

## ***The Singapore Heartland: The Performing Identities of Local Landscapes***

by

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**Abstract:** This paper will closely analyze films from Singapore's Revival Age in the 1990s to the present (e.g. *Eating Air*, *12 Storeys*, *Singapore Dreaming* and *Gone Shopping*) in order to examine how the Heartland shapes, portrays and offers alternatives to the (re)presentation and formation of national identity in Singapore. The various employment of the Heartland in these films highlights how local landscapes are essential means to understanding and conceptualizing the processes of building national identity in Singapore. As observed in these films, public and private spaces like coffee-shops, void-decks, playgrounds, bathrooms and bedrooms, become more than just places for communal and personal interaction. The Heartland and other recognizable local landscapes in Singapore films are not only used as convenient backdrops to the rituals of everyday life in Singapore, but they can be regarded as pivotal instruments that not only mould personal identity but embody the complicated struggle of forming a national identity.

Paradoxically, these familiar spaces that help create a recognizable *Singapore* on screen are repeatedly used as sites of transgression and alienation, so as to challenge the prolific and dominant representations of a cohesive *Singaporean* identity. If national film can be regarded as a site for the construction and contestation of national identity, how is Singapore's national identity represented; more importantly, whose identity is being created on screen, and is it one that we accept? Is the national identity created in and conveyed through Singapore films a coherent or fractured one?

The years succeeding 1965, when Singapore gained full independence from the Federation of Malaysia, saw rapid developments in the Singaporean society and much had to be altered to encompass the new ideology of modernization held by the government. As industrialization and modernization grew increasingly important, the focus of the nation was placed on economical and financial growth, which inadvertently led to the decline of Singapore's cultural and entertainment scene<sup>1</sup>. This progressive outlook ushered in an era of urban redevelopment, and not only saw the change of Singapore's landscape but a change in Singapore's film industry. *Kampongs* and

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<sup>1</sup> Millet, Raphael, *Singapore Cinema*, (Singapore: Editions Didier Mille), 2006, Pg 70 -71.

villages were slowly replaced by high-rise commerce buildings and HDB flats, new social engineering policies also introduced tighter censorship regulations, Singapore film production finally came to a screeching halt, and Singapore's history started to get rewritten. Singapore's film industry laid dormant for almost ten years until it slowly awakened from its slumber in the early 1990s. The industry began to come to terms with the new Singapore ideals and government rhetoric, and this was reflected in films that came after. Singapore films from the revival era to the present depict the struggles of fitting into this modern mode of living and commerce. As Benedict Anderson posits, nationhood and national identity is dependent on "imagined communities" and exists as a system of cultural signification, where history becomes an essential foundation for national narratives<sup>2</sup>; the national narratives reiterated by contemporary Singapore cinema then offers not only a fractured recollection of symbolic national images, but also a divided view of the new *Singaporean* ideology.

This paper will closely analyze three films from Singapore's Revival Age in the 1990s to the present (e.g. *Eating Air*, *12 Storeys*, and *Singapore Dreaming*) in order to examine how the Heartland shapes, portrays and offers alternatives to the (re)presentation and formation of national identity in Singapore. The various employment of the Heartland in these films highlights how local landscapes are essential

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Taken from, Dissanayake, Wimal (ed), *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 1994, introduction.

means to understanding and conceptualizing the processes of building national identity in Singapore. The Heartland and other recognizable local landscapes in Singapore films are not only used as convenient backdrops to the rituals of everyday life in Singapore, but can be regarded as pivotal instruments that not only mould personal identity but embody the complicated struggle of forming a national identity. If national film can be regarded as a site for the construction and contestation of national identity, how is Singapore's national identity represented; more importantly, whose identity is being created on screen, and is it one that is accepted? Is the national identity created in and conveyed through Singapore films a coherent or fractured one?

These spaces captured in Singapore cinema are at the same time loaded and void of meaning and memory. They serve as a resistance to the authority of the past and communicate the imperatives of the present; and work as counter-discourse that challenges the hegemony of nationhood<sup>3</sup>. This need to show an alternative perspective on Singapore's governmental dominant rhetoric can be seen in the opening shot of Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* (1997). The shadowed and dark establishing shot of an undistinguishable yet familiar block of HDB flats works as a way to defamiliarize the commonplace. Rather than depict a noisy and bustling neighborhood (as seen typically in Jack Neo's films, for instance,

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from, Dissanayake, Wimal (ed), *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis; Indiana University Press), 1994, introduction.

*Money No Enough and I Not Stupid*), *12 Storeys* opens with a stark portrayal of public housing in Singapore. The long shot of rows and rows of windows and HDB units show conformity and insipidness, as each household is identical from one another. The use of low-key lighting, somber non-diegetic music and low camera angles presents the 12-storey HDB block as sterile, ominous, cold and looming.

These images of the HDB block are further broken by long shots of empty and dark corridors, endless stairwells that emphasize the film's representation of lonely homes and stolid lives, and suggest through the intertwining narrative of four families that this is a "single portrayal of Singapore society in the mid-1990s" (especially since 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in government-built housing)<sup>4</sup>. The film as Raphael Millet notes in *Singapore Cinema* seems to be in responds to the 1997 financial crisis in Singapore, and addresses the issues and fears of a country once supported by economical stability and financial success<sup>5</sup>. *12 Storeys* in this sense, poses questions about the efficacy of the Singapore Dream and lifestyle. It also highlights the absence of humanity in a nation that has lost the need for physical closeness and relationships, and demonstrates this through the use of space. The opening sequence, for instance helps set the melancholic and grim tone for the rest of the film as various shots of families doing mundane activities (e.g. watching television, doing homework, and playing

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<sup>4</sup> Millet, Raphael, pg 84 – 85.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Pg 85.

mahjong) at home are captured in medium to tight close-ups, consequently making everyday Singapore life and living spaces look confined and restricted.

This prison-like representation of HBD housing is contrary to the design of Singapore's public housing as the modern day *kampong*. Instead of fostering community and neighborly bonds, communal areas like playgrounds, shared corridors, and coffeeshops become the catalyst for splintered relationships and identities. One particular scene that stands out as a simple yet poignant manifestation of the failure of structures designed to render human interaction and community is San San and Ming's first encounter in the public playground. Both characters are portrayed as lonely and misunderstood by their families, and in many respects, they both represent social outcasts who are unable to construct meaningful relationships with the people in their lives; but rather than show empathy between their characters, the film via spatial configuration purposefully renders the possibility of a connection unattainable. Ming and San San are seen in the playground together, but are ironically distanced by the park itself, as the camera frames each of them at opposite ends of the playground, separated by the slide. Another example of how the film changes or presents an alternative and cynical view of shared spaces in the Heartland is scenes in the neighborhood coffeeshop. The first instance of this representation is the initial shot of people in the coffeeshop. Using editing like simple eyeline matches of people ordering food and

conversing, Khoo manages to simulate the effect that there is a group of friends sitting at a table talking. As the camera pans out however, the audience slowly realizes that each person is actually seated separately. Besides using physical distance to show the lack of communal kinship, the film also portrays the coffeeshop as a place of gossip (e.g. friends talking behind Ah-Gu's back about his failing marriage, or people making fun of San San's appearance) and vice (e.g. gambling). It is in these ways that communal spaces in the Heartlands are reconfigured and subverted in *12 Storeys* to become manifestations of the tensions between hegemonic ideology and the *reality* of Singapore's marginalized, which are often not accounted for.

This particular mode of camera angles and editing to show proximity without reciprocity is also employed in Woo Yen Yen and Colin Goh's *Singapore Dreaming* (2006). To illustrate Mei and her husband, C.K.'s tenuous marriage, many of their strained interactions with one another are captured in the confines of their HDB flat. Though positioned always within the same space a few feet from each other (e.g. C.K. in the foreground and Mei in the background), they are never seen truly communicating with one another, suggesting that their house is not really a home. An interesting use of space and characterization is also established with other characters in *Singapore Dreaming*. Ma, a non-English speaking, simple and traditional housewife from a Malaysian village is captured for most parts of the film in the HDB flat, and especially in the kitchen where she is often seen

cooking as a way of showing care for her family. The flat symbolizes a contradictory place for Ma. It is both her safe domain that she has managed to make her own, but at the same time, her lack of ability to communicate with her (English-speaking) children and live up to the grandiose ambitions of her husband leaves her no choice other than to stay at home. The flat then becomes a place that highlights and reinforces her detachment from and entry to the rest of society.

Although *Singapore Dreaming* departs from *12 Storeys* in terms of cinematic style, the film coming almost ten years after Khoo's morose look at a decaying society, effectively picks up from the issues addressed previously. *Singapore Dreaming* brings with it an updated and contemporary perspective on the predicaments of the Singapore Dream, the local landscape and its people. Unlike *12 Storeys* that adopts an unconventional, art-house film style as Wimal Dissanayake suggests, "to highlight the ambivalent unities, marginalized voices, and emergent and oppositional discourses that cohabit the national space"<sup>6</sup>, *Singapore Dreaming* tries to unsteady totalizing dialectics through a more linear narrative and an inconspicuous use of space. As the title suggests, *Singapore Dreaming* deals with the Singaporean oppression of wanting to obtain the Singapore Dream (i.e. the 5Cs – car, country club, cash, credit card and condominium), but more importantly, it charts the progress of past issues and poses a new

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<sup>6</sup> Taken from, Dissanayake, Wimal (ed), introduction.

question – what happens to a society whose dream has become a national plan? The film's depiction of Singapore's national identity is one that is sustained and made up of the trappings of materialistic ambitions and social advancement. *Singapore Dreaming* plays upon the ironical common aspiration to upgrade from a HDB flat to a condominium by stressing on structural similarities shared by the HDB flats and condominiums featured in the film. The final scene of Pa's funeral where paper offerings were burnt served as a symbolic reminder of the futility of chasing the Singapore Dream. Shots of the burning paper house and its remaining wooden angular frame conjured analogous images of blocks of flats seen in the background, thereby reiterating not only the futility of pursuing the dream but the failure of achieving it. Physical spaces that signify success and development in Singapore are again portrayed as cage-like structures that entrap and imprison individual autonomy.

*Singapore Dreaming* as a more current depiction of the problematic and often dialectical relationship between constructing a unified national identity and developing independent voices draw on Singapore's changing landscape to mirror its changing mindset. The film's use of Singapore's commercial and business areas, like Orchard Road and Shenton Way is strategic in juxtaposing the Heartlands with the more globalized vision of Singapore. The spaces become representative of characters' ideals and traits, the effects of western capitalism, and at times points towards the incompatibility of one's

ability to fit into the “Singapore plan” of success. For instance, Pa's dream of being successful is tied into his want to be affluent. After winning the lottery however, the film makes apparent that having material gain may not necessarily make the Singapore Dream a reality. The image of Pa sweating in his tailor-made suit on the golf course with a golfer in the background is a perfect example of this. Instead of looking as though he belongs in this new social stratum, his outfit and figure behavior suggest otherwise, as he looks misplaced and incongruent in the shot. Seng standing lost and defeated (after being rejected from a job interview that disclaimed his overseas degree) in the midst of looming and soaring high-rise buildings in the busy business district, is again another instance of how space is utilized to establish discontinuities in the dominant *Singapore* discourse.

Jasmine Ng Kin Kia and Kelvin Tong's *Eating Air* (1999) similarly challenges the nationalist discourse which represent the nation as one, by becoming a critical art house text that adopts the perspective of the disenfranchised minorities of Singaporean society – the delinquents, the *Ah Bengs*<sup>7</sup>. The local landscape is once again transformed through style and narrative, but this time for a very different purpose. Rather than show the entrapping and claustrophobic effect spaces in Singapore emblematically have on its people (as seen in *12 Storeys* and *Singapore Dreaming*), the characters in the film, though social

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<sup>7</sup> Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (ed), *Cinema and Nation*, (London and New York; Routledge), 2000, Pg 94.

outcasts find spaces in Singapore to play in and establish as their own. Rooftops of HDB flats and construction sites become their urban playground where they fantasize and imagine another world full of adventure and reckless living; while shopping centers and marketplaces become places for gang fights and truculence. The motif of the bike rides (or joy-rides) on highways, streets and in tunnels becomes analogous for their way of alternative living in Singapore – one not driven by economic success and routine but with personal fulfillment, unruliness and a sense of brotherhood<sup>8</sup>.

The film uses a simple storyline of love and adolescent camaraderie to draw the audience into the lives of Ah Boy (a young, uneducated, thrill seeking delinquent) and Ah Girl (a dutiful daughter who lives a mundane life structured by routine). Their meeting alters their lives and this change is reflected through their evolving environment. The scene in which their relationship begins to blossom, as Ah Girl starts to reciprocate Ah Boy's feelings towards her, illustrates how the landscape changes to personify their emotions and identity. Ah Girl's undistinguishable HDB unit begins to stand out as the orange glow of Ah Boy's lighter lights up the windows of her kitchen. This scene figuratively presents Ah Girl's complicated struggle to conform while at the same time stand out from a mundane existence.

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<sup>8</sup> Brotherhood in this film revolves around notions of loyalty, heroism, and undying support amongst the group of recalcitrants.

*Eating Air* follows a cyclical narrative, where the ending of the film mirrors its beginning. The opening sequence shows Ah Boy carelessly drifting from lane to lane riding away from Shenton Way (Singapore's business district) in his motorcycle and into the CTE tunnel. This exemplifies his rejection for the conventional Singaporean lifestyle and measures of capitalist accomplishments. This lighthearted opening sequence accompanied by non-diegetic Hokkein music about carefree living is juxtaposed by a more somber finale. The final scene of Ah Boy lying lifeless in the CTE tunnel and Ah Girl walking out with his helmet in her hands subtly hints at the possibility of constructing a new identity, as the tunnel has been made to embody not only Ah Boy's want to be carefree but also Ah Girl's desire to escape from her mundane life as she longed for change. Perhaps this ending implies the need for national identity to encompass plurality, as Ah Girl is never seen walking out of the tunnel. Though the ending can be read as a bleak acknowledgement of hegemonic ideology since the renegade protagonist Ah Boy was portrayed defeated and lifeless, the film's final shot of Ah Girl walking bravely towards the end of the tunnel evokes a sense of hope and possibility. The film by not offering any obvious alternatives to the dominant ideology of *nation* as a unified identity, does not present essentialism as a solution, but proposes a more ambiguous outlook a Singapore's identity<sup>9</sup>, and suggests that Singapore is still a nation *under-construction*.

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<sup>9</sup> Hjort, Mette and Mackenzie, Scott (Ed), Pg 95.

As observed in these three films, *12 Storeys*, *Singapore Dreaming* and *Eating Air*, public and private spaces like coffeeshops, marketplaces, playgrounds, and flats are more than just places for communal and personal interaction. The Singapore Heartland and local landscape become transfigured and reinterpreted in each film to demonstrate the changing identity(s) of Singapore and challenge the hegemony of dominant ideology. Paradoxically, these familiar spaces that help create a recognizable *Singapore* on screen are repeatedly used as sites of transgression and alienation, so as to confront the prolific and dominant representations of a cohesive *Singaporean* identity. The three films studied exemplify the importance of film as a means of questioning, contesting, and expanding dogmatic notions of nationalism and identity, through the use of space and cinematic aesthetics. Therefore, Singapore film and its engagement with local landscape have come to play a significant role in communicating the new relevance and importance of peripheral voices and perspectives within the discourse of nationalism<sup>10</sup>. With an influx of Singapore films in recent years, Singapore cinema has become instrumental to the documentation of variant attitudes towards *Singapore* and what it means to be Singaporean. As Homi K. Bhabha asserts, "The nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the 'horizontal' view of society. The nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Pg 94.

own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference"<sup>11</sup>. Singapore cinema might just be that alternative voice of difference and re-presentation.

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<sup>11</sup> Bhabha K. Homi (Ed), *Nation and Narration*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), Chapter 16, P300