Film and the "Other" Singaporean

By Edna Lim

COMING UP FOR AIR: FILM AND THE "OTHER" SINGAPOREAN

The history of Singapore's film industry is marked by two distinct periods. The first period, which lasted from the 1950s to the 1960s, is considered the golden age of Singapore films due to the prolific outpouring of primarily Malay films produced by the local Cathay and Shaw studios. The second period, which began in the 1990s, constitutes a revival of sorts for Singapore film, and is marked by the recent spate of local productions that began with *Medium Rare* in 1991 and continues to the present. What is interesting about this current "resurgence" of local films is that while these films have resuscitated the previously dormant film industry in Singapore, and can, therefore, be considered a "revival," they are in fact very different kinds of films from the ones that were made during the golden age, just as the current constitution of the industry is also no longer recognizable as a legacy inherited from that age.

Most obvious, of course, is that the films today are primarily made in English or Chinese, although some feature a combination of both languages while others also include other languages like Malay, reflecting the diversity of multi-lingual Singapore. Furthermore, cinematic images of Singapore's simpler *kampong* or village past have given way to a new landscape of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats and heartlands, skyscrapers and the cosmopolitan lifestyle of contemporary Singapore. Indeed, as the authors of *Latent Images* have noted, "the new generation of films...reflected all the attributes of contemporary life."[1] They further observe that:

> there have been no historical costume movies, unlike the golden age period, with its stories reflecting old Malay traditions and legends. ... [T]he majority of the revival movies has been...aimed at reflecting everyday life.[2]

However, while revival films seem to adequately reflect modern, contemporary Singapore, the focus is less on the everyday than it is on the ordinary and the less-than-ordinary. They feature characters who are not so much the underdog as they are what I call the "other" Singaporean, the ones that are absent in prevailing official literature and representations of Singapore.

A brief survey of official websites about Singapore offers an interesting insight into the kinds of narrative that the nation-state has constructed about itself. For example, according to the *Visit Singapore* website, Singapore's:

> compact size belies its economic growth. In just 150 years, Singapore has grown into a thriving centre of commerce and industry. ... Singapore is the busiest port in the world. ... [And o]ne of the world's major oil refining and distribution centres.... It has also become one of the most important financial centres of Asia.... Singapore's strategic location, excellent facilities, fascinating cultural contrasts and tourist attractions contribute to its success as a leading destination for both business and pleasure."[3]

On the *Singapore Education* website, Singapore is an ideal "Global Schoolhouse"[4] because it is:

> a reputable financial centre, a key regional trading centre, the world's busiest port, and a top location for investment. Often cited as a model for transparency, efficiency and political stability, Singapore has earned recognition from around the world. ... The Swiss-based World Economic Forum (WEF) also rated Singapore as the most competitive economy possessing great innovative ability and a solid macro economy....[5]

Singapore's airport "has for many consecutive years been nominated as the best airport in the world." In addition, in March 2002, *The Economist* reported that "Singapore's quality of life [has] surpassed that of London or New York,"[6] making it "A Multicultural Nation with a High Quality of Life."

Obviously, these websites serve to promote Singapore, and the Singapore they promote is a successful, vibrant, accomplished and affluent one. Yet, the view of Singapore offered by locally-made films from the revival offer a rather different perspective. One of the markers of this difference is in the choice of location or setting for the films. These narratives are sometimes located in "the underbelly" of Singapore. Most obviously, the underbelly refers to the seedier, darker side of the nation that is populated by prostitutes, pimps, gangsters, murderers, teenage delinquents, and the like. Hence, the characters that populate these underbelly films are reflected identities of this already marginalized world, this "other" side of Singapore.

The tendency to use the underbelly as a setting is most prevalent in early films like *Bugis Street - The Movie* (Yon Fan, 1995), which was set in the heyday of one of Singapore's notorious red light districts in the 1960s and depicts the lives of the transvestites and transsexuals who inhabit that space. Another film, *Mee Pok Man* (Eric Khoo, 1995), is set in the grim reality of seedy Singapore, populated by associated figures like the prostitutes, pimps, gangsters and sleazy Western men.

This early tendency to depict the underbelly continues and gains the stamp of critical approval in the film, *12 Storeys* (Eric Khoo, 1997), which is considered a breakthrough for Singapore film because of the acclaim it received at international festivals. However, unlike previous films, *12 Storeys* is not set in the underbelly, but the heartland of Singapore - those Housing Development estates that cluster the island and form a significant part of the city's landscape. These heartlands grew out of the country's urban development plans in the 1970s to provide adequate public housing for Singaporeans. What started as dark, small two-bedroom apartments in simply designed blocks have since developed into full-grown estates with architectural features, gardens, town councils and facilities like swimming pools and community centres. Currently, "about 85% of Singaporeans are living in government-built housing."[7]

Indeed, Singapore's public housing programme is one of the most successful in the world, and it is something that official literature advertises as part of its pitch on successful, sunny Singapore. However, interestingly, while *12 Storeys* is located in the heartland, and it is about the lives of several individuals who live in a single block of flats in one of these estates, the film's narrative is primarily about failure and repression, not success. Success is represented by images of marital or familial happiness in the film, through family portraits, wedding photos and officially commissioned television commercials promoting marriage and having children.

Yet the film's overall tone of sadness is reflected in the disenfranchised characters who strive but fail to achieve these ideals. There is, for example, the bucktoothed hawker who subscribes to these images of happiness and marries a woman from China in order to live that happy life. Yet he remains lonely and repressed because she is never at home and rejects him sexually. In that same block of flats is a single woman who is doomed to a life of loneliness because she is overweight and unattractive. In yet another flat, is a school teacher who strives to be an ideal citizen but has a perverse obsession with his sister and her virginity. Interestingly, the film begins and ends with images of these apartment buildings. It invites us to look closer and to look beyond the image because the image is problematic. In other words, the film is about the disparity between image and reality, and while the image may be officially generated, the reality is quite different, and that difference is constituted by those "other" people that are left out of Singapore's success stories.

Since *12 Storeys*, the heartland has become a popular setting in most Singapore films, largely because the image of these flats has become shorthand for what is local and ordinary in Singapore. However, like *12 Storeys*, the heartland is used as more than a way of accessing the local and the everyday. It is used as a site through which "other" voices may be heard. This is particularly so for Chinese language films. Unlike English-language films, which started out on the fringes of mainstream cinema, Chinese language films appeal directly to the masses and this audience primarily comprise those who live in the heartland. However, instead of depicting the average heartlander, these films regularly feature characters who fail to rise above their ordinariness to become a part of Singapore's rhetoric of success. In some films, this is because they are either too poor or they are juvenile delinquents or gangsters. In other films, they lack either the proper skills or opportunity to do so.

For example, in *Money No Enough*, Singapore's first Chinese language film to achieve commercial success, the characters, as the title suggests, suffer from a shortage of money. They've either over extended themselves in keeping up with the Joneses or they lack the proper qualification and skills for promotion or for getting a

better job (such as a degree, computer literacy or the ability to speak English). Therefore, it is not merely the lack of money that is problematic but the lack of money in consumerist and affluent Singapore. Furthermore, the film's depiction of the need for qualification and upgrading of skills runs contrary to official narratives about the success and desirability of Singapore's bilingual education system. Films like *Money No Enough* may feature characters who are part of the landscape of Singapore, but they do not celebrate that everyday. Instead, the characters are trapped by their ordinariness. These aren't merely average Singaporeans. They are average Singaporeans who are doomed to being average, and therefore are not part of Singapore's rhetoric of success.

These "other" Singaporeans are usually marked by the language they speak. Although the English language is Singapore's *lingua franca*, these other Singaporeans generally tend to speak in Singlish, that colloquial, informal variation of the English Language spoken by most Singaporeans but remains the poor cousin of "proper English." If they are Chinese-speaking characters then they would usually speak Hokkien, or some other dialect other than Mandarin, especially in the earlier films. The prevalence of dialects in Chinese films is interesting especially since Mandarin is privileged by the state as the common language of the Chinese community. During the 1980s, aggressive "Speak Mandarin" campaigns were launched, exhorting Singaporeans to "Speak Mandarin and not Dialects." At the same time, the use of dialects was banned from television, radio and print media. These measures ran in tandem with the state's emphasis on a bilingual education system where English is taught as the first language, and Mandarin, the second, if you are Chinese. Hence, while the use of dialects as well as Singlish in these films is akin to defiance of state-driven causes, these languages are also used to represent the ordinary and the everyday.

Indeed using Singlish and dialects played a large part in the success of early films like *Army Daze* (Ong Keng Sen, 1996), which was the first locally made film to have used Singlish and the first commercial hit of the revival period. However, these "other" languages, like the heartland, not only give the films a distinctly local flavour: they are also markers of difference and otherness. For example, the use of Singlish or dialect is often contrasted with the use of "proper English" and Mandarin; English and Mandarin speaking characters tend to be well-educated and successful while it is usually the "other Singaporean who speak these "other" languages.

It is therefore apparent from the few examples that I've managed to squeeze into this short presentation, that local filmmakers of the revival period have collectively created yet another narrative of Singapore. Regardless of whether they are about the underbelly or marginalized individuals, these films seem to be built around the idea of the "other" Singaporean. Together, they constitute an unconscious but collective attempt to give voice to the otherwise unheard and these voices clearly contradict as well as complicate state-driven representations of the nation.

However, it is also precisely because the "other" Singaporean is such a recurring and prominent figure in local films that Singapore cinema itself has become the "other" cinema in its own country. This is apparent not only in terms of production output but also popular appeal. Realistically, Singapore cannot viably match the production output enjoyed by other more dominant cinemas like Hollywood, especially given its small domestic market. The number of Singapore films produced in any given year will always be much less than those produced by Hollywood or other larger Asian cinemas like Hong Kong, Korea, India or Japan. Hence, the film diet of the average cinema-going Singaporean would inevitably comprise films from these other more prolific nations.

However, while this may be true, domestic film output is also small because these films are largely independently funded, aided by the Singapore Film Commission or produced by Raintree Pictures, the only real major studio in operation in Singapore. Currently, the only consistent filmmaker is Jack Neo who has produced a film a year since 2002 with the support of Raintree Pictures' financial and distribution muscle. [This annual collaboration lasted until 2006. Neo's *Just Follow Law* was produced without Raintree. Ed. note] He is, in a sense, like an artist-in-residence and his films are the only locally-made ones that have made money at the box-office.

Although the revival of Singapore films has generated much interest especially at the level of the state, local films are unable to garner the kind of box-office success that Hollywood films do. In fact, only 8 of the 36 Singapore films released since 1991 have made money at the box-office. The rest performed dismally.[8] Of

these, the only local film to have made it to the Top 5 grossing films in Singapore is *Money No Enough*, which is ranked third after James Cameron's *Titanic* and Steven Spielberg's *The Lost World*.[9] So far no other local film has been able to match *Money No Enough*'s commercial success partly because Singapore films have generally gained a reputation for being either "underbelly" films, which are too intense to be escapist or entertaining, or they are variations of the same theme.

Hence, it is somewhat ironic that the very element that augured the revival of Singapore films, this "other" Singaporean, is also the same element that has come to not only characterize Singapore films in general but also resulted in its position as the "other" cinema in Singapore. Perhaps in time, and with the addition of other kinds of locally made films, the figure of the "other" Singaporean will cease to become the defining characteristic of Singapore cinema. However, if that should happen, one can only hope that it will happen without the "other" Singaporean losing its voice altogether.

Notes

1. Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000, page 27.

2. Uhde and Uhde, page 109.

3. "Singapore Today," *www.visitsingapore.com*
http://www.visitsingapore.com/sections/articles/3c/1,1177,222,00.html,
24 February 2005.

4. "Why Study in Singapore?" *Singapore Education*
http://www.singaporeedu.gov.sg/htm/sis/sis01.htm
24 February 2005.

5. "Why Study in Singapore?" *Singapore Education*
http://www.singaporeedu.gov.sg/htm/sis/sis01.htm,
24 February 2005.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. As listed on Singapore Film Commission website. They are: *I Not Stupid, Liang Po Po: The Movie, That One No Enough, Money No Enough, The Teenage Textbook, 12 Storeys, Army Daze, Mee Pok Man.* "List of Singapore Films (1991-2002)," Singapore Film Commission, http://www.sfc.org.sg/statistics/statistic_list.shtm,
3 January 2005.

9. "Singapore's Top 5 Grossing Films of All Time," Singapore Film Commission, http://www.sfc.org.sg/statistics/statistic_list.shtm,
3 January 2005.

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