

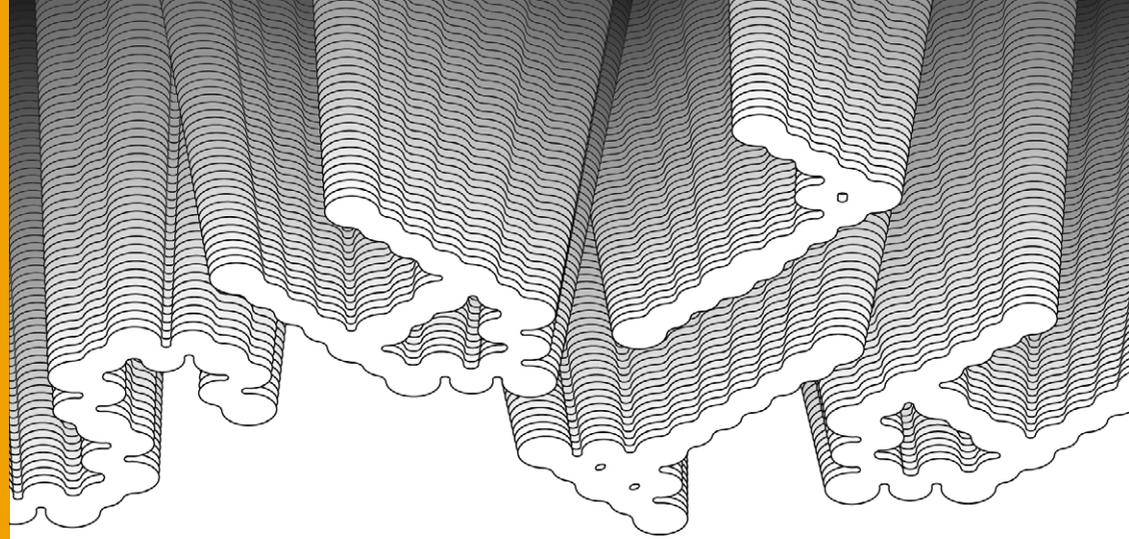


YOUTH CRITICS
PROGRAMME

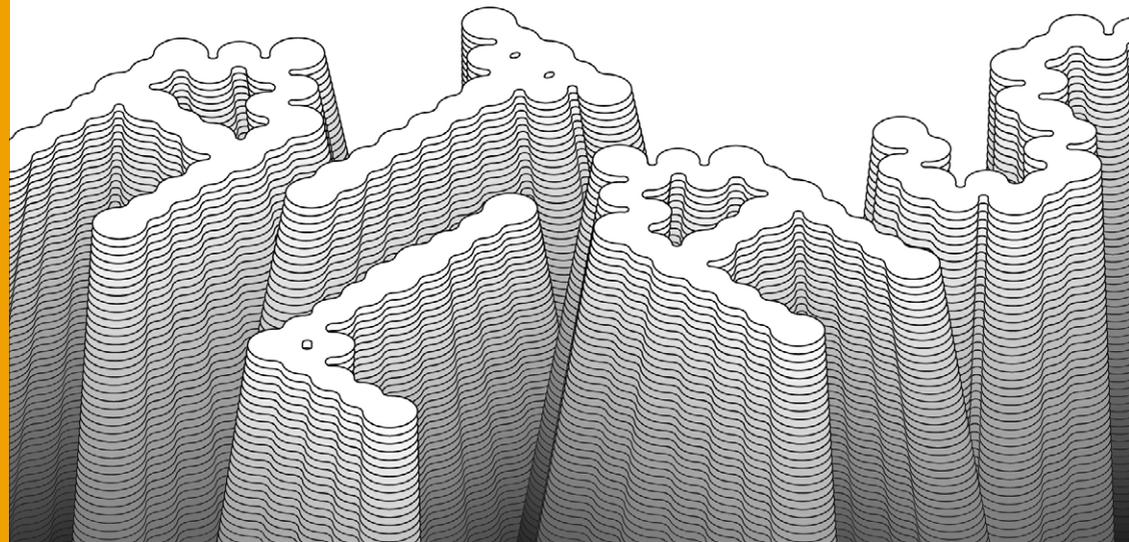
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VOL. 2
Atlas



Atlas VOL. 2



Editor's Note

Dear readers,

By now, you have probably read countless articles extolling the revolutionary virtues of Generative AI. It is a topic that is hard to escape, especially given its impact on creative industries such as filmmaking and writing. This brings us to a crossroads: what does the future hold for the art of cinema and the practice of film criticism?

In these moments, we anchor ourselves in a truth that feels increasingly precious. The soul of art, and indeed of criticism, dwells in a place algorithms have yet to tread – the depths and expanses of the human experience. Can a machine, no matter how advanced, truly capture and choreograph the nuanced dance of emotions and memories that move us? I am doubtful.

At *Atlas*, we hold dear the irreplaceable connection between cinema and the people who love it. In this issue, we celebrate the Asian films of the 34th Singapore International Film Festival which roared to life with *Tiger Stripes*, Malaysian director Amanda Nell Eu's masterful blend of body horror and coming-of-age girlhood. During an energetic two weeks, films like the Korean socio-surrealist indie *The Tenants* and

the Vietnamese poetic drama *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell* captivated audiences far and wide. Closer to home, a trio of Singaporean films – *Dreaming & Dying*, *Last Shadow at First Light*, *Tomorrow Is A Long Time* – vied for top honors in the Asian Feature Film Competition, a feat last seen in 1997.

The articles herein are written by the latest cohort of the SGIFF Youth Critics Programme. Ten spirited young writers from Singapore have lent their voices, offering fresh perspectives on the festival's lineup. Their contributions, rich with personal anecdotes and analytical depth, underscore the enduring value of thoughtful, long-form film criticism. By weaving personal stories into film criticism, it is our hope that *Atlas* charts a path into a new 'thoughtworld' – one where films reside beyond the screen as living, breathing entities, and where criticism becomes truly generative.

Thank you for reading. See you at the 35th SGIFF.

To the stories that await us,

Phoebe Pua
Editor & Mentor
Youth Critics Programme 2023



Special Thanks

My deepest gratitude to the *Atlas* editorial team, **Sasha Han** and **Renee Ng**. Your expertise, dedication, and tireless efforts have been instrumental in bringing this issue of *Atlas* to life.

Special thanks to this year's guest speakers for generously lending their time and sharing their invaluable experiences. Your contributions have been pivotal in fostering a vibrant and engaging community of practice.



GUEST SPEAKER

Sara Merican | *Film Journalist and Critic*

INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE SPEAKERS

Joella Kiu | *Assistant Curator, Singapore Art Museum*
 Natalie Khoo | *Film Programmer and Outreach Executive, Asian Film Archive*
 Viknesh Kobinathan | *Film Programmer, Asian Film Archive*
 Alexander Lee Sze Wei | *Programmes Manager, Mental Health Film Festival Singapore*
 Leong Pui Yee | *Senior Manager, Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film*
 Sam I-Shan | *Independent Arts Curator*
 Federico Ruberto | *Co-founder and partner, formAxioms and reMIX studio*
 Pauline Soh | *Senior Manager (Programmes), National Gallery Singapore*

Eternality Tan | *Vice Chair, Singapore Film Society*

Priyanka Nair | *Head of Marketing, Community and Business Development, Singapore Film Society*

Teow Yue Han | *Visual Artist and Founding Member, Hothouse*

Thong Kay Wee | *Programme Director, Singapore International Film Festival*

Rachel Wong | *Assistant Curator (Public Programmes), ArtScience Museum*

ALUMNI ROUNDTABLE SPEAKERS

Tulika Ahuja | YJCP 2015
 Paige Lim | YJCP 2017
 Ryan Lim | YJCP 2018
 Teo Xiao Ting | YJCP 2020
 Jamie Lee | YJCP 2021
 Nanthinee Shree | YJCP 2021
 Tracey Toh | YJCP 2021
 Sasha Han | YCP 2022
 Benjamin Yap | YCP 2022



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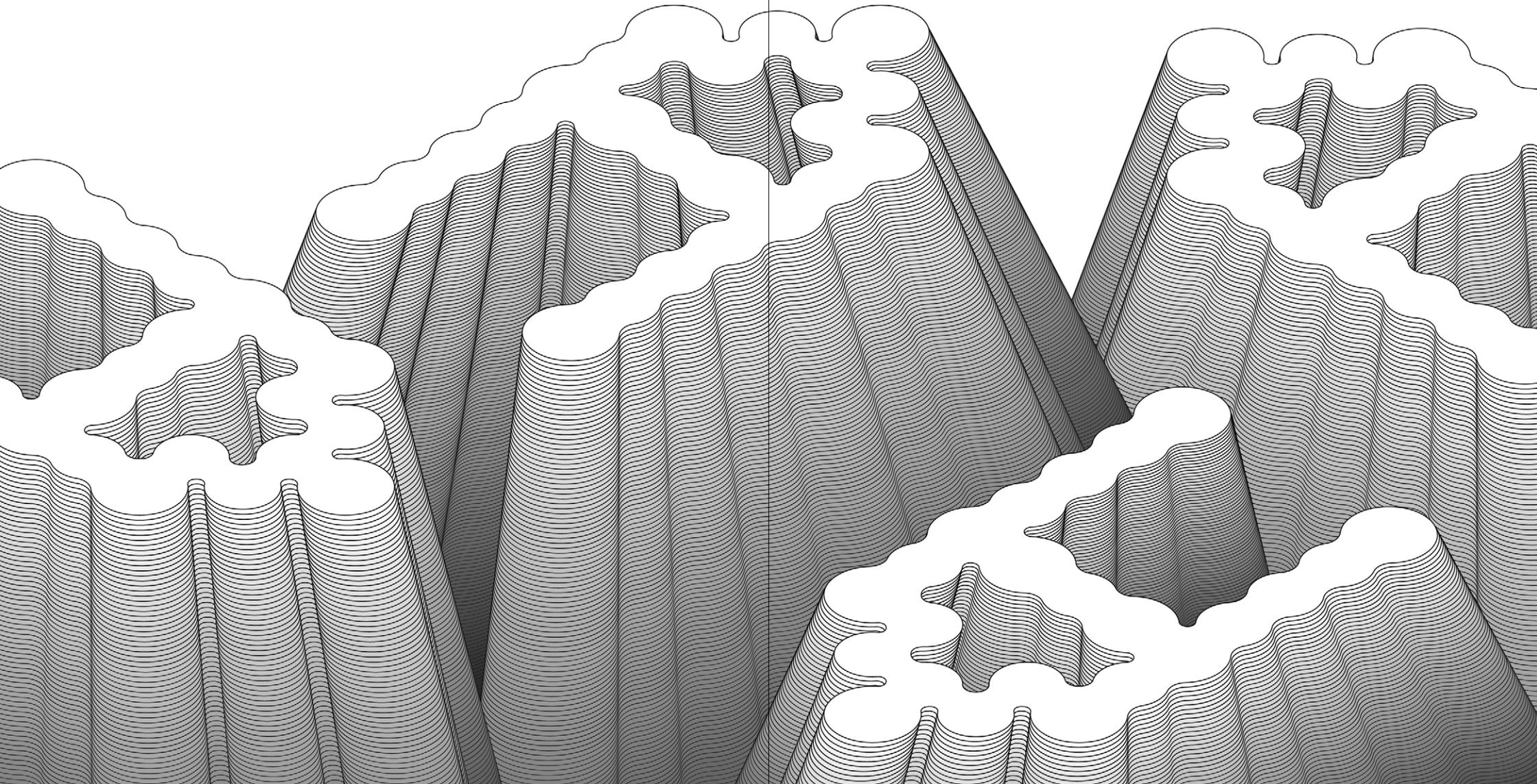
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[A]

Critical

Cartographies



The Renewing Power of Nostalgia in *Wonderland*

BY MAXIMILIAN SIN



Nostalgia is an ironic thing. It is a thing of pleasure and, hence, desire. Yet, to be sentimental at all is to feel from a distance. To be nostalgic at all signals that which was beloved is now lost; to be nostalgic is to occupy a position of loss. From this reading, nostalgia can be better understood as a mechanism for coping with loss, a looking-back when looking-forward has become untenable, a reimagining of the past when an imagining of the future has become far too bleak – nostalgia is a resource of hope.

It follows then that nostalgia in film necessitates a politics of nostalgia. It demands for critical thought on how nostalgia is treated by a dramatic medium and experienced by the audience. This is most pertinently because to be nostalgic is to be vulnerable – vulnerable to our desires and to political agenda trafficking in these re-framings of history, now through rose-tinted lenses. Being suspicious about nostalgia is certainly critical to any reading of Singaporean history and national identity, for which the notion of *kampong* features prominently in nostalgic framings.¹

It is between these tensions that Chai Yee Wei's *Wonderland* (2023) has boldly come into being. A tapestry of dewy vignettes of Singapore in 1989, the film tells the story of two elderly men, Loke and Tan, who form an unlikely friendship over fatherhood, music, and community. 1989 was, in fact, the year that Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority assumed a new governmental role of planning land use nationwide. It represented a concerted state effort to transform – materially and ideologically – what was once a fishing village into a “tropical city of excellence”.² Against this backdrop of rapid urbanisation, the film's main protagonist, Loke, is abruptly ejected from the vestiges of village life in Singapore. Having just sold his *kampong* estate to finance the university fees of his only daughter, Ling, in New York, Loke reluctantly makes the move into an ample yet sterile one-room public housing flat in the city. He is resistant to attempts by his next-door neighbour Tan and the rest of the block community to reach out and befriend him, meekly hopeful that his time in the city will merely be temporary as he waits out Ling's return once her studies are complete.

It is indeed only by entering a shared space of nostalgia that Loke and Tan manage to break the ice and begin to understand each other. For director Chai, the renewing and reframing power of nostalgia takes its brightest form through music. Music is the common thread between the two men. Both use music as a medium for reflexion, when reflexion by itself has become too difficult. Music becomes





Wonderland, 2023. Image from Mocha Chai Laboratories.

a medium for nostalgia, a resource for hope. Without words and even sight, the two men only begin to see each other in a new light when they share one evening of playing local folk music together.

In this scene, Loke lies in bed listlessly, the camera framing him in intimate close-ups as he plays a humble rendition of Chinese singer Tsiu Ping's "By the Riverside of Longing" (相思河畔) on his harmonica, a tribute to the memory of his late wife, Mei. Tan overhears these simple yet melancholic melodies from the adjacent flat, pleasantly surprised by Loke's penchant for music. He takes a chance and joins on the electric keyboard, adding melodies from Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng's classic love song, "Sweet as Honey" (甜蜜蜜) to the tune. Warm, yellow hues light their respective rooms, chiaroscuro dance on their aged faces as they concentrate on holding this duet across the narrow corridor between their units – in the gentle light and lilting music, the two men suddenly appear younger.

Nostalgia is shown to be a powerfully transformative process in the enchantment of such scenes, a thing of the magical, a "pause on life". Pausing may typically be seen as a depressive act, to be at an impasse and unable to move forward

For director Chai, the renewing and reframing power of nostalgia takes its brightest form through music.

through life's challenges. Yet, such scenes in the film provoke more critical thought over what it means to pause. It seems that for director Chai, pausing may be read as productive, a process by which individuals can suspend reality and lend themselves to a different reading of their lived experiences.

This is certainly the case for Tan, a recovering gambling addict whose habit had long forced his wife to leave with their daughter, then a child. Now, as a form of rehabilitation and repentance, Tan takes to playing the piano for his neighbourhood Catholic church. It is as the church pianist that he serendipitously encounters his long-lost daughter, Bee Kim, through an audition to sing with the church choir. Bee Kim innocuously requests "Sweet as Honey" for her audition, but instead sings the original lyrics of the Indonesian folk song it was inspired by, lyrics sung to her as a child by her mother. In doing so, she sparks the memories of her childhood in Tan, unwittingly revealing her identity. Tan is visibly shaken to suddenly be able to share a song with his daughter after so long. Once again, music provides an enchanting space, a transformative reality.

"Sweet as Honey" remains a musical motif in Tan's rehabilitative journey, a song that represents Bee Kim's childhood as much as it does Tan's desire to be a father. The scenes of Tan playing the piano alone in church are some of the most poignant across the entire film, not least owing to a heartfelt performance by Singaporean veteran actor, Peter Yu. The camera keeps its distance here, watching as if from the pews, framing the lone pianist markedly as one who plays his song in a place of worship, a holy sanctuary. An empty church also represents a form of pausing, an in-between time when mass is not in service; a productive space for music to fill, to experience nostalgia as healing.

Wonderland marks Chai's fourth feature film as a director and is a worthy addition to the anthology of stories which make up today our collective memories of Singaporean history. It is poetic, in a bittersweet way, that most of the film was

Wonderland offers much needed pause. It acts not only as a reminder to allow ourselves to be nostalgic for the past, but also to recognize it as a resource of hope.

shot in Block 5 of the Toa Payoh neighbourhood and Kampong Buangkok – the former being one of the earliest public housing flats to have been erected and the latter, the last standing village settlement in the city-state.³ In staging his ode to nostalgia, Chai brings back to life these historic places nearly forgotten and yet, rich in memory and story. It is a deeply imaginative effort in capturing the essence of the 1980s and the communities the nation has left behind on its journey to modernisation. *Wonderland* offers much needed pause. It acts not only as a reminder to allow ourselves to be nostalgic for the past, but also to recognize it as a resource of hope. It reminds us that while we may strive to capture and record the stories of those who have gone before us, we should also remember to sing the songs they sang.



Shooting of *Wonderland*, 2023. Image from Mocha Chai Laboratories.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Kampong* is the Bahasa Melayu term for a village settlement, but also signifies notions of interconnected families and tight-knit communities as lived out by *kampong* communities in the Malay Archipelago. Any discussion of *kampong* in Singapore discourse certainly includes a discussion of state discourse as well, least owing to how *kampong* has consistently been co-opted by the state to fortify national identity.
- 2 "Revamped URA Begins Role Today as National Planning Body." *The Straits Times*, 1 Sep 1989, p. 48.
- 3 Toh, Ee Ming. "Redevelopment of Lor Buangkok Kampong Likely 'Several Decades Later.'" *TODAY*, 3 Oct 2017.

Tampha's Impossible Choice: Spirituality and Womanhood in *Ishanou*

BY RHEA CHALAK



What does it mean to be spiritual?

In spiritual discourse, gender is often considered a non-factor. People are described to be the same at their core despite physical differences such as race, gender, and class. We are not defined by differences but rather, are constructed of the same energy and contain souls. The narratives of spiritual beings, while varied and diverse in their individual storylines, remain largely similar in essence. Most of these spiritual leaders are privileged or noble men – Buddha, Rama, Moses – who live indulgently before undergoing a realisation so immense that it alters the way they decide to lead their lives. When they abandon the world as they know it to embrace something larger than themselves, society celebrates their sacrifice and casts them as spiritual paragons.

Directed by Aribam Syam Sharma, the Indian film *Ishanou* (1990) seems to adhere to this narrative, but at the same time deviate from the anticipated path of spirituality. The film follows an ordinary young woman, Tampha, as she is forced to renounce her worldly ties and assume the position of a Maibi priestess.¹ “Ishanou” translates to “The Chosen One” in the Meitei language and underscores the predestined path Tampha finds herself on. With little agency over her fate, Tampha seems to undergo strange behavioural transformations ranging from innocently conversing with flowers and throwing tantrums to bouts of perceived hysteria which are viewed as spiritual possessions by the god Meibi.

In spiritual narratives, there are sometimes extrinsic agents that propel a protagonist towards a spiritual calling, either through mystical visions or dreams that appear to these protagonists in the night and let them decide what they are meant to achieve during their lifetime. An example of this would be the narrative of Moses, who witnesses God appearing to him as a burning bush or Noah, who has God speak to him or appear in visions. These extrinsic agents inspire and enlighten these spiritual beings towards taking certain courses of action. In *Ishanou* however, it appears as if Tampha, while being plagued with these visions, is not so much enlightened but rather has no real say in how her life pans out. For Tampha, spirituality induces helplessness, and she increasingly finds herself to be a spectator of her own



life. Instead of being inspired by these visions to embrace spirituality, this newfound bizarre hysteria places itself in the driver's seat of her life.



Ishanou, 1990. Image from Film Heritage Foundation.

Ishanou's documentary style provides an intimate, personal view of Tampha's life and vividly captures the significance community holds within the Manipuri social fabric. There are scenes of temple dances, women by the water trying to catch fish, old women gossiping in the market. The sound design and cinematography depicting the rich Meitei culture present an extensive exposition of the community. This communal trait of the Meitei turns mildly insidious through the communal effort to force Tampha out of a perceived hysteria. There is a scene towards the middle of the film where Tampha's husband brings a doctor home to cure Tampha of her strange illness, after which he injects her with tranquilisers to restrain her. This scene presents a fraternisation of people – Tampha's husband, mother, the doctor – all physically holding her down to eradicate whatever is plaguing her in desperation. This is later replicated when Tampha leaves her home in the middle of the night, embarking on her spiritual sojourn. A crowd of villagers led by Tampha's husband come together to look for her. While they do locate her – at the Maibi's home – they are too separate from her to truly find her; Tampha is lost. There is violence in the intensity of the desperation with which

For Tampha, spirituality induces helplessness, and she increasingly finds herself to be a spectator of her own life.

this community is wrenching Tampha away from her spiritual calling. It appears Manipuri society is cohesive and communal until a woman deviates from her societal obligations to forge another path, even if that is towards God. Sharma says: "Perhaps Manipuri culture is the only one in which a whole philosophy of genesis is propagated purely through the performing arts of Lai Haraoba. This unique aspect of Manipuri culture is the mystical canvas against which the human tragedy of the chosen one plays out".² Interweaving the collectiveness of the environment with the intimate and personal quality of Tampha's tale creates not a cohesive atmosphere but ironically, a cold, alienating detachment. Surrounded by this communal "mystical canvas", Tampha as Maibi is made abject and apart.

While dissimilar to the aforementioned spiritual figures, Tampha shares traits with other famous spiritual beings. In the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Rama's wife Princess Sita is abducted by the wicked demon-king Ravana, kickstarting the war between Rama and Ravana, where Rama eventually is declared victorious. When saved, Sita is expected by Rama to undergo an *Agni Pariksha* (an ordeal or test of fire) to prove her chastity. Despite being innocent, she is later exiled for having lived at another man's house. Sita is expected to silently adhere, to please society, to perform. In the Biblical narrative, God chooses Mary to be Jesus' mother, who conceives him through the Holy Spirit as a virgin. Mary is never asked if she wants to be a mother or have a child, nor is she involved in the creation of it. She is utilised for her womb's ability to produce a child for God's plan. In these narratives, the spiritual beings do not carry out these actions; rather these events happen to them. They are never asked about their desires, neither do they make any choices. They are passive respondents. They are, like Tampha, "chosen ones". They are also women.

It appears that *Ishanou* is not simply a film about the Maibis, but also questions and critiques the expectations placed on women in Manipur at large. Impor-

Perhaps the question ‘what does it mean to be spiritual?’ may be rephrased ‘*who* is allowed to be spiritual in a way that deviates from the commonly trodden path, without repercussion?’

tantly, rather than being viewed with adulation, Tampha is seen as a threat or disease by her own family. When Tampha leaves her family and home to answer the inexorable call of the divine, her husband takes their child and leaves her to remarry another to maintain a traditional family structure. Tampha’s new life is clearly restrictive – she is forced to give up her daughter and husband – yet it is strangely emulative of her past life as mother and wife. This is symbolically presented in the scene where Tampha and her husband are out in nature, facing each other, yet hidden from each other’s view behind a tree such that they cannot truly see each other. Even in marriage, the two are detached and disjointed. Similarly, the film ends with Tampha’s daughter bowing down in deep respect to Tampha and greeting her – not as a daughter and mother but as devotee and Mother Maibi. Initially only a mother to her daughter, Tampha is now a mother to the whole community. Paradoxically, it is only through bouts of perceived hysteria where Tampha physically lashes out that she can express herself. Yet, while her transgression allows her to break out of the mould of expectation, Tampha must return to another mould just as quickly. Regardless of who Tampha is mother to, as female, she must take on an immense burden. Her destiny as a woman is a shackle.

Perhaps the question ‘what does it mean to be spiritual?’ may be rephrased ‘*who* is allowed to be spiritual in a way that deviates from the commonly trodden path, without repercussion?’

Besides Sita and Mary, Tampha’s journey calls to mind another famous female spiritual figure, Joan of Arc who in 1431, was burnt at the stake for leading the French army to victory believing that she was divinely ordained to do so by the archangel Michael. The Bishop of Beauvais ordered for her execution, believing her to be a heretic; the very institution that shared her beliefs was the one to condemn and persecute her, simply for her gender. *Ishanou* was made in 1990,



Ishanou, 1990. Image from Film Heritage Foundation.

more than thirty years ago, presenting a persecution in a different sense – one of apathy, and abandonment. Being a “chosen one” forces women – Sita, Mary, Joan of Arc, Tampha – to face an impossible choice: spirituality through transgression.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Maibi are the priestesses and ritual upholders of Manipur’s indigenous faith of the Umang Lai. Their lives and duties encompass a wide range of activities associated to the spiritual life of the Meitei and Chakpa people. They are priestesses specifically chosen by the Lai deities, to be their intimate caretakers and oracles. Aihara, Byron. “A Lesson with the Maibi of Manipur. IMA Dhoni Amaibi.” *Seven Sisters Music*.
- 2 “*Ishanou*.” *Il Cinema Ritrovato*, 2023.

Through the Looking Glass: *The Tenants'* Surrealist and Phantasmagorical Vision of the South Korean Economic Crisis

BY HONG WAN JING



The Tenants (세입자, 2023): Embark on a 90-minute surreal odyssey into a dystopian realm, where characters recalling the children's novel *Alice in Wonderland* grapple with grown-up troubles like rent, landlords, and colonic hypersensitivity. In the monochrome setup of this film, we find a compelling case study of the housing crisis besieging Korean young adults.

Director Yoon Eun-kyung explores dark and complex narratives in *The Tenants*, creating a bizarre world within which her characters must navigate. Our protagonist Shin-dong (Kim Dae-geon), lives in a typical apartment in a city where hope seems to have taken an extended vacation. Pollution taints the air, the economy meanders sluggishly, the cost of living soars, and fatigue is a constant companion. A quintessential twenty-something, he pushes through the monotony of his office job, fuelled by the ambition to ascend to power and adorn office walls with his portraits. Compounding his troubles, his eight-year-old landlord threatens a rent hike, compelling Shin-dong to exploit a legal loophole by subletting a portion of his living space to avoid eviction. Enter a newlywed couple who not only strip him of bathroom privileges as they sublet his bathroom, but also rent out the previously undiscovered attic, accessible only through the bathroom, to a sub-subtenant – all with a few tricks up their (unusually long) sleeves.



The Tenants, 2023. Image from Yoon Eun-Kyung.



Yoon's choice of black-and-white film faithfully mirrors the dreariness of Shin-dong's daily existence. More importantly, it shatters the comfort of conventional colour representation. This deliberate decision serves as a constant reminder that viewers are not mere witnesses to reality unfolding, but active participants stepping into the surreal realm of cinematic imagination.

Living in this dystopian city are the unmistakable titular (sub-) tenants: a newlywed couple. Their living conditions vividly capture the reality and absurdity of economic struggles experienced by young Koreans. The couple, for instance, cohabits in a claustrophobic bathroom with the wife nestled in the bathtub as the husband situates himself beside the toilet bowl. The film's narrative is peppered with unexpected touches that create a comical ambience, like Shin-dong holographically calling his eight-year-old landlord to discuss the lease or the infusion of serene and upbeat K-Drama music amid the Shin-dong's despondent life narration.

These surreal elements create a barrier between reality and the economic struggles depicted in the film, making social commentary more palatable. Surrealism is a narrative device that strategically merges dreamlike visuals with harsh reality to juxtapose them. Viewers are jarringly awakened to the profound echoes of these seemingly exaggerated social issues' presence in the real world, as they emerge from their film-induced fever dream.



The Tenants, 2023. Image from Yoon Eun-Kyung.

Viewers are jarringly awakened to the profound echoes of these seemingly exaggerated social issues' presence in the real world, as they emerge from their film-induced fever dream.

Yoon's portrayal of life in a struggling South Korean neo-liberal economy, is echoed in both contemporary films like Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) and his earlier works like *Mother* (2009), as well as the Netflix hit series *Squid Game* (2021, dir. Hwang Dong-hyuk). Aligned with the concept of 'Dirt Spoon Cinema', coined by *New York Times* writer Bryan X.¹ Chen and adapted from a local idiom "born with a silver spoon in their mouth", these films depict the lives of the poor in Korea. It is not a far cry from reality; a 2022 survey by the Korean National Youth Policy revealed that 43% of Korean youths grapple with financial strain and rent in Seoul has been steadily increasing for 25 consecutive weeks as of November 2023.² *The Tenants* serves as a reflection of this grim economic state. The film, along with others termed 'Dirt Spoon Cinema', may be seen as a collective call for attention to these dire economic challenges.

In crafting the filmic phantasmagoria that is *The Tenants*, Yoon employs black-and-white aesthetics and eccentric characters to magnify Korea's economic and housing crisis. It emerges as a hidden gem, necessitating a deeper understanding of Korea's economic context to be fully appreciated. While Yoon's films have yet gained mainstream appeal, her capable direction shines through as she takes the audience on a surrealist odyssey.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Chen, Brian X. "'Parasite' and South Korea's Income Gap: Call It Dirt Spoon Cinema." *The New York Times*, 18 Oct 2019.
- 2 Byun, Hye-jin. "40% of Young Koreans Feel Poor." *The Korea Herald*, 27 Feb 2022.

The Language of Loss in *A Year of No Significance*

BY MARIANNE CHUA



It is 1979 and the winds of change in Singapore are beating down relentlessly on Lim Cheng Soon, the protagonist of Kelvin Tong's latest feature *A Year of No Significance* (2023). Lim (played by Peter Yu) is a Chinese-educated graduate of Nanyang University who, in his professional practice as an architect, is facing increasing societal pressure to adopt English in a national bid for Singapore to 'modernize'. Along this, Lim battles a series of personal tragedies – his ailing father, two broken marriages, and eventually, a death.

From the onset, *A Year of No Significance* positions itself speaking for the "silenced". The opening intertitles recall national policies of the 1970s where Singapore adopted English as the official language of business for "economic reasons" and gestures to a generation of Chinese-educated Singaporeans who were consequently left behind.

Yet, despite these intentions, Lim's personal struggles occasionally overwhelm the film's portrayal of a wider political struggle. Take for instance the way Lim navigates the new power dynamics at work where he and his colleagues are passed over in lieu of the upcoming generation of English-educated architects. While the Chinese-educated architects maintain their positions because the firm requires staff who can communicate with contractors on the ground, their current job scope renders them as middle managers, effectively negating their qualifications in architecture and limiting their opportunities to develop their



A Year of No Significance, 2023. Image from Boku Films.



craft. When Lim hesitantly attempts to reassert his authorial vision, he does so in uncertain English (“Can use... my one?”) and is bluntly rejected. Robbed of being able to communicate in Chinese, his main language, and the opportunity to be recognized as an architect, Lim is doubly silenced.

Yet, despite these intentions, Lim’s personal struggles occasionally overwhelm the film’s portrayal of a wider political struggle.

Audiences, especially those who lived through the 1970s and the impact of this policy, might be expected to derive a sense of satisfaction at having their struggles recognized on a filmic platform. However, some have rejected Lim’s story, noting that it does not speak for every member of the Chinese-educated community. According to Nanyang University alumni and historian Lee Guan Kin’s review, Nanyang graduates may have initially struggled, but soon adapted and emerged as members of Singapore’s new society.¹ Instead of representing these, Lim is, on the other hand, glum and beaten down. He responds to life’s injustices by alienating himself from his community. On a stake out at his wife’s apartment and in stalking her tap-dancing classes, he renders himself as a voyeur, condemned to spectate and never participate. His wife, gleeful in a brightly lit scene, serves as a stark contrast for Lim who hides in the dark stairwell, having lost his wife to the same influx of Western culture and influence that threatens his livelihood. It is further implied Lim betrays his company by submitting their designs to a competitor firm out of spite. From this moment, Lim’s character shifts and hits the lowest point as he becomes unsympathetic, icing out his betrayed English-educated colleague, Simon (played by Darryl Yong), and being unfeeling in reconciling his brother’s marriage as instructed by his father.



A Year of No Significance, 2023. Image from Boku Films.

It is worth noting that the ubiquitous power of this language policy is subtly conveyed. The agents of change are kept invisible, and the specific institution or figures of authority are never identified. It is perhaps due to the invisibility of these forces that the film’s focus shifts to Lim’s personal experience in the aftermath.

Yet, while *A Year of No Significance* does not capture the wider political struggle faced by Chinese-educated Singaporeans during this time, it is nevertheless a film sincerely grieving the loss of a language. This is clearest in the scene where Lim and his former schoolmates reunite at the beach and share a somber moment to bid farewell to the closure of the Chinese culture magazine that they all have contributed to. The sunset behind them is reminiscent of the demise of the significance of Chinese culture in Singapore, but its orange glow and the glimmering water as they hum a song together creates a picture of quiet resilience. They will resolve to preserve as much of the culture as they can, even as they accept its fate of reduced relevance in Singapore society.

The sunset behind them is reminiscent of the demise of the significance of Chinese culture in Singapore, but its orange glow and the glimmering water as they hum a song together creates a picture of quiet resilience.

Amidst washed gray tones, *A Year of No Significance* allows a space to memorialize a momentous year of upheaval in Lim's life and to process his grief over the language changes. It is undoubtedly more of a film about an individual rather than a generation, but it is also here where the film's intentions to speak sincerely should be appreciated.



A Year of No Significance, 2023. Image from Boku Films.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lee Guan Kin. '无关紧要的一年' – 充满灰悲色彩的伤痕电影' ('*A Year of No Significance*: Portraying the grey life of a Nantah graduate'), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 22 December 2023.

Durians and Taboos: Asking Irresponsible Questions with *Maryam's* Badrul Hisham Ismail and Sofia Jane

BY SHARIFFAH ILI HAMRAA



2023 may be remembered as among the strongest years of Malaysia's socio-political cinema. Amanda Nell Eu's *Tiger Stripes* (2023) and Chong Keat Aung's *Snow in Midsummer* (2023) each told stories of a society discontented with status quo and made waves globally, earning acclaim at prestigious film festivals like Cannes and Venice. Yet these films have not received the same welcome in their home country, with authorities citing their perceived transgressions and tackling of topics deemed taboo. Eu's coming-of-age tale was subjected to cuts from the local censorship authority, as its exploration of female puberty and sexuality was deemed objectionable and unislamic. Chong's film, which portrays a personal history of the 1969 racial riots is likely to meet with the same fate as *Tiger Stripes*.

Among these impressive works is *Maryam* (2023), the directorial debut of Malaysian independent filmmaker Badrul Hisham Ismail. The film follows a day in the life of the titular character (played by veteran actress Sofia Jane), a gallery owner who wishes to marry her young Sierra Leonean boyfriend, Damien. Despite resounding disapproval from her family and friends, *Maryam* insists on getting married the Islamic way. She perseveres in navigating religious bureaucracy, even as she is subject to demeaning encounters with its officials. Unpacking issues that afflict contemporary Malaysian society, such as classism, racism, misogyny, and religious hypocrisy, *Maryam* explores how religious institutions encroach into the quotidian. Contrary to *Tiger Stripes* and *Snow in Midsummer*, *Maryam* was not sent for classification at the Lembaga Penapis Film (LPF), Malaysia's film censorship board. The directors were well-aware of the censures that would ensue and thus decided against a local release.

As such, it was a double treat to catch *Maryam* in its original cut and attend a Q&A session at the 34th Singapore International Film Festival. The theatre was packed for the screening and a substantial number of the gregarious audience were Malaysians. Among them was a gentleman who, during the post-screening Q&A, praised the film as one of the best Malaysian films he had seen in recent years.

I was fortunate to catch up with Badrul and Sofia Jane after. Among the threads of our conversation, they let me in on the genesis of *Maryam's* story, their personal connections to it, and their hopes for Malaysian cinema in an ecosystem stifling for the arts.





Sofia Jane, Shariffah Ili Hamraa, Badrul Hisham Ismail. (Photo and caption by Shariffah Ili Hamraa)

Congratulations on the premiere at Rotterdam! How was the reception?

BADRUL: The premiere in Rotterdam was the first time we really had an audience. I was surprised there were a lot of Malaysians who came to watch the film in Rotterdam, which isn't the norm for Malaysian films that went to festivals.

Has the film been screened at all in Malaysia?

BADRUL: Not publicly.

At private screenings, then?

BADRUL: Mostly the cast and crew, and some friends. There was also a screening with a film club – a small group of people who likely heard about the film through word of mouth, because we did not have big promotions.

The film originated from this grant that we had during COVID, one of the Malaysian government's initiatives to help the creative industry. The grant was specifically for arthouse films intended for international film festivals. So, the film was intended entirely for that purpose – for festivals and film enthusiast circles, rather than a broader audience. We never really thought of budgeting for a wide release. We also didn't send it to the censorship board for approval because we have no intentions to send it to the cinemas in Malaysia.

I read that the story of *Maryam* "started out very differently"¹. How different is the final version of *Maryam* from its previous iterations?

BADRUL: The film had always been about this issue of Muslim women needing permission to be married. We had different versions of the character... but there was always something that held us back. At one point I started to talk to Faisal Tehrani who eventually became a co-writer, and he gave his input.

Since you and Faisal are male writers, how did you approach *Maryam* as a female protagonist?

BADRUL: One thing we embraced was that there are a lot of things that we don't know. What we are trying to do is explore the character, and whoever plays it would have to fill in the gaps.

SOFIA: Whatever material that comes my way, as an actor I try not to judge it. When I first read it, I had to re-read it immediately because it speaks about a lot of things, especially about women. Throughout the script *Maryam* is in this intense 'pressure cooker', with urges that are waiting to boil over. You always think about stories like that about teenagers and people in their twenties. But trying to imagine women of that age when things are starting to deplete, you know what I mean... menopause and things like that.

I asked Faisal and Badrul whether I could rope in a very good friend of mine, Ida Nerina, a wonderful actress and very good at gauging words to see how we could mould this character. It is a huge collaboration between writer, director, and actors, male and female.



Maryam, 2023. Image from Gunung Cherita.

Sofia, was there anything in the script that intimidated or excited you?

SOFIA: I don't think anything intimidated me; if anything, I was quite optimistic. Ageism is rife in our industry. It was nice to see a female character written for a demographic in a way which has not been done in cinema for years.

And could you connect with or relate to Maryam on a personal level?

SOFIA: I think I could relate to the ageing process and the vanity she has. *(laughs)* I think all women can, which is why it is nice for women of that age group to watch *Maryam* and go 'I get it, I totally get it.' I like the fact that we discover Maryam wants to get married the right way, regardless of all the setbacks that she has.

I'm curious about the decision to write Maryam's character as an aristocrat. Why was that important?

BADRUL: One of the main reasons was to show that even someone of this stature would still have to deal with this bureaucratic

I don't think anything intimidated me; if anything, I was quite optimistic.

and patriarchal nonsense. Once we decided she would come from this part of society, we also discovered a lot of nuances we could explore. For example, the social burden of face-saving. If you talk to a working-class family, there is less cultural or social pressure to retain a 'purity of bloodline'.

Did the audiences respond to these issues?

BADRUL: People started to talk about their own experiences, how they had to deal with bureaucracy, religious institutions, and hypocritical people. People from other countries with similar religious authorities, or patriarchal cultures, said they found similarities as well. This story was bigger than we thought.

But it is also not good that a lot of people share these same experiences...

Right, the universal experience of patriarchy.

BADRUL: Ya. But then again, it's not something we were totally unaware of. When we were writing, one of the things Faisal did was look at Syariah court cases. We knew this was something that happens to women. But the extent of how many had to go through it, was a little bit of a surprise to me.

I noticed that there are quite a few durians in the film. Why did you choose this fruit as a motif?

BADRUL: *(laughs)* Durians represent a lot of things.

SOFIA: Because they know that I love durian.

BADRUL: Thank God! Thank God you like durian. If not, I don't know how we would make the film. Durian is a very Malaysian fruit; it is thorny and difficult to get into, but soft inside. We played around with that metaphor. It is a political fruit in the

sense that people clear forests to plant durian farms. We were able to use that to relate to the father's character.

Also, it is an aphrodisiac, so it feeds into that desire that Maryam has.

How will we able to have a truly good film culture if we do not have the freedom to make and show films? I think that's something that Malaysians need to think about.

So, thinking back, who were you making the film for?

BADRUL: Just myself.

SOFIA: So selfish. *Shiok sendiri* ('Self-absorbed').

BADRUL: *(laughs)* Never really had anyone in mind, just me and the writers. I'm not the kind of person who thinks about the audience when working.

SOFIA: But now everybody's curious to watch the film! I had a lot of friends – female and male – who were so curious to watch it but didn't have the avenue. I think we have some Malaysians who live in Singapore coming today for the screening which would be interesting.

BADRUL: Some Malaysians from Malaysia!

SOFIA: It's interesting because there's a pattern now with films where if anything is about "irresponsible questions" that filmmakers want to ask. You are labelled 'irresponsible'. Some people feel that anything that doesn't sit right with them is propaganda. But film has always been a propaganda tool. Way back in the 1930s, though it's not how it is now.



It's been such a long time since we could make films and have decent panel discussions or Q&As, where we revitalise film culture.

Do you have one takeaway you hope audiences will leave the film with?

BADRUL: The film is about how our lives are unnecessarily determined by others. We need to question and reflect why we allow ourselves to be in these situations. If we want to have full control of our lives, we will have to take full control of our lives.

Final thought: what are your hopes for Malaysian cinema?

BADRUL: I hope there will be more freedom. Freedom to make, create, and consume. We were just talking on our way up here about how we don't have independent cinemas in Malaysia. Everything is a cineplex, a chain. How will we able to have a truly good film culture if we do not have the freedom to make and show films? I think that's something that Malaysians need to think about.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Morden, Zarah. "With International Debut at Rotterdam Fest, 'Maryam Pagi Ke Malam' Hopes for Chance on Local Silver Screens." *Malay Mail*, 3 Jan 2023.

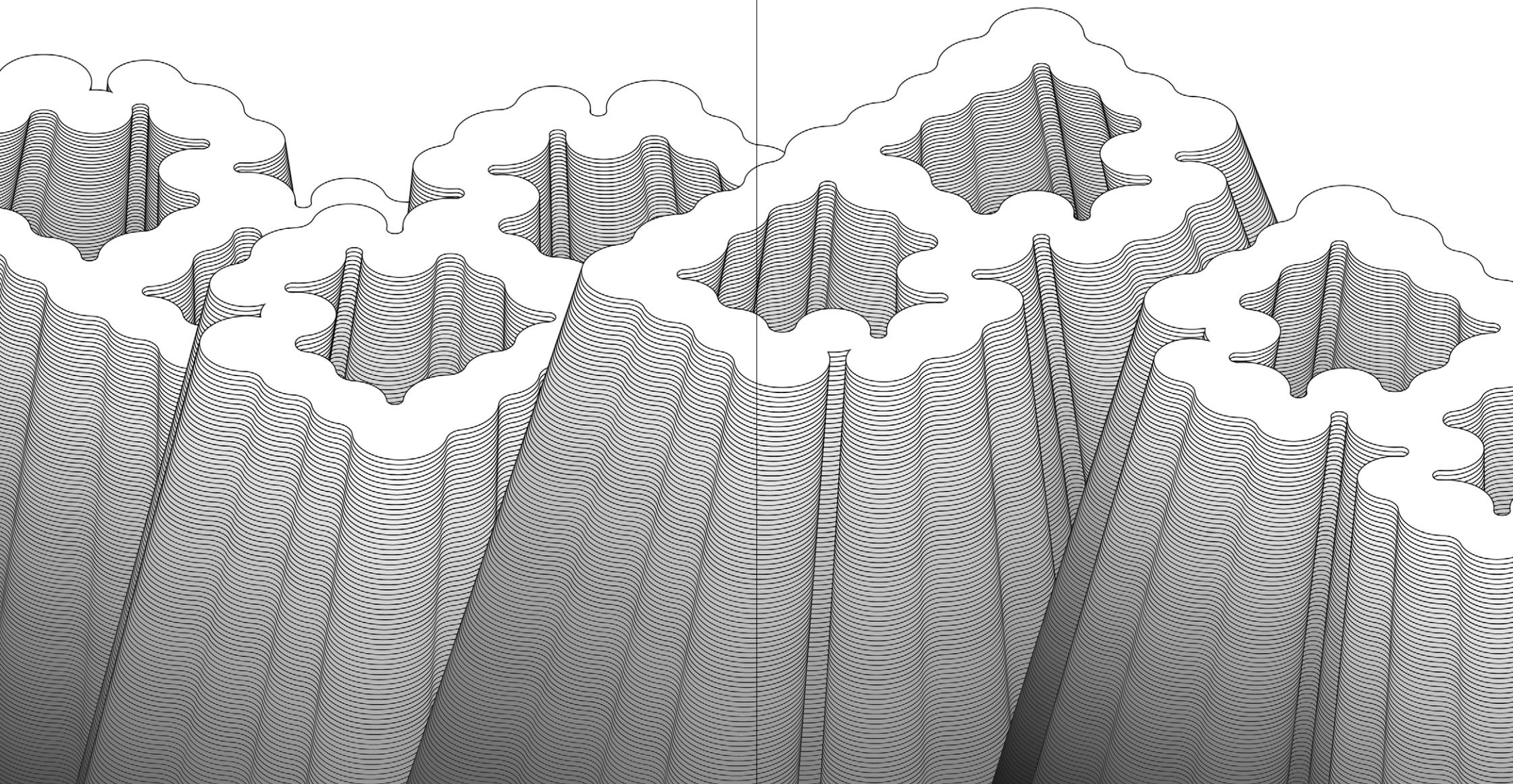


[B]

Letters

from

Within



We Begin In The Dark

BY ACE CHU

ANALYSIS

EXYL's animated short, *Acid Green* (2023), comes with an appropriately ambiguous blurb: "A person brushes the teeth of a dog and turns into a bus". I suppose, in a way, that is all that we know for sure about this film. Those events do occur, but they happen in a riotous smorgasbord of mediums, of sound and light and color. It is the sort of film where you come away with more questions than answers, straddling the tenuous balance that abstract film often does. In my experience, abstract film tends to obscure, making it difficult to forge an emotional connection which leaves me flailing for meaning. This film, however, overcomes the potential pitfalls of its genre through sheer emotional force. We are wandering through the labyrinth but there are several threads that serve as guide and anchor in our journey for meaning.



POSTSCRIPT

ACE: One of my concerns with this interview is that a reader might come to see your take as the objective way to see the film.

EXYL: It's funny because I try not to be objective about it the way that I speak, and the way I speak about these films... Whenever people ask me about the meaning of this film, I find it difficult to give people any singular meaning. Instead, I tell a collection of stories about my life.

ACE: That's absolutely perfect. I want to talk about the significance of the familiarity of the bus stop. Was there a place in mind and do you have a story behind it?

EXYL: There was no specific place in mind. Last June, I came back to Singapore to set up an exhibition at Starch Galleries. It was an hour away from my house and I had to take this long bus ride where the scenery would transition from neighborhood space to the forest halfway through. The [permanent] bus stops [are different] but the orange and white temporary shelters are the most recognizable to me. They tell me I'm in Singapore. As compared to the gray, nondescript ones

We begin in the dark. A humanoid figure crawls out into the center of frame, under the lit shelter of a bus stop. A dog's head plops into frame, comically large, mouth pursed as though sucking on something sour. There is a haunting familiarity in this primary, static scene. The bus stop, the benches, the green garbage bin are recognizably Singaporean, yet presented in a sufficiently ambiguous way that makes them seem to belong to a liminal space. Nevertheless, a personal connection is formed with setting, evoking personal experiences with setting. Even as we depart from this familiar space into different mediums and conceptual spaces, the central image remains; but, in the montage of hands grappling, bodies wrestling, and teeth gnashing, an act of love becomes an act of menace.

In *Acid Green*, meaning shifts constantly. The film's use of clay stop-motion animation conveys this inescapable sense of motion. The figure trembles, the clay rippling across his body in mimicry of a shiver. The film's scenery is smooth and well-wrought, but the person is clearly a thing in transition, in a constant process of making and unmaking. Even as he sits on the bench, his body writhes with fingerprints. The dog's head, notably, is smooth, glazed, giving it a weight of permanence and inescapability. Touch, arguably the most primal of our senses, is constantly evoked and interlaced with the idea of change – emotion and movement, sensation and transition become welded together. The sensation of touch shifts from hurting to healing, from pain to pleasure as we watch the person and the dog interlace with each other. The very act of touching then, is to invoke change, an idea reinforced as we watch the person morph into a bus. His body warps and flattens, his colors and contours bloom into a different form. What does it mean to touch, and be touched, what does it mean to make, and be unmade? The act of watching the fingerprints press into clay, as the person is made and unmade, felt like an invitation. We are complicit, then, in the making of meaning in this film. It may as well be our own fingers pressing into the soft clay, reshaping meaning into a form that is true and personal.

As we delve into abstraction, the music picks up in pace and gallops to a hectic, too-close rhythm, mirroring the frenetic energy of the ever-shifting symbols and emotional intensity of meaning-making. Yet, it ultimately culminates in a deceptively simple, single scene; with the music slowing to a distant melody, we see a shot of a real-life dog, standing on the beach, looking at the camera. This scene, after all the layers of abstraction we have had to endure, feels like an ear-



around the city that don't really give me a sense of place, the orange ones are quick to set up and easy to take down. That just gives me a sensation of Singapore.

ACE:

Right! I see how that also makes sense with the space behind the bus stop, that kind of blending of forest and city.

EXYL:

I have a story about the forest, too. I am currently based in Providence, New England and there's this invasive plant species called kudzu. It's from Japan, and it grows really, really fast. One of the ways to keep it under control is having goats, who love to eat kudzu. Kudzu is viny, has all these tendrils and covers everything under a blanket. Once you enter New England, you see kudzu everywhere and it strangles all the other plants. In the forest of Singapore, you also see this blanketing green. You don't really see individual trees, it's kind of just vines and leaves all over the place, because that's just what the tropical environment is like. The hot weather and heavy rain cause such a fast turnover of fauna in a rainforest. Our fauna looks the same as kudzu so I always thought that these plants were native and natural in New England. It was surprising to find out that they weren't.

ACE:

So, do they have goats in New England?

EXYL:

Oh, no. They just let the kudzu run wild.

ACE:

I found your film to be incredibly tactile. It evokes a lot of physical sensation – like how the protagonist shudders and the grooves in the clay almost seem to shimmer. There's also the sensation of finger against gum, of biting, then finally how the bus blooms into fingerprints. Could you speak more about the significance of the sensation of touch in this film?

EXYL:

Part of that is just because I hate working digitally. I approach animation as a meditative practice. I like to be able to set myself up to do one thing for a long period of time and turn my brain off. When you do something like that, the marks of your fingers are going to be left behind. I dislike working digitally because if there's a problem, I don't know what's wrong with it. Digital software is opaque like that. But if the clay is too wet, too dry, I can feel it, I can see it. I can change



nest confession. This scene holds the abstraction together and insists that it amounts to something. There is truth in the emotional turmoil we have just experienced, and this still serves as a moment of catharsis. In a way that perhaps only abstract films can, *Acid Green* perfectly encapsulates that confusing, overwhelming space where hurt and care become the same thing, and all that it amounts to is grief.

Acid Green perfectly encapsulates that confusing, overwhelming space where hurt and care become the same thing, and all that it amounts to is grief.



Acid Green, 2023. Image from EXYL.

Acid Green, like most abstract films, can be frustrating for some. But the very nature of its seeming contradictions allows it to represent certain irreconcilable aspects of the human condition. Through its obscurity, too, the film allows



it immediately. A lot of the processes in this film are very physical. The sensation of brushing the teeth of a dog came from me literally trying to brush the teeth of my dog – and they hate having their teeth brushed. They're always trying to get away. But the toothpaste is meat flavored. So, they love the taste of the toothpaste and keep trying to lick it while they're also trying to squirm away. You're stuck in this push and pull with your dog. It's a very physical sensation.

I say this often, I also think that despite my best efforts, all my films are love stories. They're all about relationships, and how our identities are built by the relationships we have with other people. I feel like the contours of who I am are outlined by the interactions that I have with the people in my life, and that's a very... physical process. It's very close and tactile.

ACE:

I think the big question is: what is the dog? There's that very significant still, real-life shot of a dog standing in the water. It's the mystery solved, in and of itself.

EXYL:

What do you think the dog is?

ACE:

For me, there's this self-awareness in the film. I can almost feel the director nudging me in a certain direction. There's this playing with symbols, this deliberate obscurity with this game I'm playing. That moment with the dog is a moment of silence, a moment of confession, of earnestness. There's an innocence to it, an unfiltered emotion. The rest of the film is complex, so much at once, that that one moment is the anchor for me. Like this dog is the reason for the film.

I feel like the contours of who I am are outlined by the interactions that I have with the people in my life, and that's a very... physical process.



for a deeper intimacy in the way we view the film – we fill in the blanks with the personal, with our own interpretations of the emotions, symbols and themes laid out before us. We go on this ride, and what we take from it is whatever makes sense to us. Its strong emotional core shines through as the dimly lit bus potters on its way through the night-darkened road. We might not know exactly where it is headed, nor where we are with it, but we can certainly feel the inescapable sensation of touch, of movement it animates. Looking outside the window at the scenery going past, we can feel the change in our skin.

**EXYL:**

I love the way you read it. It's so different from what I was thinking of going into it. When I showed it to my mom, she thought that I was the dog, and she was the person.

Someone from my school wrote a review about the film, and he told me, "This film was amazing. Near perfection. I didn't understand it all. I didn't understand it, but it reminds me of the time when my dog died, and I didn't have time to mourn my dog. I had to go back to school – in school, I kept having dreams that my dog wanted me to play with him and I couldn't grab hold of the ball."

I'm so glad he didn't understand it, because if he did, maybe he wouldn't have told me this story about that dream.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



The Imperfect Parent in *Reading You*

BY LATASHA SEOW

There is something about being in your twenties that makes you look at your parents differently. Perhaps it is because my friends and I are contemplating starting families of our own, or because our parents' roles as figures of authority are slowly dwindling. It is in this transitional space that we begin to see them outside of merely being our parents.

The personal and deeply moving short film *Reading You* (2023) by Malaysian filmmaker Angeline Teh explores the shifting perceptions we have of our parents as we age. Teh centres the film on the process of finding her mother's diary years after she commits suicide. Aided by diary entries, she documents her journey to understanding her mother's life, in all its complexity and struggle, up to her mother's passing.

we are constantly reminded that
the perception we have of our
parents is frighteningly incomplete.

Recent cinematic explorations of daughterhood, such as in *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Aftersun* (2022), have given me insight into the way I perceive my own parents. Both these films portray the cognitive experience of viewing our parents as perfect – an expectation that we, as children, hold onto and struggle to untangle from throughout our lives.

Reading You complements this by exploring the changes that take place when we perceive our parents outside of this singular role, and the aftermath of merging our feelings both before and after this shift. I was surprised by the state of contemplation I was left in when the credits began to roll. The film had successfully blended the generic universality of being a daughter with an introspective reflection driven by Teh's mother's diary, which granted the film's central topic a fresh and unique perspective.

The central question – “who is my mother, really?” – is relentlessly dissected in the film's short fifteen minutes runtime. With patchy bits of the filmmaker's

childhood photos scattered throughout the film and the use of scratchy rough sketches to present the filmmaker's parents, we are constantly reminded that the perception we have of our parents is frighteningly incomplete. However, when combined with the text of Teh's mother's diary, the film's sketchy imagery takes on new meaning. They begin to seem like a façade behind which her mother's true self lies hidden. We are granted access to this new side of her mother as intimate details of her life make their way to the screen.



Reading You, 2023. Image from Angeline Teh.

Although the film opens with the hurt Teh and her siblings endured as children, the film treats the mother's diary with tenderness. The honesty with which the diary conveys the mother's experience allows for a realization that, as children, the siblings may have misunderstood their mother. At its conclusion, it is clear in that Teh has not fully come to terms with her mother's death. But *Reading You* closes with the quiet narration of Teh's newfound understanding and, perhaps, her regret. It portrays healing as a complex journey rather than a destination.

Given how specific the details of *Reading You* were to Teh's life, I was surprised that I had drawn such a personal connection to the film. In part, this is attributed to the minimal use of visuals and the creation of black, empty spaces in the



Reading You, 2023. Image from Angeline Teh.

film. They provide space for viewers to be immersed in the soft undercurrent of emotions running through the film, beyond the context of the story. But the film also asks what might be done to heal past wounds? How can we connect with our parents as we ourselves become adults?

Reading You nudges us towards being gentler and to open a channel of dialogue more direct and unfiltered, beyond the front that our parents sometimes feel they must put up for us.



POSTSCRIPT

LATASHA: Mum, we have never really talked about films like this and how we feel about them, right? I do it with my friends but not really with you. I've been thinking a lot about how we only see our parents at a fixed point in their lives which *Reading You* addresses. I don't know what you were like as a child, a teen, or who you were before you had me. Even now, I think there is a big part of you that I don't see.

JACINTA: Sometimes what you go through as a mother is quite a lonely thing. There were many instances where I had to hold myself back before sharing something with you, especially when you were younger.

LATASHA: I think this loneliness applies to both the mother and daughter in the film.

JACINTA: Yeah. She's trying to understand her mother on her own but she doesn't have a clear picture of her. And so everything is presented through static and rough sketches. You don't see a clear picture of her mother until the end.

Trauma to me is like that. You don't get a whole picture. The brain shuts down some parts of it and you only get scattered pictures that you try and piece together. After Mama passed, I began to reflect on why she did some of the things she did, and to try and understand that in a more compassionate way. She did her best and was a very good mother in many ways despite all the difficulties and struggles. She never stopped looking after us. Even when she was very old and I was in my fifties, she would still buy things for me. That is her legacy to me, because I experienced so much of that love. That is something I've always wanted to give my children.

LATASHA: I totally agree, and I think that's why this film was so striking to me. It was a call to look at our parents with more compassion, even if there are always going to be generational differences. Just like how I don't always understand how you think. What you said about trauma and remembering is also true. I think choosing to forget things because they were painful is also common.



Trauma to me is like that. You don't get a whole picture.

JACINTA: You remember things in bits and pieces. And as you get older, these bits and pieces fade and you remember less and less. It's quite frightening. I was thinking about Mama and how she has already passed on for four years. In the first year after she passed, I remember speaking to the family about it but not much after that.

LATASHA: For Yeye, I can't even remember what he looks like now. He kept so much to himself, and I think no one really tried to find out more about him and his past. I don't know anything about him actually, which is kind of sad.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



from me, the sea - portraits of self in *Mangosteen*

BY SAKSHAM MEHROTA



i.

In the Spring of 2020, I found myself sitting on the corner of my childhood bed, journaling intensely. It was the seventh day of my fortnight-long quarantine and I had just about reached the limit of online lectures I could sit in for a day. Unable to meditate, I focused all my efforts on freewriting instead. After a good twenty minutes of aggressive scribbling and un-scribbling, the title read, *why i don't like coming back home*.



Mangosteen, 2023. Image from Tulapop Saenjaroen.

Thai auteur Tulapop Saenjaroen's latest short, *Mangosteen* (2022), is a journal entry too. Given how the film was shot with an unfinished script and how most of it was stitched together in post-production, one could claim that *Mangosteen* is a freewriting piece. True to Tulapop's playful style of image making, it is filled with distortion of forms and narratives which lead to unreliable and entangled storytelling. In doing so, *Mangosteen* creatively explores fiction as a tool



to deconstruct the self. The film also successfully presents the audience with an opportunity for redemption: the sea.

Mangosteen opens with the main character, Earth, deciding to leave work in the big city to return to his childhood home. His sister, Ink, runs a juicing factory in a mangosteen farm where Earth attempts to fit in. Earth enlists documentation as a tool to ease the transition into his new lifestyle. Accordingly, the first half of *Mangosteen* is framed like a documentary as we get initiated into Earth's new life. Shot on a fashionably outmoded Digital8 camera, the film gives the impression of archival material, imprinting the contemporaneous happenings in Earth's surroundings with a sense of recollection – and irrelevance. Like scribbling field notes on the margins of his journal, Earth is both narrator and protagonist. We witness him as he witnesses himself adjust to a very different rhythm of life. Here, the film presents Earth as a dispassionate observer, almost indifferent towards his sense of displacement that suspends the audience in its unhurried mundaneness.

Storytelling is Earth's attempt at making sense of the world.

Storytelling is Earth's attempt at making sense of the world. Although he is pleased to be back in his childhood home, tensions soon arise when he realises that his plans for the future differ significantly from Ink's. Earth pays a visit to the beach he would go to as a child to escape from reality. There, he remembers that his method to deal with difficult emotions was writing fiction. At this point, the narrative centre of *Mangosteen* begins to erode, as its sole perspective from Earth is jarringly hijacked by a chorus of characters and voices. This dissolution of truth is followed by Earth's disappearance from his hometown. *Mangosteen* corresponds the loss of the narrative voice to the loss of the physical self, as if reality stops when it cannot be turned into fiction.



(Photo by Saksham Mehrota)

When I look back at the grievances that I aired in my own journal, I find myself not too far off from Earth. My return to my hometown, Lucknow, was the product of the pandemic and the reason I resorted to documenting my time through quarantine to make sense of it. After two and a half years away from home, the characters in my narrative were both strange and familiar: a mother who repeats her commandments three times in a row, a father who just smiles, and a dog who is, in actuality, a backup sibling. At its centre, me. A single child who felt suffocated even in a room with windows open. Journaling turned into scriptwriting, which turned into filmmaking, following every movement of the characters – my home.

I was convinced if I could concoct a good story, I would have at least made use of my ill-fated time at home. Easily irritated, I found myself anticipating moments of bickering, for every word was material for art. I remember on a particularly golden evening, my mum asked me for the umpteenth time to cut my hair; to this, I replied that I am my own man now. I saw tears roll down her cheek, watching momentarily, before I apologised. Powerful fiction comes out of powerful reality.

Naive, and mediocre at best, I could hardly create something that was not self-indulgent, pitiful, and that had not already been written by a thirteen-year-old at the turn of adolescence. As the days melted into indistinguishable, meaningless time, I agonised over how unremarkably dull a story my time at home was writing me.

This is precisely where *Mangosteen* offers a path to redemption to me. In the last third of the film, Ink visits the same beach where Earth had his epiphany. *Mangosteen* now belongs to Ink, who narrates solely in German. She stands underneath the statue of the ocean giant and confesses her naivety. Her monologue is incomprehensible to everyone but herself and the sea. The videographic medium coils around itself and morphs the audio and visuals with it. We spiral into Ink's breakdown. She too, has taken up writing, but is unsure of her path and is desperately looking for an end to her suffering. Just as the weight can't get heavier, she is broken out of her reverie by a stranger, who takes over the burden of narration.



Mangosteen, 2023. Image from Tulapop Saenjaroen.

The slow repetition of the waves breaking onto the shore wears the old self down and reforms it into another body.

For Earth and Ink, the sea marks its significance in identity formation. The slow repetition of the waves breaking onto the shore wears the old self down and reforms it into another body. In fact, the sea separates two distinct narrative styles in *Mangosteen*. The first is Earth's visit to the sea marks the point the film transitions from a "documentary" mode of storytelling to a more conventional narrative fiction. Second, Ink's visit to the sea serves as a climax, professing the end of the narrative journey. Rather than vast and unforgiving, *Mangosteen* demonstrates that when met with sincere submission, the sea allows both Earth and Ink to shed themselves.

Earth and Ink disappear in a sea of narrative voices at the close of the film, and like the unending nature of the wave to yearn for the shore, what we are tasked to reckon with is that the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self is just as cyclical. Perhaps, fiction will always be a method of making sense of reality.

ii.

All these years later as I look back to my summer spent converting reality to fiction, I too trace my escape to the sea and then to a flight back to Singapore. But I wonder if there is any redemption for people who grew up far away from the waters. What was it like for my mother who had neither the mangosteen factory nor the sea to escape to?

I would like to think that she too had a little journal of her own, tucked in the back of a bedside shelf. To which she would go at the end of a particularly unforgiving day and scribble a poem before going to bed.

on the corner of the kitchen counter
over the slab marked
“vegetarian, NO egg, NO jenny”
under the ever widening hole in the
wall which we now know
to house
three generations of a common
house gecko
common largely as an accomplice
to every laddoo mysteriously
stolen after midnight
around the years 2009-2016

on the corner of the kitchen counter
against the window
with a grill of rust filtering the
cut fruits with seasonal bitterness
of july monsoons
on the corner of the kitchen counter
with a view of our driveway
where i shout “*muskuraiye*,
you’re in lucknow”
as i see you walk your bike in
and you burst into a cackle
the most uncharacteristic of
someone raised by
lucknow, but by
your maa



on the corner of the kitchen counter
where your grandma pickled
her last mangoes
a year before you learnt
to tell sweet from sour
where your papa
made you your first gin and tonic
where you once sneaked jenny in
to feed her two
boiled eggs and revel in
the joy of having
a dog on your kitchen counter

on the corner of the kitchen counter
where no dust has been allowed to settle but
it’s mandatory to spill some masala
every evening
that chai is steeped for the family
on the corner of the kitchen counter
where i stand
just shy of a break down and
sweaty
i allow the sun to taste me
and curse myself for not knowing how to swim



(Photo by Saksham Mehrota)



A Tragedy We Can't Avoid: The Hopelessness of Eco-Grief in *Evil Does Not Exist*

BY MICHELLE LEE YAN YEE



Set in rural Japan, *Evil Does Not Exist* follows local man Takumi and his daughter, Hana. When a company from Tokyo visits with plans to develop the forest, Takumi ultimately kills one of their representatives. Despite giving viewers hope in the characters' innate goodness, the film depicts the urban-rural clash as an eco-tragedy where one party must inevitably kill the other to survive.

Stillness and silence pervade every shot of *Evil Does Not Exist*. Through these qualities, the film allows us to experience the intimate relationship Takumi and Hana have with the forest, something that must be felt and enjoyed through one's senses. The opening shot lasts over four minutes as it pans across the forest canopy from below; it invites the viewer to stare and listen, absorbing every detail of the tree branches and the tiny sounds of the forest from the rustling of grass to the flow of water. Time seems to slow down in extended scenes where the only thing moving in the forest is Takumi as he chops wood or collects water from the river. Through immersing the viewer in the sensory experience of the forest, the film gives us an idea of what it's like to live within and alongside it, helping us understand the villagers' relationship with their natural landscape.



The opening scene of branches cuts to this shot of Hana looking upwards, letting us experience the forest through her eyes. *Evil Does Not Exist*, 2023. Image from Anticipate Pictures.



At a frustrating town hall dialogue, corporate representatives tell the villagers not to “get emotional”, using evasive corporate speak and deferring responsibility to their boss, consultants, and regulations. Despite the larger forces leading to the potential destruction of the land, both the villagers and the developers are portrayed as human and relatable. The villagers’ straightforward and personal accounts cite intangible, emotional factors like the taste of udon made with fresh spring water and their sense of local community and pride. Similarly, a scene where the two representatives are chatting after the town hall reveals the conflicting feelings they have towards their job, their desires for their future and the relationships they have. In fact, the town hall convinces them to challenge their superiors’ wishes and engage in deeper discussion and collaboration with the villagers, paying Takumi a second visit to learn more about the local way of life.

In the face of their openness to dialogue, Takumi’s decision to kill one of the representatives seems abrupt. Yet, after Hana goes missing, the final portion begins to be driven by a steadily ratcheting tension that builds up to the inevitability of annihilation. The familiarity of the forest begins to feel oppressive as the same settings are repeated, this time with extra-diegetic music that cuts through the forest’s serenity. Warning signs that were foreshadowed from the beginning – Takumi’s forgetfulness when it comes to Hana, nearby gunshots from deer hunting, the carcass of a deer – appear once again, creating the sense of tragedy.



Takumi’s love for his daughter is what leads him to the violent act in the film’s conclusion.
Evil Does Not Exist, 2023. Image from Anticipate Pictures.



In an era of human-driven climate change, *Evil Does Not Exist* is a powerful dramatization of grief and helplessness in the face of industrialised environmental destruction. Yet, it offers no hope of finding a potential solution.

Earlier in the film, Takumi mentions that the deer only attack if they, or their child, has been shot in the guts. The parallel between Takumi and the deer is made starkly clear in the final scene, where they find Hana beside a gut-shot deer and its parent. As Hana makes her way towards the deer, Takumi, as if suddenly making up his mind, turns to the representative and strangles him. The metaphor of the injured deer suggests Takumi realises at this moment the full impact that the proposed development will have on his life, destroying both his way of life and his daughter’s. Despite the rashness of this act, the grief and fear behind the killing is palpable, making it an act of self-defence.

In an era of human-driven climate change, *Evil Does Not Exist* is a powerful dramatization of grief and helplessness in the face of industrialised environmental destruction. Yet, it offers no hope of finding a potential solution. Regardless of its characters’ sympathetic natures, despite their best intentions of collaboration and compromise, the film suggests that the conflict between the rural way of life and urban development can only end with the other’s demise.



POSTSCRIPT

While watching this film, I found myself returning to memories of places in nature I hold dear. Last year, I became involved in an organisation known as Forest School, spending my weekends guiding children through Rifle Range Park and Clementi Forest. This experience was profoundly moving for me. Not only did I grow closer to the forest, but I was also able to observe the way in which children freely and joyfully interacted with nature. Like Hana, the children of Forest School benefited hugely from the opportunity to be immersed in these natural surroundings. When I saw the promotional stills depicting her in the forest, I was thus immediately drawn to watch and respond to the film.

As someone who is only casually involved in environmental activism, I already struggle with feelings of helplessness and eco-grief when I think about the nature that is being lost to climate change and human development daily. I can only imagine that these feelings are intensified to the point of life-and-death for those whose families and ways of life are facing imminent destruction, as sea levels rise and extreme weather events have already begun to devastate communities around the world.



Clementi Forest. The trees, like the forest canopy in the film, evoke a sense of majesty and awe in me. (Photo and caption by Michelle Lee Yan Yee)

I choose to believe that there's a balance to be struck between mourning what we've lost, and still trying to move forward. In this way, Takumi is a cathartic representation of unchecked grief, and also a warning figure.

When I watched *Evil Does Not Exist*, the film managed to evoke and capture the messiness of dialogue and compromise that I have observed through my experiences with advocacy. In particular, the town hall scene – where the representatives are more clueless than genuinely evil – felt very much true to life. The earnest imperfection of the compromise they reach, where one of the city-slicker representatives offers to learn from the villagers and serve as the land's caretaker, also felt like a realistic representation of ordinary people trying to do the best they can in a difficult situation.

Takumi's refusal to accept this compromise felt like an acknowledgment of the scale and extremity of eco-grief. After all, grief accepts no compromises. At this stage of anthropogenic climate destruction, any solutions to the problem cannot reverse the scale of what we've already lost and will lose no matter what.

Yet, in the face of this grief, the film does not entirely leave us without hope. I see this hope in the persistence of the villagers' way of life and the close-knit nature of their community, as well as the willingness of the representatives to listen and to learn. No matter how inevitable the tragedy of destruction may be, there is still hope to be found in the efforts made to stop it.

I still don't know how to grapple with the emotions that arise around the problem of climate change, a problem so vast and ungraspable in its scale. I choose to believe that there's a balance to be struck between mourning what we've lost, and still trying to move forward. In this way, Takumi is a cathartic representation of unchecked grief, and also a warning figure. Even as we, the viewers, relate to him, the fact that he chooses to kill the representative is both shocking and disappointing. Surely, there must be a way to resolve this conflict that doesn't end in death. At least, I'd like to hope so.

Still Awake, Still Dreaming

BY CRYSTAL YEO



Goodnight Baby, 2023. Image from Lê Quỳnh Anh.

After watching Lê Quỳnh Anh's short film *Goodnight Baby* (2023), I laid in bed and recalled a podcast on somnology that I had listened to during one of my insomnia episodes, "As you go back to the idea of what insomnia is, it's really not the inability to sleep, but when people who have insomnia really start to struggle, they really start to try to sleep."¹ I'm well-acquainted with insomnia, having spent countless nights counting sheep, reciting the alphabet, and trying desperately to empty my mind (*how is it possible to not think about anything?*). Anh's *Goodnight Baby* speaks to the insomniac in me, accompanying me in an otherwise isolating experience. The film is at once pessimistic and anxious, yet strangely comforting.

Anh's *Goodnight Baby* speaks to the insomniac in me, accompanying me in an otherwise isolating experience.

To understand more about the film and to make sense of my relationship with insomnia, I reached out to Anh, who was in town for the 34th Singapore International Film Festival. We met on a sunny Friday afternoon at a cafe near the Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film where she had just wrapped up an interview. As we settle into our corner seat, Anh takes a sip of unsweetened iced americano and talks about exploring supper spots near her accommodation after film screenings. As with our emails, Anh's personable and genuine disposition shines through in our conversation.

Having suffered from insomnia since she was four years old, Anh vividly recalls her mother pushing her to the balcony, coaxing her to sleep with help from the cool breeze. She details her craziest dream of being in a room that felt "like [her] own but looked completely different." Determined to explore her dreams, both literally and in the sense of her ambitions and aspirations, Anh opted to examine dreams in her films, seeking to unveil the emotional depths of what happens when we are asleep.

"When I started in film school, people kept saying to me, it's not practical," Anh shares, "In a way, it's saying 'grow up' or 'wake up.'" Despite approaching her 30s ("I know, I should be more serious," Anh says upon sensing my surprise), Anh remains wide-eyed in her belief in storytelling and relating to others through films.



Goodnight Baby, 2023. Image from Lê Quỳnh Anh.



As we talk about the dread that emerges in "doom-scrolling" for hours when unable to sleep, Anh reveals that seemingly mundane experiences like these were pivotal in structuring the film. "I didn't want it to be in your face." Veering away from a conventional collage of online videos, Anh found inspiration in the odd intimacy of social media algorithms which understood its users enough to "curate" a stream of media for them. If the featured videos seem at first, unrelated to the next one, the user – or audience in this case – would eventually find that they bled into one another.

Echoes of this are found in *Goodnight Baby*. For instance, between the protagonist Gia Gia's dream and reality, Gia Gia sports the head of a sea ray and stars in "The Last Fish on Earth", a video that shows her rejecting her mother's funeral plans. Upon going viral, the video lands Gia Gia on a talk show hosted by Tuan Tu. However, Gia Gia mistakenly thinks she has been invited for her fashion reviews. The videos bleed into Gia Gia's reality, emphasising the way it consumes our reality and time, trapping the audience in an uncomfortably familiar experience.

Anh candidly shares that *Goodnight Baby* was made at a very low time in her life, which perhaps informed the film's honest and nihilistic tone. As her parents were sceptical of a career in the arts and worried about her future, Anh found herself torn between her love for filmmaking and the pressure to seek a more 'practical' career. Probing further on how her relationship with her parents affected



Goodnight Baby, 2023. Image from Lê Quỳnh Anh.



the film's presentation of Gia Gia's mother, Anh hesitates for a moment before mentioning that her journey with filmmaking began because of her mother. "I started making films because there were a lot of things unsaid between us. She's pushy, like all other Asian parents. But then I also feel like I haven't done enough." It is hardly surprising then that Gia Gia's relationship with her mother mirrors this, a combative relationship kept afloat by an undeniable, unspoken concern for each other.

When speaking with Anh, I find it hard to reconcile the anxiety and nihilism of *Goodnight Baby* with Anh's optimistic disposition. I feel the need to ask if she feels she has achieved her dreams.

"[There's] still a lot of uncertainty and anxiety, but it's better," Anh shares. "Film is like a conversation [or] therapy. If you talk about your feelings, [others] who share the same feelings [can] make me feel like I am not alone in this."

For both Gia Gia and Anh, to not have dreams is to be dead.

Having shared the past hour together and exchanging stories filled with dreams and hope, I realised Anh's answer to my question was already in the film, in the conversation between Gia Gia and Tuan Tu, host of the film's titular talk show, which serves as the film's turning point. Finally coming to terms with, and admitting, her anxiety, Gia Gia is confronted with Tuan Tu suggesting that she will eventually lose all her dreams. Instead of offering consolation or advice, Tuan Tu simply says that giving up on dreams is the only way to become human. Tuan Tu then, is a mouthpiece for the people in Anh's life who have told her to "wake up", pursue a different career path, or simply be more practical. Except in *Goodnight Baby*, Gia Gia knocks on her chest, and eventually dies after hearing Tuan Tu's words. For both Gia Gia and Anh, to not have dreams is to be dead.



Insomnia may be an obstacle to one's dreams, but it can also be the state of having dreams to reach for. It is the ability to see that a state of anxiety and restlessness is simultaneously full of anticipation and hope. As we part, Anh's final words ring in my ears, "When you feel suffocated inside, you open the windows or doors. Dreams are like that".

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Somnology (SLEEP) Part 2 with Dr. W. Chris Winter." *Ologies with Alie Ward*, Oct 2018, Podcast.





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