

Conference on Film and Cinema (6-7 October 2011)

jointly organized by the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University
and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore
to be held at the ARI Seminar Room, Tower Block, Level 10, Bukit Timah Road

CULTURAL MAPPING OF SINGAPORE CINEMAS

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Daddy, what is a movie?

[...]

Daddy, Daddy! Then, where is this theatre?

- IPOS trailer campaign against video piracy

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has watched a film in a Singapore cinema over the past few years will be familiar with the public service campaign from the Intellectual Property Office against video piracy, a trailer shown among the coming attractions set in a dystopic future where movie theatres no longer exist. A child asks his father to explain what a movie ticket is – the object everyone in the audience watching is holding – as the movie ticket has now become a collector's item among the father's scrapbook of a bygone age. The solemn father, with an obvious sense of loss and mourning, then goes on to teach his son that movie tickets were for places called movie theatres, places with "a big screen" and "a good sound system" where one would go to watch things called movies. I do not suspect that movie theatres will disappear from Singapore anytime in the near future. The frequent crowds at many cinemas in Singapore provide sufficient proof of this, and also are a testament to the intense cinephilia of Singaporeans. But there are a number of cinemas that no longer exist, which is of course inevitable as film exhibition technologies change over time (not just in Singapore of course, but across the world) while also adapting to the changing environment of the city.

The primary objective of this research project is to document the diversity of the history of film exhibition and spectatorship in Singapore, a diversity that is quite unique in comparison with many other film cultures across the world. One way I aim to document this cultural heritage is by producing a map of cinemas, extant and nonextant, in Singapore. The inspiration and impetus for this research project originated during postdoctoral research at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute. I began this research in preparation for a conference I organized at the Asia Research Institute – in collaboration with the National Library, the Singapore Heritage Society, the Asian Film Archive, and the Singapore Art Museum – on the history of film exhibition and film-going in Singapore.¹ This paper presents a work in progress, and is a brief sketch of a proposed larger research project, requiring further incorporation of methodologies and research tools outside the discipline of film studies as such.

A major research program in the discipline of film studies in recent years has interrogated the relationship of cinema and modernity, situating the cinema among other forms of cultural production in the construction of modern life. Central to this question of modernity for cinema has been film exhibition and film spectatorship, and this project aims to contribute to that ongoing research programme using the case of Singapore film exhibition, and in so doing placing Singapore among other cosmopolitan centers (e.g. Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, London) critical to the invention of modern life.² While there has been research with such theoretical points of departure done on Singapore, more remains to be done, and using some of the methodologies described below should offer more perspectives on Singapore modernity, as well as its cultural connections with East and Southeast Asia.

¹ The papers presented at said conference have been indispensable references for preparation of this paper, and are cited below.

² Important studies of cinema's relationship with modernity include Charney and Schwartz, 1995; Hansen, 1991; and Zhang, 2005.