

Application of Magical Realism in Cinema

Depicting Cultures and Traditions

マジカル・リアリズムの映画への応用 —文化と伝統の表現—

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ever since its inception more than a century ago, cinema has circulated around the world, crossing national, language and community boundaries and reaching deep into social space. The transformation of international cinema throughout history is caused not only by filmmakers, but also by critics and audiences. It is a film's inherent nature to cross cultural borders within and between nations, traversing about heterogeneous linguistic and social formations.

Therefore we can safely assume that there is sort of internationalism in production and in reception, in the making of films and in its consumption. With this sort of internationalism, it is an inevitable belief that cinema functions as a system for cultural exchange, regardless of the initial intention of a film's creation.

For example: Even if a normal Hollywood blockbuster from the United States of America is made only for escapist entertainment and profit, audiences of different cultural and national backgrounds can still view this film as a visual representation of the United States of America.

We can then accept that cultural exchange is fundamental to cinema at every level, and defying the popular elitist perception that cinema is merely an inferior form of entertainment and recreation. Film festivals usually serve as a platform for films that focuses less on entertainment and more on depicting emotional truths. These films are meant to ask and portray sociopolitical and historical questions, while generating communication between the film's creators and audiences. This is similar to the differences between literary fiction (which emphasizes characterization and storytelling, linguistic aesthetics) and genre fiction (which emphasizes more on spectacle and entertainment).

The reason why I provide a literary example in the above paragraph is because this dissertation, at its heart, is an in-depth discussion on applying a well-known literary technique (magical realism) in a cinematic context. There had always been a close relationship between film and literature. Many of the most critically acclaimed films in world cinema being adapted or inspired by works of literature. To paraphrase Ronald Perrier, a study of literature will cast light on the meanings of film, and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the literature. Thus, some rudimentary knowledge on film and literary techniques will be required for this dissertation.

This paper is also meant to encourage readers to read more books if they want to understand more about the process of making movies, to become more critical viewers that are capable of comparing and contrasting. For filmmakers, such critical

skills can translate to an enhanced cultural consciousness in their own world that free them from a myopic view that cinema is only about entertainment, while raising their awareness on making worthy films that are capable of cultural exchange on an international stage.

On a more personal note, this dissertation chronicles my years-long attempt to bridge Malaysian and Japanese cultures using the philosophies and concepts of magical realism in cinema. The research lasted from 2008 until 2012, its methodology include a filmmaking experiment that yielded ten short films, one feature film and two unproduced feature-length screenplays which I served either as writer-director or producer. Each of these films feature, in varying degrees, magical realism, meant either to depict history or culture, or to illustrate the mental states of characters. These films were invited to some of the most important film festivals around the world, garnering discussions and feedback from critics, academics and other film industry insiders of various different countries and backgrounds (which are included in this paper as well).

Many people wanting to undergo a film education have often overlooked the full potential of cinema, concentrating solely on the technical aspects of filmmaking instead of its storytelling and cultural aspects. Even though movies have dominated our lives, we are incapable of understanding why literature is important in shaping our creativity and sensibilities, in helping us craft films that reflect genuine emotional truths and human nature. Being a collaborative effort in a rapidly changing environment, one cannot afford to live within a vacuum when it comes to filmmaking.

Hopefully, this dissertation's attempts to connect literature and cinema with history and culture can create such awareness of aspiring filmmakers and other cineastes.

1.1 Dissertation outline

This is the outline of the rest of this dissertation:

The following chapter, Chapter 2, will familiarize readers with the concept of magical realism and its current role in world cinema. It will discuss the function of magical realism as collective consciousness and political intrigue.

Chapter 3 focuses on my purposes and methodology, explaining about the series of films I made to experience firsthand the use of magical realism in cinema and the consequences of screening my films in public at different countries.

Chapter 4 to 6 are suggestions of the main functions in magical realism, using these films as examples. Each of the three chapters ends with a feedback of film academics, critics and industry insiders.

Chapter 4 concerns how magical realism crosses national and cultural barriers as its narrative are used to study each culture and sociopolitical situation.

Chapter 5 is about bridging history and time with the use of magical realism, asking

relevant, timely sociopolitical questions regardless of the time period used as its settings.

Chapter 6 merges cultures into one based on commonalities and other connection to provide an experience of transcultural storytelling.

Chapter 7 merges the concepts of Chapter 4, 5, 6, resulting in a feature film screenplay called “Reincarnated Dreams of Deer”, a magical realist story that mixes magical realism, folklores and myths to show little-known history events shared by Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan.

Chapter 8 concludes the findings.

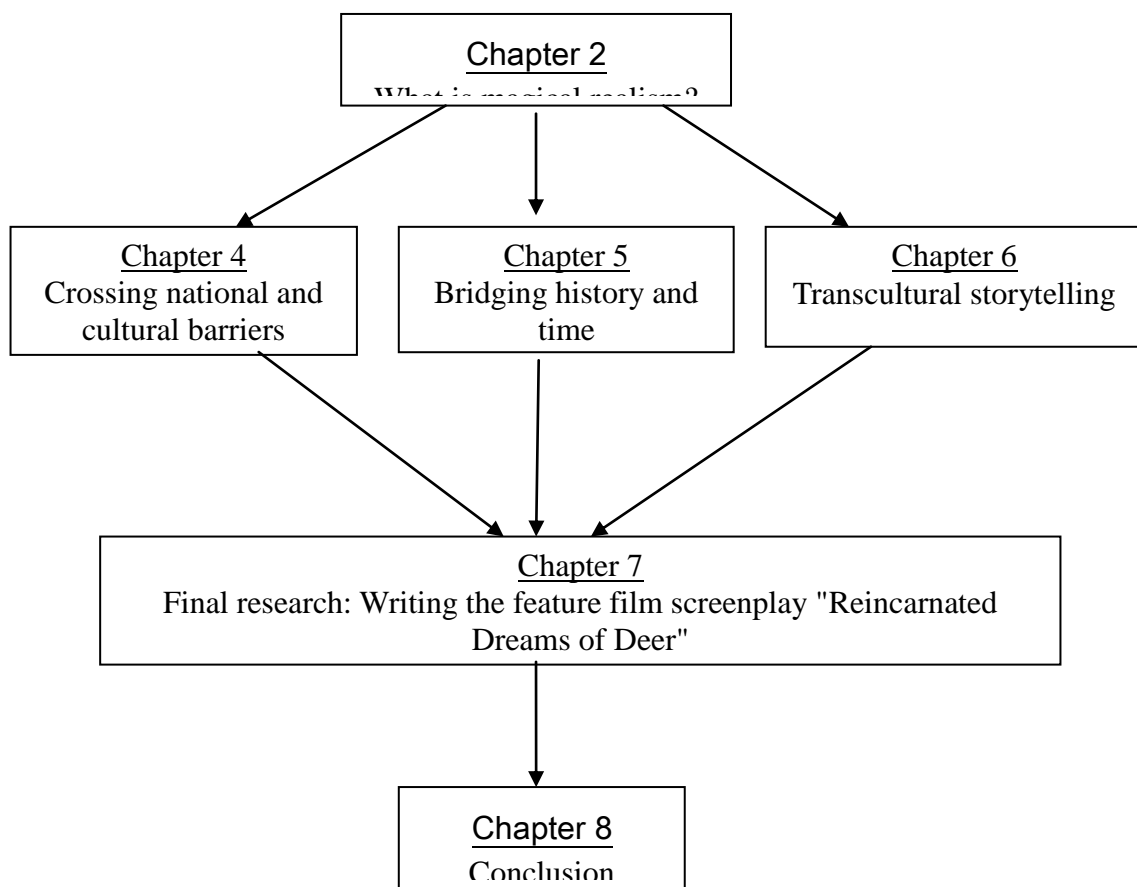


Figure 1: The outline and main research of this dissertation

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 General Background of magical realism

Magical realism is an aesthetic style or a genre of fiction in which magical elements are blended seamlessly with a realistic atmosphere, usually to produce a deeper understanding for reality.

2.1.1 History and its disputed definition

The German art critic Franz Roh originated the term “magical realism” in a 1925 essay during a discussion about an emerging post-expressionistic painting style known as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). With “magical realism”, Roh was referring to a style that depicts a mundane, realistic subject matter, but accentuated with strange and dreamlike qualities that allows one to reevaluate “reality”¹. Roh was celebrating these post-expressionistic painters’ return to figural representation after a decade or more of abstract art.

In the introduction to the expanded Spanish language version of Roh’s essay published two years later in 1927 by Jose Ortega y Gasset, Roh again emphasized these painters’ engagement of the “everyday”, the “commonplace”: “with the word ‘magic’ as opposed to ‘mystic’”. Roh eventually disavowed his designation in 1958, retiring the “magical term” as he found “New Objectivity” a better term to describe these paintings².

Despite Roh’s dismissal, literary critics were beginning to revive the “magical realism” term for use in Latin America literature, but reversing Roh’s emphasis, focusing on the magic rather than the real in the texts in question. The Spanish translation of Roh’s essay by a major literary figure like Jose Ortega y Gasset had influenced the rest of the literary circle. The Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges inspired and encouraged other Latin American writers to contribute to the magical realism movement with his first magical realist publication “*Historia universal de la infamia*” in 1935. In the 1960s, with the global success of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ “*One Hundred Years of Solitude*”, and other works of literature from the Latin American “Boom” period, magical realism was recognized by some as a significant international movement in fictional style.

Although the same literary critics have ignored the origins of magical realism in visual arts, it is not impossible to draw a link between Roh’s original intended meaning of the term (painterly magical realism), and literary magical realism. After

¹ Roh, Franz. “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism.” (1995) *Magical Realism*. Ed. L. P. Zamora and

² Evans, G.S. “Magical Realism and its Meanings: A not so necessary confusion” (2003) <http://cafeirreal.alicewhittenburg.com/review4c.htm>. Café Irreal (Accessed: October 1st, 2012)

all, magical realism continues to explore the nature of visual representation and the nature of objects being represented, as realistic texts do not. The “magic” in magical realism stories resides in the “real” world of everyday objects, places and people.

Therefore, a more general definition of magical realism is that it is a narrative device that creates (magical) meaning by seeing ordinary things in extraordinary ways.

2.1.2 Characteristics of magical realism

These are some of the common characteristics of magical realism in narratives.

Fantastical elements

As mentioned before, magical realism is a mode of narrative where reality mingles with fantasy. Characters might be capable of magical feats that defy logic, or stumble upon fantastical occurrences that are unexplained. It is allegorical storytelling using the inexplicable, making observations of ‘everyday reality’ with the extraordinary.

Plenitude

An idea championed by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier in an essay entitled "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real", the baroque is characterized by its lack of emptiness, departure of structures and rules and disorienting detail. For Carpentier, this means a layering of elements, just like his attempts to depict a transcultural and post-colonial Latin America (particularly Haiti) in his own 1947 novel, ‘The Kingdom of This World’.

Hybridity

Many works of magical realism are illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, dream and reality, and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change.



Figure 2: The hybrid nature of Magical Realism

Authorial Reticence

This refers to a lack of clear opinion about the accuracy of events and accuracy of worldview expressed by the characters in the story. For example, time is often depicted in a non-linear manner (past, present and future overlapping with one another) to reflect how it is actually experienced by the characters.

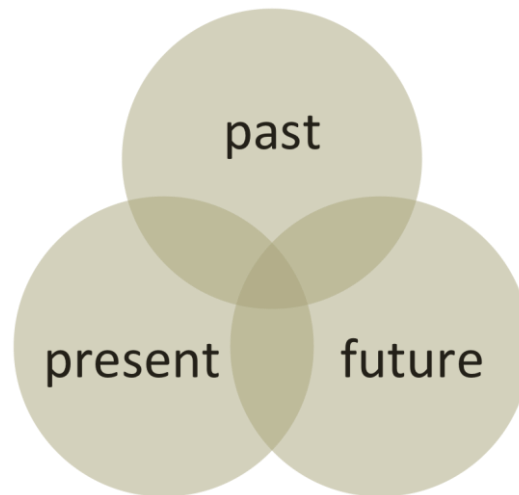


Figure 3: Non-linearity

Ghosts often appear in these stories, not as scare devices commonly employed in works of the horror genre, but as embodiments of one's memory or relationship to the past.

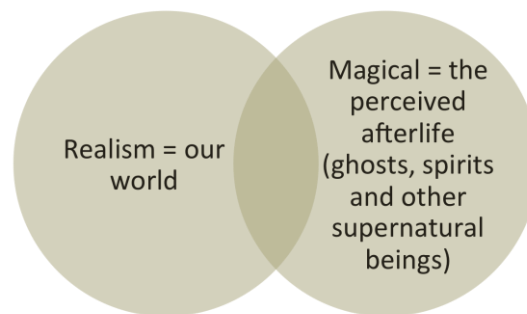


Figure 4: The line between current existence and the afterlife is blurred.

Aside from reflecting the emotional states of characters, this opens up possibilities to contextualize (cinematic) language itself. Readers or audiences have to probe and examine this ambiguity, reconsidering the techniques used to “construct reality” in the narrative.

In addition to that, there is usually no explanation or exposition about the fantastical events, nor any sense of surprise or wonder towards these events. Therefore the miraculous is mundane, as it is described with the same factual indifference that fits original everyday life.

2.2 Cinema for magical realist storytelling

With both foundations and characteristics of magical realist art and literature described in the previous section, one can identify a magical realist film³. And there are indeed many films throughout the history of world cinema that can be described as magical realist.

Because the concept of magical realism is relatively young, especially in film, there are no fastened rules or requirements of magical realism in films that are widely accepted by current academia. Usually these films share numerous characteristics and philosophy that define magical realism. Magical realism does not show any preferences towards any particular genre of film, it can be found in intimate dramas (“Eternal Sunshine of A Spotless Mind”, “Wings of Desire”, “Field of Dreams”), war epics (“Underground”, “Red Sorghum”), gentle comedies (“Purple Rose of Cairo”, “Moonrise Kingdom”) and others, therefore “magical realism” for cinema should not be regarded as a genre, but more a style or device employed in the service of the filmmakers’ imaginations and abilities.

2.2.1 Examples of magical realist films

The following are films that feature elements of magical realism. They vary in genres and countries of origin.

- Field of Dreams (1989) by Phil Alden Robinson
- Wings of Desire (1987) by Wim Wenders
- The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985) and Midnight In Paris (2011) by Woody Allen
- Being John Malkovich (1999) by Spike Jonze
- Magnolia (1999) by Paul Thomas Anderson
- Amelie (2001) by Jean-Pierre Jeunet
- Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind (2004) by Michel Gondry
- Edward Scissorhands (1990) and Big Fish (2003) by Tim Burton
- Synecdoche New York (2008) by Charlie Kaufman
- Slumdog Millionaire (2008) by Danny Boyle
- Fanny and Alexander (1982) by Ingmar Bergman
- Memories of Matsuko (2006) by Tetsuya Nakashima
- O Brother Where Art Thou (2000) by Coen Brothers
- Mulholland Drive (2001) by David Lynch
- Taste of Tea (2004) by Katsuhito Ishii
- And The Ship Sails On (1983) by Federico Fellini

³ Komar, Nishant. “Wings of Desire: An Individual Case Study” (2004) <http://www.class.uh.edu/courses/engl3322/nkomar/index.htm>. English 3322: Magical Realism, University of Houston website. Accessed: 5th Oct, 2012

- The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou (2004) and Moonrise Kingdom (2012) by Wes Anderson
- Red Sorghum (1988) by Zhang Yimou
- Angels In America (2003) by Mike Nichols (TV miniseries)
- Underground (1995) by Emir Kusturica
- Pastoral: To Die In A Country (1974) and Farewell to the Ark (1984) by Shuji Terayama
- Mother and Son (1997) and Russian Ark (2002) by Alexander Sokurov
- Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010) by Apichatpong Weerasethakul

2.2.2 Criticisms against films as a medium for magical realist storytelling

Despite the critical success of the aforementioned magical realist films, skeptics often questioned the effectiveness of films as a visual medium for magical realist storytelling. The American author, David Isaak, pointed out that film is a medium that dwells on a surface, literally superficial, and limited to showing what people do and say, but cannot penetrate to what they think and feel except by implication⁴. Meanwhile, Garret Rowlan described visual magical realism as “boxed magic, lacking organic vitality, without that substratum that exists in that juncture between the reader’s imagination and the writer’s, a bond that joins the quotidian and fantastic.”⁵ The argument is essentially the same: Literature allows readers to use their imaginations to construct the world that the magical realist author describes in detail, and adding the magical element effortlessly with some imagination, while films are hindered by limitations because their relationships with audiences are more one-sided⁶.

2.3 Exploring the potential of depicting magical realism In film

As a rebuttal against these somewhat puritanical views on cinema, my 2010 master’s thesis titled “Exploring The Potential Of Depicting Magical Realism in Film” was an attempt to showcase the possibilities of magical realist storytelling in films with a limited budget and resources. I embarked upon a two-year experiment in filmmaking that allowed me the opportunity to experience firsthand magical realism as a narrative mode for visual storytelling.

One of the main intentions behind the experimental project was to create magical realist films with artistic and technical merits, making use of magical realism to serve

⁴ Isaak, David. “Magical Realist Film” (2007) <http://www.magicalrealism.co.uk/view.php?story=21>. Serendipity. Accessed: 1st of October, 2012

⁵ Crawford, Allison. ““Oh Yeah!”: Family Guy as Magical Realism?” (2009) Journal of Film and Video 61.2 / Summer 2009. P.63

⁶ Rowlan, Garrett. “Magical Realism and Film: Degrading the Image” (2006) <http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/margin/Rowlan4.html> Margin: Exploring Modern Magical Realism. Accessed: 1st of October, 2012

the story instead of the other way around. The quality of these films, subjective as it may be, must be able to be measured on an international stage. The intention was to construct a body of work that could withstand the test of time and serve as adequate examples for magical realist films.

From 2008 to 2010, I was involved in the making of eight short films and a feature-length film with magical realism elements, serving either as director or producer. Production budgets ranged from 30 000 yen to 3 million yen, thus all of these films could be labeled as microbudget productions.

Despite their modest beginnings, these films were invited to some of the most important film festivals in the world like Cannes Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival, Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, Tokyo International Film Festival, and many others. Winning several awards along the way.

The project allowed me to conclude that cinema is without a doubt an effective medium for magical realist storytelling. Due to the vast differences between literature and cinema as mediums, one needs a different approach to depicting magical realism in their films in adequate manner without ruining suspension of disbelief. The fundamental aspects of production has to be paid attention to: From the early stages of screenwriting, to the intricacies of mise-en-scene, and then the shot compositions and art design. And finally, the careful strategies employed during editing and sound designing.

It is the story, the message, and the way it is told that are key to the concept of magical realism in filmmaking. That was the conclusion of my master's thesis.

2.4 Magical realist films for cultural purposes

After exploring the general and technical aspects of storytelling behind magical realist films in my previous thesis, on the “what” and “how” of magical realism, I am expanding my studies in this paper to the cultural roles where magical realism is engaged. In short, this paper emphasizes more on “why” magical realism is used in a cultural and political context. This is prompted by the responses towards my films at the international film festival circuit.

A film festival is first and foremost a platform for cultural exchanges; a film is usually programmed in a film festival because of its possible function in eliciting sociopolitical or cultural discourses among audiences. It also means that the themes in the film are universal enough to transcend cultural barriers.

Aside from that, magical realism often sheds light upon the thematic domain of indigenous or ancient myths, legends and cultural practices. It aims to ‘produce the

experience of a non-objective worldview. Its techniques are particular to that worldview. It conveys realities that other people really do experience, or once experienced⁷. Magical realism reflects the consciousness of the characters in the story have towards the world, or nature, this can thus be viewed as one of its cultural values.

Magical realism works often hail from countries in Latin America, Italy, India, Japan or South East Asia because the countries are rich with tradition, folklore and myths. Until today, in contrast to most Western countries, the communities of these nations are not entirely disassociated from a magical realist reality because of their inherent superstitious nature. And because of this, the absurdity of the political situation in these countries is often the main impetus behind a magical realism story as only something magical and surrealistic can do justice to its portrayal.

2.5 Magical Realism as collective consciousness and political critique

Although the term “magical realism” was coined in the early 20th century, it is important to remember that magical realist stories have existed for centuries. As magical realism is essentially a device for defamiliarisation (a narrative device to defamiliarize the familiar), the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky sees potential in using magical realism to look at historical questions. In his 1865 short tale “An Extraordinary Incident, a government bureaucrat is swallowed by a crocodile and subsequently receives visits from high society, curious to hear his views from the inside of a crocodile.

Dostoevsky was attempting to use this to metaphorize the conflict in the Russian identity between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, the crocodile represents foreign capital, exploited by Russians and exploiting them in turn. For Dostoevsky, the inclusion of magic realism was a way to circumvent censors as subverting history, hiding his own politics in a fantastical tale.

Mikhail Bulgakov, another Russian writer, also used magical realism as a political attack. His novel “The Master and Margarita”, was written during the height of Stalin’s purges in the 1930s. The story included the devil at large in Moscow (Stalin), talking cats (the ubiquity of KGB informers) and so on. Meanwhile, the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima’s Sea of Fertility tetralogy, a 4-book series, features a character who encounters various reincarnations of his best friend as he lives through Japan from pre-World War 1910s to the modern 1970s, dealing with grand, sweeping themes such as the nation’s westernization, militarism, increasing capitalism and decadence. Espousing a very individual brand of nationalism, Mishima committed seppuku on the day that he finished the last book of the tetralogy in 1970.

⁷ Rogers, Bruce Holland. “What Is Magical Realism, Really?” (2002) Writing World, <http://www.writing-world.com/sf/realism.shtml>, accessed: 2nd of November, 2012

These literary examples clearly show that “magical realism” is used to show the dislocation of the political, the individual, and also the historical. Therefore it is apparent why magical realism stories often come from places where the political scene is entirely different from the “normal” Western democracy.

2.5.1 Sociopolitical critique in magical realist cinema

Magical realism in cinema too, is often used as political critiques, and to chronicle the history of a nation.

One of these examples is Emir Kusturica’s 1995 epic magical realist film, “Underground”, which paints Yugoslavia’s devastating history from being a Nazi-occupied territory during World War 2, through Communist regime during Cold War, to the ugly Balkan Wars that resulted in the disintegration of the country along the ethnic lines.

The fate of the country is mirrored by the fates of two protagonists, Blacky and Marko who started out as sworn brothers fighting for the liberation of their country against Nazi. Their relationship gradually disintegrates due to selfish deception and double-crossing, with Marko keeping Blacko underground while convincing him that World War 2 is still going on (which represents the paranoia that occurs during Communist regime). Finally, they are at opposite sides of a war that ends in massacre (representing the Balkan War).

Another example is Greek director Theo Angelopoulos’ 1995 film “Ulysses’ Gaze”, the unnamed protagonist, during his fictional and metaphorical quest to track down three long-missing reels of film by Greece’s pioneering (non-fictional) Manakia brothers, wanders through the past and present of Greece and war-torn Balkans in dreamlike fashion, meeting ghosts of his past like his young mother or ex-lovers, (all played by the same actress) and witnessing in recurring surrealistic scenes the 1946-9 civil war that affected both his childhood and also the Manakia brothers.

In some scenes, usually depicted in one long continuous take, the protagonist suddenly moves from the present day and into the past, transforming into one of the Manakia brothers (the physical appearance of the protagonist remains the same, but he is addressed in a different manner by those around him), experiencing what they experienced during the civil war.

Coincidentally, “Underground” and “Ulysses’ Gaze”, both films linked by their magical realist elements and portrayal of the Yugoslav civil war, were the winners of the top two prizes at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. “Underground” won the Palm D’or and “Ulysses’ Gaze” received the Grand Prix award.

The Thai visual artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasthakul’s “Primitive” installation in 2011, is a collection of nine interrelated short films set in the rural

farming village of Nabua, the site of political and social upheaval and military intervention during the 1960s and 70s. The installation also includes his Palme d'Or winning feature film "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives" (2010), a magical realist story that blurs the lines between past, present and future. The film is a meditation on the lingering memories of violence, the dying protagonist Uncle Boonmee is preoccupied by guilt from participating in the Thai government's fight to wipe out communist insurgents. Later in the film he recounts a dream of a dystopia future where his future reincarnation will be involved in, representing the cyclical nature of history.

Evidently, with the film examples provided above, one can see that magical realism is a powerful narrative device to depict the complex nature of relationship between the individual and their position in history because of its subversive nature. The "magic" in magical realism is often juxtaposed with brutal contemporary realities, just to caution against romantic primitivism.

Much of the magic in magical realism has functioned as a literalization of metaphor while emulating the historical imagination of postcolonial nationalism in some countries. Magical realism texts usually show their audiences in practice how the imagination offers us ways of making sense of the world. Otherwise, it is a heightened, stylized version of everyday life. So, magical realism is not simply a literary method to represent history, but also an alternative mode of social narration that differs from the usual secular assumptions of "national history" as portrayed in documentaries.

The unique blending of reality and fantasy in a magical realism narrative allows the liberation of one's imagination, breaking down the confines of the mind in order to create an immersive experience that can occasionally serve as cultural education. Historical events do not get altered in their entirety, but the exaggeration of reality and its transcendence over it are results of a story being told not just the way events had happened but also the way things the characters thought and wished had happened based on their own yearnings, frustrations, beliefs, non-beliefs.

Chapter 3: A Filmmaking Experiment

3.1 Project introduction

To understand how magical realism can be used as an aesthetic style or narrative tool for cinema to create cultural and sociopolitical discourses, an effective way would be to get involved in the making of such films aimed for these purposes. What information can be communicated on a global stage with these films?

3.1.1 An expansion of a previous experiment

From the span of 2008 to 2010, as a research for my master's thesis, "Exploring The Potential of Depicting Magical Realism in Film", I undertook an experiment in filmmaking that allowed me to experience firsthand the use of magical realism as a narrative mode for visual storytelling.

As a writer, director and/or producer, I was involved in the production of a series of short films and feature-length films that all shared elements of magical realism. That study was a focus on magical realism through filmmaking techniques, plot and character. By the time I was done with these films, the subsequent feedback and responses from film festivals and the international film community reinforced my belief that cinema is a favourable visual medium for magical realism storytelling.

Due to the sheer scope and complexity of the subject matter, a two-year experiment was insufficient to fully explain the role and potential of magical realism in films. The "what" and "how" (cinema techniques) could be explained, but not the "why". Therefore, I made a decision to further develop the study of magical realism in cinema, producing more magical realist films, but with an eye on sociopolitical and historical portrayal as content or a subtext.

The following is a list of films from my master's thesis research (2008-2010) that I would reevaluate further for this paper. A few of them were unreleased during the completion of my thesis two years ago:

- **Fleeting Images (2008)** A short film I wrote and directed
- **Love Suicides (2009)** A short film I wrote and directed
- **Kingyo (2009)** A short film I wrote and directed
- **Woman On Fire Looks For Water (2009)** A feature-length film I produced. Written and directed by Woo Ming Jin.
- **Inhalation (2010)** A short film I wrote and directed.

- **Exhalation (2010)** A short film I wrote and directed.

From 2011 to 2013, I developed an additional number of eight film productions for this project, six have finished their production at the time of writing, and the remaining two exist in screenplay forms. They are:

- **Now (2010)** A short film I wrote and directed.
- **Girl In The Water (2011)** A short film I produced. Written and directed by Jeppe Ronde and Woo Ming Jin
- **Last Fragments of Winter (2011)** A short film I wrote and directed
- **I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me (2011)** A short film I wrote and directed.
- **Springtime Nostalgia (2012)** A short film I wrote and directed. Unreleased.
- **Second Life Of The Thief (2013)** An unproduced feature-length screenplay I co-wrote. Tentative shooting date for this Woo Ming Jin film is early 2013.
- **Reincarnated Dreams of Deer (2013)** An unproduced feature-length screenplay I co-wrote. Tentative shooting date will also be 2013.

3.2 Project aim: A method to capture history and culture

Films and cinema mean different things to different people. While the majority of people view it as entertainment, some still consider it an expression of one's own voice. My personal background as a Malaysian of Chinese ethnicity gave me exposure to numerous different traditions especially because of the multicultural, multiracial society of my country. The fact that Malaysia is a post-colonial nation (from the 16th to 20th century, Malaysia was colonized by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British) may have been one of the main driving forces behind my affinity to magical realist storytelling.

3.2.1 Looking at magical realism as postcolonial study

Magical realism text is often used for postcolonial studies; this is because magical realism is observed as stories from the fringes of mainstream traditions, a resistance to central assimilation by more generic, centralized systems (usually Europe or United States).

Just as magical realism is an oxymoron, one common assumption is that the act of colonization creates a kind of “metaphysical clash” within the colonial culture, a binary opposition within language that has its roots in the process of transporting a language to a new land, or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population.

Hence, magical realism is a reflection of speech and cognition within the actual social relations of a post-colonial culture⁸.

These influences remain within a postcolonial nation like Malaysia and its people even though it has attained liberation for more than half a century. Therefore, people in post-colonial cultures like myself are often involved in a special dialogue with history, the stories we tell are recuperation of lost voices and discarded fragments that were pushed aside during colonization. This explains my strong desire to “share” the culture and traditions of my nation with people from the rest of the world, especially because the cinematic voice of the country is rarely represented in the mainstream.

3.2.2 Understanding magical realism in Japan

Moving to Japan 4 years ago allowed me the opportunity to make films set in either Malaysia or Japan. Occasionally, I used both countries as the settings of my story to reflect my cultural dualism.

With its rich tradition and history in myths, and also with the cultural preservation of superstitions and folktales, Japan remains a country with strong connections to magical realist storytelling. Mixing fantasy with realism in films and literature has long been accepted as a very common storytelling technique in its country. That is why magical realism has existed in Japanese films and literature for centuries.

Contributors to magical realism that are similar to the Latin American fantasy writing gained prominence during the Meiji Era with the works of Sakutarō Hagiwara and Natsume Sōseki. This continued throughout the 20th century with the literary works of Yasunari Kawabata (“One Arm”), Yukio Mishima (“Sea of Fertility” series) and Yasushi Inoue, to modern-day examples like Haruki Murakami (“Wind-up Bird Chronicles”, “1Q84”).

The development of magical realism storytelling in literature is paralleled in cinema with the directorial output of Hayao Miyazaki, Shuji Terayama, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Shohei Imamura and many other filmmakers.

Similar to a postcolonial nation, it is believed that the increasing Western influence in Japanese society produced storytellers who intended to rebel against Western influences that threatened traditional cultural forms, but executed in a manner deemed acceptable by the Western critics and mainstream. It was a decision to choose a

⁸ Slemon, Stephen. *Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse* (1988) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds: L. P. Zamora and W. B. Faris. P. 407-426

consciously non-Western way of representing their own world.⁹

In other words, similar to Malaysia, Japanese magical realism is also a sociopolitical allegory. Its constant struggle with the unreal serving as a reflection of the struggle with the problems of its era, whether it is personal, interpersonal or even international. The unexpected similarities between the two countries were immensely useful in this experiment as it allowed me to make a number of films based loosely on the Japanese magical realism literary works of Yasunari Kawabata and Mieko Kanai without sacrificing too much of their nuances and subtlety. Transplanting these stories to a Western setting would have been exceedingly more difficult.

I would like to reiterate that the aim of this project is more than just an examination of film techniques, but also a study of cinema as a medium to preserve certain marginalized cultures, traditions, and history in the face of globalization and modernization.

3.3 Methodology

The short films made throughout the period of 2008 to 2010 were all financed by the Kohei Ando Laboratory of Waseda University. Production budget ranged from 50 000 yen (“Inhalation”, “Love Suicides”, “Fleeting Images”) to 500 000- 600 000 yen (“Kingyo”, “Exhalation”). On the other hand, “Woman On Fire Looks For Water”, which cost approximately 3 million yen, received financial support from Rotterdam International Film Festival’s Hubert Bals’ Fund and Busan International Film Festival’s Asian Cinema Fund. Both are film grants for filmmakers from developing countries.

Beginning from late 2010, most of my output was done either as commissioned works for commercial entities like Prada (“Now) and Kao (“Springtime Nostalgia) or as part of a commissioned cross-cultural film project (“I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me”, “Double”, “Girl In The Water”). Which made these works more relevant for cultural studies. The short film “Last Fragments of Winter” is the only film financed entirely by Waseda University’s Kohei Ando Laboratory.

Despite the different sources that prompted the making of these films, I made sure they all possess some kind of uniformity in terms of authorial vision and style. I may not have directed every single film, but I was the writer and editor for all of them.

⁹ Napier, Susan J. *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Thus the final incarnation of each film is entirely within my creative control.

The majority of these films, when completed, were submitted either to major film festivals around the world in order to gauge the reactions from other industry professionals and audiences of different nationalities and backgrounds. A few others were uploaded on the Internet to generate immediate feedback and reactions from viewers.

3.4 The 3 different stages of the experiment

The films are divided into three different groups as they each fulfill distinctively different stages for my experiment. These groups are:

- 1) Crossing cultural and national barriers with magical realism.
- 2) Bridging history and time with magical realism.
- 3) Magical realism for transcultural storytelling.

The following chapters will illustrate each stage in greater detail.

Chapter 4: Crossing Cultural and National Barriers with Magical Realism

From this chapter through chapter 6, I will go through a comprehensive breakdown of each of my films from the research to illustrate the use of magical realism as sociopolitical allegory and a depiction of history and culture. Magical realism as film technique in these films will also be mentioned, but I am placing lesser emphasis upon it as this had been covered extensively in my master's thesis.

The first stage of my research is to evaluate and examine the possibilities of making films with the potential to initiate cultural and sociopolitical discourses by employing magical realism as a narrative technique.

These methods include compiling travel videos chronicling various cultures and traditions in the form of a video essay ("Fleeting Images", 2008), transplanting a Japanese magic realism story into a Malaysian context ("Love Suicides", 2009), or concentrating solely on the superstitious beliefs and spirituality of a marginalized society within a country ("Woman On Fire Looks For Water", 2009).

The main purpose is to emphasize the culture and also its influence upon the mentality of the characters, whose mental landscapes are illustrated by the heightened or stylized realism (from the magical realism elements employed throughout the narrative).

4.1 Fleeting Images (2008)

"Fleeting Images" is a 10-minute film essay and homage to Chris Marker's poetic documentary *Sans Soleil* (1983). Like *Sans Soleil*, "Fleeting Images" is narrated by a woman interpreting a series of letters from a close male friend. Those letters mostly ruminate about the passage of time and the unexplained strands of fate that connect people of varying places, time and circumstances.

Drawing inspiration from Marcel Proust's *A la recharge du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time, 1913-1927), the simplest sights, sounds and smells trigger fleeting memories of the past. The Proustian nature of the film is done using montages of recurring motifs and contemporary imagery. The editing rhythm and the use of poetic voiceovers are attempts to replicate such a dreamlike atmosphere for the film.

This film is actually a compilation of unrelated videos I shot in India, Japan and Malaysia. The reason to intercut between these countries was to show their contrasts, and finally their similarities and interchangeability. The narrator (the writer of the letters) is a mere observer; his observations and musings of his surroundings are used to convey his (my) own sense of displacement and alienation in a larger world.

Most of these compiled videos are travel videos recorded without any manipulation of the subjects. Hence it gives the feeling of a documentary due to its authenticity. At the same time, its framing device of a woman reading the letters is staged and fictional, thus making the film one that belongs to a hybrid genre where the line between documentary and fiction is irrelevant.

The constant traveling of a traveler may be able to yield many different amazing sights, just like how the letter-writer in this short film has managed to see spiritual landmarks like Bodh Gaya (the place where Buddha attained Enlightenment), take a boat ride on the Ganges River as the sun rises, visit a nursing home of old Tibetan refugees.

But the feeling of loneliness is palpable, this is made apparent when he despaired over not being able to notice the setting sun in Tokyo, and towards the end of the film, it is revealed that the woman reading the letters is actually an imagined image of the letter writer as he yearns to have someone read his words.

There is an image of a homeless man lying at the slums of Varanasi in the afternoon, covered with buzzing flies, whether he is asleep, unconscious or dead remains a mystery. There is then a match cut to a shot of another man lying on the street of Shinjuku at night in the exact same pose.



Figure 5: Bodh Gaya (Fleeting Images, 2008)



Figure 6: A Buddhist ritual on Ganges River (Fleeting Images, 2008)



Figure 7: A man lying at the slums of Varanasi, India (Fleeting Images, 2008)



Figure 8: A man lying on the streets of Shinjuku, Japan (Fleeting Images, 2008)

This is a subtle suggestion even in contrasting places and time, the life of the homeless is essentially the same, whether they are in Japan or India. They are ignored and forgotten. This is accompanied by the following voice-over, which is a recollection of an anecdote:

“Once upon a time, a man was stranded alone on an island. When he was about to die, he wrote his name on the sand. Just to leave a mark. Afraid of being forgotten.”

Cinema is invented by humanity’s desire to capture fleeting moments of life, and the depiction of the images in *Fleeting Images* were means to ensure that their subjects remain in history. Despite its melancholic tone, “*Fleeting Images*” aims to celebrate the simple joys of existence, which begins with the common, tiny details of everyday life. This is exemplified by a scene towards the end of the film with the following narration:

“One day, I was drifting through the Ganges River on a tiny boat. A group of monks who shared the boat with me started pouring fishes into the water, returning them to nature. Their liberation prompted me to think of little things in life that I enjoyed seeing. And I could only remember some fragmented images: Leaves swaying gracefully in the wind. Sunlight peering through trees. A train passing by in the distance. A constant moving sea of humanity. I am often affected by the infectious joy of a child too. I’ve always liked watching the sunset, as if the sky is bathed in a strange golden light.”

These remembrances of mundane moments are seemingly insignificant, but they can

also be considered an object of art, a cherished memory that can be regarded from a new perspective. The romantic compositions of the shots illustrating the voice-overs would underline this. By marveling at the magic of everyday existence with methods of defamiliarization, this film adheres to Frank Roh's original definition of "Magical Realism" for magical realist art, which is to look at the everyday world with new eyes as if emerging from a dream, a world that celebrates the mundane.

Although different from the rest of my works in structure and form, "Fleeting Images", the earliest film made for this project, would serve as a precursor for the numerous recurring themes relevant to this paper.

4.1.1 Results for Fleeting Images

"Fleeting Images" was invited for screening in the following film festivals:

- CON-CAN Movie Festival 2009 (Japan)
- Singapore International Short Film Festival 2009 (Singapore)
- Hong Kong Independent Film Festival 2010 (Hong Kong)

It won the Grand Prix at the CON-CAN Movie Festival. During the award ceremony, the acclaimed director Naomi Kawase, provided a jury citation through a video message. She said this of the film:

"Despite the short running time of ten minutes, the director clearly and eloquently got his thoughts across (to audiences). The images of the film clearly represented his distinctive worldview, and they are indeed beautiful. "Fleeting Images" is an accurate title for the film."

In a 2012 review of "Fleeting Images" by Catherine Munroe Hotes¹⁰, she noted that I, the director, "have managed to capture the essence of my Proustian theme using montages of contemporary images and motifs (although the film is only 10 minutes long). The disconnect that city dwellers have with the natural world is represented in the film with poignancy when the letter writer despairs of being completely oblivious to the setting of the sun while being caught in the swelling sea of humanity flowing through the streets of Shibuya. The setting sun becomes a motif for the passage of time and it recalled the Buddhist notion that impermanence and change are undeniable truths to our existence."

¹⁰ Hotes, Catherine M. "Fleeting Images (2008)" (2012), <http://nishikataeiga.blogspot.jp/2012/08/fleeting-images-2008.html>, Nishikata Film Review, accessed: 3rd of December, 2012

4.2 Love Suicides (2009)

“Love Suicides” is a loose adaptation of a magical realist short story of the same title by Nobel Prize-winning Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata from his “Palm-of-the-Hand Stories” collection. A woman’s relationship with her young daughter descends into a path of self-destruction and abuse when she starts to receive a series of mysterious letters from her absent (presumably dead) husband.

The magical realism element in this film is apparent in its content. Each letter arrives in mysterious ways, containing outlandish instructions for the mother to minimize the noises that the daughter is making (playing the flute, footstep sounds when running home from school, scraping of spoon against porcelain bowl when eating), which she obeys without question, since her husband signs each letter. The husband is never seen in the entire film.

I transplanted this 1924 Japanese short story to a Malaysian fishing village that seemed untouched by modernization because I wanted to evoke a feeling of timelessness for the story. The wooden huts by the river, the lush coconut trees and the orange beaches are unique characteristics of a tropical country like Malaysia. Such an aesthetic choice was made to show two protagonists who are seemingly trapped in a claustrophobic place cannibalized by time and memory.



Figure 9: The troubled child lying on a rock by the sea. (Love Suicides, 2009)



Figure 10: The mother sleeping on her husband's fishing net (Love Suicides, 2009)



Figure 11: The woman receives a mysterious letter outside her house. (Love Suicides, 2009)



Figure 12: The little girl plays with a balloon at the beach. (Love Suicides, 2009)

This atmosphere would have been diminished if a modern urban setting like Kuala Lumpur city had been chosen as the location of my shoot.

Like many magical realist tales, the concept of dualism is used in “Love Suicides”. The mother represents an authoritarian figure incapable of letting go of the past, and using the past as justification to abuse herself and her child. Although Kawabata’s Japanese short story ended with a bleak ending of the mother killing both her child and herself to appease her husband, I went for a more ambiguous ending.

With the young girl’s relationship with her mother irreparably damaged, she returns to the beach accompanied by her favourite playmate, a red balloon. She throws the balloon into the sea and watches the balloon drift away.

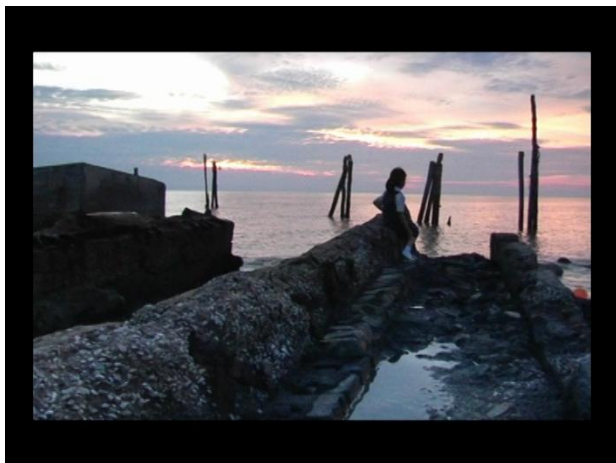


Figure 13: The girl watches the sea (before her “suicide”) (Love Suicides, 2009)

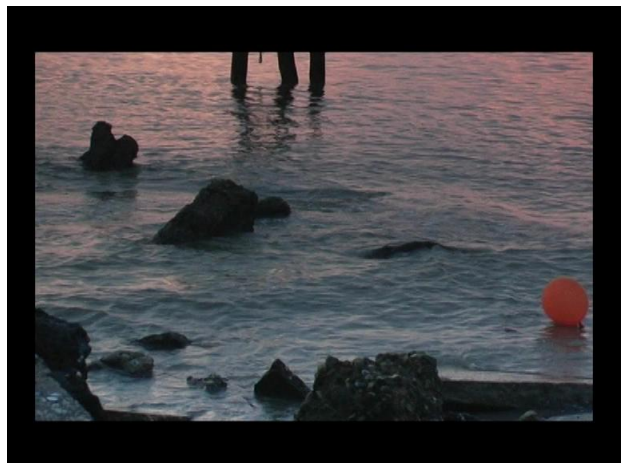


Figure 14: The balloon drifts away. (Love Suicides, 2009)

And then, the child is gone as well, whether she has committed suicide or disappeared is up to interpretation, but the child represents an innocent victim of her mother's selfish whims. The fact that the mother has to live with this for the rest of her life is possibly an even more damning existence.



Figure 15: The mother weeps in the final shot of the film (Love Suicides, 2009)

The universal themes of longing and loss may have been prevalent, but I also intended this as a slight sociopolitical allegory of Malaysia. The mother represents the government and the child its citizens. The same coalition political party, Barisan Nasional, has governed Malaysia since it achieved independence from the British Empire in 1957, and has managed to continue its grip upon the nation despite accusations of corruption, cronyism and nepotism. Being in control of the mainstream media denies a dissenting voice against the ruling party; any opposition is being 'silenced'. Malaysian politicians are still alluding to the 1969 racial riots as ways to stoke fear among the general public.

During the General Elections in May 13th, 1969, the victory celebration of a Chinese-based opposition party in Kuala Lumpur turned violent and incited a series of angry riots with a recorded amount of 200 deaths, the government pinned the incident solely on the opposition party. The string of national tragedies that happened throughout history had always been politicized; such is the nature of Malaysia's political scene.

In the end, the government's (the mother) inability to let go of the past and adapt to the present will only lead to the suffering of the general populace (the child). Obviously, a more overt critique against the government in a film would never be able to pass through the country's draconian censorship board.

4.2.1 Results for Love Suicides

“Love Suicides” was invited to the following film festivals:

- Paris Cinema International Film Festival 2009 (France)
- Festival Internazionale del Cinema d’Arte 2009 (Italy)
- Split International Film Festival 2009 (Croatia)
- Cinemania International Film Festival 2009 (Philippines)
- China Mobile Film Festival 2009 (China)
- novo Cinema da Malasia 2010 (Brazil)
- Singapore International Film Festival 2010 (Singapore)
- Fluxus 2010 - 7th International Film Festival on the Internet (Brazil)
- Los Angeles International Film Festival 2010 (USA)
- Odaiba SF7 Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Doi Saket International Film Festival 2010 (Thailand)
- Filminute 2010 (USA)
- Festival du film minute de Lille 2010 (France)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)
- The Crouch End Festival 2012 (England)

It also received Best Director awards from China Mobile Film Festival 2009 in China and Doi Saket International Film Festival 2010 in Thailand, along with a Jury Commendation from a jury group headed by Hollywood director Matt Reeves in the Filminute 2010 festival.

The noted Japanese film critic and film theorist Tadao Sato, who has published more than a hundred books on film and is one of the foremost scholars and historians addressing Japanese film, has said the following about “Love Suicides” after the short film was screened in Odaiba’s SF7 festival in 2010¹¹:

“Malaysian-Chinese filmmaker Edmund Yeo’s dazzling talents were put on display in the experimental short film “Love Suicides”, which was inspired by the work of Yasunari Kawabata. Even though Japan as a setting is eliminated, the film captures very vividly the elegant minimalism and emptiness of a Kawabata story.”

This reinforced my early belief that one can still capture the very essence of a traditional Japanese story despite its Malaysian settings or context because of the certain cultural affinity shared between both countries.

¹¹ Sato, Tadao. “Special column on 2010 Student Film 7 in Odaiba” (2010), http://www.fujitv.co.jp/csr/activities_report_2010/syakai/report/0067_colum.html, accessed: 3rd of December, 2012

Meanwhile, Catherine Munroe Hotes' review of "Love Suicides" noted the ambiguous nature of the story and the numerous possible interpretations for it:

"There are many ways to interpret this short film, since this film itself is an interpretation of an even darker short story by Yasunari Kawabata. For me, it is a tale of abuse. The quietness of the film (there is no music and only a few incidental sounds like the recorder, shoes on gravel, waves on seashore) intensifies the tension that leaves unspoken the violent and abusive relationship that must have existed for this mother to unquestioningly follow out her husband's cold-written instructions. The shot of the mother lying on a tangled web of a fishing net is an eloquent metaphor of the situation she finds herself in."¹²

¹² Hotes, Cathy M. "Love Suicides (2009)" (2012), <http://nishikataeiga.blogspot.jp/2012/08/love-suicides-2009.html>, accessed: 3rd of December, 2012

4.3 Woman On Fire Looks For Water (2009)

The feature-length film, “Woman On Fire Looks For Water” by the Malaysian director Woo Ming Jin is produced and edited by me, therefore I had significant input in both its inception and the final iteration. Similar to his previous film “The Elephant and the Sea” (2007), magical realism is a palpable presence in Woo Ming Jin’s story.

Like the short film “Love Suicides”, the main setting of this film is also the Kuala Selangor region, which is situated by the sea and is known for its coastal villages, with agriculture and the fishing industry as its main economy activities.

The film follows the story of Ah Kan, an aging fisherman who foresees his own death after reading his own palm, and his son, Ah Fei, who sells frogs for a living. Both father and son are involved in romantic entanglements that mirror one another. Ah Kan visits his old love Ai Ling in a neighbouring village, he wanted to marry her decades earlier and feels nothing but regret towards their unconsummated romance. Ah Fei is in love with his childhood friend Li Li, who says she will only accept him if he raises a large amount of money. To do so, Ah Fei finds employment in a shellfish-processing factory, where the daughter of the owner has a crush on him.

The life and work of the denizens in Kuala Selangor are shown in documentary-like detail and realism. From the harvesting of shellfish in the middle of the sea to the dissection of frogs for sale as Chinese delicacies, from the going-ons in a factory of salted fish to the early trip to the sea that Ah Kan has to make to catch fish.

The people of the village are prone to supernatural beliefs and superstitions. The character, Wai Loon, a mutual friend of Ah Fei and Li Li’s, makes references to the magical qualities of the water at a waterfall, or gives a detailed monologue of how he witnessed a work colleague being possessed by evil spirits, and the exorcism rites he had to perform to save the colleague. Other characters accept both of Wai Loon’s anecdotes as if they are natural happenings of the world.



Figure 16: Wai Loon talks about magical water (Woman on Fire Looks for Water, 2009)



Figure 17: Wai Loon tells a ghost story (Woman on Fire Looks for Water, 2009)

This is an allusion to a real-life inhabitant of a village in Kuala Selangor who was considered by others as both a “medicine man” (who treats illnesses with traditional herbs) and “exorcist” (certain illnesses he encountered are claimed to be supernatural and he will perform exorcism rituals to help the victim). The villages in Kuala Selangor are mostly Chinese and Malay-based, the traditions and beliefs of both cultures are interwoven within their everyday lives.

One moment Li Li is listening to Wai Loon’s fantastical encounter with evil spirits, in another she is talking about her sister who has moved to the neighbouring country of Singapore for better career opportunities and compensation.

This is actually a reference to the “brain drain” crisis that Malaysia has been facing in recent years. From March 2008 to August 2009, 305,000 Malaysians have migrated overseas because of the corruption, social inequality and restricted educational opportunities that most Malaysians of Chinese ethnicity have to face because of the government’s Bumiputera affirmative action policies¹³, among these immigrants, 40 percent were headed to Singapore. This has been detrimental to the country’s economical growth. The characters are directly affected by the sociopolitical situation of their country, and the changes of their personalities to increasing materialism and immorality mirror a nation that is caught between capitalistic powers.

Towards the end of the film, Ah Fei becomes cold and withdrawn, focusing only on his work and breaking off all emotional attachments with the two women in his life. Ah Kan disappears mysteriously after failing, for the last time, to convince Ai Ling to leave her loveless marriage for him. Li Li seeks solace from the “magical qualities” of the waterfall to heal her broken heart (but is in truth trying to drown herself in the water).

¹³ Mokhtar, Mariam, “Malaysia’s Brain” (2010) Asia Sentinel.



Figure 18: Li Li returns to the waterfall. (Woman on Fire Looks for Water, 2009)

The tragic fate of these characters in this magical realist tale is a metaphor of two opposing social forces incapable of finding any reconciliation.



Figure 19: A mysterious figure drenched in sunlight appears. (Woman on Fire Looks for Water, 2009)



Figure 20: Li Li opens her eyes. (Woman on Fire Looks for Water. 2009)



Figure 21: The mysterious figure crouches beside Li Li. (Woman on Fire Looks for Water, 2009)



Figure 22: Is the mysterious figure Ah Fei? (Woman on Fire Looks for Water, 2009)

4.3.1 Results for Woman on Fire Looks for Water

During its development, “Woman on Fire Looks for Water” received financial support from Busan Film Festival’s Asian Cinema Fund (ACF) for script development and also post-production. It was the first ever production to be honoured in such a way by the film commission body.

After it was completed, the film was invited to the following film festivals.

- Venice Film Festival 2009 (Italy)
- Pusan International Film Festival 2009 (South Korea)
- Hong Kong Asian Film Festival 2009 (China)
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2009 (Philippines)
- International Film Festival Rotterdam 2010 (Netherlands)
- Novo Cinema da Malasia 2010 (Brazil)
- Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema 2010 (Argentina)
- CPX Festival 2010 (Denmark)
- San Francisco International Film Festival 2010 (USA)
- Los Angeles International Film Festival 2010 (USA)
- New York Asian Film Festival 2010 (USA)
- Munich International Film Festival 2010 (Germany)
- Haifa International Film Festival 2010 (Israel)
- ERA New Horizons Film Festival 2010 (Poland)
- Fukuoka International Film Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Shanghai International Film Festival 2011 (China)
- Five Flavours Film Festival 2012 (Poland)

It received a Special Jury Award at the Cinemanila International Film Festival 2009 in Philippines.

Dennis Harvey’s Variety review noted the film’s meditative lyricism and said that the film’s “subtle charm and frequently ravishing visuals will cast a spell for those who are patient”¹⁴.

¹⁴ Harvey, Dennis.. “Woman on Fire Looks for Water” (2010). Variety, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117942706?refcatid=31>, accessed: 4th of December, 2012

Darcy Parquet's Screen Daily review claims that a big part of the film's appeal is the location shooting in Malaysian village Kuala Selangor where "numerous, repetitive shots of fish and other sea animals being processed and dried in the sun present an evocative picture of the village sustained by the bounty of the sea", thus "the setting proves to be an effective backdrop for the feelings of longing and regret that make up the main narrative"¹⁵.

For his Rotterdam International Film Festival 2010 report in the website Mubi, Daniel Kasman called "Woman on Fire Looks for Water" a "particularly beautiful and sensitive film, and one of the finds of the festival."¹⁶

¹⁵ Parquet, Darcy. "Woman on Fire Looks for Water" (2010). Screen Daily, <http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/asia-pacific/features/woman-on-fire-looks-for-water/5006995.article>, accessed: 4th of December, 2012

¹⁶ Kasman, Daniel. "Rotterdam 2010: Malaysian Gems", Mubi Notebook, <http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/rotterdam-2010-malaysian-gems>, accessed: 4th of December, 2012

Chapter 5: Bridging History and Time with Magical Realism

The group of films made for the second stage of this experiment focuses more on asking historical questions and depicting human's relationship with time. When it comes to film adaptations of magical realist literary works, one has to wonder whether the filmmaker has to remain slavishly faithful to the era depicted within these works (which were written during different points of time during the past century), or can one still preserve the essence of these stories without any of these restrictions due to the inherent timeless nature of magical realism? Can a magical realist text written in 1925 remain relevant even if it is updated to a contemporary setting?

Also, nonlinear storytelling is used for most of the films in this group (either with subtle flashback or in media res techniques), therefore events are portrayed out of chronological order to emulate the structure and recall of human memory. Sometimes, these memories are personified by ghosts (or living spirits), a common device in magical realist literature. The fragmentation is also an attempt to remove audiences' usual logic and preconceived notions when interacting with linear storylines, eliminating the distance between them and the subjects of the film, and thus being more accepting of its supernatural elements.

5.1 Kingyo (2009)

"Kingyo", my first Japanese language short film, is also inspired by the works of Yasunari Kawabata, namely the 1925 short story "Canaries" (also from the "Palm-of-the-Hand Stories" collection), with certain transmutations of the plot elements from his celebrated novel "Snow Country". This film displays the 'cosplay' (costume playing) culture in Akihabara, Tokyo. The female protagonist is dressed up as a French maid to give walking tours around the area. One winter night during work, she encounters a middle-aged university professor asking her for a tour. Traversing through the city, under the distinctively colourful neon lights of Akihabara, the two protagonists speak of a romantic past they shared.

The maid was a former student of the university professor and they were briefly engaged in an extramarital affair. Most of the film is in split screens as a distancing method for audiences. The split screens are also used to show the innermost nature and mental state of the characters. The fact that they are often separated by split screens even when occupying the same space is a metaphor of their isolation and preoccupation with their memories.

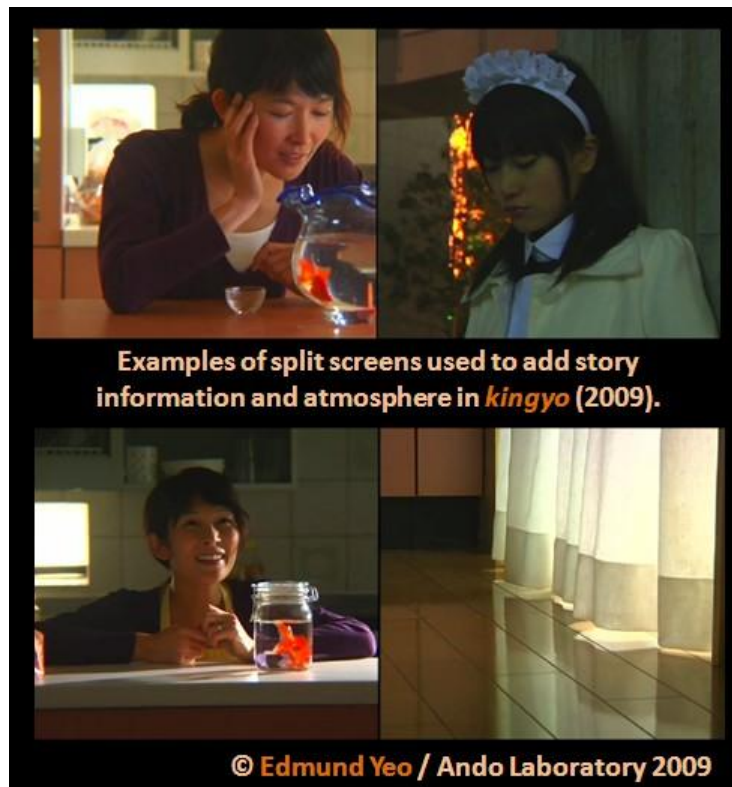


Figure 23: Examples of split screens used to add story and information and atmosphere in *kingyo*

I updated a 1925 short story to a modern day setting in Tokyo mainly because of the parallels I see between the geishas of the old and the cosplay maids of today. They seem to belong to the fringes of Japanese society; the services they provide to clients are more of companionship than of any sexual nature. Yet they seem to exist in a different world of their own, in a different time. The juxtaposition of their presences and their surroundings were a personal fascination. How did Japanese society evolve to the point where young women would dress up in European maid dresses to serve their clients? Isn't their mere existence in actuality a metaphysical conflict? Is this a reflection of Western influences on Japanese society?

Aside from these questions, I was also mildly disturbed by the general low regard and derision that other members of Japanese society held for them. In preparation for this film, I interviewed a few of these cosplay maids in Akihabara in order to understand the nature of their jobs and also their psychology makeup. What I gained from these was a realization that most of them were highly educated and articulate. I decided to composite the life stories of my interview subjects into my main protagonist. Therefore, she (my protagonist) goes by the name "Chiri", and is a soon-to-be university graduate with aspirations to be a teacher.

In "Kingyo" (which means "goldfish" in Japanese), the titular goldfishes were a gift from the maid to the university professor prior to their separation, because she wanted

him to remember her. This is expressed in her following line:

“Let’s stop seeing each other. But please remember me. I know I shouldn’t be giving living things. Then, aren’t our memories alive too?”

The pair of goldfish may have symbolized their adulterous relationship, but when the university professor brought them home, it was his late wife (who may have been aware of her husband’s affair) who looked after the fishes. The irony is not lost to him as he made this remark to the maid before their final parting:

“My wife had cared so much for the goldfish. In truth, all this while, she was preserving my memories of you.”

The two protagonists are constantly revisiting different points of time, and because of the split screens, each time-line, past and present, is seemingly happening simultaneously, time and space are distorted to the point of irrelevance. There are also literalizations of metaphors with a sequence of the university professor going through ghostly memories of his wife as he sits by a pond, and then creating a moment where he is allowed to touch her face.



Figure 24: The man touches the surface of the water. (kingyo, 2009)



Figure 25: He is suddenly with his late wife, touching her face. (kingyo, 2009)



Figure 26: The wife reacts to his touch, but he has already “returned to reality”. (kingyo, 2009)



Figure 27: The man is jolted back to reality. (kingyo, 2009)

The narrative method of “Kingyo” gave it a form of heightened (magical) realism storytelling due to its portrayal of the desires, thoughts, dialogue and actions of the characters, which usually characterizes a magical realist text. It also portrays a marginalized culture (the cosplay maids) in modern Japanese society in a sympathetic manner without any exploitative attempts to objectify or fetishize them.

5.1.1 Results for Kingyo

Kingyo was invited to the following film festivals:

- Venice Film Festival 2009 (Italy)
- Hong Kong Asian Film Festival 2009 (Hong Kong)
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2009 (Philippines)
- China Mobile Film Festival 2009 (China)
- Gulf International Film Festival 2010 (United Arab Emirates)
- Singapore International Film Festival 2010 (Singapore)
- Eskisehir Film Festival 2010 (Turkey)
- SKIP City International D-Cinema Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Ourense International Film Festival 2010 (Spain)
- Camera Japan Festival, Amsterdam 2010 (Netherlands)
- Doi Saket International Film Festival 2010 (Thailand)
- AsiaticaFilmMediale 2010 (Italy)
- Mediterranean Festival of New Filmmakers - Larissa 2011 (Greece)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)

It received the Silver Grand Prix and Best New Director awards from the Japan’s Eibunren Awards, a Silver Horse award from the Mediterranean Festival of New Filmmakers – Larissa 2011 in Greece, and a Best Editing award at Doi Saket International Film Festival 2010 in Thailand. The latter was to recognize the complicated split screen techniques used to enhance the experience of the nonlinear story.

In his review of “Kingyo” for the Toronto J-Film Pow Wow, Marc Saint- Cyr noted that “(Yeo’s) careful control over the split-screen technique in his film creates a fascination dynamic that, with the right cuts and selections of images, speaks volumes through purely visual means. Emotionally poignant and artistically daring. “Kingyo” is absolutely gorgeous to look at.”¹⁷, he also noted that “the obvious stand out is the nocturnal realm of Akihabara, a bright, colourful wonderland that brings to vivid life the mythical, romantic Tokyo of people’s imaginations”. Which suggests the fact that the updated contemporary setting of the film has managed to help enhance the viewing experience of the film.

Catherine Munroe Hotes’s review of “Kingyo” for Nishikata Film Reviews was equally effusive, while at the same time reminding her of other works of classic literature. She said “the split screen works both to build tension and to add atmosphere to scenes. The goldfish certainly look stunning in close-ups, reminding me of Kuniko Mukoda’s short story “The Carp”, where fish is also used to evoke feelings of guilt. It is a beautifully shot and edited film. Yeo has a delicate touch when it comes to creating atmosphere in his films.”¹⁸

The Japanese film critic, Harumi Nakayama, upon viewing the film at Venice Film Festival, noted in her article at Cinema Today that Kingyo, despite retaining the feeling of Yasunari Kawabata’s “Snow Country” and short story “Canaries”, has managed to also “show a unique side of today’s Japan and its current sociopolitical issues by having modern Akihabara and cosplay maids as the backdrop of the film”¹⁹.

¹⁷ Saint-Cyr, Marc. “Review: Kingyo” (2009). Toronto J-Film Pow Wow. <http://jfilmpowwow.blogspot.jp/2009/05/review-kingyo.html>, accessed: 5th of December, 2012

¹⁸ Hotes, Catherine M., “Kingyo” (2012). Nishikata Film Review, <http://nishikataeiga.blogspot.jp/2012/08/kingyo-2009.html>, accessed: 5th of December, 2012

¹⁹ Nakayama, Harumi, “The 66th Venice Film Festival screens the film of a Waseda University student” (2009), Cinema Today, <http://www.cinematoday.jp/page/N0019627> , accessed: 5th of December, 2012

5.2 Exhalation (2010)

The semi-autobiographical short film *Exhalation* was initially conceived as a project to be shot in Malaysia, but shifted to Japan due to some unforeseen circumstances. Loosely based on the death of a classmate in a traffic accident during high school, I used two young women as my onscreen surrogates in the short film; the relationship they have with the deceased is dramatized and romanticized. In the film, a young woman, Naoko, who works in a pachinko parlour at Tokyo, receives a phone call concerning the death of Yosuke, a former high school classmate. She returns to her hometown of Fujino in Kanagawa Prefecture. Yosuke's funeral is a day away, so Naoko spends her time with her friend Sayuri, having conversations about life and mortality and inevitably journeying into their own surrealistic mental landscapes.

A magical realist film in both form and content, the dead Yosuke appears a few times in the film in the form of a ghost, a literalized metaphor of the women's memories of him.



Figure 28: A ghostly figure watches over Naoko. (*Exhalation*, 2010)



Figure 29: Naoko turns to look at the ghost. (*Exhalation*, 2010)

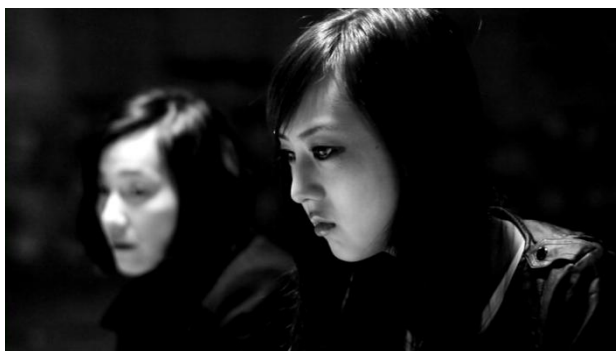


Figure 30: The two protagonists are grieving over Yosuke's death. (*Exhalation*, 2009)

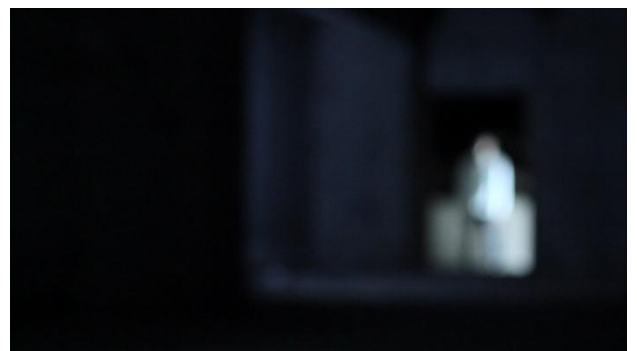


Figure 31: Yosuke's ghost is actually looking at them from afar. (*Exhalation*, 2009)

The two women also occasionally wander into surrealistic moments, like finding a creek in the middle of a forest filled with pieces of white paper (that symbolizes the fragmented nature of Naoko's heart) and a mysterious origami (traditional Japanese art of paper folding) of a paper crane.



Figure 32: Naoko picks up pieces of paper from the creek. (Exhalation, 2010)



Figure 33: Sayuri finds a paper origami. (Exhalation, 2010)

The film is filmed mostly in black and white. Just as magical realist art is about altering the perception of everyday objects and occurrences, draining the images of their colours allow viewers to focus only on the characters and notice other small details. By using this method, the few scenes with colours gain added significance because they draw attention among themselves as signifiers of the protagonists' emotions. A soothing golden hue seeps into the scenes where the protagonists are sharing a rare serene moment. A strong blue hue is later used to characterize the immense sorrow of a character mourning the death of a loved one.



Figure 34: Camera pans down and we see Sayuri stroking Yosuke's head. (Exhalation, 2009)



Figure 35: Camera pans back to Sayuri's face. (Exhalation, 2010)

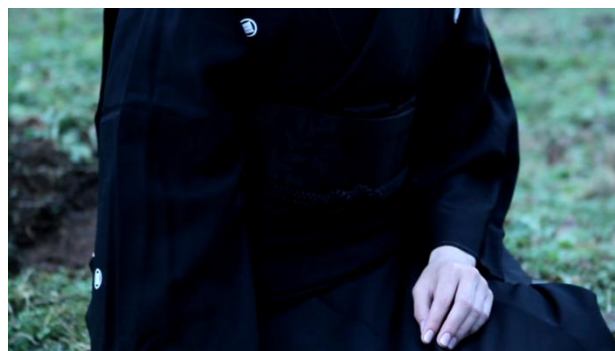


Figure 36: Yosuke is gone. He was a ghost. (Exhalation, 2010)

The concept of dualism is examined again in *Exhalation* with the two protagonists representing different philosophies. Naoko is someone with artistic aspirations who has tried to chase her dreams in the city of Tokyo, but ends up with the “mundane” job of a pachinko attendant. Sayuri is forced to remain in her rural hometown to look after her father’s restaurant, yet she yearns to move to the city as well. When faced with each other, Naoko and Sayuri have many secrets to hide. Naoko has to conceal the true nature of her job to preserve an illusion that her city life is without trouble, while Sayuri has to conceal the romantic relationship she shared with Yosuke before his death (or her pregnancy).

Naoko is unable to reconcile herself with her past; thus she chooses not to attend Yosuke's funeral, she returns to the city instead and represses her genuine emotions with a repetitive job and casual sexual encounter. Sayuri is unable to come in terms with Yosuke's death and may have possibly chosen suicide. The failure of communication is a common epidemic in contemporary society.

Even with these allusions, *Exhalation* is a more a tone poem about mourning and loss and less a sociopolitical critique. Other than that, *Exhalation* depicts certain unique aspects of Japanese culture and traditions through story content and iconography, like the occupation of an attendant in a pachinko parlour, the aforementioned origami, the elegant mourning robes worn by Sayuri during Yosuke’s funeral, and mostly their attitude towards death and the Buddhist concept of impermanence.

5.2.1 Results for Exhalation

Exhalation was invited to the following film festivals:

- Dubai International Film Festival 2010 (United Arab Emirates)
- Rotterdam International Film Festival 2011 (Netherlands)
- Jeonju International Film Festival 2011 (South Korea)
- Shanghai International Film Festival 2011 (China)
- Curtas Vila de Conde International Film Festival 2011 (Portugal)
- InDpanda Short Film Festival 2011 (Hong Kong)
- Tokyo International Film Festival 2011 (Japan)
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)

Marc Saint-Cyr's review of Exhalation in Toronto J-Film Pow Wow mentioned that "the examination of complex emotional themes were given a poetic treatment by Shin Hayasaka's cinematography and Yeo's direction." Meanwhile, the black-and-white cinematography that was used as a defamiliarization technique was also noted, with Saint-Cyr saying that "the high contrast black-and-white images emphasize the natural and urban settings and the actors' faces. The ghostly glow of Naoko and Sayuri's faces arising from the inky depths of their black clothes and hair reminds one of horror film iconography and Kurosawa's "The Idiot"." Finally, the review pointed out that I brought "a keen understanding of composition, pacing and tone to the entire film, giving it the feel of a finely crafted poem about loss and memory."²⁰

Noted film critic and historian of cinema Jean-Michel Frodon, who was also the former head editor of the French magazine "Cahiers du cinema", handpicked the short film in 2011 for a special screening in a Parisian café.

²⁰ Saint-Cyr, Marc, "Review: Exhalation" (2010). Toronto J-Film Pow Wow, <http://jfilmpowwow.blogspot.jp/2010/12/review-exhalation.html>, accessed: 5th of December, 2012

5.3 Springtime Nostalgia (2013)

“Springtime Nostalgia” is an upcoming 14-minute short film commissioned by Kao Corporation, the chemistry and cosmetics company. The stipulations given to me were the following:

- 1) It has to tell the story of three women of different stages of life. A child, a young woman and a woman of mature age.
- 2) It must revolve around Ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement.

With this, I crafted a story that is a pastiche of film noir. A young woman loses her sense of smell after the disappearance of her lover. One day, she attends flower arrangement classes (which happen to be taught by the mother of her lover) because of his fondness for this form of art. Later in the film, we see the missing man lurking alone in a forest; most probably he is a ghost, grasping at vague recollections of his mother and his lover.

In order to provide an accurate depiction of the Ikebana tradition without making the mistake of stereotyping it, I studied its history, philosophy and spiritual aspects. Ikebana is more about its shape, line and form as it emphasizes other areas of the plant such as its stems and leaves. It is an art form where humanity and nature are brought together with an employment of minimalism. Silence is a must during the practice of Ikebana.

To replicate this, “Springtime Nostalgia” also affects a minimalistic tone, the dialogue in the film is minimal (two of the three protagonists in the film speak only in one scene), the dreamlike atmosphere coupled with the nebulous plot invite themselves to all kinds of interpretations, similar to an Ikebana work. The practice of Ikebana is portrayed in realistic fashion during the classroom sequences of the film.



Figure 37: An Ikebana class. (Springtime Nostalgia, 2012)



Figure 38: Students at an Ikebana class (Springtime Nostalgia, 2012)

The focus of the film shifts suddenly from the protagonists to the nameless Ikebana students and the zen-like calm that they possess when diligently putting an arrangement together, to emphasize that the protagonists are living in part of a larger world.

This is also an attempt at ‘mono no aware’ storytelling, a Japanese term for the awareness of impermanence and a gentle wistfulness at their passing. Despite the end of a man’s life, time continues to flow, and those memories that the man tries to cling on as a ghost remain out of reach. In the end, all that remains of him is a scent of a memory.

The central theme of ‘mono no aware’ is summarized in the form of a haiku recited by the man’s mother. (the haiku was composed by the poet Mari Kashiwagi, who was also involved in the production of this film)

“The drifting scent. Drifting without end. A flower emerges.”



Figure 39: The Mother recites a haiku.
(Springtime Nostalgia, 2012)



Figure 40: The ghost walks into the distance.
(Springtime Nostalgia, 2012)

As the mother begins reciting the poem for her departed son, the film cuts to his ghost, walking into the distance, away from the forest, presumably to where all weary souls go to rest.

The mother may have attained closure and acceptance, but the protagonist remains in a melancholic cycle of her own doing. In the penultimate scene of the film, which the protagonist describes in a voiceover narration as “either a dream, or a many years in the future”, she is in the empty Ikebana classroom, picking up flowers scattered on the floor, just like how she continues grasping at her connection with the man, wondering about a “lovely, lingering scent” that she can suddenly smell.

This leads to the impressionistic ending of the film, where various ikebana designs are seen at a beach, partially submerged within the seawater. There is no one else there except for a little girl, who turns and stares directly at the camera before the film cuts to black.



Figure 41: An ikebana work at the beach. (Springtime Nostalgia, 2012)



Figure 42: The child stares at us in the final shot of the film. (Springtime Nostalgia, 2012)

The images employed here echo the ending of “Ikebana”, a 1956 documentary short by Hiroshi Teshigahara (whose father, Sofu Teshigahara, is the founder of the famous Sogetsu Ikebana School and the main subject of the documentary).

This film functions both as a narrative piece and a showcase of Ikebana, the mental states of the protagonists who are suffering from a form of emotional paralysis after the disappearance of a loved one are illustrated and symbolized by the various kinds of flower arrangement designs littered in varying shots of the film. During the production, the flower arrangements were conceived and designed by the “Iemoto” (head) of the Sessyu-ryu Ikebana school, transforming “Springtime Nostalgia” into a marriage of form between cinema and Ikebana. It is a preservation of a tradition surrounded by a magical realist story.

At the time of writing, “Springtime Nostalgia” is in the middle of post-production and has yet to be released in public.

Chapter 6: Magical Realism for Transcultural Storytelling

This stage of the research focused on films that provide visual representations of multiple nations and their cultures. In the face of the ever-growing trends of globalization, the interactions and possible (internal and external) conflicts between different cultures as embodied by the protagonists are depicted. Magical realist techniques are used to link these cultures together, accentuating either their differences or similarities.

Merging the aspects of different cultures from different nations for the consequent creation of a new cultural phenomenon. Many times these films are about people trying to make sense of their own national identity. Therefore, the narratives include young Malaysian people trying to find a better life in Japan (“Inhalation”), or Thai people coming to Malaysia in search for a better life (“Girl in the Water”). The “foreign” country is often idealized by the characters because of the tumultuous local environment that they actually live in, and thus the Japan portrayed in “Inhalation” or “Last Fragments of Winter” are romanticized and beautified.

When stories do not concentrate only on exclusively portraying one culture, it opens up different possibilities in narratives, serving as “cultural ambassadors” to audiences because of the potential discourses that it may initiate. The widening of a canvas is one of the main reasons to explore transcultural storytelling.

6.1 Inhalation (2010)

The 17-minute *Inhalation* is overt in its criticisms towards the government policies and sociopolitical ills in Malaysia. It is also a meditation on the relationship between intimacy and economic stasis.

Mei, a young woman working in a pig farm and a butcher shop is desperate for a change of environment, so she borrows her boyfriend Seng's money, breaks his heart, and smuggles herself to Japan for work. She gets deported a month later, Seng picks her up and they drive through the port town of Klang throughout the entire night, getting into heated arguments about their broken relationships, the chasing of dreams and the helpless acceptance of fate.

The free-spirited Mei does not want to go through the repetitive nature of her everyday life, which is depicted in graphic detail at the beginning of the film where she has to perform artificial insemination for pigs in the farm, or witness workers burning off the the hair of a severed pig head with a blow torch. Therefore she yearns to leave the country without worrying about any consequences that she may have to face.

Seng, in contrast, is dressed up as a regular white-collar worker. He seems to be the more rational one as he is willing to suppress his own desires and dreams to live a regular life with stable financial income. He dares not question the status quo because he is aware of the violent repercussions that he might face when living in a sociopolitical environment like Malaysia's. Because of that, some of the violent histories of Malaysia that were hinted at in my previous films are actually spoken aloud (by Seng) in the following conversation.

Mei: Why are you always trying to change me? This is who I am. I like the way I am now. You can never change me. I will never change.

Seng: Refusing to change. That's inevitable. Believing that Japan will yield a better life. That's inevitable too. Lending you 7000 ringgit to enter Japan illegally. That was inevitable then. It just happens, in the greater scheme of things. We are always like this. Never fully knowing what we are really doing. So, everything is inevitable. The May 13th racial riots. Operation Lalang. The murders of Altantuya and Teoh Beng Hock. Those burnt churches...

These references may have been oblique to viewers unless they are locals or they are well versed in Malaysian history and politics. But hopefully through cinema this will open up some political and sociopolitical discussions with people from within or outside the country. Because of the nature of the short film, the manner of relationship between the two protagonists with history are “passive-literal” (the sociopolitical situation in Malaysia directly relates to Mei being forced to a job at a pig farm because of her financial limitations and inability to attain higher education), “passive-metaphorical” (the repression caused by the sociopolitical situation is embodied by Seng, who is forced to maintain status quo) and even “active-metaphorical” (Mei's illegal migration is a macrocosm of the real-life “Brain Drain” crisis faced by Malaysia in recent years)

Finally, as the night (and the film) is about to end, Mei laments that she is unable to see the cherry blossoms in Japan. Petulant throughout the film, this is the only moment when she allows her facade to slip and express the true depth of her regret.

“If I were still in Japan. I could probably see the cherry blossoms. Petals drifting rhythmically in the air. Then they fall soundlessly. What a lovely sight it could have been.”

This is when the elements of magical realism finally come into play in this mostly realistic, documentary-like drama. Again, the descriptions of a normal Japanese

scenery may have been insignificant for one used to seeing them, but given a different context, these cherry blossoms have to be reexamined from a different perspective, it becomes a manifestation of Mei's regrets. And this becomes the depiction of an idealized Japan in the eyes of a normal Malaysian girl.

During the ending sequence, Mei is forced to return to work at the pig farm, her misery compounded by the overwhelming cacophony of pig squeals. But suddenly, there is the sound of water dripping in the background, gradually growing louder, until the noises of the pigs were silenced. Mei shifts her eyes to a nearby valve where she sees water dripping out slowly... and falling onto puddles surrounded by Japanese cherry blossoms, causing gentle ripples.



Figure 43: The pig farm. (Inhalation, 2010)



Figure 44: Mei's act of rebellion has failed. (Inhalation, 2010)



Figure 45: Water dripping from a valve. (Inhalation, 2010)

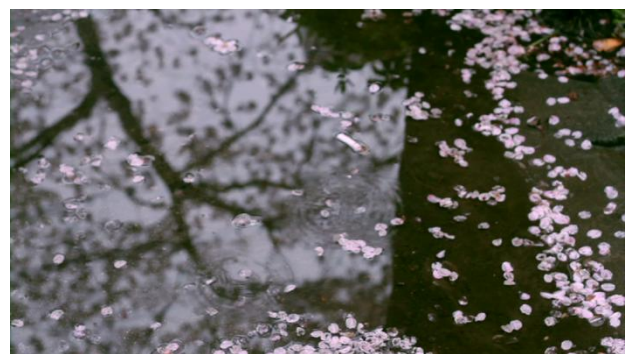


Figure 46: A puddle surrounded by petals of Japanese cherry blossoms. (Inhalation, 2010)

Suddenly we are transported to a montage of cherry blossom imagery in Japan, from cherry blossom petals drifting in the air (as described by Mei in the previous scene) to the surface of a river covered entirely in petals, becoming a river of pink. The Japan in Mei's imagination is a framed shot, an object of art, a moment of magical realism.

The last film I made during my master's thesis research, this film would also mark the beginning of my intentions to bring together both Malaysia and Japan into my works.

6.1.1 Results for Inhalation

Inhalation was invited to the following film festivals:

- Pusan International Film Festival 2010 (South Korea)
- Vancouver International Film Festival 2010 (Canada)
- Tokyo International Film Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Jakarta International Film Festival 2010 (Indonesia)
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2010 (Philippines)
- Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival 2011 (France)
- San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival 2011 (USA)
- Guanajuato International Film Festival 2011 (Mexico)
- InDpanda Short Film Festival 2011 (Hong Kong)
- "Pacific Meridian" Vladivostok International Film Festival 2011 (Russia)
- Festival Séquence court-métrage 2011 (France)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)
- New Taipei City Film Festival 2012 (Taiwan)
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)

It received the Sonje Award for Best Asian Short Film in the prestigious Busan International Film Festival 2010 (then known as Pusan International Film Festival).

Christopher Bourne of Meniscus magazine rated Inhalation as one of his top 10 films in the festival, praising the film for its subtle observation and its quiet poignancy. He reiterated that the message from the film is “the idea that one can escape misery and fate may be illusory, but the film’s final image of floating cherry blossoms represents the hope that those trapped in existential despair nevertheless stubbornly cling to.”²¹

His review reinforced my belief in what a proper utilization of traditional Japanese imagery can do to enhance a Malaysian narrative, thus showing the promises of transcultural narratives. This is made possible because of the subtle magical realist techniques used to connect both countries.

²¹ Bourne, Christopher. “The best films of the 2010 Pusan International Film Festival” (2010) Meniscus, <http://www.meniscuszine.com/articles/201008317821/the-mvps-of-pusan-international-film-festival-2010-my-picks-for-the-best-films/>, accessed: 6th of December, 2012

6.2 Girl in the Water (2011)

“Girl in the Water” is a project from the Danish DOX: LAB. Founded in 2009, DOX: LAB is a program from the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival meant to match a European director and a non-European director in order to let them work in a co-production on a cross-cultural basis. In 2011, my regular collaborator Woo Ming Jin was paired up with the Danish director Jeppe Ronde, to shoot a short film in Malaysia which is meant to blur the lines between reality and fiction. I was involved in this project from the beginning of the script development to the end of its post-production as producer and editor.

In contrast to the previous film “Inhalation”, which was about a Malaysian trying to migrate abroad, this short film is about a Thai woman, Fern, who comes to neighbouring Malaysia with her husband and child as refugees in search of work. Something happens during the journey by sea, and only Fern makes it to the final destination. She finds a baby by the beach and takes it as her own, while starting a new life in Malaysia and working as a collector of a rare Chinese delicacy – bird's nest, in a mangrove jungle.

Malaysia's political stability and economical growth has made the nation an attractive destination for refugees, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants from neighbouring nations in South East Asia like Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. The large foreign worker population is usually employed in the plantation and construction sector. Malaysia is not part of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and thus does not have a system to regulate the status of rights for refugees. Malaysia law makes no distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants. Refugees are vulnerable to arrest by immigration officers for immigration offences, which lead to detention, prosecution, and deportation. (As of 2012, the Malaysian government is still considering the proposals to become a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol).²²

An awareness of this context helps a lot in understanding the entire story in “Girl in the Water”. This is because the protagonist Fern is very much a victim of her era, her migration to Malaysia echoes the real-life situation of Thai citizens who had to leave the country during the 2008-2010 Thai political crisis, and the fragmented, elliptical nature of the 19-minute short film mirrors the increasingly unstable mental state of the protagonist Fern.

²² “2012 UNHCR country operations profile – Malaysia.” Official website of the UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e4884c6.html> Accessed: 2nd of October , 2012

As a personal story, it deals with a woman unable to accept the losses of her husband and child, thus projecting all her maternal instincts upon the baby she found at the beach (which is later revealed to be imaginary, or an extension of her grief).

Her status as a foreign migrant worker without any ability to communicate with the Malaysian society leaves her vulnerable to the sexual harassment of her employer, and the bullying of her co-workers. She finally escapes with the baby into the jungle, where she meets a mysterious young teenage boy who possesses some items that belonged only to her late husband. Everything becomes more metaphysical as magical realism has a more palpable presence in the last act of the film. Could he be a younger incarnation of her husband?

The surrealistic presence of a baby seen only by her, and her final encounters with the boy in the jungle, are literalized metaphors of her yearnings and guilt. It is only by returning to the jungle where she comes in terms with her the losses that she has suffered, and experience a spiritual rebirth.

6.2.1 Results for Girl in the Water

“Girl in the Water” was invited to the following film festivals:

- Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival 2011
- International Film Festival Rotterdam 2012
- Melbourne International Film Festival 2012
- Hangzhou Asian Film Festival 2012
- Prague Short Film Festival 2013

It also won a Robert Award for Best Short Film at the Danish Film Academy Awards in 2012.

The film was an interesting experiment because it employs a Thai protagonist who is unfamiliar with the Malaysian settings around her (thus making the character herself a “defamiliarization” plot device), and showing the differences between Thai and Malaysian cultures and languages despite being neighbouring nations.

6.3 Last Fragments of Winter (2011)

Shot just two months before “Girl In The Water” and paired up in the same program at the Rotterdam International Film Festival 2012, “Last Fragments of Winter”, which I wrote, directed and edited, shares a few similarities with the other film, namely its elliptical storytelling methods, and the removal of the distinction between reality and dreams, past and present.

The inspiration of this 24-minute short film came from Japanese writer Mieko Kanai’s short story “The Moon” found in her 1979 collection “The Word Book”. Born in 1947, Kanai is a short story writer, poet and literary critic who is less known outside Japan compared to writers like Haruki Murakami or Banana Yoshimoto because her works had never been translated for publication until 2009.

The original short story concerns a person running an errand at night when the moon is rising. The sight causes memories to bubble up, transporting him back to various points of his life when he was transfixed in the moment because of the moon or the weak, pale sunlight. Readers question the moments of these meaning, and how they tie to the present. Because of the meta-cognitive and meta-narrative experience of these stories, readers will have to “consider their role in reading: to answer the characters’ questions and solve their problems, or perhaps to construct the characters’ fictional existence”²³.

Therefore, “Last Fragments of Winter” is more of a personal interpretation of the short story than an adaptation, which allowed the space for numerous creative liberties. Kanai’s original text features a stream-of-consciousness prose and an unreliable narrator who may or may not be the same person.

Providing a similar experience in a different medium, I constructed a non-linear narrative structure for the story, choosing not to explain the relationship between the characters or the places. Allowing all these to reveal themselves gradually, scene by scene. The story is set mostly in urban and rural landscapes of Malaysia, but with a framing device of a young woman taking photos in a hauntingly beautiful snow landscape in Japan.

²³ Shimoda, Todd. “Book Review: The Word Book by Mieko Kanai” (2009) Asian Review of Books. <http://www.asianreviewofbooks.com/new/?ID=223> Accessed: 4th of October, 2012



Figure 47: A girl with a camera waiting at the snow-covered region of Shirakawa village. (Last Fragments of Winter, 2011)



Figure 48: The girl takes a photo of the snow-covered landscape. (Last Fragments of Winter, 2011)

There are intercuts between scenes of a man attending the Buddhist funeral of an ex-lover (he will later converse with her ghost) and a boy running an errand at night for his mother. The editing technique suggests that they are the same person, but later in the film it is revealed that they are actually father and son, lost in their memories. It also becomes apparent that the imagery of the young woman in the snow is a memory of the mother's.

Kanai's short story is described in the book review of Japan Times' Steven Finbow's as being similar to a Paul Delvaux (1897-1994) painting²⁴. In order to replicate a similar feeling for the film, I examined the works of the Belgian painter. Delvaux was often associated with Surrealism even though he was quoted as saying he did not consider himself "a Surrealistic in the scholastic sense of the world."²⁵ His style was described for the most unexpected juxtapositions of otherwise ordinary objects, which actually made him more of a Magical Realist painter. In 1950s, Delvaux began producing a series of works where trains are observed by a girl seen from behind. I would repurpose one of these paintings for a shot in the film (but replacing the girl with a boy).

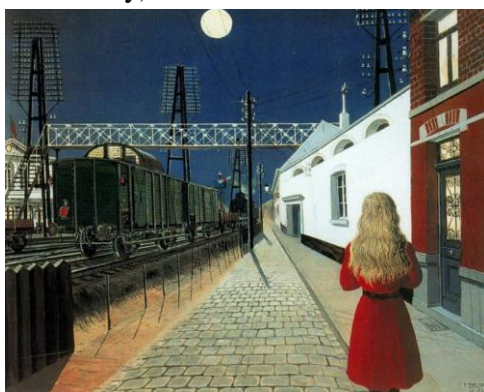


Figure 49: "Solitude" painted by Paul Delvaux (1956)

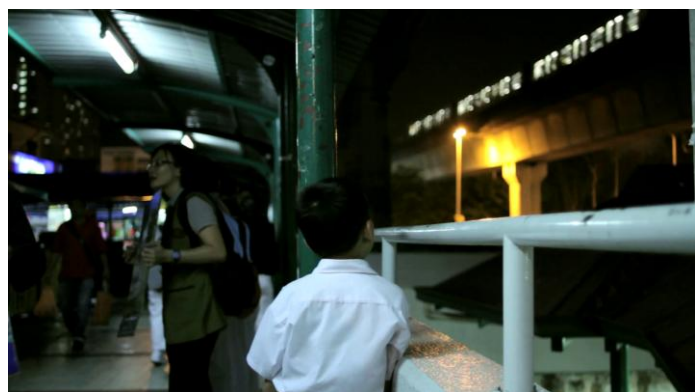


Figure 50: A homage to Paul Delvaux's "Solitude" (Last Fragments of Winter, 2011)

²⁴ Finbow, Steve. "How do writers come up with this stuff?" (2010) Japan Times, Jan. 10, 2010. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/fb20100110a1.html> Accessed: 4th of October, 2012

²⁵ Rombaut, Marc. "Paul Delvaux". New York: Rizzoli, p. 11.

This film once again shows Japan as an idealized memory of the Malaysian characters. The stark contrasts between the snow-covered Shirakawa village (a World heritage site) and the tropical locales of Malaysia, like the grassy rice fields and riverbanks lined with lush palm trees, draw attention upon themselves. They are memories being captured, history wanting to be preserved.



Figure 51: The girl takes a rest at the snow-covered Shirakawa village. (Last Fragments of Winter, 2011)



Figure 52: Later in life, she visits the lush green paddy fields in Sekinjang, Malaysia. (Last Fragments of Winter, 2011)

Even with its dreamlike atmosphere, it is very clear that the story is set just a short while after the Great Earthquake and Tsunami in March 11th 2011. A donation drive for the earthquake victims is happening behind the boy as he is waiting to look at the train. When he is buying items at the convenience store, TV news reports of the earthquake and tsunami are clearly heard in the background. There are links between Malaysia and Japan, both literal and metaphorical. The magical realism device in the film is used to capture this.

6.3.1 Results for Last Fragments of Winter

“Last Fragments of Winter” was invited to the following film festivals:

- Dubai International Film Festival 2011 (United Arab Emirates)
- Rotterdam International Film Festival 2012 (Netherlands)
- Bangkok International Student Film Festival 2012 (Thailand)
- Film Caravan 2012 (Italy)
- Sapporo International Short Film Festival 2012 (Japan)
- Nara International Film Festival 2012 (Italy)
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)
- Yxine Film Festival 2012 (Vietnam)

It received the Japan Tourism Agency Commissioner Award at the Sapporo International Short Film Festival 2012 for “its beautiful visual depiction of Japanese and Malaysian cultures and the attempts of bridging both cultures”.

Catherine Munroe Hotes’ review in Nishikata Film Review pointed out that I have “put together a hauntingly beautiful film. From the greens and blues of the family’s Malaysian apartment to the white and black of rural Japan in winter, each scene has been carefully crafted to create just the right tone.” She also noted “there is an other-worldliness to the scenes of Arisa Koike in the snow that suggests that this may not just be the youthful memories of the mother but an eternal place where weary souls may go to rest.” Hotes concluded that I have “captured the dream-like quality of celebrated writer Mieko Kanai’s story while adding unique elements from his [my] own personal experiences and cultural background.”²⁶

Meanwhile, Marc Saint-Cyr’s review of “Last Fragments of Winter” in VCinema made an observation of my multi-national sensibility: “Fittingly, for a Malaysian filmmaker born in Singapore, trained in Australia and currently living in Tokyo, Yeo’s work frequently portrays a multi-national sensibility built upon the ever-growing trends of globalization. It utilizes both Japan and Malaysia as story settings and embraces their sights and sounds of modernized urban locations (passing trains, blinking lights). Yet there are sequences that evoke a traditional and elemental world like the mother’s trip to a calm riverbank and an empty green field, and of course, the snow-covered landscape of Shirakawa-go.” Saint-Cyr pointed out that the lives and emotions of my characters are placed in a recognizable world “while highlighting its oft-overlooked beauty.”²⁷ At the end of the review, he concluded that “Last Fragments of Winter” is one of my most moving and nuanced accomplishments to date.

²⁶ Hotes, Catherine M. “Last Fragments of Winter (2011)” (2012) Nishikata Film Review. <http://nishikataeiga.blogspot.jp/2012/09/last-fragments-of-winter-2011.html>, accessed: 6th of December, 2012

²⁷ Saint-Cyr, Marc. “Last Fragments of Winter (Malaysia/ Japan, 2011)” (2011) Vcinema. <http://www.vcinemashow.com/?p=7153>, accessed: 6th of December, 2012

6.4 Now (2010) / I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me (2011)

Both “Now” and “I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me” are 1-minute shorts made one year apart that are connected in a number of ways. “Now” was a commissioned video piece from fashion label Prada’s YO! Video! Project in 2010 where they invited a few young directors based in Japan to make a 1-minute video featuring their latest product, the end product were to be displayed at Prada shops throughout the nation.

“I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me”, on the other hand, was a part of the “60 Seconds of Solitude in Year Zero” omnibus film project in Tallinn 2011’s European Capital of Culture (an initiative of European Union where two cities from the continent are annually selected to be Cultural Capitals to attract attention of the whole Europe to new territories and regions. Tallinn of Estonia was selected in 2011). 60 directors around the world like Naomi Kawase, Tom Tywker, Park Chan Wook, Shinji Aoyama, were invited to each make a 60-second cinematic love letter to the dying medium of 35mm.

6.4.1 Now (2010)

“Now”, which is shot entirely in Malaysia, features a young woman in cheongsam (Chinese traditional dress) chasing after a mysterious little girl. The chase brings her from the 100-year-old shop buildings of port Klang (built when the country was still under British colony) to the futuristic, LED lightscape of i-City (a still developing



Figure 53: A woman in Cheongsam loiters alone near some old buildings. (Now, 2010)



Figure 54: She sees a mysterious little girl. (Now, 2010)

future city concept in Malaysia where all buildings and forests are fitted with LED lights



Figure 55: The woman chases after the girl. (Now, 2010)



Figure 56: The chase brings her to the neon-covered forest. (Now, 2010)

It becomes apparent in the end that the child and the young woman are the same person from different points of time. The use of science fiction (the future) and oriental (the past) iconography underlines the irrelevance of time. The film ends with the following quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“With the past, I have nothing to live do. Nor with the future. I live now.”



Figure 57: The little girl watches the sea. (Now, 2010)



Figure 58: The young woman watches the sea, she was the child. (Now, 2010)

The message is similar to the one in “Fleeting Images” and “Last Fragments of Winter”; it is about “living in the present moment” instead of dwelling too much into the past.

6.4.2 I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me (2011)

“I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me” was edited with unused footages from the short films “Now” and “Last Fragments of Winter”. Therefore, the Malaysian Chinese girl in cheongsam from “Now” reappears side by side with the Japanese girl in the snow from “Last Fragments of Winter” through split screens.



Figure 59: The women from "Last Fragments of Winter" and "Now" appear in the same video. (I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me, 2011)

One loiters around the old buildings of Malaysia, the other tries to take photos of old Japanese architecture. They are separated, but they gradually begin to react to one another.



Figure 60: The woman on the left notices something. (I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me, 2011)



Figure 61: The other girl looks at the same direction too. (I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me, 2011)

The one-minute video is also bookended by one girl standing by the sea and the other by a pond, which hinted a metaphorical connection between the two characters.



Figure 62: Near the beginning of the short film. (I Dreamt Of Someone Dreaming Of Me, 2011)



Figure 63: Near the end of the short film. (I Dreamt Of Someone Dreaming Of Me, 2011)

With a limited running time of only 60 seconds, the magical realism here is done in the form of film techniques. Both the split screen techniques and black and white imagery (similar to “Exhalation”) are employed to provide a different perspective to the mundane. Images of traditional architecture from both countries are used to emphasize their uniqueness. They juxtapose and complement one another, becoming not just a visual representation of one particular culture, as it is neither exclusively “Malaysian” nor “Japanese”, but a combination or a unique blending of both.

6.4.3 Results for Now

Although initially intended only as a video display in a Prada shop. “Now” was invited to the following film festivals:

- Hong Kong Asian Film Festival 2010 (China)
- Ozu Film Festival 2010 (Italy)
- Festival du film minute de Lille 2010 (France)

6.4.4 Results for I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me

“I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me”, which was screened only once as part of the “60 Seconds of Solitude in the Year Zero” omnibus in Tallinn, has received positive reviews from film critics.

Maggie Lee’s review of the omnibus at Hollywood Reporter singled “I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me” out as one of the segments that “made a mark” as works that displayed resourcefulness (with budgets and time). Observing that the split screens in the short film was an expression of my cultural duality (“I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me” was listed as a Malaysian-Japanese work), and pointing out that the water motif represented “a broader idea of the flowing, ephemeral nature of filmmaking” especially because the film was bookended by shots of the protagonists standing by the sea and the pond.²⁸

In Matthew Lee’s recap of the “60 Seconds of Solitude in the Year Zero” screening, he also singled out “I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me” as an entry from the omnibus that “floored him”. While he felt that many of the shorts within the omnibus were great, but they “left as much impression as a waking dream”, yet “I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me” stood out because of its “achingly lovely visuals with a snowbound landscape and flower petals floating down a slow-moving river”.²⁹

²⁸ Lee, Maggie. “Film review: 60 Seconds of Solitude in the Year Zero” (2012) The Hollywood Reporter. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/60-seconds-solitude-year-zero-277143> Accessed: October 10th, 2012

²⁹ Lee, Matthew. “Matthew Lee Chronicles 60 SECONDS OF SOLITUDE IN YEAR ZERO” (2012). Twitch, <http://twitchfilm.com/2012/01/matthew-lee-chronicles-60-seconds-of-solitude-in-year-zero.html>, accessed: 6th of December, 2012

6.5 The Second Life Of A Thief

“The Second Life of A Thief” is an unproduced feature film screenplay co-written by Malaysian filmmaker Woo Ming Jin and I. Woo Ming Jin will direct this film with me serving as producer.

The film is set in an idyllic Malaysian fishing village and focuses on three interrelated sets of situations and characters in a style that is referred to as “Hyperlink cinema” (examples of this style of films include Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu’s “Babel”, Steven Soderbergh’s “Traffic” and Paul Haggis’ “Crash”). The events, which actually happen over a span of many years, are revealed out of sequence. The following plot summary of the narrative strands is simplified and is different from the exact sequence of the events on screen.

Subplot 1: In 2012, Uncle Lai, the village head, has to solve a series of murders in the village before his retirement, while tending to his sick daughter. He also has unresolved issues with his old friend and partner, Uncle Tan.

Subplot 2: In 2004, Su Ling runs the family’s “bird’s nest soup” business. She starts a relationship with a Thai immigrant worker, Sing, and soon becomes pregnant. Su Ling is actually the daughter of Uncle Lai.

Subplot 3: In 2010, Keiko Fujita from Japan comes to the village after learning of her ex-husband’s death. She suspects that he did not die naturally when she has a brief meeting with his new Malaysian wife. But when Keiko is involved in an accident that results in the death of a young girl, she makes a decision that affects everyone’s lives forever.

The subplots happen simultaneously onscreen, even though they are events separated by a couple of years. Only two characters will appear in all three subplots: Su Ling and her lover, Sing. If told in chronological order, the film centers on Su Ling. She has an extramarital relationship with her employee Sing in 2004 and becomes pregnant. She gives birth to a girl whom her Japanese husband Arata thought is his own. Arata dies under mysterious circumstances a few years later in 2010, prompting his ex-wife Keiko Fujita to fly over to Malaysia from Japan to investigate his death.

Keiko manages to meet up with Su Ling and her daughter, Mira. Sensing that Mira is not Arata’s biological daughter, Keiko starts to suspect that Su Ling may have murdered Arata to hide Mira’s legitimacy and her own adulterous affair. One

afternoon, Keiko meets Mira when the child is playing by herself on a nearby hill. Suddenly possessed by madness, Keiko pushes Mira to her death.

Out of panic, Keiko tries to enlist her friend Michael's help to hide Mira's body at night. But their actions are seen by Sing, who has remained in the village and is the true biological father of Mira. A chase occurs, Michael is killed by Sing during the ensuing confusion while Keiko manages to escape. Devastated by her daughter's death, Su Ling becomes catatonic.

Two years later, in 2012, a series of murders is happening in the village. Uncle Lai has to find the serial killer before his retirement. He has also been looking after his catatonic daughter Su Ling. In the end, he manages to find out that the killer is none other than Sing, who needed to inflict violence upon others to numb the pain he has felt after Mira's death.

This film encompasses numerous recurring themes from the previous short films while also depicting a rural Malaysian setting that is struggling to adjust to the technological advancements of the 21st century. Migrant workers from neighbouring nations continue flocking in for low paying manual labor and having a deceptively cordial relationship with their employers. Their desperate adoption of an artificial home is mirrored by the Su Ling's bird's nest soup business. The bird's nests were formerly harvested in caves. But rising demands in the late 1990s supplanted these natural sources with purpose-built nesting houses converted from empty shop houses. Again, it symbolizes the sacrifice of the natural past for capitalistic gains. The grip of modernization inadvertently destroying traditional communities along with their moral values has always been the recurring theme of many magical realist works.

Even so, the tone of magical realism, which was initially only hinted at (through the superstitious beliefs of the villagers and the Buddhist philosophies of the initially benevolent Sing), becomes apparent towards the end of the film. A despondent Uncle Lai brings his catatonic daughter Su Ling into the middle of the river on a boat. He then proceeds to drown her (honouring her wishes in an earlier scene)

After that, Uncle Lai carries the seemingly dead Su Ling to the riverbank and places her to rest. He sits with her for a while, and before long, he dies too. Surprisingly, Su Ling is revived, and when she gets up, she has miraculously recovered from her catatonia. However, there is no one around her but herself. The ambiguity of the ending suggests an unknown fate that is open for interpretation. Just like the future of the nation.

Chapter 7: A Final Experiment on Applying Magical Realism in Cinema

Based on the positive feedback from film industry insiders, critics and academics around the world, the filmmaking experiment in the last few years of applying magical realism in films have fulfilled the purposes of crossing cultural and national barriers, bridging history and time, and telling a transcultural story.

The next step of this doctorate research is to embark upon a final experiment that is the culmination of the previous experiments described in Chapter 3, 4 and 5. The final experiment is a script for a feature-length film titled “Reincarnated Dreams of Deer”.

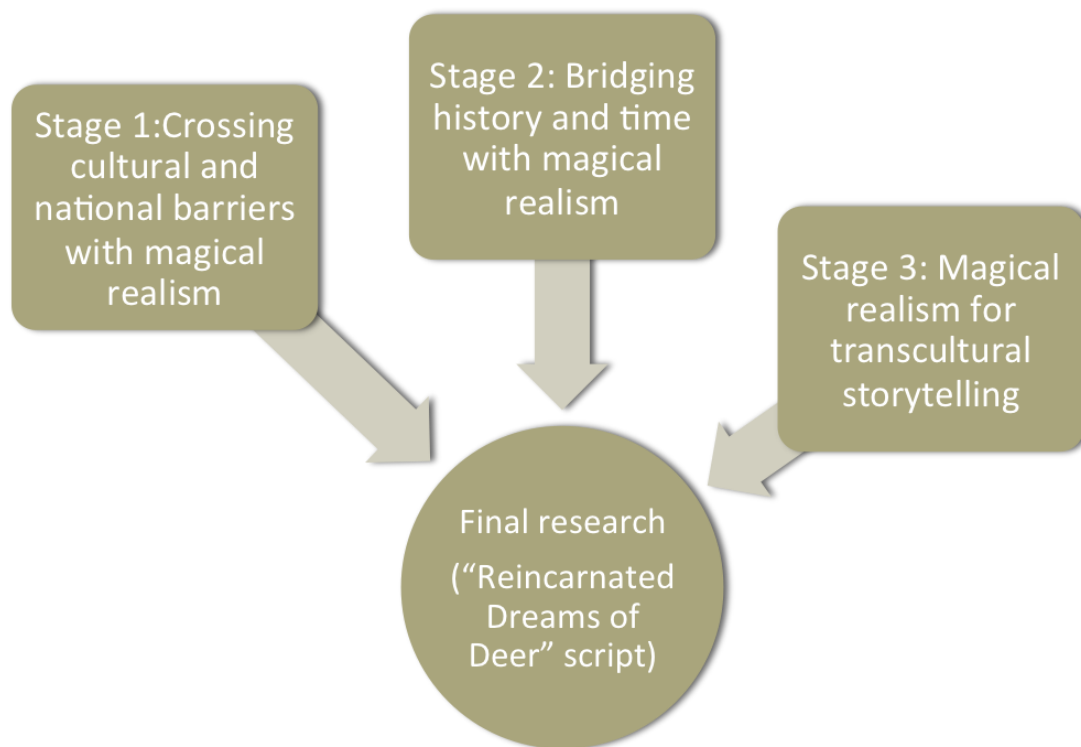


Figure 64: The final research is a film screenplay that is the culmination of previous researches.

The numerous concepts and philosophies of magical realism discussed in previous researches will be utilized for this screenplay.

7.1 Reincarnated Dreams of Deer

“Reincarnated Dreams of Deer” is an unproduced feature film screenplay I have written. The film is intended to be 120 minutes in length, with a total of 103 scenes.

The episodic film (it is divided into 5 “parts” including a prologue and an epilogue) covers a span of a century in Malaysia and depicts a comprehensive portrait of Malaysia and its shared histories with Indonesia and Japan. Which means that with the use of magical realism, the screenplay crosses national and cultural barriers, bridging history and time and also telling a transcultural story that reflects our current globalized existence.

The main plot charts the story of Shinichi Matsuda, a Japanese private detective living in Malaysia.

Prologue: Shinichi is approached by an old man named Joko to look for a deer. Joko believes that the deer is the reincarnation of a friend who died 50 years earlier.

Part 1: An anarchist group sneaks into a demolition company at night, laying waste to its machinery to protest the demolition of an old building. The demolition company is situated right next to Shinichi's detective agency (which doubles as an old mechanic shop). One of the anarchists, Rie, tries to avoid arrest by hiding in Shinichi's office, she is also Japanese. Shinichi is disturbed by Rie's resemblance to another woman he once knew. Their encounter is brief, Rie does not show any signs of knowing Shinichi at all, and she finally escapes when the sun rises. After that, Shinichi visits a mountain in Southern Malaysia to start his search for the deer. He is accompanied by two local guides who tell him the numerous historical events that have happened on the mountain, bringing us to the next chapter.

Part 2: This segment is set 50 years earlier, during the Malaysia-Indonesia war that happened from 1963 to 1966. A runaway Indonesian soldier hides in the mountain. His entire squad was wiped out during a failed siege upon a local Malaysian village. The soldier is Joko in his youth. Not long after that, two of the villagers, a young woman, Li Ling, and her brother, Meng, take pity on Joko and begin to bring him food. Gradually, Joko finds himself attracted to Li Ling and they are both involved in a clandestine love affair. Their story ends in violence when Li Ling is later forced to make a choice between betraying her lover, and caring for her brother's well being.

Part 3: This chapter occurs a few years before chapter 1. Akiko Miyagawa, a Japanese private detective is constantly plagued by dreams of events that happened a century ago in Malaysia. This lifelong ordeal brings her to the country searching for answers. She enlists the help of a historian and writer, who turns out to be Shinichi. It is then revealed that Shinichi actually inherited her detective agency and became a detective because of her. Despite their growing connection to one another, Akiko chooses to disappear one day without leaving a word.

This chapter also illustrates Akiko's dreams that are set in 1912, following snippets of the life of a young karayuki-san named Ohatsu. A karayuki-san is a Japanese woman who traveled to East and South East Asia towards the end of Meiji Era to work as a prostitute. Many of the karayuki-san has ended up at the ports of pre-Independence Malaysia. The era of karayuki-san is about to end; Japanese officials overseas are secretly eliminating Japanese brothels to maintain Japanese prestige. A few of the karayuki-san are forced to return to their country, facing prejudice from the family who had sold them away in the first place. Ohatsu chooses to stay behind, adjusting to a life without her friends.

Epilogue: The story concludes with Shinichi trying to look for Rie (who is actually Akiko), while the old Joko finds himself at the presence of the deer that he has been seeking for half a century. All these characters and strands from previous chapters are introduced to Ohatsu from a century ago through surrealistic images as she is taking a quiet boat ride through a river. In the end, Ohatsu ponders what is real.

The connection between each chapter is implied instead of overtly stated, but it is hinted that the characters from different eras are actually reincarnations of the same soul. Using these elements of magical realism such as reincarnation, this film is meant to create awareness for little-known real-life historical events in Malaysia like the Malaysian-Indonesian war in the 1960s, or the “karayuki-san” in the late 19th to early 20th century, but without having to fret about historical accuracy.

Aside from using numerous elements from my own previous works, this film is inspired by numerous literary works of magical realism like Yukio Mishima's “Sea of Fertility” series, or Haruki Murakami's “Wild Sheep Chase”, and also magical realist films like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's “Tropical Malady” (2004), Emir Kusturica's “Underground” (1995) and Theo Angelopoulos' “Ulysses' Gaze” (1995), which were films that use magical realism in their narratives to meditate upon a nation's identity and the lingering influences from historical events.

Having two Japanese protagonists (and an Indonesian one) and placing them in a Malaysia setting is to have them serve as audience surrogates. It is a technique of defamiliarization that is characteristic of a magical realism text. Malaysian audiences get to view their own culture from a different perspective, while the other audiences will be experiencing and discovering the country through the eyes of the characters.

The mixing of fact and fiction can be shown in the conversation below:

Shinichi: Excuse me, I heard that there used to be a zoo nearby which belonged to the Sultan of Johor. Is that true?

Female guide: Yes sir. His Highness Sultan Ibrahim built a gigantic private zoo for his secret English lover Cissie Hill as an engagement gift. It was said that the mountain was Cissie's favourite place, and some of the zoo animals were allowed to roam freely when Cissie wanted to take a walk. Especially the deer.

Shinichi: Deer? Why?

Female Guide: Cissie was a cabaret dancer. She liked to watch the movements of a deer. They were graceful.

Shinichi: (feigned excitement) How exciting! But what happened to the zoo?

Female Guide: Cissie Hill was killed during World War 2. Out of sadness the Sultan set the zoo on fire.

Sultan Ibrahim and Lydia Cecilia "Cissie" Hill are real-life historical figures, their relationship lasted from 1934 until Hill's untimely death on 1940. The scandalous love affair between the young woman and the Sultan forty years her senior, although publicly denied, was a source of media sensation and political tension between the Sultan and his British Colonial staff. Aside from that, everything in the conversation is fictional. Sultan Ibrahim built the state zoo of Johor in the early 20th century, but never a private zoo for his lover, nor did her death lead him to a grandiose gesture of burning down a zoo

Drawing from real-life events, the intention is not to reproduce history with accuracy but merely to give the narrative more of a historical 'pastiche' featuring recognizable images from reality, supported by dates and correlations with famous events and people. It helps to enrich a multi-layered narrative. This screenplay is a showcase of the many narrative purposes of magical realism.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 An overview of the experiment results

This is an overview of the results from the filmmaking experiment that lasted from 2008 until 2012. It is a list of film festivals screenings, including the awards won by each film:

Fleeting Images (2008, DV, 10 minutes)

- CON-CAN Movie Festival 2009
 - Winner: Grand Prix
- Singapore International Short Film Festival 2009
- Hong Kong Independent Film Festival 2010

Love Suicides (2009, DV, 14 minutes)

- China Mobile Film Festival 2009 (China)
 - Winner: Best Director
- Paris Cinema International Film Festival 2009 (France)
 - In competition
- Festival Internazionale del Cinema d'Arte 2009 (Italy)
 - In competition
- Split International Film Festival 2009 (Croatia)
 - In competition
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2009 (Philippines)
- novo Cinema da Malasia 2010 (Brazil)
- Singapore International Film Festival 2010 (Singapore)
- Fluxus 2010 - 7th International Film Festival on the Internet (Brazil)
- Los Angeles International Film Festival 2010 (USA)
 - In competition
- Odaiba SF7 Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Filminute 2010 (USA)
 - Winner: Jury Commendation
- Doi Saket International Film Festival 2010 (Thailand)
 - Winner: Best Director
- Festival du film minute de Lille 2010 (France)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)
 - In Focus: Edmund Yeo
- The Crouch End Festival 2012 (England)

Kingyo (2009, HD, 25 minutes)

- Venice Film Festival 2009 (Italy)
 - Official selection (Corto Cortissimo)
- Hong Kong Asian Film Festival 2009 (Hong Kong)
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2009 (Philippines)
- Eibunren Awards 2009 (Japan)
 - Winner: Silver Grand Prix, Best New Artistic Creator
- China Mobile Film Festival 2009 (China)
 - In competition
- Gulf International Film Festival 2010 (United Arab Emirates)
- Singapore International Film Festival 2010 (Singapore)
- Eskisehir Film Festival 2010 (Turkey)
- SKIP City International D-Cinema Festival 2010 (Japan)
 - In competition
- Ourense International Film Festival 2010 (Spain)
 - In competition
- Camera Japan Festival, Amsterdam 2010 (Netherlands)
- AsiaticaFilmMediale 2010 (Italy)
- Doi Saket International Film Festival 2010 (Thailand)
 - Winner: Best Editing award
- Mediterranean Festival of New Filmmakers - Larissa 2011 (Greece)
 - Winner: Silver Horse
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)
 - In Focus: Edmund Yeo
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)

Woman on Fire Looks For Water (2009, HD, 95 minutes) (as producer and editor)

- Venice Film Festival 2009 (Italy)
 - Orizzonti section
- Pusan International Film Festival 2009 (South Korea)
- Hong Kong Asian Film Festival 2009 (China)
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2009 (Philippines)
 - Special Jury Mention (Southeast Asian category)
- International Film Festival Rotterdam 2010 (Netherlands)
- Novo Cinema da Malasia 2010 (Brazil)
 - Opening film
- Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema 2010 (Argentina)
- CPX Festival 2010 (Denmark)
- San Francisco International Film Festival 2010 (USA)
 - In competition
- Los Angeles International Film Festival 2010 (USA)

- New York Asian Film Festival 2010 (USA)
- Munich International Film Festival 2010 (Germany)
- Haifa International Film Festival 2010 (Israel)
- ERA New Horizons Film Festival 2010 (Poland)
- Fukuoka International Film Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Shanghai International Film Festival 2011 (China)
- Five Flavours Film Festival 2012 (Poland)

Now (2010, HD, 1 minute)

- Hong Kong Asian Film Festival 2010 (China)
- Ozu Film Festival 2010 (Italy)
- Festival du film minute de Lille 2010 (France)

Inhalation (2010, HD, 17 minutes)

- Pusan International Film Festival 2010 (South Korea)
 - Winner: Sonje Award (Best Asian Short Film)
- Vancouver International Film Festival 2010 (Canada)
- Tokyo International Film Festival 2010 (Japan)
- Jakarta International Film Festival 2010 (Indonesia)
- Cinemanila International Film Festival 2010 (Philippines)
- Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival 2011 (France)
 - in competition
- San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival 2011 (USA)
- Guanajuato International Film Festival 2011 (Mexico)
 - in competition
- InDpanda Short Film Festival 2011 (Hong Kong)
 - Opening film
- "Pacific Meridian" Vladivostok International Film Festival 2011 (Russia)
- Festival Séquence court-métrage 2011 (France)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)
 - In Focus: Edmund Yeo
- New Taipei City Film Festival 2012 (Taiwan)
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)

Exhalation (2010, HD, 22 minutes)

- Dubai International Film Festival 2010 (United Arab Emirates)
 - In competition
- Rotterdam International Film Festival 2011 (Netherlands)
- Jeonju International Film Festival 2011 (South Korea)
- Shanghai International Film Festival 2011 (China)
 - In competition

- Curtas Vila de Conde International Film Festival 2011 (Portugal)
 - In competition
- InDpanda Short Film Festival 2011 (Hong Kong)
 - Closing film
- Tokyo International Film Festival 2011 (Japan)
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)
- Yxine Film Festival 2011 (Vietnam)

Girl In The Water (2011, HD, 19 minutes) (as producer and editor)

- Danish Film Academy Awards 2012
 - Winner: Best Short Film
- Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival 2011
- International Film Festival Rotterdam 2012
- Melbourne International Film Festival 2012
- Hangzhou Asian Film Festival 2012

Last Fragments of Winter (2010, HD, 24 minutes)

- Sapporo International Short Film Festival 2012 (Japan)
 - Winner: Japan Tourism Agency Commissioner Award
- Dubai International Film Festival 2011 (United Arab Emirates)
 - In competition
- Rotterdam International Film Festival 2012 (Netherlands)
- Bangkok International Student Film Festival 2012 (Thailand)
- Film Caravan 2012 (Italy)
 - In competition
- Nara International Film Festival 2012 (Italy)
 - In competition
- Malacca Chinese Malaysian Film Festival 2012 (Malaysia)
- Yxine Film Festival 2012 (Vietnam)

8.2 The true functions of magical realism in cinema

The positive feedback for my films from audiences of different countries and cultures have reinforced my belief that cinema is a medium that can transcend cultural barriers. I have always made it a priority to attend the film festival screenings of my films, mostly because they are platforms that effectively eliminate the distance between filmmakers and audiences.

In addition to that, and also most importantly, I view them as an opportunity to represent both Malaysia and Japan (regardless of where I shot my films, most of them are listed as “Malaysia-Japan” co-productions due to the financial participation of

Waseda University) in establishing cultural and sociopolitical discourses with the audiences. These cross-cultural experiences have always been enlightening and educational.

Most of the awards I have received over the years for my films were in recognition for their artistic and technical merits (and possibly, their cultural value). But in September 2012 when I received a special award from the Japan Tourism Agency Commissioner for the short film “Last Fragments of Winter”, I was told that the award was meant to recognize my efforts to use film as a medium for cultural exchange purposes, especially with the detailed depiction of both Malaysian and Japanese locales and cultures.

8.2.1 To reevaluate our everyday existences through fiction

Many of the magical realist films listed throughout this paper are films that educate us of things that we do not know of, to show us aspects of history that we have already forgotten, reexamining our everyday lives from a different perspective by using magical realism as a device to enhance the unique experience. For example: *Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders is as much a magical realist love story as a kaleidoscopic look on the past and present of Berlin city (because the protagonists in the films, who are angels, can hear the thoughts of every single citizens). Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* shows a man traveling back in time to the Roaring Twenties era of Paris, meeting real-life literary and artistic figures, but is actually a meditation on nostalgia and man’s love-hate relationship with art.

It shows that magical realism, as a narrative device, is filled with limitless possibilities. After a few years of utilizing them in my own cinematic works during my filmmaking experiment, I can confirm that magical realism has a potent feeling of visual expression that is absent in other storytelling techniques. This is because, similar to its literary counterparts, magical realism in cinema stresses the aesthetics of storytelling, (visual) language and characterization, which differentiates them from genre films such as sci-fi, fantasy or horror.

Magical realism often has a feeling of yearning and imagination about it, evoking the feeling of a dream, making it more poetic and mystical than mere escapism. As magical realism is originally connected to beliefs, traditions and folklores, being a reflection of one culture’s worldview or an embodiment of superstitions, it remains an appropriate technique to capture the emotional states of characters and the collective consciousness of society. Hence the popularity of magical realism works used to explore issues of national and personal identity.

8.2.2 As an alternative visual representation of “reality”

Once again, despite criticisms that magical realism is an irresponsible evasion of reality, a conversion of “third world suffering” to entertainment, a commodifying kind of primitivism that, like Orientalism, relegates communities to a cute, exotic psychological fantasy³⁰. Magical realism is employed because ordinary realism cannot represent certain realities. Is what is “magical” nothing but an evasion? But then, can one argue that ordinary “realism” is more of an evasion since it relies on the “plausible” presentation of a drastically falsified world? Should we merely copy from history books when realism seems to enact a form of censorship? It is arguable that the Eurocentrism view of this is that ordinary realism prefers the way it claims things are to the way they are experienced or recast in memory and in narrative.

Magical realism is a way to expand reality, not abandon it. One also has to remember that magical realism is not limited only to Third World countries, and that its use constitutes an invitation to see how unsettled the world is, and how many worlds there are³¹. And this makes magical realism such an enticing device for cinema.

Even if magical realism were incapable of revolutionizing the world, its diffusion and modification of reality are capable of making audiences reevaluate cultural and formal norms. It exists as an additional option for filmmakers and storytellers to express themselves in the creative medium of cinema.

8.3 Future Research

With the completion of this dissertation, I intend to transform both of the unproduced screenplays “Second Life of the Thief” and “Reincarnated Dreams of Deer” into films. Because of its strict censorship and limited film infrastructure, many Malaysian films can only be made with the financial resources and involvement of foreign countries, and can only be shown outside the country.

To make a story that can receive the “stamp of approval” from the Malaysian government and its censors would be difficult. Such an environment explains why, despite having attained independence since 1957, Malaysian films remain obscure on the international stage compared to neighbouring nations like Thailand and Philippines (countries that are more interested in the use of films for cultural exchange instead of just products for entertainment). Thus many Malaysian films

³⁰ Faris, Wendy. “The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism” (2002) *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology*. Volume 5, Number 2, p. 101-118

³¹ Wood, Michael. “In Reality” (2002) *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology*. Volume 5, Number 2, p. 9-14

made outside the monopolistic local studio system have received the financial support of foreign film funds like Netherland's Hubert Bals Fund, South Korea's Asian Cinema Fund or Germany's World Cinema Fund.

As both "Second Life of the Thief" and "Reincarnated Dreams of Deer" are intended as co-productions, the making of these projects are capable of generating cross-cultural benefits, opening up opportunities for future collaborations between different nations that can tell stories on films without worrying about political restrictions. And hopefully, after the films are made and presented on an international platform like an international film festival, they are capable of generating political and cultural discussions. For example: The mere involvement of a Japanese actor or actress in a Malaysian film shot in Malaysia can help raise awareness of the country's cinema or culture in a more effective manner.

Many of the greatest artistic works in history, including films, exist to question or challenge the status quo, to point out the flaws of a ruling hierarchy. The circumvention of such censors is necessary for creativity. An awareness of magical realism as a technique for cinema will ensure the continued existence of marginalized cultures, histories, traditions, superstitions and nations.

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Appendix

Dreams of Deer

By

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Part 1 (2012)

Rie Imai, an anarchist.
Shinichi Matsuda, a private detective, owns an automobile repair shop
Hamid, a policeman
Messenger Boy, a child who helps Shinichi with his investigations
Old Joko, a mysterious old Indonesian man
Raju, a worker in Shinichi's repair shop
Mohan (Anarchist 1), an anarchist leader
Male Guide
Female Guide
A group of anarchists
Boat driver
A few mechanics
Some policemen

Part 2 (1964)

Li Ling, a seaweed farmer
Meng, her teenage brother
Joko, a runaway Indonesian soldier
Aziz, a young policeman
Samad, an out-of-shape policeman
Captain Abu Bakar, police captain
A squad of policemen
Wan, a young villager
Doctor Lim, a middle-aged doctor
Random villagers

Part 3 (2010)

Akiko Miyagawa, a private detective losing her memories, looks like Rie Imai
Madam Tien, owner of a baby factory
Mister Wong, client of baby factory
Middle-aged Japanese male client of Akiko's
A film crew (later became the group of anarchists in Part 1)
Bus driver

Part 3 (1914)

Ohatsu, a Karayuki-san (a Japanese prostitute sold abroad)
Ofumi and Ohana, friends of Ohatsu's, both are Karayuki-san

1 EXT. RIVER - SUNRISE. 1914

Black screen.

The soothing sound of sea waves crashing against the shore.

TEXT: Malacca River, 1914

A river flows languorously. A wooden boat emerges. We see a young Japanese woman in kimono, OHATSU (21), lying on the boat, resting. She is covered in classical Japanese make-up, white powder on her face, her lips glistening red.

Beside her is a simple paper lantern, its candle burning brightly.

Slowly, the sun rises, illuminating the sky with a magnificent golden glow.

Ohatsu blows out the lantern and watches the river bank.

She sees: two other young Japanese women in kimono, OHANA and OFUMI, partially concealed by the morning mists swirling about them. Ohana wears yellow, Ofumi wears pink with a doll in her hands. Their powder covered faces are blurry and ethereal.

Ohatsu smiles at her friends.

2 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE / BEACH - DAY. 1964

A group of uniformed cops wander through the jungle, searching for a fugitive.

TEXT: Borneo, 1964

They walk past a magnificent waterfall.

As they continue their search, one of the cops, AZIZ (25) crouches by the creek and washes his hands and face. It looks as if he hasn't slept for a few days.

Hiding in the shadows within the lush greenery is an Indonesian young man dressed in army uniform and covered in black mud, JOKO (18). He watches the police group intently with bloodshot eyes.

Aziz feels that someone is watching him. He whirls around swiftly and stares directly at Joko's direction.

Startled by the movement of the cop, Joko withdraws into the darkness. And then, he runs away as quickly as he could.

Reaching the sea, Joko dives into the water.

3 EXT. UNDERWATER - DAY. 1964

Joko swims gracefully in the water like a fish.

The sea is clear and blue.

4 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

A fishing village with stilted wooden huts that seem as if they are floating on the crystal clear blue sea water.

A young woman, LI LING (21) is hanging white sheets to dry. Wearing a simple dress and bathed in sunlight, she possesses a sort of wistful innocent beauty.

The wind is strong, the radiant white sheets flutter in the air.

Meanwhile, Li Ling's younger brother, MENG (16), is seated nearby. Despite his plain features, he seems to emit a melancholic aura, like someone who knows more than he lets on. His attention is fixed upon the jungle near the village.

5 EXT. SHORE - DAY. 1964

Joko slowly climbs up the shore, gasping. The water has washed away the mud that covered his body earlier. For the first time, we see him properly. A dark-skinned youth.

OLD JOKO (V.O.)

I asked you to come today, because
I need this to end. I have been
searching for an entire lifetime.

He sees a deer passing by.

And then, suddenly, hearing footsteps behind him, he turns his head...

MATCH CUT TO:

6 INT. EMPTY DILAPIDATED BUILDING - EVENING

AN OLD MAN ON CRUTCHES turns his head as he hears the sounds of footsteps echoing softly through the ruins of the building.

The old man is Joko, aged 68.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

4.

OLD JOKO (V.O.)
Even in my dreams, it continues to
run away.

The footsteps grow closer, a Japanese private detective,
SHINICHI MATSUDA (32), emerges from the shadows,
stoic-looking and unshaven.

OLD JOKO
Mr. Matsuda. Will you help me?

Shinichi notices numerous Polaroid photos of a deer pasted
on the wall. The photos are faded and mysterious, not
because of age, but merely because of the constant exposure
to harsh weather conditions. He studies them closely. There
are three spots on the deer's body.

OLD JOKO
This deer was an old friend who
died fifty years ago.

Shinichi looks at Joko, the old man smiles.

Cut to black:

The title appears over black screen.

REINCARNATED DREAMS OF DEER

CUT TO:

PART 1

7 INT. MECHANIC SHOP / SHINICHI'S OFFICE - DAY

Lines of cars, old and new, in a mechanic shop. A few
mechanics are working on a car.

The phone in the office starts to ring. After a while, RAJU
(24), enters and picks up the phone.

RAJU
Matsuda Car Repairs and Private
Investigation.
(pause)
Yes. We provide a few different
services. We help look for missing
people, or follow unfaithful
spouses. But you must be very sure
of what you want. There are no
refunds.

Raju continues speaking on the phone.

(CONTINUED)

One old car, damaged beyond repair and merely a husk of crumpled metal and broken glasses, is being examined by Shinichi.

Shinichi presses his ear against the rust-covered surface of the car, listening to something. He taps his fingers against the side of the car softly, feeling the different sounds.

Raju emerges from the office.

8 EXT. MECHANIC SHOP - DAY

The MESSENGER BOY (8) arrives on a bicycle. He gets off his bike, walks past the numerous mechanics, goes to the corner of the shop, puts his schoolbag aside and sits.

He unwraps a lollipop and starts licking it. He is disappointed by its taste.

Shinichi approaches.

MESSENGER BOY

Mr Tan's payment is in the white envelope. I already changed it to Japanese Yen.

Shinichi unzips Messenger Boy's bag, he takes out a white envelope and counts the money. Satisfied, he puts it in his pocket. He notices a yellow envelope in the bag too, and a white bun.

MESSENGER BOY

The yellow envelope is from a man who needs your help. Oh, and the char siew bun is from my mother.

Shinichi opens the yellow envelope. There is a small piece of paper inside. He reads it.

SHINICHI

Okay. I will meet him next week.

Messenger Boy gets up and takes his schoolbag, he reaches into and hands his mother's forgotten char siew bun to Shinichi. Shinichi takes it, almost apologetic.

MESSENGER BOY

My mother asked when you want to come over for dinner. She'll make you some curry chicken.

Shinichi says nothing, he doesn't know how to reply to that. The Messenger Boy understands, he starts to walk back to his bike.

SHINICHI

Hey.

Messenger Boy glances at Shinichi. Shinichi gives slight smile and waves the bun.

SHINICHI

Help me thank her.

The boy nods and continues his way. Shinichi peels the bun and takes a bite, lost in his own thoughts, as always.

9 EXT. OPEN SEAS - EVENING

A motorboat speeds through the sea.

A WOMAN in the corner, her back to us, she has a pixie hairstyle, her short hair waver in the wind.

There are eight other people on the boat. They all wear homemade paper masks of the Japanese anarchist and martyr Kotoku Shushui.

After a while, the woman puts on her Kotoku Shushui mask and joins the group of anarchists. They all stare straight ahead.

The BOAT DRIVER looks over his own shoulder occasionally, unable to rid himself the feeling of uneasiness.

The sun is setting.

10 EXT. UNDER A BRIDGE - EVENING / NIGHT

The masked anarchists are huddled together, chatting with each other in whispered tones about mundane everyday things.

The woman anarchist paces slowly beside the flowing water of the sewage. The last remnants of sunlight are reflected upon its surface.

Finally, night comes. Everything above them is lit up by the pale yellow lights of the streetlamps.

With that, the woman anarchist takes out a lighter from her pocket and flicks it. The other anarchists take out their lighters and do the same.

(CONTINUED)

The anarchists come out from under the bridge. They notice that one person is watching them from a distance.

A silhouette of a boy on his bicycle. It is Messenger Boy.

The woman anarchist halts and gazes at the boy.

A brief moment passes by, Messenger Boy cycles off.

11 EXT. MECHANIC SHOP - NIGHT

A police car pulls up in front of Shinichi's shop. OFFICER HAMID steps out of his car. Tall and burly, he cuts an imposing figure.

There isn't anyone working at the place anymore except for Shinichi, who is standing beside his office.

Hamid is holding a plastic bag with takeaway food and drinks.

SHINICHI

I thought you are only coming tomorrow. Is this the car you want to upgrade?

HAMID

I'm just stopping by. There are some rumours. Something might happen tonight.

SHINICHI

What rumours?

Hamid smiles, it is his way of brushing a question away. There is no need to cause a civilian unnecessary panic.

HAMID

Have you eaten? I bought some nasi lemak. The food might get cold.

12 INT. SHINICHI'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Shinichi and Hamid are eating. Occasionally, Hamid's eyes wander outside, watching, observing. Sometimes, Shinichi follows the policeman's gaze, but he sees nothing. Just the familiar sight of nocturnal emptiness.

HAMID

Recently, I started to read. My colleagues think that I am crazy,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

HAMID (cont'd)

they always ask, how could I, under such circumstances, find time for myself to read books? But that is what I do, there are a few books in my car now. Maybe I haven't read enough during my youth, so I am suddenly very curious. Perhaps people here have stopped being curious.

SHINICHI

What have you been reading?

HAMID

It is a funny little book. Funny and sad at the same time. A boy decides to run away from home and live in the nearby trees, his feet never touching the ground at all. He got tired of a "normal life", you see, so he chooses a life more suitable for himself. Years went by, he watches everything from afar. His parents, his brother and sister, his friends, the entire town around him. When his mother was dying, he climbed to the trees near the windows of her room and speaks to her through the window.

SHINICHI

How did it all begin?

HAMID

(wry grin)

A girl. Of course. A silly promise to a girl. But the girl went away the day after he made the promise.

(beat)

Oh, don't worry, many years later, they met again. She climbed up the trees to spend her time with him. But only for a while. Just a short while. She ran away again, with another man.

SHINICHI

But he remained on the trees.

HAMID

Yes. Until he was old. It was difficult, people were cutting down the trees around him.

13 INT. FACTORY - NIGHT

The group of anarchists approach a factory with a cart of mysterious-looking equipments covered in white cloth.

A few factory worker opens the gates for them.

They enter, handing their Kotaku Shusui masks to the factory workers. The factory workers wear them.

It is a factory of tractors, bulldozers and other heavy machinery used for demolition.

They then begin to smash things up. Some go around spray-painting the bulldozers and tractors.

A few begins cutting the wires of the tractors.

ANARCHIST 1
Bring out the weapon!

Two anarchists push the cart forward. They pull aside the cloth, unveiling a large mysterious metallic egg-like object.

He presses a button, clouds of black smoke burst out from the egg, along with fountains of excrement and paint, engulfing everything as the anarchists cheer and run off.

Finally, Anarchist 1 takes a bazooka. He turns to the anarchist woman and removes his mask, revealing the face of MOHAN, a bearded Indian man in his 30s.

MOHAN
Let them remember this forever.

ANARCHIST WOMAN
(in Japanese)
Hai. Forever.

The anarchist woman nods, before hurrying away with a few other anarchists.

Mohan shouts and fires the bazooka into the air.

There is a maddening pause, and dreadful silence.

And then, dazzling fireworks, many of them, explode in the night sky.

14 INT. SHINICHI'S OFFICE, MECHANIC SHOP - NIGHT

Shinichi and Hamid are startled by the sounds of fireworks. Both men hurry out of the office and stare at the commotion.

The fireworks continue. They seem to come from nearby.

HAMID
Stay here, Matsuda.

Hamid runs towards his car and drives off, sirens wailing.

Shinichi walks back into his office, a little confused by the sudden happenings.

He locks the door and switches off the lights.

A few seconds later, he switches on the lights again.

A butterfly is resting upon the side of his window. Its wings flutter slowly before it flies away.

15 EXT. FACTORY - NIGHT

Officer Hamid drives into the smoke-covered factory. He slows down, his eyes darting about, but there is no one at all.

Suddenly, yellow paint splatters on his windshield.

Hamid hisses in shock and brakes the car. There were some faint cheering and scattered applause.

He sees, through the smoke, silhouettes of anarchists lurking about.

Getting off his car, Hamid grabs his flashlight and tries to give chase.

The masks of Kotaku Shusui seem to float about, hauntingly like phantoms, luring him deeper into the darkness. As he continues stumbling around blindly, Hamid begins to cough frantically.

No matter how hard he tries, the anarchists manage to move out of his way, their movements graceful and swift, almost like a choreographed dance.

Hamid sees the vague outline of bright lights and runs towards it.

Staggering his way out of the smog, Hamid collapses onto his knees, staring in horror.

His car is covered in flames.

16 EXT. GRASSY FIELD / MECHANIC SHOP - NIGHT

The masked anarchist woman sprints through the grassy field, towards a row of old cars and other junk.

She moves swiftly to the corner of the shop, and hides herself as another police car speeds by, sirens blaring.

Once the sounds have trailed off, the woman anarchist removes her mask, revealing her face to us for the very first time.

She is a Japanese woman, RIE IMAI (30), fair-skinned, delicate features.

Placing the mask into a drain and allowing it to float away, she then takes out a simple blouse from her backpack and wears it.

Satisfied with her new appearance, Rie walks out of her hiding place and continues her way.

17 INT. SHINICHI'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Shinichi opens the door and sees Rie, all at once. An evanescent figure walking past the concrete metallic scraps of cars in front of his shop.

Rie gazes at him in defiance.

But the expression on Shinichi's face is one of barely-concealed shock.

It is as if he had seen someone he recognizes.

A slight mischievous smile lights up Rie's face as an idea crosses her mind. She raises a finger upon her lips, signaling for Shinichi not to make a sound.

She then moves towards him in a few quick steps, and into the office. With one swift fluid movement, she closes the door behind her and locks it.

RIE
(in Japanese. Politely, but
with irony. Speaking more to
herself than to Shinichi)
Excuse me for entering.

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI
(replies in Japanese)
It's all right.

The fact that he is also a Japanese surprises Rie a little, but she conceals that expertly.

RIE
If they are looking for me, will you just tell them I am a girlfriend or a wife?
(pause)
Too unbelievable? How about telling them that I'm just a customer with a car needing repairs? Maybe that's even worse. What can I do?

Without waiting for a reply, Rie begins to walk about the office, tracing her finger across the surface of the table and the wall. She is fascinated by the place for reasons she cannot comprehend.

RIE
Is this your place?

Shinichi hesitates for a while.

SHINICHI
No, it belonged to someone else. A friend.

RIE
Must be difficult, looking after such a business.

She looks out through the window, to see whether any of the police were coming. After that, she swiftly moves to a corner, to ensure that she is inconspicuous.

SHINICHI
Can't you remember anything at all, Miss Miyagawa?

Rie turns and stare at him. He looks solemn.

RIE
I'm sorry, mister, I think you've mistaken me for someone else. I'm not Miyagawa. My name is Rie. Rie Imai. Nice to meet you.

SHINICHI

Forgive my rudeness. You looked like someone I knew.

RIE

(grins)

It's all right. I have a very common face. Ever since I came to Malaysia, people always mistake me for someone else.

18 INT. FACTORY ROOM - NIGHT

A masked anarchist runs into one of the factory rooms, followed closely by three policemen.

A fight breaks out.

The anarchist screams and curses as he is being subdued.

19 INT. OUTSIDE FACTORY ROOM - NIGHT

Outside the room, while the screaming and cursing continues, an anarchist slumps against the wall, his face covered in blood.

His mask has fallen off, he is a young man, gasping for air.

Gripped by a moment of madness, he lets out a hysterical shout.

20 EXT./ INT. MECHANIC SHOP - NIGHT

Officer Hamid heads towards Shinichi's office. He knocks the door. Shinichi opens it.

SHINICHI

Are you okay?

HAMID

We caught some of them. Bastards burned my car. Did you see any of them?

SHINICHI

No. What was it all about?

HAMID

Just some troublemakers.

(CONTINUED)

Hamid's eyes dart about, looking for hidden anarchists. He sees no one else.

HAMID

My book was in the car. It is gone now. I wonder whether I can find another copy. Damn.

SHINICHI

Have you finished it?

HAMID

(smiles grimly)

I couldn't bring myself to read the last chapter. I'm a slow reader.

21 INT. BROKEN CAR - NIGHT

Rie is hiding in one of the old rusty cars that looks like a crumpled metal shell. The same one that Shinichi was examining earlier.

She is lying in a fetal position on the passenger seat.

HAMID (O.S.)

It's a very bad habit. Whenever I reach the last chapter of a book, or the last episode of a TV series, I just can't finish it. Everything is left hanging.

SHINICHI (O.S.)

Imagined endings are always better anyway.

HAMID (O.S.)

Do you really think so, Matsuda?

A butterfly emerges and rests upon Rie's shoulder. She is momentarily captivated by it.

There is a breeze. The leaves of nearby trees rustle gently.

HAMID (O.S.)

Haha, you're not so sure yourself either.

(pause)

What a night.

When the wind is gone, she hears sound of footsteps approaching her hiding place. It is Shinichi.

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI
They're gone.

Rie sits up.

SHINICHI
Are you all right?

She nods.

22 INT. POLICE CAR - NIGHT

Hamid is seated in a car, examining a Kotaku Shusui paper mask in silence.

His colleague, Syed, is driving.

ANARCHIST 2 (O.S.)
Fuck it. You people will never understand.

Syed looks at the mirror. Behind the policemen are two handcuffed anarchists, covered in slight bruises and black smudges.

SYED
Understand what?

ANARCHIST 2
That all these are pointless.

The anarchist is gesturing outside.

Hamid peers out of the window. They are passing by the city of Kuala Lumpur, with its skyscrapers, steel structures glowing with colourful neon lights that reflect upon the windshield of the car.

ANARCHIST 2 (O.S.)
Haven't you heard this before? A city without old buildings is like a person without memories.

SYED (O.S.)
Shut up.

ANARCHIST 2 (O.S.)
You people will never understand.

And finally, the police car passes by the Petronas Twin Towers, often considered a monument erected to symbolize the country's economic strength.

There is a look of weariness on Hamid's face.

23 EXT. OLD DILAPIDATED SHOPLOTS - NIGHT

Shinichi parks his car in front of an old abandoned row of shops. Both he and Rie get out.

RIE

These buildings will be gone soon. I heard they are going to build a new train station here. So we had to leave a little warning at the factory, just to voice our displeasure.

24 INT. OLD DILAPIDATED SHOPLOTS - NIGHT

Rie and Shinichi have entered the place. Pitch black except for the lights from outside, and the flashlight in Shinichi's hands. Rie is also holding a lighter in her hand, but it doesn't really help much.

RIE

So, Mr. Matsuda, did you help me because I remind you of her?

SHINICHI

No.

RIE

(chuckles softly)
You're lying. But it's okay.
(pause)
Now, you have to pardon my curiosity, but would you tell me something about this... Miyagawa-san?

SHINICHI

That's quite difficult. I'm bad at telling stories.

RIE

Is that so? Then I apologize for asking.

Rie continues pacing about the place. Shinichi is gathering his thoughts.

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI

Her full name was Akiko Miyagawa.

The name of this person rolled out of Shinichi's tongue like a tired sigh. Noticing this, Rie halts her steps. Shinichi continues talking.

SHINICHI

I met her two years ago. She often had strange dreams of things that happened one hundred years ago. In those dreams, she is a Malay man.

(pause)

And there's always this young Japanese woman named... Ohatsu. Ohatsu was a Karayuki-san.

(CUT TO: Impressionistic cutaways of the old building and other things.)

SHINICHI (O.S.)

Long ago, towards the end of the Meiji Era, countless poor Japanese girls were sold off by their families to work as prostitutes in foreign countries. They were the Karayuki-san. Many ended up in Malaya. Have you heard of them? To tell you the truth, the Karayuki-san are largely forgotten nowadays. When they died, they were buried in unmarked graves. No names at all.

Shinichi waves his flashlight slowly, casting a weak light upon a few different parts of the building.

SHINICHI

And Akiko Miyagawa. She tried to look for traces of Ohatsu's existence. She believed that these recurring dreams were remembrances.

RIE

Did she find anything?

Shinichi does not answer her question. Instead, he takes a few steps towards her, until they are merely inches apart from each other.

SHINICHI

Listen. You and I. We knew each other from before. Two years ago, you were Akiko Miyagawa.

(CONTINUED)

Rie's face darkens with displeasure. She shrinks away from him when he is about to reach out to touch her face. Glaring at him, Rie continues moving away while flicking her lighter off, so that she is completely enveloped in darkness. Shinichi is unable to see her, he sighs.

SHINICHI

I never stopped looking for you,
you know?

RIE (O.S.)

Mister Matsuda, I told you already.
I'm not her.

SHINICHI

(chuckles humourlessly)
I find that very hard to believe.

Rie appears again behind him. He turns. She kisses him. But it is fleeting, almost like an intoxicating imagination. He cannot hold her at all.

He finds himself standing alone again as she is lost in the shadows.

RIE (O.S.)

My name is Rie Imai.
(beat)
Goodbye.

Shinichi hurries towards the direction of her voice, but Rie is gone.

25 EXT. OLD DILAPIDATED SHOPLOTS - NIGHT

Shinichi exits the shoplots, looking around frantically. He wanders through the labyrinthian alleys of the area.

There's no sign of Rie.

She has vanished. As if in a story. As if in a dream.

26 EXT. PIER - DAWN

Rie wakes up when she hears the soft sounds of guitar. She is resting on a hammock of a wooden hut next to a pier. A Malay girl is trying to play a guitar that seems too big for her.

Noticing that she is awake, the child shyly hands Rie the guitar.

Rie begins strumming a gentle tune.

27 INT. AIRPLANE - DAY

A plane flying in the sky.

Through its window, we see an endless range of white clouds in the blue sky.

28 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY

The white clouds were reflected upon the impossibly blue seawater of Semporna, a coastal village that is similar to the one in Scene 4.

Coral and sea creatures can be seen through the crystal clear waters.

A young rower navigates through the place on a wooden boat. Shinichi is on the boat.

The village is a magical place inhabited mostly by the Bajau Laut ethnic community, otherwise known as the sea gypsies. They live carefree lives in either the stilt houses on the water, or in boats. Some can be seen fishing and farming seaweeds.

Shinichi starts taking a few photos with his old camera.

29 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - DAY

Shinichi is hiking through a suffocating jungle of lush green trees, accompanied by two guides, a man and a woman. Shinichi is busy snapping photos while the two guides are standing nearby, watching.

MALE GUIDE

Are you sure we should bring him here?

FEMALE GUIDE

He said that he is a film director from Tokyo. He wants to check this jungle out.

MALE GUIDE

You mean he wants to shoot a movie here? That is crazy. There's nothing here.

(CONTINUED)

The two guides are conversing in Malay as they assume that Shinichi doesn't understand a word.

Suddenly, Shinichi turns to the guides.

SHINICHI

Excuse me, I heard that there used to be a zoo nearby which belonged to the Sultan of Johor. Is that true?

Speaking to these guides, Shinichi uses a different speech mannerism, making himself sound like an enthusiastic and flamboyant tourist. A sheer contrast to his usual cool, dispassionate nature.

FEMALE GUIDE

Yes sir. His Highness Sultan Ibrahim built a gigantic private zoo for his secret English lover Cissie Hill as an engagement gift. It was said that mountain was Cissie's favourite place, and some of the zoo animals were allowed to roam here freely when Cissie wanted to take a walk. Especially the deers.

SHINICHI

Deers? Why?

FEMALE GUIDE

Cissie was a cabaret dancer. She liked to watch the movements of deers, they were graceful.

SHINICHI

(feigned excitement)

Oh, how fascinating! But what happened to the zoo?

FEMALE GUIDE

Cissie Hill was killed during World War 2. Out of sadness, the Sultan set the zoo on fire.

They continue walking in silence. Shinichi is thoughtful.

The male guide takes out a small piece of dried root from a straw bag and offers it to Shinichi.

(CONTINUED)

MALE GUIDE

Put this in your mouth when we go deeper into the jungle.

SHINICHI

What is this?

FEMALE GUIDE

It's a secret remedy handed to us by our ancestors whenever we are on the mountains. It keeps the snakes away.

MALE GUIDE

And evil spirits.

With a frown, Shinichi takes the dried root.

FEMALE GUIDE

This mountain is always used as a refuge. It was said that a few of those animals that survived the fire in the zoo made their way here.

(pause)

It was said that twenty years after that, an Indonesian soldier came here to hide too.

As they continue walking, the distant sounds of waterfall can be heard. The tropical jungle resembles the landscape of a feverish dream.

But sunlight begins to penetrate through the once-impenetrable trees. That is when Shinichi sees the majestic waterfalls, roaring imperiously, drowning away all previous sounds of the jungle.

Both male and female guides put the dried root in their mouths.

Seeing this, Shinichi does the same.

And as if on cue, memories of a previous life bursts into existence, bringing us to a different story.

PART 2

30 EXT. GRASSY PLAINS - EVENING. 1964

We see the blood-covered face of young Joko, the Indonesian soldier.

He is trudging weakly towards the jungle, a gun in hand. He looks about, trying to make sure no one is following him.

A title card reads: Borneo, 1964

31 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

Same jungle. Same waterfall. But half a century ago.

Joko sits alone.

He points the gun at his own head and pulls the trigger.

There's no bullet left.

Joko's eyes well up with frustrated tears.

Time lapse shot.

32 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

The same squad of policemen from Scene 2, continuing their search for a fugitive.

A few of them are sprinting through the jungle, trying to give chase.

Far ahead of them, a Joko's silhouette moves stealthily through the shadows of the trees.

Aziz, the young cop, is running the fastest. Even so, he is no match for Joko's speed, and soon, he has lost sight of his target.

Exhausted after the running, Aziz leans against a tree, wiping sweat off his forehead, panting for air. The heat is too much for him. He had never liked the heat.

Behind him, his colleague, SAMAD (32), is seated on the ground. Already too tired to get up.

SAMAD

Damn Indon sure ran fast.

Samad then doubles over and begins to puke. Aziz stares at him in disgust and moves a bit further away.

(CONTINUED)

SAMAD

Urgh, lost my damned lunch.

Aziz squats down and touches the blades of grass on the ground. He then lifts his fingers to his nose, trying to detect a scent.

33 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

Joko emerges from the water and crawls to the shore.

He lies on his back, raising a hand over his face to shield his eyes from the sunlight.

34 INT. OPEN SEA / UNDERWATER - DAY. 1964

There are numerous boats in the middle of the sea. The area is filled with bottles and ropes, the people on the boats are slowly pulling up the ropes. They are seaweed farmers, and they cultivate seaweeds by anchoring the ropes to the bottom of deep waters.

A group of young people and children are swimming underwater, helping to remove the ropes. One of the swimmers is a young woman, Li Ling.

After a while, Li Ling gets onto her boat with some seaweed lines in her hand, she is helped up by her younger brother, Meng.

They then row their boat back to the village.

35 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - EVENING. 1964

The few of the policemen, including Aziz and Samad, walk through the village. The search had lasted for days, they are desperate for some rest. Their morale and spirits are low.

Aziz is sullen.

In the distance, he sees a teenage boy and a young woman, actually Meng and Li Leng, seated on the ground, picking out seaweeds from the ropes.

The siblings are assisted by a few other children. They are laughing and singing.

Aziz pauses for a while, then he continues his way.

He does not understand why such a mundane sight of two strangers has even caught his attention in the first place.

36 EXT. SEA - EVENING. 1964

Li Ling is rowing her boat away from the village with Meng. They are heading towards the mangrove jungle.

37 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - EVENING. 1964

Having exerted too much energy since the chase, and already starving. Joko stumbles through the jungle in a daze.

He tries to hunt. But there are no animals.

He tries to hack away at a nearby tree bark, but lacks the strength.

Frustration gives way to despair, Joko sinks quietly into his knees. He is losing consciousness.

But the sudden sounds of footsteps jolt him awake. The Indonesian soldier quickly turns, pointing his gun.

He sees Li Ling and Meng, they are holding a basket of watermelons and papayas. There are no fear in the siblings' eyes.

Li Ling plants herself between Joko's gun and Meng, shielding her younger brother protectively. She stares at the soldier with defiance.

Joko lowers his gun.

Li Ling and Meng then place the baskets of fruits on the ground. Meng smiles faintly at Joko. After that, he and his sister walk away.

Once they are gone, Joko hurries over to check the basket.

He cuts the papaya, juices flow languidly out of the fruit.

38 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - MORNING. 1964

The next day, Li Ling and Meng arrive on a boat again.

They walk through the jungle, Joko is there waiting for them.

(CONTINUED)

This time, the siblings approach the soldier. Meng is holding a blanket, he hands the blanket to Joko. After a brief hesitation, Joko takes it and wraps it around himself.

Meng smiles.

So does Joko.

The soldier turns his eyes to Li Ling. Li Ling looks a little shy.

39 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - EVENING. 1964

Li Ling is going through the seaweed lines.

Behind her, the sea has turned gold as the sun is setting. but she continues working. Some children around her are running about.

Meng arrives with some snacks and drinks for Li Ling, Li Ling decides to take a break, eating the snacks absently. Meng then hears Li Ling humming a song.

The melody of the song is identical to the one that Rie was playing on the guitar in Scene 26. It sounds peaceful, like a lullaby.

Meng smiles.

40 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - EVENING. 1964

Joko is watching and waiting for the sun to disappear completely into the horizon.

Buried deep within the creek next to him, there is an old faded black and white photo of a British woman wearing a cheongsam.

It is a portrait of Cissie Hill, she has a haunting gaze.

41 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - NIGHT. 1964

The sun is gone. The darkening sky is filled with faint glittering stars.

The members of the police squad, including Aziz and Samad, make their way through the woods with flashlights in their hands. Beams of lights from their flashlights flood through the forest, but they cannot find the Indonesian soldier.

Moments later, the POLICE CAPTAIN ABU BAKAR (45) leans against a tree and lights up a cigarette.

As Captain Abu Bakar starts smoking, he contemplates the location of their intended target. The smoke of his cigarette floats languidly into the air.

Aziz and Samad are half a kilometer away, searching.

AZIZ

I don't know whether it's just me, Samad. But I feel as if I've been searching this bastard for a very long time. It's a strange feeling.

Not too far away, standing on a higher ground, Joko watches the police squad.

42 INT. CAR - NIGHT. 1964

The police squad leaves on a van. It is still dark, the search has been called off. Aziz, seated at the back, watches the dark outlines of the scenery outside.

AZIZ

It's a strange sound, right?

SAMAD

What sound?

Aziz turns and stare at his partner in surprise, and then at the other cops, who all seem unperturbed.

AZIZ

You can't hear this now? These strange sounds of chains being pulled.

Samad shakes his head. Aziz continues eyeing the passing trees.

AZIZ

These few nights, I have been trying to follow the sounds. I thought I was getting closer. So close.

POV of the van, passing through the road with nothing but some faint distant streetlights to light up the way.

(CONTINUED)

SAMAD (O.S.)

Hey, Aziz.

(pause)

You asleep?

43 EXT. BEACH - NIGHT / DAWN. 1964

Joko is at the beach.

He stares at the sea. And the full moon above it. The tranquility of the scenery calms his heart.

The pale moonlight casts a reflection upon the languorous surface of the water, twisting and turning gently like a silvery eel.

Li Ling sits by the beach, wearily going through the seaweed lines, stifling a yawn. Meng is lying nearby, asleep.

A few moments pass by, she notices that Joko is standing nearby, she is slightly startled.

Joko smiles at her. He walks over and examines the mass of tangled seaweed lines. He brushes his hands through them and begins to pull out the seaweeds from the lines, helping Li Ling with her work.

Li Ling continues as well, their hands inches away from each other as they work through the seaweeds.

44 EXT. MANGROVE FOREST - DAY. 1964

Joko is sleeping by a flowing creek. Past a couple of trees, a deer wanders about.

The deer starts drinking water from the creek, then it goes away.

The boy soldier opens his eyes and sits up.

The deer is gone.

45 EXT. OPEN SEA - DAY. 1964

Li Ling gets out of the boat, she is horrified to see that Meng's nose are bleeding profusely.

MENG

I'm okay. Maybe it's just a bit too sunny here.

(CONTINUED)

Meng rubs his nose, staining his hands with blood.

MENG
I fell asleep just now. Had a
strange dream.

46 INT. CLINIC - DAY. 1964

Meng is lying on a bed, examined by DOCTOR LIM (38). He then turns to Li Ling.

DOCTOR LIM
Your brother is fine, his nose is
sensitive, too many hours under the
sun is bad for him.

MENG
See, Big Sis? I told you there's
nothing to worry about.

Li Ling smiles in relief.

47 INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY. 1964

Li Ling is in Doctor Lim's office, Li Ling is reaching into her bag for money.

DOCTOR LIM
Forget about the money, Li Ling. We
are too close to worry about such
things.

Li Ling hesitates.

LI LING
Then I'll leave now.

DOCTOR LIM
I really feel that both you and
your brother should move out of the
village. It's too close to the
Indonesians.

LI LING
(smiles)
And where can we go to?

DOCTOR LIM
Here. My place.

(CONTINUED)

LI LING

You don't have to worry so much, Doctor Lim. My brother and I are fine. Even with Father gone.

DOCTOR LIM

Two weeks ago, when I heard about the Indonesians attacking your place, I couldn't sleep at all.

LI LING

But we are still safe. The village is fine.

DOCTOR LIM

Why do you have to work so hard? With these Indonesians messing around, how can there still be business for seaweeds?

LI LING

I really have to leave now, doctor.

Li Ling heads towards the exit. The doctor gets up and approaches her.

DOCTOR LIM

I can look after you and your brother. You once told me that your brother wanted to go to school.

LI LING

That's why I'm working so hard, doctor.

The doctor takes hold of Li Ling's hand, she remains emotionless.

The doctor releases his grasp, turns and returns to his desk.

48 EXT. CLINIC / TOWN - DAY. 1964

Li Ling exits the clinic with a bag of medicine, Meng is there waiting for her.

The clinic is actually situated in a bustling town somewhat far away from their village.

The siblings make their way through the town, waiting for the train.

The train arrives.

They get onto the train.

49 INT. TRAIN - DAY. 1964

Li Ling sits in the train with Meng.

50 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

Li Ling and Meng are eating together, chatting with other village folks. Meng seems to enjoy playing with the kids.

It's another idyllic day in the village.

51 INT. LI LING'S HOUSE - NIGHT. 1964

Li Ling lies on her bed, unable to sleep. She starts dressing up, doing her hair.

She peeks through Meng's room. Meng is sleeping.

She leaves the house.

52 EXT. SEA - NIGHT. 1964

Li Ling is on a boat by herself. Everything around her is pitch black.

Her path ahead is illuminated by the lantern.

53 EXT. LI LING'S HOUSE - NIGHT. 1964

Meng is awake, he is sitting at the verandah outside his house.

54 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - NIGHT. 1964

Li Ling stumbles through the jungle, searching frantically for Joko.

Finally she reaches a clearing, and sees him standing there. She pauses, looking at him, thinking, sorting through the storm of emotions that rages through her heart.

She takes a few hesitant steps towards him. And then, Li Ling wraps her arms around the soldier, hugging him tight.

55 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

The first rays of the morning sun peeks through the leaves.

Li Ling is washing her skirt at the creek. There's some blood.

Joko appears, standing beside her, gently stroking her face and her neck.

56 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

Li Ling returns to the village on the boat.

57 INT. LI LING'S HOUSE - DAY. 1964

She enters her house and checks to see whether Meng is still sleeping.

Meng is on the bed, his face turned away from her, so she cannot see that his eyes are open.

Li Ling starts preparing breakfast.

58 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

While Li Ling is collecting laundry, she slides her fingers through the smooth cloth.

It is a warm sensation, strangely rapturous.

59 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

Li Ling is with Joko, her hands brushing through his. Time seems to pass slowly as they are both lost in their own world.

60 EXT. EDGE OF MANGROVE JUNGLE / BEACH - DAY. 1964

Leaving the mangrove jungle on her boat, Li Ling looks over her shoulder.

Joko watches her from behind the trees.

Li Ling nods at him and rows slowly away.

Then, footsteps behind her causes her to turn about, Joko is running towards her, chasing after her boat.

(CONTINUED)

The soldier reaches her and grabs the side of the boat, then he pulls himself up and sits next to her.

He gently takes the oar from her hands and begins rowing.

LI LING
(laughs)
Where do you want to go?

JOKO
I don't know.

Joko laughs too.

Li Ling speaks Malay, while Joko speaks Indonesian, their languages are similar.

Their boat drifts away.

61 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

Meng is at a pier, where numerous boats are docked. He sees one of his neighbours, WAN, a younger teenager and also a seaweed farmer, tending his boat.

MENG
Hey, Wan, can I borrow your boat?

WAN
What's up, Meng?

MENG
No, I just want to head over to help my sister out. I don't think she can manage the seaweeds alone. I'll be back in the evening.

WAN
Okay.

62 EXT. OPEN SEA - DAY. 1964

Meng is rowing Wan's boat.

63 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

Arriving at the jungle on the boat, Meng walks about trying to look for Joko.

Joko emerges.

(CONTINUED)

Meng lunges at him, Joko swiftly pushes him aside. Meng gets up again and charges at Joko, trying to hit and push him. But the Indonesian soldier is stronger and faster, he manages to push Meng onto the ground again. Meng is getting angrier, he tries to punch Joko, but Joko parries each blow with ease.

Both of them struggle for a little longer, despite Meng's constant attempts to hit him, Joko isn't retaliating with any punches of his own. Finally Joko wrestles Meng onto the ground.

This time, Meng stays on the ground, gasping for air.

MENG

Take the boat and leave.

Joko says nothing.

Moments later, the soldier returns to the jungle.

Meng sits up slowly, his nose is bleeding again.

64 EXT. OPEN SEA - EVENING. 1964

Meng is seated on Wan's boat as he drifts aimlessly with the currents.

Finally, Li Ling's boat appears, she has a worried look.

MENG

Big Sis.

LI LING

Where did you go?

MENG

I was looking for you.

LI LING

I'm sorry.

MENG

Why?

65 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - EVENING. 1964

Meng and Li Ling are picking through the seaweeds.

(CONTINUED)

MENG

To tell you the truth, big sis, I really want to leave this place.

Li Ling is quiet for a while.

LI LING

All right.

MENG

But what about you?

LI LING

I can always find some work in the city. Maybe in a restaurant. And you, you can go back to school. How does that sound?

Meng frowns.

MENG

Do we really have to plan that far ahead?

(beat)

I wasn't talking about the city. I'm just thinking of going somewhere further away. Somewhere far.

Somehow, Li Ling finds her thoughts wandering to Joko.

66 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

Li Ling is carrying seaweed and walking through the village, she pauses and looks around at this place that she had called home all her life.

Situated in the middle of a crystal blue sea, an idyllic land where there are no boundaries between water and land. The children jump into the sea, yelling and shouting happily.

She is unable to look away.

67 INT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - DAWN. 1964

Sensing Li Ling's arrival, Joko retreats further into the trees, deeper into the jungle, waiting for her to reach him. Waiting to share a private moment with her.

When she is finally with him, they both exchange wordless gazes, there isn't anything to say. He understands.

(CONTINUED)

The Indonesian soldier takes hold of her hand, squeezes it. Li Ling raises her other hand to touch his face, but thinks better of it and withdraws it swiftly.

Knowing that they have to part, he finds himself yearning for her even more.

JOKO

When the war ends, I will come back
and look for you. No matter what.
Do you understand me?

Li Ling nods.

LI LING

Yes.

Joko walks past her and towards the beach, where Meng and the boat awaits. Li Ling does not go with him.

As Joko is out of earshot, Li Ling continues her way, walking to another part of the jungle.

She stops abruptly.

The police squad led by Captain Abu Bakar is waiting for her.

Li Ling stares at them, then she gives a slight, imperceptible nod.

Captain Abu Bakar raises a hand to make a signal.

One by one, the policemen make their way towards Joko's direction.

When Aziz walks past Li Ling, their eyes meet for a brief moment. But swiftly, the young woman averts her gaze.

One policeman stays behind to escort Li Ling away.

68

EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - MOMENTS LATER. 1964

As the policemen make their way through the woods, they cast a massive ominous shadow over the trees.

The chirping birds stop chirping, the rustling leaves stop rustling. Everything had become silent except for the footstep sounds of the policemen.

69 EXT. EDGE OF MANGROVE FOREST - DAY. 1964

Meng is pulling the boat over to Joko when they hear the distant sounds of the approaching policemen. Sensing betrayal, Joko glares at Meng with hate-filled anger.

JOKO
You told them?

Before Meng can reply, Joko punches him viciously in the face. Meng recoils in pain and falls onto the ground.

Joko runs off.

70 EXT. MANGROVE JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

Joko runs swiftly. Darting past the trees, running through the shadows.

Far behind him, Aziz is giving chase again. The policeman is trying hard to keep up.

71 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - DAY. 1964

Aziz draws his gun.

He looks into the distance, there are rustling noises, and then, the sounds of someone running.

Aziz aims and pulls the trigger...

Meng falls onto the ground with a yell, stomach bleeding profusely from the gunshot. He grimaces at his wound and covers it with a hand, and then with two hands.

Blood continues pouring out through his fingers, and then from his mouth. He gurgles.

Joko appears beside him first, he grabs hold of the boy, drawing him close and cradling him. The Indonesian soldier is in shock that Meng has taken the bullet that was meant for him.

Meng smiles at him weakly.

MENG
I really didn't know they were here.

Joko nods in understanding. Meng sighs softly.

(CONTINUED)

MENG

A few nights ago, I had a dream.
We'll meet again. I know it.

Meng notices that his assailant, the policeman, is approaching him and Joko, but Meng is unable to speak out anymore, just a soft gurgling sound.

The policeman is a blurry image.

At first, Meng sees him for who he is.

Aziz.

Meng blinks a few times as the last vestiges of his life seep away.

Aziz suddenly possesses the face of a Japanese man.
Aziz becomes Shinichi.

He is too weak to give any warnings when Aziz fires his gun at Joko.

Joko falls face down by the water. Shot in the back, his spine has been shattered. The tide comes in slowly, drowning half of his face. His features have contorted into a frozen look of sorrow and agony.

The Indonesian soldier makes a soft guttural sound, and loses consciousness.

Aziz approaches the Indonesian soldier, holding his gun.

It is then that he realizes his mistake, that he has earlier shot a local villager by accident.

Aziz squats down beside the fallen Joko and Meng.

Meng's mouth is moving, his eyes are fixed upon Aziz, his hand is twitching. Aziz leans forward and tries to listen to what Meng is saying.

Meng whispers a few things into Aziz's ear. Then he dies. Aziz reaches out and shuts the boy's lifeless eyes. Somehow, the boy seems peaceful, there is a slight enigmatic smile on his face.

The rest of the police squad arrive moments later.

Captain Abu Bakar surveys the scene solemnly.

Aziz salutes his captain.

(CONTINUED)

Captain Abu Bakar examines Meng and Joko for a few moments. He gestures to his men.

Samad comes forward, takes out a knife, and places it in Meng's hand.

Aziz tries to protest, but his captain silences him with a stern stare.

CAPTAIN ABU BAKAR

Did the boy say anything to you
before he tried to... attack you,
Aziz?

(Aziz nods)

What did he say?

Aziz hesitates.

AZIZ

I'm not sure, sir. It sounded...
Japanese.

Meng's blood flows through the grass, forming a long trail.

72 EXT. LI LING'S HOUSE - EVENING. 1964

Li Ling sees a trail of blood flowing through the floor of the house.

She stares at the blood. Realization dawns upon her.

She begins to scream hysterically at the top of her lungs, again and again, until her voice cracks.

73 EXT. SEA - DUSK. 1964

Meng's empty boat drifts across the endless sea.

74 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 1964

Doctor Lim is with Li Ling.

DOCTOR LIM

They have sent him back to
Indonesia this morning. As for your
brother... don't worry, I will
settle it for you.

(beat)

They also found this in the jungle.

(CONTINUED)

The doctor takes out a blanket from his bag, the same blanket that Li Ling and Meng had given Joko earlier, and hands it to her.

DOCTOR LIM

After all these had happened, I don't think you should stay here anymore. Move to my place, Li Ling. I will take care of you. Just like before.

Li Ling takes his hand and puts it on her stomach.

LI LING

Can you feel it?

Doctor Lim stiffens immediately, he withdraws from Li Ling. There is a look of repulsion and disgust on the doctor's face.

He slaps her. After that, he tries to apologize.

75 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - DAWN. 1964

When Li Ling returns to the tropical jungle, near the waterfalls, she is visibly pregnant.

At least two to three months have passed.

She struggles her way through the place.

Finding a tree, she lies beneath it. She notices a patch of dried blood on its trunks, it is the same tree where his brother has been leaning against before he died.

She places a hand on her stomach.

LI LING

Stay.

After that, Li Ling closes her eyes, as if she is falling asleep. Her face, while still beautiful, has begun to lose colour, becoming as pale as a ghost's, as if life is seeping away from her too.

She is slowly engulfed by the morning mists. We see two arms appear behind her, and then a silhouette of Joko, drawing her into a gentle embrace, the vision is ethereal like a dream.

We see a faint silhouette of Meng, wandering in the mists, unseen by anyone.

(CONTINUED)

There is then a deer, galloping into the distance.

When we see Li Ling's face again. It is pale, her lips are colourless. Her eyes are open. Staring lifelessly into the sky. A fly crawls on her cheek.

76 INT. EMPTY DILAPIDATED BUILDING - EVENING

Back in the present, a continuation to Scene 6.

We see old Joko and Shinichi in the same empty building where they first met.

OLD JOKO

I never returned to this country until the war ended. For fifty years, I have been trying to look for a deer. It was a promise.

SHINICHI

(in Japanese)

And what will you do after you find it? Things that happened in the past should remain in the past. Wouldn't that have made you happier? Just to forget?

The old man smiles at him. Shinichi notices that some water is gathering up his shoes.

77 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - DAY

Shinichi is in the water. Drowning slowly and slowly.

Above him, there is a white light. Looking up at the sun through the water, it is both alien and beautiful, a disc of light that constantly changes shape.

There is a sudden darkness, the sun seems to be eclipsed by shadows.

But in truth, the dark shapes are two pairs of hands that reach into the water to pull him out.

Shinichi gasps loudly, his wide eyes darting back and forth. He sees the two guides he was with, they both look at him with worried expressions.

FEMALE GUIDE

Mr. Matsuda, are you all right?

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI
What happened?

FEMALE GUIDE
You fell into the water.

The Japanese private eye is still lying on the ground, he does not seem to have any recollection of it at all.

MALE GUIDE
This place is not suitable for you.
It's not a place to make movies.
(he makes a gesture to ward
off evil spirits, then places
a hand on Shinichi's forehead)
Now you have a fever.

FEMALE GUIDE
Have you forgotten? You told us you
were hearing sounds.
(beat)
Strange sounds of chains being
pulled.

SHINICHI
Yes, I heard that, didn't I?

He struggles to sit up with the assistance of the two guides.

SHINICHI
And the deer are all gone.

Fade to black.

PART 3

78 INT. WOODEN HUT - DAY

Shinichi is lying on a mattress in a traditional wooden hut, his face covered in sweat, his lips are blue. The fever has left him weak and delirious. An old man sits next to him, dabbing his forehead with wet cloth while saying something to him in an unintelligible local dialect that he does not understand.

He sees both the male and female guides standing nearby.

Shinichi motions at his camera that is placed across the room. The male guide takes it and hands it to him.

The Japanese man runs his fingers through the camera. While doing so, he gazes at the window.

(CONTINUED)

He then notices that a young woman is standing outside, bathed in the soft afternoon sunlight. The ephemeral nature of her appearance hints that she is probably an illusion from his feverish hallucinations. Or is she?

The young woman returns his gaze, with familiar defiance and mirthlessness.

She has long hair and thick black-rimmed glasses.

Despite her appearance, her face is unmistakably identical to Rie's.

But she is not Rie, she is AKIKO MIYAGAWA, a woman from his past who continues to haunt him now.

Shinichi squints his eyes, trying to get a better look of her as she walks further and further away from him. Until she is nothing more than a tiny speck.

And then, we see that Akiko is alone by herself.

She is a solitary figure walking past the slopes of a beautiful green tea field, tendrils of white mists envelope the place. Like a pastoral painting.

AKIKO (V.O.)

This is the journal of Akiko Miyagawa, private detective. I am writing this just so I can remember.

(beat)

Last night's dream was shapeless and blurry. I saw an endless stretch of tea plantation. And also some sunflowers. In the sky, I think I saw some airships, blocking out the sun.

79 INT. MECHANIC SHOP / OFFICE - DAY. 2010

The story moves seamlessly to 2 years earlier.

We are at the same mechanic shop that belonged to Shinichi in previous scenes.

We see the same old broken car that Shinichi has examined and Rie was hiding in, at the corner of the shop.

Akiko is looking at the husk of metal.

(CONTINUED)

AKIKO (V.O.)

A few weeks have passed since my car fell into the river. Chances of recovery. Zero.

She then continues her way into her office. The same office that would later become Shinichi's.

80 INT. OFFICE - DAY. 2010

Akiko is seated behind her desk. There is a fishbowl on the desk, she is busy feeding the fishes.

She yawns.

The phone rings.

Raju picks up the phone.

RAJU

Hock Seng Car Repairs...
(he notices that Akiko is frowning at him)
Oh, er, and Miyagawa Private Investigation.
(pause as he listens to the other end of the receiver)
Okay, you want a car service.

Akiko makes a face and loses interest immediately. She returns her attention to the fishes.

81 EXT. ALLEY - DAY. 2010

Messenger Boy arrives on his bicycle. He gets off his bike, finds a safe spot, and places his schoolbag on the ground.

Akiko approaches.

MESSENGER BOY

Mr. Hafiz's money is in the white envelope.

AKIKO

Did you change it to Japanese yen?

Messenger Boy frowns and shakes his head.

Akiko takes the envelope, checks the money and places it in her purse. After that, she hands Messenger Boy a lollipop.

Messenger Boy unwraps and tastes it. He seems to like it.

82 EXT. ROAD - DAY. 2010

Akiko is riding a scooter.

83 EXT. NIGHT MARKET - EVENING. 2010

AKIKO (V.O.)

At night, I continued my investigation for Missus Wong. She wanted me to follow her husband. Unable to have children, she thinks their marriage is in trouble.

Akiko is at a night market, she orders coconut water from a vendor and begins to drink. Her eyes wander about.

She sees Mister Wong, a middle-aged man, and begins to follow him, pushing through the throngs of crowd at the night market, her hand still holding the coconut.

Mister Wong is buying a few snacks from one of the stalls before making his way away from the night market, and into one of the nearby streets.

She finally sees him sitting alone, eating.

Akiko hides and observes.

Finally, a car pulls up in front of Mister Wong. A woman, MADAM TIEN, comes out with a baby in her arms.

MISTER WONG

He's older than I expected.

MADAM TIEN

You wouldn't want them if they were too young. It's a hassle.

MISTER WONG

He really looks like a Chinese boy.
(beat)

Anyway, I have already deposited the money into your account.

MADAM TIEN

Yes, I got it. Take the baby. Your wife will be happy.

Mister Wong takes the baby. Madam Tien returns to the car and drives away.

(CONTINUED)

MISTER WONG

Yes, she will be happy.

Suddenly, Mister Wong breaks down and sobs uncontrollably while holding the baby. He regains his composure and walks away with the baby.

Akiko follows Mister Wong for another few meters, before she steps aside and disappears into the shadows.

Cuts to shots of rain at night.

84 INT. AKIKO'S OFFICE - NIGHT. 2010

Akiko sleeps on her desk, she lives in the office.

In a half-awakened state, she dreams up beautiful images of her hometown in Japan.

This is interrupted by the sickening loud sounds of hammer pounding against flesh.

At a dream-like landscape, Akiko walks away with a hammer covered in blood.

She falls onto her knees, behind her, she sees a vague figure of a kimono-clad woman.

AKIKO (V.O.)

I was dreaming of the woman again.
She was undoubtedly Ohatsu. She
gave birth to a monster and I had
to crack its skull with a hammer
because I was protecting her.

She wakes up and realizes that her nose is bleeding.

85 EXT. MECHANIC SHOP - DAWN. 2010

Akiko is seated outside the mechanic shop, it is still early in the morning, so none of the workers have arrived. She hasn't gotten a good sleep.

Above her, a flock of birds fly by, their shrill cries fill up the air.

AKIKO (V.O.)

This is the journal of Akiko
Miyagawa, private detective.
(beat)

Ever since I was a child, I have
been dreaming of people from a
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

AKIKO (V.O.) (cont'd)
century ago. I would be watching
through the eyes of a boy, and I
will always see the same woman
whose name is Ohatsu.

(beat)

The dreams were no different from
reality. They are long and
distinct. Therefore, It is strange
I call them 'dreams', since they
feel more truthful than reality.

She looks across the grassy fields, a man is pacing about
while the sun is rising.

AKIKO (V.O.)
That morning, I met him for the
very first time.

We now see that the man at the field is actually Shinichi,
clean-shaven, slightly younger.

AKIKO
Do you think I speak nonsense,
Mister Matsuda?

Shinichi looks up at her, taken aback by her blunt question.
He musters a smile.

SHINICHI
No, Miss Miyagawa. I'm actually
intrigued.

(beat)

When I was a child, I suspected
that the truth about life after
death is known to every human
being. Yet I myself remained
oblivious, and a great conspiracy
of books and people hid the truth
from me.

(beat)

Maybe that is why I travel around
collecting stories.

AKIKO
(frowns in slight displeasure)
So you think what I tell you is
merely a story?

SHINICHI
Are they not the same? Memories.
Stories. The images we remember
seem to change once we put them

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI (cont'd)
into words. We end up remembering
them differently.

Akiko hesitates for a while, she finds herself
contemplating. Then decides to go straight to business.

AKIKO
You know a lot about the
Karayuki-san. That is why I wanted
to meet you.

SHINICHI
Because of this woman named Ohatsu.

Akiko nods.

AKIKO (V.O.)
But the man was right. As I
continue writing down my memories,
I fear that I am already losing
them, little by little.

86 EXT. RUINED JETTY - NIGHT. 2010

It is night when both Akiko and Shinichi examine a broken
structure by the sea.

SHINICHI
This place used to be a port. A
hundred years ago, a ferry trip
from Japan to here would last a
month. The girls huddled together
in the boiler room so that the
other passengers could not see
them. The door would be locked.

(beat)

There was one ferry. When it
arrived here, it was overwhelmed by
a horrible stench from the boiler
room. The sailors went to
investigate, they found that all of
these girls have died, the corpses
were burnt beyond recognition. The
machine in the boiler room had
malfunctioned. The walls were too
thick for anyone to hear their
screams.

AKIKO
Why are you telling me this?

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI

Because this was what I remembered most about the Karayuki-san. And this happened to more than just one ferry. Just that people have already forgotten about them.

(beat)

These are the images that filled my head when you told me you wanted to find out about them.

Akiko closes her eyes, trying to go through the images of the dreams about the Karayuki-san from a century ago.

AKIKO

But I remember differently.

When she opens them, it is suddenly daytime.

87 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAWN. 1914

A high full view, like an oil painting seen through a window glass.

There is a rustic coastal Malay village with a few huts. It is early in the morning, the village is partially covered in fog.

AKIKO (V.O.)

I have seen this image a few times. There's a fishing village. And a woman arriving on a boat. The woman is Ohatsu.

Ohatsu, in red kimono, arrives on a sampan.

AKIKO (V.O.)

Ohana and Ofumi are always waiting for her.

Ohana and Ofumi, two young Japanese women in kimono stand at the riverbank, waiting for her. Ohana wears yellow, Ofumi other in pink and carries a doll.

As Ohatsu reaches the shore, she joins Ofumi and Ohana as they head towards the fog-covered village, walking slowly up the winding path.

AKIKO (V.O.)

One afternoon, Ohatsu, Ofumi and Ohana went to take a photo together at a photo studio. Ofumi had

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

AKIKO (V.O.) (cont'd)
brought a doll with her because she was fearful of bad luck. Ohana was eager to let her parents know about her life in Nanyo (South East Asia). Ohatsu... I wanted to know what Ohatsu was thinking, but I was looking at her from afar, so I don't know.

The three young women halt in their steps and turn towards us. An eternal image.

88 INT. AKIKO'S OFFICE, MECHANIC SHOP - DAY. 2010

Akiko is seated at her desk, feeding her fishes. There is a customer with her. A middle-aged Japanese man.

AKIKO
So, how may I help you, sir?

MIDDLE-AGED JAPANESE MAN
Miss Detective, to tell you the truth, I am not sure what help do I need. I came to Malaysia a year ago because I wanted to start anew. I don't know whether you have this feeling too after moving to this country. In the last few months, I find again a past that I didn't know I had. What feels foreign isn't this place, but to realize that there are still pieces of who I used to be, waiting for me at the most foreign of places. Am I the only one experiencing this? Can this be investigated?

Akiko merely gives him a half-hearted smile in reply, she then shakes her head slowly, not knowing the answer to his question either.

AKIKO (V.O.)
This is the journal of Akiko
Miyagawa, private detective...

89 INT. AKIKO'S OFFICE, MECHANIC SHOP - EVENING. 2010

Akiko makes a phone call to Japan.

AKIKO

Hello? Mother? Is that you, mother?

(beat)

I'm sorry. I'm looking for my
mother. Her name is...

(she frowns, struggling to
remember)

I'm sorry. I made a mistake then.

Very sorry.

Akiko puts down the phone. She tries to remember her mother.
They haven't spoken for many years.

Her heart is filled with despair.

AKIKO

(softly, to herself)

08032495378... 08032495379?

08032495387?

She picks up the receiver, then she puts it down again.

90 EXT. KUALA LUMPUR CITY STREETS - NIGHT. 2010

Akiko is running quickly through the streets, as first, she
seems as if she is lost.

But gradually, it becomes apparent that she is chasing after
someone.

She runs past the chaotic crowd, past the traffic, the neon
lights, and pauses as a train passes behind her, she looks
about, and then she continues to run.

AKIKO (V.O.)

I was chasing after Ohatsu in a
cave. There was no light. All I saw
were glimpses of her red kimono.
All I heard were echoes of my own
footsteps. I ran endlessly, calling
for her in a boy's voice. Moments
later, I heard her speaking back to
me. She said... (trails off)

Finally she finds the person that she has been chasing.
Akiko grabs hold of the man's arm, the man turns around
swiftly.

(CONTINUED)

It is Shinichi. He is surprised by her sudden appearance, and that she actually found him in such a manner.

SHINICHI

Miss Miyagawa? What happened?

She laughs giddily, then she pauses to catch her breath.

AKIKO

Let's just go tomorrow, Mr. Matsuda. I want to find her, I don't care how far it is.

Shinichi watches her wordlessly, then he nods. Satisfied with his reply, Akiko starts to move away from him, disappearing into the crowd as he watches on.

AKIKO (V.O.)

"I am jealous of the butterfly. It counts not months but moments. And yet it is already enough."

(beat)

That was what I heard Ohatsu say. But I was not Ohatsu, I was someone who was always chasing after her.

91 EXT. COASTAL VILLAGE - DAY. 2010

Akiko and Shinichi arrive at a coastal village.

Akiko looks about, trying hard to remember whether the same place has appeared in her dreams.

Shinichi starts snapping photos of the place with his antique camera. He notices that Akiko's eyes are on his camera, assuming that she wants to use it, he offers it to her.

SHINICHI

Try it.

Akiko takes it, she runs her hands over the camera and smiles wanly.

AKIKO

This reminded me of someone.

(beat)

A man I knew used to have a camera like this.

She looks through the camera viewfinder, everything seems a little distorted.

92 EXT. RUINED STRUCTURE BY THE SEA / BEACH - DAY. 2010

They approach the ruined remains of a stilted hut by the sea. Akiko climbs up and touches the wood, examining the place.

After a while, she leans her head against a wooden wall, listening.

AKIKO

Is this the same place from a hundred years ago? It has changed too much. Perhaps I am foolish to think that things can always remain the same. Maybe I am truly lost.

SHINICHI

Did you ever know whatever happened to Ohatsu in the end? Or the other two women?

AKIKO

Towards the end? Ohatsu and Ofumi returned to Japan. Nothing lasts anyway. Unlike her friends, Ohatsu chose to stay. She was always alone.

They continue navigating through the ruins. Later, they are underneath the hut, knee deep in the seawater, looking up, studying it. They wade through the water and to the beach.

Letting out a sigh, Akiko plops down on the sand and closes her eyes.

SHINICHI

Are you all right, Miyagawa?

AKIKO

I haven't really slept well for the past few days. This place is so comfortable. And quiet.

The waves continue crashing softly against the shore, sending bits of sand to her feet, the sun is hiding coyly behind the clouds, the cries of seagull sound strangely melodious. There is a strong gust of wind, causing the coconut trees nearby to sway rather violently.

AKIKO (V.O.)

This is the journal of Akiko Miyagawa, private detective. I am writing this just so I can remember.

(CONTINUED)

(beat)

But it is getting more and more
difficult to do that.

Akiko opens her eyes a little, Shinichi is placing his coat
over her. Their eyes meet, she smiles faintly in gratitude.

Shinichi's hands linger upon her shoulders for a little
while, then he withdraws them and walks away.

AKIKO

Hey Matsuda. You know that it's
highly possible we will never find
anything in the end.

SHINICHI

Yes, I'm aware of that.

AKIKO

What then?

Akiko gazes at Shinichi, she is genuinely curious about his
reply.

Finding a spot for himself, Shinichi sits down. His mind
wanders, but they mostly lead to the same person.

SHINICHI

I'll just enjoy this.

93

EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - EVENING. 2010

A notable amount of time has passed. Shots of trees, grass,
animals in the jungle. A broken stone statue lying in the
middle of nowhere.

AKIKO (O.S.)

How long was I away?

SHINICHI (O.S.)

A few hours. Then I found you here.

AKIKO (O.S.)

Was my nose bleeding?

SHINICHI (O.S.)

Yes.

AKIKO (O.S.)

That sucks.

Akiko moves through the trees and finds a clearing, she
still has Shinichi's coat over her.

(CONTINUED)

SHINICHI

You spoke to me moments ago. But
you sounded totally different.

AKIKO

Did I? What did I say?

Shinichi hesitates.

SHINICHI

It was too long for me to remember.

FADE TO BLACK

94 EXT. TROPICAL JUNGLE - EVENING. 2010 (MOMENTS EARLIER)

Akiko sits under a tree. Her face is smeared with blood when
she stares dazedly at Shinichi.

AKIKO

Hey, Ohatsu.

With a sad smile, Akiko reaches out and touches Shinichi's
face tenderly, leaving streaks of blood on his cheek as
well.

She leans forward and whispers.

AKIKO

I will remember you, even in
numberless forms, numberless times,
in life after life, in age after
age forever. But will you remember
me?

Impressionistic shots of nature, people, reflecting
different lives, different epochs.

AKIKO (O.S.)

Perhaps I am really losing my mind.
Others have been telling me that
for quite a while. It's always been
like this.

Akiko sighs wearily.

95 INT. RIVER - NIGHT. 2010

POV of a boat drifting through river late at night. Everything is in darkness except for pale ghostly glow from a lantern on the boat.

AKIKO (V.O.)

In these moments of madness, I
imagine myself disappearing. Going
somewhere further away. Somewhere
far.

Akiko and Shinichi are on the boat. It is dark, they are mere silhouettes.

But occasionally, we see them, their faces, their bodies, their hands, illuminated by the lanterns nearby. Both of them are slightly soaked, beads of water run through their weary faces, dripping onto the wooden surface of the boat.

Neither of them say a single word. The boat ride seems to be heading nowhere.

Akiko peers at Shinichi, but he is too tired to notice that, he is already dozing off. There are many things that she wants to say to him, but in the end, she says nothing.

She is at peace with herself, a strange contentment after an entire life of confusion.

Looking away from him, Akiko stares straight at us, or rather, towards the direction of the the darkness.

The boat floats away from sight as that happens.

Another boat arrives in a distance behind them.

It is Ohatsu, in her red kimono, her presence is luminous even though it is already late at night.

Ohatsu begins to sing a folk song, it sounds just like the piece that Rie played in part 1, and Li Ling hummed out in Part 2.

There is a sudden light from the distance. We follow the source of the light.

AKIKO (V.O.)

And this is how I end the journal
of Akiko Miyagawa, private
detective. With an unspoken idea.
Everything has to end. The dreams.
My search. Ohatsu. And finally,
Akiko Miyagawa.

(CONTINUED)

(beat)
Imagined endings are always better
anyway.

At the riverbank, Akiko's journal lies on the ground. Its pages, filled with handwritings, torn out and scattered on the ground.

They are all in flames.

Ohatsu's voice fades away, drowned out by the sounds of crackling fire and cicadas.

96 EXT. MECHANIC SHOP - DAY. 2010

Shinichi is standing in front of Akiko's office. Peering through the windows, he sees that the office is empty, even the desk is gone.

An empty fishbowl lies at the corner of the room.

Beside the fishbowl is her glasses.

Raju walks by and sees Shinichi.

RAJU
Hey. Are you looking for Akiko? She
left two days ago.

SHINICHI
Where to?

Raju shrugs and lights a cigarette for himself. He starts smoking.

RAJU
I don't know, she didn't say much.
Just left with some of her stuff.
But she told me to pass you
something.

Raju walks away and comes back with an envelope for Shinichi.

SHINICHI
Thank you.

Shinichi examines the envelope. Raju leaves and returns to his work. Shinichi opens the letter, and sees only a blank piece of paper. He folds it carefully again and puts it into his pocket.

(CONTINUED)

Then he walks away, towards the nearby grassy plains where he first met Akiko.

Without noticing, he is sitting next to the spot that she was sitting back then. For an unexplainable reason, Shinichi is assaulted by feelings of desolation.

97 INT. BUS - DAY. 2010

Akiko is in a bus.

A clear plastic bag of fishes in her hand bobble about as the bus turns.

The scenery outside is passing her by. Time continues to move. Day to night. Night to day.

Yet she remains in the bus, not knowing nor caring how far she has gone.

The bus stops at a rural area.

Akiko looks ahead.

BUS DRIVER (O.S.)
Hey, mister, you need help?

Sounds of bus driver getting off the bus and helping someone get onboard.

OLD PASSENGER (O.S.)
Thank you so much.

BUS DRIVER (O.S.)
Oh, you're not from these parts!
Where are you going?

OLD PASSENGER (O.S.)
Haha, I don't know. Maybe further
to the North.

We finally see that the passenger is old Joko.

Joko limps slowly to his seat, he and Akiko exchange glances for a few seconds, but Akiko politely averts her eyes.

The bus continues its way.

Joko and Akiko are seated only a few rows away from each other.

This time, we focus on Joko's lined, craggy face.

(CONTINUED)

The bus stops again moments later. Akiko gets off.

Gripped by a sudden unexplainable impulse, Joko peers out of the window at Akiko as she walks away. When the bus moves again, the Japanese woman has disappeared from the old man's sight.

98 EXT. TEA PLANTATION, CAMERON HIGHLANDS - DAY. 2010

Akiko continues to wander.

The bus has actually taken her to the highlands.

Everything around her is partially enveloped in clouds. The place is colder than other parts of Malaysia.

Again, Akiko is wearing the suit that Shinichi had given her.

Slowly, when the clouds begin to dissipate, she notices that the landscape in front of her is familiar. Like something from her dream.

An indescribably beautiful green tea plantation stretches out endlessly before her.

Akiko makes her way through the winding paths of the tea field.

Some busy movements catches her eye. She sees, not too far away, a small film crew in the middle of a film shoot.

They are shooting a musical sequence at the tea field.

There are nine film crew members. They are in fact the anarchists from Part 1.

The director is Mohan, the Indian man who was referred also to as Anarchist 1 in Part 1.

Akiko sits and watches them from afar.

MOHAN

Are you guys ready? Ah, just roll the camera! Make it more dramatic!

(beat)

Let them remember this forever!
Action!

Traditional Malay folk music begins, the dancers dance, someone croons a song.

(CONTINUED)

Mohan notices Akiko's presence behind him, he turns around and glances at her.

However, Akiko is utterly captivated by the performance.

Tears gather in her eyes.

More poetic shots of the tea field, languorous wisps of white clouds and mists that envelope the place.

The sun is setting.

99 EXT. WOODEN HUT - AFTERNOON

Back to the present.

Shinichi, having recovered from his fever, exits the wooden hut.

He begins to run with urgency.

In the background, there are faint sounds of chains being pulled. Strange sounds that only he has been hearing.

Finally, he pauses, trying to catch his breath.

100 EXT. PIER - AFTERNOON

At a pier, a close-up of Akiko. She is trying to getting onto a motorboat where a few of the anarchists are waiting for her.

We move a little further from her, we can see that Akiko now has a short pixie haircut, like Rie's.

Akiko is Rie. Rie is Akiko.

When she is onboard, the anarchists begin to pull at the anchor chain.

Rie concentrates on the pulling chain. They give off a strangely familiar sound.

After a while, the anchor is up.

Rie places a hand on the cold metallic surface of the chain as the boat begins to leave.

MOHAN

Hey, your coat.

Mohan hands her a coat.

(CONTINUED)

It is actually Shinichi's coat from two years earlier.
Rie takes it, and then she laughs softly.

RIE
Ah. I'm always so forgetful.

FADE TO BLACK:

EPILOGUE

101 EXT. GIGANTIC EMPTY INDUSTRIAL AREA - DAY

Joko, the old man, is in the middle of dilapidated industrial buildings.

There are some rustling sounds.

He looks over at his shoulder.

A deer walks past the buildings.

Joko tries to follow it, moving as fast as he can with his crutches.

He loses balance and falls, the crutches fall aside. He starts crawling, exerting a lot of effort, clearly in a lot of pain.

But moments later, he gets up and begins to walk properly.

After a few steps, he starts to run.

102 EXT. MANGROVE FOREST - DAY

Joko is now a young man, just like he was when he was a soldier in 1964.

He tries to look frantically for the deer, scanning through the trees, but he sees nothing.

He continues looking about, slowing his steps.

103 EXT. POND - DAY

Joko walks into a pond. Until the water is waist-deep.

There is no deer in sight.

He frowns and continues wading his way through.

(CONTINUED)

Somewhere nearby, he spots a person sitting by the pond. It is Li Ling, with a deer sleeping beside her.

Looking at him, Li Ling laughs.

LI LING
Are you lost?

Joko smiles.

JOKO
No.

With that, Li Ling isn't there anymore.

And Joko has disappeared as well.

What we see now is an empty pond.

A leaf spirals onto the water, setting off a silent ripple.

The deer wakes up and wanders off.

We start to drift away from the place.

We are rising. Over the hills, and trees, and plains. At the sun, which causes everything to glow beautifully.

The sun sets.

It is dark.

The sky is filled with stars.

There sounds of cicadas and crickets chirping harmoniously.

There is no concept of time.

We are now in a village, it is quiet.

Through the windows, we see the lights of a wooden house flickering on and off.

Black and white photos lined the walls. One is a faded photo of three young Japanese women in kimono: Ohatsu, Ohana and Ofumi.

Outside, another cycle of time begins.

The sun rises. Trees, hills, grasses, and other everyday images of nature are seemingly glowing with a strangely beautiful radiance.

There is the soft sound of pulling chains. It slowly fades away, replaced by the gentle soothing sound of water lapping against the shore.

And then we see Ohatsu, alone in a ruined building, in a non-specific place at a non-specific time. She is still dressed in her kimono, wondering about the constant sounds of chains that she still hears faintly in the distance. Wondering whether she had just woken up from a dream.

CUT TO BLACK

END