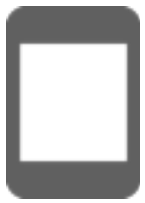# Dystopia in the Singaporean Heartland Film Genre

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## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to consider the significance of the Singaporean heartland film by examining how issues of social conformity, hierarchy, and ordering are configured into a dystopian imagination of the heartlands. The researcher argues that the significance of the genre lies in its attempt to destabilize official narratives regarding society, culture, and community by depicting stories of deviance and dysfunction in the heartlands. The methods used in this article involves discourse and textual analysis to identify the recurring patterns, themes, and motifs of the genre. Three major themes emerge from the analysis; (1) the visualization of the dystopian city, (2) the breakdown of the family unit, (3) and general pessimism towards contemporary life in Singapore. However, the analysis also reveals gaps that currently exist in its current configuration. These include tendencies to romanticize a nostalgic past, to eschew social and cultural diversity, and to reinforce narratives of repression and angst in the nation.

*Keywords:* Singapore cinema, Singaporean culture, Dystopian city, urban life

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# DYSTOPIA IN SINGAPORE CINEMA

Singaporean Cinema is experiencing something of a renaissance in recent years. Indeed, it has truly transformed itself from being at the fringes of Southeast Asian Cinema to become one that is celebrated around the world. Local films are not only competing internationally but they are also increasingly feted at prestigious film festivals around the world such as Cannes, Locarno[1] and even at the Oscars.[2] The new century has seen the emergence of some of the country's most celebrated filmmakers like Eric Khoo, Jack Neo, Kevin Tong, Jasmine Ng, Royston Tan, Boo Junfeng, Anthony Chan, Tan Pin Pin, Michelle Chong, and Sandi Tan, among others. They are not only serial winners at international competitions but they are also increasingly being recognized as cinematic auteurs in their own right. As a result of their cinematic achievements, some critics have been moved to proclaim that a New Singapore Cinema has emerged in the country.[3] Indeed, it is entirely reasonable to claim that Singapore Cinema in the 21st century is fast becoming an important art form and industry for and in Singapore (see Uhde & Uhde, 2009; Tan, 2010; Tan & Goh, 2011; Teo, 2013; Liew & Teo, 2016; Lim, 2018).

But while the maturation of a film culture is a positive development for the country, it is also prudent to take stock of not so much the economic and reward benefits of such a development but also take stock of the ways in which Singapore and Singaporean stories have been reproduced and represented in cinema. Indeed, it is prudent to investigate the character of this so-called "New Singapore Cinema." What exactly is being communicated in these films? And in particular, what is the vision of Singapore? Indeed, while international awards and acclaim indicate the growing strength and reputation of Singapore Cinema, it is perhaps timely to pause to consider and examine the cinematic representations and visions of Singapore in Singaporean films. Is it New Singapore Cinema just because local filmmakers are feted and winning prestigious awards? Or is there something more to the nomenclature?

The following is an attempt to examine the character of this re-emergence of Singapore cinema by considering the vision that is expressed in some of Singapore's most acclaimed films. To be sure, the analysis is not a comprehensive study but is a distillation or selection of some of the most salient features and characteristics of Singapore Cinema. But the analysis is not entirely a formalistic and stylistic exercise of Singapore Cinema inasmuch as it is rooted in a perspective to examine and elucidate its character, its significance, and finally its limitations and gaps. First, an attempt is made to identify and define the Heartland Film Genre in Singapore Cinema. Then it is followed by a breakdown of some of the key themes and motifs that are common amongst the heartland films. This is then followed by an attempt to contextualize the identified filmic themes and motifs in relation to real-life socio-cultural issues and concerns in Singapore. Finally, it is argued that the re-articulation and discourses of these cinematic representations reveal certain gaps in its imagination, which in of itself, raises questions regarding its cinematic vision and aesthetic.

To be sure, this article faces several limitations. Firstly, it is not meant to be a comprehensive study of an entire genre, but a distillation and synoptic view of the heartland genre in post-millennial Singapore Cinema. Indeed, the analysis does not so much focus upon specifics in terms of narrative and stylistic techniques of the genre as it does on examining and elucidating the vision and character of the genre. Another limitation of this article is the difficulty in trying to contextualize the dystopian vision in the genre with socio-political and cultural conditions in real life. That is because, according

to David Bordwell (2012), "we ought not to expect popular movies, or indeed many movies, to offer crisp, transparent visions of politics or society." That is because "filmmakers opportunistically pluck out bits of cultural flotsam, stir it all together, and offer it up to see if we like the taste. It's in filmmakers' interests to push a lot of our buttons without worrying whether what comes out is a coherent intellectual position" (Bordwell, 2011, p.25).

While directorial intention is an important consideration, to lean upon authorial intention as a source, at least in this study, is to give up an opportunity for a reader response and analysis that is not influenced by directorial or authorial intentions. While such an approach is beneficial for a comprehensive study and analysis of the genre, it currently falls outside the scope and purpose of this article. Nevertheless, it is fully recognized that more work needs to be done regarding this and other areas of the heartland film genre. Indeed, it is hoped that this paper will not only add to a growing body of literature in relation to research on Singapore Cinema and the heartland film genre but also help to open up a space in which to contextualize cultural reproduction and representations in and of Singapore.

## DEFINING THE HEARTLAND FILM GENRE

In his seminal essay, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Practice," David Bordwell (2008), the eminent film historian and theorist, argued that films and film genres have their own specific codes, conventions, tropes, and techniques. The author suggested that we can consider film practice, particularly art cinema, as "possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures" (Bordwell, 2008, p. 151). Indeed, treating filmmaking as a mode of practice, we can perhaps shed the mysticism and aura of film and art by "[ignoring] the tang of snobbishness about the phrase [art film]" (Bordwell, 2008, p. 151). By doing so, it is then possible to see that films are constituted by a set of practices, norms, and values. Bordwell (2012) suggested that film can be analyzed by looking at its subject matter, themes, visual stylistics, and formal strategies. By understanding practice, Nick Couldry (2012), a media theorist, argued that it can allow us to see "the wider forms of social power involved in media's everyday representational practice" (p. 58). Instead of treating film practice as a mere representation, a focus on practice can perhaps reveal the means and distribution of social representation, reproduction, and imagination. But more importantly, this approach can perhaps help reveal the embedded assumptions and preconceptions behind the practice of social conditions and realities in cinema. However, it is important to be reminded by the fact that it is only natural that Singaporean filmmakers are as diverse in their individual interests and concerns as they are in terms of their motivations and ambitions. Indeed, it is important not to see Singaporean filmmakers and Singapore Cinema as a monolithic whole. But filmmakers do not work in a vacuum or make films as an altruistic practice, no matter what the romantics may claim otherwise, but that films and filmmakers exist in a system of relations that in of itself has particular sets of systems, film aesthetics, and industrial practices. In other words, filmmakers work with genres, and genres have their own particular meta-narratives, themes, and visual motifs. And notwithstanding the individual idiosyncrasies of its producers and makers, everyone conforms to a certain extent to the demands and expectations of a particular genre and its particularities.

The heartland film genre is primarily concerned with the domestic stories of a typical Singaporean or Singaporean family living in an Housing and Development Board (HDB) flat. Specifically,

the genre is concerned with the exploration and examination of social and cultural issues in Singapore. The narrative trigger of the heartland film is typically a sense of discontent with the status quo in Singapore. As a result, the protagonist attempts to break out of his/her malaise by trying to investigate his/her socio-cultural environment which typically involves an examination of a social or cultural taboo or the lives of social deviants and outsiders in Singapore. Indeed, the heartland narrative offer vignettes of Singaporeans that are considered to be outside of mainstream society. Topics can range from suicide, money issues, educational stress, the death penalty, LGBT rights, or any other pressing issues of the day.

The plot and narrative patterns of the heartland film adhere closely to the traditions of a Bildungsroman (a coming of age story). The plot typically focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonists as they investigate their social and cultural environment. As a result of their discoveries, their mental awareness of their environment changes along with their new found knowledge. An important narrative device is the search and discover motif. Much like a detective in a crime novel, the protagonist in a heartland film sets about to uncover the "truth" behind social and cultural anxieties or concerns. And as they uncover the truth in their investigations, their perception of the surface world changes in the process. But unlike Joseph Campbell's hero where the protagonist returns triumphantly after defeating the villain or returns with new knowledge and treasure to better his previous living conditions, the hero in a heartland film, despite their new found knowledge, is unable to change anything. Like the narrative patterns of Italian Neorealism, the ones in the Heartland Film do not provide catharsis or neat resolutions. Instead, a heartland film favors ambiguous endings and futures. Furthermore, the ending is usually pessimistic and nihilistic.

The overriding aesthetic in the heartland film is to emphasize a sense of loss and melancholy in its design. To that end, a documentary-like approach in terms of its production design, cinematography, editing, and acting performances is typically used in the genre. This also includes the use of naturalistic lighting and continuity editing as principle devices to reinforce a sense of social realism in its stories. Unlike the muscular style of Martin Scorsese or Steven Spielberg, the visual style of the heartland film primarily employs a languid and retreated style much like what Yasujiro Ozu and Hou Hsiao Hsien employ in their films.

While it would be unfair to pin a singular style upon everyone because different directors have different styles, it is nonetheless possible to see a general consistency in the look and feel of a heartland film. This particular heartland style includes the deployment of an acting style that is minimalistic and restrained; the use of naturalistic production design (non-flashy props and set design); documentary-style camera movements and lighting; and continuity editing. Consequently, these technical codes reinforce the overall approach of the heartland film as a film practice in social realism and engagement.

## SINGAPORE IN THE HEARTLAND FILM

Singapore is a South East Asian island city-state located at the southern tip of the Malaysia archipelago (Lim & Lee, 2016). She is also a global financial centre with a tropical climate and multicultural population (Barr, 2018). After a brief merger with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965, the former British colony, once described by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as Gibraltar of the East, separated and gained full independence in 1965. While many doubted her future then, the leadership of

Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP) have led the country to transform itself into a highly developed and advanced economy in less than fifty years (Mahbubani, 2015). Indeed, while Singapore ranks highly on many socio-economic measures, its financial and economic success is only possible because its leaders took great and sensitive care in managing and ameliorating racial, religious, and cultural differences in the country.

With a population that is comprised of four different racial groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others), respecting the cultural and religious practices of each group is an important part of the socio-cultural compact that has been established in the country. To ameliorate charges of cultural chauvinism and cultural hegemony of one group over the rest, the English language is implemented as an official working language in the country. Most Singaporeans are bilingual - especially when mother tongues or second languages (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil) are taught in schools. In fact, some might even be trilingual as they used dialects at home in order to converse with their parents or grandparents. As a result, it is not an exaggeration to say that the linguistic skills of Singaporeans are as diverse as their ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The diversity and range of ethnicities and racial groups manifest themselves in many forms in Singapore. First of all, it shows up in the way 'Singaporeness' is encapsulated in the Creole language that is known as Singlish. Combining words from Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and other languages into a hybrid form of English, Singlish is distinctively Singaporean. Secondly, it is not at all uncommon or controversial to see Buddhist temples within walking distances of Islamic Mosques or to see that Christian Churches are positioned near Hindu Temples. While racial riots did take place during the fifties and sixties, these tensions have largely been improved by governmental interventions to foster cohesion and tolerance with social mechanisms such as racial and ethnic quotas in public housing, mixed schools, and national service. These mechanisms encourage people of different races and religious backgrounds to live and interact with one another whilst minimizing the tendency of people to congregate into homogeneous groups and communities. Unlike many countries facing religious and racial unrest, tensions amongst different racial and religious groups in Singapore are not as fractious and obvious. As such, the attention and care in fostering racial and religious tolerance and cohesion in the country is a hallmark of Singapore. The neutralization of race and religion as political and social weapons means that a national consciousness of racial and religious tolerance is constantly being enforced and regulated through education and interventionist policies. It is precisely because of this approach in organizing society that activists and human rights groups have often criticized the government of its paternalistic, elitist and interventionist mode of governance.

While this political discourse is outside the scope of this study, it would be remiss of the discussion not to acknowledge that there continue to exist a group of politicians, activists, artists, and writers that do not agree with the perceived lack of creative freedom and expression in the country. Critics have often accused the People's Action Party and its leaders of being authoritarian and patriarchal in deciding what is best for the country and its citizens. As the dystopian image of Singapore is fundamentally a response towards these broader socio-cultural criticisms, it is necessary to understand and examine the contextual background that gives rise to it. The following considers how issues of social conformity, hierarchy, and ordering are reconfigured into a dystopian imagination of the heartlands.

# CONTEXTUALIZING THE DYSTOPIA IMAGINARY IN THE HEARTLAND FILM

Dystopia defines the heartland film genre. According to the Oxford dictionary, dystopia means an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic. In 1992, this idea of Singapore as a dystopia was fleshed out in William Gibson's essay "Disneyland with the Death Penalty" Notwithstanding the title, the essay does not so much mock Singapore for its socioeconomic progress but for being an overly planned, structured and inauthentic society. For Gibson, the fact that Singapore was a safe, orderly, and well-planned country was an unwelcome surprise for him. Unlike Hong Kong, also an ex-British colony, Singapore was too sterile and unexciting for his taste. Instead of lauding the socioeconomic achievements of the country, Gibson compared the country to Disneyland, an artificial and constructed place, built to provide a safe but predictable site for paying visitors to enjoy themselves. While the author was impressed by the socioeconomic achievements of the country, he found that the country that he had encountered lack vibrancy, creativity, and freedom. Gibson wrote about his relief as he left Singapore for Hong Kong because the latter was not a "relentlessly G-rated experience, micromanaged by a state that has the look and feel of a very large corporation."

Like George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, Singapore is imagined as a place where Big Brother controls every aspect of society. By lampooning the technological bent and orderliness of the Singapore that he has encountered in his visit, Gibson attempts to make sense of the city by reconfiguring it within the discourse of science fiction as a dystopian city. Indeed, the idea of Big Brother is one of the more salient features of a dystopian film in the sense of creating a pessimistic view of the ruling class or a government. The city is imagined as a dystopian vision of the future where the social and the economy are centrally planned, and the autonomy and freedoms of the individual are subsumed according to the demands of the system. Like *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1931), Singapore is highly efficient in terms of its high-rise infrastructure, MRT lines, and world-class ports. Like *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1973), her citizens are reminded through the media and advertising campaigns on the uniqueness of their culture. Like *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), it has become increasingly hard to discern between real people and artificial intelligence. Indeed, Singapore, as experienced by Gibson, echoes a recurring motif and idea of the dystopian city; one that is technocratic, sterile, acquiescent and oppressive.

But the imagination of Singapore as a dystopian city does not only exist in literature or literary imagination but also in academic studies. Scholars and writers have tried to contextualize the ways in which mechanisms exist to promulgate and reinforce the organizing and social ordering of society in Singapore. To be sure, it is not necessarily evident that local filmmakers are directly influenced by academic theories and studies. In fact, both domains operate on different principles; one being critical and evidence-based reasoning, and the other being rooted in narrative and emotional storytelling. But even though both operate differently, it is still possible to see that they share some of the same concerns.

# CONFORMITY AND SOCIAL HARMONY

Cherian George's (2007) notion of "calibrated coercion" elucidates the underlying malaise felt by the heartland film. The concept explains the non-violent tactics used by the state to nudge and maneuver society towards the desired direction. By bringing lawsuits and criminal charges to political activists,

opposition, dissidents, including bloggers and news media outlets, it is argued that these tactics are calibrated to limit socio-political discourse. International groups such as Human Rights Watch have criticized the government for curtailing freedom of speech and expression in the country. While these debates lie outside the capabilities of this article, the idea that Singapore is a highly repressed and controlled society underpins the contextual background of the dystopian vision in the heartland film.

Structural mechanisms of social ordering, hierarchy, and conformity underpin the sociocultural life in Singapore. The most significant and critical social mechanism in Singapore is the concept of academic streaming in schools. Academic streaming shows up in the concept of meritocracy where the best rises to the top and gets to lead the rest. Good grades in certain subjects allow some to go to the best universities and schools whereas the less gifted students go to lower tiered ones. However, it has also created a situation where students from elite schools have, from time to time, disparage students who are not as gifted as them; leading to charges of elitism. Indeed, the categorization and labelling of the abilities of students also affect their own sense of destiny and predetermined future; hence creating a sense of fatalism and resignation. This system of dividing competences and abilities is clearly manifested in the relative prestige of so-called "good" schools and public universities as opposed to technical colleges, polytechnics, and private universities. But nonetheless, it is a system that is touted as a natural way of allowing the formation of a natural ruling class and aristocracy. Indeed, this concept of a natural ruling class is so natural that it is generally accepted as being unproblematic and uncontroversial in Singaporean society. And since it is a natural phenomenon, people are expected to follow and obey the hierarchy and to play their part in the natural order of things.

Social ordering and hierarchies do not stop at the level of education. In fact, they are reinforced throughout adulthood in the guise of national service and university placements. It is more keenly felt for male citizens because of their obligations towards national service. Indeed, the socialization of adhering to social ordering and hierarchy continues right up to their middle age for some male citizens. National Service socializes men throughout their formative and adult years to accept and conform to preconceived positions in a group and social hierarchies. Such a system continues to regulate and discipline male citizens on the importance of compliance and obedience in fulfilling the duties of their national service until the age of forty years old. Like academic streaming, the natural order of things manifests itself in its division of men into officers and men. As a result of these social mechanisms, Singapore can be said to be a highly organized and structured society with no slack for mistakes and errors. These structural and social mechanisms have led to an explication of what is or is not socially and culturally permissible in the country in the formulation of Asian Values. Espoused by Lee Kuan Yew and other Asian leaders in the early 1990s, Asian Values is said to account for not only the social or cultural but also the economic successes of East Asian and Southeast Asian countries (Barr, 2000). These values include the importance of social harmony, collectivism, and deference to authority over the importance of the individual, freedom of expression and democracy.

The Confucian concept of the Five Bonds provides a useful lens to see how social harmony and relationships are engendered and maintained in Singapore. The Five Bonds are ruler to ruled, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, friend to friend. To achieve socio-political harmony, everyone must adhere to their respective positions, roles, and duties. In such a system of relations, stepping out of one's boundaries and predetermined positions and roles would bring about disharmony and chaos. And in such a system where the group takes precedence over the individual, it brings to mind the Japanese proverb of "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down". Thus uni-

formity, conformity, and obedience are prized values. These socio-cultural conditions, whilst not directly referenced in the heartland film, provide the context and background of a world that is highly regulated and controlled: a cinematic dystopian world. So one of the strategies of the heartland film is to go behind the sterile and hierarchical facade of society to draw out the "dirt" and "dysfunction" of the consequences of manufacturing a society in this manner.

While Jana Roškerr (2016) argued that "the modern idea of Asian values has little to do with original Confucianism", Michael Barr (2014) suggested that the recruitment and network of elites in Singapore possess some characteristics of social ties and networks that can also be found in Confucian teachings. While elites are not only drawn from a rigorous and demanding process based on natural abilities, they are also drawn for their consistency, dependency, and commitment to the group. As a result, Barr (2014) suggests that it is "a lot easier to understand Singapore if you put aside notions of modernity and democracy, and begin from the premise that it is a Chinese family business, complete with a patriarch, an eldest son, guanxi networks and questions of cross-generational continuity" (p. 108).

The closed network and relationships amongst elites meant that social order and control, to the point of regulating and repressing certain freedoms and expressions, is very much part of cultural life in Singapore. Cherian George's notion of calibrated coercion suggests that the cultural conditions in Singapore, via the regulation of the press and media, is such that it is enveloped by an environment that is not necessarily conducive for alternative views and conversations. Consequently, the desires and freedoms of the individual are subsumed by the demands of the group and community. Unlike American-centric films where the agency of the individual and heroic figure is celebrated, Singapore cinema sees the inevitability of the individual being assimilated into a broader and interconnected system of social order and hierarchy. This perspective is particularly acute in the heartland film genre.


## PROXIMITY AND CLAUSTROPHOBIC HOUSING

Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* (1997) is perhaps the most definitive example of showing how the heartlands of Singapore is imagined as a dystopian landscape. Indeed, the filmmaker's penchant for the unconventional and disenfranchised segments of society and his vision of dystopia underpins not only his own body of work, but it also underpins the entire heartland film genre. In his film, the dystopian city of Singapore is visualized as a stark and concrete urban wasteland. And while the surface of the city and the heartlands appear to be orderly, clean and sterile, it is also a facade that hides stories of angst, repression, and melancholy. Indeed, it takes a "ghost;" the spirit of a character who is shown committing suicide at the beginning of the film, to go behind the scenes, so to speak, to investigate and bear witness to the hidden and dysfunctional lives of the ordinary folks in Singapore. While the use of the search and discover device is not necessarily original or innovative in of itself, the most famous use of it can be seen in *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941), its centrality provides a template for all subsequent heartland films. Khoo's directorial design does not only provide a template but it also codifies the chamber room aesthetic of dystopia for the genre. Like the densely packed towers of *Blade Runner*, the city in the heartland film is typically represented, not by the towering skyscrapers of the business district, or the languid and expensive bungalows or condominiums, but by the ubiquitous sight of an HDB in Singapore. HDBs are essentially high-rise residential buildings in Singapore.

Built and managed by The Housing Development Board of Singapore, these HDB apartments are homes to roughly ninety-one percent of the population. With a population of 5.5 million living in a land area of 719 sq. km, population density in Singapore is high; with an average of 7,792 people living per square kilometer. To house so many people living in such a limited amount of space, the construction of high-rise residential buildings makes sense in terms of land management and space planning. But the location of an HDB flat is not merely a backdrop for filmmakers to set their stories; it also represents home, family, and nationhood in Singapore.

The image of an HDB in Singapore Cinema represents an image of everyday life. It lends a certain sense of authenticity and realness to the construction of the genre. It also embodies what it means to be a Singaporean; in terms of living in a compact high-rise building, with neighbors that may not necessarily be one's choice due to government policies, and because of governmental policies that one has to be married in order to be qualified to purchase an HDB, it also means that one is forced to live with one's family until marriage, thus reinforcing the importance of forced kinship and family ties. At the same time, the HDB, in its Brutalist design, reinforces a functional and practical approach to contemporary life in Singapore. The functional compactness of the HDB also creates an image of claustrophobia with its white walls and concrete ceilings. In fact, an HDB apartment somehow resembles a prison cell with its nondescript steel gates and wooden doors, which when closed are indistinguishable from one another. While HDBs can be conceived in other ways, the heartland film conceived the HDB as a sort of a closed chamber of personal stories and secrets.

## Broken Families and Broken Dreams

Much like Wim Wenders' angel in *Wings of Desire* (1987) - the ghost in Khoo's film becomes the means through which the viewer can peer through the veneer of respectability, compliance, and prosperity of post-independence Singapore, as well as to expose the ugliness and discontent of its inhabitants. Khoo's dystopian vision of Singapore is so influential that its configuration can be seen in the works of every important filmmaker in Singapore. In Royston Tan's *15* (2005) and *881* (2007), the dreams of teenage boys and getai singer sisters are pitted against the realities of making a living in a Singapore that stifles and contains the talents of its people. The repression motif is carried forward in Kevin Tong and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* (1998); in Boo Junfeng's *Sandcastle* (2010), where the film's protagonist discovers secrets that threaten to destabilize his understanding of history, or in Anthony Chan's *Ilo Ilo* (2014) where outside help is needed to help cope with the pains of growing up in Singapore (Ho, 2015), and in Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined* (2018) where the city is filled with the hidden plights and stories of outsiders and foreigners.

Even Jack Neo's *Money No Enough* (1999), *I, No Stupid* (2002 - 2006), and *Ah Boys to Men* films (2012 - 2017) posit a world that overwhelms the autonomy and aspirations of the individual over the dictates of society. As far as the heartland film is concerned, there is no such thing as the American Dream or its equivalent in Singapore's context. For every character that seeks to upset or overturn the restraints of society, they are usually met with either punishment, disappointment, or disillusionment over their own desires and goals. Instead, what is common amongst the heartland films are often broken individuals. Indeed, like Djinn's *Perth* (2004), the only escape is to migrate out of the country or to accept suicide as suggested in Khoo's film.

The family unit, as a result, comes under attack, in terms of living under such a psychic and psychologically limiting environment. Instead of the authoritative but wise father, the dutiful and loving mother and the filial and obedient children, the heartland film genre reconfigures the archetypes into misguided or absent parents and their equally misguided and wayward children. Again, Khoo's pessimistic conception of the sad and hidden voices of the working class in Singapore extends to the family unit. Along with the disenchantment of modernization in Singapore, conservative ideas about the strong and nucleus family are slowly being dismantled in the genre. And against the disdain of modern life is a loose yearning for an imagined past that is more 'authentic' and 'real' than its current configuration. Disdain for modern life is coupled with a yearning for a nostalgic past. This is one of the more distinctive myths of the heartland film genre because it looks to a better past - a golden age if you will - where things were more innocent, authentic, and natural; as opposed to the colonial situation that beset Singapore in the past (Sim, 2011).

## NOSTALGIC MEMORIES

The heartland film yearns to go back to an imagined past that was more innocent and comforting. Indeed, the heartland film continually uses flashbacks to argue that life was much better in the past. Its romanticism harkens back to an imagined past where modernity did not intrude into the lives of ordinary folks. More importantly, it seeks to recover the imagined freedoms in the past that are no longer in the present time. The heartland film reluctantly accepts, while not rejecting, socioeconomic progress, it laments the close kinship and relationships that are lost in the process. Indeed, the genre does not play up successes and victories against colonialism, poverty, homelessness, crime, and illiteracy but a sense of critique and criticism regarding Singaporean values and identity (Chua & Yeo, 2003). And while the heartland film is not an instance of golden age thinking, it nonetheless sees the past as a period of harmony and happiness: the utopia of Singapore. Hence, unlike most dystopian films, the heartland film does not associate dystopia with viral outbreaks, human diseases, war, or nuclear holocausts; but with the reality of living in an urban city that is highly structured and orderly but hides stories of repression and oppression.

The ambiguous outcome of the working class repeatedly shows up in the heartland film genre. Unlike the cinematic imagination of the American heartlands and heartlanders as honest, decent, hardworking folks who uphold traditional and conservative values; the cinematic imagination of the Singaporean heartlander is repressed, materialistic and self-serving. The working class Singaporean is not only traditional and conservative but the figure of the heartlander is reconfigured as someone who is typically shown being unable to transcend his or her position. Because the working class is typically confined in a small space - usually a small three-room apartment - the visualization of such a small space renders the environment as almost the visualization of a confinement room or prison. The blasé and ennui that afflicts the working class character is not so much the result of his or her character but that it is the result of one's surroundings. Unlike the classic rags to riches or hero's journey typical of Hollywood, the overriding character arc in the heartland film is not a story of overcoming the odds or vanquishing the enemy. Instead, it follows a narrative that shows the passive and compliant conversion of its character. The overriding approach, despite a certain degree of resistance, is the depiction of conformity, acceptance, and obedience. Whatever small victories made during the course of the film is only made within a limited field in a personal capacity. Nothing changes fundamentally in terms of affecting the world and environment around the protagonist. Rather, the pro-

tagonist does not only understand but accepts the nature of his reality. And yearns for an imagined better past or even perhaps a better future.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE DYSTOPIAN VISION IN THE HEARTLAND

Critics might do well to remember that Singapore Cinema had a golden period in the middle of the twentieth century that was perhaps more vibrant and representative of the country as a whole (White, 1997). During the first half of the 20th century from 1937 to 1967, Shaw Brothers, a Chinese production film company, produced a series of Malay films in the country before independence (Lim, 2016). These films - helmed by Malay, Indian, and Filipino filmmakers were extremely popular in their days, and even today continues to be played on television screens during festive seasons in Singapore. But based on the recent cinematic output of the country (particularly if one were to look at critically-acclaimed films), one would be mistaken - if one were to just watch films - that Singapore is a Chinese society. Indeed, Singapore cinema, at the time of this writing, appears to be dominated by Chinese-centric films.

But Singapore is not a homogeneous society. It is a multicultural and multiracial country. To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong in making Chinese language or Chinese-centric films in Singapore but it becomes problematic when Singapore is framed as having a monolithic Chinese identity. That is because Singapore was never part of China or a Chinese colony. And to say that Singaporean Chinese have Chinese heritage and therefore must be Chinese-speaking and Sino-centric is to say that Americans must be British, German, and Italian speaking and Eurocentric simply because a lot of Americans have British, German, and Italian heritage. Like America, Singapore possesses unique and diverse cultures. And if push comes to shove, Singlish must be said to be the defining linguistic trait of being a Singaporean with multiculturalism and multiracialism as part of our everyday life.

At the same time, the dystopia approach of the heartland film jars with the international metrics of Singapore in terms of health, education, housing, income, etc. Instead, a quick survey would show that Singapore comes out rather favorably in most socio-economic rankings (see Singapore's annual rankings in The World in series by *The Economist* for more details). Indeed, the social and economic success and mobility in Singapore has allowed thousands if not millions of families and individuals, who in a generation or two before independence, had very little such opportunities, to move up the socioeconomic ladder. The social, cultural, and religious harmony of the country, despite its doubters, must surely be one of the most salient features of Singapore society. But these characteristics of Singapore are not emphasized or featured in the heartland film in Singapore Cinema. While the dystopian vision is probably justified by the contextual elements of certain socio-cultural complexities such as issues arising from postcolonial nation building (Chew 2011), it is still a curiosity that the general mood in Singapore Cinema - particularly award-winning and critically-acclaimed films - is one of general pessimism. But instead of casting aspersion on filmmakers, it is also necessary to see how international institutions have an influence on creative imaginations.

The concept of world cinema is engaged in a discourse that sees institutions and filmmakers trying to position themselves in the world by codifying what constitute or do not constitute films that belong to certain cultures in relation to the center. Indeed, film festivals as cultural institutions have what social psychologists French and Raven (1959) termed as expert power (a basis of power that

arises from expertise or specialist knowledge), referent power (a basis of power that arises from reputation and testimony) and reward power (a basis of power that arises from the ability to confer incentives and rewards).

Film institutions and festivals then do not merely evaluate films; they also institute ways of looking at the world. That is not to say that there are no attempts to account for racial, ethnic, societal, and cultural differences in the world but the categorization of World Cinema necessitates the fact that there are preconceived notions of nations, races, and identity; or in simple terms; stereotyping cultures in cinema. But film institutions do not only teach filmmakers how others look at them, but they also encourage international filmmakers to reinforce preconceptions in their films. For marketing and categorizing purposes, film festivals and institutions then stereotype and categorize according to preconceived notions of culture and society. This disciplinary power sees Singapore cinema, via the pedagogues and pedagogies of World Cinema (via film juries, theorists, and critics), learning what kind of films are acceptable for film festivals and film competitions, and what kind of content appeals to them. Michel Foucault (1980) and his theories of power relations and techniques of power can perhaps help shed light on the ways in which institutions discipline or teach filmmakers the traditions of art cinema or indeed cinema itself. But the scope of such an inquiry - the influence of film festivals and the power relations that are involved in relation to Singapore cinema – is beyond this study (De Valck, 2007; Andrews, 2010; Wong, 2011). As such, more work needs to be done in examining external influences regarding the dystopian vision of the genre.

By offering narratives that resist official and dominant meta-narratives of the country, the heartland film genre not only fit into the counterculture tendencies and anti-populism of art cinema but it also enables filmmakers to respond and reflect contemporary concerns in cinema. Indeed, it is not hard to see why anti-establishment or counter-cultural sentiments and stories are popular with the general public and critics. That is because if Cherian George is correct in his assessment and study of governmental influence in regulating communication in the country, then the resistance towards meta-narratives in the heartland film is but one platform for the expression of discontent and dissatisfaction. But the reproduction of a dystopian vision and its popularity amongst film circles does not necessarily mean that it reflects the true conditions of everyday life.

But whether such a cinematic imaginary accurately reflect reality is, of course, debatable - for the American film theorist and historian David Bordwell once suggested not to expect congruity and complexity about sociopolitical issues in cinema because filmmakers often have to simplify what are essentially complex issues in order to fit the demands of drama and storytelling. And films should not necessarily be taken too seriously for such issues are necessarily outside the expertise and capabilities of filmmakers and producers. But it does not mean that such psychic concerns - real or perceived - are not without their significance.

But the oversized presence of the dystopian heartland film genre threatens to eclipse alternative conceptions and visualizations of the city. As Singaporean filmmakers become more sophisticated and globalized, the need to appeal to established ideas of culture and regions becomes more acute especially in relation to branding and marketing purposes. Hence, it is argued, tentatively, that the heartland film genre - especially in terms of the dystopian theme that exist in the genre, and the vision of Singapore - is largely the result of conforming to the prejudices and preconceived notions of visualizing a discourse that situates passivity and obedience in Singaporean culture. So while the heartland film plays a significant role in subverting the official narrative of a prosperous and peaceful

nation with a dystopian view of sociocultural conditions, it also ignores the narrative of progress and development. And that is where the argument lies not just its significance but also gaps in the current configuration of the genre. While it is still early days in the development of the heartland film genre, the dystopian view of Singapore as a city and nation look to play a significant role in not only the heartland film genre but also in Singaporean cinema. It remains to be seen if alternative visions can be engendered in future renditions of the city.

## Notes

1. John Lui (2018, Dec 8). Yeo Siew Hua's A Land Imagined first local movie named Best Film at Silver Screen Awards. Retrieved from https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/yeo-siew-huas-a-land-imagined-first-local-movie-named-best-film-at-silver

2. Navene Elangovan (2018, Dec 18). Singaporean director's film Shirkers shortlisted for Oscars' Best Documentary Feature. Retrieved from https:// www.todayonline.com/singapore/singaporean-director-film-shirkers-shortlisted-oscar-best-documentary-feature

3. Wong Hongyi (2016). Discussing Singapore Cinema. Retrieved from https://www.objectifs.com.sg/discussing-singapore-cinema/

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