

881: The Postmodern Musical

by

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Abstract: The cinema has been identified as a site shaped by discourse such as postmodernism and capitalism. This paper aims to look specifically at these discourses through Royston Tan's *881*. Postmodernism has emphasized self-consciousness and the dissolving of boundaries between time and place, old and new. Its proponents have lauded it for being subversive while its critics point out its position as capitalism's cultural lackey. With a focus on filmic analysis, this paper consequently shows how *881* does not take either one extreme, but instead how both stances are complicit in the film.

'...[C]inema occupies a space where the global forces of corporate domination, consumerism, technology, and popular culture merge into a hegemonically powerful ensemble.'

'Perhaps nowhere [else] was it more detectable than in the world of cinema that, in its elaboration of images, glamour, and spectacles... contained strong elements of the postmodern ethos...'

- Carl Boggs & Tom Pollard

Introduction

Scholars such as Boggs and Pollard (2001) identify the cinema as a site that is increasingly shaped by discourse such as postmodernism and capitalism. Degli-Esposti (1998) echoes this observation in her writings, of postmodernism becoming increasingly 'defined by new forms of cinematic spectation that often demand a remarketing and reselling of the past.'

This paper then aims to look at a specific film in Singapore Cinema – Royston Tan's film musical *881* (2007), in relation to these discourses.

881 was chosen because of its mishmash of multiple cinematic styles, self-reflexivity, and its use of the nostalgic, which characterize postmodern films. Focusing in particular on the nostalgia and self-reflexivity of the film, this paper will show how *881* commodifies itself

through its 'new interpretation'¹ of the *getai*, while remaining self reflexive of its position as a cultural lackey² of capitalism.

Capitalism, Postmodernism & Film

Postmodernism³ with regards to film has been identified as exhibiting a form of self-consciousness, a borrowing from other texts and styles in a meta-historical and cross-generic free-for-all and the dissolving distinctions between past and present, high and low, as well as Western and other cultures (Brooker & Brooker, 1997:3). Stylistic multiplicities, self-reflexivity, intertextuality and simulation can be said to embody the postmodern (Degli-Esposti, 1998:4; Connor, 1997:199) and Royston Tan's *881* is a film that does so.

Multiple Styles

881 is a film that employs multiple and often contrasting cinematic styles such as realism, the theatrical and the phantasmal. Some parts of the film are presented in a raw home video like manner, or in the seriousness of a drama; while other parts exhibit the high theatricality of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and the stylized effects of a sci-fi movie.

A good indication of this patchwork of styles can be seen in the first few sequences of the film.

These sequences are right at the beginning of the film and serve as backgrounder to the film. These sequences are narrated through a voice over of *Guan Yin*, introducing the main characters - Big Papaya

¹ In an interview with Royston Tan on 7th February 2007. See (Royston Tan, 2004)

² See (Brooker & Brooker, 1997:4).

³ Denzin has been defined postmodernism in various ways such as (1) a description of historical movements from WWII to present, (2) the multinational forms of late capitalism, (3) a form of theorizing of the social in a post-positive manner and (4) a movement in the visual arts. Only the fourth definition will be used in this essay. (Denzin, 1991: ix)

and Little Papaya. The audience is then given bits of information about their weight at birth, their likes, their family and their performance at school. The narration continues to provide a verbal introduction to the Seventh Month Hungry Ghost Festival.

This auditory narration is accompanied by somewhat incoherent visuals that only make sense collectively through the voice over. For example, the girls' weights are presented in two separate shots of a loaf of bread and a fish on a weighing scale. Their likes – a star for Little Papaya and the moon for Big Papaya are shown in a shot of a girl holding up a star drawing and a shot of a child on stage holding a moon, respectively. Perhaps a description of a sequence of five shots found in this section will further prove my point. In the first shot, we see a fish placed on a weighing scale. In the second, a girl holds up a star drawing. In the third, a girl is on stage dressed in a costume, holding a moon. In the fourth, the national flag is shown and the fifth scene cuts to a mid shot of two cut out figures.

Their family background is visually presented in a 'mixed media'⁴ form where human paper cut outs co-exist with real humans, as actors in a staged performance. Even the Hungry Ghost Festival is shown in an entirely different visual format. Those scenes are documentary-like with shaky camera movements and somewhat grainy visuals.

Evidently, the multiple styles used in the film do not exist only between the different scenes, but can be seen even within a scene itself.

⁴ I am unable to coin a better description due to the complexity of the scene. At one level it is a scene in a film, but at another it also exists as a scene in a staged play, and at a third it seems like a puppet show of sorts. The duality of the actors in this scene also contributes to this.

Breaking Down Boundaries

881 is also seen as postmodern by way of its dissolving of distinctions between the old and new⁵. The film makes no clear distinctions between the old and new and often remains ambiguous and the era in which *881* is set in is almost impossible to tell. On one hand, it looks like the 60s or 70s as we see images of old barber shops, the doctor and hospital that Little Papaya goes to, is rudimentary. Also, the television and telephone in Aunt Ling's house is old, and even the sewing machine she uses is archaic. Yet on the other hand, the HDB flats in the background, the mention of Sengkang⁶, wireless microphones, mobile phones, Guan Yin's turntables and a new Mercedes-Benz that the Durian Sisters emerge from scream modernity.

However, before we get too caught up with the aesthetics of *881*, let us not forget the cultural politics hidden beneath a postmodern reading.

Like any ideology, postmodernism has its fair share of supporters and critics. Peter and Will Brooker (1997) write that the defendants and celebrants of the postmodern aesthetic view it as a subversive form. While its critics on the other hand merely see it as a 'cultural lackey of the late capitalist marketplace.' (Brooker & Brooker, 1997:4)

As much as the aesthetics of postmodern films are capable of subverting dominant ideologies, they are just as susceptible to commodification based on these aesthetics. Films that possess this postmodern aesthetic of pastiche, parody, self-reflexivity and intertextuality have been increasingly popular. An example of this would be Dreamworks' *Shrek* (2001) that has spawned two sequels

⁵ The 'old and new' referred to here also include connotations of the traditional versus the modern; as well as past and present.

⁶ Sengkang is one of the newer housing estates in the North East of Singapore developed in the late 90s.

Shrek 2 (2004) and *Shrek the third* (2007). The advent of *Scary Movie* (2000) and its sequels have also sparked a series of similar films such as *Epic Movie* (2007) and *Meet the Spartans* (2008) that employ the same intertextual parodic elements. The popularity and proliferation of these films somewhat reflect the extent of commodification of the postmodern.

Comolli and Narboni (1969) remind us that as much as film is often seen purely as an art form or entertainment, it remains as a manufactured cultural product within a given system of economic relations. 'It is a commodity, possessing exchange value which is realized by the sale of tickets [to audiences] and contracts, and governed by the laws of the market.'

Returning to Peter and Will Brooker (1997:4), they are critical of the simple standoff between the two camps. Instead, they propose that we should recognize that 'both complicit and critical tendencies are active or potential in postmodernism.'

Taking their lead, I argue then that 881 presents itself in this paradoxical manner by commodifying itself through its turn to nostalgia on one hand, yet exhibiting self reflexivity as a minion of capitalism.

Commodification/Reinventions/Nostalgia & 881

"881 will be Singapore's first musical film and I hope to bring out the beauty of Hokkien songs and 'getai' through this brand new interpretation... and let audiences see 'getai' in a different light".

Royston Tan

Norman Denzin (1991) has noted that postmodernism's logic of use and utility is what makes it a 'cultural lackey for capitalism' (Brooker & Brooker, 1997:4), as it 'can turn anything from the past into a

commodity that is sold', or it can 'be used to sell a commodity in the present' (Denzin, 1991). In this section I will focus on how *881* sells itself. However, let us start by first examining the subject of the film, which is the Seventh Month *getai*.

According to Tng (1995), *Getai* in Singapore can be traced back to 1942 where it first began in an amusement park as a form of entertainment featuring talented singers, dancers, musicians and traditional Chinese plays. In the late 60s, it gradually moved out to usurp the Chinese opera performances during the Seventh Month Hungry Ghost Festival.

The *getai* shows are normally performed in open spaces amid the heartlands, or at vacant plots of land along rows of shophouses (Tng, 1995). Rarely, if ever, are they seen in the city centres and business districts in Singapore. Also, performances are mostly geared towards a *Hokkien* speaking audience and in a study done by Tng (1995), non-audiences in the 20-29 years age range who received tertiary education in English found it a 'crude and noisy form of entertainment.'

There are striking similarities between watching a *getai* and a film musical. Both are spectacles featuring music, dance, songs, costumes, and lighting effects.

Collins (1988) characterizes the film musical as a product of the 'tension between live musical acts and film presentation' with the 'increasing technological sophistication of the medium', coupled with the 'sense of nostalgia for a direct relationship with the audience'. This aptly characterizes *881* as it attempts to form a relationship with its audience through nostalgia by using modern cinematic techniques to shape the *getai* experience.

Returning to the similarities of both cultural practices, I would like to suggest that one of the ways in which *881* commodifies itself is by

presenting itself as one big *getai* performance. In the film, songs and dance emerge sporadically throughout the entire film and are not confined only to the 'performance scenes'⁷. For example, Big Papaya seeks refuge with Aunt Ling after being thrown out from home, and in the scene that follows, everyone has gathered to comfort her. But soon, non-diegetic music plays and Aunt Ling's advice and words of comfort turn lyrical and all the characters break into song and dance.

In *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Jameson (1988) in an attempt to define the 'nostalgia film', cites *Star Wars* as an example not because of its historicity, but rather its reinvention of the cultural experience that the Buck Rogers Saturday afternoon serial gave its viewers between the 1930s to the 1950s. He continues to describe how *Star Wars* reinvents this experience through pastiche, enabling its older audience to gratify desires of a return to that older period and to relive its strange old aesthetic artifacts once more.

In a paraphrase, Jameson (1988) describes this reinvention as one not 'of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period⁸, it seeks to awaken a sense of past associated with those objects.'

Thus, another way *881* sells itself is not by presenting an actual past and experience of the *getai*, but rather a 'new interpretation', that creates a simulated and heightened experience of its original.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin (1935) writes that works of art are in principle, reproducible and with mechanical reproduction; this reproducibility has brought immense changes in viewing art. He cites printing as the mechanical

⁷ By this, I refer to the scenes in which the actual *getai* performances are featured - the girls are decked out in their costumes and singing on stage.

⁸ Although the *getai* is still present today, it retains with it a sense of tradition associated with the past and tradition of street theatre in Singapore. See (Tng, 1995).

reproduction of writing, and how that has brought about changes in literature.

Yet in the same paper, Benjamin points out that these mechanical reproductions lack 'aura', which is a presence in time and space. This he deems is 'obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind' (1935:668). Ironically, it is this absence of aura that enables *881* to recreate a better *getai* experience.

Earlier, we saw how the film does function as a 'mechanical reproduction' of the *getai*. Now with a focus on only the performance scenes, I would like to suggest that this reproduction also takes place at the level of replicating the *getai* experience.

The elimination of time and space through film editing is what enables the audience to have a more immersive *getai* experience. For instance the 'performance scenes' are made up of various camera shots such as the close up, medium shot and the long shot. The stitching together of these shots allow the viewer to experience the *getai* from different perspectives instead of a single one determined by their physical distance from the actual stage. Viewers also need not worry that others will obscure their view of the performance because the performance now exists directly in front of them.

On another level, *881* also frees the *getai* from being limited only to the heartland spaces in what Benjamin describes as 'the enablement of the original to meet the beholder halfway' (1935:667). The *getai* can now be experienced even in the central shopping areas of Singapore, or in the comfort of air-conditioned theatres and cushy seats.

Lastly, in a real *getai*, performers can only afford costume changes in between songs due to the constraints of existing in a single time and space frame. However, in *881* one will notice that with time and space

are compressed, we see both the Papaya and Durian Sisters in different outfits that change with each verse they sing.

881: The Self-Reflexive Musical

'Postmodernity is marked by the increasing centralization of features implicit in cinema spectatorship: the production of a virtual elsewhere and elsewhen, and the commodification of a gaze that is mobilized in both time and space.'

– Anne Friedberg

Friedberg's (1993) quote is useful in establishing the importance of spectatorship and the commodification of the audiences' gaze. Indeed the sustainability of the film industry is very much dependent on its audience. Earlier, we saw how *881* acts as capitalism's crony but now we will look at how the film is reflexive about it.

The self-reflexivity of the film is especially seen in certain scenes that characterize the position of the film spectator. In these scenes, the shifting loyalties of the audiences are unmasked, as well as the power they wield to determine the success of a film.

Cristina Degli-Espoti (1998) writes that 'one of the most distinctive characteristics of a "postmodern text" is the overt demand on the attention of the spectator whose active and indispensable participation is summoned and called upon in various levels of "interpellation"'.

Interpellation as put forth by Althusser (1970) is the transformation of individuals into subjects. In this section, I show how *881* interpellates the audience on two levels. At the first it alerts the audience to their own position in the film. While at the second, it ascribes the audience the position of a 'god' to whom the film pleads with for success.

One of the ways in which the film alerts the viewers of their ascribed position as an 'audience' is through an inversion of the spectator-spectated relationship. This takes place in one of the earlier scenes where an auditorium full of students face the camera with a standing ovation.

It is the spectator who is normally the one to present the spectated with a standing ovation; but instead the camera turns on the spectator and it is now the spectated who applaud the spectator. Although this scene is brief and the rest of the film resumes with the conventional spectator-spectated position, this break in the norm creates a new communicational relationship as the audience has been taken to another level of seeing where he is made to see himself as the audience (Degli-Esposti, 1998).

Another instance in which the film alerts the audience of their position is at the final showdown between the Papaya and Durian Sisters. In a response to the hosts two questions of who is here to support the Papaya Sisters and Durian Sisters respectively, the audience that were cheering and supporting the Papaya Sisters indifferently flipped their placards and just as enthusiastically started cheering for the Durian Sisters. This use of irony then becomes a way of exposing the quickly shifting loyalties of audiences to the spectators themselves are audiences.

I mentioned earlier that *887* seems to ascribe its audience the position of a 'god'. This interpellation I argue, occurs through the cinematography of the prayer scenes.

In the first prayer scene, the Papaya Sisters are at the temple praying for Jin Lang's health. Framed in a long shot, the girls are nonetheless reciting the prayers toward the camera.

In the second prayer scene that takes place in Aunt Ling's house, the shot begins with a fade in to an aerial view of the offerings on the

table; followed by a vertical pan across the table; a slight crane upwards and pull back to show Aunt Ling, *Guan Yin* and the Sisters facing the camera straight on. The fluid camera movements and the perspective put forth seem to present one of a spirit or god looking at the offerings spread out before him on the table before he steps back in pleasure to listen to the requests of his devotees.

By subjecting the audience to such a point of view, the film and its characters seem to view and acknowledge the audience as a spirit of god whose success can be determined by them. The film goes further by literally appealing to the audience through the prayer scenes mentioned above. Taking this view, one can then read the earlier applause scene as one of welcome and appreciation as the film welcomes its audience and at the same time thanks it for being there, in full knowledge of the power the audience holds in making or breaking a film.

Conclusion

Postmodernism can be viewed as an aesthetic, but at the same time its underlying politics should not be ignored. In the same way, films should also be seen as a cultural product that is closely tied to a system of economic relations.

The two contentious viewpoints with regards to postmodernism and film- a subversive form versus a perpetuator of capitalism, have been shown to coexist in Royston Tan's *881*.

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