

"FOUR MALAY STORIES"



拉布
与
拉比

"LABU DAN LABI"



"IBU MERTUAKU"
(My Mother-in-Law)

我的
岳母



明汉黄
· 主
· 编
· 导
· 演

"DOKTOR RUSHDI"

生医流风



村田红

"SEMERAH PADI"



马来语
对白
·
片上
· 英
· 字
· 幕



a ming wong
production
2007

in Malay with
English & Malay
subtitles

马来
四
传

Based on the films of P Ramlee

finding (in)imitable form

ming wong's rehearsal of the nation

ADELE TAN

I.

A photograph shows the cheerless shell, which is all that is left of the Federal Cinema in Malaysia. The hall is unburdened of its seating area and projection screen, collecting instead the water that seeps through its ramshackle roof. Yet the full flush of colour from the Polaroid is testament to what must have been a glorious heyday when the cinema was a handsome establishment, drawing through its doors the streams of people eager to catch the latest cinematic adventure.

Yet this interpretation is only conjectural, for I am bereft of any historical knowledge of what the movie theatre was actually like before it was abandoned. But for the Singaporean artist Ming Wong, who has made a project (*Filem-Filem-Filem*, 2008) out of photographing and videoing independent or stand-alone cinemas in Malaysia and Singapore, this record of what he calls “architectures of entertainment” acts as not only an indicator of what existed before the age of the multiplex, but also functions as a narrative of the mnemonic lacunae that is the condition of the forgetting, or should I say the ignorant city.¹ Assiduously searched out and lovingly captured as image, the beautifully grand modernist facades of the buildings nonetheless remain mute about the lives they once had and the lives they live now, often as retrofitted churches, retail shops or leisure clubs. Reversing Roland Barthes’ pronouncement that “the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation”,² there is no compunction to take the veracity of the images at face value, as the artist has made known the artificial, but meticulous construction of his Polaroids:

*The pictures of the cinemas in the exhibition are Polaroids taken with a manual medium format camera. They give the viewer a mixed sense of time and place: they have an intimacy and immediacy, as an ‘instant’ snapshot of a place, frozen in time forever—although in reality all of these pictures have been painstakingly stitched together digitally from several photographs.*³

It is obvious that he had carefully thought through the elements and process of his capture, anchoring his choice of the Polaroid in the contemporaneity of its invention with the building of many of the recorded cinemas—both medium and subject cohabit similar time periods and both are threatened with obsolescence. At the same time, he has said that the 7cm square prints reflect the ways we have been lured from the ‘communal spirit’ of movie-going to the private, individualised and miniaturised spaces and screens of our mobile phones and other portable imaging devices.

We can of course speak about Wong’s work as a catalogue for social memory, with photographs and videos as technological preservatives of the cornucopia of vernacularised Art Deco, Bauhaus and international styles and designs that can be glimpsed from the theatre structures of the 1950s and 1960s, that is, we have to put these down on paper before they get demolished or become changed beyond recognition. But that is to say little about the use these images have for us as critical triggers for thinking, knowing and remembering. The photograph’s notoriety as an imprecise and untrustworthy medium has required that it is accompanied by captions. It is out of these colourful and limpid surfaces that we must construct the fuller picture of meaning, as Wong’s Polaroids incite us to call their bluff as already encompassing a fully-fledged and understood set of terms. If the theatres are truly the ‘dream palaces’ for the local masses, and that Wong desires his photographs to be akin to the tentative vulnerability of human portraiture, then that should remind us that the images or narratives of history or of ourselves are yet to be determined. The old tales will be re-dreamed in new guises, fantasies allowed room to circulate, because as John Tagg argues, we have to “gauge and regauge the relationship of representations of this period to an always changing, elusive and incoherent historical present”.⁴ This is less the standard charting of a history of Singapore cinema than it is an enquiry into what Singapore ever had that matters so much to us now?

II.

Ming Wong’s latest foray at the *53rd Venice Biennale* could be seen as a renewed effort towards the building of a picture of meaning.⁵ His oeuvre has already been distinguished by, or more precisely, attributed to, the tropes of multiculturalism, language and identity, and here it is more saliently yoked to the project of querying (or even ‘queering’) the nation. This is the second time that ‘the nation’ will be taken seriously and it continues the investigation initiated by Lim Tzay Chuen, who conceptualised the transportation of the arch Singapore tourist symbol, the Merlion, from its home at the Singapore River through the canals of Venice. Displacing a forceful symbol is one way to get at the formulations of the nation-State, but the failure of that move—eventually the content of the presentation in 2005—brought home more than ever the complicated stakes of the ‘nation’ in the Singapore Pavilion. In Wong’s hands however, a very different creature of multiculturalism and ‘the nation’ appears, for he sets his sights on the milieu of pre-independence Singapore; a time when culture was a more unruly business, when the plethora of cinemas across Singapore and (then) Malaya were the result of enterprising Chinese businessmen, who bought up plots of land for more permanent structures after setting up temporary cinemas in open-field tents or public halls as test pieces, and when the four language scripts—English, Chinese, Tamil and Jawi—appeared on theatre signage long before their conscription into official policy directives. The cinema of that period was a vibrant jostle of Singapore-made Malay and Chinese language films by the studios of Shaw and Cathay-Keris, which appealed across racial and social divides and was open to the influences of Indian and Filipino directors, as well as the film industries of Hollywood and Hong Kong.⁶ Scenes of dubious social and sexual mores proliferated before coming under the vice-like grip of conservatism and censorship.

What is presented at Venice is a veritable cinematic *wunderkammer* that Wong and Singaporean curator Tang Fukuen have put together in order to weave a tapestry of discontinuous but related narratives of Singapore’s history reflected through film. Comprising three video installations (*Four Malay Stories* from 2005 and two new videos *Life of Imitation*, and *In Love for the Mood*), eight billboard canvases, photographs, documentary shorts and movie memorabilia recreated as artworks on paper, this catholic array is the result of contributions by others normally unseen in the sole intentionality of artistic agency. Wong has searched out the last surviving movie canvas and poster painter Neo Chon Teck, who was in the employ of Yangtze Cinema, the remaining cinema to feature hand-painted posters; the dogged collector Wong Han Min, who possesses what must be a complete archival trove of artefacts and ephemera; and local filmmaker Sherman Ong, who produced the documentaries on C.T. Neo and H.M. Wong as well as a docu-drama of a theatre attendant dreaming of an acting career.⁷ This panoply of roles is again mirrored in the staging techniques of his videos, where Wong assumes the task of playing all the different characters in *Four Malay Stories* or engages other actors to do the same in re-enacted scenes from well-loved film classics such as Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) and Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000). It is no coincidence too that Wong’s filmic heroes are the multi-talented Malaysian musician, singer, actor and director P. Ramlee and German auteur Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who acted, wrote, designed and directed his own movies and stage plays. Wong, who had been schooled initially in Chinese art, later became a playwright for the English theatre scene in Singapore and then went to the Slade School of Art in London to obtain an MA in Fine Art Media. One can wear many hats and wear them all at once without divulging where one begins and the other ends.

That the Singapore Pavilion’s exhibition is entitled ‘*Life of Imitation*’ should already give a hint as to how we might appreciate the almost recursive methodology of Wong’s practice. The mimetic transactions between art and life are obviously insinuated, although imitating art for the purposes of life is no defence against the sterner circumstances of society. Actors habitually imitate expressions and actions culled



from the situations of daily life so as to give proximate plausibility to their performances. But in Wong's case, mimetic ability is a core survival skill for someone coming in from the outside. Having lived in London and Berlin as a migrant Chinese artist, he is accustomed to the practical exigencies of learning a foreign language by imitation, by immersing oneself in the dominant culture so that one does not cause perceptible disruptions to the social fabric. The ways of doing so are clearly shown in work like *Lerne Deutsch mit Petra von Kant* (*Learn German with Petra Von Kant*, 2007) where Wong reprises Fassbinder's despondent character Petra von Kant, to learn the lines of a 'bitter, desperate, or washed up' person in anticipation of the rejection immigrants might receive so that he might better communicate his plight, and in *Angst Essen/Eat Fear* (2008), a remake of Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Fear Eats the Soul*, 1974), where assimilation is no guarantee against bare-knuckled racism, but instead raises the local ire against miscegenation.

With *Four Malay Stories*, a four-channel black and white digital video installation, the recreation of key scenes from four iconic P. Ramlee movies—*Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), *Labu dan Labi* (1962), *Doktor Rushdi* (1970) and *Semerah Padi* (1956)—with Wong as the only actor for the sixteen characters, is not so much a nostalgic nod to halcyon days but an understanding of the image as a composite of signs.⁸ In the many takes of the selected scenes, where the repeated voicing of popularly quoted lines is accompanied by simultaneous on-screen Malay and English subtitles (parodying the effects of transcription and translation in instructional language videos), our sense of an aesthetic whole is broken down and parsed into constituent bits. Played all at the same time, the plot lines of the four films degenerate into a vision of Wong working his way through an unfamiliar tongue and cultural affectations and it may well be that Wong is more interested in typologies of genre, deliberately choosing a comedy, a melodrama, a period drama and a social drama, as a way to consider functional stereotypes.

The new videos for the pavilion extend the lessons of *Four Malay Stories*. The Caucasian actress in the three-screen installation for *In Love for the Mood* alternates between playing Maggie Cheung's and Tony Leung's characters while struggling to maintain her Cantonese diction and gender distinctions, and in *Life of Imitation*, a single scene from Sirk's film of a black mother with her daughter who passes as white, is replayed by three actors of different ethnicities cross-dressing for the two female parts, but who are seamlessly swapped throughout. Two facing projections of this remake are then doubled by virtue of their reflection in the mirrors that are beside the projection screens. Choosing a melodrama such as Sirk's film only serves to highlight the stark pitch of exaggerated sensationalism (whether in mirth or sadness), but without which the entertainment complex will not be able to sustain itself and its middle class morality. This is not to say that the film industry produces meretricious products—only that Wong manages to present the hilarity of its constructions.

III.

The nationalistic appeal of Ming Wong's proposed project for the official commissioner in Singapore is understandable, given the exhibition's historical romp through the country's filmic history—hence becoming what the commissioner Lim Chwee Seng surmises as "a multi-disciplinary, multi-lingual work that embodies a strong Singaporean character".⁹ But we should not be mistaken in thinking that the operative word for the show is 'multiculturalism', as if it were a touristic branding of Singapore's purportedly racially harmonious society. To be sure, they are able to market the exhibition under that remit, but looking closer, the touchstone for this year's pavilion is that of the 'global'. For the National Arts Council, the *Venice Biennale* is the "global cultural platform that provides high visibility and connectivity" and Wong's project can be usefully aligned with the economic objectives of "gain[ing] mindshare internationally and broaden[ing] Singapore's global art footprint".¹⁰ As the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud proclaims in his *Altermodern* manifesto: "Multiculturalism and identity is being overtaken by creolisation: artists are now starting from a globalised state of culture. This new universalism is based on translations, subtitling and generalised dubbing."¹¹



Multiculturalism has rightly and roundly been denounced for the unnecessarily politicising race, for denying ambivalence, transculturation and hybridity, the performative roots of any identity where repeated enunciations engender slippages.¹²

But lest we endlessly peddle the platitudes of repetition, inauthenticity and performativity, what is in fact achieved by Wong in this venture is paradoxically the questing after the residue that is truly unique, singular and specific in Singapore's history, if we believe that repetition does produce constitutive differences. "Life of Imitation", in the vein of the polysemic, rejigged film titles above, may be construed as a paean to the copy or copying, but it can equally be a gentle rebuke against dwelling too long in appropriation, and indeed expropriation, in the accelerated global flows of communication and travel. The playful contestations of cosmopolitanism and cross-cultural experiences do not mean that we abrogate the truths of what the polity desires in their nation or what was there in their cinema. Wong's intervention here is punctual, for as in the scene of Maggie Cheung rehearsing with her lover the confrontation with her own spouse about his infidelity, we can metaphorically replicate the act of betrayal by going against the grain of the pre-given, locating in our accumulated and iterated stories a kernel of what remains inimitable.

Ming Wong, *Life of Imitation*, Singapore Pavilion, 7 June-22 November, 2009

Notes

¹ *Filem-Filem-Filem* was commissioned for the Singapore Fringe Festival 2008: Art & History. The work comprises Polaroids and two video works. One documents the interiors of two abandoned cinemas and another, derived from hand-drawn 16mm film footage and digital video footage of a Singapore-Malaysia train journey or pilgrimage, serves as a metaphorical retrace of the journeys undertaken by pioneering film entrepreneurs. See www.mingwong.org/filem.html

² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1981: 89

³ Quoted from www.mingwong.org/filem.html

⁴ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 203

⁵ The Singapore Pavilion is at the Palazzo Michiel del Brusa, Cannaregio, Venice

⁶ See Raphael Millet's comprehensive survey in his book *Singapore Cinema*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006

⁷ This is also in line with director Daniel Birnbaum's three-pronged thematic structure for the 2009 *Venice Biennale*, titled 'Making Worlds', which will focus on (i) examining the processes of art production, the sites of creation and education; (ii) exploring the relationship between artists in different generations; (iii) looking at the classical mediums of drawing and painting

⁸ The work was first commissioned for the exhibition *Labilabu*, Pesta Raya Malay Cultural Festival, Esplanade, Singapore October 2005-January 2006

⁹ Quoted from the National Arts Council Singapore's press release for this year's Singapore Pavilion

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Altermodern Manifesto: Postmodernism is dead', Tate Online, February 2009, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm>

¹² See for example Homi Bhabha, 'Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', *Nation and Narration*, (ed.) Homi Bhabha, London and New York: Routledge, 1990: 299-300