

MICHAEL M.J. FISCHER. *AT THE PIVOT OF EAST AND WEST: ETHNOGRAPHIC, LITERARY, AND FILMIC ARTS.* DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 365 P. ISBN: 9781478019893

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At the pivot of East and West: ethnographic, literary, and filmic arts begins with Michael M. J. Fischer's call to examine artistic works in conjunction with ethnographies to gain a holistic understanding of how fictional works can present historical truths, particularly for those whose voices were silenced or whose histories were buried and forgotten. This call to seriously consider the works of artists and creators continues throughout the book as Fischer highlights individual films and novels that encompass such topics as histories of war, coming-of-age stories, science fiction creatures, and local cuisines. The goal of such discussions is 'to reclaim literary and filmic productions as worthy of full incorporation into anthropological accounts of contemporary culture' (37). Fischer's exploration of a diverse range of films and novels creates a compelling view of modern Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore, in which historical circumstances collide with contemporary (and future) lives.

Chapter One focuses on the work of documentary filmmaker Tan Pin Pin, whose controversial work *To Singapore, with Love* (2013) was banned in Singapore due to its interviews with political exiles. Here, hinges swing back and forth between the present lives of the exiles and the historical circumstances that forced them from Singapore. This documentary, along with Tan Pin Pin's other works, weaves together Singapore's social and political history with contemporary Singaporean life by emphasising the passage of time and the creation of a national identity.

Chapters Two through Five form a section inspired by H el ene Cixous's notion of * criture f eminine* (1976) as Fischer promotes the work of female artists and feminine experiences of the world. Women's stories have often been relegated to the sidelines, but the idea of an * criture feminine* has allowed for the personal experiences and thoughts of women to also constitute a history worth recording. Chapter Two centres on writer and filmmaker Sandi Tan and her novel *The Black Isle* (2012), a historical science fiction/ghost story that chronicles the life of Ling (later Cassandra) through migration to Singapore in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, Japanese occupation during WWII, and Singapore as an independent state under Lee Kuan Yew. In Chapter Three, Fischer highlights the work of novelist Lydia Kwa. Kwa's novels, particularly *Pulse* ([2010] 2014), focus on the knots of personal identity and culture while playing with experiences of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. In Chapter Four, Danielle Lim's memoir *The sound of Sch* (2014), 'sch' referring to 'the first sound of schizophrenia' (150), likens mental illness to the history of illness and disease (particularly SARS and leprosy) that have played a role in Singaporean life and consciousness.

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The last chapter in this grouping of women's voices, Chapter Five, focuses on the works of Indonesian writer Laksmi Pamuntjak. Laksmi's novels *Amba: a question of red* (2014), *The birdwoman's palate* (2018), and *Fall baby* (2019) blend history and mythology with modern beliefs and ways of life in Indonesia. Through these works, Fischer argues the importance of privileging women's voices in speaking truth to historical situations where they might not have originally held importance.

Chapter Six explores the works of filmmaker Daniel Hui, focusing on politics and the creation of power both individually and societally. As a gay man, Hui sees himself – and, thus, portrays himself through his works – as an individual who is at once a victim and 'a privileged power holder' within the wider political lens of Singaporean life (210). Likewise, Chapter Seven examines the science fiction novels *The HDB murders* (Goh 2017) and *Altered straits* (Wong 2017) which represent a sense of unease about 'rigid social norms, rules, and bureaucratic procedures' that are a part of social and political life (235). Fischer argues that socially aware artists' works critique the systems they work within, alongside ethnographic writings on those locations.

Finally, in the Afterword and Exergue, Fischer backs away from novels and films to explore more broadly the social and political messages of other forms of art. In the Afterword, Fischer shares photos and descriptions of visual art pieces scattered throughout Singapore that overlap with the arguments or messages of previously discussed novels or films. In the Exergue, he touches briefly on Bangarra dance and its importance in connecting to and sharing Indigenous identity in Australia. These brief ending chapters serve to broaden the scope for the reader and make clear the possibilities for artistic and ethnographic overlap.

While Fischer's work is largely well-written, there were a few problems that stuck out to me as a reader. Fischer relies primarily on summarising the films and novels that he has chosen, but he places uneven emphasis on connecting these fictional works to the real histories of their settings. While some of the works are well situated within their cultural, historical, and political contexts, others lack certain information that might benefit the reader. Furthermore, the privileging of book or film summaries also means that Fischer's use of anthropological theories and concepts is thin in some places – though the chapters on *écriture féminine* effectively integrate gender theory. Additionally, the book as a whole might have benefited from another copy edit; infrequent misspellings of artist and politician names and inaccurate referencing of chapter content within the introduction tarnish its readability.

If nothing else, Fischer makes a compelling argument for readers to partake in a deeper exploration of films and novels created by individuals, particularly women, in Southeast Asia. His descriptions of the films and novels highlight the diversity of talent and experience that these artists draw from. Furthermore, Fischer effectively conveys the idea that works of fiction can portray something more truthful to experiences of war, poverty, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and society than what has been written in historic annals or academic textbooks and that anthropology can benefit from taking these ideas seriously.

Bibliography

Cixous, Hélène 1976. *The Laugh of the Medusa*, translated by Paula Cohen and Keith Cohen, *Signs* 1/4, 875-93.

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