Nomadic Cinema: on proximity and remoteness of films on the road and in the bedroom
by Wiwat Lertwivatwongsa

The Call of The Wild: Nature Metaphors In The Hindi Film Song Sequence
by Udita Bhargava

Missing objects, or feeling for companions in unfree terrain
by Ryan Lim

Silence is an island (or breathing caves, wounded mountains and a drifting dog)
by Sun Park

The Grainy Frontier: Revisiting the Images of Sandscape in Teshigahara Hiroshi's The Woman in the Dunes
by Łukasz Mańkowski

So Heavy I Fell Through the Earth
by Luca E Lum

Acknowledgements
Project Consultants

Daniel Hui is a filmmaker and writer. A graduate of the film program in California Institute of the Arts, he is one of the founding members of 13 Little Pictures, a critically acclaimed independent film collective in Singapore. He wrote and directed Eclipses (2011) (Pixel Bunker Award for International New Talent, Doclisboa IFF 2013), Snakeskin (2014) (Special Jury Award TFFDoc, Torino FF 2014; Award of Excellence, Yamagata IDFF 2015; Special Jury Mention, RIDM 2015), and Demons (2016) (In Competition, Kim Jiseok Award, Busan IFF 2018; Berlinale Forum 2019).

Matthew Barrington is a researcher and curator based in London. He has recently completed his doctoral thesis, which focuses on Slow Cinema, at Birkbeck College, London. He is the Manager of the Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image and a programmer for the Essay Film Festival and the London Korean Film Festival. In addition to these positions, he is a curator of cinema at the Barbican Centre.

Testimonials

Daniel Hui

It was an honour and privilege for me to serve as a consultant to such diverse, dynamic, and engaging works in this edition of Monographs. Presented here are works of many different forms and concerns — from the personal to the political, from essay films to poetic texts. I hope you will enjoy and learn from these works as much as I have!

Matthew Barrington

The Monographs project is both fascinating and of immense importance, a rare initiative providing a dialogue between the literary and the filmic, treating both as equal. Working on the project for this particular year allowed us to bring a diverse mixture of early and mid-career filmmakers, curators, and critics across continents, into a fruitful creative exchange of ideas, passions and insights. The resulting body of work provides a strange sense of coherence, as despite none of the participants being in contact, there remain several interwoven themes and reflections, born out of a sense of urgency and shared concerns with contemporary moving image climate. Working with the Asian Film Archive was a pleasure, and being able to learn and build this programme creating borderless dialogues reflects the necessity of such projects.
Programme

Introduction

Monographs is a series of video and text essays on Asian cinema commissioned by the Asian Film Archive (AFA). Conceived during the outbreak of COVID-19 when physical screenings were disrupted, it is a critical platform for writers and thinkers to discourse upon the moving image beyond the walls of the cinema. The project’s second edition consists of 13 commissioned works—seven video essays and six written essays—produced in consultation with filmmaker/editor Daniel Hui and researcher/curator Matthew Barrington.

In response to changing ecological and socio-political landscapes, Monographs 2023: sinking, shifting, stirring reimagines human and non-human relationships to the climate and environment. Evoking cycles of geological transformation, the anthology acknowledges how cinematic representations of the environment are mediated via cultural and contextual paradigms that move through cycles of dissolution, transformation, and rebirth.

sinking:

Traversing across the diverse terrain of contemporary vlogs, video art, travelogues, silent cinema and state sponsored productions, the essays grapple with the weight of current environmental crises. Léna Bùi’s Precious, Rare, For Sale surveys media representations of nature in Vietnam, pressing on the relentless exploitation and commodification of the land and its creatures. Ryan Lim’s Missing objects, or feeling for companions in unfertile terrain approaches images of submersion from a more elegiac angle, figuring the invisibility of queer and marginal identities in Singaporean cinema. Parsing the faultlines between onscreen images and the realities they conceal, Uditia Bhangava’s The Call of the Wild: Nature Metaphors in the Hindi Film Song Sequence explores how taboo desires take shape through cinematic constructions of the landscape. Priyanka Chhabria’s In The Forest One Thing Can Look Like Another, examines how Manali, Himachal Pradesh, functions as a simulacral backdrop for romance and adventure, standing in for locales made inaccessible by political strife and obscuring the realities of ecological collapse.

shifting:

As shifts in the environment are observed, the essays approach change on different scales. Through microscopic meditations on the sensorial visuality of clouds and sand, Chhimi Shimada’s mmm and Lukasz Markowski’s The Grainy Frontier: Revisiting the Images of Sandscape in Teshihara Hiroshi’s The Woman in the Dunes hint at the historical undercurrents that govern these abstract, amorphous landscapes. Meanwhile, roving rhythms play out on a broader socio-political scale in Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa’s Nomadic Cinema: On Proximity and Remoteness of Films on the Road and in the Bedroom, which navigates underground cinema networks in Thailand that evolved during the pandemic. Migratory movements recur in Nazira Karimi’s Apat, which maps the filmmaker’s uneasy relationships to the land and language, as a Russian-speaking, Tajik-born “oralman” or repatriate.

Further adrift are works that chart fluid accretions of meaning over space and time. Ian Wang’s Swimming, Dancing weaves a symphony of the Yangtze River’s plural symbolisms, while Sun Park’s Silence is an island (or breathing caves, wounded mountains and a drifting dog) braids together wounded landscapes surrounding Jeju Island, and the collective trauma sedimented on its shorelines.

stirring:

Other essays lean towards a political lens in surveying territorialisation practices within systems of power, hinting at spaces of subversion within their fissures. Zimu Zhang’s Letter to Ti: in nuclearity, we are connected dissect state and media representations of the atom bomb in the Xinjiang Autonomous region, while Radhamohan Prasad’s The Landscape of Sanatoriums explores hill stations constructed by the British exercising spatial authority over the supposed malaise of the mountains. Responding to these ideas of confinement, Luca E Lui’s So Heavy I Fell Through the Earth looks into Ergotism—an unruly illness characterised by seizures and hallucinations. It asks: what happens when disease diffuses the biopolitical boundaries between man and environment?

From meditations on a glacial Himalayan town to speculative eco-fictions, the essays unearth how various strata of personal, historical and cultural meanings are grafted onto the multitudinous landscapes of Asia. This introduction, and the sequence in which the video and written essays are paired, trace some of the many possible trajectories through the collection. By pushing the boundaries of the filmic medium, Monographs 2023 explores the tensions between form and formlessness, sound and silence, as landscapes are continually sinking, shifting, stirring.

Natalie Kho and Sheryl Gee
Nomadic Cinema: on proximity and remoteness of films on the road and in the bedroom

shifting

stirring

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Nomadic Cinema: on proximity and remoteness of films on the road and in the bedroom

Year 2023

Author Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa

Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa is a cinephile, film critic, writer, and editorial team member of Film Club Thailand. He is also a founder of Wildtype, a group of Thai cinephiles that organises film screenings, seminars, and film book publications in Thailand. Since 2008, Wiwat has been curating and organising a series of Thai short film screenings called Films by Wiwat, focusing on overlooked Thai short films. Since 2008, he has collaborated with Documentary Club for film programmes.

Our screenings are small-scale—held at The Reading Room, a private library on the top floor of a three-story shophouse, with a projector aimed at a lopsided wall. We had to rely on our eyesight, our focus, a pile of books under the library on the top floor of a three-story shophouse, with a projector aimed at a lopsided wall. We had to rely on our eyesight, our focus, a pile of books under

A month after I returned from Hong Kong, Thailand’s Constitutional Court dissolved a political party that seemed to kindle hope for the youth, leading to nationwide protests at universities. The students adopted many initiatives to demonstrate against the unelected government. In response, the government passed a law that banned certain political symbols and clothing, leading to a wave of street protests across the country. The protests were followed by a coup d’état, the people learned to be hopeful again. But, not long after, all things stumbled, ceasing to exist upon the arrival of the first wave of COVID-19.

The pandemic has torn things apart; it prevented people from cohabiting, talking, partying, looking at each other, and even staring in the same direction in those pitch-black rooms. Film screenings were shut off, be it a small or a large scale. The Reading Room began to operate solely as a library, refraining from organising events and gatherings. We and the films became nomads by circumstance and so, we hit the road. So did the protests.

1. I was in Hong Kong on the day Tsai Ing-wen won Taiwan’s presidential election in a landslide. I was there that night and the previous night for the Hong Kong Independent Film Festival 2020. There was a screening of Kanax Li’s short documentary, documenting Hong Kong’s large-scale demonstration in 2019. The screening took place in a meeting room at HKICC—an ordinary building resembling a high-school from the outside—with no signs of a film festival inside whatsoever. After observing the space for a while, I followed the crowd into the room. The screening room was packed, the atmosphere captivating. The film was just a series of short clips from the frontline, though it made the whole audience cry.

2. Who would have thought that a few months later, after I returned home from Hong Kong, every part of the world would be suffering from said pandemic, along with political turmoil spreading region-wide, from Hong Kong to Myanmar and even Thailand? It was a time of uncertainty amidst the squall of a pandemic and insane yet beautiful political uprisings.

3. The pandemic has torn things apart; it prevented people from cohabiting, talking, partying, looking at each other, and even staring in the same direction in those pitch-black rooms. Film screenings were shut off, be it a small or a large scale. The Reading Room began to operate solely as a library, refraining from organising events and gatherings. We and the films became nomads by circumstance and so, we hit the road. So did the protests.

[The Reading Room Bangkok, https://readingroombangkok.org/]


Wildtype's screening in The Reading Room
In August, I visited Songkhla to meet up with some friends and brought a set of Thai short films that discussed politics, aiming to screen them in a local gallery. Then, independent screenings took place in cafes, libraries, and art galleries across the country. Film lovers got together, dealt with independent film distributors, and sold tickets to the screenings of these authorised films outside the oligopoly of the Thai cinema business. During that time, a friend of mine was planning to screen a Filipino documentary, The Kingmaker (2019),2 that brought the audience back to the Marcos era and posed questions regarding the future. The film had been shown in theatres earlier. However, the police blocked the screening, due to them being ‘uncomfortable’ about some elements on the poster: Imelda Marcos’ portrait and the film’s title, The ‘King’ maker. Both elements reminded them of Thailand’s central institution, even though it bears no relation to the Philippines. With The Kingmaker being banned, the organisers didn’t want to take the risk and decided to call off the screening, which extended to my Thai short film program. I realised that while the pandemic might have prevented us from watching films, the political deadlock is so powerful that it might discourage people from even thinking.

Films always hold more far-reaching possibilities.

5. Limitations, however, brought about some kind of potential. We wanted to try pushing boundaries and did so with the support of the Japan Foundation in Bangkok and in collaboration with Documentary Club, an independent film distributor that organises screenings both in theatres and beyond. We returned to the periphery and organised online screenings of two sets of films from the southernmost border of Thailand and Okinawa. We co-selected the films with a curator from Okinawa, aiming for films made by locals rather than outsiders. On our side, we chose films from the project called ‘Deep South Young Filmmaker.’3 The project intended to teach filmmaking to high school students in the three southernmost provinces so they could learn how to tell stories of their own, instead of letting people from the centre tell one for them. There was a story of a pregnant teenage girl ordered to move to Malaysia, expressions of frustration toward military checkpoints in the area and a boys’-love story set in a Muslim society. Despite time limitations, we attempted to include a screening and Q&A session with the directors. In addition, we invited historians from both sides to give bilingual lectures on the historical traumas from both areas.

Unsurprisingly, the most impressive moment occurred when Mukosangen Ryodonari Art Space in Akita, Japan, projected some parts of the programme on the wall and opened the gallery windows so people inside and outside could watch them together. COVID-19, it seems, could not rip away our desire to screen and experience films. The beauty of it is just so memorable.

6. In July 2020, students and the people eagerly went down to the streets to protest the government in an impressively creative fashion. Their tactics varied, ranging from flash mobs to randomly gathering to do unexpectedly hilarious things. Those included repurposing popular quotes from megahit transgender comedies to satirise the situation;4 organising the ‘Hamtaro Run’5, in which they altered the Hamtaro theme song’s lyrics into a quick-witted political one; coming to the full-scale protest dressed as characters from Harry Potter;6 explicitly mentioning Thai society’s ‘He Who Must Not Be Named’ for the first time. The film had been shown in theatres earlier. However, the police blocked the screening, due to them being ‘uncomfortable’ about some elements on the poster: Imelda Marcos’ portrait and the film’s title, The ‘King’ maker. Both elements reminded them of Thailand’s central institution, even though it bears no relation to the Philippines. With The Kingmaker being banned, the organisers didn’t want to take the risk and decided to call off the screening, which extended to my Thai short film program. I realised that while the pandemic might have prevented us from watching films, the political deadlock is so powerful that it might discourage people from even thinking. Fils always hold more far-reaching possibilities.

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Around that time, artists, writers and musicians formed a loose alliance. We planned to organise screenings at the protest site and The Kingmaker, which was targeted earlier, was also part of the programme. Flash mob protesters then began to stay overnight. We contacted filmmakers for their short films so we could design a unique programme for mob screenings. The process was simple: we emailed them and they let us screen their films for free. There was an experimental film made in response to the decade-long examination of political turmoil, a documentary on the lives of political prisoners and a film on the 1932 revolution by a university student. The programme also included films that documented, played with, and questioned the current political situation, old films from the mass killings and newer films that were screened immediately to the most recent issues. We planned to screen it on a television in the tent like they did with experimental films and on a giant screen. The programme was ready, yet we had to call it off after the police dispersed the mob the night before.

Thai Short Film Program screened on Documentary Club’s platform in parallel with a flash mob.

[Image 332x64 to 465x255]

[Image 476x446 to 608x624]
We believe that cinema is a reaction to and a conversation with the changing society. Hence, we organised many screenings alongside the remarkably evolving protest. Those screenings included an online one on Documentary Club’s platform, held in parallel with a flash mob. We promoted it on social media under the theme ‘Thailand’s Contemporary History through Experimental Films’ and distributed the QR code to the online film programme. Then, we printed a QR code to another program focusing on political prisoners on brochures and handed them to the protesters so they could watch it at home. Some activities worked well, and some did not. But it made us realise that not only is film a possibility, but film screenings are as well.

After several protests, countless dispersions and the second wave of COVID-19 towards the New Year celebrations, the above-mentioned group of artists founded ‘Thalufah Village’ and set up an overnight protest site next to the government house. On that occasion, we finally had a successful screening where we’re proud of when one of our political film programs was screened as a part of the artist-led protest. The protesters sat on the ground, watching films in an open-air setting and struck up conversations. Such a beautiful moment it was.

People kept protesting, despite losing the momentum after many protest leaders had been arrested on different charges. In the meantime, COVID-19 was here to stay, and people suffered from one wave after another. They got poorer. The medical care system was poorly managed. The dictatorship was still in power and seemed like it would continue to be.

In September 2021, it was apparent that organising traditional screenings was almost out of the question. But at the same time, Thai musicians decided to host the ‘Open Hat Festival,’ a two-week-long online concert on YouTube Live that openly accepted donations. Malaysia's Wuben9 also organised online screenings on Facebook Live. We adopted the idea and managed WILDTYPE 2021, the annual short film screening we've hosted for over a decade. Due to limitations, we decided to screen the films on YouTube Live, making the screening a one-off. We screened new films alongside old films that we love.

Due to limitations, we decided to screen the films on YouTube Live, making the screening a one-off. We screened new films alongside old films that we love.

Online platforms open doors to new approaches and sensibilities. We experienced the aesthetics of online screenings when the audience live-chatted during the session. It took us back to the time we were able to get together in person, through another form. The audience was just so into the films that they couldn’t wait to share what was on their minds. It’s like they were one with those films. It’s like they were watching those films in the same place when, in fact, they were doing so from their own bedrooms in different cities across the country. We also launched a Q&A session with the filmmakers and audiences via Clubhouse, leading to a several-hour-long discussion. No faces were shown. Even so, it was such a warm gathering. Some filmmakers and audiences via Clubhouse, leading to a several-hour-long discussion. No faces were shown. Even so, it was such a warm gathering. Some filmmakers and audiences via Clubhouse, leading to a several-hour-long discussion. No faces were shown. Even so, it was such a warm gathering. Some filmmakers and audiences via Clubhouse, leading to a several-hour-long discussion. No faces were shown. Even so, it was such a warm gathering. Some filmmakers and audiences via Clubhouse, leading to a several-hour-long discussion. No faces were shown. Even so, it was such a warm gathering.

Now, theatres have resumed operation, superhero franchises are in theatres preventing small-scale films from showing, film festivals worldwide are being organised on-site, the protest leaders are still in jail and the wind of change is blowing gently over us, day after day, while the storm is yet afar. During this challenging time of being a nomad, we have discovered new possibilities for screenings and found that film still has its magic. Films connect people with one another, inspiring them to exchange thoughts, share similar sentiments, resist and rebel in their own way, and learn to hope for change. Films can be horrible Bastards, but also Fantastic Beasts, and there is not only one place where you can find them. You will always find them, one way or another.
The Call Of The Wild: Nature Metaphors In The Hindi Film Song Sequence
Udita Bhargava is an Indian filmmaker living and working between Germany and India. Her debut feature DUST (2016), a German-Indian co-production, premiered at the 66th Berlinale. Her shorts have been screened and awarded at film festivals across the world, including the Oberhausen Film Festival, where her short C/O Carrom Club (2014), won the 3Sat Prize. Udita studied film directing at the Film University Potsdam Babelsberg Konrad Wolf. She has worked on several international film productions including Danny Boyle’s Slumdog Millionaire (2009), Lars von Trier’s Antichrist (2009) and Mira Nair’s The Migration (2008). She holds a Master’s Degree in Mass Communication and a Bachelor’s Degree in English Literature.
A valley, still and golden; the afternoon light ripe and mellow; the open sky above. Ritu (Nanda) sings into the landscape; the very same song that her lover Arun (Sanjay Khan) had sung for her at this spot before he departed for military service. The hues (yellow brown), the cabriole, her cigarette smoking companion Ajay, who is her lover's younger brother, give the scene an air of a western. Yet, suffused with longing rather than intrigue, the scene could not be more different than anything belonging to that genre.

The story of the film revolves around Arun. As a child, he is adopted by rich parents. When Ritu, the daughter of his adoptive parents' friends, comes for a visit, the reticent Arun falls in love with her. She too reciprocates his love. All is set to fall into place with a wedding when Arun discovers the truth about himself: that he is the son of a 'lowly' servant rather than the heir to a highborn Hindu family.

Through the landscape she transmits her feelings to her absent lover Arun; the landscape is the chamber that holds the echoes and memories of their love, and now her longing. That a woman can express her desire so freely, so eloquently, is rare. Maybe it is because her lover is absent? In his presence, might she have been shy or proud? She experiences her lover by finding a oneness with her surroundings, which held the body of her lover in the past, and which continue to connect her with him. There is a brief cutaway to the trees and the skies: they are witnesses to the vastness of this woman's desire.

Not a single glance is exchanged between her and Ajay, her companion at the moment; after all he is not the object of her desire or her emotion. But one could mistake her intent as she sings; her words so mysterious and full of secrets waiting to be unravelled. Indeed Ajay mistakes her intent briefly and thinks that her song is for him. But soon, thankfully, her wedding is fixed to her missing lover Arun, only to be endangered by the facts of his birth.

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2. "Wadiyan Mera Daman" - Abhilasha (1968)

A young couple, Amal (Sachin) and Rajni (Rajni Sharma), are sitting by the banks of a broad river; it is a place where he often sits alone, but today, with his wife next to him, all that he loves in the world seems to be present at once.

I love them all
Who?

the earth, the rivers, the dusk and dawn.
And?

Stop me, I will be yours.
Harness me, stop me

They have been married at a very early age; she is still a child. According to tradition, she continues to live with her family, visiting her husband only at intervals. The love between them continues to grow and mature during their brief meetings. At the end of the film, she joins him as a wife in his home.

This song is a reflection of the growing maturity of their love; it is an embodiment of a whole world opening up for their shared emotion. Reeds wave gently in the wind, lotus flowers are in full bloom, clouds swim across the sky and are reflected in the water, giving us a sense of union both fleeting and eternal.

We are so close, the moon and the stars so far
To tell you the truth, they feel like an illusion,
But they are true—the earth, the river, the dusk and dawn,
And you!

His young bride is the embodiment of nature. And like nature, she is delicate, ever changing; young as yet, she will fill out like Mother Earth.

In the morning tomorrow when you leave all of this behind
With me, they (the earth, river, dusk and dawn) shall miss you too.
I love them all
the earth, the rivers, the dusk and dawn,

Stop me, I will be yours.
Harness me, stop me

His words allude to her impending departure but he is mature enough to feel the sorrow of that eternal parting which will one day break the chain of their love. At the end of the gentle song, they walk through the river. The darkening landscape is like their garden of Eden, from which they cannot not be banished since they have given it life with their desire, their love, their song.


While singing, Chanda (Vidya Sinha) fills water in an earthen pot from the tumultuous river; her voice floats across the landscape to Yogendra (Parikshit Sahni) who is entering her village for the first time. He is enchanted.

The river flows, it tells you “I don’t want to join the sea, I will get salty.”
the river tells you “I don’t want to join the sea, I will get salty.”

Stop me, I will be yours.
Harness me, stop me

Yogendra, the hero, gives up his privileged life in the city to go and teach in a village. His fiancé refuses to join him. They part ways. Battling social ills and the resistance of the local landowner, who wants to keep the village folk under his thumb, Yogendra starts to build a school in the village. In the process, he wins the admiration and love of the film’s heroine Chanda; she joins him in his selfless devotion to the nation.

Chanda’s song is an introduction to a new life for Yogendra: a first encounter with unashamed and innocent desire, not burdened by the norms of middle class life, wherein such an expression might not be possible even in the metaphoric language of song. The look on her face is naughty. The whole idea is delicate, ever changing; young as yet, she will fill out like Mother Earth.

Take me for yours, settle me in the village
I will be yours fully;

the river flows, it tells you “I don’t want to join the sea, I will get salty.”
Harness me, stop me
Stop me, I will be yours.

The body of the actress and her movement across the hilly forested landscape are full of vitality. She, like her desire, like the river, helps to keep this world alive. In Chanda’s imagination, her tumultuous desire should culminate in peaceful domesticity. The villain Rajju (Amrish Puri) too hears the song. He will come in the way, unsuccessfully, in the fulfillment of her desire. Yet right now, Chanda is totally unaware of both men—the villain and the hero—and is absolutely free to dream of her life as a river.
Deva (Prabhu Deva), the ace dancer, holds the gaze of the heroine Priya (Kajol). She listens wide-eyed. Shy, Deva moves across the docks, his movements quick and smooth. His song has woken up the destitute who spent the night in the streets; they join him in dancing. Addressing his prospective lover through the moon, he asks:

The moon, oh moon, why don't you descend to the earth sometime, so that we can talk? And if you feel shy, why don't you wear a cloak of clouds and come down? Come on down.

The title of the film is Sapney, meaning 'dreams'. Priya, the daughter of a rich industrialist, wants to become a nun. Her neighbour, Thomas (Arvind), is in love with her and devises a plan to stop her from taking her vows. He asks his friend Deva to convince Priya to join the latter's music troupe. Unfortunately for Thomas, Deva and Priya fall in love.

The song depicts the blossoming of Priya and Deva's love. The sea is quiet beside the docks, the full moon shines steadily in the sky. Like Priya, it seems hypnotised by Deva's words.

We will bathe together in the blue rivers of dreams, lose ourselves in the foggy wakes, pick stars, make ourselves a home from them.

The moon, oh moon, why don't you descend to the earth sometime, so that we can talk?

Just when we think that Priya is sinking further into a reverie, she breaks into song: the very same song as him! This time, it is she who compares him to the distant moon, inviting him to come and speak with her.

And we will ask the moon so many questions of wonder why are the wings of butterflies so colourful? what do fireflies do if they wake all night? lose ourselves in the foggy wakes.
They are the fireflies, dancing in the night, while the moon watches on. The aliveness of the lovers-to-be takes over everything else. They hug, then a heave, Priya looks at him with large eyes; her first orgasm? A brief moment of wonder from him. Then they break into dance again. Smiling, they leave the docks, having lost the reticence or reserve of lovers who haven’t consummated their love. Metaphorically at least, they are lovers now.

6. Post 1990s and conclusion

In 1991, India opened up its economy, aligning itself with the free market. Cable TV entered our homes and along with it came new influences from all corners of the world. The song sequence changed, drawing inspiration from MTV rather than just the Hindi cinema of yore. The old metaphoric language gave way to a new one—sexy, racy, sometimes even vulgar. With highly expressive dance choreographies, desire was located in the body and expressed through it. The couple too, no longer alone but surrounded by professional dancers, became the centre and focus of the song, whereas nature elements receded to the background. Increased physical contact and sexual interactions between the couple became routine on screen, even as the environment in which the lovers were placed lost its previous meaning.

The internet is full of pages dedicated to the ‘perverted’ songs of the 90s which managed to get past the censor board despite their sexual innuendo. One of the most popular examples on many lists is the song ‘Gutar Gutar’ from the film Dalal (1993); the title refers to the coo-ing of a pigeon.

Oh God it climbed on top
On the roof the pigeon rolled
\%
\%
The mad (love) bird ate his fill
flew away
On the roof
On the roof the pigeon rolled
It died on top
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Missing objects, or feeling for companions in unfree terrain

sinking

shifting
Written Essays

Missing objects, or feeling for companions in unfree terrain

Year
2023

Author
Ryan Lim

Ryan Lim is a film writer and MA student at the Department of Japanese Studies, National University of Singapore. His research work reads Japanese artistic production from the 1970s, as it relates to fragmenting political logics or emergent collectivities. In his other writing, he is interested in tracing the infrastructural lives of works, by moving closer towards critical modes and our attachments to objects.

The “movements” of these films, to be certain, are not facts of any nature. We cannot fully know what currents they belonged to, simply because of heavy-handed bureaucracies and vexing myths of nationhood, and so on. But in that, we acquire an object lesson that burdens us: the fact of belatedness, that regardless of our best intentions, our films often feel like actions one step too late. Snippets of the past are received by the present for mourning and, without intervention, a future of unwitting forgetfulness.

I have been wondering if such a fact that we habitually experience as a curse might also be acquired as a form of parallel wisdom that requires its own maintenance. The curse: belatedness has seldom been a happy affair, and tends to reveal an ugly head but no body. We’re prone to underestimating just how unable we are to transcend our crises or their persistently bad-faithed agents. As a queer person who was present to view Sambal Belacan at its homecoming, we were certainly part of a moment more liberated than those before. But would the position of a queer life necessarily be freer, or would our oppositional habits and selves punch up higher? If it were, we might now say, know how to skirt censorship (our own too) better, instead of being dealt better cards.

Belated films or late legacies may have been part of actions stopped prematurely, but they do not have to bind us to starvation. I’m keen on a set of tactics that attends to what’s nearer sight, rather than resting amidst forward predictions and banking on the unwrapping take-up of new burdens. While we continue to anticipate the moment of happening and hedge that against the predictions and banking on the unwitting take-up of new burdens. While we continue to anticipate the moment of happening and hedge that against the predictions and banking on the unwitting take-up of new burdens. While we continue to anticipate the moment of happening and hedge that against the predictions and banking on the unwitting take-up of new burdens. While we continue to anticipate the moment of happening and hedge that against the predictions and banking on the unwitting take-up of new burdens. While we continue to anticipate the moment of happening and hedge that against the predictions and banking on the unwitting take-up of new burdens.

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1. Recognition

“The knowledge that results from recognition... is not the same kind as the discovery of something new; it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself.” (Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*)

By now, we know that what we call cinema is a moving centre. If it’s an industry, it booms and busts. The writing of its history speaks of avant-gardes followed by main flanks. When the Golden Age of Malay cinema recessed here in Singapore, it left behind a cultural desert and approximately five years ago, everyone was talking about our new wave until it was not.

This nation is an amnesiac one, where our public memories seem less like storage devices than they do a stuttering processor, a point within a system that remains off-limits and opaque to us but one we are nonetheless custodians of. Film is no exception, even in its scattered examples: the slow restoration of our cinema’s transnational, archipelagic origins, the discovery of Rajendra Gour as the first filmmaker of an experimental tradition, the stream of cinema’s exiles making their way home (the recent 2020 screening of banned lesbian mini-docudrama *Sambal Belacan in San Francisco* (1997) — albeit to a quarantined reception — comes to mind). New exiles take its place too, from Tan Pin Pin’s *To Singapore with Love* (2013) and most recently, Ken Kwek’s *LookAlMe* (2022).

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2. Resentment

“[..] contrary to what might seem as common sense, quiet must not be conflated with silence. Quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention.” (Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*)

By now, we know that visibility is a trap, and few films here testify to that as vividly as Ken Lume and Loo Zihan’s *Solos* (2007) did. The story of vexed relationships between a student, his male teacher and his mother would make its world premiere at that year’s Singapore International Film Festival. Shortly before the date, the censorship board announced that it would be passed only with cuts and the film would be refused classification. A joint statement made with two ministries cited the film’s potential to cause enmity and social division in a country that remains off-limits and opaque to us but one we are nonetheless custodians of.

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## LookAtMe


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Solos' thematic slant developed an imaginary heart. "Going Solos," a journalist wrote in her headline, and when asked about Solos’ eventual lack of awards in the competition, a jury member felt that "the film was trying to draw attention to itself." A pervasive media code will make certain categories feel exceptional in the way a gimmick is labelled as such, but that sort of visible scale-making has a counterpart too in critical tendencies. One of the few academic takes on it suggested that “[that] scene posits itself as an event that could take place between any two men in any bedroom in Singapore.”

"Could" here is eyebrow-raising, and I might understand if the casual slippage there led one to think the film would somehow activate the homoerotic desires of any “man” “any[where]”. In what was known about Solos' perceptible heart, there were at once banal facts, virile prophecies, and outsized ambitions ("Subtlety wins big at film fest," the post-festival coverage reads "). Here was the thing: Opposition was spectacle and the spectacular was oppositional, both facts folding into one another without ground and into its own thing.

Do cinemas attract? More pointedly, do queer films exist in the shape of queer desires — be they political, ethical, material, amorous, sexual? There is something to be said about the default way we’ve come to make positive investments into cinematic containers and wait for them to mature into gardens. It is ironic that in Solos, desires deliver slim returns. Apart from those sensational, scattered moments, the characters remain virtually mute and those who desire, characters or audiences alike, find themselves in wait of a reply. But Solos is certainly not a silent film; it was only in one of the final cuts that Kan and Loo decided to excise spoken dialogue. What remained were sounds that linger within interior spaces. The two lovers bawl, household appliances work, they malfunction, the mother convulses, washes clothes after, crickets and air-conditioning stay noisy as ever.

For queer hopefuls looking for an aspiration of life, watching Solos offers a container, but evacuates it of its original contents before returning us its bruised remainder. The characters embody this principle well: their communication is devoid of interaction, unfolding in gazes that seldom intersect. But as the motley of sounds in the background alerts us, those gazes are always shifting somewhere else and in anticipation of something else. One could ask Kan and Loo what those others might be — we might be expecting the good life, stability, even liberation — and they would perhaps shrug their shoulders, for they likely know what something without its time in the sun is like.

Why Solos? What to make of Solos’ more quiet companions in unfree terrain? What to make of Solos', or feeling for missing objects, or feeling for companions in unfree terrain? And between sensual or exuberant commitments, and whose results are left up in the air. It is this "in-the-air"-ness that makes the attachments of our perceptions also becomes an ethic: trained to see a body while invited into a negative space.

The story of Solos refers us to a bewildering archive of delay, frustration, and sheer boredom, as it ejects us from the sensorium and leaves us to our senses. Releasing us from spectacular visions, the film starts to admit the things in the middle that hold the promise of a future together, even if that does not seem particularly free or looks suspiciously like housework. Solos' more quiet registers alert us to changes between states, normative as those states may seem; the student non-purposefully cuts mushrooms while waiting for his lover to return home from his work. These patient displays stage work to be done between sensual or exuberant commitments, and whose results are left up in the air. It is this "in-the-air"-ness that makes the attachments of Solos so difficult to pin down. The immersion of a swim is interrupted by banal rain right after, distributing our attention across its images like an atmosphere. It also makes a slight mockery of our own dramatic attachments to images. Plain sight finds it hard to keep up with the maintenance Solos performs on its own habitat.

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Written Essays

Flooding makes a wager on, as it transits from one ignorance to another backdrop, but it doesn’t mean there is nothing to focus on. It’s an environmental us, however. They may be unmeaningful, lacking a joint circumstance, language, reinforcements too. Migrants are architects who maintain a Möbius strip the subterranean hum that holds them together in ordinary life receives its

3. Rehearsals

“Those who desire to invent a transformational infrastructure to shape the world that is in transition often look for something to appear more solid than it can be in order to anchor what’s emerging.”

(Lauren Berlant, On the Inconvenience of Other People)

By now, we know that we can’t live like this. Midway through Sherman Ong’s Flooding in the Time of Drought (2009), a woman speaks these words to her Filipino-Chinese friend, who has just confessed to having had an abortion, for fear of her interracial relationship being discovered. Her friend turns away, as another round of menstrual pains forces her back into rest.

It is a bad situation, but those words conjure reckonings with infrastructure too: being in a slump is not that different from living in a dump. Above hangs a more invisible crisis, devised for this two-part film (its parts are subtitled Drought and Flood). Singapore has run out of water and reliable information is nowhere to be found, though nobody seems to be in panic. This being so even for the sprawling cast of economic migrants, who mostly reside in functionally furnished public housing flats. The oddity only registers in the bulk of bottled water and minor flare-ups about bidet usage. Sometimes, the afternoon sun is bright enough to blind one to the very fact of drought or flood, leaving it up in the air if it were the limit of a mise-en-scene.

Perceptual glitches cut across sensibilities. A denier might ask whether this is a new fact of climate or just a month’s bad weather, while the paranoid would ask if the drought is letting up or being covered up. The premonitions flash across a commons, but in Flood and Drought political desires remain fleeting. They are conveyed only through individual backchannels that render our attachments or responsibilities as something at most temporary: though not without function.

One could point to the mosaic arrangement of stories happening, and one could draw a shared axis through their gender troubles (a Thai man is asked by his aunt to ward off sleeping death syndrome by dressing up as a lady before bed), persistent racialization (an Indian couple whose caste difference is unknown to their in-laws), or intergenerational trauma (a daughter of a resettled Chinese Indonesian family runs out of money for university). Still, certain questions of structure block the provisional solidarity. How much of a commons can be plausibly put together from discrete affairs, separated by scene cuts or a change in language? What can come out of the relation between drought and flood, neither of which will reveal its full self? Sometimes, even a light pan is enough to reveal another inhabitant, but it is a gesture without consequence as she is plugged into her own computer. Elsewhere, a migrant speaks to a bilingual, but his reply is not received. What of the question of responsibility; can we expect them to pick up a common orientation or find ground, when the premonitions flash across a commons, but in Flood and Drought political desires remain fleeting. They are conveyed only through individual backchannels that render our attachments or responsibilities as something at most temporary: though not without function.

An ideal habitat cannot be captured; a state of negativity cannot be critiqued. The habitat has to be built.

Experiences are enchantingly restaged in Flood and Drought, but the subterranean hum that holds them together in ordinary life receives its reinforcements too. Migrants are architects who maintain a Möbius strip between seeing and unseeing (themselves being seen and unseen), between chronic flare-ups and a relaxation of crisis. Such a position means that they speak only in asides: this is how we live, you can’t live like this. I am most interested in splinters like these, which are too formally or contextually fragmented to do the work of worldbuilding. It was never whole, not for all of us anyway. They loosen us, however. They may be unmeaningful, lacking a joint circumstance, language, backdrop, but it doesn’t mean there is nothing to focus on. It’s an environmental fact that Flooding makes a wager on, as it transits from one ignorance to another or from one injury to another. The Chinese Indonesian daughter relates the circumstances of her family’s move to Singapore, having lost their livelihood in the 1998 Indonesian riots, while her privileged relative harvests away at his video game. The message may be lost on him, but their senses make the slightest contact through attentive inclusions.
Violence indeed forms a spectre over these migrants, though it is not the kind that galvanizes them into an identity or a march. A Korean resident recounts a dream, in which she is her country’s last queen and is raped at a banquet by invading Japanese soldiers. The gay Japanese man to whom she tells this story feeds fish in his aquarium, and at the end of it, asks her to complete the story: did they really have sex? Filled with only a tentative curiosity, his remark does not divert or try to defuse the situation. It creates a new situation.

In these traumatic visions, the force of violence could have been channelled towards an aspiration, but it is instead let loose for the establishment of partial reciprocity — a response-ability. Rehearsals are all about speaking into the air.

The circumstances these stories are told in feel too structural for any kind of repair, yet those stories come together under a filmic shelter that makes it impossible for them to remain entirely private. They converge around an unidentified point, be it wisps of cigarette smoke, an unknowable weather pattern, the seemingly real time. The missing object finds its pull still. It tugs at the corners of our sensing apparatus; it transforms our simulated surrounds into strange supports; it designates heirs to an objectless heritage.
Missing objects, or feeling for companions in unfree terrain
Silence is an island
(or breathing caves, wounded mountains and a drifting dog)
Silence is an island (or breathing caves, wounded mountains and a drifting dog) (\( ? \))

In which language do you dream? A question that follows a confession: my tongue speaks Korean, and my mouth speaks English. As if it is impossible, unfathomable, to have a body that speaks two languages at once. I’m asked to gauge my proximity to them—mother tongue or foreign land—tell me which one I speak. I wonder if the question should be: In what language do you remember? I often wake up with the feeling of having dreamt with no recollection of the dream. Only the imprints of the fantasy linger as fatigue. Maybe in one of those dreams, I met Trinh T. Minh-ha, who said silence could be a language, “a will not to say”, a mode of speech that carries the past and moves towards the future. And I wonder what it might sound like to remember in the future tense—an echo of wordless memories that outlives the listeners.

Some tunnels are vessels, not for mobility but for stillness. In Minju Kim’s film, “The Red Filter is Withdrawn.” (2020), the camera inhabits the empty spaces of coastal caves and military bunkers embedded in volcanic craters across Jeju Island, the largest island in South Korea. Static with a firm intention, Kim’s frame centres on the rectangular openings of these sites. Through these double frames emerge the oceanic backdrop surrounding the island, clouds floating in the sky, a silhouette play of trees and white light beaming through the holes, animating a pair of rectangles like anthropomorphic eyes. Breathing.

The projector is turned on.

As the Second World War ended in 1945, Korea was liberated from the Japanese Occupation. Swept up by a blinding joy, people on the peninsula marched toward liberation—to the south and the north, only to find themselves divided in two, under the occupation of the US and the Soviet Union. It was Independence Movement Day on the 1st of March, 1947, when a crowd gathered to commemorate those who resisted the Japanese occupation on Jeju Island. There was police brutality, there were incomprehensible deaths, and there was anger and grief. History remembers that this moment ignited an insurrection on the impoverished island, and motivated the ruling regime backed by the US force to order a military crackdown on insurgents by branding them communists (also known as the “Red”, ppalgaengi also known as the “Red”, ppalgaengi). The complexity of the 4.3 Jeju uprising and massacre, which lasted until 1954, is pronounced as a hesitant record on the National Archives of Korea’s website. It attempts to summarise this splintered history with uncertainty: the sum of many untold stories—has created an opaque haze around the historical records and the environment. The island breathes haunting memories of violence and survival.

Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. The island breathes haunting memories of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival. Kim and I talked about the inability to speak, or in Kim’s case, to make a film during her artist residency on Jeju Island. The island was laden with stories of violence and survival, of violence and survival.
In “The Red Filter is Withdrawn,” there are moments reminiscent of James Benning’s Ten Skies (2014), an epic film that captures ten skies for a hundred minutes. Despite the film’s simplicity in its concept and structure, it conjures up a myriad of emotions and reflections, as well as sublime linkages between the earth and the ethereal. While both films allude to the fact that a landscape is not innocent, Benning’s Ten Skies “depends absolutely on the camera’s capacity to indiscriminately record reality,” whereas Kim’s “The Red Filter is Withdrawn,” believes that the camera discriminates and excludes. Kim interrogates this limitation and the questionable intention of cinematic frames through the words of Frampton: We can never see more within our rectangle, only less.  

We have come to watch this.

“In his decision to work exclusively with archival footage “Farocki positions himself [...] not as a producer of images but as a (critical) spectator of the “images of the world” and of the world as image. He thus places himself in a position from which he can create a dialogue and intellectual exchange with an audience that is equal to him, to the extent that it shares with him the same perspective and (almost) the same cognitive position.”

- How Essay Film Thinks, Laura Rascaroli

Kim becomes a spectator of the world outside an image by working with the exclusionary nature of a frame. Its ability to create, show and reveal one reality is always at risk of erasing another. Her frame refuses an enclosure and surges forward with a possibility. A renewed attitude towards the production and consumption of images: a movement from what to show to what not to show.

I had never considered air as a landscape until I returned to Seoul from Boston in 2016. I rushed out as the automatic glass doors of the airport opened, and my throat gasped, inhaling air but not enough oxygen. Air is now a filter tinted with dusty yellow, obscuring the spiky highrises of Seoul as if a rubberthumb has smudged the top part. Air is now felt in my body through its grainy texture.

Kim’s conceptual and structural work is, in a subtle way, always about a body. In “The Red Filter is Withdrawn,” the body, without being visible on a screen, is central as a mediator, or medium, breathing the air of the emptiness, exhaling through a frame. The bodily engagement—the mediator’s exhalation—manifests as an intervention into the structural framework, such as the red filter suddenly dropped in front of the camera or a jolting, shaky handheld camera movement that renders the presence of “I” palpable.

The red is both a filter and blood that flows from the past into the ocean, a blood vessel in your finger blocking the lens. The red is a body.

In my memory, the spring of 2014 is like a dream within a dream. Two parallel realities follow and overlap with each other. In one memory, I was attending a creative writing class at a college. Just outside the school building was the Boston Common buzzing with a crowd. Mourning takes many shapes.

As the first anniversary of the Boston Marathon Bombing neared, the collective grief materialised as an unstoppable strength, a will to reach the finish line. Boston Strong! Voices were muffled like I was underwater while scrolling through breaking news: a ferry with hundreds of passengers on board sank in South Korea.

I first saw Youngmee Roh’s Invisible Sleeping Woman, Capsized Boat and Butterfly (2016) at Lotte Cinema Broadway in Seoul. The awkwardly hybridised name of the cinema mirrors the identity crisis of the city that has been hastily moulded by soaring capitalism and an aspiration to Western modernity for the West. It also tells a story of gentrification: Lotte, a mega-conglomerate that owns a multiplex chain, acquires an independent cinema named Broadway. I walked up to the box office in the remodelled cinema and climbed up another flight of stairs only to walk down, turn right and walk up again to enter the screening room, or this memory might be entirely flawed by the already disorientating reality.

On the screen, the lyrics from the song “A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes” from the Disney animation Cinderella (1950) appear white on a black background in the absence of Cinderella’s mellifluous voice.

No matter how your heart is grieving
If you keep on believing
The dream that you wish will come true

Written Essays
Silence is an island (or breathing caves, wounded mountains and a drifting dog).

Silence is an island (or

Written Essays


Hollis Frampton, A Lecture, presented it at Hunter College in New York on October 30, 1968.


Hollis Frampton, A Lecture, presented it at Hunter College in New York on October 30, 1968.


Silence is an island (or breathing caves, wounded mountains and a drifting dog)

Written Essays

To love a particular mountain or stream is not to love the motherland or fatherland in an abstract sense. It is instead a mode of passionate inhabitation which often runs contrary to the imagination of national interest, as witnessed by the struggles of indigenous people across the world against large modernist development projects that propel them into a homogenous empty time.  

Mountains occupy an ironic place in the Korean language. There is an idiom, “too many captains will take a boat to a mountain”, which is equivalent to an English one, “too many cooks spoil the broth”. It is common to hear this expression without its head: one might say “going to a mountain” in a phrase as a metonym for a digression. Suppose the evolution of language can trace the transformation of social climates; it is worth noting how a mountain is characterised as a non-destination or diversion in the Korean vernacular.

My conversation with Roh “went to mountains” many times. One of the diverging paths led to her ongoing interest in fairy tales and the irresponsible optimism reflected in their narrative structure: a hero’s journey is confronted by a struggle, escalated to a climactic conflict, and resolved with a victory and reward, happy ending. We shared the tales we were told growing up and how they instilled a collective belief in us, driving us to keep on enduring. When our faith betrayed us, we became speechless adults. In a society fueled by false hope, belief manifests as a symptom. And it is painful, but it tells you where the wound is.

On another path to a mountain, we went back to the day when we witnessed the unflinching brutality of belief. It was quiet. It was the image of a ferry, half of its lopsided body submerged in the ocean as if it was exhausted and needed to rest. While we were sharing the weight of shattered belief, our mundane and irrelevant moments on that day in April 2014 were woven into a whole, held by helplessness and guilt. We mapped fragmented contexts for what was transmitted on our respective screens: a belly of a capsized ship, a false report that everyone was rescued, seven hours of silence and the resting ocean after it engulfed everything.

Two spiralling narratives propel Roh’s dreamlike images; a voiceover narration that describes the woman’s actions and captions that foresee the consequences of the situation. The two voices distract and betray one another. And through this tension between the action and warning (or hope) emerges Roh’s fable, like the apparition of the past, like déjà vu. The film adapts a technique of a poet whose material is the gaps between words, embracing multivocality, speaking in multiple tenses. I dwell on one passage in the narration that describes the woman’s actions and captions that foresee the endings are death. The woman’s eyes are closed. Her face is scratched, her dress drenched in blood, lying flat. Death is also the beginning as the camera tilts up to the woman who is now standing, looking down on her own dead body. Another dream begins.

Sound of thunder from all directions
(You will receive help from many people)

( You will receive help from many people)
70% of the Korean peninsula consists of mountains. On this land, the movement flows in rhythm with a contoured vista. A path is never straight, replete with hidden depths and unknown peaks. Once utilised as an invincible fortress, the mountainous landscape had become an obstacle for post-war South Korea, creating detours in its ambitious plans for rapid economic growth. To cut through mounds of earth between cities, tunnels were built in quick succession.

Driving through a tunnel is like being inside a flicker film. I used to pass through a tunnel at least twice a day to commute to school. This tunnel is a two kilometre-long puncture through Hwangnyeong Mountain that spreads across four neighbouring towns, and at that time, the tunnel was drenched in a sci-fi orange hue. I would stare at a rectangular sodium vapour lamp flickering into a dab and morphing to draw a long beam stretched to infinity. I saw all sorts of things: hallucinatory optical illusions, glimmering reflections, ghostly shadows. Things that make up a film, later I learned. It transported me from one side of a mountain to the other, from past to future, wiping out what was on the other side of (or above) the tunnel.

The absurdity and violence of the man-made holes came to my consciousness when the rainfall brought about a landslide. It destroyed the tunnel, broke the roads and swallowed cars. And people complained about the traffic.

The essence of Ellie Kyungran Heo’s film Island (2016) might reside outside the film. So when she is asked to choose a still image that represents the film, she sees you an image that is not in the film. Heo’s gesture is gentle and unyieldingly precise; nevertheless, it lingers with a question, why.

The image of the back of a white dog on an open green field looking out to a tranquil ocean and spotless sky bluring into a canvas of silky blue. The dog seems big, but my mind sees it small against the vastness of nature.

A film that looks at the back of a dog looking. I am drawn to see what the dog might see, beyond the horizon, outside the confines of the flatness and four walls. I let my attention expand to reach the horizon’s vanishing point.

Island begins with the dog sleeping under a gazebo bench where a group of tourists are chatting. They soon move on to their next tour destination, leaving the gazebo in silence. Over the droning silence and loneliness of Mara Island, with a population of fewer than 150 people, a swarm of tourists washes over and withdraws. The transition repeats. A refrain that pulsates throughout the film.

2014, somewhere in the South Sea, the Sewol ferry was heading to Jeju Island. The ferry was at full capacity, and most passengers were high school students on a school trip. Heo was on Mara Island, a few kilometres off the coast of Jeju, for a project with the last remaining student on the island. She spoke of the paralysing fear she felt when the news of the ferry disaster reached the island.

Fear. Again I borrow the wisdom of Gloria Anzaldúa, who illuminates the generative power of fear, the force that shifts perspectives so dramatically that one starts to see through and “reach the underworld”. “As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul.”

On the island, Heo quickly learns the white dog is a stray but has a name. The dog belongs to no one yet is present in everyone, like a sea breeze that leaves salty watermarks wherever it touches. Heo stops looking for a subject and starts drifting with the dog that barks in dissonance with domesticated puppies; weaves through tourists who are busy taking photos, sometimes, of the dog; and meanders the edges of the island.

I say the film follows the dog because it makes me follow the dog. Disparate moments flow like a stream of consciousness, but you will not be lost as long as you keep a white dot in sight. Loose associations emerge in a slow timescape built upon unassuming attention to everyday moments. And I begin to feel the sticky air of an island and how familiar that feels. The saltiness that makes the skin itch, the taste of tears. The film becomes an impression of a climate you only remember as quotidian details that cohere into feelings.

There are scenes when the dog is not in the frame, and it’s when the camera stays with the residents individually; a woman with an army of dogs; a lonely policeman who seems to be off duty most of the time; and a drunk monk, the only person who addresses the camera. His speech commences in the future tense but abruptly returns to the past, expressing regret.

“We will remember our sin with deep, eternal resentment. We were wrong.”

One time the tension builds up: the dog wanders off the frame behind the uncontrollably fluttering flag, and the camera looks, for a while, at the shivering grass while we hear a cacophony of violent barking and squealing. With a sonic relief, the screen is filled with a white furry surface that subtly and slowly rises and falls. Then a step closer to red flesh: we arrive at the wound. The film never resolves this tension if the resolution means knowing how and why.

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13 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 38.
The last time I met Heo in person, she left me with a quote (or another question): “There is no island on an island”, passed onto Heo by her mentor Kim Hakmyun. It lingers.

In Island, there is no island but many lives. And if I have to describe what life looks like in Heo’s films, I will invite you for dinner. Eating plays a crucial part in many of Heo’s films. Sitting at a table and sharing the same pot of stew. We have learned, in cautious clarity, that eating together is a daring commitment toward being together.

However, sharing a meal is a part of a mundane routine, like a reflex, nothing more significant than asking, “Have you eaten?”, which is akin to “How are you?” in English. The film brings us back to the pavilion; now, the dog is limping with a bandage around its foot. A family walks into a gazebo and sees the dog. “What is that puppy doing there?” a sympathetic voice asks. They observe and speculate. A ship horn. They are distracted by the sea, where the ferry is coming from. Let’s go—a return to silence.

Back to the image of the back of the dog. It’s still holding me, and I’m not ready to turn away.

January, pandemic-stricken Seoul. It’s dark. I open my curtain to a wall of an apartment building identical to the one I am in quarantine. A wall of windows—it’s the only view that I have had in many bedrooms of South Korean apartments. A dog barks. By the time it reaches my ear, the sound has bounced off too many walls, and it is impossible to locate the source. The faint reverberation hovers and evaporates into the sky. I’m left with the familiar hollow silence, non-diegetic to densely-stacked lives on display blinking with ceiling lights and TV glare, drawing a different archipelago of glowing rectangles every night. I hear my phone buzzing. Heo’s message, wishing me a happy new year. Another bark echoes. I look out. And there is a dog. There is an island.
The Grainy Frontier: Revisiting the Images of Sandscape in Teshigahara Hiroshi's *The Woman in the Dunes*
To say something about the Japanese is to say something about sand.\(^1\) Sand means particles, details, and grains. These combine into a bigger picture and form a landscape of distinctive and massive formlessness—a desert. There is no desert in Japan; outside of a small space of sand dunes, such a landscape remains non-existent. The word for the desert in Japanese, either sahaku (砂畑) or sunahara (砂原), reflects the vastness of flowing sand (the former) or sandy plains (the latter). In either case, the word indicates the spatially interconnected with the particle of sand: a field of sand, an ocean of sand, a space preoccupied with the notions of a somewhat moving sand. Despite this, or perhaps precisely for this reason, sand dunes became one of the most resonantly allegorical Japanese tales of the 1960s, which was first released as a novel in 1962 by Abe Kōbō, and then adapted into a film by Teshigahara Hiroshi in 1964, with Abe as a screenwriter.

The Woman in the Dunes (1964) is perhaps the most critically acclaimed and recognized Japanese New Wave film. Critics and researchers have framed the film through a broad spectrum of perspectives, negotiating Teshigahara’s visually enthralling piece on the grounds of aesthetics, its allegorical capacity in the context of the anthropological or political gaze, or redefining the universally-resonant motifs of the Other, metaphors of collective identities, or notions of existentialism. One may claim that the tale of a school teacher gone missing in the realms of sand dunes, who is then forced to embrace a new identity in the new environment with the eponymous woman by his side, is, in fact, a tale which reception awaited an abundance of critical or analytical perspectives; or that its margins for further discovery remain rather limited. I wouldn’t argue with either of these statements. I would, however, claim that as long as there is art, there is a certain timelessness and limitlessness, especially when it comes to the representation of a formless vessel, the allegorical capacity of which seems to be equally limitless. This is to say, the sand dunes itself becomes a bottomless pit of meanings and allegories that resonate years after the tale originated in the minds of both Abe and Teshigahara.

The film fades in with the opening credits decorated with the fingerprints of the film crew and stamps (hanko) appearing on the screen. The image appears in step with the sounds of the city; the noises from a train station recall Tokyo, wherefrom the protagonist, Jumpei Niki, has escaped, as we learn in the following scene. It is the only time in the film that the audience encounters the presence of an urban space, even for a brief moment. The credits roll out, the city ambience fades out, and the particles of human tissue—fingerprints and stamps—are replaced with the grains of sand, just as nature takes over the urban. We’re already there. Accompanied by non-diegetic high-pitched strings in glissandi, we’re already gazing at the details of a grainy reality. The cinematographer of the film, Segawa Hiroshi, invites his audience to the realm of the dunes through four consecutive shots that progressively reveal the spectrum of a desolate sandy landscape: from a grainy close-up of a single particle of sand to a wide shot revealing the linear patterns of the dunes. The latter, in particular, forms a somewhat disturbing, almost carnal sculpture—the subconscious receives the visual when the face of a woman is juxtaposed in an exquisite double exposure a few seconds later.

The aforementioned four shots introduce the space with a distinctive noise of the non-diegetic quietness of the environment. We can almost hear the pulsating grains of the earthy picture radiating from the image, foreshadowing the unsettling story that is about to unfold—the tale not necessarily about a man’s agency, but that of the landscape in which humans struggle to sustain themselves, literally, on the surface. Then we see the man, a schoolteacher from Tokyo named Jumpei Niki who ventures into the fields of sand to find a new species of bug. The first moment we see Niki, he’s climbing up the dunes; then he rests. Left in the remnants of a boat in the middle of a sandy ocean, a space of palpable remoteness and vastness, he launches into a monologue about the life he had in Tokyo, about which he seems somewhat critical, but also eager to abandon. When the flow of words, the images, too, form a visual stream of consciousness—a woman appears through a double exposure, juxtaposed with the panorama of the sand dunes, and her presence tells us a story of a faded romance.

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\(^1\) This is actually a reiteration of Anna Lowenhaupt Tangri’s hypothesis from her seminal book, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
When he’s left there, all for his own, with the flow of thoughts and images, critiquing the plastic culture of Japanese modernity—one of the few moments in the film when we get to experience a clear distinction of actuality—there’s a sense of Niki being locked in a liminal moment: between urban and rural, but also individual and collective, as his indiscernibility translates to his inability to confront social expectations. He’s burning to escape the collective organism, only to find himself within a new one. Having been told (by villagers who appear out of nowhere) that he has missed the last bus to Tokyo, the man is invited to stay a night at the cabin in the dunes, where a woman lives on her own. The setting seems predetermined by fate—something between a horror setup and a male erotic fantasy, which Niki cheerily embraces at first, unaware of his unfolding future. This is how Teshigahara’s vision of a desert becomes a landscape for an echoing past, a flowing present, but then again, a stage for the unknowable future that is yet to unveil.

In building the visual tension of the film, Teshigahara sweeps the sand through a perspective that resembles that of an entomologist looking for a discovery (clearly the film’s protagonist), a collector, perhaps even a photographer gazing at his needs; or an ikebana (flower arrangement art) artist, taking a step back so that one can see the wider picture clearly and deliberately. After all, Teshigahara was an ikebana artist himself; born and raised in the family of ikebana master, Teshigahara Sōju, whose practice he depicted in avant-garde short documentaries—but not a regular bioptic. — Eventually, he followed his father’s path, but more so did this to keep the family’s legacy intact, while his film career had to stop. Through an ikebana perspective, Teshigahara captures four quick snapshots of the particularity of the scenery he observes. He imitates the artist who begins looking with a gaze fixed on maximum detail, but who then slowly repositions himself to gain a distanced perspective. It is only possible to seize the whole image of the artwork, once the person behind the work takes a step back and looks at it from a distance. From the very first scene, Teshigahara invites his spectators to look through a fixed and predetermined gaze; not only does he direct each of the scenes, but also pays close attention to the capacity of his spectator’s eyes.

Let’s take a step back, then. Why the desert? If it doesn’t exist in Japan, why have Abe and Teshigahara decided to take interest in something that feels so distant, beyond one’s reach, perhaps even irrelevant? “The desert is often mobilised as one of the figures of late capitalism, resource depletion, and exhaustion,”4 writes Daniel Mann about the use of space in cinematic representation. The New Wave filmmakers strived for a strong resonance with the here-and-now. The season of politics (seiji no kisetsu) abounded in protests against the ANPO agreement5, Narita construction plans, and nuclear policy. Artists of that time deemed it necessary to address reality in their filmic representations and Teshigahara was one of the few who leaned towards the surreal and allegorical in his body of work. The Woman in the Dunes is no exception, although the aspect of disinterestedness indeed seems to determine his aesthetic and formal choices.

The motivation behind the setting can be found in Abe’s writing. He was not only a successful novelist but also a proficient theorist and philosopher. One of the essays that left as deep impression on the researchers of his work was titled “The Idea of the Desert” (Sabaku no shisō, 1958), in which Abe delineated political and geographical markers of the desert space, as well as spatial strategies of incorporating sandy landscapes in film representation. There, he envisions the desert as a political metaphor, a frontier, where the government has no right to be; the absence of deserts in Japan opens up a margin for allegorising the Japanese post-war landscape—a forgotten wasteland; a vast desolate space—as well as Japan’s imperialistic ambitions. After all, Abe experienced his coming-of-age among the enormous landscapes of Manchurian deserts, so sand might have been engraved in his mind with immediate political significance—as an image of Japanese colonisation—thus becoming not only a metaphorical vessel, but also a tool for scrutiny. As with many things that the Japanese inherited over the years and made their own, sand in Abe’s eyes seems to be no exception: it becomes purely Japanese.

The film was shot entirely on location amidst the Tottori Sand Dunes (the only sand dunes in Japan) in Tottori prefecture in West Japan. The dunes are quite far away from Tokyo, which makes it interesting that the protagonist of the film misses the bus back home. With such a setting, the bus would take half a day at least, if not longer, and more importantly, I highly doubt that such an intercity bus would even exist in the 1960s. Realism aside, something more important is hidden here: the particularity of the environment existing within the frame of one’s imagination. I wonder: what was the reaction of those watching the film in Tokyo in 1964? Did they realise the fictionality of the setting? Was there anything uncanny about the idea of such a setting? Was there at least one person who thought that the image of the desert near Tokyo was not purely imagined?

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What strikes me as peculiar in Abe’s choice of setting is that even though there are no deserts in Japan, he manages to unravel his narrative as an allegory for a space that organically refers to a massiveness built from the singularity of sand—particles, grains, components, details, micro-elements. An image that exists on entirely different circumstances when shown through a close-up or a wide shot revealing the wholeness of an imagined sandscape. Teshigahara takes this premise a step further. By extending the allegorical capacity of the space through a selection of audiovisual techniques that enrich the image as a whole, he comes up with a whole spectrum of double expositions, in detailed close-ups, the distorted sound design, and the use of Brechtian techniques. These render the sand both beautifully captivating and poignantly metaphorical in many ways. The closer we look, the grainier it becomes. The wider the picture, the more collective it gets—we get to see the individual struggling against the collective body, or rather, shovelling to survive on the backdrop of an organism that consists of sand.

The imagined space of grainy particles becomes a perfect vessel for envisioning an anthropologically-oriented groupism-related allegory—the organism that consists of components that needs to remain intact so that the body can thrive, a metaphor for the Japanese sense of collectivity, that is—the audiovisual strategy behind rendering such force points to notions of agency. Teshigahara, consciously or not, captures the presence of sand through a more-than-human-agency lens, which links to a very distinct under-standing of the politics of spatiality. A desolate landscape refers to the political wasteland of Japan’s 1960s reality on one hand; on the other, the frontier works as an imaginary space for existential scrutiny of the individual—a mere grain of sand in the whole picture: the desert.

Much like in Teshigahara’s film poetics, although without focus on the graininess per se, the earthy representation (that is, carnality encompassed within a frame of land) can be also found in Imamura Shōhei’s body of work (The Insect Woman, 1963; The Profound Desires of the Gods, 1968) and Kanai Katsu’s film, The Desert Archipelago (1969). The former casts an anthropological gaze on the idea of seclusion in the context of Japanese collectivity, while the latter offers a take on Camus’ existentialism. In all of these cases, the landscape becomes vital—it’s an environment where individuals are controlled, formed, and subjugated to the needs of a constantly modernising reality. The characters are allegorised, but what fascinates is the outdated perspective and the male gaze behind it, as the filmmakers decide to impose a gendered frame: these are the women who either actively or passively superimpose conformity, and perform somewhat of an abusive controlling act over the men. And they are, obviously, sexualized through an erotic gaze; insofar as their primal sexuality is linked with the forces of nature, they embody the component of nature in all of these films—an invisible notion that is there.

This is encapsulated beautifully in Teshigahara’s film: the collective force connects with the notions of sand to form an uncanny omnipresence. There is clearly an uncanny feeling in the film’s ambiance—be it the villagers, whom we barely get to see, or the sand itself, which accentuates its presence according to the protagonist’s mood shifts. Everything in the setting seems under control and surveillance, which results in the sand pit becoming somewhat of a fluid panoply.

The water element is not accidental here, as it underlines the formlessness of the film’s sandscape. Surprisingly, there is a lot of indication of the watery nature of the environment the film takes place in; humidity, sweat, and different forms of liquids reappear throughout the story, influencing the characters and their motivations. The movement of the dunes, which constantly changes the surroundings, seems also to be fluid. The omnipresent force of sand makes things rot or rust, shaping the lives of the dunes’ inhabitants so they have to adjust their routines to its movement and take precautions in order not to lose their everyday essentials, including water. Covered with sweat—which Segawa renders through numerous close-ups, with an equally fascinating obsession—they have to comply, prepare for the unpredictable, and get used to distractions and constant motion.
The presence of water and the watery nature of the sand in *The Woman in the Dunes*.
The Grains Frontier: Revisiting the Images of Sandscape in Teshigahara Hiroshi’s The Woman in the Dunes
In other words, sand possesses agency and it's a watery one. It gets everywhere, just like water. Its formlessness, changeability, and permeability are revealed in Teshigahara's audiovisual approach. It seems that with the sand's infinite capacity as an allegorical vessel, and the landscape it builds into, one can untangle the limits of the narrative to an imagined maximum. That's the reason why Teshigahara's sand resonates years after the film's premiere. The sand as imagined in The Woman in the Dunes is both the earthquake and tsunami, a capitalistically-driven bubble of the neo-liberal dream of agency, and an existential fable of a 'no exit' situation; its formless force haunts the real landscape just as it haunts Niki and the woman in the film. When the horizontal lines of the sand walls collapse in one of the scenes, they reveal the friction in the textures of the sand. What we get to see is the inside; and it's the harshest image of the whole piece.

Whenever I rewatch The Woman in the Dunes something strikes my attention and leads my thoughts to the uncanny resemblance between Teshigahara's film and Alain Resnais' Hiroshima, mon amour (1959). The radiating quality of a single image of sand that reappears throughout the film—an image that might as well exist solely for the sake of its exquisite beauty, as sand was never given such attention in film history—sparks a visual connotation. The layers of sand, as captured by Segawa, draw the spectator's attention to carnality and textures: the dunes are introduced as the landscape of bodies and sand attached to sweaty human skin. The close-up of the latter brings to mind the poses of the human bodies from Resnais' introduction, where the grainy image was juxtaposed with the coarseness of a keloid scar. Teshigahara's idea to juxtapose the sand with skin, the dunes with bodies, and the environment with carnal through numerous double expositions seems a very conscious visual projection, which stems from his acknowledgement of the image's power, as well as the actor's presence. Okada Eiji stars in both of these films and surely there is a temptation to draw the line connecting the realms of these stories.
This is not to say that The Woman in the Dunes is a narrative reflecting on post-nuclear trauma; but to underline the inseparability of certain visual allegories to specific notions, especially in the Japanese context—be that the image of sand’s or skin’s graininess or the landscape of bodies formed in a specific posture; or to emphasise the allegorical capacity of sand that starts from aesthetic choices but then translates to a wider scope, such as the notions of unrepresentability, especially in the context of nuclear trauma. If we look at The Woman in the Dunes as a tale of certain remoteness, where the dunes become an embodiment of a frontier, a stage for a transfiguration of the Other, we might conclude that it might as well be a narrative revolving around the idea of the seclusion of those who are stigmatised for various reasons—the hibakusha (nuclear survivors) certainly did experience such stigma in their lives.

Something entirely non-Japanese—because it doesn’t exist and remains purely imagined, almost unnatural, perhaps hidden, somewhat rejected (in a psycho-analytical sense), in a way absent—might as well resonate with a symptomatic link and become a very Japanese notion. And it did. It has become a vessel, simply because years after the premiere of The Woman in the Dunes, there is still someone striving to capture the metaphorical meaning of Teshigahara’s sand. To evoke Anna Tsing’s words again, through which she encapsulates her understanding of an assemblage, “making worlds is not limited to humans”—I have a feeling that The Woman in the Dunes might be read as an assemblage that mutates, as an “open-ended gathering”, a work-in-progress that reveals “a potential history in the making.”

After all that time, The Woman in the Dunes became this wonderful cinematic miracle. The sand took over to create a world of its own rules. Thus, the film unveils unlimited layers of meanings, visual references, and philosophical tropes. What seemed to resonate back when it premiered, on both Western and Japanese grounds—a scrutiny of the post-war here-and-now, a criticism of fast-paced modernization, and a disconnection from the plastic culture and the bubble of Japanese identity—has now been interwoven with universal and contemporary notions that perhaps no other Japanese New Wave title has managed to render. In fact, the film became something else—it mutated; the film started to superimpose a new meaning to embrace. At the end of the story, the woman is taken away, and the man is left alone. There is no woman in the dunes any more. The ladder remains there, all ready for the man to let go of the sandy landscape, but he refuses to leave, as he has just extracted another sign of fluidity, another element of water that will make him stay: the water pump. “This ending is a warning”, writes Violet Lucca in her analysis of The Woman in the Dunes for Sight and Sound in 2022. The sand pit became another inescapable hole among the seemingly boundless pool of neo-liberal choices. These stand as attractive, tempting, shining among the wastelands, in this bottomless pit of despair: climate crisis, human rights violation, you name it. The water pump becomes more important than anything else, a fabricated illusion of one’s agency. And then we know—Jumpei has been gone for seven years now, succumbed to the sand. The warning was there from the start; we just had to take this one necessary step back.


So Heavy I Fell Through the Earth
Written Essays
So Heavy I Fell Through the Earth

Luca Lum

Luca Lum is an artist and writer attuned to the ineffable assemblage of time, memory, body, and affect, where the technological, semantic, and informational mosaic interweave, occasion, and precipitate. She was co-founder of an artist-run collaborative project and space, WALL (2019-2021), which experimented with novel situations of knowledge, agency, autonomy, and communion. She is currently pursuing graduate studies at MIT.

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British artist Tai Shani’s Singaporean staging of *Neon Hieroglyph* at the former Pasir Panjang Power Station dreams up a recuperative vision for new life amid ongoing collapse. The premise of the work is an exploration of a feminised history of Ergotism—ergot poisoning by ingesting fungal ergot alkaloids through contaminated rye grains—on Alicudi, a remote Italian island off the Sicilian coast. This history of Ergotism is entwined with the history of witchcraft on the island, its accounts of flying women, supernatural powers, and otherworldly visions.1

In this work, Shani leans into the unruly and disorderly grammar of Ergotism to speculate upon a liberatory form of existence, focusing on bodily decimation and hallucination as a breach into a more expansive, deindividuated alter-life. Its central characters are catatonic women (presumably also witches), fungal spores, and more subtly, artificial intelligence. Stitched from scraps of history, personal feelings around cosmic, communal love, and a jumble of visual and linguistic devices, this envisioned world spins through time, space and categories of life. Loose chapters are depicted through an interlacing of narrative voiceover, CIDI animation, live capture, and theatrical elements. Its visual sequences tend toward the non-narrative quality of a screensaver or GIF—relaying information in slow-moving, almost-still video loops. The alter-life that the work proposes is framed as aerial, feminised, dispersed, sickened, liberated, biophilic, communal and cosmic: “This bread is a starmaker of collective stardust”, the narrative voiceover intones near the beginning of the piece, “We are ... Green communists ... eternally communing.”

Eco-fictions such as Shani’s aim to relocate authorship and focus away from the human as the mechanism through which things gain their existence and are made meaningful, turning instead to non/post/trans-human subjects – the ecological and the artificial. Through reorienting scales, these become world-building acts that attempt to shunt the interpellations of subjects and objects by human systems and global capital. These se acts question the values, borders, and connective tissue between nature and culture, man and animal, environment and self, the sovereign individual and the collective swarm. By interrogating those borders and values, the embed viewers into otherwise illegible or previously unimagined realities. Redrawing a point of view simultaneously redraws the subject — and redraws its world. Through this, one hopes, possibility in a depleted world is recuperated, its potential unleashed.

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It’s said that within medival Europe, when a large majority of the population was illiterate, [ ] people would flood the churches; not just to / admire the light-washed stained-glass windows, or marvel at the cosmic curvature of the navel, but to listen to the Mass sermon – delivered in Latin – of which they couldn’t understand a word. -----

The sound of scripture was ecstatic, hallucinogenic – the language of the gods — holy enough to get high in a cloud of unknowing."

Ergot, the ascomycete fungus *Claviceps purpurea* infects a range of wild and domesticated grasses. Rye is particularly susceptible to the fungus as it can withstand colder temperatures and poor soils. It is planted in autumn to grow slowly over winter, coinciding with the growth cycle of *C. purpurea* spread, making ergot infections more likely. The dampness of Spring brings an efflorescence of rye, the required insect pollination patterns, and rains which facilitate increased grain contamination.2 Recorded episodes of Ergotism or ergot poisoning through the making and ingestion of contaminated rye bread span as far as the middle ages in Europe, occurring simultaneously with the bubonic plague, or Black Death. It is characterised by severe muscular contractions, seizures, hallucinations, and gangrene, and can cause death. Historically, it has been linked to the presence of witches on the island of Alicudi, as well as thousands of kilometres away in Salem, Massachusetts.3

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Tai Shani, still from The Neon Hieroglyph, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Manchester International Festival.
The narrative thrust and material qualities of Neon Hieroglyph purvey a kind of aerosol desire. It is the desire for the human subject, its perspective, and world to expand, disperse, and vacate gravity. To attain the kind of weightlessness exemplified by the ethereal glow of a divinely lit cathedral window and the flow of otherworldly Latin, Shani’s work surges forth in language, voice, and image. From the outset, the opening title sequence highlights the work’s overarching aesthetics and thesis: a delimited human condition transcended through what we might consider as sickness, madness, and death. On screen, a kind of juddering, catatonic motion characterises the bodies and the visual perspective of those bodies at first. The lower jaw of a CGI-rendered, red-haired woman slackens with a stiffness similar to a marionette. Instead of language, gushy froth is expelled, as ochre green spores ascend on her cheeks and fumes from ergot poisoning rise around her. This gushing forth of elemental matter is a visual metaphor for Shani’s own uses of language and its effects. She conveys language’s excesses, through gushy hallucinatory association as poetic speech and as pure substance, languages of the body more eloquent than everyday speech.

Disassociated, terrible reality did not feel real at all, all the rose emojis at the end of each message were making us cry. The impermanence became marked phenotypically across our faces, our eyes continuously pooled, our odd gaping mouths fell almost silent apart from a creepy note of parasitic panic humung subtly beneath death tolls and under ambient noise.

I came sexually and asexually, and when I came, I was a brain eating alien, I was a snapped stalagmite, I was a quivering shadow, I was a roundworm larva, "... my unbreachable distance from my name...culture...history..."

The figure on screen recalls its past and future lives; it comes into one form and then another, with others and auto-poetically erotically. As with any threshold experience, this loss of a sense of delimited self is a condition of both dread and ecstasy, as detailed by Mark Fisher. These bodies are thus not just depicted as sick and catatonic — they are self-generating, erotic and euphoric. Shani engenders a “continuity of the inorganic into the organic [... ] where natural substances and artificial creations are no longer any different.” While the CGI renderings remain frozen, they are overlaid with the recorded motion-capture substances and artificial creations are no longer any different.” While the CGI renderings remain frozen, they are overlaid with the recorded motion-capture substances and artificial creations are no longer any different.”

Through the crises sh t trees close to the dramatic town in the s h m a r e y the w a t er f o r t h e cl o n e s in the sacred temple then, IKEA, EYES CLEAR, WALK OUT OF THEIR MINDS, THEN, BREATHE, RELAX, UP TO WHERE THE DESERT’S EYES, CLIMBING UP TO PARADISE.


so heavy i fell through the earth

written essays

breezing through the categories of "animal, vegetable, mineral"—her alien, worm, stalagmite, shadow—, shani chooses not to interrogate the condition of each specific embodiment before casting a relentless connective vector onwards. rather, each form seems to quite literally matter less than contours of their coaling and trajectory. what rises to the fore is the rate and speed of change. perhaps shani’s main gambit is less about interrogating embodiment than it is about enabling an experience of flight and weightlessness: the human sliding into the transhuman potentiality of the smooth, engulfing, rapidly devouring machine, the fungus, and the aerially suspended witch of alicudi, undoing its gravitational holds and becoming pure gush, a body-without-organs.

but is this a flow without intensity, and what is freedom without it? in two sequences, the voice-over narrates the scroll of text as it moves up the screen. an overly generous reading would be to regard it as an instance of shani wandering through permutations of the relation between language and image, or as a technique of over-speaking and over-elaborating to designate excess. the repetition of the image of language and narrated word in this instance brokers no tension or surprise. like a priest reading without inspiration or insight from the bible, this deadens the relation between screen image and voice. these inexplicable redundancies cause the work to feel both overwrought and turgid; excess and potential for their own sake are not by default subversive acts. in other parts of the work where overt description and directives eclipse form and disposition, i greet this discomfort once again.

as a direct reference to the folk anecdotes of the witches on alicudi, shani’s bodies and their realities attain supernatural qualities. we watch as bodily perspective drifts up a domestic staircase before flying out above rolling trees. in the final scene of the film, this floating perspective zooms out into space, transporting us into an imaginative dimension where laws of physics are even more demonstratively loosened. objects, like an ice cream sundae, a gnarled and amputated monster’s hand, and a miniature stained glass window of a cathedral, change and appear at will. this seems to follow the work’s thesis, which is that ergotism places existence between life and death, between the worlds, where something else can arises, frustrating hierarchies and material gravity. body and language alike are supposedly uplifted by their derangements. you only die as much as you concede to this one physical, human form, shani aims to evangelise. let there be death, let there be lightness, let there be an exceeding of scales.

in the preface to mark fisher’s flatline constructs: gothic materialism and cybernetic theory-fiction, exmilitary cautions: “if late capitalist society breeds fictions of simulation, then its realities of paranoid specular traumatic interactions are soaked in social fantasies of the outside and evil.” the story of an aerosol spore that induces mass hallucination, one might argue, is far and away from a billionaire’s aspirational spacefight fantasy to escape earth’s limits. on the surface, shani’s work upends its world through its focus on the marginal and the already-here. it revivifies the female witch, the scapegoat for capitalism, as examined in silvia federici’s analysis on primitive accumulation and witch hunts from mediaeval europe to settler-colonial america; it’s a story about a fungus, something small yet impactful that can world another way of being; it’s a story that reaches into the cosmos through food and domesticity and the fungal, something small yet impactful that can world another way of being; it’s a story that reaches into the cosmos through food and domesticity and the microbial.

through its form and content, one might argue that shan’s work suggests that new and other life can come out of a rescaling of perception, not just the terraforming of another planet.

the narrative mirrors the transformations the audience supposedly receives in return: a transformative vision that carries us above our fixities and locations. our bodily schema, like that of the bodies on screen, become unmapped and undone, no longer weighed down by the turgid morass of mundane mattering, but lofted by the speed of an unceasing flow—her images and her words forming a boundary-blotting benediction. as our temporal, microbial, connective, bodily, spiritual scales expand, we are infected with a renewed sense necessary as a portal to another world: delirium, the gift of unknowing, ignis sacer.


[8] federici, silvia, caliban and the witch: women, the body, and primitive accumulation. penguin modern classics, 2001

[9] holy fire, or st anthony’s fire, is the name for ergotism or the effects of ergot poisoning

[10] tai shani, the neon hieroglyph

https://www.newmystics.xyz/2021/05/26/tai-shani/
In previous iterations, this narration is taken on by other actresses, such as Irish actress Molly Moody. In that particular iteration: "...the actor Molly Moody became an organic algorithm filter that snubbed out bits of her natural accent." Nature is co-extensive with the cybernetic. Other accents, such as American and Scottish, are amalgamated to become a "completely untraceable voice—a kind of futuristic speech, an amalgamation of different tongues, existing in this threshold space that's both alienating and arresting." In the case of Moody’s, or at least on the version exhibited by FOLD / Futur Shock and Parrhesiades, her speaking head, which closely resembles that of the digitally rendered human, makes appearances in the main video at times as a live layer speaking underneath a catalytic CGI-ed female, animating it as a shadow moves behind a scrim. In the Singaporean rendition, Kukathas’ head floats to the side of the main screen, the main CGI-ed female avatar on the screen remains a white woman with red hair, layered with Kukathas’s vocal animations. Where Moody’s accent notably shifts in the other rendition of the work, slipping and glitching Kukathas’ shifts are less detectable. I wonder if this has anything to do with the way English language theatre in Southeast Asia is shaped and received by my ear, itself perhaps already an amalgamated voice littered with linguistic palimpsests and erasures.

For Shani, the interfacing of human and digital elements constructs an expansive body that exceeds this world. With a techno-utopian attitude, she states, "What I like about AI is to escape from what’s historically co-produced with humans and human forms of power. [...]" In speaking about her previous work, DC Semanaris, she regards the artificial intelligence body as possessing a "gigantic potentiality"—a black-boxed thinness that human coders are unable to fully understand or account for through their programming. Because of this assumed thinness, artificial intelligence and the digital realm becomes a form of ultimate-other not contiguous with human structures of power. Shani additionally suggests a "broken relationship with our body" as the reason for the disconnection we have with a different set of realities or expanded embodiments. To her, perhaps the unaccountable effects artificial intelligence could engender, could open up possibilities of embodied difference as well. Shani codes femininity and artificial intelligence with this divine, absolved potentiality. But these conceptions of femininity, witchcraft, and the cybernetic, at times feel wielded like a smokescreen to enchant us with an idea of what we are watching.

Tai Shani, screen capture from The Neon Hieroglyph, 2021.

The eagerness to cast aside any earthly shape also suspends a deeper kind of reckoning in favour of a fantasy of freedom imagined in the absence of power and politics. Shani’s work is at times waterlogged by its own fantasies of transcendence. In The Atlas of AI, Kate Crawford writes, “The term ‘artificial intelligence’ may invoke ideas of algorithms, data, and cloud architectures, but none of that can function without the minerals and resources that build computing’s core components.” Even in charting new paradigms, artificial intelligence is not materially exempt from the muck and the mire. It is entangled with mining and mineral extraction, labour exploitation, and trained very often on non-consenting subjects. A world is as much its soil as its angels, its gravity as its atmosphere.

When I watched Neon Hieroglyph in person, the images of Kukathas and the white avatar floated side by side, the circuitry between them curiously unalive, their relationship neither fully explored nor ironised. Kukathas seemed included as a way to signal some kind of localised address Moody is unable to do. What does it mean for a Malaysian actress of Indian heritage to ventriloquise a white digital avatar in a revitalised power station in Singapore? Perhaps not much, but the at once entirely-other not contiguous with human structures of power. Shani’s voice—a kind of futuristic speech, an amalgamation of different tongues, existing in this threshold space that’s both alienating and arresting"—the site of effortful, offloaded work in order for the weightlessness Shani seeks. Under the overtly capacious conception of a cybernetic posthumanist body that can contain and bloom multitudes, Kukathas’ presence, and her repetition of the same script, has implied import, but seems unable to do its work. More inclusion of difference does not automatically fold in subversion, especially when the terms of potentiality are regarded as inorganic.

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[12]  "Tai Shani: The Neon Hieroglyph." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0bn90NRqH8&t=2052s
The seductions and lures of a recuperative and reparative address in eco-fictional works are multiple: it confers justice and reversals, transcendence and re-enchantment; the brokering of an exit; choosing life. It can feel morally exquisite to be the one who gives a roadmap to alterity in a scarce economy of malnourished hope.

In Shani’s baptism of words and images, I search for moments of indigestion, for the work to fold and burst its seams. I watch the recorded live-stream of Neon Hieroglyph for FOLD / FuturShock and Parrheisades on YouTube again. The work’s containment as a audio-visual piece that starts and ends relatively the same, albeit with a narrative head swapped out for another. There is a dead air about it. I wait for a feeling of shattering, I wait for a feeling of worthing, but all I feel is being strenuously guided along a spell-out map of becoming. The work feels less like a crack in the world, “the birth [and] the death of cinema”, as Shani describes, than a fantasy of an alterity that is suggestively liberatory but otherwise noncommittal. Perhaps it also betrays our cruel and strained fantasies of address and our desires for what aesthetic experiences are sometimes expected to do. In cramped times of saturated crises, the aesthetic realm claimours to be commensurate with ethics and politics, thus reassuring its value and viability of address.

In one instance in Neon Hieroglyph, the onscreen visuals of green fungal astral spores teem to red, resembling blood corpuscles, and the work suddenly reaches across time to address the then-present of “June 2020”, around the time of the Black Lives Matter Protests and early infection peaks of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This outlier temporal sequence highlights an anxiety around the uses of speculation and the need for art to in some ways contain discernible relevance. Was this intended to ground the work in some kind of historical continuity? There is the general biopolitical resonance, of course. However, I speak too much to the obvious ticking-tape now, and its dispensable Events, other worlds of deeper time and nuance slip away.

Open your pink playdough face for an anthropo-romantic divination of your cryptic future and you’re spilling carmine which was once your necropolitical, necropolitical, necropolitical face, and a thousand police cars set ablaze on the streets of our beloved paradisiac hellhouse.

A recuperative address like Shani’s makes claims in the positive—it can create a new body, it can contain and make an address. Its speculative thrust might be seen as one that coaxes possibility, a prime ingredient for worthing. There is an optimism about it not entirely dissimilar to the dreams of futures that was once your necropolitical, necropolitical, necropolitical face, and a thousand police cars set ablaze on the streets of our beloved paradisiac hellhouse.

To what extent can we programme a crack in the world? The old power station where Shani’s work was staged is located in a relatively inaccessible and inconvenient site, suggesting a spatial deviation from usual circuits of movement in the city. The erection of the Singapore International Festival of the Arts, a temporary reprogramming of attention in a city, is a kind of détournement breaking regimes of the everyday. But within these diversions converge certain straight lines. In Singapore, the planned obsolescence and preservation of select spaces is one such straight line. The intentional, planned détournement is another. The watching of a work like this, so explicit in its scripting of space where the push towards a simulation of recuperation and transformation forms a key point indicator, entails a kind of foreclosure of meaning and possibility. Where is the chance for surprise that does not seek to justify its values and meaningfulness? Where are the leaks that no programme can contain?

Contrary to Shani’s desires in creating a form that could hold everyone and everything, I wonder about an address that spills beyond everything, one beyond holding, that defies a pat teleology of transformation and worthing. To be beyond holding because it can only augur an unpredictable horizon, where the frame of the screen, the language of cinema, the cybernetic body, and the uses (or ruses) of narrative voice, and the site of exhibition disengage with naif utopianism and pick apart its fantasies. To be beyond holding—a project of overflow that exhausts its excesses and breaks its own frames. Instead, an eco-fictional imaginary springs its own traps.

Postscript:

At the time of the commissioning and writing of this text, Tai Shani’s monograph The Neon Hieroglyph (published by MIT Press) had not yet been released for reference.
Tai Shani, still from The Neon Hieroglyph, 2021.
Courtesy of the artist and Manchester International Festival.
The film was just a series of short clips from the frontline, though it made the whole audience cry.

I love them all. Who?

The missing object finds its pull still.

or this memory might be entirely flawed by the already disorientating reality.
The film was just a series of short clips from the frontline, though it made the whole audience cry.

I love them all

Who?
the earth, the rivers, the dusk and dawn,
And?
And you!

Was there anything uncanny about the idea of such a setting?
These stand as attractive, tempting, shining among the wastelands, in this bottomless pit of despair: climate crisis, human rights violation, you name it.

The missing object finds its pull still.

Through this, one hopes, possibility in a depleted world is recuperated, its potential unleashed. It can feel morally exquisite to be the one who gives a roadmap to alterity in a scarce economy of malnourished hope.
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