

Fragmentation And Displacement: Edwin's Accented Film Practice

Teo Miaw Lee

Abstract: This article aims to explore the sense of displacement and fragmentation evinced in the short films made in the post-Suharto's era by Chinese Indonesian independent filmmaker, Edwin. This emphasizes on the sense of dislocation and alienation arguably relates closely to his experience of growing up as Chinese in Indonesia during the New Order period (1966-1998). Under President Suharto's government from 1966 to 1998, Chinese Indonesians were placed in a state of uncertainty. In one sense, they were forced to assimilate to the indigenous culture, however, they were constantly reminded of their difference. This paper argues that Edwin's films are deeply informed by his personal biography as a Chinese Indonesian, but that this ethnic background appears indirectly, producing an 'accented' form of filmmaking. Edwin brings his own experiences of hybridity and 'in-betweenness' to bear on his filmmaking practice to produce more complex representations of Indonesian society. His upbringing in the socio-political context of the Suharto era, together with his membership of the archipelago's long-standing Chinese diasporic community, has contributed to his development as an 'accented' filmmaker.

Index Terms: Accented film practice, Chinese Indonesian filmmaker, fragmentation, displacement,

1. INTRODUCTION

Under President Suharto's government from 1966 to 1998, Chinese Indonesians were placed in a state of uncertainty. In one sense, they were forced to assimilate to the indigenous culture, however, they were constantly reminded of their difference, especially with the enforcement of the WNI label (foreign descendant Indonesian citizen), that distinguished them from their pribumi counterparts. The tension between the indigenous and Chinese Indonesian was at its zenith when large-scale riots broke out on 13 May 1998. The riots were primarily ignited by the onset of the Asian economic recession, which had caused the Indonesian economy to collapse earlier that year. Chinese Indonesians were targeted by the indigenous rioters, making them victims of the social unrest. Following this political and economic crisis, Suharto's government (1966-1998) was overthrown. When the Indonesian Presidency was assumed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, under her open and democratic administration, she subsequently restored all forms of Chineseness that had been suppressed for many decades. Since then, the expression of the Chinese language and Chinese press has been permissible in public and Chinese filmmaking begun to revive. Edwin, a Chinese Indonesian independent filmmaker, is perhaps one of the most prominent directors to emerge in the post-Suharto's era. His films rarely address Chinese themes directly; instead they are inflected by a more subtle treatment of the ideas of hybridity, displacement, alienation and the shifting role of family in contemporary Indonesian society. This article examines Edwin's early filmmaking career, the development of his unique cinematic style and some of his recurrent themes. It will argue that Edwin's films are deeply informed by his personal biography as a Chinese Indonesian, but that this ethnic background appears indirectly, producing an 'accented' form of filmmaking (Naficy, 2001). Edwin brings his own experiences of hybridity and 'in-betweenness' to bear on his filmmaking practice to produce more complex representations of Indonesian society. This article attempts to explore the sense of fragmentation and displacement that is evident in Edwin's short films. This emphasizes on dislocation and alienation arguably relates closely to his experience of growing up as Chinese in Indonesia during the New Order period. According to Gaik Cheng Khoo, historical and socio-political contexts are crucial to understanding the specific diasporic condition of Chinese South East Asian filmmakers,

as the complexity of their ethnic backgrounds deeply influence their filmmaking practice (2009, p. 69). In relation to Edwin, this article argues that his upbringing in the socio-political context of the Suharto era, together with his membership of the archipelago's long-standing Chinese diasporic community, has contributed to his development as an 'accented' filmmaker. More specifically, it will demonstrate how Edwin works, in what Hamid Naficy calls, an 'interstitial mode of production', a key condition of accented filmmaking. The discussion will begin with a brief summary of Edwin's biography as a filmmaker before turning to look more closely at the themes and aesthetics of his short films.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Accented Cinema

In his book, *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), the Iranian-American film theorist, Hamid Naficy, sets out to describe a set of characteristics that define exilic, diasporic and post-colonial filmmaking. Naficy argues that "the accented style helps us to discover commonalities among exilic filmmakers that cut across gender, race, nationality and ethnicity, as well as across boundaries of national cinemas, genres and authorship" (Naficy 2001, 39). As well as highlighting a range of stylistic and thematic concerns shared by films from a range of contexts and backgrounds, Naficy places great emphasis on the conditions of production that give rise to the "accented mode". The following section thus aims to place Edwin's film practice within Naficy's "accented" cinema framework. It will argue that while Edwin rarely focalises themes or stories that relate directly to his ethnic Chinese background, his films nevertheless exhibit, what Naficy understands as, "structures of feeling", that speak not only to his hybrid identity and sense of in-betweenness, but also encode his cinematic practice in terms of the particular socio-political context in which he works. In this sense, Edwin's work engages with his complex identity formation, while simultaneously transcending the film's actual subject matter, granting it the border-crossing qualities that Naficy attributes to the accented mode. Given the emphasis placed by Naficy on production context, it is useful to first examine Edwin's production methods, which closely correlate with what Naficy calls the "interstitial mode of production." For Naficy, one of the defining aspects of