



**sherman ong**

*banjir kemarau (flooding in the time of drought)*

# fractious frames: critical exposures through the filmic lens of sherman ong

## ADELE TAN

Photography and film historically have long been noted as aesthetic mediums that discomfited audiences, practitioners and theorists alike because of a chief flaw—they are liable to deceit. We were vexed earlier in the twentieth-century by the photograph preserving only one static shot of a continuous moment. At this moment we are finding ourselves troubled by the quality of digital technology (which translates the image into a binary code) precisely because we now read celluloid film as more authentic due to its indexing of presence through the work of light ‘engraving’ the image of the world onto a receptive filmstrip. In our digital era typified by our facility with PC editing suites, we distrust the photograph and film because it self-consciously flaunts its ability to lie.

Yet in Malaysian-born, Singapore-educated and based photographer and filmmaker Sherman Ong’s body of work, the medium’s propensity to falsity has been properly welded to its dramatic content. The practical convenience of shooting films digitally can now be turned into a conceptual motif. This is suggested most clearly when Ong quotes from John Berger for his epigraph in his 2002 award-winning documentary *The Ground I Stand*: “Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place.” In this Ong seems to be saying (if we substitute film for landscape) that paradoxically the inauthenticity of film carries within itself a truth function by laying bare other lies that we inure ourselves with. In his films, Ong sets up these lines of untruth, striations of reality and folklore, episodes of dreams, hallucinations and other habitual acts of ‘making things up’ that are inconspicuously part of our everyday lives. They could be benign situations of deceit that help lubricate social engagement or they could be ones that move things along a tragic momentum, driving characters from one crisis into another.

As a person straddling two countries, Ong is not so much displaced as being constantly in transit between places and thus is adept at surfacing gaps and contradictions in the socio-cultural milieu. Frequently seeking points in Asian cultural practices which have been taken for granted as symbolic heritage and yet are poised on the brink of disappearance, the artist uses recognisable elements which he proceeds to estrange and deform in order to throw up a different picture from the status quo. From traditional Malay dance to Indian mythology (as featured in his early short films such as *Exodus—Wanita yang berlari*, *New Beginning* and *Drought*), Ong inserts them into his visual sequences not as stand-ins for multicultural exoticism but as ciphers of certain inimicability that exists between the aesthetic forms we impose and reality we experience, especially when mythology is one way of representing extraordinary experience outside of reality. In this cultural crossfire also lies Ong’s wry socio-political bite.

In *State of Things*, Ong makes use of the first two lines of Singapore’s Malay language national anthem by Zubir Said, the *Majulah Singapura* (*Onward Singapore*), to discombobulate his unsuspecting interviewees, asking them if they knew what is meant by the words, “*Marikita rakyat Singapura/Sama-Sama menuju bahagia*” and what they felt is the contemporary relevance of the verse to their immediate existence. He is met largely by faces of incredulity and hesitance such that we cannot but agree that the campy, off-key rendition at the film’s end by a transsexual might be a more than adequate tribute to the near-obsolete meanings of, “We, the people of Singapore/ Together march towards happiness.” And in *The Ground I Stand*, Ong exposes societal divisions of age, class, race (particularly Chinese and Malay) and education in the embodiment of a single but independent old Malay widow, Macik (aunt) Nyaterang, who lives near subsistence level. Like a repository of memories and oral histories, she is a reminder of how far post-war Singapore has come but whose contentment and resignation to her lot is at odds with the ethos of ambitious betterment that is Singapore. The documentary’s conciliatory tone is inoffensive and gently touching, yet even as we salute her cheerful stoicism the ground soon gives way to another question: what is the alternative?

Hard-hitting politics however is not Ong’s main thrust. He is an artist who is far too interested in the subtleties of human foibles and fantasies to make only blunt political points. If he can be called a realist filmmaker in any way, it will be because of his choice to cast non-professional actors in their most intimately known environments, to exploit improvised dialogues and to make salient social phenomena that have gone under the radar. In these ways, Ong’s treatment of filmic narrative resembles that of his eminent predecessor, the Kuching-born but Taipei-based Taiwanese ‘new wave’ auteur Tsai Ming-liang, who favours long takes, often of static medium and long shots. Similarly, Ong dispenses with flashy camera angles but adheres to the single ponderous frontal shot as the most authentic frame where cinematic time is deliberately slowed to the pace of lived time. However, this does not mean that he produces true-to-life characters but merely that they are identifiable bits of ourselves delivered to us via structural characterological composites. This is best seen in his 2008 film *Hashi*, made for his Fukuoka Asian Art Museum residency where several actresses play a single role (with knowing reference to Luis Buñuel’s 1977 film *The Obscure Object of Desire*). As generous and sympathetic as Ong is towards his characters, we are ultimately given generic sketches of situations that implicate psychosomatic desires, from love affairs to infertility, through his three main female characters Shino, Junko (played by two actresses) and Momo (played by four actresses). Yet as singular and specific as each character is, they perform as structural signifiers linking us to each other’s predicaments even though qua Buñuel, the real woman is always obscured. *Hashi* means severally “a bridge, a pair of chopsticks or the edge”, and as Ong explicitly puts it: “Chopsticks, for the Chinese and the Japanese, connote stability.



When we are able to eat, things are somehow under control, in order. The Edge—unstable, unsure, at a loss, looking for a direction. Bridge—all humans need to make connections with another being at different times of our lives. At different points in our lives, we exist in all the above states of being—hence the title *Hashi*.” Thus, we expect no moral chastisement from Ong but a portrayal of urban alienation reflected in the architecture of segregative walls and windows, with his characters frequently in the shadow, framed and hemmed in.

Besides being accomplices in subterfuge, conventional film and photography also have been aligned with death, mediums that have arrested and trapped the soul of the subject but now too slowly meeting their own separate demise. But in Ong’s work, death features as an insistent pressure, to be understood as forces of dissonance and fracture and equally as an obsessive fascination that liberates one from sedate confines. The fantastical dreams that Momo (who frequently falls asleep during the day) has of tuna fish attacking Japan, giant whales charging out from bowling pin machines with blood spurting from their blowholes and being an overfed cat whose belly subsequently explodes after being continually stuffed by Shino, are reminiscent of erotic *shunga* prints of the *ukiyo-e* movement or latter day apocalyptic hentai manga. The quiet but deadly violence that permeates Ong’s film too extends into more concrete circumstances of illness, suicide, guilt and loneliness that were variously experienced by the protagonists. Even current world conflicts too infect bourgeois desires as Junko and her boyfriend debate which Muslim country to go for a vacation, veering from Afghanistan to Malaysia or Bali.

It was not until *Flooding in the Time of Drought*, a two-part feature length film made for the 2008 *Singapore Biennale*, that death, catastrophe and schism became significant focal points for Ong. Exhorting us to imagine a dystopic vision of resource-poor Singapore island blighted by drought and then by flood,

signs of which are not immediately visible on screen, the extremities of climate change then become metaphoric indicators of the nation’s psychological climes, for the locals as well as the migrants who have made Singapore home. One surmises that Ong had created this state of emergency in order to discuss the more perturbative aspects of Southeast Asian life—the racial tensions lingering past the 1997 riots in Indonesia, simmering resentment over the Japanese invasion in the Second World War, and ethnic discrimination around the region which has been ingrained over generations and transported along with the migrant communities. Nonetheless, amidst the sporadic ventures into death and violence, sexual relations and sexualities, these are the lines of division that bind us to each other, in one way or another, as people survive through their crises. And the audience too finds that there is nothing to be squeamish about when speaking of morbid difficulties but emotional dividends are paid when we begin to address what makes people so desperately unhappy living in Singapore, or for that matter anywhere else in the world.

Film, for Ong, is not only a useful tool to present the real-world state of play but also a remarkable barometer of the sorts of dreams we want to have for ourselves. Dreams are a literal and necessary feature in many of his films, but they are not there to lull or sate our desires. Momo in *Hashi* is perhaps Ong’s best mouthpiece for truncated reveries as she is given to making the perverse twists in her soporific pronouncements. On recollecting her dreams, she has said, “I couldn’t dream the ending”, or “I had a nice dream, thanks for waking me”, and I wonder too if she may just as well be making an ontological statement about film. Despite the placid surfaces of many of Ong’s works, they harbour a quality of good-natured fatalism. To avoid being taken in by blithe filmic dissimulation, we have to believe, as Ong does, that “tragedies like dreams are waiting to happen”.



All images: Sherman Ong, *Banjir kemarau (Flooding in the time of drought)* (video stills), 2008

Part 1: 91 mins

Part 2: 92 mins

Hindi/Italian/Chinese/Indonesian/Japanese/Thai/Korean/Tagalog/Malay/  
German with English subtitles

Photography Tan Hai Han

Photos courtesy the artist

Adele Tan is a Singapore-based critic and writer; was assistant editor *Third Text* and her writings can be found there and in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, Contemporary, Art Asia Pacific, ARTicle: Singapore Biennale Companion 2008* and the online journal *Ctrl+P*. She has also written catalogue essays for artists Lee Wen, Wang Peng and the performance art festival *The Future of Imagination 5*. She has completed her PhD in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art (University of London) researching on performance art in China. Her other abiding interests include critical theory, psychoanalysis and feminism. She will be a GAM fellow at ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany in the summer of 2009

CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART PROJECTS 2009 PROJECT 3

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