary technologies expanded the scope of the museum's film programming. In April 2003, the National Museum of Singapore building at Stamford Road was closed for major redevelopment and the museum was relocated to Riverside Point. While Riverside Point did not have space for large-scale displays or exhibitions, it did have a 193-seat former Eng Wah movie theatre, which would play a major role in the museum's programmes.<sup>5</sup> The first exhibition that the museum developed at Riverside was *Rivertales* (2003), a multimedia exhibition targeted at a younger audience with film installations created by film-makers Royston Tan and Victric Thng.

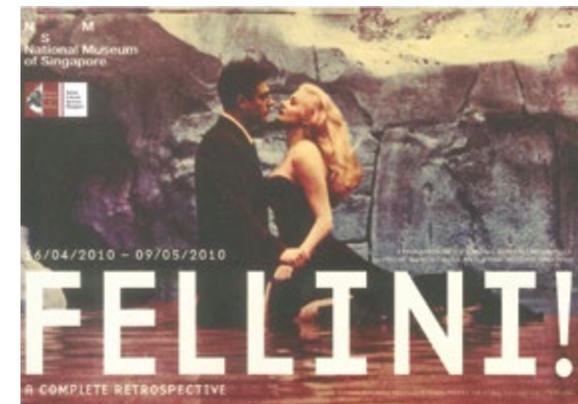
Writing about the commissioning of *Rivertales*, former National Museum director Lee Chor Lin highlighted a 1995 exhibition on the Singapore Story by the Ministry of Defense for Singapore's 30th anniversary as a watershed that changed the way the museum thought about exhibition-making:

**“The museum’s curators learnt much from this monumental portrayal of Singapore history: that audio-visual elements could effectively perform the storytelling function better than static displays of artefacts; that having a point of view, whether from an**

**authoritative source or a secondary perspective, was an important point of reference for the audience; and that with audio-visual devices, more room could be made for other points of view.”<sup>6</sup>**

In the 1980s, there was a significant change in governmental policy towards the arts, in which the arts was identified as a growth area with economic and tourism potential. This policy shift led to the setting up of new government institutions and organisations during the 1990s and 2000s, which began to fund films as a “creative industry”. In contrast to these agencies, the museum—with the development of *Rivertales*—was among the first government agencies to commission film-makers towards social rather than economic ends, such as addressing and documenting Singapore's history.

Given the nature of the spaces available at Riverside Point and the unique ability of its theatre to project both 35mm film as well



*The Fellini Retrospective* was organised in 2010 as part of the Cinémathèque's annual international film showcase. Image courtesy of NMS

as Beta video, the Museum became a key organiser of film screenings and events in Singapore from 2003 to 2006. In 2004, for example, the museum collaborated with the Substation and the Singapore Film Commission to jointly organise *Singapore Short Cuts*, a showcase of Singapore short films.<sup>7</sup> The programme has since grown to become a defining benchmarking platform for Singapore film-makers, having premiered key works in Singapore's film canon such as Ho Tzu Nyen's *Utama: Every Name in History is I* (2003) and Tan Pin Pin's *80km/h*. Ho's *Utama* would go on to become a seminal piece of artist cinema and a critical part of Singapore's film and art canon. The following year, the Cinémathèque worked with the 5th Asian film symposium and forum on Asian cinema, an event which championed the urgent need for film conservation at the time and helped to launch the Asian Film Archive (AFA), an organisation that now plays a critical role in film preservation in the region.

## THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE'S CINÉMATHEQUE

When the National Museum moved back to its redeveloped premises at Stamford Road in 2006, it deepened its engagement with film as a medium in and of itself, establishing the National Museum Cinémathèque and unveiling a new 247-seater Gallery Theatre and a 35mm projector. The Cinémathèque was the first and only one of its kind to be linked to a museum in the region. It featured year-round, original programming that focused on film history and heritage, as well as several regular film series and

4 “Event Listing: Film Show The National Museum and the Goethe-Institut will screen *The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart at the National Museum Theatre and National Museum Film Room on Thursday at 7 pm and 7.45 pm. Respectively. Admission is free.” *New Nation* [Singapore] 12 Feb. 1979: n. pag. Print. Singapore National Library Microfilm Reel NL9998; “Event Listing: A FILM Entitled. *Tsar and Carpenter*, by Albert Lortzlng will be screened at the National Museum Theatre and Film Room at 7 pm and 7.45 pm. Tonight. Admission is free.” *The Straits Times* [Singapore] 11 Feb. 1979: n. pag. Print. Singapore National Library Microfilm Reel NL9993.

5 Zhang, Wenjie. “The Bigger Picture: Film and the National Museum Cinémathèque.” *Film as a Language of History: ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2012*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2012. 62-79. Print.

6 Lee, Chor Lin. “Using Film to write History: The National Museum of Singapore Experience.” *Film as a Language of History: ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2012*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2012. 49. Print.

7 Zhang, Wenjie. “The Bigger Picture: Film and the National Museum Cinémathèque.” *Film as a Language of History: ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2012*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2012. 62-79. Print.



The National Museum of Singapore's Gallery Theatre, opened in 2006, is a 247-seater theatre with a 35mm projector. Image courtesy of NMS

10 annual events with thematic retrospectives and showcases. A particularly important programme from this early period was the *World Cinema Series*, introduced in 2007. For the first two years, the series was presented in collaboration with the Cinémathèque's long-standing partner, the Singapore Film Society. Held every first Tuesday of the month, the series showcased essential but neglected masterpieces of world cinema such as Claude Lanzmann's 9-hour Holocaust documentary *Shoah* and Bela Tarr's 7-hour film *Satango*. The *World Cinema Series* also included experimental film programmes such as a live music performance by local band The Observatory as an accompaniment to the 1926 Japanese avant garde film, *A Page of Madness*.

In its formative years, the NMS Cinémathèque was also one of the few venues in Singapore to promote critical studies of film with a historical perspective by organising public seminars, symposia

and publications such as the *Cinémathèque Quarterly*. In 2008, the Cinémathèque presented Singapore's first complete retrospective dedicated to Italian maestro Michelangelo Antonioni. A collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute, it presented 16 feature films, early short films, a panel discussion and documentaries about Antonioni's life and work, marking the first film programme of its kind to be presented in Singapore and the first of many annual film festivals that the museum would collaborate on and host. Today, the Cinémathèque is known for its annual film festivals, such as the German, Japanese, Italian and French film festivals, providing Singaporean film-makers and audiences with extensive and diverse oeuvres of film to enjoy.

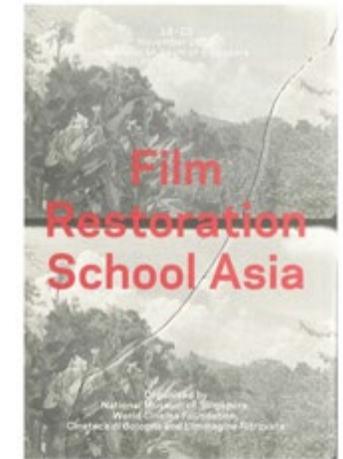
That same year, the Cinémathèque developed a concerted series of programmes to accompany the museum's key exhibitions such as *Odysseys of Myth: Greek Mythology in Cinema*, a film

programme curated in conjunction with Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre exhibition. Featuring masterpieces from Greek Cinema of the past to popular imaginations of Greek myths in Hollywood Cinema, it explored the histories of film and pop culture that were inspired by Greek myths and history, resonating with what audiences saw in the museum's gallery at the time. The Cinémathèque also curated and presented exhibitions on film such as *Under the Banyan Tree*, a series of popular film screenings that were reminiscent of early Singapore cinema experience in outdoor theatres.

In a regional film landscape defined by a dearth of critical discourse, the NMS Cinémathèque has also played a critical role in building networks of affinity and collaboration. In 2012, for example, it organised an ASEAN Museum Director Symposium to address "Film as a Language of History", an unprecedented meeting that brought together museum directors and film specialists from the region. That same year, the Cinémathèque embarked on a major film restoration—in collaboration with the World Cinema Foundation (now World Cinema Project), Konfiden Foundation and Kineforum of the Jakarta Arts Council—of Usmar Ismail's *Lewat Djam Malam*, one of the most important films from Indonesia's illustrious cinema history. A work-in-progress restoration was previewed in March 2012 at the *Merdeka! The Films of Usmar Ismail and Garin Nugroho* programme at the National Museum, and the completed restoration premiered at the Cannes Film Festival later in the year. Since then, the film has travelled to film festivals around the world. In 2013, the Cinémathèque also organised and hosted the inaugural Film Restoration School Asia, a six-day practicum to provide film preservation and restoration training to safeguard our shared cinematic heritage, as well as address the growing

need for specialised knowledge and skills within Asia.

As the Cinémathèque grew over the years, it also expanded its programmes beyond Singapore and promoted Singapore film heritage and history through programmes and exhibitions as part of festivals in other countries. For example, a selection of Malay films from Singapore's golden age of cinema was presented at the Filmoteca de la UNAM in Mexico City in 2013. In 2015, the Cinémathèque also crafted a travelling programme for films for Singapore's overseas missions. To date, more than 14 overseas embassies have used the film package to hold Singapore-focused film festivals in cities around the world from Hong Kong to Havana.



The Film Restoration School Asia was held from 18 – 23 November 2013. Image courtesy of NMS

## THE NMS CINÉMATHÈQUE BEYOND 2016: A NEW LANDSCAPE

In its first decade, the NMS Cinémathèque played the important role of a national film centre, addressing a gap in the film landscape, "legitimizing film at a national level as an art form of historical and cultural importance" and promoting Singapore film



*Homecoming* by Royston Tan was commissioned as part of Singapore Heritage Festival 2016. Image courtesy of Chuan Pictures

abroad.<sup>9</sup> As a benchmarking platform for film, it has launched the careers of many Singaporean film-makers and provided a platform for critical discourse relating to Singapore's social history to flourish. It has also played an important role in bringing Singapore's films to its people.

Today, there are more independent film venues and the significant role that NMS Cinémathèque played in its early years as one of the only film venues and programmers is now fortunately shared by many other players in the local film scene. Nevertheless, the role that film can play as a medium for representing historical narratives and engaging a general audience remains important for the National Museum of Singapore as the country's definitive social history museum. In a world riddled with increasingly complex tensions and new emerging forms of technology that have

reordered our attention spans and changed the ways in which we learn and engage with each other, museums are faced with urgent responsibilities to be open and inclusive civic spaces for the public it serves, of which the film scene and film-makers are part.

In line with this, the National Museum of Singapore has partnered the Singapore Film Commission (SFC) to present a series of new programmes such as *Cinémathèque Selects*, which highlights Singapore film in all its different and perhaps unsung facets, as well as the lesser-known people and professions in the film industry. Focusing on art directors, scriptwriters and other professions, this series of double-billed screenings will feature an important but less known film from Singapore's canon and present it together with a film from the past that has informed its creation.

Other programmes that are part of this collaboration include expansions of the *International Cinema Retrospective* and *Singapore Cinema Heritage Retrospective* as well as the continuation of *Singapore Shortcuts*, all of which have been important platforms for film education and the professionalising of Singapore film-makers. The NMS Cinémathèque is also re-launching the *Cinémathèque Quarterly*—what you hold in your hand is but the first issue in a series of new ways of engaging with Singapore's heritage and film.

With the increasing international prominence of Singapore films, these films are gaining new meanings and currency as Singapore's national heritage. Increasingly, as Farocki and Adrei Ujica claimed, film and history are two sides of the same Mobius strip. Our histories not only compel the films that are made, but our films are also making history. In the face of such developments, through this partnership, the NMS has returned to its game-changing roots of commissioning films, providing a new context for the cinematic experience. As part of Singapore Heritage Festival last year, the Cinémathèque commissioned *Homecoming*, a film about life on Pulau Ubin. Such films tell the stories of the people's history. To celebrate as well as cultivate these films, the NMS Cinémathèque will also be commissioning short and feature length films annually.

Outside of its partnership with SFC, the NMS Cinémathèque continues to uphold its legacy as a platform to connect Singapore with other cultures. NMS Cinémathèque continues to present annual film festivals from other nations, in partnership with prominent cultural institutions such as the Japan Creative Centre, Institut Français, the Goethe-Institut and the Italian Cultural Institute. In 2017, the museum will expand

these programmes to include more in-depth lectures about the intersections of film, art, culture, food and the shared histories that connect us all, such as its upcoming *Singapore and the World* series starting in April 2017.

As an integral part of the National Museum, the Cinémathèque also plays an important role in developing the museum as a civic space that makes cultural consumption open to all. Cinémathèque programmes cater to diverse audiences, providing intimate and meaningful opportunities for the young, families and seniors to enjoy cinema as well as Singapore's history and heritage. These include special programmes for children, such as *Young Cinema*, which is returning in 2017 as part of Children's Season at the museum, and will feature animated films from Singapore, France and the region as well as workshops for families, and programmes for seniors such as Silver Heritage screenings that celebrate films of the past like Phani Majumdar's *Sri Menanti* (1958) and Chun Kim's *Parents' Hearts* (1955). Through these programmes, the Cinémathèque helps to make NMS the people's museum—one that is accessible and resonant with all Singaporeans.

The founding of the NMS Cinémathèque in 2006 was the culmination of what seems a natural path for the significant role that the NMS served while located at Riverside Point. However, this has always been only one part of the story. From its nascent beginnings in its multi-coloured theatre to the present, its film programming has referenced and pointed to the museum, supporting its educational role in making history come alive and touch its viewers. Moreover, it has been essential in making the museum and the cinema a robust civic space for communities to come together in their appreciation of film or the history that film carries within it.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang, Wenjie. "The Bigger Picture: Film and the National Museum Cinémathèque." *Film as a Language of History: ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2012*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2012. 62-79. Print.

# An Evolution of Film Programming at NMS

1976

NMS opens its multi-purpose theatre and begins screening films as an extension of the museum's programmes

2003

NMS at Riverside Point 2003–2006.

2004

Singapore Short Cuts 2004–Present

Started in 2004, *Singapore Short Cuts* (SSC) is an annual programme that features the best of Singapore short films.



10th Singapore Short Cuts

2006

NMS Cinémathèque is established

ARI Asian trends seminar series Apr–Nov 2006

A monthly series of public lectures organised by Asia Research Institute and NMS focusing on the rapidly globalising trend of Asian cinema.

2007

Under the Banyan Tree 2007 onwards

Started in 2007, *Under the Banyan Tree* (UTBT) is a popular film series that celebrated the magic and romance of watching movies in the outdoors with a programme consisting of beloved film classics from Hollywood and Asian cinema.



Under the Banyan Tree Advertisement Panel, 2011

Present

Cinémathèque Selects 2017 onwards

*Cinémathèque Selects* is a monthly double-bill screening that profiles the boldest film-makers and most inventive productions from Singapore's past to its present.

2013

Film Restoration School Asia 18–23 Nov 2013

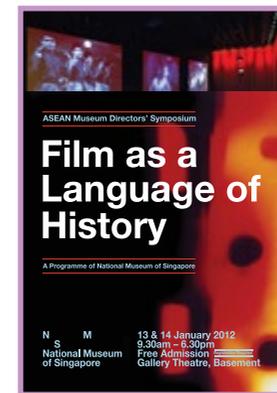
A six-day film restoration workshop catered to professionals in Asia.

2012

7th Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference 19–22 Jun 2012

ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 13–14 Jan 2012

A two-day public symposium bringing together film-makers, academics and historians to examine the relationship between film and history.

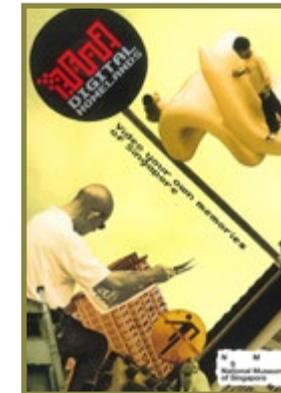


ASEAN Symposium Poster, 2012

2008

Digital Homelands Singapore 15 Jan–30 Sep 2008

A nationwide initiative for Singaporeans and residents to share their memories and stories of places in Singapore to which they have a special connection to in a short digital video.



Digital Homelands Poster, 2008

World Cinema Series 2007–2015

*World Cinema Series* was a monthly programme showcasing essential as well as rarely seen neglected masterpieces of world cinema.

## Partnerships Programmes

Singapore International Film Festival 2004–Present

Japanese Film Festival 2006–Present

Perspective Film Festival 2008–Present

German Film Festival 2013–Present

Singapore Chinese Film Festival 2014–Present

Italian Film Festival 2014–Present

## Overseas Presentations of Singapore Film

Sintok Singapore Film Festival Tokyo 12–20 May 2012

Singapore Film Festival (Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai) 1–3 Oct 2012, 10–12 Dec 2012, 4–6 Feb 2013

The Golden Age of Singapore Cinema (Mexico City) 4–12 Apr 2013



2013 Golden Age of Singapore Cinema (Mexico City) film stills

Singapour en France – le festival 2015 Film Programme 10 Jun–6 Jul 2015



Singapour en France, 2015

***Eating Air, jiaq hong, in Hokkien, or makan angin* in Malay, is the colloquial slang for a joyride.**

**Made in 1999 on the cusp of the turn of the century, the film captures aspects of *beng* and *lian* subculture, which seem to have mostly faded out in the here and now: what with the totalising advent of hipsters and mainstream high fashion.**

**A “kungfu-motorcycle-love story” about Ah Boy (Benjamin Heng), the arcade-gaming and rooftop-hanging anti-hero protagonist and the listless Ah Girl (Alvina Toh), who works in a photocopying shop, the film captures pre-high speed internet pre-iPhone pre-Marina Bay Sands Singapore, a time of pagers and voice messages, “breathing dreams like air” as the Fitzgerald line goes.**

**Almost two decades on since the movie’s release, *Cinémathèque Selects* screens *Eating Air*, directed by Jasmine Ng and Kelvin Tong, alongside the directors’ selected British film *Billy Liar*.**

**Inspired by *Cinémathèque Selects*’ format which allows for tangential connections to be made and aesthetic and thematic conversations to be had, we present, alongside the screening, never-before-released stills from *Eating Air*, and a set of Ah Boy & Ah Girl stickers from illustrator Djohan Hanapi. *Makan angin!***

Film Still from *Eating Air* (1999); Image courtesy of Jasmine Ng and Kelvin Tong; Photography by Cher Him



5



## Boo Junfeng answers five questions from K. Rajagopal:

**1. Your first short film was shot in Europe. Did the western sensibilities in films influence your style in the films that followed? What did you gain or not gain from that experience?**

My six months in Barcelona were certainly an eye-opening experience, but I don't think it had a stylistic influence on my films. If anything, the years when I was at Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Film, Sound and Video course, prior to the exchange programme in Barcelona, probably had a bigger impact on me. It was the first time I actually enjoyed going to school, and I was exposed to the conventions of film-making there.

The time I spent in Barcelona was very special and it opened my eyes to the world. It was the first time I had travelled and lived so far away by myself, and for a 19-year-old, it was a very big deal.

X

**2. What do you think is the relationship between films and politics? Do you feel your films are political?**

I think any work that engages with a social issue is inherently political. Personally, I prefer films that transcend rhetoric and enable the audience to see something they otherwise wouldn't see. I believe that films, more than any other medium, have the potential to do that.

**3. Social stigma and taboos in society have been prevalent in your short films. What compels you to address these issues?**

They are often issues that I care about in the first place, so naturally, when I think of stories that I want to tell, I look in the direction of subject matter that is more pertinent and urgent to me. For my short films, I tend to look at them more conceptually—like how I was going to adapt Alfian Sa'at's short play *Katong Fugue* into a more cinematic form, or how I was going to depict the day before a young man is to be conscripted in *Keluar Baris*. But for my feature films, I learnt to dig deeper into the characters—who they are and what they would do in their circumstances.

I've always believed that an issue no longer remains just an issue when it comes through a story. It becomes a human experience and it allows people to empathise with the characters involved. It has the potential of broadening our view of the world. That's what I try to do with my films.

5



Above: Image of Boo Junfeng courtesy of Yew Jiajun  
Below: Image of K. Rajagopal courtesy of Akanga Film

**4. All of your films' stories stem from a secret waiting to be unravelled. Why and how do you find inspiration for your films or stories?**

Perhaps it has to do with the quietness and introspection that my lead characters tend to have. Their relationship with the past and skeletons in the closet become an effective device for the audience to enter their internal worlds.

**5. What is your process like in film-making? Is there a particular film-making process you adhere to when creating your films? If yes, would you change it?**

I always make sure the actors are properly prepared before going into production. I conduct workshops and rehearsals so that the cast is on the same page as I am. This is probably a result of working on shoestring indie film budgets. There is very little time to spare on set for rehearsals, let alone to open things up for discussion, so I try and do most of that prior to the start of shoot. Sometimes it costs us some spontaneity on set, which can be useful in shaping characters and giving them life. Hopefully, we can afford the budget to open things up a little in future projects.

## K. Rajagopal answers five questions from Boo Junfeng:

**1. You've been making shorts for so many years. In fact, you were in the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) short films competition with a much younger Eric Khoo way back in the day.\* What took you so long to start on your first feature film?**

It is interesting that you mention Eric as it was his win at SIFF that spurred me on to make my first short film, as I realised that there was this platform I could be part of. But I would say that a lack of confidence and resources prevented me from working on a feature film.

When I completed my third short film and won my third award consecutively for three years, I actually wanted to progress to make a feature film. However, I had no idea whom to approach for funding, nor was I familiar with any of the film producers, as I had self-funded and produced all my shorts till then. I was making short films when there was no MDA (Media Development Authority) or SFC (Singapore Film Commission) funding available. I did not pursue the making of a full-length feature even when funding was available, as I did not feel confident enough to make a film. So I stuck to my regular job and lead a conventional life for ten years, making a television film occasionally, till I was approached by Sun Koh to work on *Lucky 7*, the omnibus feature film, where I encountered you and many others in the film community such as Brian Gothong-Tan and Lim Tingli and Ho Tzu Nyen.

*\*SIFF (Singapore International Film Festival) was rebranded as SGIFF in 2014.*

**2. Several of your shorts are very personal. Which elements of *A Yellow Bird* are the most personal to you? Do you find it necessary to personalise the stories in the films that you make?**

The title of the film itself is very personal to me. It came from my mother and my childhood memory of her telling me to make a wish whenever I saw a yellow bird. I guess I can't help but include a part of me in the characters in my films. In some way, my real life experiences play out on the reel. As I write the stories for all my films, a part of me is bound to be present in my films, even if it isn't strictly biographical. I do not feel that is necessary to personalise the stories in my films, but somehow that is how I have functioned so far; perhaps I will challenge myself in the future to tell a completely fictional story.

**3. How has your experience in being an actor helped you as a director? Was there anything that you needed to overcome in order to switch from acting to directing?**

I think being in theatre and practising as an actor has had a tremendous impact on my film-making. I learnt a lot from theatre directors such as Ong Keng Sen, Kuo Pao Kun and William Teo, who were masters in storytelling. They inspired me to direct films eventually. They taught me in detail how to work on scripts and with actors. They were aestheticians and perfectionists, relentless in getting what they wanted out of the performers. I definitely had to change my work process and approach when I switched from acting to directing, as you require a different set of skills. As an actor you work on your character or physicality or emotions either by yourself or with your co-actors, but as a director you have to collaborate with various people including writers, cinematographers, editors, production designers and producers. You have to adopt a macro approach to your work and be able to see the bigger picture as a director.

**4. Who are the younger film-makers whose work you look forward to? (Focusing on film-makers who have not made feature films)**

I like the work of Jow Zhi Wei, Chiang Wei Liang and Anthea Ng. I like their storytelling and see great potential in their work.

**5. Have you ever wondered what you might have done instead if you did not discover your passion in film-making?**

After I turned 40 I had a short stint in teaching—I enjoyed teaching and working with special needs persons as well. I always wanted to be a teacher before I discovered acting, so it would be a toss-up between the two.

# A Man Escaped



Film still from *Apprentice*; Image courtesy of Meg White

## Young Critics' Pick: A review of Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice*

Tharun Suresh

One of the most powerful images in Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice* is that of a long, dimly-lit corridor leading to the execution chamber. The atmosphere of the shot is unsettling, with the sound of fans whirring beneath the cold silence of the corridor undercutting the mood of morbid suspense and terror that grips us.

The person to be hanged is carried by the arms, hooded, and soon surrounded by a congregation of men in uniforms, emotionlessly walking with him into the chamber. Ironically, amid the officers in the room following the rules and abiding by the routine inspections required of a proper, humane execution, the man to be hanged seems the most alive and human as he struggles in his bondage to his inevitable death. His panic in facing the fate that has been decided for him grips us as the camera follows him into this dark, relentless space harshly lit by the tungsten lamps.

As the lever is pulled, we see the gaping wound of the floor open up and an eerie silence soon follows after the violent snap of the spinal cord. Yet something desperately human lingers. The creaking of the rope almost sounds like a muffled cry of struggle from the body. As the camera hovers over the hanging dead body, we wonder to ourselves if maybe he is still alive. Then they drag him down, and we return to the sterile silence affirmed of the death, without emotional resolution.

However, aside from the actual event of the execution depicted, there are no preachy monologues or long-winded dragged out sequences that aim to make us queasy with sentimentality, or draw us into either side of the debate. The film echoes Bresson's *A Man Escaped* in its drawn down simplicity. The narrative arcs are slim and the camera movements uncomplicated, suggesting that the film is uninterested in aesthetic excess.

In turn, the film lacks any explicit exposition on the topic of the death penalty, though it gives us raw scenes and emotionally charged dramatic sequences. It appears to not polemicise the issue, instead seeking to provide a detached portrait of the act of execution. The subdued color tones, slow pacing and deliberate sound mix—by turns quietened and heightened—evoke the subtlety of the film's aesthetic, refusing to drum up the horror of the execution or to sensationalise the experience.

The film thus foregrounds the character of the prison space itself with its drab architecture, sterile hallways and unforgivingly quiet structures that inhabit the contrasting violence of the hanging. Images of fences, barbed wires, boundaries, locks and bars are repeatedly foregrounded, evoking the prison's withdrawal from larger society that hides its darker inner world. In the opening sequence of the film, the camera finally lands on Aiman standing behind bars, fiddling with the hood he's about to put on the death row inmate.

The image foreshadows the feeling of social isolation that Aiman himself experiences as he learns to become an executioner. What Boo provides us with is not a perspective on the death penalty, but rather a unique chance to peer through the bars of the prison wards and navigate through its boundaries to perceive the execution for ourselves. The sustained long shots and the smoothly tracking camera movements invite us to absorb the atmosphere of the prison wards, and allow us to experience what it must really be like to be a guard on duty outside death row. The cinematography does not assert emotional response but rather invites it gently, coaxing out of us a reaction that genuinely comes from our own perspective of the execution. The film does not force us to sympathise with the hanged, but passively encourages us to do so.

Yet this veneer of passivity is undercut by a subterranean mood of outrage. There are moments of understated revelation in the film, such as when Aiman drives by a candlelit tribute to the man he is about to hang, or when he arrives at the house of a death row inmate for clothes to find the family indifferent to his death. These moments are burrowed within a film that refuses to assert their significance outright. They are sly inserts of humanity in a film dealing with institutionalised death.

This appearance of passivity echoes Aiman's own journey as an apprentice. From the outset he's the perfect executioner, with the toughness of military training, a certain compassion for the inmates, and an eager mind to learn. Rahim himself perceives this, and takes him on as an apprentice, seeing in him someone to mould after his own. After all, apprentices blindly obey their mentors. They don't question their mentors, but instead begin to follow in their footsteps. Yet beneath this forced passivity as an apprentice is Aiman's darker inner world that subconsciously rebels. His past history of a father executed by Rahim himself still haunts him, as he fiddles with the old Popeye stickers in his closet, ruminating over a lost father figure. Aiman in turn expresses an inner outrage at Rahim. When Rahim jokes to him about "learning the ropes" Aiman does wince a little, unable to laugh. He may be able to learn the methods of humane execution but not the attitude that Rahim has towards it. Aiman is the imperfect apprentice just like the film itself; he is willing to understand the process of the execution but unwilling to deny its inhumanity.

The film in turn straddles this uneasy tension between passivity and engagement, reflecting a society engaged in the same tricky balancing act between indifference towards the ethics of the death penalty and a desire to advocate on either side of

the debate. In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault highlighted the historical process by which the death penalty over time transformed from a theatrical, outdoors event with an actively engaged audience to what is now an event that takes place within the confines of institutional authority, restricted to an invisible bureaucracy as its only audience. What in turn happened was the neutering of the role that the public plays in forging an opinion over state sanctioned death. Society, like Aiman, is encouraged to feel passive, unquestioning and not be empathic towards executions and its ethics.

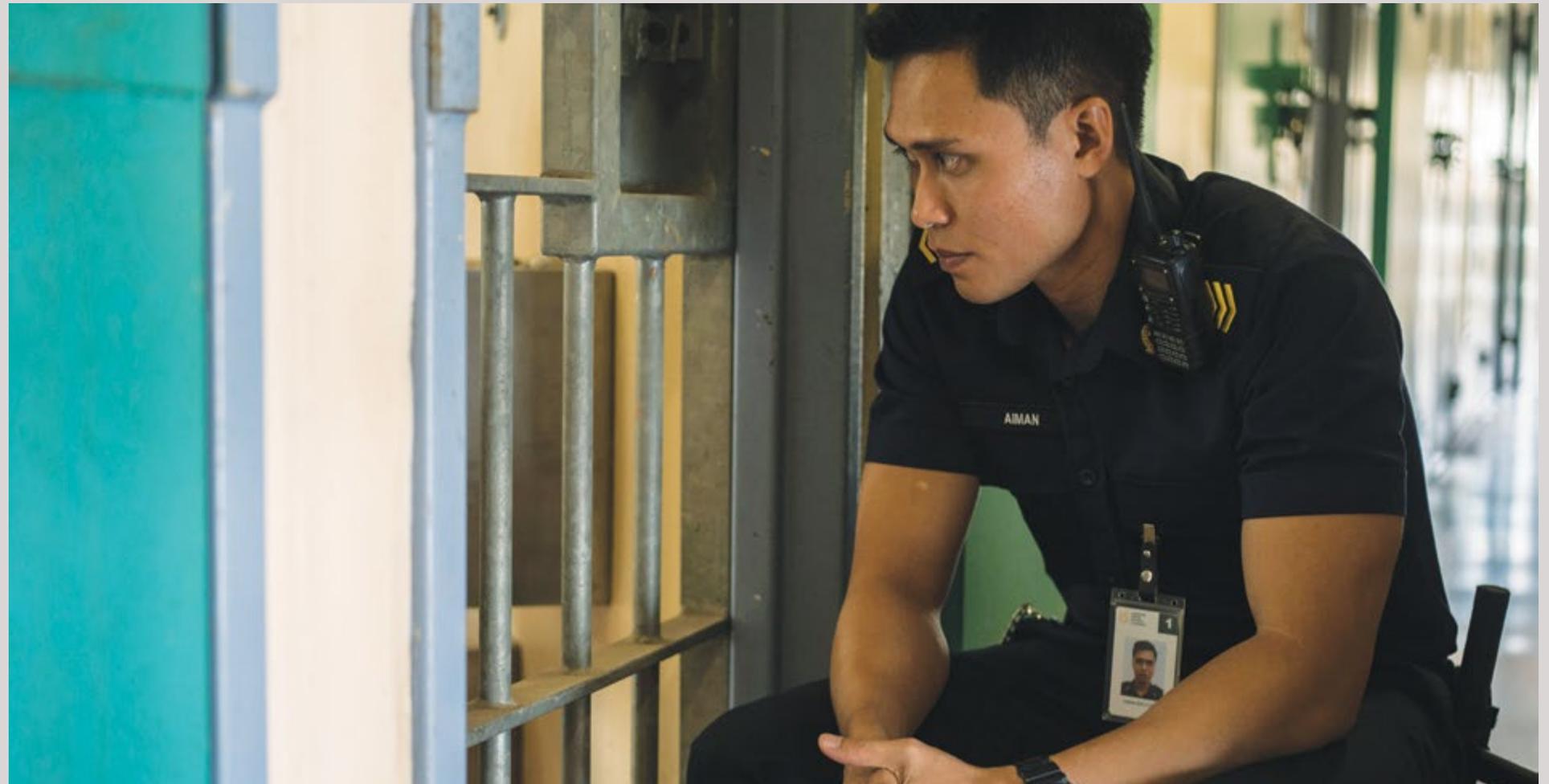
What *Apprentice* reveals is our own complicity as a society in the decision to execute someone. It reveals the insidiousness of being passive towards

the death penalty. The film's ending, a close-up of Aiman as he is about to pull the lever, is left as a cliff-hanger. The film seems to leave it up to us as the audience to decide whether or not to go ahead with the execution. Of course, the film does not provide us with a third option of indifference. We cannot be mere apprentices to this way of things. If we pull the lever, or if we don't, the film has engaged us in contemplating the dilemma of the execution either way. It does not pick a stand on its own but forces us as an audience to.

Rahim shows Aiman in a detailed, graphic tutorial how the two vertebrae of the spine split apart during a hanging to instantly sever the spinal cord, holding two fingers on Aiman's back to demonstrate with the

precision of an anatomy instructor the physical process of death. Rahim's guidance and mentorship provide an outlining form of what it means to be an executioner, and Aiman in turn quickly picks up on the rituals and administrative duties of being the hangman. The pair bond over the details, such as the type of rope to be used, or the weight of the bodies to be hanged, each caught up in how things are done and blissfully ignoring what they actually signify.

In turn, the film itself seems caught up in the tension between the forms of execution and their actual significance. This illuminates a larger issue surrounding the film, with regards to how a viewer or a critic deals with the film's form and content. In understanding this film we can be preoccupied by the



Film still from *Apprentice*; Image courtesy of Meg White



Film still from *Apprentice*; Image courtesy of Olivia Kwok

perhaps superfluous details of its form such as the camerawork, direction and performances, and be interested solely in their execution or we can begin to probe at the questions provoked by the film in dealing with such a sensitive topic. At once as viewers and critics we are caught up in the same dilemma as Aiman is: do we appreciate the film as a film or do we appreciate the film for what it portrays? Do we look at an execution for what it is or do we begin to question what it means? As a critic this

position is almost nearly irreconcilable. It is our prerogative to evaluate the former position. Yet it seems ignorant to overlook the latter question as well.

Of course to appreciate the film as a film seems almost callous, and participates in the same ritual of indifference that as a society we've grown accustomed to having towards the death penalty itself. Reviews that praise the film's tension, suspense and mood of dread often also surreptitiously veer over the

actual subject matter of the film except for a single line or two on the dialogue it provokes about the death penalty, which seems to ring of nonchalance.

Being a film, of course, this is inevitable. Any artistic work has a problem of trying to reconcile form and content, both in cinema and even in criticism. There is a temptation, as always, to dismiss what a film really stands for and to substitute in its place an easy label such as "great film", so as to

reduce the film to its very form. In order to be a hangman we need to psychologically prepare ourselves in this way, turning our attention to the forms of execution in order to forget that we are actually taking a human life away.

The mode of the review seems equally ill-prepared to deal with such a dilemma. As an audience member and a critic you are first provoked to provide an evaluative response to the film, before you are asked to comment on what it signifies. Reviews rarely begin with context or political orientation. A critic is a taste-tester and a labeller who warns the general public of what to be wary of as they step into the theatre. There is something of a hollowness in the role of criticism. Like Rahim, we are preoccupied with measurements, estimates and the rope used to kill, at the exclusion of the killing itself. Like a noose itself, there is a fundamental gap in the function of the film review that is often only filled by a curious, yet inaccessible academia. The traditional review, as digested by the general public, seems to be inadequate to deal with such socially charged material, especially in Singapore.

Political cinema has always suffered this problem. The early works of Eisenstein and D. W. Griffith in current reviews often have their political content neutered for the forms through which they depict them. Academia in the formalist tradition has always fascinated itself with the theories of montage demonstrated in the works of Eisenstein, yet they seem to casually overlook the communist ideology espoused. It is equally easy to find critics praising Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* while equally overlooking its overt racism, seeming to imply that form can exist without content, and that the ideological leanings of a work can be distinct from their trappings and craft. This kind of obsessive formalism has often been aligned with the excuse that it is

an evaluation of the historical significance of the film itself, or a look at what it really meant for cinema. We can then be art critics caught up in the forms of what things are at the exclusion of what things mean. Art remains as art, detached from reality. Reviewers in turn find themselves apprentices to this particular tradition of understanding cinema as a formal medium. Quietly, we submit ourselves to accepting the rituals of rating films out of a ten, listing out the great performances, suggesting some parts of the film up for awards and moving on. Newspapers have ingested this routine, and publishing media seems uninterested in the urgency of the subject matter at hand.

Questioning this whole process puts us in Aiman's shoes more firmly than ever. We have to decide by the end of the film whether or not it's a good film, just as he has to decide whether or not to execute. Of course, that does not matter at all; whether it's a good film or not, or whether he chooses to execute the man or not are evasive dilemmas that surround a larger question of how we begin to engage with the matter at hand.

Accordingly, the final paragraph of a review is the definitive summation of the author's opinion about the film. As a reader, you're expecting me to say: Boo Junfeng is an astounding film-maker, or Benoit Soler's cinematography is impeccable. You want me to write "two thumbs up" and end the review with a strong word of praise, or conversely dismiss the film as topically well-chosen and cleanly executed, yet essentially soulless, with a dilemma that is not so much a dilemma but a foregone conclusion. Either way, I would expect such a summation myself because I want to know if it is worth watching this film and spending time at a theatre to take in the experience. However, I am going to do this film a favour and deny you your right to know whether or not it is

in fact a good film. This review will not be an evaluation of the film's quality outright. Whether or not you think it is a good film is now up to you; but just remember that that does not really matter. Amid all this trite discussion on art there is actual blood spilt on death row, and *Apprentice* at the very least acknowledges that, and so should we. In this way, you will not be a mere apprentice to the way reviews are done. Just as the film ends in cliff-hanger suspense, so shall I conclude this "review" with no actual "reviewing" done, per se.

# Finding

# the

**Young Critics'  
Pick:**

**A review of  
K. Rajagopal's  
*A Yellow Bird***

Tulika Ahuja

# Bird

# Yellow

Titles of films, books and songs are chosen with care and intent, influencing the perspectives of viewers, readers and listeners. Titles set expectations by pushing viewers to look out for certain elements even before beginning the experience of watching a film.

Watching *A Yellow Bird*, one is looking out for the appearance of just such a bird. As a title, in and of itself, *A Yellow Bird* seems at first to evoke the pure and simple imagery of flight and freedom. The viewer begins to wonder what relation the film shares with the bird highlighted by its title. When a yellow bird does indeed appear in Rajagopal's film, the realisation that the bird is already dead takes on a larger significance. The viewer, with the context of the title in mind, begins to consider what he or she is meant to take away from the film. As a story that is essentially about the struggles faced by an ex-prisoner while reintegrating back into society, this particular scene cements the film's overall presentation of hopelessness.

*A Yellow Bird* makes a strong statement about how life outside of prison is not necessarily any more enlivening than it is behind bars, especially if you are not just an ex-convict but a minority race ex-convict, like Siva. The film calls attention to social class and rehabilitation, topics that are little explored in mainstream Singapore media. As Siva (played by Sivakumar Palakrishnan) holds the dead yellow bird in his hands, his helplessness symbolises a larger sense of foreboding that attempts to speak out to Singapore society. It makes one wonder if prisoners can ever truly find their way back into society completely, and if society actively offers accommodation for the same.

The film represents a marginalised perspective, and throughout its duration, cleverly uses its cinematography to remind audiences of its commitment to this

representation. The protagonist's outsider status in society, which is a result of his prisoner past as well as his Indian ethnicity, is referenced persistently. For instance, the shots are angled such that viewers are distanced from Siva, either caught looking at him through railings or small doorways, implying that he is not on the "inside", along with the viewer. At times, when the audience is placed in proximity with the protagonist,



Film still from *A Yellow Bird*; Image courtesy of Akanga Film

they are found watching him look out at rays of light he has no direct access to. It emphasises the juxtaposition between these different classes in society, suggesting the presence of an impervious boundary.

*A Yellow Bird* successfully creates a parallel between those on the inside and the outside. In doing so, the film serves as a social commentary, urging us to relook the current structures of our society. For instance, the

protagonist spends the entire plot of the film searching for something familiar to situate himself back into society, shuffling between attempts at regaining closure with his family, ownership of his house and stability of his income. Close-up shots of Siva employ light and shadow techniques to mask some of the protagonist's features, leaving viewers distanced from the main character, reminding us of his struggle to

fit in. Our inability to view Siva as a whole in these close-ups also feels somewhat like our inability to grasp the character completely. Just as Siva is discovering himself in the film, the audience also finds itself trying to pick up clues to learn the nature of his crimes, his sexual relationships with women and interactions with his mother, ex-wife and daughter. While these feelings of misplacement create a distance between the audience and the protagonist's story,

the parallel presentation of misplacement in society suggests that this distance is meaningful—allowing us to connect with Siva's reality while holding us at bay, because most of us would be unable to truly imagine what it is like to be in his shoes.

For international audiences too, these grounding perspectives of *A Yellow Bird* add a minority perspective to the version of Singapore more typically seen in other productions in the industry, typically dominated by a Chinese lens, from filmmakers as different as Eric Khoo to Jack Neo. In the film, the marginalisation of the Indian community is brought to the forefront through Siva and his family, and is a fresh and strong viewpoint in a space of cultural representation where the minority is usually employed to play secondary, supporting roles. Although Indians make up 9.3% of the country's resident population, their representation in local cinema is often limited to ethnic stereotypes, such as Suresh's thick accent in *The Blue Mansion* (2009) and Krishnamoorthy and Lathi's dance around the trees in *Army Daze* (1996). Because a film does not exist on its own, but instead plays a role in creating an impression about the locality in which it places both characters and viewers, *A Yellow Bird* sends a beacon of authentic minority representation out to international audiences, who sometimes still conflate Singapore with China.

The simple language of the film situates viewers in Singapore, making it an accessible tool for communicating with the masses. While depicting typical Singapore scenes, it focuses on the minority's experience of the city-state. For instance, as Siva cycles with his rickety bicycle one early morning over a highway, returning from his illegal workplace, his path is crossed by an athlete cycling over the same empty highway for recreation. Immediately placed

in a familiar setting, viewers witness the contrast between the lifestyle and access that majority of the Singapore community has in comparison to the marginalised minority. In another scene, as Siva looks up to see flocks of birds in the sky while the film seems to offer freedom and hope for a second it is merely a calm prelude to the gunshots that follow. Viewers are again placed in a familiar setting of birds being culled in housing estates. Like the birds, Siva is not desired by society. Like the birds, Siva, who has been made homeless by this point in the film, is separated from this idea of residing at “home”. Does Singapore have space for those on the fringes? It is worth noting that even when Siva finds an outlet for redemption, it is in an illegal tent in the forest with an illegal sex worker from China. This unidentifiable place could be both nowhere and somewhere simultaneously, and offers a heavy visual contrast to the concrete jungle Singapore is traditionally identified with. With this, the film implies that outliers are unable to even find a safe space in society or to interact with the community at large.

K. Rajagopal has been making films since the mid-90s and although *A Yellow Bird* is his first feature film, his previous productions include directorial segments in *Lucky 7* (2008) and *7 Letters* (2015). These works have touched on themes around alienation and displacement, and in an interview, Rajagopal consciously admitted to wanting to give a voice to “the other” in *A Yellow Bird*. This is the voice that often gets ignored in the multicultural makeup of Singapore. The use of language is then significant in *A Yellow Bird* as other than being labelled a “black ghost” by his Chinese co-workers, Siva is spoken to in Mandarin for the most part of the film. Being a language he is not familiar with, it is disheartening, but also refreshing to see this alienation from the minority’s perspective.



Film still from *A Yellow Bird*; Image courtesy of Akanga Film

This appears stronger in the context of Singaporean cinema where Mandarin is typically used for dramatic and emotional effect, and to some degree could be seen as a tool to authenticise local cinema. Rajagopal’s sincerity, both with regard to his use of language and representation of the minority, seems to come from a personal place and is a perspective that is essential for the development of both cinema and Singapore as an open and inclusive space.

It is this fusion of representation, hardship, rehabilitation and language that makes *A Yellow Bird* truly authentic. This authenticity

Another example perhaps is how smoking a *beedi* and a cigarette are used separately to create dramatic effect. In contrast to the cigarette, the *beedi* is a fragile, poor man’s Indian cigarette. Siva is shown smoking a *beedi* in only one scene, where the dialogue too draws attention to the economic inadequacies viewers then associate with the protagonist. Yet, the symbolism of the *beedi* is soon superseded by the large amount of cigarettes the protagonist smokes. These attempts at uniting and essaying a larger social commentary can sometimes distance viewers from the important truths being presented, because their frequency lessens the singular impact of its appearance and of Siva’s individual journey.

That being said, *A Yellow Bird* is no doubt an important film for Singapore cinema and for underrepresented communities. By offering a serious and earnest perspective that is often overlooked, *A Yellow Bird* makes the Singaporean film canon fuller and more diverse. It offers audiences a stark and gritty insight, stoutly refusing to hold out olive branches of feel-good narratives or over-aestheticisation.

In interviews, K. Rajagopal has said that the film’s title is very personal to him. It came from his childhood memory of his mother telling him to make a wish whenever he saw a yellow bird, and that it symbolised hope. In the film, perhaps Siva’s yellow bird is Chen Chen, the Chinese sex worker through whom he finds moments of connection and redemption. Finding commonality in their positions on the margins of society, Siva the “black ghost” and Chen Chen the “yellow slut” make each other whole, if only for a while. One wonders what wishes the marginalised in Singapore might make every time they see a yellow bird, and if our society has enough space—and heart—to encompass their hopes, too.



Film Still from *Eating Air* (1999); Image courtesy of Jasmine Ng and Kelvin Tong; Photography by Lucas Jodogne

# The Has-been

***A profile of  
maverick  
producer-director  
Tony Yeow***

Kent Chan

# That Never Was

I first got to know of the late Tony Yeow in my role as a film editor. I was involved in the initial edits of Ben Slater and Sherman Ong's documentary on Yeow called *Tony's Long March*. That was close to five years ago (the final version, to be shown as part of the Cinémathèque programme, was edited by Tan Jingliang). It was a fairly straightforward documentary; Yeow would speak directly to the camera, and I would intercut with what little footage of his surviving films existed in that outmoded technology we call VCDs.

Slater and Ong had shot the interviews together; Ong was filming while Slater was firing questions at Yeow. The film made the process seem simple, but if you had (like me) spent time ploughing through the footage that came right before and after each cut, hearing the directions, communications and miscommunications between the three, you will probably come to notice the chemistry that existed between them.

Walter Murch, the acclaimed film editor of *Apocalypse Now* and *Godfather* fame likes to talk about editing in relation to the way people blink their eyes. Blinking being the speedometer of our cranial activities and the cut being the gears shifting. I personally prefer looking at movement. Firstly, movements occupy more screen space and secondly, they are the windows to one's quirks. If you looked closely enough at Yeow, there was something rather feline about this languid, charismatic opportunist that was nonetheless capable of surprisingly boisterous gestures. And, in a funny way, this body language said a lot about the man and his career as a film-maker.

A part of me is tempted to make some farfetched claim about Yeow that goes, "if there were one film-maker that sums up the history of Singapore cinema, that film-maker would be Tony Yeow" or perhaps more salaciously "look no further than Tony



Film still from *Ring of Fury*; Image courtesy of Ben Slater

Yeow for the illegitimate daddy of Singapore cinema history" or some other easy, wildly hyperbolic tagline. The possibilities are endless, but to go on would require more imagination than I am willing to exert at the moment. Nonetheless, the temptation is very much there.

So while I may not actually make those claims, it might be worthwhile to see where that temptation stems from. For that, we need to look at the man himself. The work itself. Yeow, born on 31 January, 1938 on the very cusp of Chinese New Year, was a veteran film-maker who began his film-making career in the truncated post-war Singapore film industry.

A brief run-through of the three feature films he directed: 1975's *Two Nuts*, a slapstick buddy comedy involving two men's madcap adventures in the city after they are forced to leave their *kelong*, which had become polluted; 1991's *Tiger's Whip*, another attempt at comedy, this time via an American's attempt at recapturing his virility; the 1973 martial arts action genre film, *Ring of Fury*, a hawker's revenge tale against extortionist organised crime that only made it past the Singaporean censors eighteen years after completion.

Yeow was heavily involved in two other films, 2001's *The Deadly Disciple* and 1991's *Medium Rare*. He kicked off and developed the latter project from scratch, but eventually pulled out as director at the eleventh hour due to differences with his cinematographer.

It was as if Singapore cinema between the 1970s and 1991 underwent a "cut", a cessation that resulted in two very separate film scenes—postwar cinema and the 1990s cinema revival. If Singapore cinema were a film, that very cut produced an unexpectedly long intermission between two eras. The former was the local industry



Film still from *Tony's Long March*; Image courtesy of Ben Slater

that emerged since the beginning of the 20th century, including the 1950s and 1960s period commonly referred to as the golden age of Singapore cinema. Films produced at the time were predominantly in Malay, but Chinese language/dialect films were introduced towards the 1960s. On the other hand, the films of the 1990s revival, coming decades after Singapore's independence in 1965, have been predominantly in Mandarin and occasionally English; a shift that seems to parallel the politics of language on the island.

Yeow had arrived a decade or so late. Had he begun his film-making career in the pre-independence era, he'd likely have found himself cast less as a maverick and just one of the many characters that populated the Malaya film scene.

Nonetheless, Yeow holds the unique distinction in Singapore cinema's history as the only film-maker to have made movies *before* and *after* the 1990s revival of Singapore cinema.

Singapore cinema was nonexistent from the 1970s to the 1980s. That is, until Yeow came along again, with the aforementioned

*Medium Rare*, an oddity of a Singaporean film that just happened to be local cinema's first English film. So in some ways, Yeow kick-started the revival even though the government was by then making a concerted effort to rev up Singapore's media industry in the bigger push towards creative industries as the nation sought to redevelop its economy and image.

Yeow's film-making career can be broadly summed up into three categories: films he made, films he almost made and films he didn't even get close to making. It is arguably this third category that makes him such an interesting figure and also where Ong and Slater's film gets its title.

Yeow had never stopped making films. He was not a good writer, but he would come up with idea after idea, hire scriptwriters to write them and then try to pitch them to investors and producers.

This juicy nugget didn't quite make it to the final cut: Yeow had come up with a film about an epic romance set during Mao's Long March. He had stoked the interests of a couple of film producers from Hong Kong and (Yeow's) word has it that Andy Lau

himself was interested to play such a lead if the project took off.

Alas, this being Hong Kong—being China—meant that the Long March was too big of a sacred cow to delve further into. And the project went cold in a not-quite-alive-enough-to-be-dead way typical of Yeow. But there you have it, *Tony's Long March*. Yeow was ambitious (like the Long March), but perhaps a little sneaky (classic Tony).

You could also say that he was smart, but just never had the luck. It's like with *Ring of Fury*, but then you think, that's not right—he had enough luck to have made three feature-length films! So maybe he just wasn't film-maker material, which he readily admits to as being a bad storyteller. He had no qualms about referring to himself as “the has-been that never was”. Yet despite all that, he was a lifelong film-maker with a career spanning four decades. It's a career that survived the death of one industry and revived with the birth of another.

Now here's the thing about Tony and Singapore cinema: for a long time they both seemed to care only about cinema as an industry rather than, say, cinema as films.

Cinema was but a means to an end that was all part of a numbers game. And when there wasn't an industry, both would lose their way and only make a comeback through muddled steps. When one returned as an industry reborn, the other was already an old man.

And with that, we arrive at Tony's last Singaporean film, *Tiger's Whip*, not to be mistaken with pioneer Singaporean contemporary artist Tang Da Wu's installation of the same name (albeit thematically related). The film tells the story of an American actor, very unsubtly named Dick Weiner, who after losing his mojo to some fictional disease, travels to our sunny island to seek a cure. After befriending an Indian taxi driver (which oddly enough, also happened with David Bowie in the rockumentary *Ricochet*), Dick develops a romance with a local, played by Andrea De Cruz, while on a hunt for tiger schlong, that eastern cure-all for every testosterone-centric ailment. The quest culminates with him recovering his peace, which naturally corresponds to his powers as well as achieving spiritual enlightenment. Life really is good if you are white and male.



Production still from *Tony's Long March*; Image courtesy of Ben Slater

Yes, the film was blatantly pandering to an American market, but setting that aside for a moment, after editing *Tony's Long March* I get the sense that *Tiger's Whip*, oddly enough, comes closest to being a personal film of sorts for Tony. He may be an outwardly self-deprecating character, even personal at times, speaking of his spirituality, religion and the death of his son, among other matters, but hardly ever with his films. Film-making seemed to be a personal endeavour for him, but not the films themselves. He seemed passionate about making films and what the films made, and less about what the films were about—more quantity than quality.

That's the Tony I got to know while editing his long march.

A man that came the closest to being a local Ed Woods. A film-maker I came to know of as much for his indiscretion as his keenness to make films, despite lacking the prowess. But even then, there was something affable about the man and his lackadaisical nature whose eyes widened even if you had only offered him a hypothetical million dollars to make a film. There was something of an underdog appeal to him that I couldn't quite pin down. And that's why, despite the temptation to pay the man a compliment by marrying Singaporean cinema to his film-making career, I can't quite bring myself to do so.

Singapore cinema is a different creature these days. For one, I would be hard-pressed to still term it an underdog, when it has seen waves of repeated success in recent years. More and more film-makers are emerging to make a name for themselves. This month, Kirsten Tan became the first Singaporean film-maker

to have her debut feature film, *POP AYE*, win at the Sundance Film Festival. I'd like to say it is our first local film to do so, but that achievement goes to Raintree Pictures' *One Last Dance*. And even that was an awkward "local" film, given that it had a pair of Hong Kong and Taiwanese leads, a Brazilian director and a Singapore that tried really hard to masquerade as cinema's Hong Kong. I hate to highlight the fact that Kirsten is also a female film-maker, for fear that it would detract from her accomplishment—as would pointing out that K. Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird*, which premiered at last year's Critic's Week at Cannes Film Festival, is by a minority film-maker—but it is worth noting, in a still sexist and Sino-centric industry, that Chinese male Singaporean-dominated cinema is perhaps opening up these days and making waves, with film-makers like Kirsten and Raja producing the work they do and being recognised for it.

Unlike the aforementioned *One Last Dance*, we no longer feel the need to pander to an American market. If anything, with geopolitical shifts in relation to world economies, China is the big thing now. More and more film-makers start to learn their trade from an education in film school. There are considerable funding resources locally, despite the generally anemic sales records of local films. And the benchmark for a film's success could just as well be critical as it is commercial, if not more so. All prerogatives that Tony was never accorded during his time. And call it whatever you want; a new era, a new wave, a renaissance, a blip or what not, we now have something we can decidedly call Singapore cinema that Tony is sadly no longer a part of. But lest we forget, for a very brief, even non-existent period, Tony was Singapore cinema.

# “The Form Allows You to Experiment”

## Coffee with the Short Film Programmers of the Singapore International Film Festival

Gladys Ng

Directors and actors are in the spotlight most often, but there is an entire ecosystem that makes up the film industry, from gaffer to sound designer to festival programmer. Film-maker Gladys Ng has a *kopi* chat with Leong Puiyee (PY) and Lai Weijie (WJ), the programmers of the short film segment of the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF), about their selection process and what makes them tick.

## What is film programming? What's a day in a life of a film programmer?

**WJ:** You watch ten bad films and if you're lucky, you get one good one. (laughs) On a very basic level, from the start you just watch films and then you divide them into "This is interesting", "This is horrible" and "I'll think about this again later".

**PY:** In a way, you're not watching it as an audience member, you're watching it with more objectivity. Thoughts like "I think this might be good to screen at the festival", or "If I screen this at a festival, what does it say?" go through my mind when watching a film.

## What qualities make a film programmer?

**PY:** You cannot be biased. You need to have an open mind. The local scene is quite small so you'll definitely watch films from film-makers you know, but you have to watch without letting personal relationships colour your view. Programming for SGIFF, it's also to showcase works from emerging Southeast Asian film-makers and stories that you don't get to see often. Especially with short films, there's more to it than your standard narrative.

**WJ:** I'd like to think that it requires a bit of an overarching vision, so that when the audience watches the final selection, they will have a reaction. Even if they don't like the films, even if they hate the films, at least they are reacting. I think the most *sian* thing is if they watch the film and feel nothing. That'll be demoralising. I'd rather they react very strongly towards it. It initiates an interesting discussion.

**PY:** We acknowledge the fact that not everyone will like the films, but I guess

that's the fun part. To watch and find out for yourselves what you like or don't like.

## Do you look for films that break conventions?

**WJ:** I don't think we go out of our way to do it. It really depends on what we get.

**PY:** It depends on the merit of the film and story.

**WJ:** Of course, there're some films we get that *do* break the mould, but they're terrible.

**PY:** Controversial, yes, but if it's essentially pointless, then it's a no. It's more about the essence, the story, the vision, the sincerity of the film that we look out for.

## When you select a film, do you consider the film-maker's past works and how the current piece sits together with their entire body of work, or do you just look at the film on its own?

**PY:** For me, it's just the work on its own. When it comes to selection, I don't take into consideration the previous work of the film-maker.

**WJ:** Maybe unconsciously, it'll seep into our minds when we're watching. But we don't actively want to chart a film-maker's progress and how the current work compares to the previous film.

**PY:** We might discuss between ourselves how it's different from their past films, but in terms of the selection, we still focus on the current film for what it is.

## What are the differences between short and feature films?

**PY:** First, obviously, it's the duration. The short medium allows you to experiment more. A feature is

generally 90 minutes, so with the exception of experimental film-makers, you kind of have to stick to a certain structure.

**WJ:** It's difficult to say, because there'll be always be exceptions. But generally with features, directors are more conservative because they will have to conform to certain limitations of the form. There are considerations that come into play if you want a theatrical release, for example. But in terms of shorts, the medium is still flexible; the platform that you showcase your work on is more flexible. For young film-makers, most often it's where they hone their craft. Or for experienced film-makers, it's the time for them to be a little more playful.

**PY:** That's the beauty of short films—whether you're new or experienced, I think the form allows you to experiment.

**WJ:** Practically speaking, financially the stakes aren't as high—the budgets are small enough that film-makers can take a couple of risks.

## Short films can work as a sketch pad, to try things out.

**PY:** Which can be fun and interesting.

**WJ:** One of the shorts we had from Pimpaka Towira (Thailand) this year felt like an experiment for the feature film that she's going to make. She tried out certain things and they worked quite nicely, so she might bring them on to the feature now.

## What kinds of stories work best in the short film format?

**WJ:** I can give you the film school answer. Minimum characters; real time; it involves one moment—that's enough

for a short. That's the film school sort of answer because it's low budget and concentrated.

**PY:** I don't think there is a specific formula to making a successful short. Know what you want to say. There can be so many ways to tell a story through films. Know the language of the film you want to make, the emotions you want to invoke.

**WJ:** I think as long as your film is specific, it can take any form and you can do anything. It describes or it showcases you as a film-maker. The worst kinds of films are the ones that try to follow rules, but it's just a generic plot with boring, unmotivated characters. It's just so banal and generic.

**PY:** Like Tran Ahn Hung said, don't ever try to follow other film-makers. It just doesn't work.

## So it's a distinct voice that works for you?

**WJ:** I guess a specificity. Like when you watch it, you go, "Okay, I don't see how another film-maker could make that film."

## After you've selected the films, how do you decide on the sequence they are being shown?

**WJ:** Instinctively, you'll know which kind of films pair up nicely and then usually, just to keep things interesting, we will usually throw in at least one film which is a bit out of sync with the rest of each programme. Otherwise it's too predictable. Let's say this is the experimental programme, but we will throw in one narrative film.

**There are also shorts from different countries in each programme.**

**WJ:** Because the SGIFF shorts segment is also a competition, it's nice to see how the Singapore short film stacks up against its fellow Southeast Asian short films. In theory, everyone's film should be of that standard.

**PY:** It's interesting to see the different ways of storytelling and culture from each country put together.

**Do you try to programme with a theme? For example in programme 2 this year, the characters in the films seem to be displaced from their environment.**

**WJ:** It's definitely deliberate. When we put it together, we go with the flow—what kind of film goes with the programme, the rhythm of the programme. If not, watching five short films at one go can actually be very tiring. It's like playing a playlist. If your playlist is boring, the people on the dance floor will be bored.

**PY:** In terms of the themes, sometimes it's only after putting them together that we realise there is actually a theme.

**You've seen works from self-taught film-makers and those who went to film school. Is there a difference in their craft?**

**WJ:** Maybe it's more of an experienced film-maker versus a younger film-maker. Say when you see a more experienced director like Pimpaka Tagyamon (Philippines) who did *Lola Loleng*, I think there's a difference in energy. I don't really think about it in terms of film school or no film school.

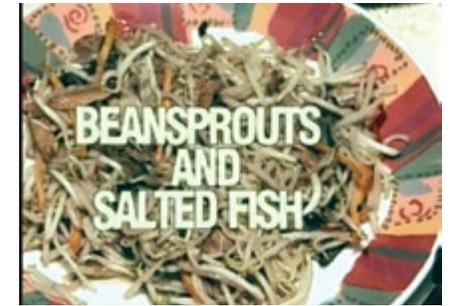
**PY:** With the experienced film-makers, it's more confident, more assured, whereas the younger ones bring an energy. You can feel a youthful energy.

**Can you recommend us a must-see short? (Local and regional)**

**PY:**



*15* by Royston Tan



*Bean Sprouts and Salted Fish* by CheeK



*Come* by Kirsten Tan



*Superdong* by Pok Yue Weng



*Vanishing Horizon of the Sea* by Chulayarnnon Siriphol

**WJ:**



*Mother* by Royston Tan



*Motorcycle* by Aditya Assarat

# Despatches from the Asian Film Archive: Curating Film and the Archives of the Future

Karen Chan

Despatches from the Asian Film Archive is a regularly featured column of the Cinémathèque Quarterly. Developed in partnership with the NMS Cinémathèque, it features the Asian Film Archive's important work and lesser-known film artefacts and projects from its collection.

*"As much and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should call into question the coming of the future... the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and a responsibility for tomorrow."*  
– Derrida<sup>1</sup>

## ON ARCHIVES

As a foregone conclusion, the professional identity of the archive is expected to be objective and neutral. Recognised as passive resources and receptacles of history, archives are seen as tools to be used and a means of supporting the cultural and historical work of academics and general users.

However, nothing could be further from the truth.

Archives are socially constructed institutions that "embody and shape public perception of what is valuable and important" within the "history and philosophy of knowledge in both the humanities and the sciences"<sup>2</sup>. In how and what they collect, they are a vanguard for our collective memory and identity formation. In so being, they have inspired the way we question the relationship of reality and how we represent it. It is a popular but misplaced assumption that the archive is only about the past. As John D. Caputo famously claims, "In the end the archive should be an open book, an opening to the

future, the depository of a promise, it is to burn with a passion for the impossible. It is to be marked by a promise of something to come."<sup>3</sup>

The characterisation of the archive as a promise and experience of the future is profoundly important. While the archive holds vestiges of the past and of history, its function must be repurposed and redefined, to remain relevant and to secure its future. Developments in information technology are directly impacting the evolution of the archive. The conceptual changes that accompany new technologies affect how we understand time and space, thus determining how we form memories.

In this respect, the archive is a powerful institution that defines and influences what gets transferred from the individual to collective memory<sup>4</sup>. For any archive, its relationship with its stakeholders and users needs to be constantly re-examined so it can address current societal challenges and respond to cultural needs.

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE (AFA)

In 2005, the AFA was founded to provide a much-needed home for the many Asian films that had yet to be preserved. The transnational ambit of the AFA being "Asian" was key and is critical to AFA as its name reflects the geographical and

1 Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 34, 35.

2 Pearce, Susan M. *Museums, Objects and Collections*. Washington: Leicester University Press, 1992. 89.

3 Caputo, John D. *The Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. 278.

4 Hutton, Patrick. *History as an Art of Memory*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993. xxii.



Musicians, artists and actors performing alongside the sound ensemble, part of *Is Everything Louder If the Image Disappears?* Photography by Walter Navarro Peremarti and image courtesy of Asian Film Archive

expansive cultural possibilities in this digital age of cinematic production, distribution, consumption and preservation. Being “Asian” claims a cultural space that investigates the character, complexity and history unique to the Asian cinematic heritage across national borders.

The liminal status of the AFA as an Asian archive extends to its organisational structure. Having grown out of the film community, the AFA strives to remain connected to the community despite becoming a subsidiary of the National Library Board in 2014. A film archive provides the material infrastructure for film history of the countries in its collection but this cultural and historical work is usually “invisible”, going unnoticed by the public and the authorities. The advocacy and promotion of building this institution required the involvement of the community and the government, and straddling an effective dynamic between the two realms determined the success of the archive.

Organisational film archiving in Southeast Asia was in its infancy as little as ten years ago, when only Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand had their own dedicated film archives. Today, most Southeast Asian countries have their own national archives while a few host an audio-visual archive department as a unit within a larger entity, such as in the case of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archives of Malaysia). Cambodia has a resource centre for Cambodian audio-visual materials while the Philippines established a National Film Archive only in 2011. Given the set-up of these regional institutions, their collecting policies would be centred on a few guidelines: a mandate to preserve their individual national films; films screened in their country; films made about their country; co-produced films by their country.

Like many heritage institutions around the world, limited resources and rapidly deteriorating films are key challenges to film archiving scenarios in Asia. This is a major reason for why the hundreds of films and their related materials such as photographs and publicity kits were submitted from all over Asia in the first year of the AFA’s Reel Emergency Project’s open call for the deposit of films for preservation in 2006.

The AFA’s collection and selection criteria are determined by a list of priorities. These include the condition of the films’ formats, its ‘Asian-ness’, and the significance of the films on local (with respect to the country of origin) and international cultural landscapes. Films that are independently produced and that are not preserved in the home country of the film-maker or by any other archive receive special attention. Political sensitivity and managing diplomacy towards each country, individual film-maker or archive is particularly crucial for a transnational organisation.

With a lean staff strength of six, the AFA must be particularly conscious of its links to the larger networks of Southeast Asian, East Asian, diasporic Asian and transnational Asian cinemas. It is structured to manage three core pillars of work—developing and providing access to its collection, curating, facilitating outreach and film literacy educational programmes, and advancing research within the film archiving industry as well as growing scholarship on Asian film. The team relies on the expertise, efforts and time of an enthusiastic group of volunteers, interns and part-timers to assist with a host of tasks including documentation, cataloguing, technical work like cleaning or digitisation of films, and overseeing the front-of-house during events. Collaborating with venue and programme partners allows the AFA to grow new audiences while tapping on different platforms for exploring pertinent issues.

## A NEW CONTEXT, A NEW PROJECT

Today, there are more film archives in the region to meet national preservation demands, and more programmes that address different elements of film literacy. Yet, film preservation and film literacy needs are as vital as ever. How then does the AFA remain relevant and define itself within an environment that has become complex but continues to have gaps and needs that have yet to be fulfilled?

For one, digital innovation has captured the imagination and production methods of the film industry. Film archivists in turn bemoan the pressure of finding ways to cope with preserving new unpredictable and unstable digital formats. Apart from the practical concerns of know-how and time, there is the very real issue of acquiring necessary funding to support on-going digital preservation to keep up with new technologies. The estimated cost (in 2007) of preserving film archival master material per title annually was USD1,059 while the digital preservation of the same material was estimated at USD12,514<sup>5</sup>.

To give these figures some local context, the AFA recently restored a film and is preserving it in both celluloid negative and digital preservation medium. The cost of making a negative print was SGD4,806. Digital preservation onto linear tape-open (LTO), a magnetic tape data storage, and back-ups of the same title cost SGD13,200. One can safely assume that the archival print negative can arguably sit safely for over a hundred years if storage conditions remain constant and cool. A feature-length film generates a combined average of 18 to 20

positive and negative print reels, taking up a fixed amount of shelf space in the repository. Archiving a digital-born 2K resolution feature film to a similar standard as an analogue film could take up to 3.9TB of storage space, and it would be necessary to migrate to a contemporary format every four to five years.

Factoring in specialised active man-hours, inflation and the growing numbers of digital films produced every year, the necessary funds to continue archival work becomes a phenomenal sum. With this in mind, archives can no longer make do with an ad hoc policy to “acquire everything, just in case”. The digital era has ironically forced archives to become more selective in their acquisitions. As such, the AFA has in place a carefully articulated selection policy that is tied to issues of access, constantly remembering that an archive (or an archivist) must look backwards and forward in time. When acquiring filmic material, he or she must assess if someone in the future may find the material significant and useful.<sup>6</sup>

In addressing this issue, it is particularly important for the AFA not to privilege only the mainstream, the powerful and the state. As the AFA is not tied to one particular national mindset and keeps relevant policies sufficiently flexible to remain responsive to the demands and needs of stakeholders and users, the AFA can adopt a selection and curatorial view that is distinctive to most national film archives in the world.

Film-makers and artists of various disciplines have approached the AFA to explore a showcase of their works within the AFA's public programmes. This has sparked numerous discussions on how the



Screening of the silent film *Pan Si Dong* with live performance, part of *Is Everything Louder If the Image Disappears?* Photography by Walter Navarro Peremarti and image courtesy of Asian Film Archive

AFA could initiate more ways of examining and thinking about cinema through new perspectives. Cinema, with its inherent historical value, could be used as a way to cultivate multiple interests in film heritage from different sectors of society.

A recent event organised by the AFA resonates with such efforts to balance the showcasing of multiple voices and alternative stories. *Is Everything Louder If the Image Disappears?* was a film/sound programme that examined the sonic component of scenography. The programme was made up of two parts—the first part a screening of *Pan Si Dong* (1927), a rare restored silent film, with live scoring by non-musicians performing a combination of foley and ambient music improvisation. The second part of the programme was a deconstruction/reconstruction of the film, with the visual stripped, leaving behind

only the inter-titles. Actors performed the reading of the inter-titles alongside a live scoring by the sound ensemble. The departure from the usual music scoring traditionally accompanying a silent film and the intentional investigation of the impact of visual and audio encourages and challenges the perceptions and interpretations of the participants and audiences. The AFA engaged a range of multi-disciplinary artists such as Bani Haykal and Zai Tang for the project. This gave the archive and the artists a chance to work together, thus creating opportunities for exchange and an openness to fresh ideas. Moreover, it provided the opportunity for the AFA's audiences and the AFA to look at historical films through contemporary and experimental mediums—bringing new meaning to canonical films.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, Janna. *The Past is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film*. University Press of Florida, 2012. 126.

<sup>6</sup> Kula, Sam. *Appraising moving images: assessing the archival and monetary value of film and video records*. MD: Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2003. 12.

## A WAY FORWARD: FILM CURATING

At the 75th anniversary of the British Film Institute's National Film Archive, Paolo Cherchi Usai, current Senior Curator of the Moving Image Department at George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, delivered a speech entitled "The Lindgren Manifesto: The Film Curator of the Future". Consisting of fourteen statements, the five that capture the essence of the Manifesto have been reproduced in their entirety below<sup>7</sup>:

1. Restoration is not possible and it is not desirable, regardless of its object or purpose. Obedience to this principle is the most responsible approach to film preservation.
2. If film had been treated properly from the very beginning, there would be less of a need for film preservation today and citizens would have had access to a history of cinema of their choice.
3. Turning silver grains into pixels is not right or wrong per se; the real problem with digital restoration is its false message that moving images have no history, its delusion of eternity.
4. Governments want to save, not give, money. Offer them economical solutions; therefore, explain to them why the money they give too massive digitization is wasted. Give them better options. Treating with the utmost care what has survived. Better yet, doing nothing. Let moving images live and die on their own terms.

5. Be aware that the world is not interested in film preservation. People can and should be able to live without cinema.

A full discussion on these points is not within the scope of this article, but it is easy to see how Usai's provocative statements would have spurred a lively discussion on the future of film curatorship in the transition from the analogue to the digital.

He laments the absence of preservation from the beginning of film history, making it virtually impossible for film restoration. Digital "content" is deemed to lack history and tangibility, and he reminds us quite rightly that the average person is disinterested in film preservation, recommending that films die with dignity.

Hisashi Okajima, Chief Curator of the National Film Center/National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, responded to Usai's speech with a love letter to film. While Okajima admits that Usai's manifesto provides food for deep thought, he pledges to digitally restore Ozu's cinematic treasures. He will strive to maintain the best possible film preservation centre he can as this is the best way he knows how to continue getting future generations of audiences to see the films that his organisation has been preserving<sup>8</sup>.

Indeed, the way forward for archives in an age of digital technology and film-making is unclear, without one simple strategy or remedy. The AFA has pledged in its mission to preserve Asian cinema and to make this art form available for all to appreciate and enjoy—but just how it carries out this

mission rests on the shoulders of the young archivists and programmers in the AFA.

A key part of this process is attracting new audiences to the AFA's events and cultivating and maintaining their interest in film heritage. By tapping on the National Library and public libraries' platforms, AFA's screening programmes *Alt Screen* and *Fade In/Fade Out* have seen a new demographic of audiences watching non-commercial Asian films and joining in discussions about them.

Curating inter-disciplinary programmes is one direction that the AFA has recently embarked on. From film-visual art, film-music, film-literary word, film-theatre to film-dance, an exploration of the intersections of these disciplines help to develop new audiences and increase an interest in what the archive can offer. The AFA's collaborations with the Centre for Contemporary Art and the National Art Council have brought film and visual art audiences and communities together. *State of Motion*, the AFA's annual programme held during Singapore Art Week, a key event in Singapore's cultural calendar developed around Singapore Art Stage, encourages participants to remember, re-imagine, envision and visualise featured made-in-Singapore films and film locations from the past in Singapore's ever-changing landscape, alongside commissioned art works that reflect on Singapore's social, cultural and political history.

The AFA has also been tapping on its stakeholders (especially film-makers and academics) to help advocate its work. A recent advocacy initiative, *Save Our Film* (<http://asianfilmarchive.org/saveourfilm/>), addressed new challenges in preserving

digital materials. Some of Southeast Asia's acclaimed film-makers have pitched in to highlight the urgency and importance of preserving cinematic heritage, and to encourage more film-makers to deposit their films and help to spread the message of film preservation.

These efforts are part of the process of building the AFA's identity as an Asian film hub while re-purposing its services. More than a mere repository and a library of resource, the archive is making the preserved collection of cinematic heritage relevant by creating contemporary, innovative and experimental programmes. These programmes will develop a critical thinking audience, willing to actively commit to the preservation of Asian heritage through its films. Rather than just passively acquiring, the AFA wishes to actively engage with its stakeholders and audience through its curation. In so doing, the archive has redefined the way it sustains itself. It offers not only resources for traditional research but has also developed multiple platforms for creative journeys and in-depth conversations on different subjects, with film as the springboard for those discussions.

A recent definition of film curatorship as "the art of interpreting the aesthetics, history, and technology of cinema through the selective collection, preservation, and documentation of films and their exhibition in archival presentations"<sup>9</sup> has offered a way forward in the preservation of film. It has provided a renewed sense of purpose for the AFA's mission—"Save, Share, and Explore"—in galvanizing new generations of film lovers, and anyone concerned about cultural heritage, to fulfil "a promise, a responsibility for tomorrow"—an archive for the future.

7 Usai, Paolo C. "The Lindgren Manifesto: The Film Curator of the Future", *Journal of Film Preservation*, Issue 84. Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2011. 4.

8 Okajima, Hisashi. "A Love Letter to Film", *Journal of Film Preservation*, Issue 89. Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2013. 9, 10.

9 Francis, David. *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Marketplace*. 2008. 170.

# Biographies

**Tulika Ahuja** is motivated by film, photography and art. She is currently an assistant curator at Kult Gallery, and was a participant of the Singapore International Film Festival's Youth Jury & Critics Programme.

**Kent Chan** is an artist, film-maker and curator based in Singapore and Amsterdam. His practice revolves around our encounters with art, fiction and cinema that explore the links between aesthetic experience and knowledge production. The works and practices of others often form the locus of his works, which examines the ambiguity that lies at the interstices of art (making) and daily life. His works have taken the form of film, installation, text, conversations and exhibitions.

**Karen Chan** is the Executive Director of the Asian Film Archive. A pioneer staff since 2006, she manages the Archive, overseeing the growth, preservation, and curation of its collection. Under her leadership, Singapore's first film collection was successfully inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Register. Karen teaches film preservation, film literacy, and Singapore cinema history courses to students and the public. She contributes on the Executive Council of the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association. Her prior work experiences include teaching English and History, working with the National Archives of Singapore and the Natural History Museum in New York City.

**Kathleen Ditzig** is an Assistant Curator and Manager in the Curatorial and Outreach department of NMS, where she develops programmes for the NMS Cinémathèque, *Singapore and the World* and other museum projects.

**Djohan Hanapi** is a full-time illustrator running Knuckles & Notch, a risograph press, based in Singapore. He graduated from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and has always been obsessed with analogue printing.

**Amanda Lee Koe** is the fiction editor of Esquire Singapore and the youngest winner of the Singapore Literature Prize for the short story collection *Ministry of Moral Panic*, which was long listed for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. A 2013 Honorary Fellow of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa and a 2016 awardee of the PEN America/Heim Translation Grant, she is based between Singapore and New York.

**Tharun Suresh** is an eighteen-year-old currently suffering through NS. He is an avid film fan and participated in the Singapore International Film Festival's Youth Jury & Critics Programme.

**Gladys Ng's** films reflect her nature, often nuanced and subtle, interspersed with wry humour. Her short film, *My Father After Dinner*, was presented Best Singapore Short at the 26th Singapore International Film Festival. She was trained in writing and directing at the Victorian College of the Arts and participated in FLY ASEAN-ROK. Her latest short, *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life*, was commissioned by SGIFF and developed during a film residency in Thailand with Objectifs.

**The SGIFF Youth Jury & Critics Programme** is a series of workshops supported by the National Youth Council and Asia-Europe Foundation, organised in partnership with the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University. It aims to nurture the next generation of young film jurors and critics of cinema from the region. During the Singapore International Film Festival, youth writers cover the Southeast Asian Short Film Competition in the live online journal, "Youth Meets Film", and also vote for the winner of the Youth Jury Prize at the Silver Screen Awards. The reviews of *Apprentice* and *A Yellow Bird* in this issue of *Cinémathèque Quarterly* were commissioned in partnership with the Youth Jury & Critics Programme.

# Coming soon at the NMS Cinémathèque!

**Cinémathèque Selects** is a monthly double-bill screening that profiles the boldest film-makers and most inventive productions from Singapore's past to its present. Focusing on diverse aspects of film-making, from directing to producing, script writing to cinematography and art direction, the series uncovers lesser-known local productions and features significant films in Singapore's cinematic landscape. Each film screening is accompanied by conversations with the film-maker. A second film chosen by the film-maker reveals inspiration and influences from diverse corners of the film world.



## 11 February: *Eating Air & Billy Liar*

Presented alongside the Singapore canonical film *Eating Air* (1999), *Billy Liar* is a gem among the "kitchen-sink" dramas that constitute the British New Wave movement and was selected for screening by the directors of *Eating Air* because it inspired their film.



## 11 March: Short films featuring sound design by Lim Ting Li & *The Birds* by Alfred Hitchcock

This edition of *Cinémathèque Selects* features sound designer Lim Ting Li's film audio work from a range of Singapore short films alongside Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Constructed without the characteristic musical score of its time, *The Birds* relies on an electronic soundtrack that includes simulated bird cries and wing flaps to create valleys of tension and pastoral calm.



## 8 April: *Two Sides of the Bridge*

Presented alongside another film selected by one of the film directors, *Two Sides of the Bridge* by Lim Meng Chew and Chen Ge is one of the surviving feature films from an era that marked the end of Singapore's studio films. The film tells a story of a young man from Kelantan in Malaysia who relocates to Singapore in pursuit of love and a brighter future.

## International Cinema Retrospective: Jacques Tati, 20 May – 4 June 2017

One of the signature programmes of NMS Cinémathèque, the *International Cinema Retrospective* presents studies of key directors, landmark movements and other thematic concerns in international cinema. This year, we present the complete retrospective of the French screenwriter, director and actor Jacques Tati; presenting all six of his feature-length films – *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, *Playtime*, *Mon Oncle*, his long-dreamed-of colourised version of *Jour de fête*, the revelatory *Traffic*, and the little-seen *Parade*, along with four short films that contributed to the creation of his full-length cinematic masterpieces.





Film Still from *Eating Air* (1999); Image courtesy of Jasmine Ng and Kelvin Tong; Photography by Cher Him