ANIMATION STUDIES

The Peer-reviewed Open Access Online Journal for Animation History and Theory – ISSN 1930-1928

QING SHENG ANG – THE INTROSPECTIVE MERLION: TRANSCULTURALISM IN SINGAPOREAN ANIMATION

Posted on May 16, 2019 by Amy Ratelle, Editor

Introduction

Singapore achieved independence in 1965. In 2015, the government of Singapore launched the *SG50* initiative (2015, SG50 Celebration Ideas), calling upon Singaporeans from all walks of life to propose ideas for celebrating 50 years of independence. The top-down initiative focused on "things that make us uniquely Singaporean," in hopes that residents would engage in ground-up activities that may shed light on the national identity of Singapore – a highly equivocal term considering the relatively young age of the nation-state.

Nevertheless, the initiative attracted a myriad of projects. They ranged from heritage exhibitions and tours to photography and illustration artworks. Incidentally, the period of 2013 to 2016 also witnessed several explorations of national identity in local animated cinema. It is uncertain whether the trend can be attributed to the top-down influences such as *SG50*, or simply a ground-up reflection of the collective voices of Singaporean animation filmmakers. This topic presents an opportune area of media ethnographical research, particularly when the notion of 'Singaporean' animation remains vague to both academic and societal intelligentsia. Could this trend present the possibility of a new wave of animated cinema in Singapore? This paper explores how a process known as transculturation may shape the future of Singaporean animated cinema by reflecting upon the creative voices of local animation filmmakers through a case study of seven animated shorts.

The Singapore society

To find possible answers to the research question, we first need to delve in the pockets of the societal system that contributes to the formation of culture and identity in Singapore. It is crucial to have an understanding of Singapore after independence – a postcolonial nation-state – before attempting to analyze its contemporary animated mediascape.

Search...

ARTICLES

Transnational Animation

Francis M. Agnoli & Rayna Denison – Introducing Transnational Animation: A Special Issue of Animation Studies

Dean Bowman – Playing Around with Studio Ghibli: Understanding the Remediated Meaning of Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch (2013) through its Transcultural Marketing Paratexts

Ian Friend – How does a Transnational Audience Factor in Character Design for Professional Broadcast Animation

James Mclean – Transmutation and Recolonization in Japanese Animation: Battle of the Planets and Anime's Growth in the West

Helen McCarthy – Re-creating Anime History: The Development of British Anime Fandom and the Developing Comprehension of Anime History as a Transnational Phenomenon

Singapore is a multiracial country made up of three main ethnic groups and one category called 'others,' called "CMIO" for short (Goh, 2009, p. 14). As of 2015, the population stands at about 5.4 million, comprised of 74.3% Chinese, 13.3% Malays, 9.1% Indians and 3.2% minority ethnic communities including Eurasians, Arabs and Armenians (Department of Statistics Singapore; Gomes, 2015). Even though Singapore is largely inhabited by Chinese, there is little to no trace of 'Chineseness' – defined as Chinese primacy or nationalistic sentiments towards mainland China (Veer, 2013; Goh, 2009). This is due to the success of multiculturalist policies set in motion since independence, which molded the cultural identities of Chinese and non-Chinese alike, adopting a Neo-Confucian model termed as an "Asian form of communitarian nationalism" (Veer, 2013).

The Neo-Confucian model embodied large saving rates, working culture that embraced diligence, market liberalism and predicated on developing streamlined education (Gomes, 2015). These provided a "counter-discourse against Western ideas of modernity" (p. 11), which allowed the country to both position itself as a cosmopolitan hinterland as well as preserving its cultural heartland and heritage (Goh, 2009). Singaporeans are thus nurtured to be able to communicate with the world regardless of race or religion. An idealized Singaporean in this sense would be able to communicate in fluent English at a business meeting, and switch to a local slang when purchasing at a wet market.

Ethnic groups are not treated race-blind, but given space to practise their cultural or religious activities. This is observed by the different holidays recognized in Singapore – *Chinese New Year*, *Hari Raya Puasa* and *Deepavali* just to name a few. Such governmental regulations resulted in a "neoliberal capitalist modernity" (Chakravartty and Zhao, 2008) hallmarked by a relatively high national per capita income in the world (Anon, GNI per capita). Each ethnic group of the postcolonial multiculturalist state are thus prominently represented at the communal level, setting stage for cross-cultural exchanges (Goh, 2009). These factors contribute towards the state rhetoric under the incumbent hegemony.

Transculturation

Culture, defined by Jeff Lewis as an "assemblage of imaginings and meanings" (2002, p. 22), is an intellectual conception by a community in order to establish communication amongst each other. The tangibles involve language, signs and symbols for instance. In multicultural Singapore, different languages such as English, Chinese and Bahasa Melayu are used for communication. Reinterpreting Jensinius's (2012) research on disciplinarities, cross-cultural exchanges could mean a mixture of Chinese dialect and Malay in a single sentence, like 'siao lah' (which means 'being crazy'). Intercultural exchanges could result in the addition of meanings to a word, such as the Hokkien (Chinese dialect) term 'walao,' literally meaning 'my father,' but extended to situations of expressing frustrations or anxiety.

Transculturation could then be seen as the ultimatum of a cultural exchange, when pluralistic amalgams are formed (Cuccioletta, 2002). Chakravartty and Zhao described the encounter as "unequal", producing novel "forms, styles, or practices" (2008, p. 12). The process is unceasing and constantly changing, involving not only addition but subtraction and barrier-construction on both ends of the encounter (Flüchter & Schöttli, 2015). Singlish, an amalgamation of

English, Chinese dialects, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil, is an example amalgam that is recognized as an "unofficial symbol" of Singapore's identity (Gomes, 2015, p. 41). It encapsulates transcultural aspirations of adding meanings while subtracting terms, although a full state of hybridization is yet to be reached for it to be considered transcultural.

Albeit limited, short-form animated works produced in Singapore may arguably have been consciously or unconsciously shaped by transculturation in the same way transculturation is shaping the society of Singapore. The phenomenon becomes more prominent in light of the skepticism brought about by globalization (Velayutham, 2007). The question of identity makes its pivotal presence in some of the work, while subtly hinted in others. The paper will now analyze seven short animated films that exhibit such a vision.

Case Studies

Curry Fish Head (2013)

Curry Fish Head is a film produced and directed by Srinivas Bhakta, telling the history of Singapore through the eyes of a girl fast forwarding through time. The story begins in a village in the mid-1990s. The mother of the girl tells her to buy some lady's finger, a vegetable ingredient required to cook the titled dish. She falls into a magical hole in the ground while playing hopscotch and goes through the process of accelerated aging. She found a husband who rescued her from a sea serpent whom subsequently left her after having two children.

The journey included some symbols representing modern Singapore, such as a Merlion (creature with a lion head and fish tail), Capitol Theatre, various popular places of worship and Marina Bay Sands. One of the scenes showed the couple taking a ride on the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) train, one of the main modes of public transport for modern Singapore. The husband was depicted retiring the marriage upon seeing another voluptuous woman – a possible critique of ailing social values. One of the daughters went away with a tattooed motorcyclist, while the other went with a Caucasian man – both a sign of globalization and a Western-leaning cosmopolitan attitude of the younger generation.

The various *mise en scène* and performances of the characters echoed a transnational outlook that embraced "cosmopolitan forms of imagined communities" (Velayutham, 2007, p. 6; Anderson, 1991). This revealed a sign of transculturation at work, fusing the worldview of different nationalities into a possible new amalgam, albeit in a direct, representative approach. One may also argue that the symbols utilized in the film echoed a sociopolitical rhetoric often reiterated by the government to form a top-down imagined identity among the citizens in response to globalization (Velayutham, 2007, p. 10). Nevertheless, food is one of the main products of transculturation, which inspired the narrative.

1997 (2014)

1997 is a graduation film by Wei Choon Goh and Jiahui Wee. The film follows a boy and a girl through their journey in primary school. The structure is dominated by the montage technique, revealing bits and pieces of a schooling experience in 1990s Singapore. Schoolchildren of different skin color were mixed in the same classroom and studied a variety of subjects such as science and history, as seen by the photos of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and

physicist Albert Einstein on a textbook. These are signs of acknowledging a regulatory education as state apparatus in the formation of an identity amidst cultural differences.

In a later scene, schoolchildren were seen dashing to the canteen for food when the bell rings. There they played a variety of games, like the flag eraser game, marbles and five stones. These scenes act as a dictionary of activities that aided a bottom-up formation of identity. As Gomes describes, memory and nostalgia plays a significant role in cross-cultural exchanges towards "communal homogeneity" (2015, p. 100). The film, centered on nostalgia, exudes a transcultural aspiration which may serve to pollinate other future works that attempt to establish a similar connection with a local audience who can relate.

Go Local (2014)

Go Local is a music video directed by Jac Min containing sequences of stop-motion animation using the cutout technique for a song of the same title. The video opens with a montage of iconic Singapore places and objects, such as the Esplanade Theatres by the Bay, letterboxes of the 1980s, a Merlion and shophouses. These familiar symbols appeared consistent in the cases investigated.

One of the scenes depicted the lead songstress at a hawker center – a place housing multiple adjacent food stalls in Singapore. Packets of paper towels labelled with the word "CHOPE" were also depicted. This Singlish word means 'to reserve', and is believed to originate from a physical stamping instrument called 'cap' in Malay and 'ćhāp' in Hindi (Manandhog, 2014). The practice of 'choping' is observed by Singaporeans at public eateries, where seats with a packet of tissue paper would not be taken by another person. Such a practice is known to only exist in Singapore, attesting transculturation in a specific time and space.

Another of the scenes features an interracial wedding. Even though the characters were simplified cutout paper boxes, the costumes and setting identified the groom as Malay and bride as Chinese, undergoing a Malay-style wedding at the void deck (common space on the ground floor) of a high-rise HDB apartment. Again, the breaking down of barriers between different races points towards the possibilities of transcultural practices that may result in "hybrid ethnic identities" such as a Chinese-Malay in future (Slimbach, 2005, p. 209), and subsequently the breaking down of the hyphens to form new identities.

The Violin (2015)

The Violin is a short film produced by *Robot Media Playground*'s director, Ervin Han. The film traces the whereabouts of a violin from the 1960s to the modern-day Singapore. The film goes through the early days of a hustling port; the Japanese invasion and occupation; racial riots following the end of war; the merger between Singapore and Malaysia; Singapore's rapid development after independence. The starting character, a little boy, receives a violin from an overseas merchant and became very passionate about the instrument. He eventually handed it down to his daughter after the war, who passed it down

Calligraphy in Religious Animated Films

Rose Bond – Poetics and Public Projection: Layered History, Redrawn Memory

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Jason Douglass – Artist, Author, and Pioneering Motion Picture Animator: The Career of Helena Smith Dayton (runner-up)

Volume 11

Peter Moyes & Louise Harvey – She's Not There: When New Illusions Meet Ol' Time RealTtime; Mo-cap, Virtuality and Live Music Performance

Ellen Rocha – Beyond Materiality in Animation: Sensuous Perception and Touch in the Tactile Existence of "Would a Heart Die?"

Jacqueline Ristola – Recreating Reality: Waltz With Bashir, Persepolis, and the Documentary Genre

Dirk de Bruyn – Re-processing The Mystical Rose

James Frost – Jan Švankmajer: Film as Puppet Theatre

one more generation to her son. The development of the façade of Singapore can be seen clearly, transforming from cluttered shophouses to skyscrapers and high-rise apartments.

The cultural negotiation taking place in Singapore extends itself to what Gomes indicates as "intercultural anxieties" that are "deeply entrenched in a history that Singapore is still negotiating and coming to terms with" (2015, p. 22). The depiction of the racial riots in the film is an epitome of such mediation. The same event, alongside the other events depicted in the film, have been remembered officially by the education system in the textbooks, and this film aligns well with the top-down formation of a cultural identity from the perspective of the hegemony.

Pioneers of the Future (2015)

Pioneers of the Future is a graduation animated film produced by a group of students from Nanyang Polytechnic. The film responds to the *SG50* theme in the style of an 8-bit game. Characters and settings depicting the sights of a Singaporean public transport, hawker centers, residential areas and various others were faithfully captured in this abstracted visual design. The film relies on direct symbols appearing in the speech bubbles of people, indicating the topics of communication among the people. A highly-scripted narration accompanies the animation, voicing a polished textbook version of what Singapore is about, matching the state rhetoric from word to word. For example, the film boasts about the world-class healthcare and port systems in Singapore.

Even though the film may not be an accurate expression of the voices of its creators due to limitations imposed by perhaps the institutional requirements, it has nevertheless mirrored some of the cultural themes seen in the other cases visited. Examples are the racial diversity and the façades of Singapore. The influence of transculturation on the *mise en scène* of an animated film is obtrusively manifested in this film.

The Tiger of 142B (2015)

The Tiger of 142B is an animated adaptation of a short story written by local writer Dave Chua. The twin brothers, Henry and Harry Zhuang, created the film as part of the Singapore's Writer's Festival offering. The story centers on a man plagued with troubles of unemployment and a shaky relationship. His destabilized life is projected on a series of murder happening at the block he lives in, suspected to be committed by a tiger. He eventually meets the tiger in an ephemeral time-space and leaves the audience to decide if he was in fact the tiger.

The struggles against an authoritarian capitalist state is not new in the Singapore live-action cinema, and the animated films sit well within this theme. Characters exist in tight urban spaces and reflect the problems of globalization, including increased competition in the labor market. Such problems serve to forge a common denominator among people of different cultural origins, which then relates well to the audience. Additionally, the characters speak with an accent known to be Singlish. Chinese prayer processions happening at a void deck coupled with characters of various ethnicities roaming around the flat in

search of the tiger convey the successful intercultural exchanges within the filmic fictional space. This is a sign of an influence of partial transculturation on the narrative design.

Lak Boh Ki (2016)

Lak Boh Ki is a Chinese dialect – Hainanese – or, the title for 'Drop Nowhere,' created by the author of this paper. The film tracked the adventure of a baby who dropped a plush Merlion toy out of the window of a 12-storey flat, trying to retrieve it. From window to window, ledge to ledge, the baby teased falling off the building, but ends up in the safety of window sills and laundry on bamboo sticks. Throughout the journey, characters of different ethnicity and nationality, particularly an Indian girl and a Chinese man from China were seen in their respective apartments. They made no attempts at helping the inadvertent baby to safety, leaving the audience with questions about the residential landscape in Singapore.

The film opened with a female housewife on the phone while cooking at the kitchen. She spoke in Hainanese, which is one of the recognized dialects that exist in Singapore. Each household seemed to live in isolation of its neighbors while contributing to problems such as littering at the window and high noise levels. Even though the living spaces are close to one another, the film suggested the wide, unspoken separation among the inhabitants. This presented a stark contrast to the other cases that aligned themselves to the state rhetoric. *Lak Boh Ki* instead challenged the idealized, polished cultural façade fabricated by the hegemony. This may also be another product of transculturation, as it was previously suggested that transculturalism carries not only an addition of cultural elements, but also subtraction and impediments between them.

Conclusion

The 50-year milestone of Singapore's independence witnessed the production of several animated films that questioned identity at their forefront. Whether it is a top-down initiative like *SG50* or a bottom-up activity such as 'choping' seats, transculturation is argued to play an imperative role in the intercultural negotiations of a common identity. These are reflected in the seven cases examined. *Go Local*, *The Violin* and *Pioneers of the Future* empathized more with the top-down ideas of a Singaporean identity instilled by the government, while *Curry Fish Head*, *1997*, *The Tiger of 142B* and *Lak Boh Ki* contains more ideas from a bottom-up communal viewpoint. The similarity of symbols and languages used in the film affirmed certain cultural traits concurred by the filmmakers as Singaporean.

The paper thus projects a prediction of the forthcoming animated cinema dealing with cultural themes – that of which continuously embrace transculturation in the same way Singaporeans are challenging and accepting differences in the community replete with multiple ethnicities, nationalities and religion. If film is a medium in which human beings understand themselves better, then, as Slimbach (2005) suggests, transculturation will allow us to be exposed to "a bigger, more complex understanding of the world, and thereby of ourselves" (p. 214). Future animated cinema may therefore partake in more meaningful roles in the formation of a transcultural identity in Singapore.

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