







Snow City (2010) by Tan Pin Pin  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

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## Interview

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# Tan Pin Pin

**For the last decade Tan Pin Pin has used the documentary form to make visible aspects of daily life in Singapore that are selectively ignored or conveniently forgotten. Her films seek out fascinating characters with stories to tell, objects that trigger memories and traditional practices that have to be continually modified to make way for an efficient and hyper-modernised way of life. A careful observer, Pin Pin's filmmaking shows sensitivity to a city in a perpetual state of flux, as well as a keen eye for the fatalism and dark wit that typifies Singaporean humour. In this e-mail interview with the Cinémathèque Quarterly, she discusses her filmic beginnings, the processes behind many of her works, and why it's important to keep asking the right questions.**

**What was the initial trigger that made you want to be a filmmaker?**

While I was an undergraduate studying to be a lawyer, I was introduced to photography as I was browsing through the art section of the University library. I am influenced by photographers Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand and Diane Arbus. In particular, I was blown away by Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958). They championed a personal way of seeing and an independent way of working which I identified with. I started out as a photographer and moved to film a few years later when the technology became more affordable. At that time, filmmaking was a very exotic and expensive sounding activity, but I sensed that things were about to change.

**What was your very first film, and did it contain within it, a hint of the themes that would come to preoccupy you?**

My first film was *Moving House*, which was made in 1997. Most people have seen the 2001 version which was commissioned by Discovery

Channel. This was shot in 1995 with Jasmine Ng's help. I borrowed a 16mm Bolex and a Betacam video camera from Ngee Ann Polytechnic. I filmed my extended family coming together to exhume my great-grandfather and moving his remains to Mandai Columbarium. I wanted to make a memoriam for the first Tan who came to Singapore in the late 1890s from Fujian, China, and spawned five generations. So in a sense, it was a story of Singapore. I am interested in beginnings and questions like, where do we come from, what have we become and why, and where to from here?

**Was your interest in filmmaking furthered through film school, or are you entirely self-taught?**

Those were the pre-Internet days, so I read voraciously at the library and was a fervent attendee at all Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) and Singapore Film Society (SFS) events; but watching and making are different things. I decided to work at Mediacorp in the drama department to learn the ropes of production. I was an assistant director in the series *Triple Nine* and *VR Man*. To this day, keeping continuity is second nature to me because of the training from that period. When I won a scholarship to attend Northwestern University's MFA film programme 2 years later, I found I had to unlearn everything I learnt at the TV station as their approach was very different. They were industry focused but they had a strong art school slant in their pedagogy too.



*Moving House* (2001)  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin



### **Do you think it is more difficult being a filmmaker in Singapore, as compared to elsewhere in Asia, or beyond?**

In Singapore, the cost of living is manageable (barely) compared to the west and the lumpy political and censorship environment is a bore and detrimental to creativity. But at the end of the day, I would still choose this life over any other. I enjoy the challenge of making this life work and pushing myself to make great work.

On the funding front, documentaries and non-narrative films have only just begun to register in the Singapore Film Commission's radar. Previously they were considered too uncommercial. I am looking forward to the new works that will come out of this new phase in film funding.

### **Which of your films did you most enjoy making?**

*Singapore GaGa* (2005) was enjoyable. It was an opportunity to meet people I had always wanted to meet, like the MRT train announcer Juanita Melson, avant garde toy pianist Margaret Leng Tan and ventriloquist Victor Khoo. *Snow City* (2010), which will have its international premiere at Cinema du Reel, felt the most effortless. It was edited in three days with Sun Koh. I had spent a long time looking at rushes for the Singapore Biennale, so I knew my rushes very well and a film was born in the process. In *Moving House* (2001), a thunderstorm broke as the graves were being demolished. I felt like the film gods were



*Singapore Gaga* (2006)

Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin



*Snow City* (2010)  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

looking upon me favourably at that moment. I couldn't have asked for a better dramatic turning point than this naturally occurring one. I follow my curiosities and let them lead me.

The most seemingly intractable film was *Invisible City* (2007); I felt it had to be as jaunty as *Singapore GaGa*, which had preceded it. It's an entirely different film in every sense, and it took time for me to realise that. It has come into its own, winning several awards along the way.

**Your earliest works, *Microwave* (2001) and *Lurve Me Now* (1999), seem like anomalous experimental outtakes compared to your other films. What prompted these shorts?**

Those films were made while I was a graduate student in the USA. I think if I had stayed there, my films would have continued in that whimsical yet dark vein, but I returned to Singapore, for better or worse. I don't think we have a choice in the kind of work we produce as filmmakers, but we do have a choice as to where we live. By deciding to move back to Singapore, I made a subconscious decision regarding the kind of work I would be making. I knew it would be primarily for a Singaporean audience and that it would be work that would attempt to push open their perspectives of Singapore, to see this country as a teeming, contested terrain.

***Lurve Me Now*, which features Barbie dolls being fondled and caressed by human hands, with the voiceover of a woman breathing heavily, was banned here in Singapore. When was it banned? What reasons were given for the ban and has the ban since been lifted?**

The film was submitted for a screening at SIFF where it was banned. The ban has not been lifted since 1998 despite an appeal, but it can be seen online on my Youtube Channel. I was told that it was banned for the sexually explicit audio which consisted of heavy breathing sounds! A first.

**The narrator for *Moving House* states that, “For Singaporeans, moving, rebuilding and resettling is a way of life, whether voluntary or involuntary...the dead are not exempt.” There is a kind of stoicism running through the film, a sense that things ought not to be this way, but since they are, one has to adapt. But your films also invoke a sense that if we keep adapting, we also risk a kind of death.**

I included that in the voiceover because I was surprised that centuries old syncretic religious practices could be transposed into a columbarium set up. The family had no space to place the food spread in the tight columbarium so they just brought along a folding table, lined it with a table cloth and continued the prayers without a break, as if they



*Moving House* (2001)

Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

were still in the grand gravesite that had just been demolished. Perhaps they were merely exhibiting the adaptability of immigrants? Why fight? Just adapt and move on. All through the documentary I wanted someone to say, enough is enough. I WON'T MOVE! But no one said that. However in fairness, when I asked the Chew family why they agreed to be featured in *Moving House*, they said that this was their way of resisting the move. Their mere existence was resistance. This recent campaign to save Bukit Brown (an old gravesite in Singapore with the remains from as early as the late 19th century) is an interesting case study for me, because I see the fighting spirit I didn't see when our families had to move.

**What do you feel about that spirit of adaptability, as a filmmaker and as a Singaporean?**

I think artists, and I think of myself as one, are as a breed, eminently adaptable. We have to be. Most of us are supplicants and we have to satisfy the whims of funders, (government or private), investors and for some, the audience too, as well as ourselves. Serving several masters, we are chameleons and Houdinis. Fortunately, the form is very malleable. It is, after all, a system of signs so we can, with some dexterity, serve all.

**There are wry notes and even humorous moments that alternate with sombre rituals and beliefs in your films. Do you think there's something idiosyncratically Singaporean about that, or something innately human – that we laugh despite the tears?**

My films have a strain of the absurd which I feel isn't often noticed. You see it in the films I made while in the USA. From the gravedigger bidding for a miniature gold coffin pendant during the 8th month auctions (*Gravedigger's Luck*, 2003), to Margaret Leng Tan playing the toy piano in the void deck (*Singapore GaGa*), to the jazz band playing "It's Gotta Be You" at the Fort Canning Tunnel Opening (*Snow City*), to Barbie's relaxed pose while in the microwave (*Microwave*); I feel these moments spring from the same dark roots. I have been very influenced by Eastern European writing and films in that respect.

As to whether these funny bits have to do with being Singaporean, perhaps they do. I feel that we live in Kafkaesque times. I love





*Singapore Gaga (2005)*  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

Singaporean humour. You get its full blown effect in sites like sammyboy.com, with its combination of sex and politics. I can't reproduce it with fluency but when I hear it, I enjoy it. It is very passive-aggressive, always said with a gleam in the eye and it can be bawdy. I wish I could do it enough justice.

**In your description of *80km/h* (2004) (a single shot of Singapore filmed from a car, starting from its most eastern point, to its most western point), you state that its 'duration is its message'. The film suggests that what the landscape lacks in sheer immensity and variation, is compensated for by the constant changes, layer upon layer, that the island undergoes. Again, that idea of "moving, rebuilding and resettling" recurs. What are your thoughts on this?**

The whole work lasts 38 minutes, which is the length of time it takes to traverse the country at 80km/h. The land keeps being churned and churned. My mother was cremated and interred in a Columbarium in Mount Vernon. Fifteen years later, we were told that the government needed to re-settle the columbarium to Chua Chu Kang. Only in Singapore do you resettle columbariums! So I agree with your analysis. Archaeology and the act of rediscovering are themes in my work. I feel that the documentary form is very suitable to tackle these issues.

**If *80km/h* has cartographical value, *August 9th* (2006) has sociological value, in that it too is a map – its heady sequence of parades, floats and mass patriotic spectacles vividly show how the national agenda has shifted over 40 years. Tell us a little bit about the genesis of *August 9th*. It was commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore, but did you already have the idea in mind beforehand?**

I am a great fan of National Day Parades (NDPs) and have attended it and filmed it for as long as I can remember. However, even as a fan, I have never sat through all the NDP recordings back to back in 10 days, which I had to do for the purposes of making *August 9th*. Several impressions emerged.

I was struck by how similar the parades were except for cosmetic changes. Singapore may have moved from third world to the first, but the style of this public display of nationalism over forty years remains a constant. It is so consistent in fact that shot sizes, framing and camera positions for the T.V. recordings of the event have remained unchanged over the years.

I came to see the parade for what it is - a ritual. Its filming and our viewing is ritualised too. The other aspect of NDP that struck me was that the qualities that make the NDP what it is also embody Singapore. The whole event is very organised and disciplined in a precise and militaristic way. Even the SIA stewardesses had to march in unison!



*80km/h* (2004)  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin



August 9th (2006)

Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

I was also struck by the passing of time. In the 10 days that I sat through all the footage, I saw the same leaders age incrementally before my eyes. As the years passed, they became more bent and grey, just as the parades became more flashy, colourful and better funded. I couldn't help but feel the journey of a country through time and this is the main theme I hope to communicate to the viewer.

***Singapore GaGa* feels like an auditory montage – singing tissue sellers, clog-wearing uncles playing on harmonicas; students singing cheers during sports day and avant garde pianists making space for silence. What inspired this?**

I wanted to create a CD of specifically Singapore sounds. Whether it was the toot of the *karung guni* man's horn, or the mannered voice of the MRT announcer, or Charlee and Victor Khoo performing their ventriloquist act; I wanted to set it down as an auditory record of sounds that mattered to me in Singapore. As I went around collecting these sounds, it evolved into a documentary. I am glad this work has resonated with audiences, but it started as a personal ode to our soundscape.

**A recurring element in *Singapore GaGa* is people who've been neglected or marginalised in some way and yet the film**



*Singapore GaGa* (2005)  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

**was embraced as a celebration of the rich tapestry of life in the city-state. Were you aware of these various, arguably opposing readings of the film as you were constructing it?**

Yes, I was aware of the opposing readings in its construction. It was intended. *Singapore GaGa* is a bitter film. I thought *Wasted Days and Wasted Nights* was the perfect song to bracket it. Yet the sense of hope, humour and celebration runs alongside that. I think internal tensions and contradictions make a work strong. The text should be readable in many ways, by as many people.

***Invisible City* is a paean to ethnographic filmmakers and photographers like Ivan Polunin, who has reams of footage he shot in Singapore and Malaya between the 1950s–1960s, and Marjorie Doggett. What drew you to these documentarians?**

I felt a great affinity with Dr. Polunin as well as Marjorie Doggett, Marjorie Topley (anthropologist in *Invisible City*), as well as Lim Chen Sian and his team of archaeologists; in fact I felt connected to everyone I met who is featured in *Invisible City*. They are recorders and documenters of Singapore, which is what I feel I am. I sought them out because I wanted to find out about their motivations. I hope my work is as valuable as theirs.





*Invisible City* (2007)  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

### **What projects are you working on at present?**

The National Library Board has commissioned me to produce a work that explores using words as images; I am also working on a documentary about our linguistic heritage and collecting material for a work on our “islandness”. I am also completing a feature script.

### **Does Singapore still interest you, in that it will continue to feature as the primary subject of your films, or has the very act of uncovering, prompted a desire to explore other landscapes?**

I find Singapore endlessly fascinating but it would be nice to live elsewhere for a while. I know my output will be very different from what I am making now if I lived elsewhere. It would be very nice to explore that side of myself.

### **We had an exchange (the Museum Cinémathèque team and yourself) about the films that have influenced you or that you simply love as works of art. You mentioned the Canadian filmmaker Arthur Lipsett (whose works are being featured in our World Cinema Series this year). Why Lipsett and what else would you put on your dream list?**



*Invisible City* (2007)  
Image courtesy of Tan Pin Pin

I listed 13 works including artist videos by Artur Zmijewski, and I think they picked this film (Lipsett) because they have never shown much work from the margins. Lipsett works with found footage and his treatment of it in *21-87* (1963), which is his most well-known work, is brilliant. *9th August* is a found footage film which tries to excavate the meaning of the parades through juxtaposition with other footage. I would like to see more of this kind of films in Singapore.

Tan Pin Pin's films have screened in Singapore schools, clan associations and in Singapore Airlines. They have also been shown in art galleries, at film festivals and they have been broadcast on international television. She has won more than 20 awards, most recently for *Invisible City*. The citation from Cinema du Reel describes it as "[a] witty, intellectually challenging essay on history and memory as tools of civil resistance". *Singapore GaGa*, chosen as the Best Film, 2006 Straits Times, is described as "[o]ne of the best films about Singapore". It was the first Singapore documentary to have a theatrical release where it had a sold out 7-week run. Her latest works, *The Impossibility of Knowing* and *Snow City* were both shown at the Singapore Biennale 2011. She is currently completing *Yangtze Scribbler*.







*Moving House (2001) by Tan Pin Pin*