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Graduation Short Films from Singapore's ADM, 2009-2011

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some of the graduation films created between 2009-2011 by the final year students in the BFA Digital Filmmaking program at the School of Art, Design and Media (ADM), Nanyang Technological University (NTU). A taxonomy of projects is provided based on key issues common to the films and on the generation-specific points of view. These common issues go beyond the storylines and offer a telling mosaic of the cultural values of today's future filmmakers, their conflicts and opinions about Singaporean society.

BACKGROUND

Singapore's film industry goes back to the 1930s but modern formal training in film is just over a decade old.¹ Ngee Ann Polytechnic established its School of Film and Media Studies in 1989, and it has offered a Diploma in Film, Sound and Video since 1993.² Similar options have been available at Diploma-granting local institutions such as Singapore Polytechnic and Temasek Polytechnic. In 2005 the Nanyang Technological University launched the first-ever Digital Filmmaking Bachelor in Fine Arts (BFA) degree program in Singapore.³ This program was one of the six professional degrees offered by the newly established School of Art, Design and Media (ADM). Other institutions offered filmmaking programs but ADM's was the first local 4-year professional degree fashioned after the American-model of BFA degree programs. In 2006 the LaSalle College of the Arts officially launched its 3-year BA program in Film, and in 2007 New York University's Tisch Asia, also based in Singapore, introduced an MFA Film degree program.

Getting the new program off its feet was a task that required solving challenges at many levels. One of the most significant challenges in establishing the initial direction of the program included finding the appropriate balance between instruction and innovation, craft and experimentation. We devised a model that emphasized conceptual thinking and general skills during the first year, craft and film awareness during the second year, intermediate technical and creative issues in the third year, and self-expression and professional practices in the fourth year.

¹ Uhde, Jan. *Latent images: Film in Singapore*, 2nd ed. p. 16. NUS Press, Singapore, 2010.

² Nee Ann Polytechnic website, March 2012. <http://www.np.edu.sg/fms/aboutus/Pages/introduction.aspx>

³ The original members at NTU ADM's film and animation faculty include Ho Wen Shing (Taiwan), Scott Hessels (USA), Mark Chavez (USA), Hannes Rall (Germany) and myself (Mexico/USA). I was also Founding Dean of the School.

The program benefited in its early days from generous funding provided by Singapore's Ministry of Education. This funding was used to develop a significant filmmaking toolbox. During 2005-2008 purchases were made of cameras that ranged from HDV to Super16mm to digital 2K. The program also invested in innovative and leading-edge (at the time) software such as Final Cut Pro. Students had the option to shoot on film, digital or both.

The program also devoted significant resources to build a prominent film library. This was particularly important in terms of building film awareness, especially as many mainstream and independent films relevant to the education of young filmmakers were at the time on official lists of restricted R(A) films. "One of the fundamental changes under the new Restricted (Artistic) ruling was the raising of the age barrier from 18 years to 21 years."⁴ Those restricted films could not be screened in most public venues and could not be placed on open-shelf libraries. When available these films required an elaborate checkout process, and could be watched in a relevant course and only under the supervision of a qualified faculty member. Fostering self-expression was one of the goals of the new film program and the ADM approach was to expose film students to as many film styles and examples as possible.

Between 2005-2011, the BFA Digital Filmmaking program at NTU's ADM produced 25 graduation films. The level of recognition accomplished by some of the films in local and regional festivals was significant, and a few traveled across continents. Nine of the 25 graduation films, 36% of the total, received funding from the Singapore Film Commission (SFC).⁵

The students who entered the BFA Digital Filmmaking program at NTU came from a variety of academic backgrounds (Table 1). The three classes that have already graduated (2009, 2010 and 2011) represent a total of 64 graduates, with approximately 56.25% (36 individuals) coming from Junior Colleges, 40.6% came from the Polytechnics (26 individuals), and 3.12% (2 individuals) from overseas institutions. The next three classes (2012, 2013, and 2014) represent a projected total of 76 graduating students, with 60.52% (46 individuals) coming from Junior Colleges, 34.21% from Polytechnics (26), and 6.57% (5) from overseas institutions.⁶ The conventional wisdom in the early days of the ADM film program was that the skills of those coming from Polytechnics would far surpass the level of work done by those coming from the more academically-inclined Junior Colleges. That initial assumption proved not to always be the case but Table 1 also shows a ratio of students originally from Polytechnics who directed an ADM graduation film (1 director out of every 2.16 film students) that is slightly higher than students originally from Junior Colleges (1 out of every 3).

A large percentage of graduates from this program are currently active in a variety of areas related to local film production. It is likely that some of these graduates will continue to have a significant impact on Singaporean filmmaking as their careers mature and evolve.

⁴ The Restricted (Artistic) category was introduced in 1991, http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_15_2004-12-27.html

⁵ The nine films that received SFC funding are, for 2009: *Kitchen Quartet* by Nicole Woodford, *My Underwear My World* by Danny Lim, *Neighborhood Ghost* by Felice Tang, and *Promises in December* by Elgin Ho. For 2010: *Hello, Goodbye* by Tay Li-Cheng, *Mandy's 8 Theories of Sleep* by Wendy Chee, *Mu Ji* by Charmaine Oon, and *Remember* by Alicia Yang. For 2012 *Lucy* by Nigel Heng Teng Yi.

⁶ Variations in the ratio of Junior College to Polytechnic students are minimal as the ratio is carefully regulated throughout the admissions process.

<i>PREVIOUS INSTITUTION / YEAR OF GRADUATION</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012⁷</i>	<i>2013⁷</i>	<i>2014⁷</i>	<i>DIRECTORS⁸</i>
Anderson Junior College	0	1	0	0	0	1	
Anglo-Chinese Junior College	3	1	1	0	0	0	1
Catholic Junior College	1	1	1	0	1	0	1
Hwa Chong Junior College	1	0	0	0	0	2	1
Innova Junior College	0	0	0	0	1	1	
Jurong Junior College	2	1	0	0	2	1	1
Meridian Junior College	1	1	1	0	3	0	
Millennia Institute	0	0	0	1	0	1	
Nanyang Junior College	0	2	2	2	2	0	1
National Junior College	2	0	1	2	2	0	2
Pioneer Junior College	0	4	1	2	1	0	2
St. Andrew's Junior College	1	0	0	0	2	1	1
Serangoon Junior College	0	0	0	0	2	1	
Tampines Junior College	0	1	0	0	1	1	
Temasek Junior College	2	1	0	1	2	3	1
Victoria Junior College	0	1	1	2	2	1	1
Yishun Junior College	0	0	0	0	1	0	
(Other Junior College)	0	0	0	1	0	0	
SUBTOTAL JUNIOR COLLEGE	13	15	8	11	22	13	12
LaSalle College of the Arts	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts	1	1	0	0	1	0	2
Nanyang Polytechnic	0	2	1	3	1	0	2
Ngee Ann Polytechnic	2	3	1	3	1	3	3
Republic Polytechnic	0	0	0	1	0	0	
Singapore Polytechnic	2	3	2	5	2	4	2
Temasek Polytechnic	1	2	3	2	0	0	2
SUBTOTAL POLYTECHNIC	7	12	7	14	5	7	12
Overseas	0	0	2	2	1	1	1
SUBTOTAL OVERSEAS	0	0	2	2	1	1	1
TOTAL ADM FILM GRADUATES	20	27	17	27	28	21	25

Table 1. Breakdown of ADM film students by prior institution, 2009-2011 film directors, and 2012-2014 projections of graduating students.

THE PROCESS

The development and production process at NTU's ADM Film program was designed to facilitate the collective process of filmmaking. The original ultimate goal was to push the students' creativity and craft as high as possible, to develop their individual voices and to prepare them for industry.

During the period of 2005-2010 students were required to develop concepts before presenting their graduation film proposal. During the development process film students were encouraged to freely

⁷ Projected. The Class of 2013 is currently in Year 3 of 4. The Class of 2014 is currently in Year 2.

⁸ Students who directed graduating films at ADM between 2009 and 2011.

discuss ideas and critique each others' work in a collegial manner. This did not always materialize as the large majority of Singaporean students that I have worked with prefer not to express their opinions in public and often feel uncomfortable critiquing the work of their peers in front of the faculty. A great fear of ridicule, a dislike of open criticism, and a tendency to peer pressure are unfortunately more often than not common characteristics of the Singaporean university students that I have taught. Students were also provided with feedback and specific recommendations to improve their work. Emphasis was placed on taking advantage of the development process to refine ideas, and on planning as realistically as possible throughout preproduction. Many students, especially those from Polytechnics, resisted the practice of concept development as they were used to quickly bringing ideas into production. The traditional Singaporean work ethic and practical mind places a high value on bringing costs down and in that local context the practice of concept development seems, even to students, like an unnecessary luxury.

The film ideas and treatments would then be pitched to a selection panel consisting of faculty members and visiting professionals.⁹ The latter have included, for example, Tang Fong Chen, Producer at Zhaowei Films; Kelvin and Leon Tong, filmmaker and producer at Boku Films; David Irving, American filmmaker and former Film Department Head at NYU's Tisch Asia; and Ramon Menéndez, American scriptwriter and scriptwriting faculty member at NYU's Tisch Asia. As with most pitch-based selection processes the role of the panelists was to select the most promising films, the most likely to succeed, and to provide constructive criticism along with the green light for production. Production teams were assembled with the required critical roles of Director, Producer, Writer, Cinematographer, Editor, Production Designer and, recently, Sound Supervisor. Students were expected to have a total of two critical roles in two different projects, and they also had additional secondary roles (usually grips and gaffers) in other projects.

Many of the 2009 graduation films were shot on HDV and a couple were shot on S16mm film. During 2010 many of the films were shot on 2K formats with a variety of digital cameras. All projects were edited on Final Cut Pro and some were color-corrected at external post-production facilities.

The early concerns with potential censorship of student films fortunately never materialized. The Media Development Authority (MDA), the national regulatory agency, improved their content rating practices and "evolved from traditional censorship towards media classification and media literacy. Different media are guided by different classification practices, codes and guidelines shaped by community standards."¹⁰ During the mid-2000s five new ratings were created in the Singapore film classification. They are: G (General Viewing), PG (Parental Guidance), NC16 (No Children Under 16), M18 (Mature 18), and R21 (Restricted 21).¹¹ These age-specific ratings expanded the themes and range of material that is allowed to be screened at public venues in Singapore.

GENRES AND TOPICS

The 25 graduation films reviewed here present a wide variety of voices and span a wide range in the spectrum of film genres. As is common with graduating student films, many of them cross-over between genres. Generally speaking drama is the most common genre among these 25 films,

⁹ The pitching process was replaced in 2011 with a *free-for-all* policy.

¹⁰ Media Classification, from the MDA website, Singapore, March 2012.
<http://www.mda.gov.sg/Policies/MediaClassification/Pages/MediaClassification.aspx>

¹¹ There is also an NAR classification (Not Allowed For All Ratings) for "films that contain materials that erode the moral fabric of society, undermine national interest and/or stability, or create disharmony among various racial and religious groups [which] will not be allowed for commercial screening."

including family, romantic and social dramas. Comedies are rare, only two films have significant elements of comedy. A couple of films can be categorized as fantasy and/or sci-fi, and one film is within the mockumentary genre. The films are all under 30 minutes, ranging in length from a low of approximately 9 minutes (*Neighborhood Ghost*) to a high of 27 minutes (*He and His Necktie*).

Table 2 presents a straight-forward breakdown of the major issues found in these films. The categories used represent the issues that are consistently present or absent in a significant amount of these films or issues that are common to student films elsewhere. I have paired a few issues for the sake of simplicity. The issues include: family and generation-gap, relationships and romance, social issues and social class, sexuality, death and violence, humor and comedy, fantasy and sci-fi, and politics and religion. A taxonomy with greater granularity would be possible but is beyond the scope of this paper. There is some overlap between the chosen issues and the “seven major content concerns” that are defined in Singapore’s Board of Film Censors Film Classification Guidelines.¹² The films are listed alphabetically within each year.

These films are about defining an identity for the filmmaker and for his or her generation. In terms of visual style I believe that these films are trying to get as far away as possible from the “Singaporean film look” popularized in the 1990s and early 2000s by films such as Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1996) and *12 Storeys* (1997). The desaturated, contrasty and bluish visual style that defined the renaissance of film in Singapore seems to have suddenly become unfashionable with the younger film crowd.

¹² MDA online guidelines, 1 February 2010. These concerns are: theme, violence, nudity, sex, language, drug use, and horror.

<i>TITLE OF FILM / MAJOR ISSUES</i> ¹³	<i>FAMILY/ GEN. GAP</i>	<i>RELATION -SHIPS/ ROMANCE</i>	<i>SOCIAL ISSUES + CLASS</i>	<i>SEXUALITY</i>	<i>DEATH/ VIOLENCE</i>	<i>HUMOR/ COMEDY</i>	<i>FANTASY/ SCI-FI</i>	<i>POLITICS/ RELIGION</i>
Backyard Bowler	YES	<u>YES</u>	–	–	SOME	–	–	–
Frail Line	YES	YES	–	<u>YES</u>	–	–	–	–
Kitchen Quartet	YES	–	<u>YES</u>	–	–	–	–	–
Mu Dan	<u>YES</u>	YES	SOME	YES	–	–	–	–
My Underwear My World	YES	–	SOME	–	–	<u>YES</u>	–	–
Neighborhood Ghost	<u>YES</u>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Promises in December	YES	YES	<u>YES</u>	–	SOME	–	–	–
Respirator	YES	–	YES	–	YES	–	<u>YES</u>	–
Threshold	–	YES	YES	YES	YES	–	–	<u>SOME</u>
Toot Toot ¹⁴	<u>YES</u>	–	–	–	SOME	–	–	–
	9/10	5/10	5/10	3/10	3.5/10	1/10	1/10	.5/10
Subtotal 2009	90%	50%	50%	30%	35%	10%	10%	5%
Between Wife and Death	<u>YES</u>	YES	YES	–	YES	SOME	–	SOME
Hello, Goodbye	YES	<u>YES</u>	YES	YES	–	–	–	–
Hot!	–	YES	<u>YES</u>	YES	YES	–	–	–
Living It	<u>YES</u>	–	SOME	–	SOME	–	SOME	–
Mandy's 8 Theories of Sleep	–	YES	–	–	–	<u>YES</u>	YES	–
Mu Ji	YES	–	<u>YES</u>	–	–	YES	SOME	–
Remember	<u>YES</u>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Tenth of May	<u>YES</u>	YES	YES	SOME	–	–	–	–
3 Days Grace	<u>YES</u>	–	YES	–	–	–	–	–
	7/9	5/9	6.5/9	2.5/9	2.5/9	2.5/9	2/9	.5/9
Subtotal 2010	78%	55%	72%	28%	28%	28%	22%	5%
He and His Necktie	SOME	<u>YES</u>	YES	SOME	–	–	–	–
Lucy ¹¹	–	YES	SOME	<u>YES</u>	–	–	YES	–
Sky and Night	–	YES	–	YES	–	–	–	–
Seeya in Elektrik Dreamz	YES	YES	–	SOME	YES	–	<u>YES</u>	–
The Line	–	YES	YES	–	YES	–	–	<u>YES</u>
The Wedding Avenger	YES	YES	SOME	SOME	YES	<u>YES</u>	YES	SOME
	2.5/6	6/6	3/6	3.5/6	3/6	1/6	3/6	1.5/6
Subtotal 2011	42%	100%	50%	58%	50%	17%	50%	25%
TOTAL %	70%	68%	57%	39%	38%	18%	27%	12%

Table 2. Breakdown of the major issues present in the films analyzed.

¹³ A ranking of “YES” means that the issue in question plays a significant and/or dominant role in the film. A ranking of “SOME” means that the issue is minor but considerable. A ranking of “–” means none or minimal. For the purposes of percentage computation SOME equals .5, and YES has a value of 1. The total percentage is calculated based on the year subtotals, and decimal numbers have been rounded off to the nearest integer.

¹⁴ The taxonomy of this film is based on seeing an unfinished cut, as the final film was not found in the School’s archives.

FAMILY AND GENERATION GAP

Family and the gap that exists between generations are the most common topic in these graduation films. Seventy percent of all films, 18.5 out of 25, deal with these topics. Much of life in Singaporean society revolves around the family. It is common, for example, for young adults to reside in their parents' homes until marriage. Due to a number of reasons, including but not limited to a limited real estate and the prevalent governmental housing policies, many young adults reside in their parents' homes until marriage. Some young adults have an in-campus residency experience during University studies, but that experience is limited to a small sector of the population.

It is well known and well documented that generally speaking the first-generation of modern Singaporeans lived a life that is common to first-generation immigrants everywhere: hard work, and a simple life shaped by compromises. Singapore started its life as a Republic in 1965, and in a short period it managed to grow admirably. This new wealth developed a society with a higher standard of life, richer but also more complex and sometimes complicated. These complexities are the central themes of the films reviewed here. Evidence of today's complexities, for example, are the results of the May 2011 general election when the ruling People's Action Party of Singapore (PAP) had unusually low, lowest ever, returns since the founding of the country.

The film students whose films are the subject of this paper are all third generation Singaporeans. Many still have grandparents who are first-generation immigrants and parents who are the children of immigrants, or immigrants themselves. Possibly for these reasons family and the generation gap are the leading topic of the 25 films reviewed here. The topic has seen a decline from 90% in 2009, to 78% in 2010, to 42% in 2011, perhaps because some younger Singaporeans are more self-centered than their older siblings, or because they have found simpler and more efficient ways to deal with the generation gap including rejection or hypocrisy or both.

Singapore is a society where many languages are spoken: English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and many other dialects including Hokkien, Hakka and Teochew. The later originate in Fujian and Guangdong, two of the regions in China where many Singaporean Chinese ancestors originate from. The local English-based language of the street, Singlish, is also frequently used.¹⁵ Many young Singaporeans speak more than one language and this is expressed in the ADM graduation films, where the choice of language reveals subtleties about local life. The use of language in Singapore is a complex issue, and a proper analysis of the use of language in these films is beyond the scope of this paper. There is a clear eagerness to re-mix the languages and dialects that the young feel comfortable speaking.

In some cases the filmmakers are critical of the older generation and in others they appear sympathetic. In some of the films the Confucian values are portrayed as monolithic and old-fashioned while in others they are portrayed as desirable. Perhaps this switching back and forth between approval and rejection of their elders is a defining characteristic of the notoriously narcissistic Y Generation in Singapore. Only very few are openly critical of themselves in public. "It's an impossible situation. [...] The children there are looking at strange animals. The parents have become monuments, sculpted by society and their children. Of course, these children don't realize they'll become the same kind of fools. They are already more orthodox than their parents."¹⁶

Mu Dan (2009), directed by Lincoln Chia, is a tastefully provocative story that shows how the young generation impacts the lives of the older generation. The interesting aspect of this story is that it is

¹⁵ Tongue, R. K. (1979) *The English of Singapore and Malaysia* (second edition), Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, p. 17.

¹⁶ There's Always Tomorrow, Interview of Douglas Sirk, in Morris, Gary, *Action! Interviews with Directors from Classical Hollywood to Contemporary Iran*.

the mother who is transformed by her son falling in love with a lingerie model, a relationship that she initially rejects. This conflict is the engine that leads the middle-aged divorced mother to “coming to terms with loneliness and eventually discover[ing] her sexual awakening.”¹⁷ The film includes a stylized closing sequence where peony flowers are used to represent metaphorically the traditional values that the mother leaves behind. A beautiful way to portray the disintegration of obsolete traditions and the awakening of late sexuality.

Neighbourhood Ghost, 2009, directed by Felice Tang, is a 9-minute short about the unexpected and positive relationship that blooms between two outcasts from different generations. A cynical and lonely blind man embarks on “a hopeful search to find lost loved ones, but instead, the only one he meets is a little boy who sticks to him and, worse still, does not seem to understand that he is not welcome. Faulty assumptions and the moral consciousness of the ten-year-old, however, eventually find the blind man learning just what it feels like to be alive and to be loved.”¹⁸ A metaphor of the old generation being surprised by the fact that some of the young are genuinely and actively interested in building inter-generational bridges.

Toot Toot (2009), directed by Boo Xinying, is an unintended chronicle of a shifting movie. What originally started as a movie about the filmmaker's aging grandmother became a chronicle of the filmmaker's distress at the real-life passing of her grandmother. The comparison between the summary of the original story and the IMDb online synopsis is revealing of the transformation. The summary of the intended work: “Grams and Andrea share a transcendental relationship through Andre’s precious keepsake, a bean bag. Upon returning home from her overseas studies, Andrea finds her beanbag missing, suspects Granny as the culprit behind its disappearance and seeks revenge, what follows amidst the crazy synthesis of imagined confrontations and flashbacks from the past brings Andrea to a sharp realization that perhaps she has lot more than she had.”¹⁹ The synopsis of the completed movie: “The only way this 22-year-old film student could think of to revive, relive and recapture memories for her 80-year-old grandmother plagued with dementia was to make her a film. But as she and her team of enthusiastic friends embark on a journey to achieve her dream film, grandmother enters a stage of severe cognitive decline and drifts further away into lost memories.”²⁰

Between Wife and Death (2010), directed by Pat Shiu, is a dark family melodrama with a bit of sinister humor. The narrative is compact and the style is over-the-top humor. The story is entertaining and twisted in the style of tabloid stories. The protagonist is a dominating wife who crosses the boundaries and leads to the destruction of the family. The action start when the “young, successful CEO of a large pharmaceutical company, his wife, and her brother attend the CEO’s mother-in-law’s funeral. Odd behavior and complications ensue. Throughout the day, the CEO turns fearful, his wife becomes aggressive and her brother gets emotional. Suddenly, complications escalate: Mother has been murdered. As the mystery unravels, so do the characters and another death swings into the picture.”²¹ A bit of an extreme parody about the lives of the rich, and the fragility of relationships, intrigue and backstabbing sometimes found within affluent families.

Living It (2010), directed by David Lee Ling Wei, is the story of a son who empathizes with his father's disabled condition only after undergoing a similar experience. “Being put into his father’s shoes, the son experiences the tormenting trauma of the amputation, the mental nightmare of what his father

¹⁷ Chia, Lincoln, et al, *Mu Dan*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

¹⁸ Tang, Felice, et al, *Neighbourhood Ghost*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

¹⁹ Boo, Xinying, et al, *Toot Toot*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

²⁰ IMDb (Interactive Movie Database) synopsis of *Toot Toot*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1727384/synopsis>.

²¹ Shiu, Pat, et al, *Between Wife and Death*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

is experiencing. This leads him to come into a new light, understanding his father's plight."²² A symbolic metaphor of the sympathy and gratitude that the younger generations of Singaporeans sometimes feel for their elders, feelings that require commitment and that are not to be taken for granted.

Remember (2010), directed by Alicia Yang, presents the relationship between a granddaughter and a grandfather who is no longer able to communicate. The story is told through a montage of memories and moments that encapsulate how the relationship used to be. Poetic and lyrical much of the narrative cuts between memory and present, polishing the limited reality of a silent grandfather with the bliss of happy memories. "Two individual minds search for their Past. They are connected through a shared memory of the Past."²³ This story is about the fleetingness of time and the permanence of feelings. It is also about the realization by the young Singaporeans that they will never know or understand the young experiences of their elders.

Tenth of May (2010), directed by Wong Ru Yi, is a family drama about the tensions surrounding the disagreements between mother and daughter about the details of a wedding. "Rebecca's mother imposes a traditional Chinese tea ceremony in Rebecca's modern sleek wedding reception. This leads to a series of very traditional Chinese customs that seem antiquated to Rebecca and her new age liberal guests."²⁴ What starts as a straight narrative about generation-gap and a perfectly traditional mother unravels into the revelation of a divorcé's repressed sexuality. It is through the confrontation of these desires that mother and daughter find the common ground that allows them to improve their relationship and move beyond their misunderstandings and resentments. The takeaway of this story is that inter-generational compromise is possible only after a frank exchange.

3 Days Grace, 2010, directed by Kenny Tan, is a simple and elegant 22-minute portrayal of the forced confrontation of an elderly father and the son whom he abused as a child. "Sonny, a tough 38 year old boxing instructor is located by a social worker to return to his ailing father after 17 years. Without caretakers and on such short notice, he is tasked to take care of his father for a period of three days while the authorities process the paperwork to have his father admitted into a nursing home."²⁵ The roles are reversed while the ailing father is in the hands of his intense and frustrated son. Facing his demons is challenging but the son decides that he wants nothing to do with the past and moves on without looking back. A stark reminder that the younger generations can sever relations with the old generations and still survive and thrive.

The simple and direct style of *The Wedding Avenger*, 2011, directed by Michelle Cheong, is refreshing and entertaining, in spite of the occasional limited production values. "A newly wedded bride battles her inner fears on the night of the wedding dinner" and "confront[s] the repercussions of being in a marriage that she is unfortunately not prepared for."²⁶ The inner conflict of the protagonist, particularly the disagreement with her family, is portrayed with unusual sense of humor, and she is accompanied throughout her journey by a fantastic arcade game character who flips between foe than friend. "Drawing inspiration from arcade games and fairytales [this film is] *Alice in Wonderland* meet *Street Fighter*." This film provides a clear statement about the inevitability of the generation gap, a view that some issues can only have rejection as a solution and that life, nevertheless, goes on.

²² Lee, Ling Wei David, et al, *Living It*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

²³ Yang, Alicia, et al, *Remember*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

²⁴ Wong, Ru Yi, et al, *Tenth of May*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

²⁵ Tan, Kenny, et al, *3 Days Grace*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

²⁶ Cheong, Michelle, et al, *The Wedding Avenger*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2011.

RELATIONSHIPS AND ROMANCE

Learning about romantic relationships with the opposite sex and practicing how to be good at it occupies much of the minds of young Singaporean adults, as it does elsewhere in the world. It is not surprising that 16 of the graduation films reviewed here, or 68% of the total, deal with relationships and romance in one way or another.

The trend within this genre is of increased popularity: from 50% of the shorts in 2009, to 55% in 2010, to an absolute 100% in 2011. Interestingly just a few of the stories offer happy endings and speak of fulfilling relationships while most describe forced marriages and living together but without love. Isolation and lack of communication are recurrent themes. Nine of the 16 shorts that deal with relationship and romance portray unhappy or conflicted relationships. The perceptions of these young filmmakers about romantic relationships across generations represent a telling dissection of Singaporean society today.

The narrative in *Backyard Bowler* (2009), directed by Amanda Tan, is triggered when boy-gets-girl-pregnant and that leads them to a forced marriage. Clearly that is not what either one of them wanted, and they experience regret and recrimination. The film focuses on the boy as a grown man, years later, in the “final moments [of his life] as lung cancer debilitates him.”²⁷

Hello, Goodbye (2010), directed by Tay Li-Cheng, is a morality tale about a traditional, curious and somewhat frustrated young woman who rejects temptation in exchange for an unsatisfying but safe existence. She finds herself ignored by her hard-working husband and initiates a flirting relationship with a stranger, a handsome businessman who is clearly wealthier than her husband. “Wen takes to working as a chambermaid to find the human connection she desires. Looking through guests’ belongings, the shy Wen derives a curiosity about their lives.”²⁸ As her flirting leads to the climax of the story the young woman chooses to give up her adventure, accepts her frustrations and hopes for the best. A road taken by many young Singaporeans.

He and His Necktie, 2011, directed by Aaron Ng Kai Jun, is a film about how the workplace can sometimes impact the life of a couple and human relations in the family. Things usually get complicated when the protagonist's wife becomes the romantic interest of the protagonist's boss, especially when the protagonist and his wife's sole reason for staying together is their teenage daughter. “Oblivious to his superior’s secret desires for his wife, [he] comes to a realization of the unfolding events, only too late. Will he finally know what he has to do to save his crumbling relationship with his wife?”²⁹ A somewhat slow yet poignant chronicle of the crushing realities that some individuals have to endure, and a not-so-shiny side of Singaporean middle class life.

One of the few happy romantic stories is *Sky and Night* (2011), directed by Phuong Dao a young Vietnamese filmmaker and the only non-Singaporean director in the group. In this 10-minute impressionistic story the female protagonist decides to “live on the street with a young travel[ing] girl whose baggage was robbed on her trip to Singapore.”³⁰ The two young women seem to fall in love but the audience is given few clues to really understand the deeper forces in action.

²⁷ Tan, Amanda, et al, *Backyard Bowler*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

²⁸ Tay, Li-Cheng, et al, *Hello, Goodbye*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

²⁹ Ng, Kaijun Aaron, et al, *He and His Necktie*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2011.

³⁰ Dao, Phuong, et al, *Sky and Night*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2011.

SOCIAL CLASS AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Thank you to an effective and robust net of quasi-socialist measures social class conflicts are rarely in the foreground of Singaporean society. But it is quite common to have social class differences between generations of the same family; *Kitchen Quartet* and *3 Days Grace*, for example, deal with some of those issues. Other social issues that are common sources of good stories in Singaporean society include marriage (i.e. *Ten of May*, and *The Wedding Avenger*), domestic helpers (*Promises in December*), food (*Kitchen Quartet* and *Mu Ji*), military service (*The Line*), romance in the workplace (*Hello, Goodbye* and *He and His Necktie*), drugs (*Threshold*) and single parents (*My Underwear My World*, *Mu Dan* and *Respirator*).

Kitchen Quartet (2009), directed by Nicole Woodford, is an accomplished drama about the parallel clash of social classes and generations. Food, a national pastime in Singapore, becomes the guiding thread in a story with characters that are from “different demographics and social classes in Singapore's modern society.” The story starts as a food critic negatively impacts the career of a “promising female chef through his review. Forced to question her culinary career, she re-examine[s the] relationship with her hawker mum while the withdrawn young son of the critic uses food as a means of connecting with his father. Both daughter and son find themselves threading down the same path as they struggle to gain acceptance from their respective parents. While food inexplicably extends beyond taste, the two different families confront their inner selves without them realizing how their lives intertwine.”³¹

Promises in December (2009), directed by Elgin Ho, is a melodrama based on the 2004 tsunami that devastated parts of Sumatra in Indonesia. The film's main characters include “an Indonesian domestic helper and a Singaporean taxi driver. Individually from different backgrounds, they share similar expectations through their struggle, searching for ideals of life in Singapore. On a December day, their lives interweaved abruptly revealing the sacrifices each of them must face.”³²

Mu Ji (2010), directed by Charmaine Oon, is a humorous and fast-paced “visual documentary with a heavy dose of chicken love, Charlie chickadees, Chicken nuggets and Chicken Snacks.”³³ This 15 minute mockumentary explores the issue of processed food in today's Singapore. It also explores the different perceptions of food between old and young, as the former reminisce about *kampong* (village) farms while the later are more comfortable in supermarket aisles.

SEXUALITY

Eleven of the 25 films (39% of the total) deal with some aspect of sexuality. Repression and dysfunction are recurring topics. The popularity of this subject has been on the rise from 30% in 2009 to 58% in 2011. This trend might be an indication that students feel more comfortable talking about this issue in public. Singaporean society has relaxed a bit in this regard during the period in which the films were made. Also a new set of age-specific movie ratings facilitates for this issue to be discussed in different ways that are considered appropriate for different ages. Only a decade ago many movies dealing with sexual topics were either censored or not approved for public consumption.³⁴ Interestingly most of the 11 films dealing with sexuality focus at different levels on

³¹ Woodford, Nicole, et al, *Kitchen Quartet*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

³² *Promises in December* summary from filmfest.migrantvoices.org/films.html

³³ Oon, Charmaine, et al, *Mu Ji*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

³⁴ *Straw Dogs* (1971, 118 min), for example, the Sam Peckinpah drama/thriller featuring Dustin Hoffman is notorious for its violent sexual scenes. The film has an R rating in the USA but a 105 minute VHS version was “passed with cuts” in

forms of sexuality that are not always socially acceptable including same-sex (i.e. *Threshold*, and *Sky and Night*), inter-generational (*Frail Line*, and *Hello, Goodbye*), infidelity (*He and His Necktie*), necrophilia (*Seeya in Elektrik Dreams*), and fetishism (*Lucy*). The repressed sexuality of the second generation of Singaporeans is featured in *Mu Dan* and *Tenth of May*. Only one film, *Hot!*, has a scene with partial nudity and an official rating of NC16.

It is interesting to point out that a few of the films featured daring scenes of sexuality during the development stage that did not make it to production. Examples of this include physical contact and kissing in *Hello, Goodbye*, a masturbation scene in *Tenth of May*, and a heterosexual bedroom sex scene in *Sky and Night*. All these scenes could have been presented within the boundaries of the NC16, M18 or R21 ratings. The absence of the original scenes, especially in the films of Generation Y filmmakers, gives new meaning to the term self-censorship.

Frail Line (2009), directed by Er Kia Hui, is a story about the “capriciousness of feelings” and the “changed dynamics of a father-daughter relationship after a separation of many years. The daughter is a hair dresser with long hair, she cuts her hair after the breakup with her boyfriend. Disillusioned with romantic love, the daughter seeks solace and escape in the company of her father, a male figure who has re-entered her life.”³⁵ The girl reminds the father of her mother when she was young, and the action leads to a scene with father and daughter on the same bed. This 12-minute open-ended film is poetic and provocative, as the audience is left to wonder what actually transpired between the two characters. A reminder that intergenerational romantic relationships are complex and sometimes complicated.

Hot! (2010), directed by Koo Chia Meng, starts with a murder at a pool party. This event quickly exposes the superficiality and selfishness of those in attendance. The film's intent is to “examine the people of this country, their pretty facades and their cold hearts.”³⁶ This short is unique in its direct portrayal of sex, particularly in the steamy shower scene that is the lone example of physical and lusty sexuality in this group of films.

Lucy (2011), directed by Nigel Heng Teng Yi, is the improbable story of a man who gets a sex robot but never uses it. “An out of job husband buys a second hand android helper only to discover that it had been outfitted with sex organs. He represses his growing attraction towards his new appliance, as he struggles to rekindle his ailing marriage.”³⁷ The film offers an interesting portrayal of a contemporary upper middle class professional young couple, including their detached confusion and melodramatic dysfunction. A film about sex where no one has sex. The film was meant to include significant visual effects for the robot but apparently they were not completed before graduation.

DEATH AND VIOLENCE

The issue of death and violence is fifth on the list with 38% of the films dealing with it. The popularity of this issue increased from 35% in 2009 to 50% in 2012. Out of the 11 films dealing with death and/or violence two deal with accident (*Promises in December* and *Living It*), two with abstractions of death (*Threshold* and *Seeya in Elektrik Dreamz*), three with sickness (*Backyard Bowler*, *Respirator*

Singapore and given a PG rating for general release.

<https://app.mda.gov.sg/Classification/Search/Film/SearchDetail.aspx?sType=Feature&sRowID=AAAH4UAAPAAA2SAAi>

³⁵ Er, Kia Hui, et al, *Frail Line*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

³⁶ Koo, Chia Meng, et al, *Hot!*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

³⁷ Heng, Teng Yi Nigel, et al *Lucy*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2011.

and *Toot Toot*), and four deal with violence (*Between Wife and Death*, *Hot!*, *The Line*, and *The Wedding Avenger*).

The year of 2011 saw the first war film of the bunch, *The Line*, including on-screen physical violence and a significant component of visual effects which have been traditionally low in ADM graduation films). Strictly speaking *The Line* (included in the Politics section) is the only action movie of the batch of 25 films. It is filmed on location and includes a combination of practical effects and digital visual effects, and a significant amount of compositing.

HUMOR AND COMEDY

A few of the 25 films include humorous moments, but humor as the narrative style and comedy as the overall tone are rare in this group of films. At 20% of the total humor and comedy are the second least popular issue and genre in the pack. In addition to *My Underwear My World* and *The Wedding Avenger*, two other films, *Mandy's 8 Theories of Sleep* (in the Fantasy section) and *Mu Ji* (in the Social Issues section) also display dominant tones of humor and comedy.

My Underwear My World (2009), directed by Danny Lim, deals with a boy who withdraws from reality in response to the loss of his mother. His "unusual behavior gets him teased at school and causes him to become even more introverted and distant. His father, confused and desperate, keeps bungling ways to reach out to his son. A confrontation and a clumsy accident suddenly cause the father and son to view each other in a new light and form stronger bond than ever."³⁸

The Wedding Avenger (also included in the Family section) is an ambitious production that employs a consistent comedy tone throughout the entire film. Humor is used effectively to soften scenes as shocking as the newly-wed young woman throwing a hand grenade at her traditional family while they pose for a formal photograph. The short film also uses overlaid animated graphics in the style of 8-bit videogame graphics to punctuate a few scenes with humorous commentary. In spite of her rebelliousness the female protagonist ultimately compromises and happily accepts as a husband a detached boyfriend who had previously fallen asleep during her wedding night. The take-away message reminds us of the ageless adage: life is a game, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.

FANTASY AND SCI-FI

At 27% of the total output fantasy and sci-fi play a small but important role in this collection of films. A few of the 25 films employ somewhat fantastic visual metaphors as a storytelling device but only 27% of the total output fully ventures into the genres of fantasy or science fiction. Both of these have been on the rise from 10% to 22% to 50% between 2009 and 2011. The five films that I include in this category are *Respirator*, *Mandy's 8 Theories of Sleep*, *Seeya in Elektrik Dreamz*, *Lucy* (in the Sexuality section) and *The Wedding Avenger* (in both the Family and Humor sections).

Respirator (2009), directed by Michael Tay, is a dramatic metaphor of the sacrifice that earlier generations of Singaporeans have made for their children, and how the failure of the elders could also spell failure for the young. "To save her 7-year-old son from dying of a rare heart disease, a single mother undergoes a bizarre operation to save him but recovers from the operation only to

³⁸ Lim, Danny, et al, *My Underwear My World*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

learn of the terrifying consequences.”³⁹ Production values and visual effects are appropriately scaled to the production with positive effect.

Mandy's 8 Theories of Sleep (2010), directed by Wendy Chee, is a happy film about the charming relationship between a preteen boy and a girl. The relationship is expressed in both real life and in the fantasy of their imaginations. This film is about a “girl, who besides being an animal activist and a serious scrap-booker, loved to sleep until [the boy] came along with a trolley bag pack of question marks.”⁴⁰ This is a charming short film flooded with sweet innocent romance.

Seeya in Elektrik Dreamz (2011), directed by Nelson Yeo Kok Rei, is a 20 minute unusual and bizarre “tale about four people confronting the end of world. A woman has a fling with an unknown man, just moments before the world ended. She searches endless for him after that. Two orphaned kids finding each other in a godforsaken world. A friendship is formed. After his wife left him, a dreamless gravedigger goes around stealing dream from corpses.”⁴¹ The film brings together multiple taboo subjects into somewhat of a surreal montage.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

Traditionally politics and religion are the top taboo subjects in Singaporean society, along with drugs and homosexuality. It is therefore not surprising that only two films out of 25 deal with political issues, and another two deal with religion in a limited way. These four films represent 12% of the total output of the ADM 2009-2011 graduation films.

Strictly speaking *Threshold* (2009), directed by Loo Zihan, is not a political film. But it expresses the political views of the filmmaker by delivering in a subtle tone a message about the policies and laws surrounding homosexuality and drug offenses in Singapore.⁴² The story was inspired by a real incident reported in an 8 June 2006 article in *The Straits Times* where a medical doctor was framed by two agents from the Central Narcotics Bureau. “In a dingy motel room [...] a sexual threesome has been arranged to take place.” One of the police officers “struggles between his suppressed inner desires and his role in society as a law enforcement officer” since he has had a “homosexual relationship with the subject being framed.”⁴³ The film seems to suggest that individuals representing the authority are sometimes guilty of crimes similar to those of average citizens. This film opens a door of sympathy towards the common man who breaks two laws that are not entirely popular with the Singaporean younger generations. The open ending leaves the audience to ponder the moral and ethical issues surrounding the authorities more than those of the man who has broken the law. The 20-minute film received a rating of R21 by the classification agency and was passed without cuts.⁴⁴

The Line (2011), directed by Cheng Shian Wen, holds the distinction of being the only war film in the group. The film, also included in the Violence section, presents “two Singaporean peacekeepers on a

³⁹ Tay, Michael, et al, *Respirator*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

⁴⁰ Chee, Wendy, et al, *Mandy's 8 Theories of Sleep*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2010.

⁴¹ Yeo Kok Rei, Nelson, et al, *Seeya in Elektrik Dreamz*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2011.

⁴² Drug possession in Singapore may be punishable by the death penalty. *Misuse of Drugs Act*, Singapore, originally published in 1973. http://agcvldb4.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-185&date=latest&method=part

⁴³ Zihan, Loo, et al, *Threshold*, NTU FYP, Singapore, 2009.

⁴⁴ MDA Film Classification Online Database, <https://app.mda.gov.sg/Classification/Search/Film/SearchDetail.aspx?sType=Feature&sRowID=AAAH4UAAPAAADVBAAI>.

relief mission in the [fictitious] earthquake struck nation of Taunesia.” The two are dismissive about their mission but they unexpectedly “find themselves [being] pursued by a ruthless and relentless enemy. Running for their lives [they] discover what it means to hold the fate of an entire [country] in their hand.”⁴⁵ The 22-minute film received a rating of M18 by the local classification agency and was passed without cuts.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

The issues contained in the 2009-2011 ADM graduation films go beyond the individual stories of each film. When seen collectively these films render a telling mosaic of the impact of wealth and change in Singapore, a society that stands with one foot in Asian traditions and with another foot in European traditions.

These films are also an expression of the massive generation gap that is now ripping through Singaporean society. A gap that acknowledges change but has not yet defined the shape of that change. These films collectively render the changing identity of a country with changing economical, social, political and environmental landscapes.

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