

THE *UNHEIMLICH* DOMESTIC:
DWELLING *ON* AND *IN* ERIC KHOO'S *12 STOREYS*

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Storeys: The HDB

Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys*¹ brings to light the private, parallel lives of the inhabitants of Housing and Development Board (HDB) block of apartments² that would otherwise be contained within its four walls. Like Lilian Chee, Khoo uses an intimate method of reading the HDB and its inhabitants, communicating more accurately the lived experience of the HDB than a technical architectural analysis would have allowed³. The “embodied details”⁴ of the occupant lie in the cinematic topography of the film — Khoo's adroit use of framing often emphasizes the human body and its gestures, subtly conveying an inhabitant's psychological state even in the absence of dialogue. The body becomes a kind of architecture⁵ that exposes excess: what is contained within the character's psyche slips through the cracks of physicality, writing itself onto the body.

On another level, the film examines how the body dwells within the domestic space, underscoring the relationship between the structure of the HDB and the human body. The HDB structures our experience of the domestic space. In *12 Storeys*, the opening montage is dedicated to the architectural structure of the HDB block, calling the audience's attention to the setting of the movie. For the Singaporean audience, the HDB is commonplace and often overlooked — in other words, a backdrop in our lives. As opposed to Tan Pin Pin's films which use the montage sequence of Singapore's urban spaces to create a separate filmic

¹ *12 Storeys*, directed by Eric Khoo. (1997; Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 1997).

² I will henceforth refer to the HDB apartment simply as ‘HDB’; this should not be confused the authoritative governmental housing department of the Housing and Development Board.

³ Lilian Chee, “An Architecture of Twenty Words: Intimate Details of a London Blue Plaque House,” In *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, eds. Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 183.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 185

⁵ Andrew Ballantyne, “The Nest and the Pillar of Fire,” In *What is architecture?*, ed. Andrew Ballantyne. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12.

space that diverts attention away from the documentary's subject⁶, Khoo's cinematography forces us to confront the architectural structure of the HDB block first and foremost. As implied by its title, *12 Storeys*, the structural dimension of the HDB as architecture — “architecture” referring also to the ideology behind the concrete structure — is the subject of the film. In fact, narrative and plot come secondary to the film: the narrative is discontinuous and lacks clear casual links, and the film is a twenty-four hour realist slice of HDB life beginning and ending at nightfall. *12 Storeys* is a kind of social documentary (though not strictly a documentary in the sense of a reportage of factual events), albeit a rather bleak one, that seeks to present life in a HDB apartment devoid of the politically correct fanfare that would otherwise be embedded in a government-endorsed HDB publicity campaign.

In fact, in place of a celebration of the Housing & Development Board's achievements through the efficacy of these HDB homes, the opposite is achieved. The voyeuristic exploration of these intimate and otherwise obscured narratives in *12 Storeys* makes palpable the uncomfortable and uncanny excess of domestic life in the HDB. Khoo problematizes the synonymy of the domestic space with the concept of home — that is, the domestic space is not home in the sense of *dwelling* wherein one feels spiritually at ease. Instead, it leans more towards its opposite meaning — an alienating and isolating space. To unpack the domestic through Freud's analysis of the uncanny: the house is *heimlich*⁷ in the sense that that which is within the house is homely and familiar, but it is hidden from the public eye. The *unheimlich*, or the uncanny, is the exposure of that which was intended to be

⁶ Lilian Chee, “Chasing Inuka: Rambling around Singapore through Tan Pin Pin's Films,” In *Asian Cinema and the Use of Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Lilian Chee and Edna Lim. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 60-61.

⁷ German for ‘homely’; its antonym, *unheimlich*, is the German translation for ‘uncanny’ but also directly translated as ‘unhomely’.

secret, hidden away, has come to light⁸ — reflected in the exposure of the hidden lives of the HDB inhabitants and the accompanying social taboos these characters represent. Khoo's exposing of the domestic sphere thus makes the HDB uncanny.

So far, there are several strands of the uncanny in Khoo's film that I have alluded to: the uncanny nature of the body as architecture — the body is portrayed structurally as a shell containing interiority; the uncanny exposure of the interiority through the body's betrayal of hiding excess; the uncanny domestic that Khoo uncovers rather psychologically through the slippage of. I propose that these uncanny exposures of the domestic confront the Singaporean viewer with an unsettling portrait of modern life in the suburban HDB. This confrontation is necessary in order for the HDB to be a true *dwelling* in Heidegger's sense of *Dasein*⁹: "As soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer."¹⁰

Stories within Storeys: Personal Narratives

As the homophonic title suggests, the film involves not just storeys, but stories within these storeys. There are four narrative strands in the film: the young man who commits suicide and appears as a ghostly onlooker throughout the film; San-San, the obese and unloved lady whose surrogate mother continues to taunt her rather schizophrenically even after her death; Ah-Gu and his shrewish Chinese bride, Li-Li; an overbearing eldest brother left in charge of his two younger siblings. Khoo allows us access into the private domestic interior, and so too, these inhabitants' interiority. These narratives confront social taboos like suicide, mental illness, foreign brides, sex and incest. It also critiques Singaporean society's lack of empathy and community that is glimpsed throughout the movie, especially in the apathetic response to

⁸ Sigmund Freud and David McLintock, *The Uncanny*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). 123-159.

⁹ German for "being". Ballantyne, "The Nest and the Pillar of Fire," 17.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger quoted in Ballantyne, "The Nest and the Pillar of Fire," 16.

the suicide, as well as the characters lack of interaction with one another despite being neighbours.

In the opening montage sequence, these stories are hinted at through the illuminated windows at night (Figure 1.1). There is a gradual zooming in into the lives of the people framed through the window (Figure 1.2). The structure of the HDB still takes precedence in the mise-en-scène, emphasizing how the narrative is still framed ultimately by the architectural structure of the HDB. In this manner, Khoo's framing directs the audience's gaze towards the HDB. A kind of voyeurism is also suggested in the framing of these shots as the viewing takes place in a darkened space — in this case, at night — and the object examined is illuminated, but whose view is directed only towards itself. The voyeur is able to see the object while still remaining hidden from the object's sight, obscured by the darkness, paralleling the audience in the theatre. The audience is then visually written into the scene, forcing us into an uncomfortable position of confronting our own act of spectatorship. The meta-commentary refuses the audience to simply view the film as spectacle — aiming at nothing other than itself¹¹ — in the manner of a classical Hollywood film that forces the audience to become lost in a fantasy created by the cinematic space on-screen. Instead, the Singaporean viewer is confronted with familiar sights framed in an unconventional and unfamiliar manner: the HDB becomes impersonal, imposing and isolating. The building dwarves its inhabitants. This is coupled with the uniformity of the structure (Figure 1.3 and Figure 1.4) portrayed by Khoo demonstrates a similar unyielding uniformity of existence, creating a Brechtian distancing that instinctively beckons reflection.

¹¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994). 14.

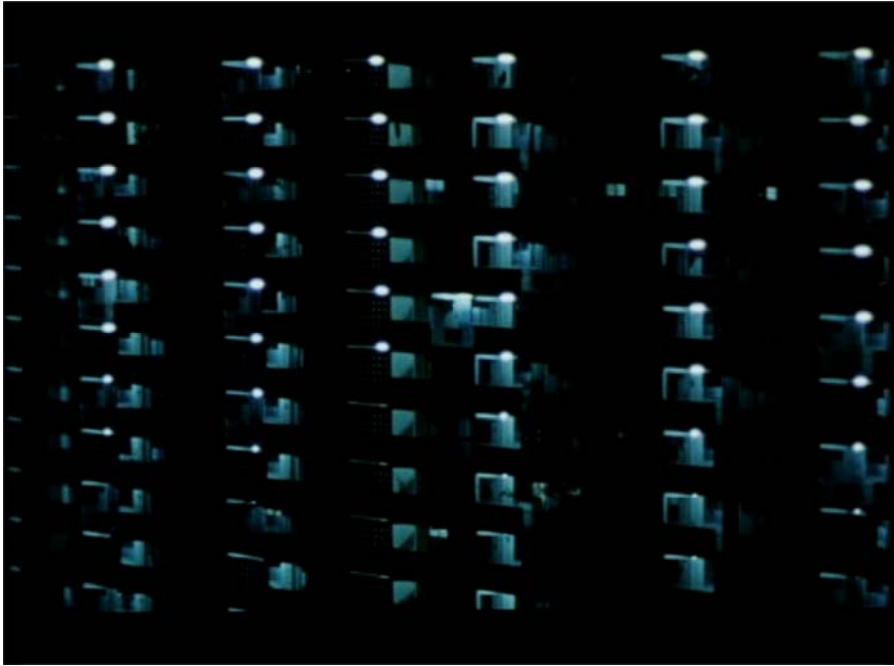


Figure 1.1 Long shot of lighted windows of a HDB block



Figure 1.2 Medium shot of San-San in the top-most lighted window



Figure 1.3 Khoo focuses on the HDB's geometrical uniformity

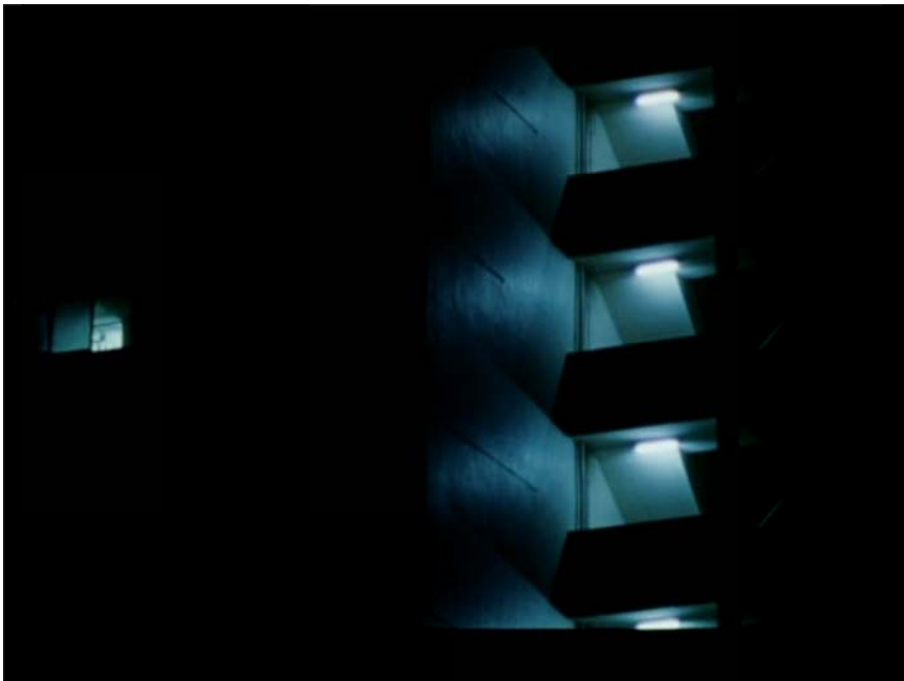


Figure 1.4 Khoo focuses on the HDB's geometrical uniformity; the stairwell from a different angle

Stories within Storeys: The Architecture of the Human Body

Ballantyne's essay enlarges our conception of architecture to include the man-made structures and natural structures. These systems governing the natural world are reenacted in the man-made. From a naturalist perspective, the natural precedes and informs the man-made. Therefore, we can read the body as architecture to project what the architecture of the HDB cannot (yet) concretize. The HDB also lies in contrast to the expressive architecture of the human body, the neat geometry of the HDB with its rows of identical windows stacked neatly atop each other belies the complexity of the life of its occupants.

This idea of the body as architecture is also elucidated by Karen Bermann in detailing how the Nazis identified the Jews through their physiognomy, publishing images of "typical Jewish posture" to create a reductive archetype of Jewishness¹². The focus on the external body makes it a "theater of appearance",¹³ as the body becomes a signifier for race, underscoring the body's externality and appearance. Though the question of whether race can be mapped onto the body is controversial, the idea of the body as signifier is pertinent. The body's attempts to mask the internal — genetic, in the case of the Jews; psychological interiority, as in *12 Storeys* — fall short. This theater of appearance is ultimately pretense as bodily postures inevitably betray excess interiority.

Khoo's use of close-ups of the body and of bodily gestures demonstrates how the body exposes excess interiority of the character's psyche. The internal is externalized. For instance, at the start of the film, we are first introduced to the man who commits suicide in a close up of his mouth as he smokes, the camera emphasizing the exhaled smoke that seems almost a foreshadowing of how his spirit will leave his body (Figure 2). At this point, his

¹² Karen Bermann, "The House Behind," In *Places through the Body*, eds. Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile, (London: Routledge, 1998), 168.

¹³ Ibid., 168. I am using this phrase not in Bermann's manner wherein the phrase refers to the architectural convention and propriety of Prisenracht 263 becomes a camouflage. Rather, I borrow the term as to refer to Bermann's previous paragraph of physiognomy as signifier/symbol.

unstable interiority is hinted at, demonstrating how the body can betray interiority. Similarly, the shot of Li-Li crying alone in her room (Figure 3.1 and 3.2) demonstrates the body's expression of sadness — tears manifest the tumult of emotions that she must face leaving her lover in China to come to marry a “rich” Singaporean man only to be tricked by him. Her retort to Ah-Gu's claim that he is a rich man living in a mansion also functions as Khoo's critique of the HDB.



Figure 2. Close up of a man exhaling cigarette smoke



Figure 3.1 Close-up of Li-Li crying alone in a dark room



Figure 3.2 A photograph of Li-Li and her lover back in China that solicits her tears

These narratives help to bring to life the HDB, as “[w]hen we encounter buildings then we find them in connection with the life that inhabits them ... acknowledge[ing] the existence of that life and the building’s role in it.”¹⁴

Story within Storeys: The National Narrative

¹⁴ Ballantyne, “Nest and Pillar of Fire,” 15.

The buildings around us are decisions made by society and not the individual, of which the circulation of money in the economy, coupled with political processes, mediate these decisions to produce buildings¹⁵. This is also extended to the HDB. Apart from its visible aesthetics, the economic and political aspects of the HDB — which are often overlooked as these details are not immediately glimpsed.

The HDB was first established 1960 “to replace the prevalent unhygienic slums and crowded squatter settlements”¹⁶. The government’s priority was to create as many housing units as possible within a short time¹⁷. As such, these early flats provided running water and electricity, but little else apart from these basic amenities, as the government (via the arm of the HDB) was more concerned with the practical and immediate needs of providing more sanitary living spaces. As these HDB estates matured, communal areas such as the playground and nearby hawker centers emerged¹⁸ to increase quality of living of its residents. These communal spaces sought to fill the void that was left behind when its residents left the close-quartered and rather exposed slums and *kampungs* for the high-rise and enclosed HDB.

Produced in 1997, *12 Storeys* shows a relatively modern HDB estate that has been upgraded and equipped with a small hawker center and a playground that feature in the film as communal spaces where the lives of its various characters interact. However, the efficacy of these spaces in providing communal living is questionable. In a scene in the playground, Meng encounters San-San in the playground as he performs an aerobics routine after a run (Figure 2.1). Instead of greeting her, he turns away and faces a different direction (Figure

¹⁵ Andrew Ballantyne, “Introduction,” in *Architecture: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

¹⁶ HDB.gov.sg, accessed October 29, 2015, □<http://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/about-us>

¹⁷ Siew Eng Teo and Lily Kong, “Public housing in Singapore: Interpreting 'quality' in the 1990s,” *Urban Studies* 34, no. 3 (1997): 441-52, accessed 29 Oct 2015.

¹⁸ Ibid.

2.2). Khoo, without the use of dialogue, is able to show Meng's thoughts through a single gesture. The body is thus a structure embedded with interior meaning in the same way that the domestic and private is contained within the structure of the HDB. In the frame, the space of the playground in the extreme foreground, demonstrating its presence that alerts the viewer to the embedded messages of fun and community connoted by the playground. Ironically, this does not materialize as they both Meng and San-San continue in silence, somewhat ashamed to be sharing a private moment in this public space. In spite of the HDB's clustered communities and communal spaces, these spaces no longer serve the aim intended by its government-commissioned architects. This illuminates Ballantyne's notion that architecture exceeds the architect — borrowing from Roland Barthes's concept of the death of the author — as the building becomes a text that is interpreted by its user, and so the architect's intentions are neglected in favour of the experiencing individual, who ultimately possesses the agency to define and determine the role and function of the building for his/herself¹⁹. Architecture is thus a “sense” that “lies in the mind of the beholder”.²⁰



Figure 3.1 Neighbours Meng and San-San at the playground

¹⁹ Ballantyne, “Nest and Pillar of Fire”, 49.

²⁰ Ibid.



Figure 3.2 Meng deliberately shifts his body to avert from San-San

The Uncanny Story: *12 Storeys* as a reflection of Singaporean Life

After watching *12 Storeys*, one is left with a heaviness that stems from the film's lack of resolution. This affect is not only the result of Meng's mental breakdown, let alone the other psychological imprisonment that San-San and Li-Li silently endure. It is the totality of the sudden exposure of that which is internal, including the conflicts within the self, experienced by these residents of the HDB, that is ultimately mediated by the imposing structure of the HDB.

Perhaps to read the film allegorically, the HDB is a representation of the government's intervention into the private lives of its people — an intervention that *intrudes* into the domestic space. It is sterile, ordering the lives of its inhabitants in an efficient, but otherwise unfeeling manner. If the domestic is our psyche, then our psyche is likewise ordered around a subtly political narrative of the state and its ideology of pragmatism. We lose our individuality, in other words. To be truly at home — to *dwell* — means to become aware of these chinks that surface a seemingly impenetrable political move. Rather than to treat everything as a spectacle to be taken entirely at a superficial image-value without any

doubt, as in Debord's sense of postmodern consumerist society, Khoo's film challenges the audience to unpick the threads that bind and blind us unswervingly to the political ideology. Khoo thus uses the cinematic space as architecture that critiques these existing social norms. The domestic can only be reclaimed through being a thinking body within the structured state apparatus of the HDB.

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