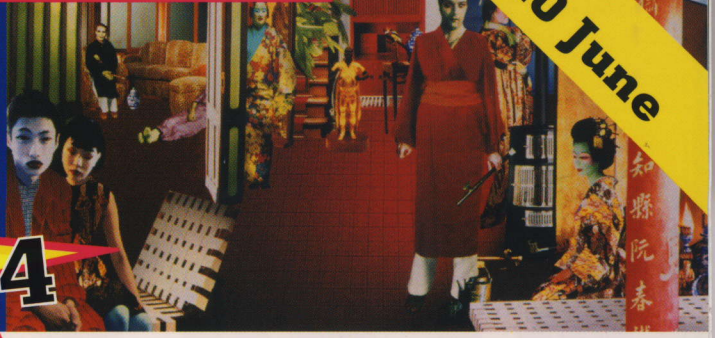


MONTH OF PHOTOGRAPHY:

4 to 20 June



2004



POPULAR
pleasures

through

**PHOTO-
GRAPHY**



NO SPITTING
எச்சில் துப்பாதிர்கள்

Pop Shots at Everyday Life: Photography and Popular Culture

“Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another.”

Madonna

by VENKA PURUSHOTHAMAN

What kinds of pleasures define our everyday life? Is human pleasure conditioned behaviour or is it instinctual? Pop queen Madonna's dictum, underscores this contemporary dilemma and emphatically serves as an anthem for the individual seeking to float in the high-tide of globalisation. Her anthem fits within the ambit of what is often termed as popular culture.

Popular culture is a labyrinthian social formation that deals with the primacy of everyday life. To understand popular culture one has to return to unpacking received knowledge about culture and the way society is made of varying life forces. Contemporary society is defined by the presence of different cultural formations, which represent constantly shifting social, political and economic circumstances. Shifting away from institutionalised understanding of Culture, with a capital 'C' which comes with an inventory of values, beliefs and norms, today, societies in keeping with the changing landscape of the 'social' – largely due to the global economy – find themselves defining culture through the production and circulation of meanings, values and pleasures. In doing so, they create social identities and social relationships that are relational to a larger social order.

Global capitalism is a centre of mass culture where people are trapped with a fetish for commodities, which seem to define who we are. With intense massification, personal identities disappear amidst a cloud of urbanisation. People, in their daily lives struggle to produce for themselves ways to determine who they are, what kind of social relations they have with their family, friends and community at large. This is also a struggle to refuse the trappings of categorisation such as gender, race, class and age.

Popular culture is not a quantitative gauge. It does not refer to ideas of popularity amongst most number of people nor does it refer to a dichotomy of high culture and low culture where popular culture is synonymous with plebeian or vernacular sensibilities.¹ Rather popular culture is defined as that which serves the interest of 'the people' who feel subordinated in relations to a dominant ideology, that is, mass culture². Popular culture is not mass culture though it is closely bound to it; popular culture is a culture of struggle against the hegemony of sameness, of massification. Popular culture is not political activism. Instead, people make use of the mass cultural resources (photography, television, fashion, arts, mass media etc) in creative and imaginative ways to derive their coping strategies, their resistances, their

social identities and a culture peculiar to their world. As such popular culture is never static; it is a culture of process rather than of definitive products.

Popular culture is the culture of the people. Madonna, David Beckham, Simon Cowell, Britney Spears, William Hung, *Friends*, *Baywatch*, *Phua Chu Kang*, *Masters of the Sea*, *WWF*, *Fear Factor*, *The Bachelor*, shopping centres, tattoos, graffiti art, tracing, skateboarding, Hello Kitty, diets, etc are not only popular but play a crucial role in defining people's way of life and their identity. It is a social condition, not an aesthetic or philosophical discourse. It is a culture of here and now, the immediate and the ordinary. Popular culture is culture that is always fresh and evolving as such; it cannot be structured, confined or institutionalised. Popular culture is a social presence that allows for the formation of subcultural identities against the forces of homogenisation. Popular culture offers a democratic prospect for appropriating and transforming everyday life.³

¹ John Storey. *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

² John Fiske. *Reading the Popular*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

³ Iain Chambers. *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*. Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1986.

⁴ John Fiske. *Reading the Popular*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁵ John Fiske. *Understanding Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

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Singapore Pop Shots

"Teachers complain that their students are picking up catchphrases like: "Don't pray, pray" and using them even in the classroom. The students may think that it is acceptable and even fashionable to speak like Phua Chu Kang. He is on national television and a likeable, ordinary person...So in trying to imitate life, Phua Chu Kang has made the teaching of proper English more difficult. I therefore asked TCS [Television Corporation of Singapore] to try persuading Phua Chu Kang to attend NTUC's BEST classes, to improve his English. TCS replied that they have spoken to Phua Chu Kang, and he has agreed to enrol...If Phua Chu Kang can improve himself, surely so can the rest of us."

Goh Chok Tong, National Day Rally Speech, 1999

The two quotes above by Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong brandishing Phua Chu Kang, the fictional protagonist, of a Singaporean sitcom of the same name for speaking 'bad' English reveals the inextricable link between politics and popular culture. In a situation where, entertainment imitates real life, it is reason enough to inspire flaring passions for both the audience and the state. *Phua Chu Kang* is popular, precisely because it allows its viewers to create their identities independent of the strictures of the capitalist state (Speak good English to survive globally). The sitcom becomes the location for strategies of resistance for survival for a social identity for those who feel subordinated for their use of their language: Singlish. The state, in acknowledging the power of the playfulness co-opts this activity into its own discourse: Phua Chu Kang is used in a commercial by the Ministry of Health to promote healthy and clean habits during the times of SARS in 2003. The moment *Phua Chu Kang* moves into the realm of official discourse, the viewer ceases to be an active participant in meaning-making and relinquishes the social relationship with the sitcom, seeking alternative sources of play.

In other instances, line-dancing senior citizens garbed in American country-styled clothing and young teenage girls wearing salacious hipster jeans exposing butt cracks and g-strings reveal their play with social discipline and evasion of ideological codes such as Asian values. Here pleasure is not inherent in capitalist commodities such as line-dancing and

low-rise jeans but rather created by the participants in their practice. In this instance, culture cannot be readily read out of these products but only in its social use. As John Fiske astutely observes, "the meanings of popular culture exist only in their circulation, not in their texts; the texts, which are crucial in this process, need to be understood not for and by themselves but in their relationships with other texts and with social life, for that is how their circulation is ensured."⁴ More importantly, these examples reveal the manner in which people negotiate and contest capitalism by playing tactical games against the powerful omnipresence of economic systems. Fiske adds, "the powerful construct 'places' where they can exercise their power – cities, shopping malls, schools, workplaces and houses...the weak make their own 'spaces' within those places...occupying them for as long as they need or have to."⁵ Resistance to dominant ideology is semiotic and not activist. Hence, carparks and basketball courts are converted into line-dancing spaces whilst pubs and corridors of shopping malls become the haven for teenage girls. Here people are free.

pop shots marks the use of photography to capture and experience popular culture in Singapore. Works by 11 photographers reveal concepts of everyday life through a mediation of excess (exaggeration and sensationalism), play (interpretation and resistance) and pleasure (fantasy and freedom) as their site for interrogating life and living. In the process the photographs display ideological formations and their questionable normativity; the power

of capitalist hegemony; questions of identity and social formation i.e. gender, race and class, age and opportunities of resistance against commodification.

pop shots takes a look at the social significance of photography as a cultural tool of socio-political discourse. It is a critical tool of popular culture and its use by photographer (voyeur), the photographed (exhibitionist) and the viewer/reader (self-indulgence) have established tremendous scope for the production of meanings and new identities. It is in this process that the photographers present semiotic, linguistic and discursive readings of the popular as social and provides us with an opportunity to see popular culture in practice.

pop shots offers a close look at the domains of vernacular language and in doing so, the photographers rather than engage in an abstract concept offer an intimate dialogue with the viewer through the study of everyday **rituals** (Ernest Goh, Ming, Sherman Ong and Tay Kay Chin), **objects** of desire (Chua Chye Teck, Lim Kok Boon and Gilles Massot) and place of the **body** (Frank Pinckers, Tan Ngai Heng and Terence Yeung) in contemporary Singapore. This precept is critical as popular culture is not about what the world is but how we see the world, for "seeing is not believing but interpreting".⁶

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