



Singapore Shorts: “Whatever happened to The Class Of 2002?”

Ben Slater *reviews a compilation of Singapore short films, and comments on the past and current crop of short-film makers in Singapore*

Rewind

It was April 2002. The Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) was raging on like a small war against mediocrity. Fresh from England, feeling self-conscious in sandals, I managed to secure a press pass, and attended jury screenings at the SIFF. After each session, everyone would pile into a people-mover vehicle to head for the obligatory *nasi padang* – Malay food – at the Rendez-Vous Hotel, whose manager is a film fan who supports the festival every year with this culinary kindness. Philip Cheah, the festival director, would offer me a place in the van, but I would decline. Not totally out of shyness, but I was busy, rehearsing a play in Little India, and couldn't dally with *cinephiles*, much as I wanted to.

One morning, we were at the Alliance Francaise for the local shorts competition screening. What were my expectations? Not high, I suppose. Cheah had told me that in previous years, juries had been so underwhelmed by the quality of the films that they refused to give out all the prizes. My only previous experience of short films from Singapore had been a fairly disastrous screening of student work at the Substation (a local arts centre); the documentaries were passable tertiary fare, but any attempt at fiction clunked hard.

The Alliance was a fairly large hall, with a few hundred seats. The jury sat on the back row. I was at the aisle, ready to leave in case of emergencies. Lights faded. Film began, and it was a real film – celluloid. For twenty-plus minutes, I sat rapt. When it was over I was filled with the desire to watch it again, immediately. There was that feeling when you hear a great pop record as a teenager. Something that swoons with all the complex emotions – dark energies and romantic yearnings – of that moment when you stumble out of childhood. If it gets its sonic hooks in, you have to own it; to be able to play it again and again.

Royston Tan's *15* left me with something close to that. The adolescent world it presented was utterly alien to my own. Southeast Asia, race, gangs, crime, brotherhood, bad education. I was completely seduced by the image-rush, and the strong emotional track that pulled the viewer through. At the time, I wrote for the UK film magazine, *Vertigo* (to justify that much-coveted press pass), and the following contains something about *15*:

"At its core is a portrait of two fifteen-year old boys – fighters, thieves and pill-poppers, but essentially they are kids. Tan portrays them as they see themselves – locked in a speed-cut zone of ceaseless techno and advertising imagery. Tracking shots through a nervous system; tattooed and naked in a desert; darkly comic threats to rival gangs sung blankly into camera; fighting incidents rendered as videogame; a birthday cake in the face explodes like a wound; charged dialogues in the crevices of void decks. Deep in their locked-off world, which exists as the taboo bad-trip flipside to Singapore's consumer-driven society, Tan opens up a well of extraordinary tenderness, friendship and vulnerability."

Along with *15*, the others on the competition shortlist of short films included Wee Li-Lin's *Holiday*, Han Yew Kwang's *The Call Home*, Sun Koh's *My Secret Heaven*, Leonard Yip's *Eve Of Adha*, and special mention should go to Los Angeles exile Sandi Tan's coolly satirical *Gourmet Baby*, which was shown 'out of competition'. It was a bumper crop, although I probably didn't realise it at the time. *15* came from nowhere. It was so perfect (and I don't use this word lightly) as a short film that the others were left for dust.

I didn't remain on the back row of the Alliance for the duration of the programme. Partly because I had to be somewhere, and partly to avoid the awkwardness of exiting with the jury, I sneaked out during *The Secret Heaven*.

Short-film crazy

That group of film-makers – let's call them the 'Class of 2002' – is well represented in the DVD collection *Singapore Shorts*, assembled and produced by the newly established Asian Film Archive, an organisation based in Singapore and dedicated to the presentation, archiving and discourse of film-making in the region. Royston Tan's



The Secret Heaven

work is in the DVD collection, but not *15* (which he subsequently expanded into a feature film of the same title). Wee Li-Lin, Sun Koh and Han Yew Kwang are represented by their 2002 entries.

Certainly the ferment for this wave of short-film-making was in place a good few years before (and that's evident from the earlier works on the DVD), but it felt like 2002 was a watershed year – a moment when something crystallised and the form was suddenly ripe with possibility. No SIFF competition line-up has been able to match it since. But now there are other outlets: festivals, venues, screenings and opportunities for film-makers to show their work. They proliferated like a virus after that watershed. Short films were in theatres and galleries; on TVs; on plasma screens in shopping centres; on buses; on the seat backs in taxis; on the internet; on your community centre wall; on 3G phones. Post-2002 Singapore seemed to go short-film crazy, and it hasn't really recovered.

We could be cynical. Anyone can make a short film, the poor step-cousin to the big daddy of cinema (the feature flick). The tech is cheap (and getting cheaper) and if your friends were willing... In the short film, there is no need to sustain more than a quick joke, a twist in a tale, a journey between places. Content was less important than finishing the damn thing. Entire sub-genres were created in the explosion.

There was the 'Disconnected Modern Lovers' film: shot in food courts, shopping malls, underground tunnels and Changi airport, where two attractive leads fail to meet while their Mandarin voice-overs explained the poetics of the situation. Wong Kar-Wai was patron saint.

Another was the 'HDB Whimsy' film, where adolescents and children are misunderstood by various arguing parental figures amidst a backdrop of high-rise flats, metal grilles, cramped washrooms, Indian sundry shops, *mee pok* (pork noodle) stalls and tragicomic void decks (of public housing apartments built by the Housing Development Board, HDB).

Then, there was the 'Singapore Underground' film, where we get to glimpse the bleak isolation and dark transgressions that lurk on the edges of the Lion City. Fruitless attempts to locate depth in a city of surfaces.

Yes, anyone can make a short film, but to make a good one ... now, that's another thing. The stakes are often raised by the diminished running time. The rhythms are new, unpredictable; no falling back on

a three-act structure. With less room for the story to develop, there isn't room for narrative drift or an inch of slack. Every moment and second counts. With a short film, you need impact and confidence. Slow build-ups are out. Set the mood quickly, let the images unfurl. Take the audience somewhere but do it soon.

Some crazy people really enjoy watching two hours of shorts in a row. I find it far more exhausting and difficult than any kind of feature. Each short requires a new level of attention. When one ends, you reset the defaults and start again. This is tiring to do. The result: audiences for shorts can be remarkably impatient and unforgiving, as I was watching *The Secret Heaven* that first time.

Well, I watched it again, or rather, watched it properly for the first time on the *Singapore Shorts* DVD, and my opinion isn't much changed. It's well-made, for sure, but it is the apotheosis of 'HDB Whimsy'. Cute kids, overacting actresses, cramp flats. Working-class parental aspirations for their children expressed through torturous piano lessons. Yes, the main girl is very sweet, and gives a good performance, and her fake-out suicide is a heartbreaker but the film is caught between social comment and the lyrical ache of this child's fantastic escape, and neither of them catches fire.

The family is a dysfunctional stereotype; the same one that was on show in Jack Neo's *I Not Stupid* (in cinemas at the same time as SIFF 2002), where an outwardly cold and/or brutalising Mother is countered by a passive but more-in-touch-with-his-feelings Dad. When Chinese Matriarchs go bad. The naturalism of *My Secret Heaven* never allows the film to truly absorb the world-view of the child. She remains at a distance: cute, spunky and in her disobedience, somehow a mysterious object rather than a living, dreaming being. That is the most interesting element of the film: the character's wilful, wrong-headed and boundless refusal to do what has been imposed on her.

(Dis)obedience

The compilers and curators of *Singapore Shorts* decided that 'Distance' should be the theme of the DVD, and that's certainly present (although I think my idea of distance is different from theirs) but watching the short films in a sequence of my choosing, I am struck by how many of them deal with (Dis)obedience. Rules are broken; social norms are rejected; parents and teachers are constantly disobeyed. In the light of

Singapore's one-party, authoritarian history, this is a fascinating trope. Wee Li-Lin's *Autograph Book* could be a sequel to *My Secret Heaven*, with the twelve-year old girl now older and unpopular in school, but with a covert and unexplained penchant for defacing textbooks. Both shorts could play as unofficial 'prequels' to *Sex*, *The Annabelle Chong Story*. And I don't mean that quite as flippantly as it sounds.

Wee's focus is the emotional hot-house of middle-class adolescence, and although it plays out in a girls' school full of stereotypes (class bitch, bimbo cheerleader, misfit, probable lesbian, self-righteous teacher), this suits the good-natured, stylised register of the film. The direct-to-camera speeches (where the characters voice out what they have written in each other's autograph book) is the neat visual device that saves the day. In her work before and since *Autograph Book* (including her 2002 entry *Holiday*), Wee has specialised in mostly cosy, vaguely uncomfortable situation comedy; at worst they are stilted and trite, at best they mine a seam of offbeat humour that lifts them beyond primetime.



Autograph Book

It's still a world away from *15*, and begs the question: what would the female equivalent of *15* be like? This issue of gender is worth a quick detour. In the last decade, Singapore feature films have been overwhelmingly masculine and frequently misogynistic. In *15*, the feature-film version, women enter the frame only as sex dolls or harping shrews. Then, there is Eric Khoo's continuing series of impossible objects of beauty and desire; Jack Neo's ugly girls, super-*kiasu** wives or ruthless mistresses; the battered, abused whores and wives of Djinn's *Perth*; and the assorted female body parts of *Zombie Dogs*. It's a very distressed landscape. Countering this, the short film scene has yielded many distinctive female film-makers. Some like Tania Sng and Gek Li San are not included here. Their voices may be marginalised by the lesser visibility of the form (compared to features), but at least they are active.

Most haunting

Navigating the DVD menu of Asian Film Archive's *Singapore Shorts*, we pass from children to young adults, and come to what is probably the most haunting film of the collection, Bertrand Lee's *Birthday*.



Birthday

The pair of working-class, Chinese (speaking) rebels that carry the long-short (about 30 minutes) have gotten married, with a kid, at a painfully young age the guy could pass for 18; both give superb performances). We see him being retrenched in the opening sequence (a recurrent scene in Singapore film and TV from Jack Neo's

Money No Enough onwards), and then we move into the hermetically sealed vault of the couple's HDB flat, where they prepare for their son's birthday. Over the course of that night and the following day, their relationship implodes. The financial insecurity they face is killing her, and although the sex is still good, these beautiful losers lock themselves off into private states of anger, denial and resentment.

Lee's notes on the film inform us that it may be the last day of their marriage, and this explains the man's last-ditch attempt to revive a sense of nostalgia about their past through a visit to the coast, but I wasn't so sure. My feeling was that the lovers needed to push their marriage to the edge in order to feel anything – something.

Lee, who has experience in ads, knows where to put his camera, and he pushes and pulls us towards and away from his characters in a very measured, assured rhythm. In one exquisite moment, they glumly share a cigarette through the windscreen of a moving car; a shot that simultaneously celebrates togetherness, and commiserates with their aloneness. It may be one of the most powerful and stylish images in all of Singapore's brief cinematic history.

Along the way, the lovers shout, copulate, trespass and vandalise; there is a disobedient streak in the film. Lee avoids the usual inclusion of the couple's parents (which are never referred to), who could have been so easily wheeled out to explain or disapprove of their offsprings' lifestyle choices. This seems like a minor miracle, and is so against the grain of Singapore short films, that it marks *Birthday* out as profoundly different.

In an accident earlier this year, Lee lost his leg, and has withdrawn from film-making. In an interview with *The Straits Times*, he described being psychologically unable to watch films, let alone think about making them. Let's hope that given time, he can return.

After the collapsing, nuclear family of *Birthday*, we segue into Tan Pin Pin's *Moving House*, a judgement-free visual essay on the lengths an extended family will go to in order to be obedient.

When their ancestors' graves are scheduled to be exhumed by order of government bodies (to clear the way for new housing estates in land-scarce Singapore), two families (the DVD contains both Tan Pin Pin's original 'home movie' about her own family, and the longer Discovery TV version about another family), set out to excavate the burial sites, and carry out a new set of rites to smooth the journey from one resting place to another.

Here, obedience takes two forms: that boundless loyalty to their deceased loved ones, bearing witness to the premature re-appearance of their bony, decayed remains; and an unspoken commitment to the 'powers-that-be' that have imposed this humiliation upon the living and the dead in the name of progress.

In both versions of the film, Tan captures the way the families are cheerful and relaxed in their reverence – no 'to-camera' bitterness about the Singapore government. The vibe: we have no choice. The ritual must be completed, so let's get on with it as peacefully and respectfully as possible. I'm aware that this is a very 'local' reading of the film, and I wonder whether the interest of Western juries and TV commissioners in *Moving House* stems simply from its bizarreness, the matter-of-fact way that bones are lifted from the dirt, rather than the larger implications.

Tan honed a certain sensibility for pointed documentary with *Moving House*, in which simple but effective editing choices say more than an hour of editorial narration. She also established her proximity to her subjects: close enough to let them talk, but far enough away to cast a cool eye (I can't help returning to *Distance!*).

Her latest mini-feature, *Singapore GaGa*, extends and develops this practice further. Again, it is finely tuned to Singapore's idiosyncratic tensions, and I wonder what responses it gets outside the island. A multi-stranded tapestry of interviews themed around sound and music in the Lion City, *Singapore GaGa* cumulatively reveals an alternative history of the republic, which counters the official line (she assembles a cast of mild-mannered misfits, has-beens, outsiders, rebels and mavericks).



Moving House

This implicit engagement with political discourse is extremely rare in Singapore, largely because any film deemed 'partisan' is actually illegal. The ongoing investigation into documentary film-maker Martyn See, whose short-film portrait of Opposition figure Chee Soon Juan (called *Singapore Rebel*) caught the attention of the police before it could be screened, stands as a warning to all other film-makers – Don't Go There.

Royston Tan's contribution to the *Singapore Shorts* is *Mother*, a piece in the DVD compilation that returns us to disobedience once more. Found-footage of home movies from the 70s/80s unspool and flicker as an actor recites a prose poem in Mandarin about a delinquent's profoundly unfilial hatred of his mother. It sounds angsty, but it's actually more layered than my crude description suggests. For one thing, Tan doesn't pretend that the footage directly relates to the narration; rather, it becomes a signifier for all families: sometimes for a past that seems idyllic but may be hiding something, and sometimes for a childhood that our narrator may have wanted but never had. His litany of cruelty acted upon his mother repeats itself into oblivion, and you are left hanging at the end with a few tons of unspoken regret.

Tan made *Mother* the year before *15* (the short version), and you could trace some connections between the benumbed teens of that film (who almost never discuss their families), and *Mother's* outpouring. That year, he also made *Hock Hiap Leong*, the short that launched him on the international film circuit. It is something else entirely, a blatantly and knowingly nostalgic lip-sync routine in praise of a decrepit coffee shop. The real companion piece to *Mother*, however, is the more lyrical *Sons* from a year before that, which marries the slick, advertising honed eye of *Hock Hiap Leong* with the poignant disconnect of the later film.

Tan is something of a chameleon. Even if you'd seen all the shorts that preceded it, *15* (the short) still came as a surprise. That film of course, should be included here, but it remains a touchy issue. The feature-length *15* was horribly censored in Singapore while celebrated uncut abroad. Attempts to revive the short version (which had sailed under the radar because of its limited appearance at SIFF), have failed. Forget ordering the UK DVD on Amazon – it gets sent straight back, rejected. Within Singapore, *15* (both versions) is in real danger of becoming a lost movie.



A scene in Royston Tan's short film, Mother

Having just finished shooting his second feature, Tan is now destined to burn very bright, but his relationship with government agencies (they fund him or give him awards, then censor or chastise him) epitomises the fatal ambivalence that the authorities have towards the arts in general. They are not willing to pay the cost (hearing stuff they don't want to hear) of brilliance and originality.

OK. Back to the DVD. Han Yew Kwang explains that the idea of *The Call Home* was not his, but rather presented to him as he was preparing to make a 'thesis' film. The film is another long-short, twenty minutes cataloguing details in the life of Kasi, an Indian construction worker who strives to live with dignity as he serves his time in Singapore, but rapidly succumbs to the temptations of life away from home (smoking dope, booze, possibly whores), and the miseries of dormitory life and tedious labour. It's hard to tell how 'authentic' Han's portrait of this way of being is. He has a measured, unobtrusive way of shooting, and the details feel right (although in three years of working and walking in Little India, I've never seen a worker crying at a payphone). The film, however, emulates Kasi's life rather too closely, and it winds up edging into boredom.



The Call Home

It's a very worthy issue, and seeing it on arrival in Singapore in 2002 it seemed like it was a powerful statement, but I can't help thinking

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there are other approaches. Construction workers in Singapore are among the most voiceless and marginalised groups on the island. Domestic workers (maids) and their predicaments received much media attention, and their rights are frequently discussed. Han's film makes Kasi into an object of pity, and we go through all the appropriate emotions as we pity him, but what then?

Malaysian director Yasmin Ahmad is currently in the early stages of developing a project about a construction worker in Singapore. Anyone familiar with Ahmad's mixture of the magical romance and earthy humour will realise that she could take the material into radically different territory. As for Han, he has just finished his first feature, a slapstick comedy in Mandarin.



Three Feet Apart

Odd ones out

The two odd films out are Jason Lai's *Three Feet Apart* and Eva Tang's *While You Sleep*. The former, a Flash animation, seems to be included by virtue of its explicit intersection with the 'Distance' theme. While it was bold to put one animated film amidst a programme of live action, Lai's film doesn't hold its end up, and it adds nothing to the DVD. It's a one-gag flick, and even if it's meant to be a sad joke, and the comment it makes about communication and technology is all in the notes – we don't even need to see the film. The other one, *While You Sleep*, is a student piece, shot in freezing London-standing-in-for-Japan with a Japanese cast, in black and white – all for no clear reason. Tang builds a tentative narrative about a single mother whose life-saving operation requires her to be unconscious for a few days. In her absence, the daughter bonds with the quasi-senile grandmother; her brother plays with his PlayStation 2; and their estranged father makes



Locust



While You Sleep

a pathetic attempt at reconciliation. Its slight, minor-key observations are based entirely on moments layered on top of moments, and this reveals a hint of Tang's potential, but nothing more.

My exhausting viewing marathon concludes with *Locust* by Victric Thng, a director often touted as Singapore's leading 'experimental' film-maker. Thng is a stylist, for sure, knowing how to combine a pleasing image with a poignant Mandarin voice-over. For three minutes, *Locust* presents footage of a huge swarming crowd (in China during winter, perhaps?). Faces move in and out of focus, the mass anonymity of the group fleetingly giving way to individuals, their smiles and personalities. It concludes on a repeated, slowed-

down fragment of two young men sharing a moment of tenderness amidst the seething rush. It's a well-made piece, a short film as a declaration of love (a good companion to Tan's *Mother*), and I'm curious as to where Thng will go next. My hunch is that he could thrive, away from the constraints of the cinema or TV space – video installation may be better suited to his atmospherics.

A little Googling reveals that *Locust* has played in a slew of Gay & Lesbian film festivals around the world, none of which are cited in the DVD's 'Screening History' section. Not quite sure what they're afraid of.

So, the 'Class of 2002' morphs into the 'Class of 2005' if indeed this DVD provides the signpost along a journey for this eclectic assembly of talents. Short films have such a limited life, so the Archive can be commended for finding a place for them to retire, and hopefully to be visited often by the public. It's clearly not a commercial exercise, but a labour of love.

Fresh voices

The strength of the DVD is that it shows how this generation of film-makers have fresh, distinctive and 'other' voices, something that the creatively conservative major media in Singapore (print, TV, film) generally avoid like the plague. The short film epidemic I mentioned earlier has given rise to a wide variety of dubious talent contests with heavyweight corporate sponsors. As PR exercises, they are effective: making a lot of noise about how 'open access' these networks are (with the attendant rhetoric about digital tech), but I seriously doubt that the next Bertrand Lees or Tan Pin Pins will emerge from this process. Rather we'll have more (and inferior) variations on HDB Whimsy, Disconnected Lovers and Singapore Underground to add to the ever-growing pile.

The best work here is personal, and even the films that I really dislike on the DVD never feel like the shameless 'Calling Cards' which are the norm in Europe and America – shorts that only exist to show off their makers' skills and get jobs. At the same time, I doubt that any of these film-makers are naive enough to think that they can expand into features or TV without suffering compromise to the very elements that make them stand out.

Another paradox. Until Singapore learns to truly, properly, deeply nurture the talents that are already out in the open, then the Class of 2002 or 2005 and all the future classes may have to remain in school.

* *Kiasu is a Chinese dialect (Hokkien) word for 'fear of losing', used in describing social attitudes (of people, especially in Singapore and Malaysia). The word is applied widely in the context of not wanting to lose out in a highly competitive society, and the behaviour in response to fears of missing out on benefits and advantages which others may receive.*

Photographs provided by Asian Film Archive

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