Animating Singapore: The complex expression of Singapore's contemporary daily life and culture through animation.

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University

in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

2017

(Year of Submission of Hard Bound Thesis)

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Hans-Martin Rall for his tireless support and encouragement. He has been a steadfast anchor for my post-graduate endeavors, and I would not have made it this far without his guidance as a mentor on academia, animation and life.

Professor Ishu Patel was an important spiritual guide for my soul. He provided me with the ethical and artistic basis that I keep close to my heart at all times to remind myself of my power, role and responsibilities as an animator and artist.

I would also like to thank Hong Bee Kuen, manager of graduate programmes, whose efficiency and initiative kept us up to speed on important events and deadlines. Professor Michael Walsh, chair of the graduate programme, has also been very helpful as well in terms of his willingness to listen to feedback.

My fellow course mates were also important to my research. Mark Wee was exceptionally helpful, inspiring and fun to be with, providing an incredibly emphatic source of cathartic release when I was frustrated with being an academic. Zu, Henny and Santiago have also been wonderful colleagues and peers.

I would like to thank my best friend Jiahui Wee. Her companionship and empathy gave me much comfort and sustenance during the lows of my graduate life.

Finally I want to thank my family. They gave me the gift of freedom to pursue my dreams. It is because of their trust that I might one day fly.

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Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate the complex expression of contemporary Singapore daily life and culture through the animated art form. This will be done a double-pronged research approach, utilizing a mix of theoretical and practical components. The theoretical research will investigate the complex expression of daily life and culture (Singapore and foreign alike) through case studies and literature about existing animated works, while the practical part attempts to create a film abiding by the observations gleamed from the theoretical portion, and vice versa. This practical component will focus on expressing the deeper, more complex aspects of Singapore daily life through the creation of an animated film, which will seek to express mainly the kaleidoscopic sociocultural landscape of Singapore through the depiction of people on the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) railway. The paper makes the case that there is a shortage of complex, original and compelling animated expressions of the various aspects that make up Singapore's daily cultural life, and that such expressions can be deliberately achieved through conscious control of the components of the animated medium.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Singapore is home to a culturally diverse and dynamic population (Noor and Leong 2013; Lim, Hashim and Buttney 2014; Reyes 2013). The cultural milieu of Singapore is further complicated by its relative youth (Mutalib 1992, 69), as well as its union of Eastern and Western perspectives, boasting a primarily Asian population with a significant colonial past. All these elements mix together to create a curious cultural potpourri that continues to evolve and surprise. Investigations into the ever shifting cultural zeitgeist of Singapore are thoroughly done in the realms of sociological and political studies, where objective aspects such as policy and population are studied through their respective fields. Sorely lacking however, is an artistic enquiry into the cultural elements and issues that exist in Singapore, which can add to the discussion by accessing subjective aspects of sociocultural milieu in Singapore. Nominated Member of Parliament Kok Heng Leun, speaking to parliament on the potency of art in telling critical stories about Singapore, said that:

> "[Art] examines our relationship with the environment we live in. It examines our relationship with people we live with. It examines our relationship with ourselves."

Indeed, Singaporean poet and artist Gwee Li Sui (2015, public presentation) warns that solely depending on sociological and political perspectives confines Singapore art within the narrative of national agendas and ideologies, where a work is judged in terms of its usefulness to society. As a result, what is lost is art's inherent ability to negotiate the more abstract, subjective aspects of emotions, beauty and truth. Additionally, Singapore's cultural milieu is difficult to investigate sociologically and politically, and an artistic approach can contribute to such a conversation. Specifically, the animated art form has the potential and toolset to engage with these alternative perspectives about Singapore.

Focusing on the artistic perspective through the medium of animation, the review of the animator's perspective is difficult, due to a lack of local creative and artistic

impetus in the medium. The overwhelming emphasis and support for commercial and didactic animation, impedes a much needed animation discourse in the dialogue about cultural life in Singapore.

Commercial and cultural obstacles due to rating policies, size and infancy of the medium (among other factors), has stifled creation of animated content aimed specifically at addressing and satisfying local perspectives (Tan 2016). Although this is changing of late, especially with the surge of national pride sparked by Singapore's 50th birthday, I want to investigate if animated expressions of local cultural, daily life remain underutilized and underdeveloped. Animated works such as *The Violin, Flats, Lak Boh Ki* and *Nation Building* do well in showing locality through the animated art form, vivid in their visual presentation of Singapore. These works, among others (which will be analyzed in detail in chapter 4) tend to take the easy way out in citing local affiliations, using preordained Singaporean symbols such as Sir Stamford Raffles, the Merlion or the national flag to establish locality, instead of trying to engage and express local sensibility and attitudes that are less blatantly Singaporean. A big part of this research would focus on interrogating whether these expressions of local life and culture succeed in presenting a fittingly complex and compelling version of Singapore and/or Singaporean-ness.

"Complexity"and similar notions – definition within this research

The notion of "complexity" will be mentioned throughout the paper, and it is defined as a general term that refers to expressions that go further in expressing Singapore life, culture or general Singaporean-ness in animation. It is important to note that the definition of "complexity" and/or similar concepts such as sophistication, multi-layered approach, nuanced expression and such, are defined specifically in the context of this research project.

This is a necessary disclaimer as I am aware of the use of these terms, particularly "complexity", as having very specific designations in other areas of research, such as scientific and philosophical fields. The Nanyang Technological University for instance, has an entire institute dedicated to the study of "complexity", a term which

is used to refer to "trans-disciplinary collaboration in pursuit of understanding the common themes that arise in natural, artificial, and social systems" (Complexity Institute 2016). "Complexity" is also often associated in academia and research with the idea of "complex systems", a notion that generally refers to the "how parts of a system and their relationships give rise to the collective behaviors of the system, and how the system interrelates with the environment" (Bar-Yam 2002). Thus, it is noted here that "complexity" as defined below are different form and not related to the use of the term in other research disciplines.

In this paper, "complexity" is achieved when a film addresses a deeper subtext of locality, or highlights an often overlooked, obscure subculture or facet. Complexity can also be achieved through the means of expression, when a perspective or message is communicated in a nuanced, non-literal, or original way.

Fig 1. *The Violin*'s rich visual showcase of Singaporean indicators. From top-left: The National Theatre, The National Library, Lee Kuan Yew's "Moment of Anguish", The Esplanade, Changi Control Tower, Sir Stamford Raffles Statue. (Ervin Han 2015. Still from The Violin.)

It is not sufficient as an expression of locality when a film merely represents aspects of Singapore without delving into sociocultural subtext and commentary. Hence, a film that merely shows famous landmarks of Singapore without inquiry, commentary or exploration of the undertones and the less literal aspects of locality would fail to be complex. For example, *The Violin* (examined in detail in chapter 4) is a film that is visually rich with Singapore elements (Fig. 1). The film however, is not complex because it does not use animation to address a deeper subtext, nor does it

do anything original with the animated art form, telling Singapore's 80-year old history in a standardized, literal, realistic way.

The Tiger of 142B achieves complexity due to its highly stylized treatment of the characters and the setting of a HDB (short for Housing Development Board[1]) estate. The film excellently utilizes the animated medium's ability to warp reality; causing an unreliable, dreamlike descent of the main character's psyche into self-doubt and paranoia. Complexity is realized as the film steeps the viewer in a shroud of mystique presenting an animated vision of a HDB estate that has never been seen before. *The Cage* (examined in detail in chapter 4) is a film that also achieves complexity as it effectively tells the story of the often overlooked senior citizens of Singapore, communicating a story that is rarely seen told with such distance, intimacy and gradual pacing.

Apart from these films, this study will interrogate other local and foreign films for this quality of complexity, and find out the ways in which such sophistication has been, and can be expressed in local animation. The research will focus on these expressions specifically with regards to the art form of animation, which is different from its closest relative, live-action film-making, in the sense that in an animated film, the content of every single frame (as well as the interstices between them) must be deliberately considered and provided for by the animator (Schaffer 2007, 461). "Every aspect of an animated film, even representations of natural phenomena, are created, manipulated, and plotted to function within [the respective] narrative framework", hence allowing a more ideal representation of the creator's mind (Iles 2008, 186).

As such, the medium of animation is particularly suited to a discourse seeking to analyze and apply deliberate and conscious control of the various elements within the artist's disposal. The medium is also distinct in how it can tap into the

[1] The Housing Development Board is a governmental agency in Singapore that is in charge of "[planning] and [developing] Singapore's housing estates (Housing Development Board 2016). These estates are the most common types of domicile in Singapore, housing 80% of Singapore's population. The high-rise flats are commonly referred to as "HDB" flats even though the initials actually refer to the government agency.

subjectivity present in sociocultural perspective through its ability to deal with the abstract, the unreal and the ambiguous in relation to ultimately referencing an expressed truth (Leslie 2014, 30).

An artistic perspective

It is also important to point out that my project's contributions to the issue come from an artistic approach as a practicing animator. The themes surrounding the project, such as national identity, sociology, racial and ethnic demographic composition, politics and such are issue that are heavily deliberated by other schools such as sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and so on.

Therefore, considerations of these other aspects will not be dealt with in this thesis. This paper will focus on the artistic, particularly the animated perspective in the creative expression of these issues.

To reinforce such an artistic approach, the paper will test the above hypotheses by executing a practical component, in which an animated short film will be created by keeping in mind the unique features of the animation medium in expressing aspects of Singapore's cultural landscape.

Research aims and questions

The following are the main questions that describe the problem and outline the general premise and framework that will form the research:

- How does this case study approach the expression of life and culture in their respective locales?
- Is the attempt valuable and/or compelling, and why?
- If the attempt is not valuable and/or compelling, how can it be improved?

Chapter 2: Literature Review:

Importance of artistic perspectives in national discourse

In approaching the research, it is first pertinent to examine the broader issues surrounding animation that affect the creation and production of animated films about Singapore. Indeed, the industry and art of animation is frequently considered institutionally and nationally as a subset of the arts industry. The state's perspective on art has changed, and will continue to change over the decades. Indeed, Kong (2012) talks about the most recent tendencies of the ruling elites' stance on the arts, saying that:

> "The more broadly 'cultural social policy' direction emphasizes the value and integral place of the arts and culture in everyday lives. This is in part in recognition of the fact that for Singapore to be a truly global city, there must be a lively arts and culture scene and high levels of participation by residents."

Evidently, the institutional forces are aware of the importance of the arts with regards to its contributions to national development and cultural progress.

Despite this realization, the inherently experimental and sometimes critical nature of the artistic approach sometimes clashes with governing forces in Singapore. Kok (2016) voiced his concerns that art was politically insignificant, and had very little play space when it comes to state censorship. Voicing his concern that "the arts [were] not mentioned in [2015's] budget speech", Kok also said that the arts were vital to Singapore's future by "[preparing Singaporeans] to engage critically, with wisdom and empathy." Kok supports his stance with a series of rhetorical questions, saying, "how [does one innovate] if one does not ask hard questions? How does one innovate if one has to keep seeking permission to be playful, permission to transgress, permission to make mistakes?"

The existence of such a tense relationship between art and state creates interesting dichotomies in the creation process, resulting in lack of alternative perspectives in artistic expression. Hence the importance of encouraging and promoting works that asks compelling and important questions about local life and culture.

Animation as a unique medium to express local life and culture in complex ways

An artistic perspective would be useful in negotiating the elusive nature of cultural life, due to the approach's knack for embracing subjectivity. The animation medium is uniquely able to deal with the intangible, abstract aspects of cultural life due to its intrinsic ability to bestow and control levels of abstraction within its aesthetics. Furniss (2008) describes animation's unique access to a sort of abstraction slider, where creators can consciously manipulate the aesthetic of the work to range from perfect mimesis of nature or complete abstraction.

An example of utilizing abstraction to convey more nuanced messages is how *The Tiger of 142B*, a film by Harry and Henry Zhuang, blurs the lines separating logical reality and the myth of a roaming tiger amongst HDB block 142B. The animators make excellent use of animation's ability to abstract, minimize and warp reality through a shift in graphic style in order to reflect the main character's slipping into the psychic chasms of self-doubt and paranoia (Fig. 2).

Fig 2. The established style of reality (left) versus the main character's descent into psychosis (right). (Harry Zhuang and Henry Zhuang 2015. Still from *The Tiger of 142B*.)

Such an ability allows for animation to tap into the subjective, intangible realms of cultural zeitgeists in a way that classical sociological and political discourses otherwise struggle with. Esther Leslie (2014, 30) describes the harmonious yet contradictory duality of the medium:

> "Animation's nature does not obey the law of physics ... [b]ut sometimes it *is* also just nature – redrawn and conceptualized, but mediated, with just a heightened element of drama, a potential that borders on the animistic. ... Animation presents a parallel world [,] a nature recognizable to us processed through concept, imagination, and technology. It is our nature returned back to us through mediations."

As such, an animated perspective can be a powerful tool for social commentary and reflection due to its toolset that can uniquely express the subtext of soft topics such as society and culture. Yuri Norstein's seminal *Tale of Tales*, for instance, manages to poetically encapsulate Russian melancholy, regret, nostalgia, and essentially, memory, through the skillful use of the animated art form. The film presents a varied assortment of sequences and realities; vastly different from one another in terms of visual style, narrative and logic. These different planes of animated existence are merged into a sentimentally coherent communication of Russian culture and consciousness (refer to chapter 5). Thus, animation's ability to manipulate the abstraction of truth allows it to embrace the subjectivity of topics such as the expression of cultural elements, as well as the capacity to communicate specific, obscure, skewed, or unreliable points of view.

Animation as a metaphor for mental frameworks and skewed perspectives presents to the viewer a unique opportunity to interact with and explore the seemingly polar aspects of the real and imagined. Carels (2006) writes that animation is the "art of the interval", one which "activates a whole mental framework, maybe as many as 24 frames per second. Animation, better than live-action, demonstrates how our mind works, how it processes images and ideas". Compared to live-action films, animated

films "in general, [are] far more obviously the product of the human mind" (Iles 2008, 186).

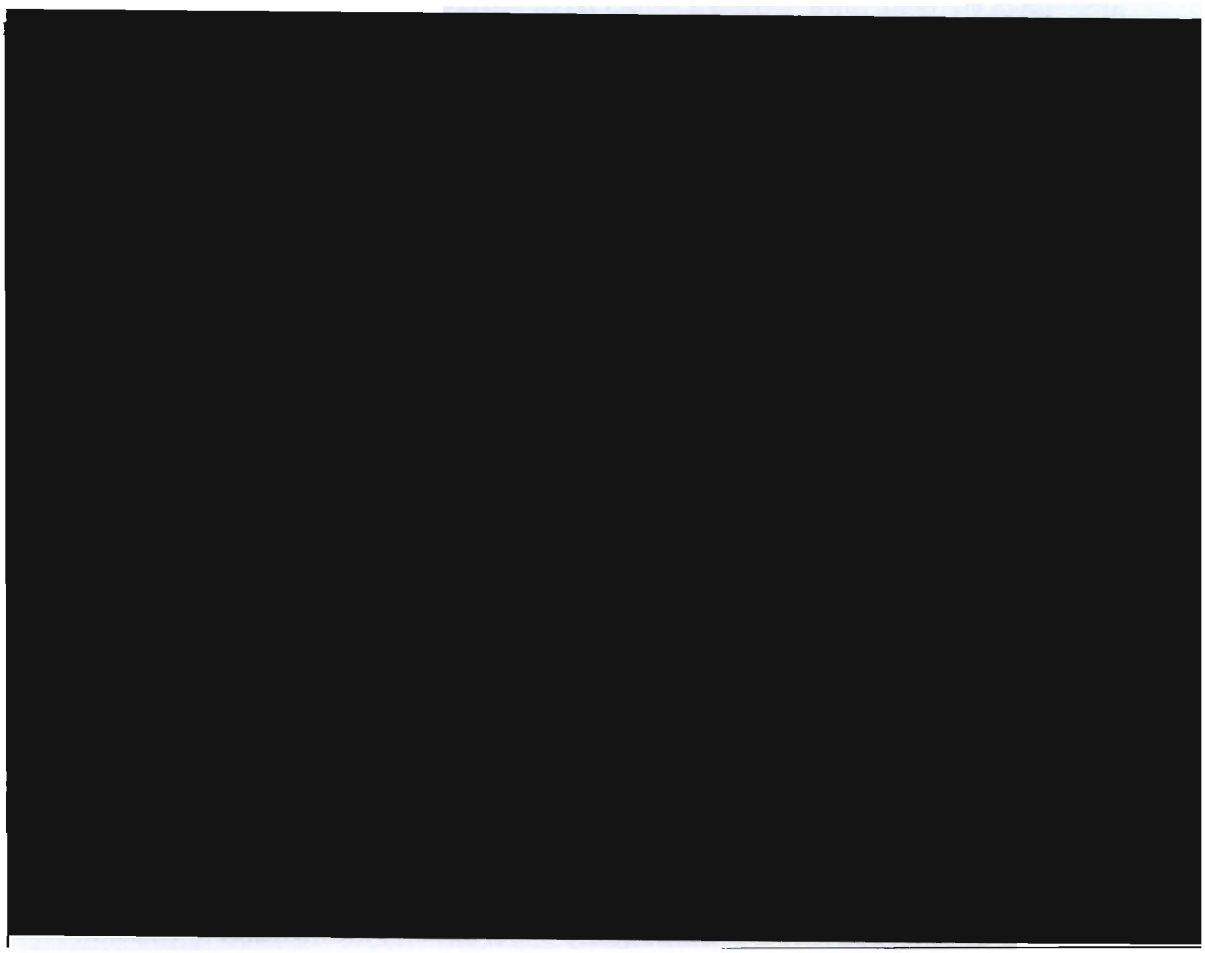

Fig 3. *The Cage*'s minimal, suggestive background design. (Mohan Subramaniam 1990. Still from *The Cage*.)

Take, for instance, Mohan Subramaniam's *The Cage*, which features backgrounds that are stylistically minimal in their design and execution, with simple thin black ink lines finished off with thick, heavily textured color pencil strokes (Fig. 3). The lines are thin but not overworked in their meticulousness to photographic detail, and much of the dreary, gloomy character of the atmosphere is communicated by the sheer textures of the color pencil strokes, rather than an expositional attention to the details of his surroundings. In this case, the animated toolset allows for the abstraction of the background designs in a way that clues the audience in, in a non-literal way, to the old man's feelings about his life. The backgrounds suggest instead

of tell, and allows the audience a degree of interpretative space that is not found in films such as Ervin Han's *Flats*, which features richly details background designs.

This highlights a somewhat lacking aspect of complexity in local animated works so far, where explorations of sophistication in terms of Carels' notion of demonstrating mental frameworks are still rare. Most animated films, with the exception *The Cage* and *The Tiger of 142B*, stop at realistic animated versions of reality and/or history. Thus, a particularly ripe area to explore would be the expression of deeper psyches and perspectives through stylization, something that is less accessible to forms of storytelling such as live-action filmmaking or photography. This would also help with attaining the aforementioned degree of complexity through psychological depth.

Having reviewed literature and works dealing with the complexity in animated expression, in what ways have cartoons and animated films represented Singapore life and culture?

Animation and aspects of Singapore's cultural life

It is difficult to find consistent, credible and updated critique of Singapore animated works. Scholarly sources are scarce on the subject and journalistic sources are usually limited to informative press releases and summaries of notable local animated work, mostly extolling the infrastructural strength of the industry in its aspirations of achieving a media hub. Few, if any sources provide artistic critique and perspectives for the works. As such, there is definitely space for serious critical writing regarding animation in Singapore in general.

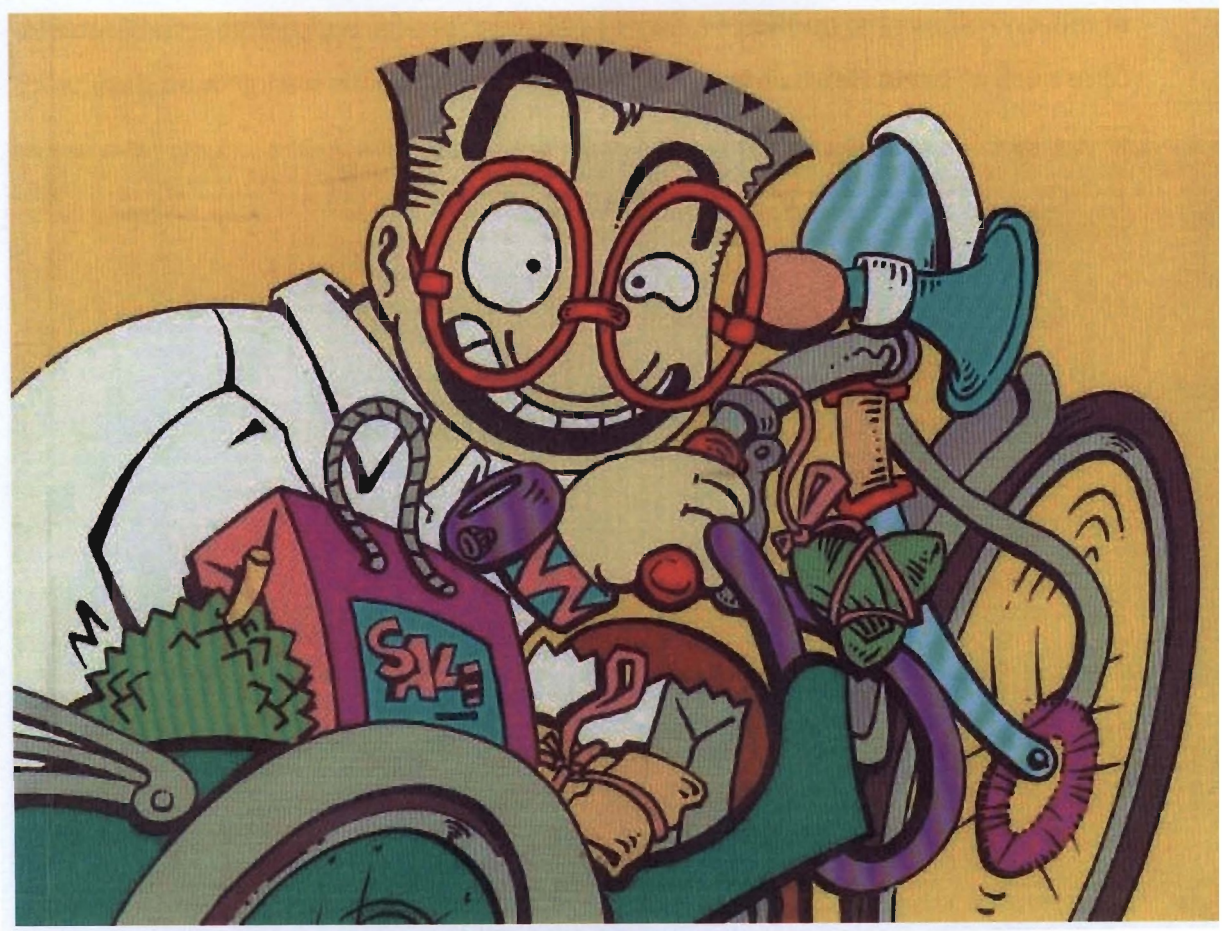

Fig 4. *Mr. Kiasu* (Johnny Lau 2013).

Singapore's animation history is brief with only a few significant milestones, the most notable one being Animata Studio, which was Singapore's first animation studio (Soo 2001). Animata primarily created commercial animation, some of which were localized. A particularly famous one was a TV commercial spot for McDonalds featuring *Mr. Kiasu*[2], a then popular comic book character, promoting the "kiasu burger" (*Kiasu Burger* 1993). Many of these animated works are localized and hence showcase certain degrees of Singapore's cultural life, such as the kiasu burger advertisement, which featured a narrator with heavy Singlish accent. However, most

[2] *Mr. Kiasu* was a comic book character created by comic artist Johnny Lau in the 1990s that personified the "kiasu" attribute, which is said to be common among Singaporeans. The term "kiasu" is a mixture of hokkien (a Chinese dialect) and singlish (Singaporean English) which literally means 'scared to lose' in Chinese. *Mr. Kiasu* has since been discontinued. It is significant as a statement on Singaporean identity in cartoon form, even though it never quite fully graced the animation medium.

of these works did not try to investigate and represent aspects of Singapore's cultural life in complex, or challenging ways, prioritizing the commercial advantages of capitalizing on a local treatment.

There is an exception however, in Subramaniam's *The Cage* (1990). The short-film, which won a Special Jury Prize at the 1991 Singapore International Film Festival, is an intimate look into the quiet, mundane life of an old Chinese man living in Singapore. The man stretches out his days milling about at the neighborhood coffee shop and void decks. This changed one day when he purchases a pet bird, the keeping of which is a particularly popular hobby among older men in Singapore. He eventually releases his bird "allowing it the freedom that he himself feels he will never know in his secure, but highly structured and ultimately boring life" (Bendazzi 1995, 409). The film makes a strong statement about the place of old people in hectic, bustling Singapore, which struggles continually with the rise of the ageing population. It also explores the mundanity of old age, paralleled with the idea of prized but nevertheless caged birds. It is a compelling animated account that explores a select aspect of cultural life in Singapore, specifically that of the retired generation.

Despite the short and abrupt history, recent years have seen an unusual rise in the amount of animated works that deal with aspects of Singapore's culture. This is probably due to the rise of patriotic sentiment aroused by Singapore's 50th birthday. These works come in a large variety of techniques and come from a wide range of initiatives, such as the *Celebrate Singapore Animation Competition (SG50 Programme Office 2015),* which was launched to encourage animated tributes to the nation. The analysis of these films, such as Lawrence Koh's *Nation Building* will be a major component of this research (chapter 4).

So far, the most significant, professional films that address local cultural life have come from Ervin Han and the respective studios that he represents. In 2011, Han created the film *Flats.* Described as "a paean to our living Singapore landscape", the film follows the footsteps of a boy and his sister as they wander through the

heartland domestic landscape of HDB flats[3] and void decks. Han's next project, *The Violin*, was released in 2015. The film was created for the REWIND/REMIND Film Festival, organized by *iRemember Singapore* and the *Singapore Memory Project*, initiatives that seek to explore Singapore's identity through nostalgia (Singapore Memory Project Website 2015). *The Violin* is a deeply sentimental film that follows a violin's journey, where it "graces different stages of Singapore", from the 1930s, through the Japanese Occupation, Singapore's independence, and modern day Singapore. These films are similar with regards to their expression of Singapore's cultural life as both successfully represent the Singapore architectural, infrastructural and to a certain degree, social landscape. However, the films generally do not succeed in showing deeper, honest stories, issues and values that are unique to Singapore, and as such, fail to achieve complexity in their expression of these aspects. More on how, where and why these films fail or succeed in complexity can be found in chapter 4.

Fortunately, there are also films that succeed in the complex expressions of locality. Ervin Han, for example, manages to find some success with Singapore's very first animated sitcom. *Heartland Hubby* (2015) featured a local ensemble cast, and unabashedly embraced Singaporean attitudes, language and behavior. The strongest aspect of the show with regards to Singapore's cultural life is the language, perhaps due to the dialogue-driven humor. Characters speak in a huge variety of accents, ranging from the local Singlish, Standard English, accented English from foreign talents and laborers, to locals with heavily affected British accents by better educated characters. This aspect clearly and effectively demonstrates Singapore's rich ethnic and racial diversity, and many punchlines come from the mishearing and/or misunderstanding of other accents or slang. The sitcom, though heavy-handed in approach and does more literal telling rather than showing, is

[3] The 'heartlander' is a term originally coined as a term referring to Chinese Singaporeans of certain habitation and income. It has since evolved into a more general term directed towards every day, working class authenticity of the average Singaporean. "[T]he heartland space in Singapore [can be taken to refer to] local tastes, small businesses, and something more homespun in contrast to the high-end glitz and upmarket fashions of Orchard Road" (Poon 2013, 562)

nevertheless effective and successful in expressing the diverse ethno-religious aspects, among other factors, of life in Singapore.

Aside from these instances, local animation that expresses aspects of Singapore's cultural life is rare compared to the commercial output, which tends to cater to more generalized, global audiences. Animation production, differentiated from live-action film-making, usually demands high production costs and long production times. This makes it difficult to justify the production of local content, as these animated films cannot be easily sold abroad and producers find it hard to recoup costs. Additionally, "uniquely Singaporean traits are just beginning to be defined and portrayed in sitcoms, dramas and animations, there is no desire to localize them to such an extent that they cannot be exported" (Soo 2001, 161).

Soo (2001, 163-164) makes a strong case for experimentation and risk-taking in the local animation scene, and for the medium to be viewed as a legitimate art form. Such an emphasis could prove to be a valuable for the expression of Singapore's cultural landscape and life, as more original exploration of the medium would could easily be achieved with more realistic or nuanced portrayals of uniquely Singapore aspects, which is still underrepresented in animation.

Animation in Singapore is still underappreciated and underutilized in terms of expressing local sensibilities, complexes and identities. This is affected on many different levels, from the perspective of the government through arts and cultural policies to the acknowledgement and appreciation of the general public. On the other hand, the apathy and largely unfulfilled nature of local animation means that there is plenty of space to explore and experiment in. With proper support from political and social avenues, the creation of animated content expressing facets of local cultural life should prove rewarding enough for animation creators to investigate in due time.

Soo (2001, 164) writes that "Singaporean artists are only just beginning to explore from a local context. [Animation] is beginning to develop as a form of expression that is becoming more mainstream... There is [increasingly] greater chances of a

breakthrough to elevate its status from cartoon medium to art medium in Singapore." The sheer youth and inexperience of the local animation art and industry scene could perhaps learn from foreign expressions of their respective national issues.

Other countries' expressions of culture through animation

Much has been written about the impact and influence of animation from countries with rich, elaborate histories of animation such as Japan and the United States. Less scholars however, deal specifically with the expression of their respective cultural identities. Fortunately, the legitimization of animation studies as an academic field pushes for more research in this area. Academic works have already begun to move into the discourse of animation and its relationship with national culture, identity, politics and etcetera.

A particularly notable example would be Pierre Floquet's essay titled *What is (not) so French in Les Triplettes de Belleville*[4], the literature examined the presence and absence of the French perspective present in Chomet's film. Floquet (2006) remarked that "[the film] is filled with clichés reflecting a French perspective." The author interrogated and picked apart many of these uniquely French sensibilities, and much of the erudition was presented in a sort of "things a non-French might have missed" perspective. Floquet mentions that he is "aware that many elements in the film cannot be appreciated and assessed similarly by those unfamiliar with French culture." A strong conveyance of a particular sense of cultural character can perhaps bring about a degree of alienation when it comes to appreciation of the film by viewers who are unfamiliar with such a zeitgeist. It is important to observe that this alienation, if indeed it does come into play, has not stopped *The Triplets of Belleville* from succeeding in terms of critical reception. Floquet writes of that film,

[4] An animated French comedy film released in 2003. The film is director Sylvain Chomet's first feature film and was considered a well-received animation, being nominated for two Academy Awards, including *Best Animated Feature*. English title: *The Triplets of Belleville*.

that "meaningful dialogue is minimal, onomatopoeias, sound-effects, and noise in general add to the notion of universality that emerges from the film, so much so that international versions need not be dubbed." The film, and Floquet's treatise on its relationship with French-ness will be further analyzed in chapter 5.

Maria O'Brien also investigated the relationship between national notions and animation. In her essay titled *The Secret of Kells (2009), a film for a post Celtic Tiger Ireland?* O'Brien (2010) deftly picked apart the underlying sentiments presented in the film *The Secret of Kells*[5], isolating the narrative aspects of the film for close inspection. This is significant because the film is easily affiliated to Irish folklore in terms of visual design, but O'Brien ignored that easier, more obvious and blatant route of association and instead accomplished the much more daunting task of comparing the film's underlying sentiments and sensibilities with that of the Irish. This aspect of the text is particularly effective in stripping away the literal, superficial surface evocations and references of visual design and getting to the essence of how animation can make stronger associations with deeper socio-cultural aspects of cultural zeitgeist and consciousness.

Floquet and O'Brien's texts are helpful in how they interrogate the expression of local themes, values and sensibilities in animated films. Floquet's focus on the universal themes that are appealing internationally in the very French *The Triplets of Belleville* and O'Brien's exploration into how *The Secret of Kells* expresses the subtext of Irish folklore and sentiment, reveals that the discourse of how animated works address local aspects can be approached from different angles. Generally speaking, similar principles to how the above scholars have gone about their respective papers can be adapted into this research as well.

The sources above show, with existing examples of notable animated works, that the medium of animation can form special relationships with aspects of a respective

[5] A 2009 French-Belgian-Irish fantasy animation feature film directed by Tomm Moore and Nora Twomey. The film was nominated for the Best Animated Feature Academy Award. The film had significant financial backing from the Irish sources, including the Irish Film Board and Raidió Teilifís Éireann, the national public service Irish broadcaster.

country's cultural life. Learning from the frameworks of analysis employed in the respective examples, it is easy to see how animated attempts can uniquely reveal, investigate and interrogate aspects of Singapore's cultural landscape. With relation to this research's goals to academically interrogate the animated expression of life and culture in Singapore, the above literature help as examples of how to investigate the relationship between animation and the creatively communication of national or cultural aspects. The above authors' approaches also loosely inspired the research strategies formulated in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Research strategy

The research strategy designed to tackle the objectives can be broken down into two main components. The first part of the objective, which seeks to "make the case that there is a shortage of complex, original and compelling animated expressions of the various aspects that make up Singapore's daily cultural life", shall be investigated via the theoretical research component. The second part of the objective to test and prove that "such expressions can be deliberately achieved through conscious control of the components of the animated medium"; shall be explored via a practical component.

The idea of a practice-based arts research working hand-in-hand with theoretical analysis is somewhat new and still finding its place amongst academia. Borgdorff (2007) writes that "art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes." This is the basis upon which the practical component is undertaken; to use the medium that is being discussed as an experimental vehicle for additional insight into the research.

The theoretical research component will attempt to triangulate a good sense of animated depictions of local life and culture by analyzing two categories of animated work, namely local animated films (chapter 4) and animated work from other nations/cultures that have rich sociocultural commentary (chapter 5). Local animated films about Singapore will first be analyzed in depth in order to get a good sense of where films about Singapore have already been. Whilst the exploration of animated works from other countries will be undertaken to see what local animated films have not yet explored, as well as where they could go with regards to representing local life and culture in complex and compelling ways.

The works cited from these categories will be analyzed as case studies, in which they will be dissected based on the research topic and/or the relevant category. The case studies chosen are selected based on the strength of their respective artistic

expression on sociocultural aspects, as well as the uniqueness of that expression. It is important to note that as a result, examples that fail to compellingly represent the desired commentary or sociocultural aspects will also be chosen when appropriate to analyze and understand their mistakes. This will help to avoid such mistakes in the execution of the practical component.

The case studies will be analyzed by asking the following questions (and more if specifically applicable):

- How does this case study approach the expression of life and culture in their respective locales?
- Is the attempt valuable and/or compelling, and why?
- If the attempt is not valuable and/or compelling, how can it be improved?

After these analyses are presented, they will be compared and contrasted to one another and distilled into an overall conclusion, which will then inform the practical effort (and vice versa).

The practical component of this thesis, the artistic research, will take part in the creation of an animated film that seeks to engage in social commentary about contemporary life in Singapore. As mentioned, current animated attempts locally tend to simplify the idea of locality by using shortcuts to establishing Singaporean values and/or elements. Films such as *Lak Boh Ki, Nation Building* or *The Violin* for example, regularly invoke recognizably Singaporean monuments, images and/or characters to instill Singaporean-ness. As such, the practical part will also involve the accounts of discarded ideas and themes or concepts that were consciously avoided in order to fulfill the research objectives, and/or to set the work apart from already explored territory by existing animated works about Singapore.

The research aspect of the study will commence first to gather a preliminary understanding of the relevant artistic and cultural landscape, after which the practical part will commence alongside. Both components will go hand-in-hand in

analyzing and putting into practical application the ways in which local cultural aspects and/or social commentary can be communicated in a complex way.

The research component of this paper will start off by examining local animated films about Singapore.

Chapter 4: Animated films about Singapore

Lak Boh Ki

Ang Qing Sheng's 2016 film *Lak Boh Ki*, is touted as the first Hainanese animated film. With regards to the expression of Singapore daily life and/or cultural aspects, the film succeeds in doing so on a superficial level by focusing greatly on the architecture of the HDB building and by also conjuring somewhat blatant Singaporean motifs. The story follows an infant boy as he perilously attempts to retrieve his Merlion soft toy which has fallen out of his window onto an extruding ledge. Through a series of natural but disastrous turn of events, the soft toy is blown, picked up and dropped all over the facade of the HDB building, leading the infant through the disastrous gauntlet. By this token, the film succeeds in describing the architectural face of the HDB, which is an iconic aspect of Singapore life, through the narrative events of a simple but universally relatable obstacle course. The exterior of the HDB block is addressed not merely through the description of the painted concrete, but also the things that are seen around it and within it. A particularly memorable and key visual and narrative aspect is the drying laundries that hang off of bamboo poles. These articles are involved in the narrative when the baby boy falls and is saved (momentarily) by the makeshift safety net of a large carpet hanging off two poles. The film also involves various elements such as air conditioning units, window ledges and window handles when the boy falls and his clothing catches onto these various hooks, saving him.

Fig 5. Still from Lak Boh Ki depicting a HDB block. (Ang Qing Sheng 2016, still from Lak Boh Ki)

The film's depiction of the Singaporean HDB is definitely the most prominent visual motif present in the film (See Fig. 5). The architecture is treated with a very sterile realism with regards to its visual style, as there is little to no cartooning, abstraction or stylization done to the look of buildings in the film. The modelling of the building, color choices, the surface quality and the way the film is lit suggests that Ang was trying to achieve a photographically faithful representation. While this was successfully achieved to a certain extent, the film could have taken advantage of the medium of animation's ability to present artistically skewed visual treatments, providing another dimension of control for expressing locality. A case could be made that the film is attempting to be photo realistically relatable, but considering the story of the film, photorealism could have been achieved with live-action filming, or a hybrid of animation, compositing and live action reference. The uncanny effect resultant from this half-way effort at achieving lifelike fidelity takes away from the authenticity of a lifelike image and character, making for an awkward image design that does not achieve a pleasant look nor does it convey a believable reality. Overall, the design of the film seems like a wasted opportunity to employ abstraction, cartooning or any other form of stylization as another dimension to convey or comment about locality.

The narrative of the film, as simple as it is, proves effective as a dramatic vehicle for interest and characterization. The objectives of the film, as described by the synopsis provided by Ang, tells us that the work seeks to "[reveal] the contemporary Singaporean landscape made up of foreigners". The film achieves such a goal at certain levels, showcasing a presumably Hainanese woman on the phone, an Indian teenage girl (Fig. 6), as well as a loud, argumentative mainland Chinese man off camera, throwing all manner of appliances out his window in his rage.

Fig 6. Indian girl in Lak Boh Ki. (Ang Qing Sheng 2016, still from Lak Boh Ki)

The simplified manner of which these characters are presented are too neutral in terms of the fact that their appearances are not affirming, challenging or otherwise commenting on existing sociocultural stereotypes. This sort of neutrality is of course, not necessarily detrimental to an animated expression. However, taking into account that the film is seeking to specifically comment on and reveal a "Singaporean landscape", presumably beyond geographical or architectural, delving into areas such as sociocultural zeitgeist and general sensibility, the instances explored by the work do not go deeper by perhaps showing a stereotypical behavior by a certain ethnicity or nationality, and then affirming or refuting it. Mainland Chinese expats in Singapore, for instance, are often considered to be inconsiderately loud on mobile phones, and it could be argued that the film was trying to establish such a mold. However, nothing was done in the film that comments on the

characterization; the man shouts on the phone, throws some objects out the window, and is faded away as the baby moves on.

On the topic of foreign population in Singapore, especially in the context of the contemporary time frame, in which foreign composition has been a big issue socially, culturally, politically and economically (Vasu, 2014). A big part of conveying any sort of point about how outsiders or foreigners are part of the system is in showing that integration (or lack thereof, depending on the perspective being expressed). The film engages the political subtext on a basic level through the inclusion of these diverse ethnic characters, but fails to put them in a landscape deeper than a geographical and architectural one. Foreigners are presented at face value, living in the shell of a HDB building, but how they fit (or fail to fit) socially or culturally is not touched on. It essentially presents the cogs without explaining how and where they fit in the bigger machine that is Singapore.

The main character of the film, a nameless infant boy, is an interesting choice that gives the film some degree of complexity due to its originality. The instinctive, mostly ignorant little boy is blissfully and tragically unaware of the dangers of his journey, making him both vulnerable (particularly in the audience's eyes) and invincible in his oblivious fearlessness. This presents a never-before-seen angle from which the otherwise standard subject of the HDB domicile is approached.

Aside from the characters, the film conveys the aspects of locality much clearer and simpler when it comes to the presentation of the HDB domicile as well as the vital Merlion soft toy; which very blatantly establishes the film as Singaporean. Indeed, Ang (2016, email interview) said that the Merlion was "an obvious motif that represents Singaporean identity," and identified a collection of multi-colored Merlion plush toys towards the end of the film as a representation of how the Singaporean culture can be "borrowed from other cultures." This is not necessarily simple or superficial, as these symbols are all rooted in some sort of historical source that can give rich insights into the Singapore condition. *Lak Boh Ki* uses these symbols prominently, but succeeds only to a certain extent in clearly establishing a

deeper commentary about locality using these icons. The rich potential for nuanced explorations of these indicators was either non-existent, or not explained well enough within the film to be empirically accountable for. The HDB landscape is presented boldly with the entire film taking place within and outside it. There are, on the one hand, compelling allusions made to the rich variety of people living within just one block. Different houses decorate and furnish their houses differently, and this subtle undertone of variety does do well in achieving some complexity for the film in terms of the expression of local life and culture due to its understated and effective communication of such.

Fig 7. The Merlion soft toy. (Ang Qing Sheng 2016, still from Lak Boh Ki)

The Merlion soft toy is one such signifier that screams Singapore, but only explores the surface of the rich subtext available to the creation and symbolism of the mythical beast. The Merlion is created in 1964 for the Singapore Tourism Board (Yong 2016). After which, it has been taught in textbooks as a national myth/folk tale to elementary children in primary school, a story about how Sang Nila Utama, seeing the Merlion, founded Singapore in an inspired state of mind. The film acknowledges references and comments on none of this, arbitrarily using the design in the film to presumably connect it closer to locality. It could be argued that a deeper point was present. Perhaps the infant boy's dicey quest for the Merlion soft toy is a metaphor for an oblivious danger in Singaporeans' pursuit of patriotism? Perhaps the usage of the Merlion design for the soft toy could have been a

lampooning of the capitalistic consumerism of a national symbol that doubles as a tool for marketing and commercialization? These deeper points, if present, were not quite evident enough, and as such, did not contribute much to the film's complex expression of Singaporean-ness. This is due mainly to the non-expositional presentation of the film, with a lack of dialogue or literal information that explores the Merlion motif. This subtle expression, on the one hand, is compelling as a complex means of expressing the motif, however, in the case of *Lak Boh Ki*, not too informative with regards to such deeper observations regarding the motif (if they existed).

On the whole, *Lak Boh Ki* manages to succeed at a certain level in terms of providing an entertaining and engaging, Chuck Jones-esque experience. Regarding sophistication, the film does express complexity in its non-expositional means of exploring the Singapore landscape through animation, particularly the architectural and social aspects of living in a HDB block. The main character also communicates a certain degree of complexity due to his innocence and ignorance to his perilous journey, presenting a fresh way to present the HDB domicile and estate. The film, however, misses out on certain other aspects that could have been used to achieve a much more multi-layered expression, particularly with regards to the depiction of foreigners, and how they are intertwined with Singapore life and culture. Nevertheless, the film presents a refreshing reflection of a Singapore landscape through an entertaining journey made possible by the tool set of animation.

Nation Building: The Story of a 50-Year Country

On the subject of blatant locality, Lawrence Koh's SG50 animated tribute, *Nation Building: The Story of a 50-Year Country* is a work that is as didactic and literal as its title. The 10-minute 2D animated film made in 2015 is a factual and standardized presentation of the highlights of Singapore's 50-year history that would sit right at home in a social studies museum, leveraging little of the medium's abilities to tell stories in complex and compelling approaches.

Koh engages in other forms of narrative progression, such as dramatic dialogue, but these devices are simply used to introduce and conclude the narrator's instructive exposition, rather than bring about emotional effects. The history lesson is introduced as a conversation among a Singaporean Chinese family, and the film unfolds as the parents preach Singapore's history to their children, who periodically reply with wonder and pride.

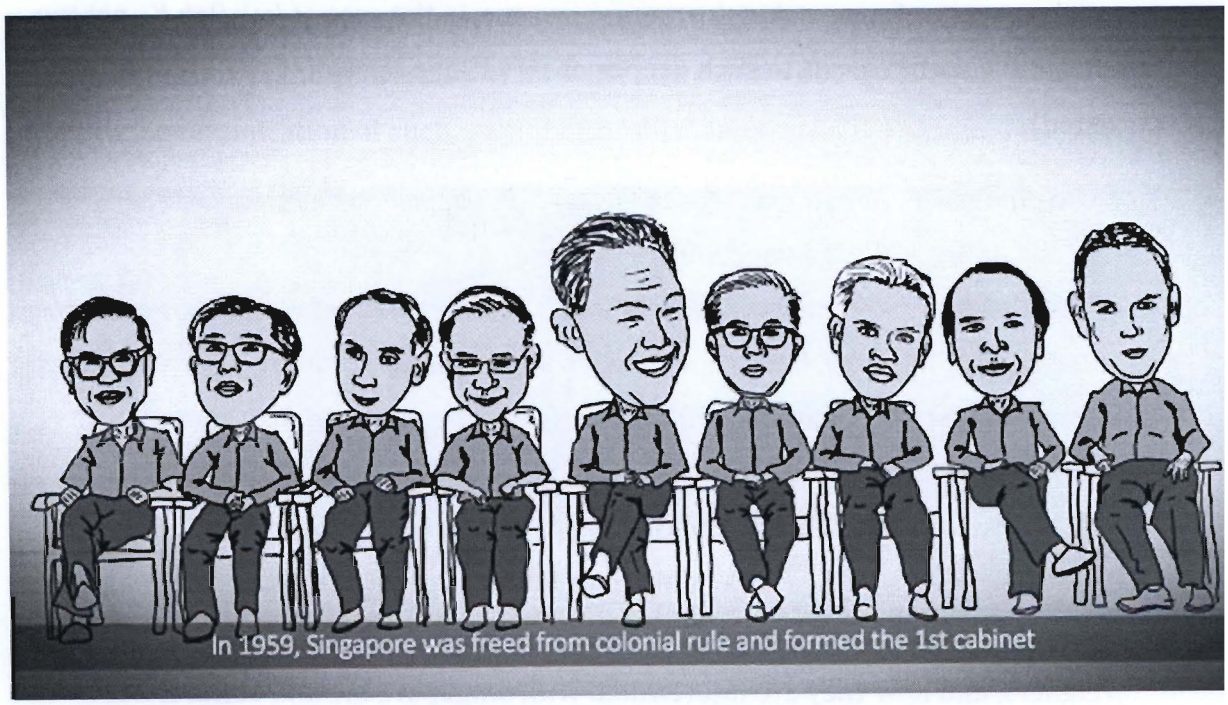

Fig 8. Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore's first cabinet. (Lawrence Koh 2015. Still from *Nation Building*.)

Fig 9. 3D shots from Koh's *Nation Building*. (Lawrence Koh 2015. Still from *Nation Building*.)

Visually, the film is a potpourri of styles and mediums. Mixing 2D and 3D shots (Fig. 8 & 9) together, the film does not command a consistent style, and the execution of both the 2D and 3D shots are technically lackluster. As such, they do little to add any artistic flair or flavor to the ubiquitous symbols such as the Merlion and the Singapore skyline. The artistic treatment of the film's most prominent "character", Singapore's late founding father Lee Kuan Yew, also left much to be desired. The drawings of the late Lee are for the most part, static 2D line artworks traced over existing photographs (Fig. 8). The filmic movements of Lee Kuan Yew, along with the other non-fictional, historical founding fathers, are strictly reduced to computer program movements that technically qualify as "animation", but fail in terms of granting movement that breathes life into the figures. This relegates the work (for the most part) to a technical level that is just somewhat fancier than a bog standard PowerPoint slide presentation, leaving plenty of artistic and technical room for much convincing and effective animated storytelling. The technical shortcomings of *Nation Building* fail to elevate the level of complexity present in the work, as the message is communicated in a standardized and predictable way.

Considering the visual and narrative presentation used in the film, Koh does an adequate job in communicating Singapore's historic milestones factually. However, the straightforward, literal storytelling fails to engage with the audience on a deeper level, and the work fails to communicate any sort of emotional appeal beyond an encyclopedic animated document. There are opportunities and attempts at such, most noticeably when the film touches on Singapore's separation from Malaysia. The well-known "moment of anguish", which rendered founding father Lee Kuan Yew momentarily speechless and visibly upset, is a particularly prime moment for pathos, as well as a valuable narratively low point that would be a great setup for a rousing comeback and payoff later on in the story. The opportunity is squandered however, as the moment is expressed via the words of a spoken narrator, visually accompanied by a black and white live action video of Lee fed through a basic posterize filter. These aspects do little to present the emotional trauma inflicted on the founding father and indeed, the people of Singapore. The medium of animation would be uniquely adept at addressing the sensitivity and vulnerability that was so sentimentally overwhelming that it broke the usually staunch professionalism and politically self-aware façade of Lee Kuan Yew. Koh could have delved deeper into the toolset of animation in using abstract or non-realistic imagery to better convey the collective national disappointment and eventual grit to succeed. If the opportunity was taken advantage of, the film would certainly have come across as a much more complex and compelling presentation of not just Singapore's literal history, but the emotional seeds that sowed the consciousness of the nation as a whole.

All in all, Koh's *Nation Building* succeeds in delivering literal, historical information to the viewer. The film's decision to tell the story through a crudely rendered and animated 3D Singaporean family injects a little bit of charm and interest, but it is not enough to make the rest of the film compelling on any level. The standardized, textbook scripting and presentation of events reveal the superficiality of such an animated approach, and the literal artistic treatment of animating exactly what is said in the voice over leads to a reliance on overtly local elements to relate to locality.

The Violin

Robot Playground's 2D animated film *The Violin* (2015) employed similarly blatant indicators of Singaporean-ness. However, the film utilized these elements through a narrative and visual approach that utilizes dramatic and emotional appeal, hence achieving more depth in terms of animated storytelling. The film bears the same premise as Koh's *Nation Building: The Story of a 50-year Country,* detailing the highlights of Singapore's relatively short but eventful history, but it does so with a stronger emphasis on pathos through stronger storytelling and more sentimental aesthetics. The film follows the eponymous violin as it travels through the nation spatially and chronologically, revealing the true message of the film: Singapore's progress.

Compared to Koh's approach, *The Violin* employed the use of pathos more prominently and effectively, prioritizing a sentimental response from the audience through nostalgic visuals and sound design. The story is also told less informatively and literally, without the use of a narrator or dialogue, and instead expressing the film's message through an emotional story that spans generations. The 16-minute short is effectively geared towards inducing feelings of sentimentality, nostalgia and pride among the local patriotic through animated emotional appeal. This is successful to a certain extent, but the film lacks depth in terms of conveying the more complex and important aspects of Singapore sensibility and/or attitude.

Fig 10. The sentimental color palette of *The Violin.* (Ervin Han 2015. Still from *The Violin.*)

On the surface, some aspects of the film are sufficient in terms of technical execution. Aesthetic elements such as the color, background, and to a certain extent, character design, are adequately accomplished technically (Fig. 10). These aesthetic aspects certainly do fulfill the apparent objective of the film to visually and emotionally induce nostalgic, sentimental feelings of patriotism towards the nation. However, the film is narratively and conceptually hollow, expressing well how Singapore came to be but not what it actually is.

This could be due to the detachment from human characters that are relatable. The story moves through the eyes of several different characters across the generations, but the human touch is always kept at a distance, and we never follow one character for long. This is probably due to the narrative focus on the violin, which functions well as a focal point for the story to revolve around. A non-human and non-conscious main element (the violin) does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of relatable aspects. This would definitely not be an issue if the various owners of the violins had varied and interesting stories and personalities. This is not the case for *The Violin* as the owners of the instrument embark on relatively blasé and predictable routes of musical mastery and success. It is interesting to note that the

film parallels the emotional highs and lows of the nation with the peaks and troughs of the characters, which is a particularly intriguing mechanic to mirror the fates and feelings of micro and macro stories and perspectives. However, this parallel is only obvious on a surface level, as the emotional progression is simplified and superficial. The character and national rags to riches story is a relatively consistent uphill climb, with one significant era of anguish and tribulation. As such, the sentimental setups and payoffs are relatively predictable. For example, one of the more emotionally challenging and significant moments of the film addressing conflict and difficulty comes from the depiction of the Japanese occupation of Singapore (Fig. 11). This is emotionally the most challenging and successful aspect of the film, succeeding where Koh's *Nation Building* had failed.

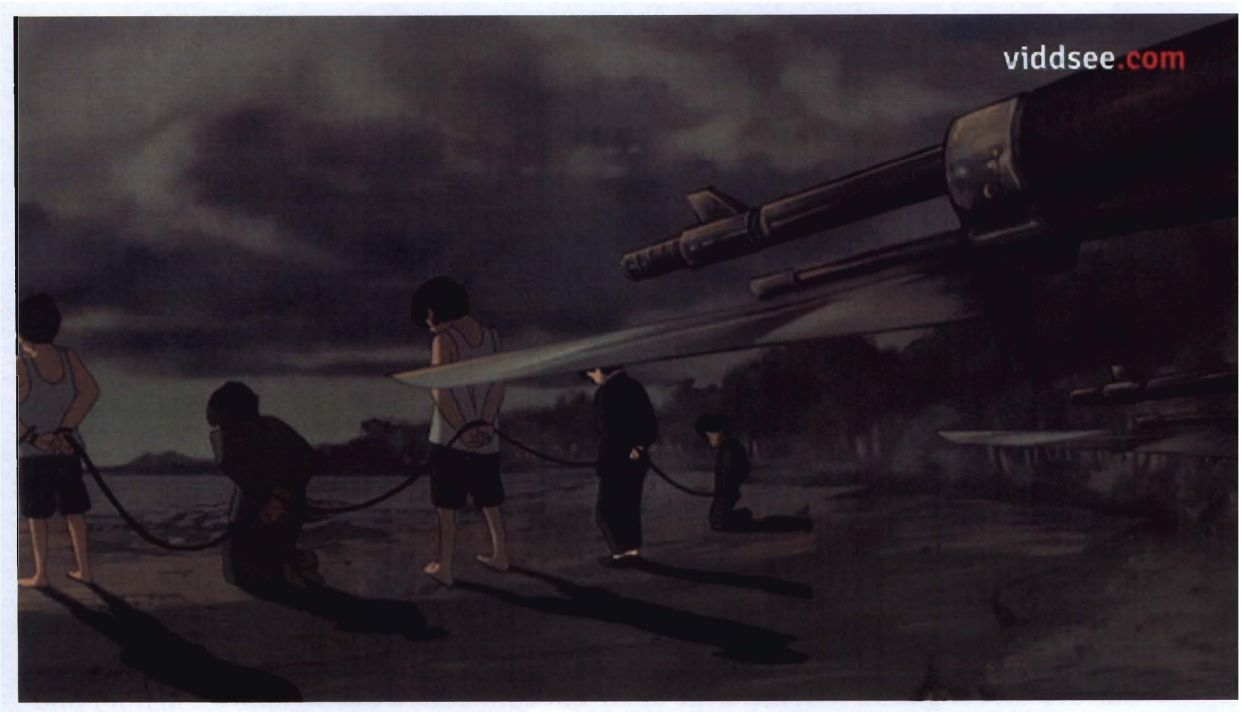

Fig 11. The Japanese Occupation (Ervin Han 2015. Still from *The Violin*.)

The scene begins with the uneasy tranquil before the storm, as a trishaw driver sleeps in his carriage, peacefully oblivious to the incoming Japanese bombers far above. The bombers arrive, unloading their explosive munitions, reducing the colonial shop houses below into smoke, dust and fire. Scenes of misery ensue, providing a useful exploration of emotional atmosphere of the era. What is lacking is

the connection of the violin to the fate of Singapore, as the film takes a short detour from following the violin, opting instead to showcase B-roll shots of the scenes of occupied Singapore. These sequences are compelling in their recreation of the past, but the violin's absence misses an opportunity to show its practical and metaphorical context and significance to conflict and tribulation, and as an extension, its symbolic relationship to Singapore. The instrument is only shown in a sequence where the first owner, a Chinese boy, is hurried onto a truck by his parents in order to escape the bombardment and invasion. The film then infers that the violin is sat there immobile, dead, until the end of the occupation, when a man checking for supplies amongst the abandoned shop houses finds it, and brings it home for his daughter. As such, there is a narrative break in the connection between the violin and Singapore's history. The sequence in itself is actually quite a fascinating animated insight; however, the hard cutoff from the main story is a little jarring and severs an already tenuous connection between the titular violin and its representation Singapore history and culture. Perhaps the film is trying to infer that the occupation brought about a suspension of passion, arts and life. However, considering the emotional ambitions of the work, a much more varied and complex sentimental range could be achieved by bringing in the violin as a means of soulful reprieve or morale respite during the horrors of war. Instead the sequence, and the entire film, ends up being emotionally one-dimensional; it is either happy or sad, lacking any semblance of depth and complexity in its expression if Singapore historical ordeal, atmosphere and culture.

Examining the motifs and themes surrounding the eponymous violin is also a curious investigation that has little apparent connection to Singapore's history and culture in the film. The violin, as a musical instrument, brings with it heavy connotations of the Western world and its classical history, hailing from Italy and being most prominently found in Western classical music. In the film, it is a gift from a presumable foreign man (his nationality is difficult to discern due to his Western facial features but dark hair) to a local Chinese boy, who grows with the instrument and gradually improves at it, carrying him through a growing up montage where he

is shown entertaining various audiences with. Perhaps the violin as a choice of an instrument is a reference to Singapore's colonial origins? This is pure speculation, as the film makes no attempt to connect and deliver such a metaphorical relationship. Judging by the seemingly arbitrary decision to focus on a violin is it difficult to connect the choice to something deeper and more complex. Perhaps the musically-inclined narrative could have been better represented with more regional or traditionally local instruments, or with a mixture of eastern and western implements. For instance, having the story revolve around the unlikely union of a western violin and an eastern erhu would have made for a more culturally apt metaphor for the unique blend of west and east music, culture and outlook that has been a part of Singapore for most of its relatively short national history. Such a choice of opposing instruments coming together to exude a different sort of melodious harmony would have been an immediately obvious and compelling musical metaphor in expressing the special tune of Singapore culture and life.

The Violin treads on similar historical paths with the animated form, but through a much more effective use of pathos as well as a much more effective technical execution, the film functions adequately as an animated expression of Singapore. The work falls short of being complex however, due its standardized treatment of the story and its lack of vivid characterization. The short film's reliance on Singaporean indicators such as distinctly local architecture, symbols and monuments is not leveraged with nuanced animated expression. The film could achieve sophistication in terms of its expression by perhaps concentrating on more specific areas narratively. For instance, *The Violin* could have had stronger focus on characters, in which Singaporean sensibilities, attitudes, philosophies and culture can be dramatically communicated through social dynamics and human interaction. This is certainly achievable, as the following work, also by Ervin Han, shows that the creators can clearly work with strong characterization.

Heartland Hubby

Ervin Han and Bernard 2014 animated sitcom *Heartland Hubby* "revolves around the wacky misadventures of the Lim household" (Robot Playground Media 2014), and it generally succeeds in expressing a very detailed expression of Singaporean life, culture and sensibility. Created as a television series for local, free-to-air terrestrial station Channel 5, the humor is primarily dialogue-based, and achieves a somewhat compelling representation of Singapore through animation. One of the main ways in which the show's humor is generated comes from the way it addresses Singapore's multicultural diversity.

Heartland Hubby frequently features racial and ethnic stereotypes, and it reinforces or reverses them, particularly through characterization. Figures such as the Caucasian boyfriend struggling to understand Singapore culture, or, the immigrant employee from China, succeeds in giving *Heartland Hubby* referencing the local racial and ethnic diversity, as well as the complicated and controversial debate on foreign talent and labor. On the sensitivity regarding these debates, Yap (2014) writes:

> "Debates on immigration and foreigners have become highly topical and controversial in Singapore in recent years. Both have been "blamed" for a variety of woes that Singaporeans currently face, including a widening income gap and wage stagnation among the lower income groups; rising competition (for jobs, housing, communal space, and the like); and a rising cost of living."

Not only does the show embrace these issues, it addresses and comments on the prevailing stereotypes unflinchingly on both sides of the immigration coin. For example, in episode 6, the grandfather of the family has a new girlfriend: a young, attractive Chinese immigrant named QiQi (Fig. 12). QiQi is quickly stereotyped as a gold digging girlfriend in the class of a mail order bride by his concerned family. Thus, the show is entertaining as a sitcom, and it is propelled by a strong sense of characterization and unflinching expressions of potentially sensitive issues such as race, ethnicity and immigration.

Fig 12. Ah Gong and his Chinese immigrant girlfriend. (Robot Playground Media 2015. Still from *Heartland Hubby*.)

The medium of animation allows for the show to embark of flights of fantasy, such as talking animals or gigantic robots and apocalyptic zombie wastelands. This works to a certain extent when it comes to expressing complexity in local life and culture. Of particular note are a couple of stray cats who haunt the void decks of the housing estate.

Fig 13. Bubur and Cha cha. (Robot Playground Media 2015. Still from *Heartland Hubby*.)

These cats serve the important narrative function of reflection from a macro perspective frequently commenting on the inanity and insignificance of the affairs plaguing the main characters. Bubur and Cha Cha (Bubur Chacha is the name of a popular regional dessert), nicknames of the couple of cats, are animated instances of a sort of void deck culture prominent in Singapore, where select residents from the respective estates voluntarily feed the stray cats. The cats, as a result, are familiar with and close to human contact, but are technically still wild animals that retain their freedom whilst enjoying the comforts of domestication. This interesting relationship makes Bubur and Cha Cha surprisingly appropriate commentators and narrators of the human (and Singaporean) condition, as they are close enough to bear reliable witness and they are yet distant enough to contextualize the behaviors and underlying sensibilities of their human feeders (or slaves, from the perspective of the cat). The fantasy device of having non-human characters talk to the viewers is one that is achievable across different mediums (even live-action film-making), however, 2D animation allows for such treatments with relative ease and seamlessness. The cats' combined banter usually provides the best lines in the script, supplying consistently astute and cynical comments on the idiosyncrasies

and ironies of the human characters. For example, episode 7 details a residential election coup by the main character, Lim Teh Peng, who takes over the post of residential committee (RC) chairman. The ensuing tug-of-war for power is retrospectively commented upon by the feline duo, saying that humans are mindless "goondus" (a sometimes endearing local word meaning stupid or silly) who "will do anything as long as it gets them three square meals a day." His friend adds that humans are "just like dogs! Roll over! Play dead!" The conversation then takes a turn into self-awareness and contradiction, as the cats are enticed into tail wagging submission as a resident feeder piles up a small mountain of cat feed for them. It is this sort of self-conscious, self-deprecating writing that makes *Heartland Hubby* excel at what it is essentially trying to do. The reflective comments above are of course, on a macro perspective, really a social reflection and commentary on the Singapore, and perhaps even human condition. In this case, the animated vehicle is utilized efficiently in portraying Singapore life, outlook and culture through humor.

Heartland Hubby also capitalizes well on animation's ability to tell stories that would be otherwise difficult to pull off in other media forms. Episodes with stories revolving around giant robots, zombies and aliens are examples of how the show embraces animation to immerse the characters in exotic settings and stories. This does not directly relate to and comment on Singapore life and/or culture, but some of these situations allow for unique explorations of Singapore characters in fantastic situations that would be otherwise difficult to express in more realistic mediums.

Heartland Hubby also serves a role as comedic reflection of contemporary events locally. For instance, one of the stories in episode 3 revolves around the arrival of an expatriate, George Hilton, a Caucasian social media millionaire who founded parody sites MyFace and Friendbook, and how he integrates and maneuvers his new residential estate. This is a thinly veiled reference to an actual event in 2011 when Eduardo Saverin, co-founder of Facebook, moved and obtained citizenship to Singapore, in the process renouncing his American citizenship. When Hilton was asked about his intentions of moving to Singapore in *Heartland Hubby*, he passionately voiced his yearning to immerse in Singapore life and culture,

surreptitiously muttering under his breath that he is also here for the "little tax breaks here and there". Heartland Hubby is referencing Saverin's decision to become a Singaporean, a process that also saved him an estimated $700 million in capital gains tax. These sort of reflections and animated responses to real events locally fulfills a function of very direct social commentary in a way no other media forms can, due primarily to animation's ability to abstract and exaggerate.

Overall, the series manages to compellingly portray an interesting and somewhat nuanced animated expression of Singapore. This is largely attributed to its clever, humorous writing, which addresses many locally pertinent and relevant issues. The series is also for the most part courageous in its scripting and vivid depictions of sensitive issues such as race, ethnicity, and especially foreign laborers and talents. Taking advantage of the capabilities of animation, *Heartland Hubby* also embarks on exotically fantastic adventures from time to time, allowing the viewers to see the Singapore sensibility in these cartoonish situations. As a result, the animated show manages to express present day Singapore in a somewhat complex but definitely compelling way, through animation.

Flats

Flats by Ervin Han, like Heartland Hubby, depicts a more or less contemporary portrait of Singapore, albeit with the narrative, visual and sound design of *The Violin*. These three aspects all focus in on communicating sentimentality and warmth, and as a result, the film is almost entirely emotional in its appeal. This however, does not express a compelling, challenging or complex Singapore, due to its adequate but ultimately one-dimensional sentimental appeal.

The film is perhaps most interesting narratively, as the story, although simple, takes the audience through a sufficiently representative landscape of the contemporary HDB estate. The story revolves around a pair of presumably siblings, an older brother and a younger sister as the play with their toy of the day. As they meander through the void deck of the estate, they experience, somewhat ignorantly, the social

microcosm of the typical HDB estate. Thus, the film seeks to be a "paean to [the] living Singapore landscape", and achieves it through a much smaller focus on the heartland estate.

Fig 14. *Flats'* sentimental color scheme. (Ervin Han 2014. Still from *Flats*.)

The visual design immediately conjures up gentle, sweet feelings due to the dominance of warm orange and yellow hues. There are not many other colors apparent in the film, apart from a rather pleasing complementary greenish-blue that is seen on several key elements and other not-so-important ones in the background. Visually speaking, the lighting design is also important tonally, with the film happening around sunset. The characters are often lit dramatically from the back or the side, casting significant and heavy shadows that bring across a moody visual appeal overall.

Fig 15. A Chinese funeral. (Ervin Han 2014. Still from *Flats*.)

The most evident and commendable local aspect expressed in the animated showcase is the diversity of people, as well as their activities around a typical Singaporean residential estate. Through the film, the siblings encounter a Malay wedding, a Chinese funeral and a gathering of interracial chess players. While these are not many instances, these circumstances are excellent choices for showing the ethnic, cultural and even emotional ranges that could present itself in an average day at an average estate.

The film is largely pedestrian and blasé in its animated expression as it does little with the story or visuals to take advantages of the mentioned capabilities of the animation medium. The entire story, and its accompanying visuals, could have been just as easily accomplished to a satisfying degree through the live-action media form. Perhaps the strongest capitalization of the medium's unique properties would be the somewhat interesting cartooning of the characterization in expressing Singapore's rich cultural and ethnic diversity. However, the character designs are relatively formulaic and similar, without a significant range of caricature that might

be needed to more accurately reflect the diversity of the different kinds of people you might meet around a typical HDB estate.

All in all, *Flats* is an emotionally effective work that adequately expresses Singapore life and culture on a surface level. Aesthetically, it is an excellent animated showcase of the sights of a typical HDB void deck. However, the work does not achieve complexity due to its touch-and-go treatment of the elements showcased within the film. There are rich subtexts available in the shared communal space of the void deck, where the variety of age, income, ethnicity and race interact in compelling ways. This film does not delve into the nuances of these social dynamics, and hence misses out on an opportunity to communicate these deeper aspects through animation.

The Cage

Like *Flats*, *The Cage* has a narrative that revolves around a very intimate animated showcase of the Singapore HDB estate. The nine-minute animated film follows an unnamed, retired Chinese senior citizen as he ambles through his residential estate. It is a slow animated exploration of an old man's monotonous daily routine, which works well in reflecting the tired, sluggish, feet-dragging tedium of growing old in the fast-paced society and culture of Singapore. Regarding the film's addressing of locality and its reference to Singapore culture, Soo (2001) writes that the film "uses distinctively local characters and settings to make social commentary."

The film is relatively dry and uneventful, with very subtle narrative peaks and troughs, which adds to the depiction of old age as a numbing process when one gets used to the vicissitudes of life. The narrative turns and climax revolve around the old man's attempt to inject new passion and happiness in his repetitive daily life by buying and keeping a pet bird.

The unnamed main character of the film wanders his estate, passively observing life with nary an expression when he chances upon a bird-singing corner (a place where

avid hobbyists hang up their bird cages for social, communal and perhaps competitive purposes, typically found at HDB void decks of estates with more elderly demographics). The lively twittering song of the birds makes him break out a smile (the only change of expression in his face in the entire film) and he proceeds to purchase his own songbird and cage at a pet shop. Bringing it home, the old man has little excitement for the bird, and its relentless twittering even keeps him up at night. Though he is not visibly annoyed at the pet, his passivity and unchanging, unsmiling expression communicates the fact that the song bird has not brought him the joy he previously received as a casual admirer. He eventually sets it free, though the act is never shown.

The film ends on a visually poetic note, as the camera, situated within the now empty cage, zooms out from a close-up of the old man, compositionally framing him as if he is perpetually caged in his very essence even though he has the semblance of freedom (Fig. 16). Bendazzi, commenting on the final sequence says that in freeing the bird the old man is "allowing it the freedom that he himself feels he will never know in his secure, but highly structured and ultimately boring life." The film, as a result, makes statements and asks questions about the social, cultural and even political aspects of ageing in Singapore, but in a way that is inferential and compelling, as the lack of literal explanation and dialogue forces the viewer to read between the sparse lines.

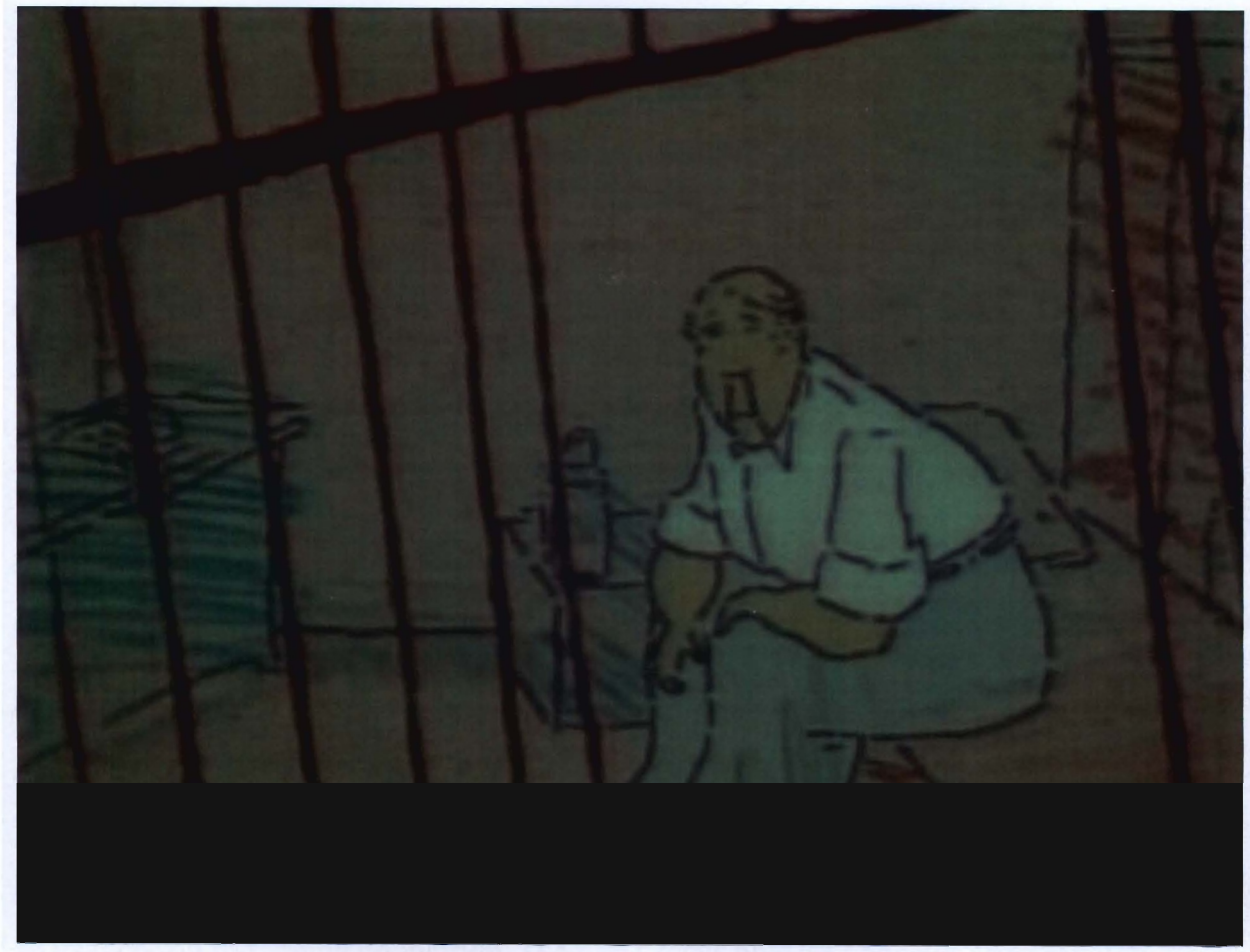

Fig 16. The old man, caged. (Mohan Subramaniam 1990. Still from *The Cage*.)

The visual style of the film reinforces this aspect of non-literal appeal. Much of the backgrounds are done with thin lines colored in with thick color pencil strokes that are not too polished. These still backgrounds retain a lot of spontaneity and life. The dark outlines are wobbly and consistently disjointed, and these outlined shapes are colored in very roughly with the strong color pencil strokes frequently coming out of the confines of the dark lines. The overall feel is an atmosphere that is alive despite its lack of movement. This sort of economic imagery works well for the film in adding a degree of play space for the audience to fill in the gaps. The indistinct design also adds to the perspective of the aged, as the textural, undefined edges where colors bleed into and out of the supposed boundaries separating hue and value blurs to suggest the special perception privy to the elderly. The treatment also provides for a refreshing visual take on the Singapore landscape. Particularly

prevalent in the film as a visual (and narrative) motif is the local residential estate. Subramaniam, instead of painstakingly rendering the iconic HDB architecture photographically, suggests the buildings through an economical assortment of rectangles and lines. The result is a somewhat warped, abstracted interpretation of local architecture that communicates the monotony, repetition and scale of the Singapore HDB estate through animated stylization. In this sense, less is more as the film communicates not so much the superficial façade of the HDB flats, but hints through its wobbly line work and scattered color strokes the spirit of the residential landscape from the very specific point of view of the old man.

The animated characters are similarly fashioned in a wobbly, disjointed dark outline, but are instead colored with solid colors. This is presumably due to the fact that is it far more economical to color animated frames with solid colors in terms of maintaining consistency and seamlessness. Regardless of the coloring technique, the line work, albeit limited in its technical execution in terms of animated movement, contributes to the nuanced expression of the old man's psyche due to its looseness in details and richness in textures; aspects that suggest the myopic yet experienced perspective of old age.

The film's success in the skillful manipulation of the animated medium to express the perspective of a retiree living alone in Singapore is evident not merely in the use of literal aspects such as sights and sounds, but also in subtler aspects, like chronological pacing and repetition.

Firstly, the sound design is relatively simple and straightforward, but its close relationship with the main narrative makes for a meaningful aural dimension that adds on the impact of the story. As the old man wakes up, we are introduced to his daily morning routine of turning on his portable cassette tape player. The Chinese opera tune is heard passively, as he turns his back to it and goes to the bathroom immediately after turning it on, as the meandering melodies of the Chinese opera tune underscores his life, and the film. The songbird is a change in his life, as he leaves the music player off when he has the pet in his possession, and after he

releases it, he turns on the music player again, as the exact same tune ekes out of the machine. These aural indicators are very distinct and original as narrative bookends. The sound design also does a satisfying job of portraying a realistic local soundscape that is true to the heart and soul of an average humdrum heartlands estate. The overall audio atmosphere is roughly mixed as the cuts are crudely edited and obvious; however, the authenticity helps in establishing a very complex, real and inferential ecosystem without having to rely too much in visual meticulousness. Such a combination of audio scrupulousness and visual sparseness makes for a very engaging and vivid experiential blend of interpretative perception.

There is strength in Subramaniam's unabashed animated envisioning of Singapore. It lends the story a distinctive degree of authenticity and realism as the Singaporean-ness is not overtly highlighted, and does not fall into the trap of overstating its unique local flavor, which is vivid in how naturally it is presented, with very little attention directed at that aspect. This is distinct from many of the previous examples such as *The Violin* and *Lak Boh Ki*.

The Cage ultimately uniquely contributes to animated depictions of Singapore due to its focus on the ageing population. The film's focus on a growing but often ignored demographic and culture of Singapore, and respectfully places the ageing population's plight, interests and condition within the context of locality.

The Tiger of 142B

Similar to the *Cage, The Tiger of 142B* is an 11-minute animated film adapted from Singapore author Dave Chua's short story of the same name. The film centers on a young Chinese man, who "finds [that] he [was] having [difficulties] in communicating with his girlfriend." This is further underscored and complicated by a string of brutal killings around the block (142B) that they live in, amidst unreliable rumors that a wild tiger has been spotted in the area. The tempestuous winds of his life merge to form a perfect storm of paranoia, self-doubt and mystery. Taking place in an otherwise typical HDB estate, the film is compelling in the way that it

introduces an artistically surreal (at times abstract) murder mystery into the Singaporean landscape; creating a very fresh way to experience locality through an animated work.

Fig 17. Ripples along the skin, reminiscent of a tiger's stripes. (Harry Zhuang and Henry Zhuang 2015. Still from *The Tiger of 142B*.)

The relationship between the protagonist and his distant girlfriend is a key part of the narrative, as her increasing emotional distance and coldness is inversely proportionate to the vividness of his hallucinations. The Zhuang brothers very skillfully weave the micro story of his problems with the girlfriend with the macro story of the murder mysteries, supposedly killed by a wild stealthy tiger. The two seemingly unrelated aspects are never actually addressed in the film directly. Amidst the man's difficult dialogues with his girlfriend, they never acknowledge or speak to each other about the strange tiger killings happening right at their doorstep. Instead, the union of these two aspects is shown visually, as otherwise normal objects or interactions in the man's life transform increasingly vividly into the stripes that resemble the ones found on a tiger.

It starts gradually, as a close up of a foot massage for his girlfriend slowly, almost unnoticeably, shows the resultant wrinkles rippling into tapered stripes (Fig. 17). The wooden slats of their sofa pulsate ever so gently as the body of a tiger would in slumber. Descending down a flight of steps, the vertical supports of the staircase railings contorts around a highly stylized fisheye effect to suggest the girth of a tiger's torso. These distortions in the animated reality point at how the main characters self-doubt and frustrations take metaphorical shape as the rumored murderous tiger. The clever use of cinematic techniques as well as cartoon/illustrative flexibility creates a smooth blend of outer real world and inner psyche, providing a somewhat seamless mix of both narratives (Fig. 2). This creates a dreamlike mystery that is still ultimately rooted in a strong and believable reality, established through strong, controlled storytelling and essential, concise dialogue.

The visual design of the film is highly stylized, with very deliberate color and rendering choices. It is somewhat cartoony, with an emphasis on bold lines and an interesting use of patterned stripes to create texture on surfaces when needed. This is a particularly refreshing way to depict the Singaporean premise and place, as the film takes place in an unabashedly local setting. The stylization sets the film apart from more realistic and straightforward representations of Singapore. In the process, the quintessential Singaporean heartland is tinted with flavors of dread, mystique and surrealism through style design, color choice, composition and mise en scène.

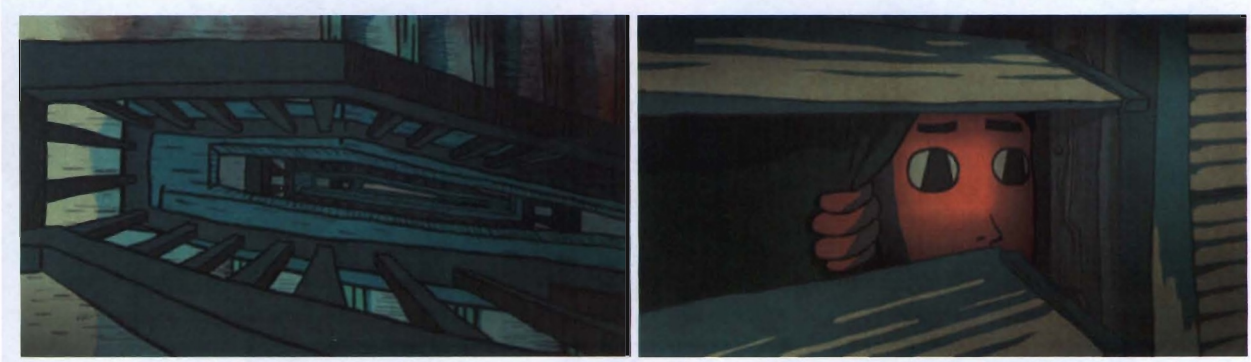

Fig 18. Story-centric indicators of Singaporean-ness that are not literal and blatant. (Harry Zhuang and Henry Zhuang 2015. Still from *The Tiger of 142B*.)

It is also interesting to note that much like *The Cage*, *The Tiger of 142B* is extremely faithful and recognizable as a film set in Singapore, but its locality is never emphasized or shown for the intrinsic purpose of being local. This is specifically and especially relevant in terms of the analysis of local work as many films, such as *Lak Boh Ki*, *The Violin or Nation Building*, where locality is mentioned to serve a very specific purpose or agenda outside of the narrative of the film. These references do not automatically make the relating films bad works by any means, but the heavy-handed mentioning of locality does chip away at the authenticity of the portrayed aspects of Singapore life and/or culture. In comparison, *The Tiger of 142B* modestly and also vividly depicts a local setting by utilizing aspects that are recognizably Singaporean in such a way that they are all ultimately subservient to the narrative. For example, the metal railings that follow the quintessential HDB staircase warps through a fish-eye effect to suggest the strips of a tiger warping around its body (Fig. 18). Potted plants along a corridor walkway, common sights in the HDB estate where soil and space for hobbyist agriculturalists are scarce, eventually reveal a tiger hiding within in a particularly dream-like sequence (Fig. 19).

Fig 19. A visually distorted, dream-like sequence. (Harry Zhuang and Henry Zhuang 2015. Still from *The Tiger of 142B*.)

Conclusion of Chapter 4

As seen from the above analyses, there have already been many ways in which animators have expressed Singapore life and culture through animation. Some of these examples do so in a complex and compelling way through non-standardized, more nuanced uses of the animation medium, while most others fall short due to their overall simplicity and/or superficiality in expressing Singapore life and culture. This paper posits that local animation is just barely scratching the surface when it comes to interpreting and reflecting the Singapore condition. How do animated films dealing with Singapore life and culture fare when compared to foreign animated expressions of their respective localities?

Chapter 5: Foreign film analysis

Tale of Tales

Yuri Norstein's Tale of Tales expresses through animation the depth and emotional vividness of Russian melancholy and tragedy. This is done in a non-literal way that conveys these feelings with a complex fusion of visuals, sound and animated folk lore, symbology and history.

The range of motifs reflected by the film is staggering in quantity and breadth, so much so that several volumes could be dedicated to such a literary undertaking. This immense scope is achievable in large part due to the film's embracing of the abstract realms of animated storytelling, where its lack of literal guidance (and significant dialogue), opens the films and its themes up to a huge potential for varied and emergent interpretations by viewers.

Fig. 20 Childhood house. (Yuri Norstein 1979. Still from *Tale of Tales*.)

As such, a summary is a difficult task, and the film *Tale of Tales* can be roughly summarized as a profound, poetic representative of the Russian condition and history. At the same time, this is not entirely the case, as this broadness is beautifully complemented by very specific and vivid personal touches Norstein injects from his life and experiences. An example would be how Norstein based a particularly important house in the film on one where he used to live in as a child (Fig. 20). Although it is a very personal memory, Norstein's choice also accesses "a [Russian] nostalgia for such housing" (Kitson, 2005). As such, Norstein very skillfully navigates a large number of themes and motifs, in how he addresses and satisfies macro and micro aspects in the animated format.

Narratively, the film's structure is dream-like, as a stream of consciousness that intercuts different micro-narratives that have different characters and stories that are not necessarily interconnected. The visual style of these narratives also varies from scene to scene, serving to adjust the underlying tone of the respective stories they belong to. This disconnect between scenes work due to the non-linear progression of the narrative structure. Some characters, particularly the little grey wolf, also appear in other chapters, bleeding the micro-narratives together in a seemingly disjointed by a spontaneous, connected train of thought. This narrative sequencing or editing is successful in emulating how a person might recount personal and shared memories. By embracing the unpredictability and fleeting segues of spontaneous, "live" nostalgia and thought, Tale of Tales is experienced as a very personal and yet very Russian stream of consciousness. Such an ethereal, suspended experience is also enhanced by the "construction of a set of parallel worlds: the old house with, nearby, an old street light and the setting for the war-time scenes; the poet's world, where a fisherman's family also lives and a bull and a walker comes to visit; the snowbound winter world of the boy and the crows; and the forest next to a highway, where the Little Wolf makes his home under the brittle willow bush." There is a curious mix of very real scenes and histories, such as the war-time scene, along with scenes that are suspended in fantasy, such as the poet's sequence, with personified animals of strange scales that talk and emote as humans

do. This seemingly chaotic potpourri makes for an animated experience that touches on the real and the phantasmagoric at the same time.

Zooming out, the overall impact and greatest lessons for films about Singapore is how it appeals to the emotion in a complex way, and how it accesses and poetically reflects on Russian memory and legacy. With regards to its depth and the originality in the communication of the mosaic of Russian sentiment, Kitson says that "*[Tale of Tale's]* tone was [melancholic], its structure complex and the overall effect quite unique." This is an achievement many didactic, literal films about Singapore miss, as the focus on linearity, coherence and over-description leads to an animated communication that comes across as more tell, than show. There are plenty of works that already satisfy and beat to death, the horse of didactic local animation. Indeed, as evident with *Tale of Tales*, the animated medium, with its capabilities of abstract, exaggeration and suspension of reality, is perfectly suited to tackling the deeper, subtler undertones of values, philosophies and/or sensibilities of life and culture in Singapore.

With regards to how the work accesses and expresses Russian memory and legacy, *Tale of Tales* does so in a poetic way that makes full use of animation's capabilities for the ephemeral and the abstract. The unique presentation of Russian memory is serendipitously perfect in artistically reflecting the hornet's nest of Russian history, politics, culture and society. Norstein steps back from any attempt to disentangle and solve the prevailing issues, and instead, artistically meditates and expresses on these aspects through the film, achieving an animated collage of Russian memory that is sentimentally accessible even to non-Russians. Such an approach has not been attempted in Singapore animation, as animated films attempting to express Singaporean memory and nostalgia (such as The Violin) are relatively linear and standardized in their narrative structure and presentation. This is not necessarily a bad thing; however, the notion of Singaporean nostalgia being accessed in a poetic way through the medium of animation is a compelling one that should provide a more interesting expression of Singapore life and culture. This has somewhat been achieved with The Tiger of 142B but it has so far not been done with regards to

accessing Singapore memory. More broadly, the approach of abstraction and poetic visual storytelling and presenting is an approach that is still rare when it comes to films about Singapore.

Triplets of Belleville

The Triplets of Belleville, by French animator Sylvain Chomet, is an animated feature film that has done well internationally despite its heavily French sensibility. Indeed, Pierre Floquet (2006) writes that "Nostalgia of good old France does not systematically appeal to foreigners; so why has Les Triplettes de Belleville been so successful abroad?" Floquet's answer is the presence of universal themes present in the film, which, despite the strong French perspectives present, drive the film's appeal and accessibility for audiences all over the world.

In the film, a determined grandmother (Madame Souza) who has dedicated her life to her grandson's (Champion) career as a cyclist is forced to take on a Mafia syndicate, who abducts her grandson in the middle of the Tour de France. Along the way, Madame Souza befriends a trio of aged music hall singers, famous back in the 1930s. The titular triplets help Madame Souza to save Champion, and bolstered by Souza's tremendous grit and determination, they succeed at the rescue, foiling the syndicate's entire operation as a result.

The story is relatively simple, but the way in which it was told, in terms of storytelling and visual style, is distinctively different from the contemporaneously popular styles of Japanese and American animation (McCaan 2008; Zhao 2009). The animation style is reminiscent of Disney's approach to classical animation, with close attention to physics, and smooth movement. However, in terms of visual style, "Chomet embraces a film style that is distinctive from the current American aesthetic – an attempt; it seems, at a nationalist project that seeks to guarantee an effective French presence in the world of cinematic animation that is achievable through a singular vision." (McCaan 2008) As such, the film carves a niche out for itself visually. One of the strongest aspects of this visual distinction is in the strong

stylization present in the film with regards to its treatment of characters. A waiter, desperate to please, flexible to every demand, is impossibly pliable, bending like long grass in the wind. Champion, much like the other professional cyclists, is exaggerated in his bottom-heavy stature (Fig. 21). His thighs and calves are the size of footballs and his upper body is thin like a reed. Gangster goons are rectangular slabs of concrete dressed in uniform tuxedos, stolid in stature, movement and demeanor. The extreme caricaturization extends beyond the characters themselves. Even monuments and architecture are not spared from Chomet's revealing embellishments. An escaping freight liner bears an impossibly tall hull (Fig. 22), the skyscrapers of Belleville (a big city metropolis styled as a fusion of Manhattan, San Francisco and big European cities) are needles that are impractically tall, their ridiculous height emphasized with a vertical pan that is just a beat too long. Even the Statue of Liberty is a morbidly obese version of its real self, her blazing torch replaced with a dripping ice cream cone, her tablet replaced with a massive hamburger.

Fig 21. Chomet's rich caricature of Champion. (Sylvain Chomet 2003. Still from *Les Triplettes de Belleville.*)

Fig 22. An impossibly tall hull. (Sylvain Chomet 2003. Still from *Les Triplettes de Belleville.*)

These characterizations, according to Floquet, are an essential part of the French perspective. Describing Chomet's earlier film, Floquet writes:

> Les Triplettes de Belleville is filled with clichés reflecting a French perspective. One such cliché is that Americans are obese. Chomet seems to have this stereotype in mind, as he repeats in Les Triplettes de Belleville the same description of fat Americans as the caricature of tourists in Paris found in his first, celebrated short La vieille dame et les pigeons (The Old Lady and the Pigeons, 1998). In this film, the typically cliché-esque tourists are featured in both the opening and ending sequences, as punctuations of a story that just happens to take place in Paris. Their debatable manners work as a reflexive counterpart to the eccentric neurotic behaviours of both the policeman and the old lady. They are ridiculed, each one of them, either tourist or citizen, in their own ways, and beyond the scope of their apparent differences — so obese Americans in Chomet's films are not necessarily illustrative, they are factual components among others of a parodic world.

As such, Chomet does not necessarily relate to these clichés, but he is in fact commenting on the French tendency to hold these prejudices. The visual presentation and design of the film describes to a certain extent, a French sensibility that is also, less deeply, accessible by foreigners who are unfamiliar with the representation simply as great caricature in an animated film.

Apart from the representation of typically French stereotypes, the film also has other aspects that might be missed by the non-French, such as the "high bridge that pushes Madame Souza's house into a tilt" which is apparently "typical of railway constructions in France during the first half of the 20th century". These French touches are nestled among other references that are much more universally identifiable "from Chaplin and Tati's films to Winsor McCay and Fleischer cartoons; from Glenn Gould and Django Reinhardt to Fred Astaire" (Floquet 2006). Thus, French locality does not consume the film, and even if these touches are missed, the entire film still functions as a coherent story about the determined love of Madame Souza for her grandson.

The lesson here for local animation perhaps is that the fear of localized content being inaccessible to foreign, international audiences is one that is not necessarily true. Themes of humanity, or of values such as love, hate and strong pathos are all universal languages that can translate globally. Also, locality can in fact, be that X-factor for an animated work. As established, the world is not yet familiar with Singapore sensibility and attitudes, as such, an honest, authentic, or inspired local approach to animated storytelling would be a fresh angle. Coupled with the internationally accessible language of universal themes as evident in *The Triplets of Belleville*, this could be a potent combination for global appreciation of not just Singaporean animation, but Singapore culture and life in general.

200

200 by Vince Collins is a gloriously psychedelic, kitschy and ironic animated film made for the U. S. International Communication Agency. The 3-minute, 2D hand-

drawn animation was created for a bicentennial celebration of America's 4th of July, presumably in the year 1976. The film is a kaleidoscopic explosion of color and sounds, as per Collins' usual style in the 70s, and it is filled to the brim with all manner of American icons and symbols. The film plays like a run-on sentence, as Collins spoofs his clients in sarcastically highlighting the pomposity and vacuous nature of mindless American patriotism and nationalism. In the process, Vince Collins represents in an original and compelling way, the superficiality and ostentatiousness of American patriotism.

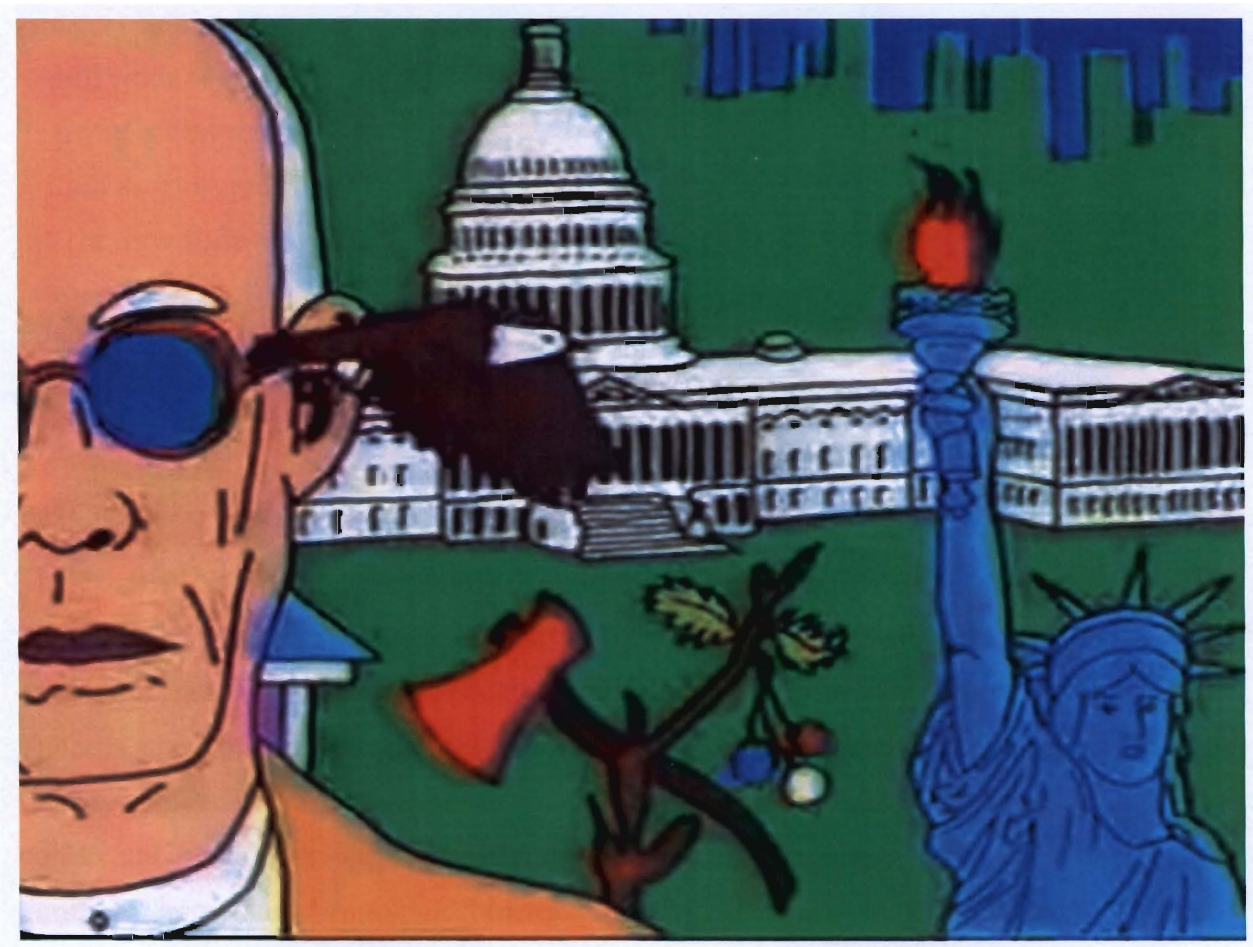

Fig 23. An absurdly patriotic fantasy landscape. (Vince Collins 1976. Still from *200*.)

The film begins with the number "200", sitting large, bold and pompous on a ground of red and white stripes as a pattern of white stars fly over the skies with great speed. The numbers give way to a marching, band, and the ground spirals into a circular cut-out, flipping over and over to show the American bald eagle and the

American peace movement as two sides of the same coin. From there, the flips reveal aspects of what are popularly seen as American indicators and symbols, such as the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, Whistler's Mother, and even more esoteric concepts such as industrialization, space exploration, and many more (Fig. 23). The eagle then hatches from an egg, and flies through a surreal landscape with even more symbols, such as American Gothic, the Golden Gate Bridge, the White House, the Statue of Liberty (again) and the Manhattan skyline. The eagle transforms into the Liberty Bell, which transforms back to the eagle, now draped with an American flag. The camera zooms into the eagle's eye, and a triangle crop emerges to reveal the Eye of Providence. The camera zooms in again to show the outline of the United States of America and Mount Rushmore, which warps into a red, white and blue tube. From the tube, hundreds of items pour out, such as the automobile, hamburgers, hotdogs and baseballs (Fig. 24). The film ends with a seemingly infinite stack of "THE END" balloon words, flashing white and red before a sky of saturated blue, with white stars soaring overhead.

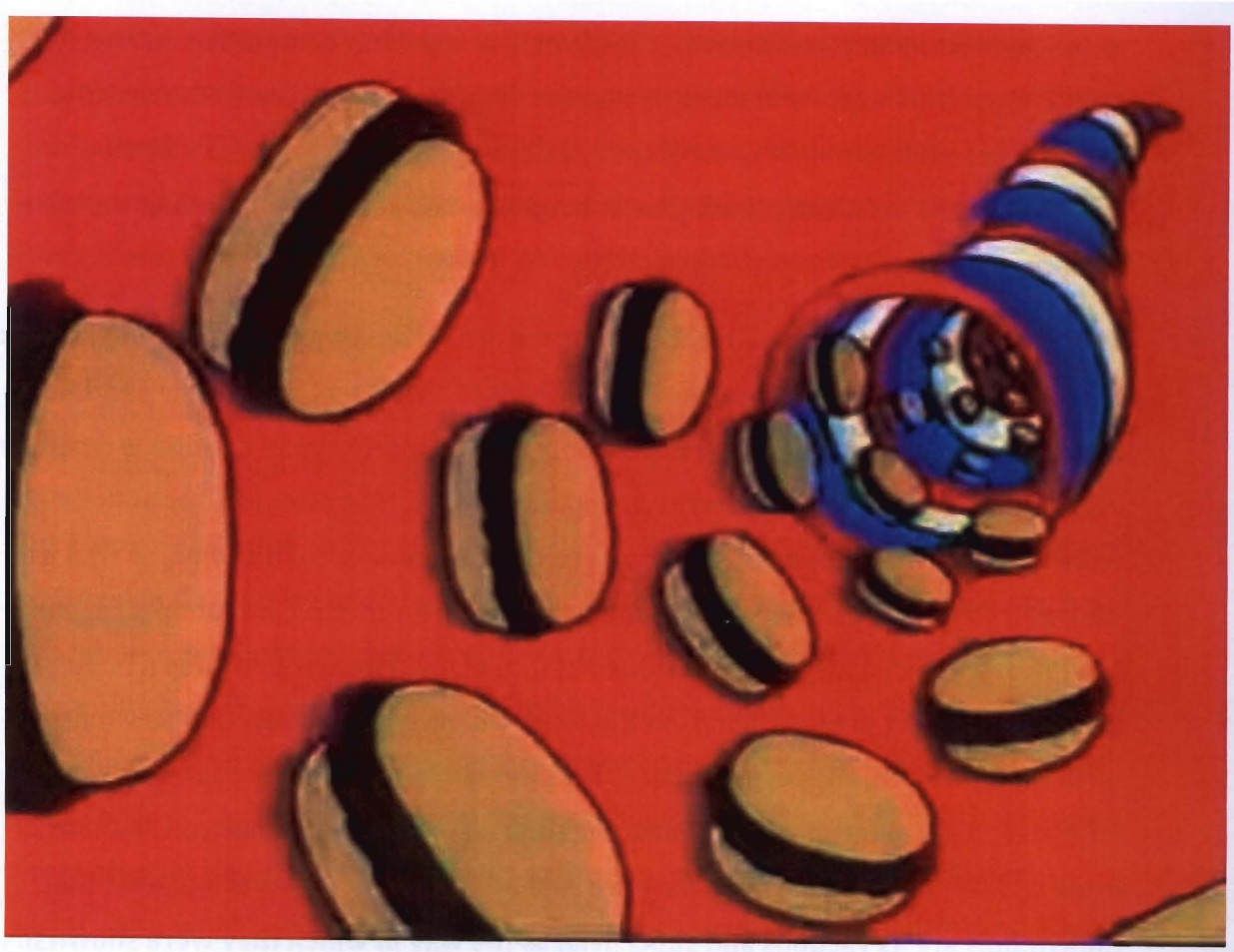

Fig 24. The American industrialization of fast food. (Vince Collins 1976. Still from *200*.)

The exhaustive quantitative citation of symbol after symbol reeks of sarcasm and cynicism at the subject matter. The symbols rotate, scale and are distorted in quick succession, color schemes are difficult to define as hues pulsate and objects fly by. There is a lack of any form of consistency and reverence for the subject matter, as the sheer speed at which the paraphernalia bombards the viewer leaves zero contextual information about the relationship of the elements appearing one after another. There is no chronological context save for the transitions of elements morphing into other elements, and the entire visual experience is nothing short of an exhaustive battering on the eyes.

This visual barrage is complemented by an equally bombastic and pompous soundtrack. The film is primarily accompanied by an epic, high octane hard/glam rock guitar solo that never lets up for the entire film. The wall of sound is again,

numbing in its monotonous fervor, functioning as a perfect companion for the optical assault. The genre of music is popular for the time the film was created, and fits in terms of its infinitely overreaching ambitions to be as, for lack of a better word, "die-hard" as it can possibly be. It heightens the absurdity of Collins' sarcastic patriotism.

The film is a challenging experience, and there are no doubt viewers who might miss the derision for patriotism present. It is difficult to ascertain Collins' true sentiments about the subject matter and his expression; as his description of the film is woefully concise and there is not much written about the work. However, looking at Collins' work and his overwhelming tendency to critique the subject of his films, as well as the absurdity in the film's aesthetic and narrative presentation, it is almost certainly a satirical work that should not be taken at face value. There is of course a huge amount of subtext present just from the sheer quantity of symbols Collins conjures up in the short film. On the other hand, his lack of apparent respect and reverence for the symbols in terms of their meanings and significance as American symbols of pride is clear. The way in which they are rushed right by the viewer suggests that the symbols are as vacuous and superficial as the way in which they were shown in the film. The animation's contempt for these symbols are also apparent in the choice and order in which they were shown. There is no significant narrative or chronological progression, but the equal emphasis of normally reverential things, such as American Gothic or the Statue of Liberty, with symbols that have bad connotations of American greed and vice, such as the mass production of hamburgers, hotdogs and television, further add to the underlying feeling of mockery evident in the film. With *200*, Collins basically ridicules the idea of American patriotism with funding from a government agency specifically devoted to "public diplomacy", which many believed was an euphemism for "propaganda" (Bardos 2001).

Singapore animated films tends to rely on the reference of local symbols such as the Merlion and the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles. While they are indeed significant indicators and/or artifactual milestones, they are only sincerely relevant as sincere

vestiges of reverence when they are brought up with a strong awareness of their original context and/or if they take on new meaning. A relevant example would be Han's *The Violin*, a film overflowing with these obvious local cues (Fig. 1). These indicators are lovingly brought to animated life, but they are not explored with any sort of complexity, merely expressed one-dimensionally as objects of reverence and nothing more.

The History of English in Ten Minutes

The History of English in Ten Minutes (2011) is a short series of 2D animated shorts designed and commissioned by the Open University in order to communicate in an informative and light-hearted way, the history of the English language. The Open University is a UK-based, distance learning campus, and as such, the series are published primarily online through streaming sites such as Youtube. Although the main focus of the series centers on the etymological legacy of the English language, the History of English almost always touches on and explores themes of English history as a whole, and as an extension, English culture, society, politics and identity. The films' main mode of communicating information is through English comedian, and broadcast personality: Clive Anderson's vocal narration. His accent, as well as his comedic timing and well-written witticisms, go well with the animated style: a cartoonish line-drawn style that moves with erratic, limited animation. Together, the quirky visual design and Clive Anderson's quick, dry delivery of the wry, sardonic script conveys a certain English-quality that is difficult for a non-English to define but one that is definitely felt. The overall impact of the series of short films is animation that is essentially English through and through; from subject matter and content to visual and audio appeal.

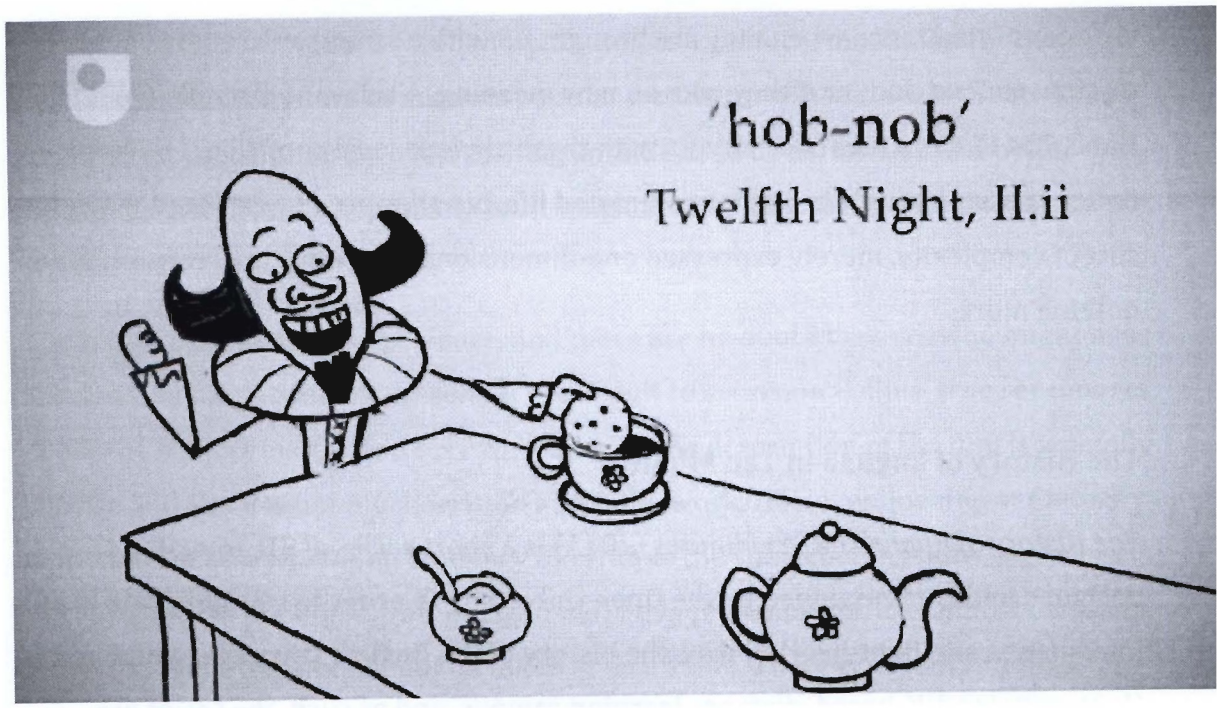

Fig 25. The invention of the "hob-nob" (Open University 2011. Still from *The History of English in Ten Minutes*.)

Apart from the script's informative monologue on etymological history, *The History of English in Ten Minutes* also references blatantly English indicators, such as stereotypes. A chapter on Shakespeare's contribution to the English language for instance, engages with the cliché of the English as tea-lovers, when Anderson says that "a nation of tea drinkers finally took into their hearts when [Shakespeare] invented the hob-nob" (Fig. 25).

Keeping in mind the linguistic focus of the series, as well as its reliance on a vocal narrator as the main delivery of information, it is important to emphasize the relationship between language, thought and perhaps identity. It has long been suggested that the language we speak shapes the way we think. Although this is yet to be confirmed, current researches in psycholinguistics hint that in fact, "that language [could probably be] part and parcel of many more aspects of thought than scientists had previously realized" (Boroditsky 2011). This relationship of linguistics with culture and psychology comes into play often in the series, as it summarizes significant contributors to the ever-evolving language with the cultural, philosophical and political tendencies of these influencers. America's forays into

capitalism for example, brought about terms such as "breakeven" and "bottom line". The French for instance, brought in their advancements in justice systems, contributing words such as "judge", "jury" and "evidence". Shakespeare invented many words, but more significantly brought poetic flair to the English language. Thus, the series links simple etymological history with concepts, philosophies and politics, which are all related to English culture, creativity, and indeed, identity as a whole.

The takeaway lesson for the local context would be that a blatantly local approach is not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to the expression of locality in animation. The History of English in Ten Minutes shows quite resoundingly that a compelling animated representation of locality is still possible if the work communicates that very spirit and sensibility of the respective locality. Lawrence Khoo's *Nation Building* for instance, is extremely blatant and literal about its animated exposition of Singapore's history. The approach however, is likened to an animated textbook, vacant in terms of creative expression and flavor. It is perhaps, in a roundabout way, strangely representative of Singapore's obedient culture of sterile and efficient communication; but such an angle is better done with textbooks and encyclopedias, not animated films. The attempt would have been a deeper and more interesting attempt if Khoo had worked a certain Singaporean sensibility into the delivery of the historical education, as *The History of English* did.

Singapore might lack the sheer history legacy of the English to do something of similar chronological scope, but the multiethnic, multiracial property of the nation, and its resultant lexicon, could be similarly expressed with a depth comparable to *The History of English in Ten Minutes*. A particularly interesting focus would be to express the local lexicon of *Singlish*[6], where the medium of animation could access the ether of local linguistics where it is at odds with the ruling elite's emphasis on "proper English". The linguistic conflict between state and citizen is a narrative that

[6] "Singlish, Singapore's brand of colloquial English, is accepted by some as an essential marker of Singaporean identity but deplored by others [particularly the government] as a variety of English that puts Singapore and Singaporeans at a disadvantage because of its lack of international intelligibility." (Hoon 2003)

comes prepacked with plenty of subtext for the willing animator, and it is so far lacking when it comes to animated works. *Heartland Hubby* is the only work so far that engages with the debate, and there is no doubt space for more.

As such, *The History of English in Ten Minutes* engages with much more aspects that just English language, and through its distinctly English method of delivery and writing, expresses deeper, subtler nuances of Englishness through sensibility, tone and humor.

Conclusion of Chapter 5

As the above analyses of foreign films' expression of their respective nations' life, culture or identity has shown, there are much more areas Singapore animators can explore in the quest for representing these values with complexity.

Generally speaking, the films analyzed in this section achieve complexity by portraying their national aspects in non-literal, poetic, nuanced, and/or deep ways. *Tale of Tales* for instance, manages to achieve such complexity through the use of non-literal, poetic subtext in such a way that it reflects the very complex and abstract idea of Russian memory. *The Triplets of Belleville* attains complexity due to a strong French sensibility and perspective, communicated through strong character design and storytelling. *200*, purposely confronts the superficiality of the numerous symbols and indicators of American patriotism, animating them in absurd, ironic glory; achieving complexity due to the originality of its assault and its challenging critique of the said symbols. *The History of English in Ten Minutes* is a film that is nationalistic through and through, from its title to its content and the presentation's sensibility. The blatant subject matter and narration is not what makes the film's expression complex, rather, it is the overwhelming sense of English wry wit that permeates the way in which the series is presented that achieves such complexity.

As such, given the relatively few amount of examples of local films that express Singaporean-ness in complex ways, the foreign films in this chapter have shown that there are many more ways in which local works can go about achieving complexity. The lessons learnt from these two chapters of case studies will be keenly heeded in the following chapter, which will describe the efforts of the practical component of the research.

Chapter 6: Practical Work

The practical component of my research puts the observations gleamed from the above theoretical case studies into practice, by making an animated film that expresses contemporary Singapore life and culture; with an aim to do so in complex ways. The practical project is rooted in the matrices of time and space, specifically focusing on representing contemporary, modern day daily life in a Singaporean landscape. The qualifier of complexity, as mentioned in chapter 2 is defined in comparison with the aforementioned shortcomings of animation about Singapore that come across as superficial and/or ineffective in their respective expressions.

Ultimately, the practical research will be embarked upon with the hopes of proving or disproving, as well as answering or asking the following research questions:

- How does this case study approach the expression of life and culture in their respective locales?
- Is the attempt valuable and/or compelling, and why?
- If the attempt is not valuable and/or compelling, how can it be improved?

Singapore's kaleidoscopic, multi-racial, multi-ethnic population

I decided to choose an aspect that is commonly attributed to Singapore: its multiracial, multiethnic diversity. Population diversity is of course, not exclusive to Singapore; indeed, this sort of diverseness is found throughout the world as a common aspect of big cities. However, Singapore's diversity is unmistakable, and very much linked on a very foundational level to the nation's political, geographical and cultural roots. Singapore's embracing of multiracial politics (as opposed to Malaysia's racial politics) was a definitive move that was the foundation of much of Singapore's political and national identity. Considering the salience of human diversity with regards to Singapore, the nation's kaleidoscopic sociocultural landscape is an appropriate focus for the practical film.

The premise of the film

Two important specifications of the goal of the project were grounded in the matrices of time and space, in an attempt to triangulate a definite and original point of view and approach for the film. For the dimension of time, I had chosen to reflect the present day. This is due to the recent proliferation and trend of sentimental local nostalgia, a tendency especially prevalent among creative expressions of Singapore. The rose-tinted treatment common among sentimentality is of course not necessarily bad in an animated work. However, that the animation industry has seen quite a number of animated works that express this sort of nostalgic sentiment. Indeed, *The Violin* by Ervin Han, a film that dwells on much of the fond memories of Singapore's past, received significant public and press recognition and critical acclaim locally. As such, the choice to reflect present day Singapore is a decision that is twofold; it is specifically trying to avoid the much trodden road of depicting Singapore's past, and it is also trying to avoid sentimentality, a more general trait common to these approaches.

As an avid observer and sketcher of people on public transport, I decided that the commuter ecosystem would be a perfect fit for the expression of diversity locally. Among the two main modes of public transport in Singapore, the train and the bus, the train was chosen due to its status as a more fundamental form of transport and its pervasiveness throughout the island. The bus system, playing a more auxiliary role, has a lot more specificity and generally is more demographically segregated depending on bus service and time. The chances of encountering diversity as such, is higher in the train system. Due to the train system's propensity to feature more unexpected variety in terms of commuters, it was chosen as the main (and only) setting for the film. Colloquially initialized as the MRT – short for Mass Rapid Transit, the space is also very apt as a metaphor for Singapore's multiracial, multiethnic society. Its transitory purpose is also an apt reference to the nation's economic roots as an important maritime and aviation port.

An ideal achievement was that the film's emphasis on Singapore would be recognizable to someone familiar with Singaporean-ness. The interior carriage of an MRT carriage in Singapore has many identifiably local visual cues, even though there are several generations of different carriages through the decades. The vertical grab poles, garishly saturated hard plastic seats, triangular handle bars and the tumultuous circular regions joining the carriages are all familiar visual elements that could easily be employed in the background design to shout "Singapore!" These elements however, are deliberately left out in order to test if Singaporean-ness is discernible in an animated work when there are no obvious, surface indicators of such locality. This is a conscious attempt to contrast efforts such as *The Violin, Lak Boh Ki, Heartland Hubby* and similarly blatant Singaporean-ness in animated films. With regards to actual audience response, it would be ideal if a local, or one familiar with life and culture in Singapore, can tell that the work is indeed about Singapore without any literal information about such a motive. As discussed earlier in chapter 4, The Tiger of 142B achieves such subtlety in its invocation of local indicators that are story-centric and not literal (Fig. 2).

Embracing subjectivity

Having decided on the time and space for the focus of the film, as well as the main premise of the practical project, many approaches were considered in how the idea of diversity should be approached. One particularly noteworthy conundrum came in the demographic composition of the characters presented; the resultant composition was chosen carefully to accurately reflect my subjective perspective of what I feel about the percentage of Singapore's population. This is the result of deliberately imposing my personal artistic bias to the project, as initially, the plan was to be as statistically accurate as possible when it comes to ethnic, social and economic representation in the kind of characters that would be featured in the film.

This early approach to demographic composition was formed with the idea of dividing up the shots and the characters featured in the film based on reports

published by the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) and Singstat. According to the reports, the ethnic composition of Singapore's population came up to 76% Chinese, 15% Malay, 7.4% Indian, and 1.4% others. The percentages were then applied to the planned number of shots that I intended to work with or the duration of the film, coming up to about 15 Chinese shots, 3 Malay shots, 2 Indian shots, and 1 "other". This obedience to numerical significance was then reapplied laterally with the composition of economic, educational and social findings, ending up with an absurd matrix that is as befuddling as it is ludicrous. Yielding artistically to the confines of demographic research was not impossible, but it severely limited my personal perspective and subjective bias, making it difficult to consciously express what I, as an artist, felt about the subject matter. For instance, the resultant matrix would allow the film only one shot with foreigners, of which would have to be accordingly divvied up in that same shot into various immigration levels, educational backgrounds and financial situations. Ultimately, the approach was abandoned due to the fact that it did not reflect my personal perspective as an artist.

The alternative was to go on artistic intuition, to consciously confront and accept the risks that come with deliberately imposing personal biases and observations. This seemed counter-intuitive originally, due to the opposite nature of subjectivity in art and objectivity in research. Ratner (2002), however, commented on the often overlooked harmony between objectivity and subjectivity in research, stating that while objectivity is key, subjectivity is inevitable in the way that it "guides everything from the choice of topic that one studies, to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data." Indeed, Ratner asserts in his conclusion that

Thus, it is evident that embracing a micro-level, intimate perspective as a cog in the system would produce a film with a much more nuanced, original point of view. The macro perspective of demographic analytics is of course; far from pointless in the realm of artistic expression; but the inherent universal truth of the figures remove vital playing space for creativity and experimentation in the practical research component. This intuitive, artistic emphasis is tangibly translated into relevant

imagery through the use of cartooning and caricature, where the stylization, simplification, exaggeration and emphasis of the elements present in the practical work reflect the perspective of the artist.

Characterization through cartooning and/or caricature

Delineating the definitions of "caricature" and "cartoon", and their similarities and differences is a complex endeavor. As such, it is important to clearly define and disambiguate the two terms, as they closely relate to the practical aspect's sensibility in expressing local life and culture through essential an illustrated, moving, two-dimensional art form.

Wright's (1875) seminal work on caricature sets a strong foundation in not just defining caricature, but the "spirit of caricature", which extends back to the early artworks of Egypt and Greece. Wright identifies caricature before the term came about, highlighting works from Egyptian and Greek antiquity that exude qualities of humor, ridicule, satire, grotesque and exaggeration (p. 1-5). Wright suggests that there is a timeless "tendency to burlesque and caricature", and that it is "a feeling deeply implanted in human nature", that it is "one of the earliest talents displayed by people in a rude state of society."

Indeed, this is a classification shared among a plethora of authors, such as Porterfield (2011), who associate caricature as more of an attitudinal concept, rather than a tangible piece of work. Similarly, "cartoon" is also used frequently as an attitudinal concept of presenting ideas through humor, satire and exaggeration. However, "cartoon" has a much wider range of meanings associated with it.

Hess and Northrop (2011) use "cartoons" to refer to editorial, political illustrations. The source chronicles the evolution of these illustrative strips as political and national reflections, which defined and reflected American national identity. The source uses the term "cartooning" in the title, but a lot of the work featured worked with humor, satire, exaggeration and parody; themes that are commonly prescribed

to "caricature". This extends to the very aesthetic of the artworks, frequently depicting iconic symbols and public figures, especially politicians in exaggerated forms.

Furthermore, the term "cartoon" also expands out laterally to refer to different art forms, namely editorial strips (Colldeweih & Goldstein, 1998), comic strips (Katz, 2006), animated television series and feature films (Yoon and Malecki, 2009). Comparing the use of the term in these sources, "cartoon" is regularly associated with minimized and/or stylized illustrative renderings in the respective mediums. It is also frequently associated with humor, but not as specifically and commonly associated to themes of satire, parody and exaggeration as "caricature".

For the purposes of this research, "cartoon" refers simply to the overall stylistic treatment of simplifying a character from its real life counterpart. Caricature, more specifically, refers to the specific conscious attempt to capture and express a certain quality about that said character. With regards to my film, which is heavily character dependent, cartooning deals generally with the aesthetic process of simplifying the characters, and caricaturizing deals more precisely with expressing a certain narrative or idea through that cartooning process.

This decision to embrace the subjectivity naturally led to the decision that the film would showcase said diversity by portraying cartoon, animated caricatures of the people observed on the trains. The cartooning of the characters chosen for the film would allow me to emphasize aspects of a character that I found interesting, allowing me to simplify the artistic expression of what that said character represents in the train, and indeed, Singapore life and culture. Simplification, can reveal more as it subtracts; the removal of unnecessarily photographic details reduces the noise of other unimportant details, and allows the audience to very quickly understand the perspective of the artist.

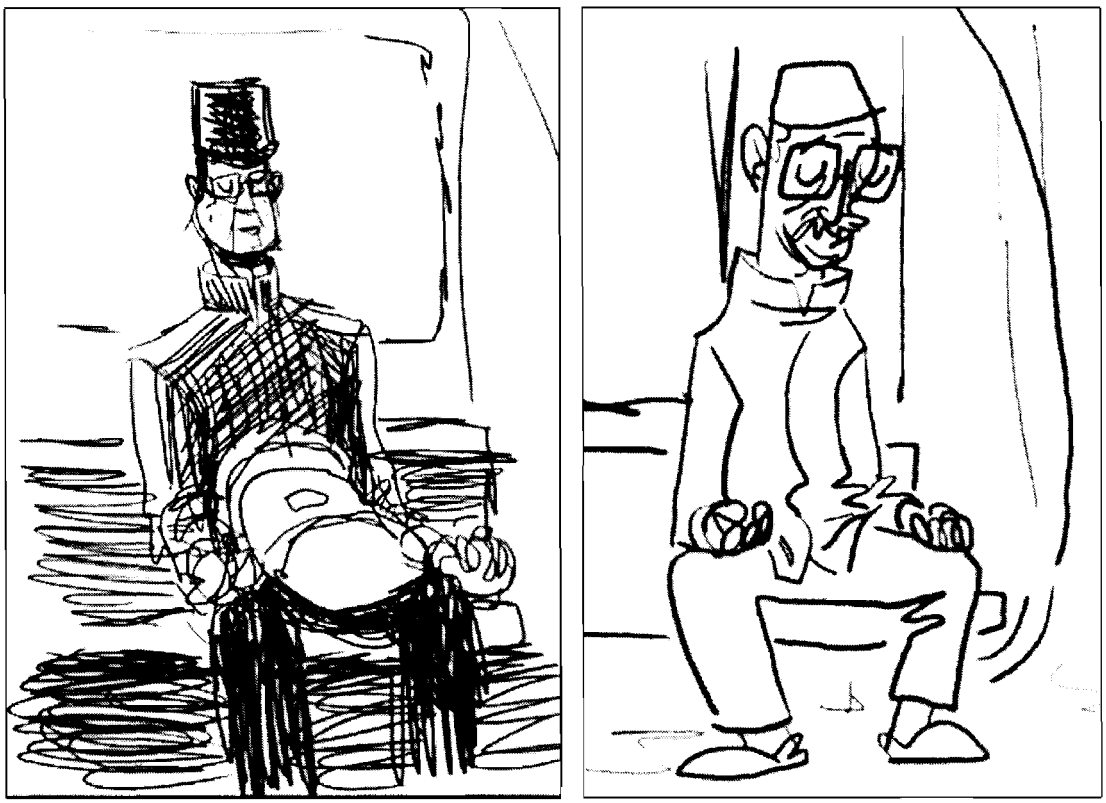

Fig 26. Simplifying character design for a more concise and mediated visual communication. (Developmental still from practical component)

For example, Fig. 26 depicts the filtering process of caricature and simplification on a Muslim, Malay man who meditates peacefully in the carriage. The drawing on the left is a drawing done on the train, with the drawing on the right done afterwards in an attempt to reduce the level of detail in order to more concisely communicate a certain artistic interference and interpretation. This process of minimizing details allows for a purer communication of my specific perspective of Singaporean culture through characterization.

Caricature was an important visual strategy adopted to reinforce this idea of conveying an essential message and characterization through a minimizing of uninformative detail and the emphasis of important ones. Defined as "a picture, description, or imitation of a person in which certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect," (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) the intrinsic approach of caricature in subtracting, accentuating and concise visual communication makes it a potent tool for the objectives of this research project in expressing locality vividly.

Caricature and cartoons are also powerful tools for social commentary. Kleeman (2006), researching cartoons' ability to "investigate social and environmental issues", writes that:

> The communicative power of cartoons lies in their ability to present often complex issues, events and trends in a simplified and accessible form. They usually do this by employing the devices of caricature, analogy and ludicrous juxtaposition to sharpen the public's view of contemporary issues.

Caricature and similar approaches however, are also double-edged swords due to their tendency to offend, especially when the artist is depicting sensitive issues such as race and ethnicity. This is especially evident of late; with an obvious example being post-September 11 political cartoons depicting Arab or Muslim cartoon commentaries (Diamond 2002).

As such, a significant portion of this research project was focused on the management of the caricature-esque stylizations, and it was necessary to be wary in the handling of the depictions of the various cultures and subcultures referenced by the film. The visual design of the characters had to be strong enough that they would be immediately recognizable as the archetype they were, yet not overtly so that they were cheapened by the easy use of conveniently stereotyped physiognomic features. This was important as the visual approach had to accurately reflect my personal sentiments regarding the portrayed characters. Although there were certainly

characters and situations that were unsavory or transgressive to me, my overarching feelings towards these characters were that they were all ultimately interesting, complex and endearing.

Fig 27. The ageing mat rocker. (Developmental still from practical component.)

One such potentially tricky situation was the portrayal of an ageing Malay rocker (Fig. 27). This was an observation of a common subculture seen in Singapore that is often associated with a very specific age and ethnic group, i.e. older Malay men who enjoyed rock and roll in its Golden years. The potential for controversy comes from the fact that this is a common stereotype of older Malay men, who were teenagers and young adults in the prime of their lives during rock and roll and heavy metal's dominance in the 70's and 80's. These rock gentlemen are identifiable by their long hair (defiant against a receding hairline), tattered jeans and band T-shirts, and the subculture is commonly referred to colloquially as "mat rock". (Fu & Liew 2008) The wariness with such a depiction derives firstly from the fact that portrayals of race are sensitive in Singapore, and that the potential of caricature to stereotype complicates this already tricky ethical conundrum. Indeed, Wonham (2004) Writing about the "vogue for 'coon' images in songs and graphic publications during the

1880s and 1890s", mentions caricature as a particularly potent tool as a "touch of exaggeration that typifies". Such a result would be the opposite of the stated research objective in creating an animated array of vivid, complex characters.

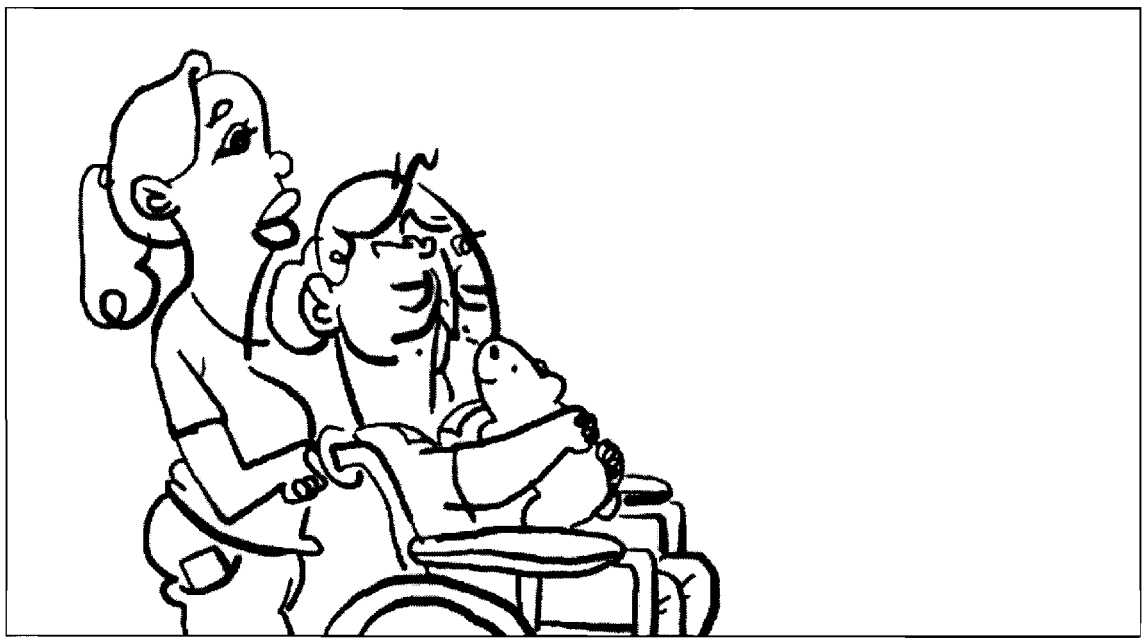

Fig 28. A later version of the Filipino helper and the granny. (Developmental still from practical component)

Such an issue also came into play with other characters in my film, such as the depiction of a Filipino maid (Fig. 28). One of the scenes involved a Filipino domestic helper pushing an elderly woman on a wheelchair onto the train – a pretty common sight locally, especially on public transport. The earlier Filipino maid did not look like a typical Filipino maid, as my depiction was rather generic. Although it was not a conscious decision to do so, I realized that there was an unconscious wariness within me regarding issues that might be potentially risky in terms of caricaturizing race and/or ethnicity.

The wariness surrounding the portrayal of Filipino domestic helpers came from an awareness of the fact that they are common locally, and have been embroiled in a huge media and political firestorm of late, centered on issues such as wages (Seow 2016), diplomatic relations with the Philippines (Seow 2015) and their impact on the sociocultural fabric of Singapore (*Are maids diluting our culture*, 2010). Indeed,

domestic helpers are a particularly prevalent and ubiquitous aspect of Singapore society and culture, especially considering the busy work lives typical of local adults, where these helpers are often hired to look after the house, the young and the elderly. This, on the one hand, makes their inclusion all the more important. On the other hand however, the controversy and still-developing political, sociocultural and racial issues surrounding the discussion was enough to make me hesitant about the way I depicted them. Ultimately, the decision was made to be visually honest, specific and vivid in my visual definition and description of these racial and ethnic indicators.

This decision was mainly based on the fact that the film would have no dialogue or otherwise literal devices such as narration or subtitles to clearly point out these aspects of the characters, as such, I must risk saying too much, or risk saying nothing at all with overly generalized character designs. These conflicting fears about misrepresenting or marginalizing certain groups of people were put to rest as I decided to focus on being true to my artistic bias.

Such a decision was also supported by literature on artistic depictions of politically and/or culturally sensitive issues. These sources primarily deal with non-animated media such as editorial political cartoons, but the fundamental sensitivities of such portrayals, despite the difference in art form, are quite similar.

Regarding the traversing of ethical and fair visual depictions of tricky topics such as race and ethnicity, Anderson (1988), talking about political cartoons and caricatures, suggests two requirements that are "essential to a morally sound [cartoon]:"

> The first requirement is that the cartoon [contains] at least a small grain of truth as the cartoonist knows it, [and] the second requirement for a morally sound cartoon is that if it is offensive, it should be offensive with a reason.

Andersen's philosophy basically 1) ensures that the depiction is handled fairly, with awareness and respect for the truth, and 2), that offensive depictions are justified as such with regards to subject matter and/or desired impact.

The first position is agreeable enough but many sources split regarding the right of a cartoon to be offensive. Ward (2001), for instance, disagrees, stating that artists and publishers should take care in the publishing of potentially offensive cartoons, that they should take care to ensure that the "stories are accurate and well-researched" and should "foster deliberation on legitimate, if sensitive social issues."

Bringing the discussion into the realm of animation, the most pertinent example from the above case studies would be Chomet's *Triplets of Belleville*, where traces of what some might refer to as racism, manifests. This is particularly evident in the film's depiction of obese, consumerist Americans. Indeed, Gecevicius (2014) notes "the appearance of a significantly fat look-a-like Statue of Liberty, symbolizing the ever-hungry consumerist society [of America]." Gecevicius reflects upon the somewhat blatant trope concerning foreigners, re-contextualizing the obvious exaggeration as a self-aware reference to French consumerism as well; writing that "throughout years France has adopted some habits of consumption related to North America." In this way, *The Triplets of Belleville* manages to ethically handle vivid caricatures of North Americans, by turning the trope inwards so that it is not merely a standardized, unsophisticated stereotype. There are also traces of truth in such a stereotype, confirmed by studies such as Bellisari's (2013) study on the connection between North American culture and the biological epidemic of obesity. In this sense, *The Triplets of Belleville* echo the precepts outlined by Anderson in the prior paragraphs.

Using the above sources as guiding philosophies, it was easier to approach the tricky situation of cartooning and/or caricaturing specific races and ethnicities in the practical project. Taking particularly care to ensure that the depictions in the practical component were either grounded in truth, or contextually appropriate in tone, medium and subject matter; the depictions of specific races and/or ethnicities

such as the Malay rocker, an Indian family, the Filipino maid, and other similarly tricky representations were able to be expressed honestly and unabashedly. The general guiding precept behind this project's approach to these potentially barbed social issues was to be honest and empathetic, rather than to stereotype and simplify. Ultimately, the Filipino maid became visually Filipino through the exaggeration of typical physiognomic features such as larger hips and plumper lips; the Malay rocker stayed old, and stayed Malay.

An interesting aspect that came with the portrayal of the Malay rocker was also the idea of representing subcultures that are not particularly mainstream or common locally, as a means of showcasing diversity. Just as the old Malay rocker was an ambassador of "mat rock", there are a few other characters in the film who are included to give the edge of unpredictability and hints of opposition to the status quo. All in all, the representation of minorities are important to the objective of achieving complexity in my animated expression, as they present a non-standardized and challenging facet of the population, and cultural makeup of Singapore.

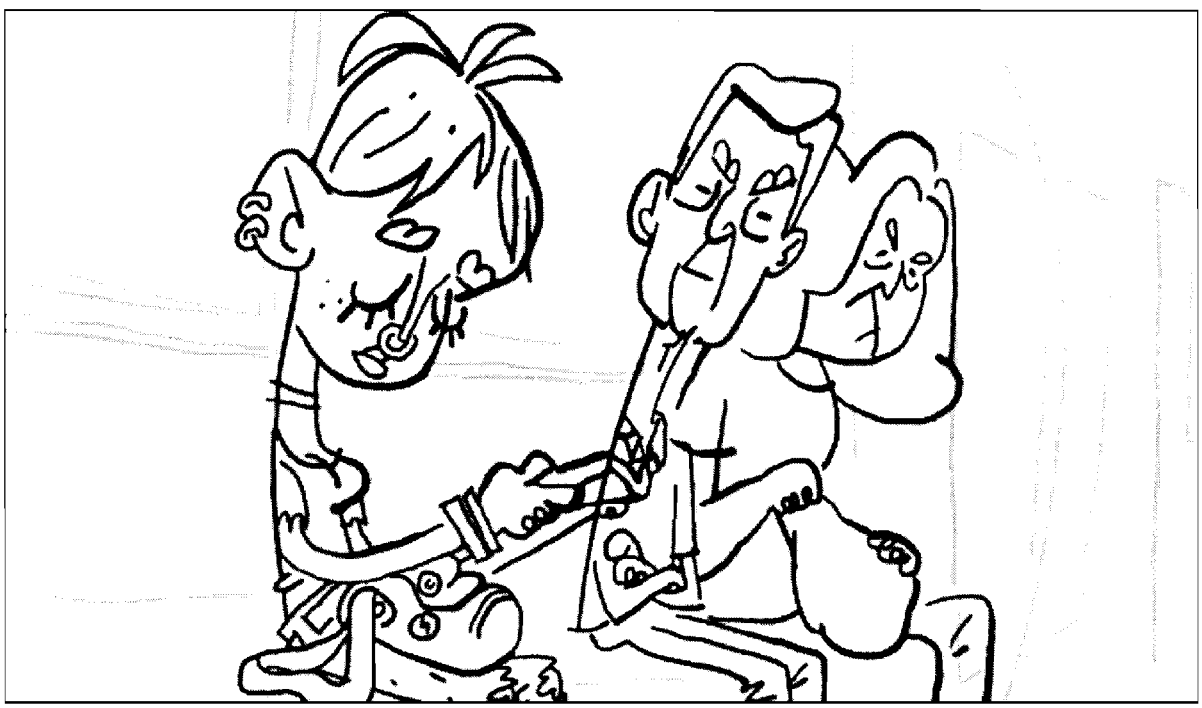

Fig 29. Punk girl and disapproving fellow commuters. (Developmental still from practical component.)

One such character who represents an alternative splinter group and a sort of opposition to the status quo is the punk girl (Fig. 29). The opposition to the status quo is expressed in contrast against a nearby couple of older, more traditional attire and perhaps thinking. They look over disapprovingly at the punk girl who is minding her own business and doing nothing transgressive. This, like many other instances in the film, was inspired by an actual observation on the MRT, where a couple of older folks on the train who did not know each other, had a moment of spontaneous connection when they collectively shook their heads at a teenager who happened to be decked out in alternative, gothic attire, body resplendent with tattoos and piercings. Much like the animated example, this young lady was certainly not doing anything transgressive, and she was completely oblivious to the passive-aggressive objections from the more traditional, older locals. This represents, on a deeper level, conflicts between sub-cultures and the mainstream, as well as the differences between the younger and older generation. This also references the conflicts between progressive Western influences on the younger generation and its conflicts with the Eastern traditional values commonly espoused by the older, less liberal generation. This notion of "Asian values", attributed to several prominent Asian statesmen including Lee Kuan Yew, and its defensive stance against the onslaught of Westernism is particularly poignant in the migrant, transitory Singapore (Langguth 2003). This shot, and the characters featured within, encapsulates this complex debate.

A Singaporean/local style for animation?

Is there a local, Singaporean aesthetic and/or style for animation? Bendazzi (2016), in *Animation - A World History,* seeks to document the global history of animation, and does so by geographical categorization (i.e. by countries). Visual style is rarely used as a basis of comparison and categorization in the work, as the histories of these different countries' animated works are complex assortments resulting from

artistic trends, socio-political changes, industrial and technological innovations, as well as external influences from other countries. Hence, it is difficult in many cases to talk about a local style of animation.

Indeed, there are distinct styles derived from and/or unique to certain countries, such as Japanese (Clements & McCarthy, 2015), Chinese (Giesen, 2015), French (Neupert, 2012) and American animation (Bendazzi, 2016), which have rich histories. But these animation styles are difficult to pin down and define clearly and categorically, due to the fact that they evolve over time, and hence, slice up laterally when you analyze them chronologically. The American animation history for instance, which has been internationally popular since the 1930's, has gone through many different phases of dominant visual styles through the decades (Dobson 2010), to the point where it would be difficult to sum up an "American style" for animation.

Moreover, considering the Singapore perspective, the relatively short history of Singapore and its inherently cosmopolitan foundation means that the derivation of a local aesthetic is extremely difficult to find and define (Soo 2001, 164). In his coverage of Singapore in *Animation – A World History*, Bendazzi (2016) does not talk about style, opting to feature and discuss industrial and production progresses in Singapore animation.

Of course, one could attempt to derive a "local style" or sorts by going back in time and deriving an aesthetic from the indigenous cultures that comprised of Singapore's population, such as Malay, Peranakan, or even the Chinese. But such a definition is still limited because these cultural flavors are more regional than they are local, and they are shared by many neighboring geographies. In fact, an endeavor to define or describe an aesthetic that is Singaporean requires a very varied melting pot of cultural aesthetics and sensibilities because that is what Singapore is today. Chua (1998) talks about how Singapore's extraordinary multi-ethnicity results in a convoluted intertwining of cultural hybridity, a postcolonial

identity that is composited of Chinese, Indian, Malay, and other regional cultural memes.

The search for this local Singaporean style for animation remain elusive and complex. As such, it behooves the narrow scope of the research to focus more intimately on the artist's expression or what he perceives of the overall dynamics and zeitgeist of Singapore life and culture, than to try to unlock, untangle and represent the complexities and sensitivities of a collective, intertwined and shared cultural identity.

Setting: close-ups or establishing shots?

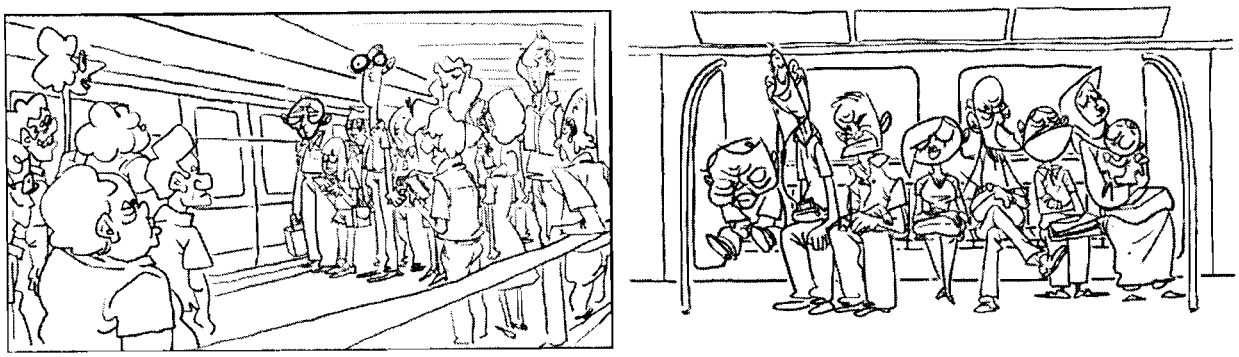

Fig 30. Earlier developmental shots showing wider angles.

As evident from the examples above, individual characters can reveal and ignite conversations and thoughts about issues from other aspects of Singapore life and culture. Thus, I quickly realized that individualized shots featuring rich but momentary glimpses into solo or concise characters and moments would be advantageous in accessing rich subtexts with the animated form. This was in contrast to initial plans for the project, which cinematically involved several wider, establishing shots, in order to portray the setting of the railway transport (Fig. 30). This would be especially interesting as it provided a chance to express the ebb and flow of the transport system as a whole, not just the characters. Close observations of the transport revealed an organic, tidal-wave pattern to commuters. Peak hours were crowded, frenetic, and quick-tempered; while non-peak hours were calm and

peaceful. This idea was later scrapped so the film only had tighter shots of the people using the transport, due to the focus of the film on primarily showcasing the sheer diversity of people on the train system, and indeed, Singapore, as well as the aforementioned emergent subtexts when the film focused in on vivid, close-up examinations of characters and moments. The project would lose such an edge should it become more specifically about the railway transport in Singapore in a more general way. Such a narrative would no doubt be interesting, in terms of say, studying the peaks and troughs of human traffic in Singapore, however, it would distract somewhat from the focus on distinct, rich animated characters that were meant to showcase the variety of people in Singapore.

Having decided on a focus on people, the setting of the film was designed to be loosely drawn and rendered so as to complement and not distract the audience from the characters. Distinct elements in the background were also not rendered meticulously detailed or realistically, to the point where it would be easy for the audience to assume that the setting was a generic location in a generic metropolis. The specificity of Singapore should ideally be carried across from the type of characters appearing in the film and not superficial clues from the background.

Sound design

Similar to the visual dimension, the sound design also offers plenty of enticing opportunities of Singaporean indicators. The film has not progressed to the stage of sound design yet, but a similar avoidance of blatantly local elements would be enforced at that juncture. Singlish in particular, is so distinctively local that the use of it in dialogue would immediately attribute the work to Singaporean-ness (Hoon 2003). What might be worked into the sound design of the film would be the inclusion of less blatant, yet familiar local sounds, such as the soundscape of the train system, and/or the associating noises heard from the machinery of the carriages. One example of such an iconic yet, non-blatantly local sound would be the safety declaration of the carriage doors closing. A bell jingles, and a pleasant, racially

neutral voice announces that the "doors are closing", followed by a series of alarming beeps, after which the doors slide close with a satisfying sci-fi-esque airlock sealing sound. Anyone who has had to commute regularly in Singapore would instantly recognize that sequence of sounds. As such, it is a compelling element to include, seeing that it hints at locality without blatantly saying "Singapore".

The conscious avoidance of dialogue in terms of sound design was decided upon an effort to set the project apart from the audio cues of locality present in the local films analyzed above. *Heartland Hubby* for instance, relies heavily on local accent and "Singlish", and in fact, often uses the conflict between Singlish and proper English to land a joke. *Lak Boh Ki*, similarly carves out an interesting audio niche for itself in terms of its strong focus on the Hainanese dialect, reflecting a very particular facet of cultural identity in Singapore society. Thus, the objective for the sound design of the practical component hinges on communicating locality in less obvious ways, allowing the audience to realize the fact instead of spelling it out in an obvious manner.

Narrative design

The conscious decision to not rely on Singaporean indicators also extended into the narrative design of the film, in discerning how the story or plot of the animation would unfold. Such a decision was made in an attempt to express the practical objectives in a complex way, which is not literal, standardized or straightforward. An early idea for a linear storyline and plot was quickly discarded. This initial idea to tell a classic story with a basic plot arc with a beginning, middle and end revolved around a battle amongst several commuters for the last available seat on the train. It was intended to be a comedic animated short film primarily functioning off of dialogue and slapstick humor, designed to showcase local language, sensibility and conflicts. This approach was abandoned because it did not quite adhere to the research objective to showcase diversity, as it focused on just a few commuters,

even though there would be background characters that could somewhat adequately do the job of referencing diversity. A bigger emphasis would be to put the notion of diversity as the main character of the film. This diversity as a main character sought to communicate an intrinsically local attribute through animation. The attribute of Singapore's rich ethnic and racial diversity is one that is recognizable but not blatant in its locality, it is thus sufficiently nuanced as a facet of Singaporean-ness that adds to the notion of sophistication with regards to the research investigation and objective of a multi-layered approach.

Fig 31. Several photographs from Edwin Koo's *TRANSIT* series. (Edwin Koo 2011. *TRANSIT*.)

As such, it was decided that the film would take on a somewhat more spontaneous and improvised narrative progression. I endeavored to design the plot of the film in such a way that it would emulate how one would experience Singapore's diversity when taking the railway transport. Such an experience has no narrative arcs; you never know what kind of characters might step into the carriage at the next stop, and which characters might leave. As such, the subtle social dynamics of a journey in a public transport vehicle is always changing and rarely predictable. The exclusion of a traditional narrative progression hints at that spontaneity and is a more complex way of addressing life and culture in an animated art form, when compared to a linear storyline with predictable arcs.

This documentary-like approach is similar to and in a large way inspired by photographer Edwin Koo's *TRANSIT*, a "collective portrait of commuters, capturing the daily theatre that the eye fails to see." (Koo 2015) The work basically sees Koo capturing flatly composed photographs of commuters on the train station as the train doors are closing (Fig. 31). The works are revealing in their artistic interrogation of the people in Singapore and the way they respond to the inquiring

gaze of a camera that forces a visual exchange in a public space. Although Koo's project has a much different focus, it nevertheless reassures my work on the plausibility and validity of seeking out the narratives amongst the "the daily theatre" of the MRT.

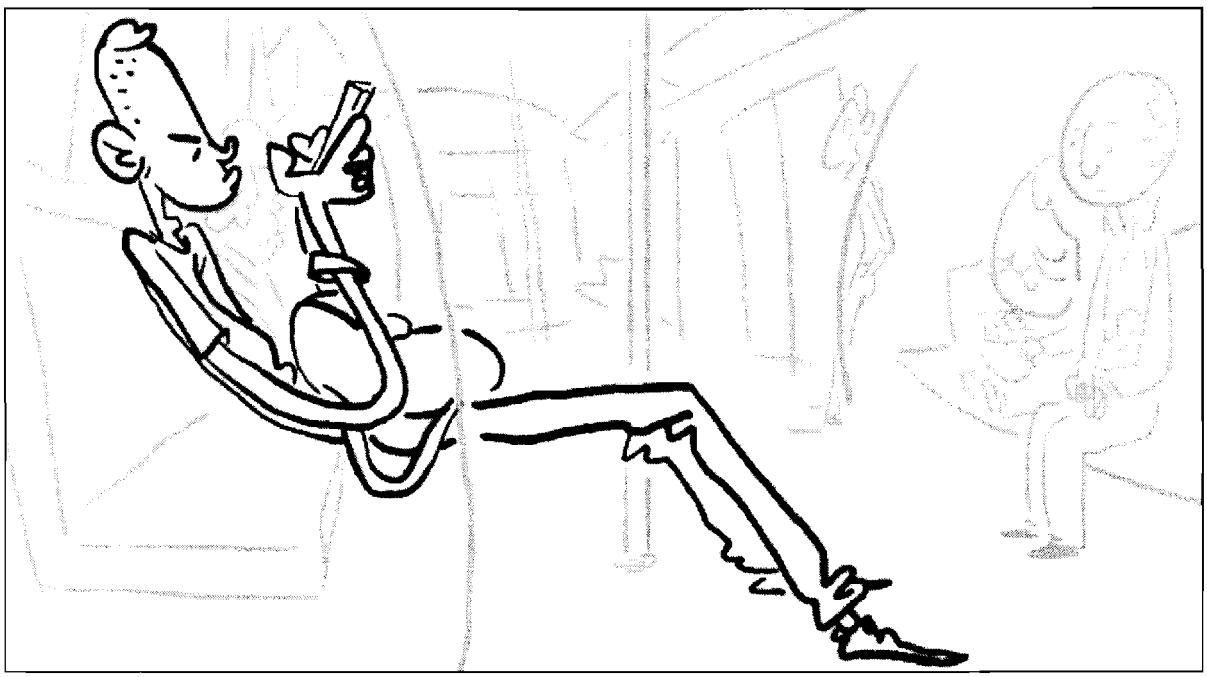

Fig 32. The publically transgressive and dominant private teenager. (Developmental still from practical component.)

As referenced to by Koo, the boundaries people draw up in such a public space as the MRT is also an important aspect of narrative and visual style design in my practical work. Despite the intrinsically public nature of the MRT, personal space and privacy is sacred. Transgressions are often responded to with passive aggression, and the film, as a result, has few instances of strangers dealing with one another. This works its way to the visual design of the film, as the main character/s of a shot is always rendered in pure black, as opposed to the other background or foreground, supplementary scene elements, that are rendered in a lighter gray. This is done in an effort to clearly highlight the main micro-narrative of the shot, and to also draw up the line between private and public space. One notable shot featuring a

pronounced distinction between public and private space is one of a cocky teenage student (Fig. 32). The young man is engrossed in his mobile device, his slouch and impolitely invasive long legs span almost the entire breadth of the carriage. He is clearly in a public space, physically taking up quite a lot of it, whilst his entire effort and attention is dedicated to a tiny space of about 6 inches in front of his face. The point is driven home with the slightly greyer lines of the background, which separates him aesthetically and spatially from the rest of the scene.

With regards to the overall aesthetic finish of the film, the original idea to keep it black and white might be overturned. This is due to the realization that color adds another dimension to exploit in terms of communicating the idea of complexity and variety. Having the film in color would also allow for the adjustment of moods and pace based on warm or cold color schemes, and further extend the underlying tension of conflicts in another dimension that is somewhat deeper in its subtlety.

Conclusion to Chapter 6

The film, though not finished, has revealed much regarding a conscious attempt to express in complex ways, life and culture in Singapore through animation. The animation art form is a multi-faceted orchestra, comprising many different aspects of artistic design such as sound, visual and narrative. This means that there are many dimensions to consider and manipulate in terms of expressing said complexity. The lessons learnt from the theoretical component informed many of the practical decisions undertaken in the production of the film. Particularly with regards to the avoidance of blatant Singaporean indicators, which is perhaps the biggest takeaway and experiment with regards to a more nuanced expression of life and culture in Singapore?

In the quest for such non-literal local cues, the practical component has also proved useful in testing out if the notion of Singaporean-ness can be conveyed without the use of such indicators. The film is somewhat successful in communicating the idea of Singapore, but it is nevertheless not recognizable immediately. The rich diversity is

obvious but the association with Singapore is a more difficult one to make, as similar variants of such diversity in public transport can also be found in cosmopolitan metropolises around the world such as New York. This reveals the somewhat universal aspect of Singapore's kaleidoscopic population: despite the very distinct ethnic and racial makeup of Singapore demographic, the cosmopolitan phenomena and condition is one that is relatable around the world. In this case, although the film has deviated somewhat from its original intended scope and message, the resultant communication is one that contributes just as much in terms of complexity and insight.

Taking a cue from *The Cage*, this project's quest for complexity also revealed useful insights into how the showcasing of subcultures and minorities, and how that affects the expression of local life and culture. The practical project achieves a degree of complexity due to the inclusion and unabashedly portrayal of minorities and subcultures such as the punk girl and the Malay rocker. Particularly with regards to the punk girl, where, as a symbol of teenage resistance and Western liberalism, she is shown to behave quite normally.

The narrative design was also vital in the forging of a complex animated expression. The conscious avoidance of a non-linear storyline was useful in communicating the randomness of witnessing interesting characters on the MRT, but also added a degree of complexity in not being a standard animated story with a linear classical plot with a beginning, middle and end.

All in all, the practical component has been useful as a testing ground for the insights gleamed from the case studies, and would hopefully contribute to the so far short list of films expressing the complexity of Singapore life and culture.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

All in all, the research has revealed a few key important key findings that can contribute to the scholarship of Singapore animation.

We have learnt from chapter 4 several commonalities in Singaporean animated expression of local life and culture, the most common of which involves the literal and direct announcement of the film's nationalistic focus through the use of symbols, persons, monuments and icons such as the Merlion, Sir Stamford Raffles, Lee Kuan Yew and so on. These indicators are not inherently detrimental to complexity in an animated expression of locality, however, many of the films that are not complex in such an expression fall short because of a sole reliance on these local cues to communicate local aspects.

We have also found out in chapter 5 that there is much to learn from how foreign films communicate nationalistic themes and sensibilities in complex ways. These films tend to achieve complexity through the communication of deeper associations or references to national motifs, such as the English sarcasm and wit in *The History of English* or the evanescent poetry of *Tale of Tales* or the ironic aesthetic glorification of patriotism in *200*.

The art form of animation certainly can, has, and probably will continue to express, in complex ways, Singapore life and culture. Although the list is still relatively short, films such as *The Cage, The Tiger of 142B* and *Heartland Hubby* show that complexity in the expression of local themes and sensibilities has already been achieved. The different ways and approaches in which these local animated works bring about complexity, as well as the foreign films analyzed in chapter 5, showing other ways complexity can be attained tells us that there are countless other ways in which local films can reach such compelling depths in their expressions.

Heeding the observations obtained from the aforementioned case studies, the practical component of the research has proved to be a useful space for experimentation with the complex communication of local life and culture. The

production of the practical component as an animated short film showcasing the kaleidoscopic, multi-racial, multi-ethnic population of Singapore has also dug up useful insights into how complexity in animated expressions of locality can be consciously controlled and worked into a film.

Looking ahead, this research is important primarily due to its focus on not just animated works about Singapore, but also works that are complex in their expressions of locality. Indeed, it is important to encourage and create more work that not just represents Singapore life and culture for its surface qualities and features, but art that does justice in reflecting and informing the deeper aspects of life and culture in Singapore.

Animators and animation producers that are looking to create animated work expressing Singapore life and culture can also use the research (particularly chapter 6's report on the creation of the practical component) for ideas on how to consciously, through practice, express such locality in complex ways.

There is a need for, and there is plenty of space for more academic research into the expression of Singapore life and culture through animation. Inversely, other schools, such as sociology, can approach the same topic from the other side. There is a shortage of research dealing with the critical analysis of local animated works in general. This research has briefly touched on several topics that could by potentially useful possible areas for fully-fledged research coverages. A researcher could examine the commercial exportability of local films with local values and sensibilities, or specifically the use of national and/or patriotic indicators through the animation art form. Historical archiving of older works for instance, would also be an important area to look into in terms of preserving, spreading and analyzing the short but developing legacy of Singapore animation.

Looking back, there is undeniable uncertainty and doubt when one is reminded of the lack of a clear legacy and direction in terms of animated expression of Singapore life and culture. That very same notion however, can be turned upside down, and suddenly the relatively blank slate of local animation is an unpicked tree of

opportunities for new ways of representing and interpreting Singapore in the animated art form. Contemporary animators expressing local life and culture could very well be pioneers in the art form locally forging new ways of animating the sociocultural landscape of Singapore.

---------- THE END ----------

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