ACCESS ◭

Aesthetics of the Pathetic: The Portrayal of the abject in Singaporean cinema

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ABSTRACT

A central figure in documentaries and commercial films in 1990s Singapore cinema is the abject figure in various guises, ranging from the urban poor to migrant sex workers from the other parts of the region. These abject figures make their living on the street and are thus fully visually exposed to every passing eye and lens. Set against the backdrop of Singapore's triumphal national economic success story, these figures are aestheticised in visual representation, and stand as immediate disruption, critique and indictment of the long ruling government. Ironically, the same figures could just as easily be represented as 'heroic' figures of strength, self-reliance and individualism, qualities that are essential to Singapore's success.

Introduction to the abject

The abject—literally one who is low in position, condition or status and even degraded— has enjoyed a particularly enduring status in film: as individuals living in penurious circumstances, immortalised by Charlie Chaplin's iconic portrayal of the street urchin; as characters whose narratives are reflections or reactions to the Real by Italian neorealist cinema; as compelling alienated anti-heroes who embody non-mainstream values in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976); and, generally, in the characterisation and representation of the grotesque or the kitsch. In all these instances, the portrayal of abjectness is a reaction to impoverished conditions of reality. A recurring image in Singaporean visual culture—photography, documentary and commercial films and television—is a representation of the abject person. However, Singapore is the model of global capitalist success of the second half of the twentieth century. Why, then, would there be such a fascination with the abject among local Singaporean artists? To answer this question, one needs first to provide a brief history, as evidence, of the emergence of this film genre in Singapore.

Singapore film: 1990s onward

The Singapore film industry's history is often divided into two periods: the 1950s "golden age" of Singapore cinema and the 1990s renaissance that is ongoing (Millet, 2006; Lim, 2007).[1] The golden age lasted about a decade when Cathay-Keris and the Shaw Brothers studios were prolific in the production and distribution of Malay language feature films, often with themes derived from folklore and history of the Malay Archipelago (Millet, 2006). Malay film production had begun in the late 1930s but was disrupted by the Second World War. Immediately after the War, pent up demands of an audience starved of entertainment spurred by competition between Cathay and Shaw film

studios to return to production. Unfortunately, by the early 1960s, the advent of television broadcast and regional political upheaval, including the political separation of Singapore from Malaysia, resulted in Cathay-Keris moving its production to Malaysia; meanwhile, Shaw Brothers had moved its production operations to Hong Kong. Subsequently, save for a few exceptions such as *They Called Her Cleopatra Wong* (1978), the golden age of cinema was effectively over in Singapore.

Emerging from economic recession, the Singapore government began to look into new areas for long-term economic growth industries. Anticipating an exodus of filmmakers and related specialists from the Hong Kong film industry due to the 1997 handover to China, the Singapore government decided to develop the moribund local film industry to draw this pool of talent to Singapore. An inter-ministry committee began to develop an attractive infrastructural framework of tax incentives, generous financing, production facilities and more relaxed censorship guidelines. Thus, in 1990, during the Third Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF), the government pledged a $1.0 million fund for film and video projects, and $300,000 worth of scholarships for five years (Uhde & Uhde, 2010: 56). The film industry was further supported in 1998 with the establishment of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), with an initial funding of $2.5 million, with the mission to "encourage, upgrade and develop Singapore filmmaking talent through training activities" and to provide funding for "productions, training and film-related travel".[2] In the same year, Singapore's MediaCorp, a state-majority-owned media corporation, established Raintree Pictures, a profit-driven production company whose focus is on both local and transnational co-productions.[3]

Within this financially encouraging context, film production was revived in the 1990s. After several box office failures (Uhde & Uhde, 2010: 76), the first film to turn a profit was *Army Daze* (1996), adapted from a play of the same title. Directed by theatre director Ong Keng Sen and produced by Cathay Asia Films, the film chronicled the coming-of-age journey of five misfits during their three months of basic military training in National Service. The period also saw the directorial debut of now-established filmmaker Kelvin Tong. With Jasmine Ng, Tong co-directed *Eating Air* (1999), a film about working class young adults whose alienated experience from mundane jobs and unemployment leads them to seek excitement in love, crime, video games, the re-enacting of martial arts comics, street violence, and high-speed motorcycle cruises late at night. Although it did poorly at the box office, it was invited to film festivals in Hong Kong and Rotterdam the following year. Two other now established filmmakers emerged during this period. Jack Neo, known to local media audiences as a television comedian, burst into the scene with *Money No Enough* (1998), a comedy-satire written by and starring himself, about three lowly educated, ethnic Chinese men who, after a string of failures in work and in life, emerged as owners of a successful car-wash and car-care product company. With $5.8 million in box office takings, it remains the highest grossing local film to date. The other filmmaker to emerge during that period was Eric Khoo. Born into a very wealthy family in 1965 and formally trained in filmmaking at the City Art Institute in Sydney, Australia, he is undoubtedly the most internationally celebrated Singapore filmmaker to date. He was the first Singaporean filmmaker to have his films selected for the annual Cannes Film Festival: *12 Storeys* (1997) was screened in the "Un Certain Regard" section, *Be With Me* (2004) was screened at the Director's Fortnight selections, and *My Magic* (2008) was nominated for the Palm D'or. *Be With Me* was rejected for competition in the foreign film category by the American Academy Awards because it has "too much" English and hence is "not foreign" (Chan, 2008), while *My Magic* was Singapore's official entry for 2009. In Singapore he received the Young Artist Award in 1997, the Singapore Youth Award in 1999, and the national Cultural Medallion in 2007; such national honors were awarded to him in spite of the fact that his films have unfailingly featured characters, images and narratives of the marginalised in Singapore.

Abject marginalised characters were undoubtedly preoccupations of 1990s Singapore films. Academic discussions on the 1990s film revival generally focus on: Firstly, the state's economic interest in contributing to the financing film of production; secondly, individual filmmakers' personal initiatives (Tan, Lee & Aw, 2003; Millet, 2006; Uhde & Uhde, 2010); and thirdly, the analysis of film texts as configurations and representations of local identities in the city-state (Guneratne,

2003; Marchetti, 2005; Khoo, 2006; Tan & Fernando, 2007; Law, Wee & McMullan, 2011). When the abject as a recurring subject has been the focus, the films have been celebrated as a matter of "giving voice" to "the Other Singaporeans", "the ones who are absent from prevailing official literature and representations of Singapore" (Lim, 2007). This is one possible answer to questions about the fascination with the abject among local Singaporean filmmakers. If this is indeed the case, it is necessary to analyse firstly, the way these films and documentaries construct abject onscreen subjects, in both documentary form and aestheticised representations. A particularly important detail is the texture of clothing; secondly, to investigate the affects—in particular, pathos—that the realist aesthetics seek to invoke in the audience, through an examination of its underlying ideology of humanism; and finally, how the realist-humanist aesthetics of the pathetic engage with the specific socio-political context of Singapore. The remainder of this article considers each of these aspects of filmic constructions of the abject. The final section considers the limits to political critique and the constraints on what filmmakers can actually achieve through political critique.

Imaging the Abject: Aesthetic of the pathetic

Texture

Costumes have a fundamental role to play in film. Their importance goes beyond the screen to exert great influence on creating new fashion trends. Elizabeth Wilson highlighted the importance of costume when she pointed out that often "the clothes they [actors] wore became a vital feature of the film and directly influenced retail fashion" (1985: 171). Obviously, costumes need to be designed for characters representing different social classes on screen beyond just glitz and glamour. The usually understated, simple, clean lines and muted and pastel colors of the respectable middle class are easily contrasted with the excessive colour and texture of figures of extreme poverty and wealth. No one is likely to mistake one for the other. The textured opulence of the rich is constructed through layers of rich fabrics for clothes, accessorised by glittery jewels, colour-coordinated bags and shoes, and a smooth, made-up face. In extreme visual and material contrast, the attire of the poverty-stricken is often shown as tattered, patched, of garish, clashing colours and patterns, and with the obvious sheen of cheap synthetic fabrics for clothes and—even in the tropical heat—sometimes layered to keep warm, an indication perhaps of underlying low-grade illness. This may often be accompanied by poor, non-erect body posture, and a naked face etched with life experiences. This is precisely the figure that is featured in Singaporean documentary filmmaker, Martyn See's *Nation Builders* (2007). In one scene an elderly woman, severely hunched with obvious osteoporosis, struggles to push a wooden-trolley laden with the cardboard boxes she has collected. With an ill-fitting wide-brimmed straw hat that gives her some shelter from the sun, she is outfitted in three different flower prints, layered in two shirts. On top is a light grey/blue shirt with a slightly glossy sheen, embellished with recurring flowers and vines, and with sleeves rolled up to her elbows, revealing the sleeves of another dull brown cotton shirt underneath, patterned with small white flowers. Her pants are of a light material decorated with yet another print of white flowers, albeit larger.

A common but slightly less abject figure in Singapore is the poorly educated worker in low-skill service jobs. Colloquially, the older men and women in this group are addressed as "Uncle" and "Aunty", often expressed in tones that suggest not so much respect for elders, but more an ageist disrespect for the "pre-contemporary". Young men are called *Ah Beng* and young women called *Ah Lian*, common vernacular names in Hokkien (a Chinese dialect spoken in Singapore)*,* reflecting plebian family background (Chua, 2003b: 10-12). They are distinguished by two features: adornment and speech. For the Aunty and the Ah Lian, many of the items of clothing are bought in local shops in public housing estates or chain stores such as *This Fashion*, a very low end clothing store, regularly selling items below S$10, sourced from factories in Southern China. The clothes are often distinguished by their colours, which suggest the legacy of the strong colours found in traditional Chinese clothes, but made of a light and glossy synthetic material. The male figures, old and young,

are usually portrayed in simple "wife-beater" singlets, bermudas and rubber flip-flops, and are common amongst the down-and-out male characters in Khoo's films. They are also noticeable through their language. They are predominantly dialect speaking, especially among the middle-aged and older men. In general, all can converse in comprehensible, functional Mandarin and, if compelled, speak ungrammatical English with pronunciation that usually draws laughter from English-speakers (Chua & Yeo, 2003). In addition, filmic representation of the Ah Beng is easily identified with tasteless, large tattoos, usually of motifs that symbolise masculinity and machismo and with conversations laced with Hokkien and Cantonese vulgarities as punctuations. The anti-heroes of Royston Tan's *15* (2002) are perfect examples.

Of all the sartorial textures of the abject, that of the streetwalker is perhaps the most iconic. Stiletto heels or thigh-high boots, short skirts, tight tops to show skin and especially cleavage, costume jewelry, excessive make-up—all obviously inexpensive goods even to the untrained eye— are often finished with too big and too loudly coloured hair. This image has been much caricatured, perhaps most famously by Julia Roberts in the Hollywood movie *Pretty Woman* (1990). In the opening scene of Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995), the audience is introduced to the coffee shop where streetwalkers take their breaks between client meetings. Two sex worker characters are dressed in body- hugging mini-dresses, pink and red respectively, with much of their thighs bared or seductively veiled by black stockings. The woman dressed in red is adorned with garish gold bracelets and large-hooped earrings; the other sports dark red lips that contrast with her sallow skin. Bunny, the main character, enters the scene dressed in all-black— short, body-hugging and revealing—juxtaposed with her milky pale skin, making her an arresting sight. In the brightly-lit coffee shop, the sartorial sense of the three sex workers is on display, making it a visually striking scene.

Similar figures show up in Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (2007),[4] a film shot in documentary style in Geylang. Geylang is a Foucauldian heterotopia (Foucault & Miskoweic, 1986), a public space which does not restrict anyone from entry. It is a place like any other mundane place but features a range of signifiers of difference. It is a residential district with a normal population of all ages and genders. It incorporates retail businesses catering to the everyday needs of all, and places of worship for all major religions. It differs from other residential districts, however, in the highly visible presence of the sex workers, around whom all the other businesses on the main street apparently revolve, pushing the routines of ordinary life into the background, and rendering them invisible. It is this difference that is captured by amateurs with their mobile-phone video cameras and is aesthetically represented in films, documentaries, mainstream television drama serials, movies and art.

The sartorial splendor of the sex workers is on full display in the *Pleasure Factory*. In one scene, a Chinese national sex worker scrutinises herself in the mirror in a light- weight bright pink dress that clings to the body. It is sleeveless and cut low at both the front and the back, with a glittery sequined trimming around the edges of the top half of the body, highlighting the chest area. In another scene, a main character, Ming, is decked out in a fiery-red sleeveless dress and blood red stilettos with vinyl sheen. Walking to be picked up by a client, she struts across the street, against the back-drop of the hustle and bustle of people eating at a coffee shop. In both scenes, the audience's gaze is directed to the streetwalkers with their visually arresting outfits.

Pathos

The focus on the tattered-dressed old lady, the excessive colors on the bodies of the lowly educated, and the "cheap-chic" of the sex workers in Singapore films and documentaries are means by which the audience is drawn into a shared pathos for the onscreen individuals as representations of the socially marginalised characters off-screen. They may or may not deserve their present fate, but nevertheless, deserve to be pitied. They may be pathetic, but should be treated like everybody else, that is "normal" and "human". In the history of film, this affirmation of the humanity of the socially

marginal is a 'realist' tradition (Scott, 2004: 79) dedicated to the reproduction of reality with as little distortion as possible (Willemen, 1972: 37).

Realism is an explicitly value-oriented approach to filmmaking. Italian auteur Roberto Rossellini defined neo-realist film as "moral poetry" (Ruberto & Wilson, 2007: 7-8). Renowned documentary filmmaker John Grierson takes a realist approach as a way of informing and educating the public about "real" issues so as to achieve democratic or ideological consensus (Armstrong, 2005). Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein posits aesthetic realism as a film-technique in the service of pathos, to create an "intense emotional experience" by providing a "realistic" representation of "exploitation, class and revolution" (Tudor, 1972: 31). Recently, participatory modes of documentary filmmaking have taken a more interventionist approach in the treatment of "reality", in the hope of achieving some political awareness and change (Armstrong, 2005). An example is Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). With this ideological approach, it is unsurprising that the abject should become a primary subject of realist film aesthetics. This ideological orientation of realism should, however, be problematised and its negative consequences considered.

The public presence of the socially marginal is commonplace and even visually unavoidable in most capitalist societies. These marginalised members of society have no means of shielding themselves from the public gaze, rendering them easy targets of voyeuristic attention—aesthetic, intellectual or otherwise. Witness, for example, the number of ethnographic studies that have reached canonical status in academic urban anthropology (Whyte, 1943). In the documentary, *Nation Builders* (2007), there are many shots in which those who were being filmed look up in incomprehension at the camera recording their activities, often too surprised to object. In one particular film sequence, an old woman shields her face from the intrusive camera with a large plastic bag, shouting at the filmmaker, who persists in filming her. In her haste to escape, the cardboard boxes on her shopping cart fall off. She stoops to pick them up, understandably annoyed. The camera rolls on.

Like the old woman who collects used cardboard boxes, sex workers on the streets of Geylang are fully exposed and aesthetically spectacularised in films for the audience's pleasure. In one scene in *Pleasure Factory* (2007), the fully clothed body of the character Ming, the sex worker in red, protrudes from a convertible car with its roof down, parked in a back alley flooded with amber streetlight. Ming is seen leaning back and pumping her body rhythmically on top of a man. It seems that the purpose of this scene is to provide a spectacularised version of events in Geylang, even though the police are a constant presence and would decidedly not tolerate such public sex.

Pleasure Factory stitches together three parallel stories in Geylang. The first revolves around two apparently gay young men. One of them, Jonathan, is actually a heterosexual virgin. Kiat, his partner, helpfully suggests that they go to Geylang in the hope that he will lose his hetero-normative virginity. Jonathan chooses a sex worker from China who is gentle with him; the two are seen on screen interacting with care, concern and intimacy towards each other. They part with his promise to revisit her. This encounter confirms Jonathan as a straight man, leaving his gay friend devastated. The second narrative revolves around a young woman who is at risk of being inducted into sex work by her own sex-worker mother, while a young man who is smitten with her, shadows her and waits helplessly for her. The young girl is saved from having to become a sex worker after the male client physically abuses her after her attempt to give him oral sex causes him pain. Unable to tolerate the abuse of her daughter, the mother attacks the violent client. Mother, daughter and the young man, who is waiting outside the hotel room, flee to a coffee shop. The young man and the girl's mother bond, with minimal dialogue. In one scene, the mother cries, seemingly wracked by guilt and misery. In the very last frame of the film it is daybreak and the girl is seen fully clothed, sleeping soundly in the bed of the smitten young man. The final part of the narrative concerns Ming, who at the end of the night's work pays a street musician to play her a special song, but ends up taking him home with her. They cosy up on her bed content, with no suggestion of subsequent sexual activity. In the film's span of one night, the loneliness, alienation and suffering of sex workers, both local and migrant,

are diminished by their ability to establish connections with other lonely individuals, who are in need of human contact. In this way all the main characters are humanised and the abject is "normalised".

Filmic realism undoubtedly intensifies the pathos for its subjects. While the intrusion of the camera and the filmmaker behind it is plain to see, this is justified by the sense of pathos, of social injustice and the sense of the filmmaker's mission or "duty" to give voice to the marginal people represented on screen. This realism on the part of the filmmaker is motivated by the belief that exposing the reality of their subjects will prick the conscience of society and focus on the plight of the abject. The sympathetic response of the audience parallels the filmmaker's. It is worth noting the irony in the fact that those who have the discretionary funds to spend on such indulgent pursuits as watching movies, imagine that their own humanity, and that of the filmmaker, is enhanced when the film invokes their compassion.

Abject as political critique

Beyond the ideology and aesthetics of liberal humanistic realism, which embraces a sense of indignation and injustice as social critique, artistic representations of the pathetic participate in local Singapore politics on at least two other levels. Firstly, the filmmakers, amongst other artists, are working against the backdrop of the triumphal story of the economic success of Singapore that is constantly projected to both its citizens and to the outside world by the single most dominant political party in control of the state, and upon which its longevity and legitimacy to rule rests. The road to this successful economic development has been paved with instances of severe repressions of dissidents, from radical high school students to unionists, to secure a favourable environment for capitalist development. This history of authoritarianism that undergirds capitalist success is one which liberal humanists love to hate. The official image of national economic success is a social and physical landscape that appears overwhelmingly as a homogenously middle class society. This is achieved in part by the near universal provision of subsidised public housing by the state, blending the poor with the middle class, thereby erasing the visibility of the poor, and avoiding a spectacle of class differences. Indeed, state officials have been eager to proclaim Singapore's success in eradicating poverty. Former ambassador to the United Nations and noted public figure, Kishore Mahbubani (2001) declared that "there are no homeless, destitute or starving people in Singapore". A falsehood exuberantly proclaimed is immediately vulnerable to contestations. By simply pointing to the inevitable presence of the underclass—the pathetic—the lie that all Singaporeans are beneficiaries of the nation's achievements under global capitalism is immediately and effectively exposed. The aesthetic of the pathetic is thus a critique of the Singapore government, easily achieved. Indeed, the fact that many of these films have been well received on the international film festival circuit of generally liberal intellectualised audiences is, of course, to a very significant degree because they are read as illustrations of a courageous political critique in/of Singapore. The filmmakers are seen as heroes!

There is a second level to the international dimension of the politics of representation of the pathetic at work. Olivia Khoo (2006) points out that many of the Singaporean films which thematise the socially marginal should be situated as part of a larger genre of Asian transnational films, which has been read as representing "the international fraternity of the lost", a pithy phrase from film critic, A. O. Scott (2004: 79). This "fraternity" includes directors as varied as Tsai Ming Liang, a Malaysian in Taiwan, the late Edward Yang, and Hou Hsiao Hsien, both Taiwanese, Korean Kim Ki-duk and, one should also add Singaporeans Eric Khoo and Royston Tan. In their films, the "lost" is the price East Asian societies have paid for rapid capitalist development since the 1960s; the pathetic ones are the figures on the dark side of capitalism, recognisable everywhere in this capitalist world. It is this "universal" and readily recognisable quality that renders the films of these Asian filmmakers and their subjects well received by the international film festival audience. Nevertheless, as a representation of the Asian regional vernacular modernity to an audience for whom these Asian

films are foreign films, it is also a representation of an Asia stuck in the Third World, in the anteroom of capitalist modernity, permanently late in arrival relative to the developed West. In Khoo's words, "it appears almost impossible to remove the stain of Asia's 'third-worldism' in the cinema or to recognize either its economic or filmic modernities" (2006: 94).

The limits of critique

Singapore films, do not, however, always succeed in what might be politically-motivated intentions. Various forms of subversion of the power of political critique are evident. Firstly, there is the self-subversion due to the co-presence of a profit motive and the imperative for commercial success. Take as an example *Money No Enough* (1997), Jack Neo's greatest box office success. The film's three main characters, Ong, Chew and Hui, (or whatever order they should be in) speak a mixture of Singlish, Mandarin and Hokkein. Singlish—the local vernacular made up of essentially English words with Chinese dialect grammar—is spoken by those who are not well schooled in the "Queen's English". However, it is often used by those who are properly English-educated, who argue that it is a Singaporean identity marker. Exclusive Mandarin speakers are severely economically disadvantaged in Singapore, where English is the commercial and government administrative language. Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, is a social indicator— in reality and in media representations— of those who have been completely "left behind by the economic and cultural development of Singapore" (Chua, 2003a: 162).

Chew (played by Jack Neo) is a mostly Mandarin-speaking white-collar worker who is progressively displaced by younger, inexperienced English-speaking colleagues with the necessary educational qualifications that he does not have. Passed over for a long overdue promotion, he quits in protest and frustration, only to be saddled with bills and a looming threat of bankruptcy. The character Ong is a building contractor whose excessive consumption is causing him frequent run-ins with loan sharks to whom he owes money. The character Hui is a simple-minded coffee shop waiter who dreams of winning the lottery and owning a mobile phone. Consistent with Neo's box-office success formula for comedy with happy endings, the three friends achieve financial success in a car-wash and car-care businesses, eventually finding happiness by assimilating into the mainstream society. Ultimately, the film teases the audience with a political critique of the disenfranchising effects of government policies but does not follow through to the consequences of such critique. Instead, it provides a fairytale resolution to the hardships of the marginalised; hard work and honest pay are the basis of mainstream success. Economic success and failure becomes the responsibility of the individuals themselves. In this scenario, the government is not only exempt from any responsibility, but the film also ends up upholding the government's policy of meritocracy.

A second form of reversal or subverversion of the aesthetics of the pathetic as political critique is the filmmaker's lack of self-reflexivity. In Khoo's *Be With Me*, one of the characters is a fat, uncouth security guard. He lurks in corners and shadows to gleefully watch an unattainable, beautiful young professional woman. Violence pervades his living space, where his father and brother are openly disdainful of his failed life. Fatigue at work causes him to lose his job in the building where his love interest works. In a particular scene constructed to create revulsion for the character, the man consumes canned braised pork with noisy abandon, ending up with grease staining his lips and chin. His pathetic life ends when, on his way to deliver a confessional letter to his love interest—one that he has racked his brains to write—he is thwarted by a suicide attempt by another character who has jumped off a tall building after a failed lesbian love affair. The falling woman lands on him, killing him. Is it punishment for his voyeurism towards the object of his never-to-be-fulfilled desire? The relentless misery experienced by the character when even hopes of a confession are abruptly dashed, leaves the audience to wonder if Khoo has any sympathy for this character. Khoo's excessive aesthetic and narrative strategies in creating this particular pathetic character appear to have backfired. The excessive characterisation has reworked a sad character that is marginalised by society and perhaps deserving of public sympathy into a 'freak', a person deserving of revulsion and

general rejection. The aesthetic interest, and melodramatic treatment, has obviously overwhelmed what little political critique there is.

Third, as in all communication media, the "correct" reception of the intended message of the filmmaker is never guaranteed; indeed misreadings, unintentional or otherwise, are more frequent. Jack Neo confesses that his film *I Not Stupid* (2002) was intended to be an explicit critique of the education system that disadvantages the poor and the slow. He had hoped to create "mass awareness" for the "problematic" social realities and "get everyone, including the authorities, to take notice, talk and address the issues for the good of society" (Chua & Yeo, 2003: 183)—a textbook example of humanistic realism. Ironically, instead of promoting awareness of the systemic institutional violence the education system perpetrates on less-than-excellent students, the film was read by many as a warning to parents who impose excessive demands on their children (Mulchand, 2002). The educational policies, and by implication the government, were exempted from responsibility for the problems, while the problems were displaced onto the unreasonably demanding parents. Saving their own children and teaching them resilience in the face of failures now fell to the parents.

Finally, the presence and suffering of the poor obviously cannot be denied, but sympathy can be eroded and individual lives can be turned into didactic lessons for others. This was exactly what a state-owned television station did. The Singapore government likens sustained national economic growth to a marathon race without end, with every nation as a competitor. This has translated into a generalised middle-class way of life of deferred gratification, consisting of years of intensely competitive schooling in preparation for joining the "work-to-consume" life of interminable working hours interspersed with bouts of consumerist excess. This competitive struggle is encapsulated in the common saying, "No one owes us a living", as individuals, as families and as a nation. Within this ideological context, a Singaporean state-owned television station produced a series entitled *Extraordinary People*. In this program, selected poverty-stricken individuals, of the likes of the cardboard collecting lady featured in *Nation Builders*, were turned into extraordinary people. Their "heroism" lies precisely in their tenacity and ability to endure grinding poverty, to eschew dependency on others—individuals or the state— and to rise above charity. Such resilience and self-reliance is the national spirit! The liberal humanism of pathos is for "wimps"! A neo-liberal hyper-individualistic spirit of self-reliance and resilience is what is called for and celebrated. Ironically, the foremost aesthetician of the pathetic, Eric Khoo, fell into the same trap, or perhaps, slipped and showed his real ideological preference as a Singaporean incapable of escaping the imprint of the nation. In the film, *Be With Me* (2005), Khoo featured the "true" life of Theresa, an old blind woman, and her extraordinary achievements as a human being. Rather than foregrounding her impoverishment, he focused on her courage in overcoming it. In these examples, the stories of the abject are reworked as heroic representation of the Singapore's triumphal success story.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it should be recognised that at the centre of liberal humanism in the realist aesthetics of the pathetic is an insidious need to constantly reproduce its object for sympathy. Fundamentally it is not seriously interested in the social erasure of the abject or social inequality, since without the abject it would have no subject for its practice. The humanistic politics of pathos quickly reaches its critical limit as, at best, it can translate into a politics of symbolic reconceptualisation and recognition of its subjects with the aim of giving the abject person 'dignity', without effecting any real material transformation of their lives. Few, if any, of the socially marginal would be satisfied with the symbolic recognition alone; they would rather not have to inhabit the margin altogether. The fundamental critique beyond realist aestheticism is the question of what kind of society produces social marginality as a necessity and collateral of its own development. We have known for a long time that relative poverty is the necessary evil of capitalism. Yet, in these days of the post-real-socialism in which neoliberal capitalism is ideological and materially hegemonic and

in which the cornucopia of capitalist consumerism has aestheticised the banality of everyday as lifestyles, the political imagination and the discursive spaces for the fundament critique of capitalism are distinctively absent.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive reading of the Singapore film industry during the 1950s, refer to Millet (2006) and Uhde & Uhde (2010).

2. Functions and activities of the SFC are listed on their official website: http://www.sfc.org.sg/abtus.shtm.

3. To date, Raintree has produced an estimated 30 films, including a number of transnational (East Asian) productions such as *2000AD* (2000), *The Eye* (2002), *Turn Left, Turn Right* (2003), *Infernal Affairs II* (2003), *Rule #1* (2008) and *Painted Skin* (2008). As intended, such films function to showcase a mix of foreign and local talent, thereby extending the potential audience from a local market (be it Singapore or Hong Kong) to a regional or international one. Such efforts for a regional outlook and approach towards production and distribution echoed those of Singapore cinema in the 1950s. Regional talents like P. Ramlee were invited to direct or feature in film productions, and the audience was always conceived of as a regional one.

4. The film was selected for *Un Certain Regard* section of the 2007 Cannes Festival, one of the few films from Singapore so honoured (Arnold, 2007).

5. In 2009, the National Gallery in London exhibited an installation of Ed and Nancy Kienholz's *The Horengracht*, a recreation of Amsterdam's notorious red light district.

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