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LOOKING OUT AND ON THE MOVE

Aesthetics of Infrastructure in Recent Singapore Cinema

Gerald Sim

From the late 1990s on, films from Singapore started to gain traction at international festivals such as Cannes and Berlin. These independent productions representing the city-state's renaissance in world cinema were replete with tales about subjects undergoing psychotic breaks, who are victimized by both an authoritarian nanny state and unforgiving capitalism. They projected on screen the external effects and internal aftermaths of rigid socioeconomic policies exerting pervasive pressure and exacting irreversible psychological costs. Filmmakers looked inward for insight and emerged from self-analysis rehearsing a prevalent set of themes in a spate of films that were considered, explicitly as well as implicitly, as constituting Singapore's national cinema (Chua and Yeo 2003; Berry and Farquhar 2006, 215). Looking back upon the narratives led by Eric Khoo's trailblazing features *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *12 Storeys* (1997), for example, we meet alienated and isolated characters, frequently unmoored if not unhinged. Visually, their afflictions are traced to the overbearing verticality of urban structures, bland brutalist public housing especially that signify the inhabitants' permanent immobility imposed by the prevalent power of the state (Sim 2020, 99–100; Chua and Yeo 2003, 118; Wee 2012, 983–84). Chua Beng Huat and Meisen Wong (2012) elaborate poetically on this “aesthetic of the pathetic,” with which these abject figures can be interpreted either through pathos as victims, or alternatively as resilient embodiments of neoliberal individualism. That is to say, these Janus-faced characters are socio-political critiques on behalf of victims, as well as validations of a triumphal national ideology. The point is, both exegeses reach for internal local conditions to find explanatory context.

But something new has appeared in the last decade. This national cinema broke free from phenomenological limitations earlier circumscribed by traditional notions of how local identity is to be expressed through filmmaking. One discerns a locational openness, effectuated in part by prominent displays of transportation and economic infrastructure that connote mobility and connectedness, and of greater a propensity if not willingness to gaze outward, often embodied by subjects standing at the outskirts of the island's social and geographical imaginary. These characters and narratives evince a more open and willing curiosity about how the world beyond informs the national self. They adopt an updated

view of Singapore's place in the world system, particularly within global networks that comprise supply chain capitalism.

Anna Tsing's trenchant article "Supply Chains and the Human Condition" conceptualizes an uncommonly generative schema that grasps global capitalism as a system in which "labor, nature, and capital are mobilized in fragmented but linked economic niches" (2009, 149). Film scholar Kay Dickinson has demonstrated the argument's utility for apprehending cinema's often international division of creative labor (2021, 174), particularly applicable to cinemas of small nations reliant on foreign financing and markets. But it is Tsing's particular attention to the "human condition" that truly illuminates Singapore cinema. Having doubled down on longstanding economic investments in the services sector, the city-state's bona fides as an infrastructure hub inflect social relations and cultural expression ever so deeply. Via the Marxian definition of infrastructure's determinative relationship to the superstructure, much can be read into recent work emerging from Singapore's modest filmmaking tradition, prominently represented in what follows by a handful of both fiction and non-fiction films. More often than not, they underline Tsing's emphasis on the nature of exploitation that supply chain capitalism subtends.

Among these works, K. Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird* (2016) instantiates the trend most incisively. Despite receiving recognition during International Critics Week at the Cannes Film Festival, the neorealist drama remains oddly understudied. It tells the story of Siva, an itinerant Indian-Singaporean ex-convict who bonds with an undocumented Chinese sex worker, Chen Chen, on the social, economic, and geographical margins of the island. *A Yellow Bird* continues the habit observable since the 1990s of local productions to feature the marginalized or members of Singapore's underclass, except for its move to highlight precarious workers and migrant laborers. Rajagopal was among several filmmakers to decenter national subjectivity in this way. The documentaries *Sementara* (2020) and *IN TIME TO COME* (2017), both inspired by the occasion of Singapore's 50th anniversary celebrations, made similar pivots. By centering the presence of temporary residents, the films reconceive what it means to be *from* and *of* Singapore. *A Yellow Bird* in particular uses actor Sivakumar Palakrishnan's physical performance of Siva, a visceral character not given to introspection and dwelling within the infrastructural interstices of urban landscape, to defamiliarize the city-state's more familiar postcard-friendly vistas. Its images serve more than unvarnished realism; they revise local iconography.

The denouement of Singapore's initial decade-long cycle of national cinema may have come about through a combination of creative redirection or simply emotional fatigue. Audiences and critics tire of wretched pessimism. Films can only wallow in abjection for so long before thematic exhaustion. Recent films, including the cluster of works highlighted here, continue to harbor healthy levels of cynicism within languid stories expressed in social realist style; they sometimes persist with handy tropes that make films intelligible to international audiences, namely, alienated protagonists subsisting at the margins (Khoo 2006, 92–93). But whereas those characters' incessant navel-gazing exacerbated psychological damage in the past, we now see a collective decision to step back from the abyss, sometimes literally so. Before, it was common to see characters in despair jumping to their deaths from atop the very buildings that symbolize their plight. This would happen onscreen and off, in the narrative foreground and its backdrop as in *12 Storeys*, *Eating Air* (1999), *15* (2003), and *Be With Me* (2005) (Sim 2020, 125–27). Even when the incidents occurred in subplots, these tragedies only magnified the horror by fomenting the implication that the grisly spectacles were commonplace.

The humdrum recurrence of those suicides makes what happens during a key scene in *Ilo Ilo* (2013) feel like a significant moment of inflection. Writer-director Anthony Chen's celebrated first feature about an adolescent's bond with his family's Filipina domestic helper set during the Asian financial crisis won the *Caméra d'Or*, making it the country's first entrant to win an award at Cannes. The relationship between young Jiale and Terry, who hails from the city named in the title, is initially fraught. The maladjusted boy tests his minder incessantly. One day, Terry witnesses a suicide jump – someone driven to it by the economic calamity spreading throughout the continent. Soon after, Jiale takes Terry to the roof of the adjacent block and flippantly muses about the nice view at the rumored spot from which the victim decided to end it all. Terry jerks him back from the edge, rebukes his insouciance with a tight slap, and says, “You think killing yourself is so funny, huh?” The strike freezes Jiale, who looks back holding his face in stunned silence. Chen's camera lingers on them with a pair of two shots, just long enough for us to realize that at this juncture between the first and second acts, the insolent boy fails to react in the way we expect. Terry's hand jars Jiale from his morbid indifference to the death and suffering of others, confronting him with a view that is not his own of the world below. Can I prove that this is the juncture at which thematic or perspectival change occurred within a film cycle? No. But the scene stands out, I argue, as an important moment of cinematic reflexivity. Within *Ilo Ilo*, the transformational gesture marks a turning point in Jiale's relationship with Terry. The more she becomes a part of his life, the more he understands their shared existence. Compared to the earlier films with a death drive, the incident signals a phenomenological U-turn.

When Terry arrives via a well-traveled route from a valued Southeast Asian neighbor to deliver an admonishment about what it means to be of Singapore, she recapitulates the actual irony that Singaporean productions are less likely to attract a local audience without first earning recognition abroad (Yun 2018). In that respect, to even exist, the films have to be meaningful to people beyond its shores. This rooftop scene also provides the film with its most well-circulated image, that of Terry and Jiale looking happily into the distance where the boy is pointing. The production still does not appear in the film but was used for the film poster. Above the photograph the title is layered over what appears to be the landmasses of an archipelago floating among the white and gray clouds in a Singaporean sky. We are asked to reckon that they are looking in the geographical direction of Ilo Ilo, the Philippine city from which many migrants find their way to Singapore for work as domestic helpers. Indeed, in accordance with a thematic pivot away from solipsism, Singapore cinema navigates its way toward the peripheral, liminal, and exterior. Over the course of artistic maturation, films come to terms with the contingency and instability that constitute the national condition – a state of being perpetually defined by externalities.

A Transnational Infrastructural Hub

Modern Singapore's geopolitical identity was grafted by the British, who saw the island at the tip of the Malay peninsula as a strategically located trading settlement and port, a base on which to challenge Dutch dominance of maritime shipping lanes. After gaining independence in 1965, the city-state continued to press its geographic advantage. The Port of Singapore has been among the two busiest in the world for decades. The country has also leveraged its locational asset with substantial outlays for its world-class airport, a vital node for international cargo and passenger travel. Since operations began in 1981, Changi International Airport has opened a new terminal every decade and will vie, like the Port, to be

the world's busiest when the fifth terminal is completed in 2030. Singapore's rapid transformation from a Third to First World economy in a single generation was driven by manufacturing and services. Although manufacturing remains an important but diminishing part of the local economy, the services sector now contributes more than 70% to Singapore's gross domestic product. To that end, the state has underwritten infrastructure construction of all kinds. A massive petrochemical refining complex sitting on reclaimed land off the island's western coast is responsible for the economy's second biggest export, refined petroleum. A deregulatory regime of financial policy helped to turn Singapore into a regional leader in financial services, a position unachievable without digital communications infrastructure. Do not be surprised that Singapore is one of the most connected countries in the world with twice as many submarine cable landing stations as China. This has facilitated the country's rising market position in media, marketing, e-commerce, and data colocation.

On financial media and global news sites like *CNBC*, *Forbes*, and *Wired*, state agencies place snazzy advertorials touting the island's infrastructural facilities and as a welcoming destination for business and investment. Singapore also positions itself as a platform for infrastructural investments throughout Asia: the place with the financial, industrial, and regulatory systems to help strike those deals (Rajah 2016). Over and over, we regularly come across two terms in these policy statements and branding exercises: infrastructure and hub. The latter, in particular, has burrowed into local vernacular. On websites, mission statements, and other forms of public messaging, "hub" denotes well-located retail, service, and transportation centers. Hubs refer to physical places offering one-stop convenience but also to virtual sites that we used to call homepages or sitemaps. These words peppering local speech demonstrate that the calculated decision to lean into the growing services sector has redefined more than the economic base. Doubling down on being an infrastructural hub has trickled down to the quotidian experiences of people, who eventually take on those aspirations themselves, of being a center of regional activity, a vital node within a network, an advantageously situated common space serving multiple communities, markets, transactions, and routes. As Brian Larkin writes, infrastructure can "address and constitute subjects" (2013, 329). Hubs are gateways, points of convergence, connectivity, and accessibility. They are material objects of utility – assets and systems that support, connect, communicate, mediate, and store. But eventually, they translate into a notional existence, an idea, an identity that people and societies inhabit.

Themes of movement, travel, and exchange with people and places outside oneself echo throughout this discourse. The idea is that Singapore today is not simply a country with world-class infrastructure, or a place for infrastructure. Rather it's *of* infrastructure, or rather, it *is* infrastructure.¹ It is a part of its character and has reified in important films of the last decade, a cinematic trend that coincides with greater scholarly attention originating both within film studies (Leow 2020) and without (Comaroff 2014; Chua 2020) to the policy and practice of land reclamation. Sand is imported from neighboring states, transported in barges, then emptied onto the shoreline to expand Singapore's landmass. Its geological reality originates elsewhere, and is not its own. Charmaine Chua raises the crucial point that the disruptive effects of geological displacement on regional socio-economic ecosystems and migratory flows rehearses the historical circumstances behind Singapore's "colonial nationhood and the global trade it would facilitate" (244). By and large, writers believe that sand and thus land – the scarce, precious, highly politicized resource that is definitional to Singapore – is therefore a referent that is epistemologically unstable and, in fact, contingent. They present yet another way in which the country itself takes on the transitory character of infrastructure (Chua, 239; Comaroff; Leow, 171).

When the rate of film production sprang to life in Singapore during the mid-'90s, the screens were populated with obverse, antithetical themes like disconnection, stasis, and vacuity. The social immobility of the working class and underclass were expressed in characters experiencing sensorimotor paralysis within Deleuzian time-images (Sim 2020, 121–23), wherein relief could be accessed by turning oneself over to gravity, then into the ground. But a decade or so onward, I sense a daring to imagine the prospect of movement, and an increasing acknowledgment of others when constituting that self. Earlier, scholars and critics privileged authenticity within debates of postcolonial hybridity and subaltern agency (116–17). These days, as a de facto project in national cinema-making, films are relinquishing the notion that identity is something essential and unique, something discoverable, negotiable, and resolvable by looking inward.

An Aesthetic of Infrastructure and Supply Chains

As if in the process of reconciling itself with the prospect that authenticity and identity are impossible for a piece of infrastructure, recent films seem willing or intent on defining them with a different tack. The purest grade of that aesthetic purpose can be found in documentarian Tan Pin Pin's *IN TIME TO COME*, a non-narrative excursion of Singapore's vaunted infrastructure: local pavements, gleaming elevator foyers, train stations, public housing void decks, mall walkways, pedestrian crossings, underpasses, and pristine, freshly built underground highways. Tan's camera seeks and finds beauty in these anonymous interstitial spaces, enacting an understated but bold redefinition of national culture. Also prompted by the nation's 50th anniversary milestone to reflect on national identity, Joant Úbeda and Chew Chia Shao Min's documentary *Sementara* adopts a different tack by curating a set of interviews. It too is fascinated with Singapore's relationship to its infrastructure. The film's observational gazes, B-roll footage, and visual transitions seek out port cranes in the foggy distance, migrant construction laborers and worksites, and the curious sight of a couple posing for wedding snapshots at Changi Airport. The camera drifts to highways, drainage canals, footpaths, and alleyways; rolls through the subway's tunnels, tracks, and trains; and is captivated by the hypnotic vision of underground expressway lighting streaming overhead. "Sementara" is the Malay word for transience, akin to the people, goods, vessels, and cultures on the move through an infrastructural hub.

In addition to *mise-en-scène*, films also take on an infrastructural perspective by opening their visual and narrative gazes outward, as if animated by systems thinking, which emphasizes the interrelationships of parts within a whole. These sightlines occur along pathways established by infrastructural edges and transportation routes. One way or another, they turn toward other nodes in the logistical network to which Singapore is inextricably and economically connected through supply chain capitalism. These neighboring lands, peoples and cultures are increasingly recognized as part of Singapore's social constitution. Earlier films portrayed one tormented denizen after another. Subjects now encompass marginalized outsiders and racial Others on whom modern Singapore depends but still often effaces when imagining national identity. The impetus for change probably originated in filmmakers' desire to counter xenophobia against new immigrants and nonresident workers particularly from China, India, and Bangladesh.² In doing so, their films follow Tsing's lead in seeking to highlight the depths of economic exploitation within supply chains.

IN TIME TO COME partakes in the respite of South Asian laborers eating and napping on the grass. *Sementara* humanizes immigrants by interviewing a homesick Bangladeshi

construction worker living in a cramped dormitory, the young Chinese proprietor of a small boutique, and a Filipina domestic helper lamenting about condo rules forbidding her from swimming in the pool. Women like Terry in *Ilo Ilo* enabled significant numbers of local women to enter the workforce (Hui 1997, 118). They were followed by unskilled Chinese laborers, just like Chen Chen in *A Yellow Bird*. Siva's solidarity with her spotlights his countervailing conflict with the Chinese men renting a room in his mother's cramped flat. The battles that he wages with the tenants read like an irresistible metaphor for actual hostilities that arose from the Sinicization of retail spaces and public soundscapes. "Fuck off from my house!" Siva snarls at one of the men. But by not asking audiences to identify with the local Indian's misdirected aggression, Rajagopal stymies hostility toward the foreigners. *A Yellow Bird* had a hometown companion at Cannes that same year. Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice* (2016) offered restorative justice for Singapore's other dark-complexioned minority with a cast and screenplay that are mostly Malay.

These films swivel to face the outside while perched on the fringes of the national imagination. Storylines often observe this 180-degree rotation through scenes in which characters gaze out from the island's edges. Evicted by his mother, Siva begins sleeping at a dank shoreline encampment where Chen Chen begins working for a pimp. The vegetation looks dispirited but at this liminal place on the island's periphery, he emotionally regroupes. The couple bathe in the water, bond on the shore, and eventually consummate their relationship. The film later takes Siva to an embankment under an expressway, a spot unclaimed by Singapore's need to salvage every bit of buildable land. He squats on a stretch of mud, rocks, and driftwood and stares pensively out at the water. We only observe him traveling toward those banks, never in the opposite direction. A border affinity can explain why *A Yellow Bird* keeps a distance by merely circling historical events such as the 2013 Little India riots, Singapore's first incident of mass racial violence in five decades. When a private bus ferrying Indian migrant workers killed a pedestrian in the ethnic enclave, bystanders swelled into a mob that rioted for two hours. *A Yellow Bird* uses the event to situate itself locally but only alludes to the episode tangentially. We traipse with Siva when he happens upon a group of rioters dashing past. He scuffles with a policeman, extricates himself, jumps a barrier, and finds refuge underground in a canal, taking us into another interstitial space. He sleeps on the floor of the cavernous drain, and rises in the morning to the rumble of a passing subway. In long shot, he spots daylight peeping through grates overhead (Figure 17.1). He looks around, then scales a steel ladder embedded in the wall, not searching for an exit, but surveying and orienting. It is an odd, surreal narrative pause, in a film whose *mise-en-scène* returns often to infrastructural architecture and concrete: canals, drains, alleys, highways, paved sidewalks, corridors, stairwells. In sum, after stumbling upon the riots, readable to local eyes as an unmistakable historical reference, the film stays decidedly on the periphery, where Siva's contemplative interregnum prompts reflection on, I would argue, the national character. Here, anonymous infrastructure that signifies not locations but the means to reach destinations, connote transportation, movement, and transience, prevalent themes of Singapore cinema's infrastructural cycle.

Ilo Ilo, set in the urban heartland, conspires to reach the water's edge on multiple occasions. When Terry has to leave due to the family's dwindling finances, Jiale looks away from Singapore as the family returns from the airport along its southeastern coast. The protagonist in *Perth* (2004), a middle-aged former merchant mariner, narrates his backstory at the docks while staring wistfully at passing ships. The film also looks asea by engaging in symbolic irony. Its title frame superimposes the name of the Australian city over



Figure 17.1 Siva finds refuge in a canal (*A Yellow Bird* 2016. Director: K. Rajagopal).

Singapore's iconic waterfront skyline. *Ilo Ilo*'s title rehearses the same semantic trick. Thus, as these two stories about the national condition commence, the words prompt spectators to glance southeast toward Australia, or northeast toward the Philippines. *Ilo Ilo* even inserts an additional layer of multilingual polysemy. The film's Chinese titles read, "Father and Mother are not home." They too beckon us to redirect our vision, to look elsewhere, outside. Irresistibly, *Ilo Ilo* joins *Perth* in referencing the long durée of Singapore's maritime history. At the start of this Oedipal drama between Jiale, his mother (Hwee Leng), and the Filipino woman who cared for him, the very first thing we are told about the matriarch is that she works at a shipping company. Hence, by the time we watch Hwee Leng typing up a termination notice addressed to a colleague and victim of the Asian financial crisis, our awareness of migratory flows and interconnected economies is thoroughly activated.

The same two actors were cast in the director's next film, *Wet Season* (2019), this time playing a student and an unhappily married school teacher who have an affair. Commenting on the 30th Singapore International Film Festival's choice of *Wet Season* for opening night, executive director Yuni Hadi cited the event's historical importance to local filmmaking "anchored on resonating stories of home, or steadfast tales with Singaporean sensibilities at their core" (Sindie 2019). No wonder then, that when the woman divorces her husband and ends the illicit relationship, she reaches closure in her hometown . . . semi-rural Taiping in northwest Malaysia. This Singaporean irony recurs once more in Sundance award-winner *Shirkers* (2018), Los Angeles-based author Sandi Tan's self-reflexive documentary. When they were teenage cinephiles in Singapore, Tan shot an unfinished film with Vassar film professor Sophia Siddique and filmmaker Jasmine Ng. Part autobiography, part exploration of the cinematic imagination, Tan weaves their memories with the life of Georges Cardona, their filmmaking mentor who absconded to Louisiana with the unfinished film. Cutting between Singapore in the past and America in the present, the emigrant's odyssey takes Tan home only to inevitably draw her out.

The cultural logic of supply chain capitalism's thematic mobility and transnational flows occasionally expresses itself through referential realism in the form of images shot at the island's edges as they were in *A Yellow Bird*, *Perth*, and *Ilo Ilo*. In this regard, the liminal border preoccupations of Tan Pin Pin and Charles Lim's work in art and documentary video stand out as well. When the goal is psychological realism, the logic manifests in intimate stories shot elsewhere; *Apprentice*, for example, outsourced the locations for its prison scenes to Australia. Correctional facilities are of course another type of infrastructure. While locational stand-ins are not uncommon in filmmaking, and international co-productions especially, the practice carries added importance in Singapore cinema where infrastructure is an idea that spills from the referent into the signifier and signified.

Singapore's cinema can't help but return to it. The films are of infrastructure, the thing Singapore embodies, having fashioned all the ways to patch itself into the global supply chain. Still, do not be deceived by infrastructure's stereotype as anonymous architecture, devoid of color and texture, or risk failing to recognize local specificities both social and cinematic through which people express autonomy. As Tsing puts it, the basic units of supply chain capitalism are "commodity chains based on subcontracting, outsourcing, and allied arrangements in which the autonomy of component enterprises is legally established even as the enterprises are disciplined with the chain as a whole" (148). She discourages us from thinking that global capitalism standardizes or homogenizes. The call resonates with voices in world cinema studies counseling the same (Hjort 2010, 15). Dudley Andrew's grammar in "An Atlas of World Cinema" is particularly striking for its lexical intersections with concepts of travel and movement between complex ecologies (2004, 10, 21). These thinkers obligate us to understand the world's cultural tapestry in full. For Tsing, we would then appreciate how supply chain capitalism uses "diverse social-economic niches" for production efficiency. Within these niches, workers are encouraged to fashion themselves as entrepreneurial subcontractors, laboring in actuality by performing the cultural differences that end up subjugating them further. "These figurations blur the lines between self-exploitation and superexploitation" (171).

Tsing's argument steers me back toward *A Yellow Bird's* expression of these tendencies. The film begins by foregrounding the very social relations that Tsing believes define labor within supply chains. Rajagopal parachutes us into the middle of Siva's workday. When the camera recedes from the initial closeup, we see him marching in line, curiously the lone Indian among a group of Chinese men, all clad in uniforms that include black hats with red furry trim. After a beat or two, we decipher that he is marching in a Taoist funeral procession. Among the outsourced mourners is an undocumented woman from mainland China (Chen Chen), marked as such by her non-Southeast Asian accent. Compelled to secure a better paying gig to support her child back home, she turns to sex work, but not before hiring Siva as private muscle. By what must be coincidence, these two entrepreneurial figures – a manual laborer and a sex worker – were cited by Tsing as examples of supply chain labor that produces value in part by performing the differences "that establish their super-exploitation: gender, race, ethnicity, and so forth. [I]t is a familiar feature of independent contracting. A day laborer must perform brawn and availability; a prostitute must perform sexual charm" (158–59). Moreover, when Siva agrees to be Chen's protector, he actually becomes doubly exploited.

If this is a fluke, then it should not be a surprise, given the degree to which the syntax behind this dilemma of supply chain capitalism is refracted and rehearsed in Singapore. By way of a conclusion, consider its instantiation within a sociological phenomenon that has

vexed the state for most of its existence. Educated and socio-economically mobile people who use their means and opportunities to emigrate with their labor, skills, and tax dollars were branded as “quitters” by Singapore’s first two prime ministers at National Day speeches more than 32 years apart. In 2002, with the Asian financial crisis fresh in the memory, the quitters were derided as “fair-weather citizens” over “stayers,” who remain committed to the country and, more importantly, *in* it, “rain or shine” (Goh 2002). Interpreted as judgmental and moralizing, the address triggered months of public debate. That larger reaction to the speech obscures the fact that emigrants had already been marked using the same formulation in 1969 and 1970. It occurred in the context of a graduate brain drain, an exodus triggered by the institution of national military service in 1967 (Lim 2007, 123–24; Lee 1970). Sandi Tan may find a somewhat familiar ring in the language even back then:

Whether we are shirkers or quitters, or stayers and fighters, will determine whether we live in peace or not. If people believe that we are stayers and fighters, we are more likely to live peacefully.

(Lee 1970)

Such are the inexorable conundrums of both a state and its citizens integrally reliant on the outside, on global flows, and on supply chains. It is the dilemma of success, because national aspiration is tautologically conflated with geographical portability and economic mobility. By default, excelling at infrastructure confers anonymity, while being a hub normalizes transition and transience. Consider the irony of stamping foreign workers as temporary, a status codified in state policy no less (Yeoh, Huang, and Gonzalez 1999, 117), when mobility and leaving are imbricated in the national ideal to quit. This cycle of Singaporean films presents the symptoms of that condition, in poignant acknowledgment of its history and purpose as a gateway, conduit, and transnational service hub. They also coincide with the rise of media infrastructure studies as a discipline, where scholars at least since Larkin (2013) have grappled with questions about the text’s relevance in comparison to the infrastructures behind it. At this opportune moment, these films step forward from a context that is infrastructural all the way down, in myriad ways that these passages have only begun to consider. They raise world cinema as a useful platform for those debates, and volunteer themselves as affective purveyors of infrastructural style, or supply chain aesthetics – Gesamtkunstwerks of an infrastructural age.

Notes

- 1 The concept was distilled into the 2022 multimedia art exhibition, *Lonely Vectors*, hosted by the Singapore Art Museum at its new space, a repurposed warehouse at a historic shipping terminal. The artwork’s purpose was to “draw our attention to the fault lines, choke points, exclusive zonings and infrastructural politics that characterize our global economy. Agricultural and irrigation channels, trade and shipping routes, economic zonings and migratory patterns are engraved across the surface of the earth, and are integral to our contemporary lives” (Lonely Vectors 2022).
- 2 Liberalized immigration policies in the 2000s led to rapid population growth that strained infrastructure and stiffened competition for jobs and housing. Locals directed ire at arrivals who were both high-earning professionals and unskilled laborers who populated service positions and construction sites.

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