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KENNETH PAUL TAN
National University of Singapore

Violence and the supernatural in Singapore cinema

ABSTRACT

This article surveys the approach of two important film-makers to the experience of redevelopment projects and the spatial reconfigurations of the urban landscape in Singapore. Tan Pin Pin's documentary Moving House depicts the violent collision of modern development with traditional rituals, showing the mass exhumation and transfer of graves to apartment-like style blocks to accommodate public housing construction. The ghosts of the dead return to such public housing estates in Eric Khoo's fiction film 12 Storeys (1997) to pass through the claustrophobic spaces of alienation containing the struggles of upward mobility. In such examples, the supernatural and fantastic provide a violent reconstruction of the social memory of postcolonial Singapore.

KEYWORDS

Singapore cinema
Tan Pin Pin
Eric Khoo
violence
supernatural

Violence in modern societies can take several forms, though the spectacle of behavioural forms of violence at the interpersonal and inter-group levels often distract from its less easily identifiable social-structural dimensions built into the system itself. This article focuses on aspects of social-structural violence associated with a postcolonial city state's accelerated development over the decades into a peaceful, urban, industrial, Chinese-dominant but formally multicultural nation, embedded geopolitically in the Southeast Asian region and culturally, economically and competitively in global capitalism. Singapore's

- 1 For further development of the arguments regarding national anxiety, in connection with Singapore film's depiction of supernatural and monstrosities, see Tan (2010).

self-image of a spectacularly successful nation continually troubled by historical trauma, permanent vulnerability and new challenges yields a notably repressive culture marked by a public grammar and vocabulary of anxiety that, as Yao Souchou observes, combine in 'over-the-top' expressions that produce a 'culture of excess' (Yao 2007: 41).

This language of anxiety has, naturally, found its way into those parts of recent Singapore cinema that seem to point to latent modes of social violence and, in some cases, contribute to its reproduction.¹ Not surprisingly, many Singapore artists and film-makers have tended to dwell disparagingly on the impact of these developments on the nation's integrity, the city's creativity, the people's compassion and the individual's humanity. But a number of them, although critical of Singapore's apparent 'one-dimensionality', are themselves indirectly or unwittingly complicit in these social-structural conditions of violence (Tan 2008). This essay explores themes like rapid urbanization and the loss of a collective sense of place and community, family ties and cultural vibrancy in Tan Pin Pin's *Moving House* (2001), and it examines the repressive, alienating and destructive power of capitalism in Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* (1997). These films reflect the cultural ambiguities and anxieties of postcolonial modernization that underlie Singapore's struggles and strategies to locate itself as 'western', 'East Asian' or 'Southeast Asian'.

Stephen Prince observes how the central – and always unanswerable – question that horror films pose again and again is, 'What must be done to remain human? [...] The question of what must be done to remain human is posed in its negative form, by showing the loss of humanity [...] because the fear of this loss motivates the genre' (Prince 2004: 3). Ken Gelder identifies two features of postcolonial horror:

First, it refused to honour the sanctity of boundaries and borders, whether they were national or bodily. Infection and inhabitation (hence: spectralization, hybridity, etc.) thus emerged as dominant horror tropes. Horror became increasingly fascinated by circulation: one thing passing into another, mutating, even melting, identities along the way. Secondly, horror came to relish the clash between the modern and the traditional, the new and the archaic [...] Temporal disjunctions were emphasised, often through a series of 'returns of the repressed', working to reacquaint you with what you thought was over (or elsewhere). Possession and dispossession, the clash between the properly adjusted modern subject and archaic signifiers coded as 'excessive', and the traumatic defamiliarizations associated with the uncanny all become determining tropes for horror texts.

(Gelder 2000: 34–35)

In these Singapore films, the 'non-human' that emerges grotesquely from – and, at the same time, provokes – the fear of a loss of humanity is expressed in distinct boundary-crossing supernatural figures. In *Moving House*, Chinese ancestral spirits (whom the audience does not actually see but hears about) cross into the de-sacralized consciousness of modern Singaporeans who mourn the loss of customs and the values associated with them, while downplaying their own responsibility for choosing 'temporal' over 'spiritual' authority in a relentless national drive for material growth and progress. In *12 Storeys*, the ghostly memory of a nagging old woman consumes the numbed consciousness of a 'failed' female subject in the Singapore success story, while a young male

guardian angel through his own gaze unobtrusively connects the stories of desperation that play out in the isolating apartments of a public housing block, drawing the audience's attention to a common tragic theme. Like the ancestral spirits of *Moving House*, these figures create 'temporal disjunctions' that problematize 'the modern and the traditional, the new and the archaic' (Gelder 2000: 34), in what Bliss Cua Lim (2001: 294) describes as 'the disputed Now' when 'times other than the present contend with each other'.

Lim argues that

Haunting or ghostly return insists that 'prior' modes of consciousness are never completely surmounted or occluded, and that social reality depends on a fractious consensus. The spectral estranges our predisposed ways of experiencing space, time, and history and hauntingly insinuates that more worlds than one exist in the world we think we know.

(Lim 2001: 294)

This article acknowledges the power of ghosts to demand recognition of the complex and disjointed worlds that make up the 'now'.² However, it also recognizes the power of cinema to gratify audiences predisposed to the comforts of order and regularity by helping them to purge themselves of their anxieties once these anxieties have been ritually acknowledged. As Jay Meddin argues, 'ritual serves as one major mechanism by which symbolically skilful organisms order and regulate their inner lives, inner lives that are extensively aroused by the very use of symbols themselves' (Meddin 1980: 252). Meddin continues, 'Ritual patterns and structures behaviour tightly and thereby helps to contain associated symbolic activity and render it manageable and "safe"' (Meddin 1980: 257). Adopting Meddin's argument, this article will explore how symbolic elaborations, problematizations and disruptions in and through the films themselves may be suspended, and coherence and 'normalcy' re-established in daily life, through cinematic experiences that resemble rituals performed to summon supernatural figures – the spectres of anxiety – in order that they may be named, exorcized and expelled to the Other-world. This contributes to the pleasures of Singapore cinema and, possibly, to its commercial viability in the capitalist city's creative economy. It is this aspect of the cinematic experience on which this essay will focus.

MOVING HOUSE: THE VIOLENCE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT³

Raphaël Millet describes Northwestern University-trained Tan Pin Pin as a 'pioneer' of the documentary genre in Singapore and counts her 22-minute *Moving House* among the 'first breakthroughs' in a genre that is important for recording the history of 'a young nation still in the making' (Millet 2006: 113). Millet, however, does not describe the extent to which Tan's films attempt to perform a sophisticated social and political critique. In *Singapore GaGa* (2005), for instance, Tan captures and then privileges the marvellous diversity, idiosyncrasies and musicality of ordinary voices in Singapore, voices that have mostly been overpowered by the ubiquitous and bland pronouncements of officialdom. In a society depoliticized by the 'science' of administrative technique and reduced by state-authored national ideology to a monological public culture, these have been ghostly voices that the film delights in bringing back to life.

In *Moving House*, a documentary commissioned by the Discovery Channel, Tan contrasts the lofty and historically momentous proclamations of

2 For a comprehensive analysis of the figure of ghosts and phenomenon of 'haunting' in social life, see Gordon (1997).

3 Some arguments in this section are based on Tan (forthcoming), which discusses several of Tan Pin Pin's films as sociopolitical interventions.

Singapore's material progress and development against her visually humbler style in documenting a day in the life of the Chew family. The Chews are one of 55,000 families required by the Singapore government to exhume and relocate the remains of their buried ancestors in order to free up precious land for urban redevelopment. Slow-paced scenes of a family experiencing 'sadness and confusion' are interrupted with upbeat clips from a black-and-white *Berita Singapura* newsreel from the 1950s, in which a British-accented voice announces Singapore's modernity to the world: 'Smart, modern flats [...] a great conception of decent modern living for all, and a signpost to Singapore's future'. Declarations of this kind are a very familiar part of an official narrative of nationhood that, particularly in the muscular hands of the postcolonial developmental state, has interpellated ordinary Singaporeans into the rank and file of a clean, obedient, industrious and self-sacrificing workforce-citizenry deemed necessary for national survival and success. In *Moving House*, the driving ethos of a founding generation of political leaders (shown in the black-and-white footage) intrudes into the most intimate and sacred spaces of contemporary Singapore (in colour). In this sociopolitical order, personal memories, human and spiritual relationships and traditions that do not contribute positively to economic development and sociopolitical stability are disparaged and rendered soft and dispensable. Having ideologically come to accept that the material comforts they enjoy are possible only with paternalistic, pragmatic, hard-headed and progress-oriented policies, Singaporeans have had to repress the intangibly valuable, sentimental and immediately gratifying aspects of life.

Tan's film points to two stages of violence which are visually resonant. At the first stage, in the 1950s–70s, large numbers of Singaporeans living in village communities were dispersed and resettled – sometimes against their will – into modern public housing estates (Loh 2009). In the earlier decades, these mass-produced high-rise apartment blocks – though clean, safe and convenient – were criticized for alienating the individual, atomizing community and lacking aesthetic character. At the second stage, the imperatives of further national development in the context of land scarcity serve as justification for the humiliation of the dead, whose final earthly homes were destroyed while their bodily remains were ground into dust, stored in mass-produced urns, and rehoused within endless rows and columns of virtually identical columbarium niches. The visual and conceptual resemblance between apartment blocks and columbaria is uncanny, and the film does not miss the opportunity to foreground the irony. The documentary's narrator observes how: '40 years ago, the vision involved better housing like this for the living. Now, it's the dead who enjoy such modern accommodation.'

In this juxtaposition, the image of clean, orderly and efficient public housing estates draws attention to the modernity of these new columbaria. As a modern solution to land scarcity, these columbaria reflect not only the death of living customs and traditions and a 'second death' of Singaporeans' dead ancestors but also the 'deathliness' of the living who must dwell in small, mass-produced and virtually identical compartments in the sky. Largely driven by nostalgic impulses that whitewash over seriously poor sanitation and fire hazards, the public imagination of genuine community today relies heavily on memories of village life, where, it would seem, people bonded together and cooperated unconditionally (Chua 1995). Other than the loss of community, *Moving House* points suggestively at the loss of a sense of place, cultural vibrancy and strong families, incurred in the rigid pursuit of national development according

to a muscular and controlling developmental logic that reflects a postcolonial obsession with renewal, cleanliness, safety, efficiency and the values associated with being modern.

Where a sense of place is concerned, the documentary's narrator describes how Singaporeans have come to expect that 'after development comes re-development. For Singaporeans, moving, rebuilding, resettling – whether voluntary or involuntary – is a way of life [...] and the dead are not exempt'. The justification for constantly pulling down and rebuilding has mostly been couched within the ideology of land scarcity, where the government needs to exercise near-absolute power to make the most rational and pragmatic use of limited physical space. However, the speed of Singapore's urbanization and its frequent disregard for history and context can make the experiences of living in Singapore seem transient. Unable to anchor personal, social and even national memories to concrete places such as one's childhood home, school, hang-outs and even family gravesites, since such places are regularly demolished in a continually redefined and therefore impermanent landscape, Singaporeans find themselves cut off emotionally from their physical city, knowing very little about its history. Without these deep emotional and cultural resources, the bulk of nation-building work has been merely formal, elite-directed, politically expedient, regarded with cynicism by the general public and devoid of popularly meaningful content other than the heroic actions of the nation's founding fathers (Loh 1998).

The loss of tradition – an aspect of local cultural vibrancy – is expressed clearly in the responses that members of the Chew family volunteer in the interview segments of *Moving House*. They lament the impending disappearance of *Qing Ming*, the annual Chinese memorial ceremony through which extended families can pay their respects to the dead by gathering at the graveyard to clean up their ancestral tombs and make ritual offerings of food and mock money. As one of the Chew sons reflects, 'without the cemetery, I think the atmosphere and tradition will die off.' Having installed his parents in a columbarium, he expects to visit them only on the anniversary of their death, rather than during the *Qing Ming* festival. The interviews also reveal a sense of loss where family life is concerned. At one level is the Confucian virtue of filial piety, which is expressed in the celebration of *Qing Ming* (Anon 1989: 45). At another level, *Qing Ming* has also been celebrated 'like a picnic'. It is an opportunity for the entire family to come together, in spite of their busy lives. Without the graveyard and *Qing Ming*, a suitable place and key motivation for large and convivial family gatherings will, according to the Chews, be lost. Placed as a still at the end of the film, a faded photograph of the Chew family posing at their ancestral tomb creates a sense of regret that their family reunion may never take place again.

The Chew family members register their complaint about the government's exhumation exercise in restrained grumbles, which is perhaps more generally representative of the extent to which resistance is enacted in everyday life in Singapore. One member, for instance, almost cheekily points out a contradiction in the government's reasoning:

[The dead] have been lying down there so peacefully for the past 20 years. All of a sudden, we disturb them. Sad! Most unfortunate, our country's area is small [...] why should they have so many golf courses? A waste of land too. Why can't they provide this land for a permanent cemetery so that the traditions can be maintained?

It is also interesting to note, in this regard, that the Chews certainly value convenience. While celebrating *Qing Ming* at the graveyard is a convenient solution to the perceived need for annual family get-togethers, such gatherings are not necessarily impossible to organize without this location.

They also value material success: during the exhumation of the remains and later at the installation of the urn, the family members ritually exclaim, 'Prosperity to all!' Indeed, the Chews – like many other typically modern families – value the rewards of modernization and are doubtless complicit in its demands. One family member observes how ancestors need to be buried in auspicious locations that will afford their spirits good *fengshui*, which can then be transmitted to their descendants. As the film notes, observing *Qing Ming* is a way for the filial to obtain the blessings and protection of their ancestors. Filial piety, it would seem, is as much a transactional relationship as it is a virtue. Ben Slater observes how, in the film,

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.

(Slater 2005)

By choosing to submit to worldly authorities, the Chews not only risk losing the protection and blessings of the spirit world, but also incurring its wrath. One of the Chew sons attempts to deflect the responsibility for this choice by recounting how, 'When I offer my prayer, I told my late parents, we have no choice but to exhume you, because our government requires the land. We hope you will keep protecting and blessing us.' As suggested earlier, though, it is not that the government has forced Singaporeans against their will into accepting its version of economic prosperity and all that it entails. Rather, the people have bought into an affluent lifestyle of comfort and stability, dealing with the inconveniences, sacrifices and forms of loss that it entails by suggesting that they have no choice under an authoritarian government.

Another means by which the Chews cope with the viscerally dreadful consequences of choosing temporal over spiritual authority is by resorting to spontaneous joking and (nervous) laughter. One of the gravediggers, for instance, makes fun of his relatives by moving the jaws of a recovered skull as if it can talk. Another family member recounts how '[w]hen the coffin was sawn [open], there was thunder. Don't know whether it's a good omen [...] or bad omen. But personally I think it is a good omen.' Even the film-maker Tan recalls, 'When the bones were being exhumed, which is a very sacrilegious scene, there was lightning and thunder, perfect for the scene. I had the heavens help me make thunder. To this day, I cannot forget that moment' ('The Insider: Tan Pin Pin' 2006). These theatrical gestures that appropriate the filmic effects of camp horror form a momentary distraction from the visceral fears and guilt that attend ordinary Singaporeans' own culpability for the loss of strong community and family ties, sense of place and inconvenient customs of their ancestors. The repressed guilt, like the angry ghosts returning to the land of the living, threatens to disrupt the everyday consciousness of modern, pragmatic and convenience-loving Singaporeans. *Moving House*, as a modern ritual, gratifies audiences by summoning the repressed guilt/ghosts to appear in safe

filmic space, so that they can, once acknowledged, be sent away peacefully, as everyone exclaims in relief, 'Prosperity to all!'

12 STOREYS: CAPITALISM'S BRUTALITY

Moving House drew an ironic visual comparison between a typical columbarium complex and a typical public housing block that, in Singapore, contains twelve storeys of apartments. Against the grain of more celebratory official accounts of the government's public housing accomplishments, Singapore's most accomplished art-house film director, Eric Khoo, portrays these blocks as physical and symbolic sites of human alienation and estrangement. And since these vast public housing estates are occupied by more than 80 per cent of Singaporeans, Khoo's vision of the life of ordinary Singaporeans is a thoroughly bleak one. C. J. Wan-Ling Wee describes how in Khoo's films 'Singapore's modernist built environment appears [...] as a disjunctive and claustrophobic space to which individuals have to adjust emotionally – generally unsuccessfully' (Wee 2002: 130). Tan See Kam, Michael Lee and Annette Aw observe in these films depictions of a 'widespread, persistent communicational dysfunction within families' (Tan, et al. 2003). In his second feature film *12 Storeys*, this bleak vision drives three tragic intercutting stories that take place on a Sunday in the lives of residents living in a twelve-storey block of flats. The main characters are, as Chua Beng Huat observes, 'representative types of Singaporeans who have fallen out of step with the Singapore Success Story' (Chua 2003: 181).

In the first story, a civic-minded and patriotic schoolteacher Meng (Koh Boon Pin) assumes the position of household head when his parents go away on holiday. The repressed, self-righteous and intolerant Meng, obsessed with the Singapore dream of upward mobility through personal discipline and achievement, imposes his rigid value system on his younger sister Trixie (Lum May Yee) and brother Tee (Roderick Lim), but his efforts to discipline and punish them only heighten their disrespect for him. Among the many things that Meng represses is an incestuous attraction to Trixie, a repressed desire that in the end returns explosively when he fails to control not only his insubordinate sister's free-spirited and highly sexual behaviour but also her body that she figuratively withholds from him but physically submits to her sleazy boyfriend. In the final scene, Meng breaks down and is led away by the police as his cries of desperation disappear into the deathly silence of the night. It is not difficult to read this dysfunctional household as a cautionary parable for a paternalistic state.

In the second story, buck-toothed Singaporean hawker Ah Gu (Jack Neo) tries desperately to save his marriage with the beautiful Lily (Chuan Yi Fong), whom he has brought home from China. Claiming to have been tricked by Ah Gu's exaggerated promises of a luxurious life in Singapore, the 'China bride' emasculates him with insults about his unattractive appearance and modest social status, refusing to bear his children and consorting with other men, while he is made to stay at home to do the housework. In the global relations of power shaped by international flows of capital and labour, Lily is both an opportunist and a victim, her sexuality harnessed as capital for upward mobility. And yet, she is ultimately dependent on the resources and goodwill of her husband, to whose sexual needs she helplessly submits in the final scene.

In the third story, a lonely obese woman San San (Lucilla Teoh) is not only taunted by her unkind neighbours but, worse, also tormented by her adoptive mother (Lok Yee Loy), who sits in the corner of the living room and hurls

streams of vulgarities, insults and accusations attacking San San's physical appearance, personal hygiene, failure in life and lack of motivation for self-improvement. Even San San's attempt to commit suicide ends in failure. The audience discovers, eventually, that the old woman is recently deceased and so her berating can be interpreted as San San's traumatic flashbacks or a now internalized disciplining voice that continues to ring even more gratingly in the old woman's absence. Or quite simply, this is the horrible voice of a ghost whose cruel words will continue to haunt San San's consciousness until its unfinished business has been settled.

The 'ghost' of the old woman could also represent the spirit of capitalism. The audience learns from her harangues that she had worked as an *amah* for twenty years, saving enough money to be able to afford a public housing apartment. Typically, *amahs* were single young females who emigrated from the southern parts of China, were employed by wealthy families as domestic servants and lived mysterious communal lives within amah 'sisterhoods'. These thoroughly working-class women were notably hardworking and spartan in their lifestyles. San San's adoptive mother embodied the celebrated values of capitalism such as industriousness, determination, thrift and the acquisitive, possessive and accumulative drives tied to aspirations of upward mobility. In her death, the old woman's spirit becomes an evangelist of capitalist values, preaching to San San a harsh and robust sermon that reprimands her for not being able to live up to the capitalist gospel. By making the audience sympathize with San San the loser, Khoo appears to be critiquing the competitive spirit of capitalism in Singapore whose people, in their personal and collectively national desires to be 'number one', have lost sight of what it means to be human. The ghost/spirit of capitalism emerges from the death of humanity and returns to haunt those who might still be struggling to stay alive, as San San appears to be doing.

But in Khoo's film, physical death can also yield a second kind of spirit, one – as Michael Lee observes – that is more liberated from the 'material conditions and constraints' of the panoptical and claustrophobic society that characterizes modern life (Lee 2000: 104). At the beginning of the film, a handsome young man (Ritz Lim) unexpectedly jumps to his death from the twelfth storey of his apartment block, moments after San San's abortive attempt. The audience sees that in life, the depressed and asthmatic young man was vomiting blood and appeared to have a drinking problem. To his grieving parents, his death is inexplicable; but perhaps they are merely in denial about difficult truths that point to themselves as culpable – difficult truths they will not acknowledge, much less articulate. His tattooed arm and smoking and drinking habits signal to the audience that he is something of a rebel in society, and it is not unreasonable to assume that his death may have resulted from an inescapable sense of alienation – of being stuck in a society and yet entirely separate from it.

The young man returns as a ghost that Khoo names Spirit in the final credits. Khoo's portrayal of the ghost is unorthodox. Spirit moves in broad daylight, bears no blood stains in spite of a violent death and remains entirely unseen by the film's characters, so that 'the extraordinary [...] is rendered somewhat ordinary' (Tan et al. 2003). Esha Niyogi De notes how this good ghost's intervention is foretold by a group of male residents chatting idly in a coffee shop about the morning's suicide and how they hope 'the good [will] return to help and heal their community' (De 2002: 216), a serendipitous articulation of hope for the re-spiritualization of a community fractured and a society dehumanized by the austere imperatives of capitalism. Indeed, Spirit serves as San San's guardian

angel, a negation of the spirit of capitalism that haunts her in the form of her scolding mother. His poignant embrace in the final scene gives the audience some comfort in this thoroughly bleak film: with Spirit watching over her, San San might eventually find moral fulfilment and happiness.

Penetrating into private and secret spaces of the home, Spirit witnesses silently the lives of three dysfunctional families and also his own, and directs the audience's voyeuristic gaze to gain some insight into the cancerous family secrets and barely repressed desires that threaten always to return and lead slowly to each family's destruction. Michael Lee describes Spirit's role as offering a 'posthumous gaze' through which the audience of *12 Storeys* can see vicariously 'what we have kept as secrets or are forbidden to see [...] [H]ow the dead see us, or rather, how we imagine them to see us, has a lot to say about ourselves.' Spirit 'allows the audience to relate their own secrecy practices with those they see in the film' (Lee 2000: 99, 104). De observes how Spirit's linking role helps the audience 'to connect a core of suffering between the atomized characters in the housing block, and to find herein the hope of community' (De 2002: 216).

Tan, Lee and Aw note how Khoo's film is a political critique of the government's originally social-democratic public housing project, 'in consciously probing into domesticity in public high rises and in developing the attendant themes of urban isolation and alienation'. But the film-maker also plays a redemptive role very similar to Spirit's, and Khoo offers clues to suggest this: for instance, the video camera in Spirit's room. Just as Spirit empathizes with the suffering individuals he witnesses, and just as Spirit directs the audience's gaze towards an understanding of the suffering among the disparate characters, so too does Khoo the film-maker who, through his art, critiques the worst aspects of Singapore's capitalist society, connects his subjects' isolated experiences of suffering and offers a possibility – or at least a hope – of human reconnection and an authentic community. *12 Storeys*, as modern ritual, summons the cruel spirit of capitalism, repressed by Singaporeans in their transition to postindustrial lifestyles, in order that this spirit might be exorcized collectively. The film-maker, inserting his presence into the film in the form of a good spirit, attempts to transform the audience into a potentially redemptive community.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's self-image of having achieved success against all odds puts tremendous pressure on its government and people to maintain and exceed this success. The push for progress and development destroys many things in its path, often indiscriminately, sometimes unwittingly. To cope psychically with such losses, Singapore's culture of comfort and affluence has been attained through the self-mastery of repressive techniques. Desiring economic progress, upward mobility, affluent and convenient lifestyles and a 'world-class' city, Singaporeans have had to repress the loss of their sense of place and community, family ties, passion and compassion, Asian customs and values, openness to the rest of the world and even the discipline, hard work and thrift associated with earlier capitalist-industrial attitudes.

But no repressive efforts can be complete, consistent and fully successful, even in dominant hegemony. Therefore, the 'now' is always a complex and fractured world of disjunctive values, attitudes and ideals. The supernatural intrusions featured in these five films should tell us something about the impossibility of a coherent world of ideology and experience. The more

violently social structures impose monological order by drawing and policing boundaries, the more violently do the excluded and violated cross these boundaries to assert their presence, just as the ancestral spirits or the memory of an angry old woman do in *Moving House* and *12 Storeys*.

Yet the symbolic and experiential power of cinema to appeal and gratify should not be underestimated. These films manage to provide symbolic elaborations of repressed fears and guilt through supernatural figures in ways that assist the audience to adapt to their latent anxieties while opening up new possibilities of meaning that may not be so comfortable or even comprehensible. The cinematic experience, however, also serves as a modern-day ritual that ultimately controls the appearance of the supernatural – as horrifying as it may seem – in relatively safe filmic and cinematic space, and then casts it out of the ‘now’ so that normal human life may resume.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kenneth Paul Tan is associate professor at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School for Public Policy. He has written extensively on Singapore, particularly on governance, multiculturalism and the culture industry. His publications include *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics* (National University of Singapore Press, 2007) and *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension* (Brill, 2008).

Contact: Kenneth Paul Tan, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, 469C Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 259772.

E-mail: spptank@nus.edu.sg

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