

May 16th, 2008 ISSUE



Richie's Fable of Riches

Smitha Radhakrishnan chats with first-time feature film director Richie Mehta about working with family, attracting big stars, and putting 100% into a character named Amal. [SEE MORE](#)



The Rise of Raj

Kunal Nayyar, the actor behind *The Big Bang Theory's* Rajesh Koothrappali, joked about doing the APA interview MTV Cribs style, before giving us a more subtle glimpse into the life of a CBS sitcom star. [SEE MORE](#)

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Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival 2008: Xin Lu Video Bus Tour

By [Brian Hu](#)

Ming-Yuen S. Ma's Xin Lu Bus Tour takes off, stutters, then stumbles onto something wonderful.

Visual Communications' 2008 Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival may have taken place at the luxurious Directors Guild of America, the art-house megaplex Laemmle Sunset 5, and the newly-renovated ImaginAsian Center, but it's also not adverse to alternative forms of exhibition. For instance, John Torres' experimental feature *Years When I Was a Child Outside* was presented via multiple projectors and featured live musical accompaniment. (APA correspondent Rowena Aquino has the breakdown [here](#).)

The other example is the *Xin Lu Video Bus Tour*, a five-hour interactive media experience featuring works by video artist Ming-Yuen S. Ma, who serves as tour guide on the bus. Conceived as an experiential metaphor for -- or rather, extension of -- the themes of displacement and nomadism which are central to Ma's work, the bus tour asks that the audience view and interrogate the pieces from an unsettled -- even unsettling -- position.

The tour begins at 1pm in West Hollywood. After a brief introduction to the project, the bus is on the move and the videos begin. Immediately, the viewing situation leads the spectator (or rather, the tourist) to stray away from the small television monitors which present Ma's videos. Our eyes and ears gravitate to the bus windows and to the world beyond. Or to our neighbors, whose reactions we silently analyze. Or to the bus driver, who might be enchanted by the premise, or perhaps is laughing inside at how ridiculous we all are. When the DVD starts to skip, interrupting the videos, we tell ourselves that the visual and aural stuttering is the medium-specific, aesthetic manifestation of movement itself: how perfect! But then why is Ma so nervously trying to fix it?

At the beginning, the videos feel inconsequential as our attention drifts in these other directions. *Myth(s) of Creation* and *Mother/Land* raise issues of exile and displacement, but the rhetoric of the works (which are complex in their presentation and in their logic) demands the audience's absolute attention. The interactive atmosphere is simply too distracting for the register of focus the works require. Lacan and Deleuze/Guattari are tough enough at my desk in my bedroom; on a bus they incite car-sickness.

About an hour in, the bus makes stops in Echo Park and downtown L.A. At each stop, Ma introduces somewhat invisible "landmarks" of Los Angeles: plaques detailing forgotten histories, tacked to gentrified buildings by the guerrilla historians Pocho Research Society; and the Chinese American Museum, where we come face-to-face with a living "exhibit" played by performance artist Kristina Wong. The dominant themes now are amnesia and postmodern historiography, which have tenuous relations with *Myth(s) of Creation* and *Mother/Land*, though all are influenced by post-structuralist approaches to identity and history.

After the Chinese American Museum, we're back on the bus, with Kristina Wong on board playing a number of roles, including the vulgar "Miss Chinatown Second Runner-up." Her presence brings levity to an otherwise suffocatingly serious affair. But when Ma tried to tie her performance art back to the themes of personal history, the tourists seemed unenthused, or rather too exhausted to bother. Ma introduced the issue of re-creation as historiography and tried to get the tourists to discuss this once-controversial issue in historical method. And though I found Ma's argument to be somewhat contradictory to the Pocho Research Society (which is very much interested in fact as truth, not just performance as truth, which Ma and Wong celebrated), I felt a little bad for him, since the discussion never took off. And admittedly, I myself was perhaps too tired to join in as well.

At this point, it was about 3 hours into the bus tour. Ma showed his 2003 work *Movements East-West*. The work was slightly less cerebral than the preceding two. Throughout the piece, we see dates of "significant" events. Some have obvious historical meaning (June 4, 1989, September 11, 2001), some are less so. The images don't directly visualize or contextualize the dates, and the juxtapositions of multiple localities and temporalities keep any sense of a master narrative of world history (or even "Chinese" history) vague at best. We're forced to question not just history but our relationship to it: what do we know? How are we able to know it? How do we distinguish between official and unofficial history?

A brief stop at the end of a runway at LAX reminds us of limits placed on artists and citizens following 9/11. The moral seemed a bit obvious and forced, though Ma did give us -- literally -- a fresh angle from which to look at the airport.

Back on the bus it was about 4:30pm, and we proceeded into the final leg of the tour. Ma showed his latest work, the hour-long *[os]*. The video itself was quite terrific. It collected memories of childhood in Hong Kong by homosexual Chinese men, many of whom have since moved to other parts of the world. On their own, the oral testimonies were compelling enough; together, they form a collective memorializing of a time and place that no longer exists, for better or worse. They also form an alternative to the dominant way of conceptualizing the Hong Kong diaspora, which typically foregrounds successful businesspeople and their "traditional" families.

And it was while watching *[os]* that I finally felt the concept of the bus tour. By "felt" I refer to the sensorial experience of sitting, looking, thinking, dreaming. The day was coming to a close. Through the windows I could see the sun setting and in my seat I could feel fatigue take over my body. Food coma (more on this later) set in and I dozed off for the opening moments of *[os]*. When I drifted back to consciousness, I found myself in a trance. The images and sounds on the video monitor droned onward as the bus did, through the streets of L.A. County. The testimony of the men sounded as worn by life as I was by the bus tour. In other words, there was a feeling of affective equivalence between medium (which includes the videos as well as the bus itself) and viewer. There was a profound sense of empathy through the phenomenology of the aesthetic experience -- a rare sensation of transcendence which many works of art strive for but rarely achieve.

[os] in particular was successful because of its mode of address. As opposed to *Myth(s) of Creation* and *Mother/Land* which demand an intellectual engagement (which is better suited for museum, theater, or classroom exhibition), *[os]* and to some extent *Movements East-West* are more visceral experiences that engage our bodies as opposed to simply our minds. Or rather, through their hypnotic use of image of sound, speak to our bodies which then incite our minds. Thus, these two works best took advantage of the specific exhibition space of the tour bus. The movement of the car, the duration of the trip, combined with the works themselves, created an engaging venue for contemplation.

But in addition to the sensorial experience, the tour bus as a concept also activated personal memories for me. Sitting in a moving automobile was much like long road trips as a kid, and indeed the specific experience of waiting in a backseat awakened numerous memories with my family. The lunch-boxes we were given at the beginning of the journey contained buns from various Asian cultures. They were probably tastier than any I had as a kid, but they did serve as a catalyst for my own memories being on road trips. The final stop of the tour -- to Mashti Malone's Persian ice cream -- was like the rare treat of lucking out on a real rest-stop treasure in the middle of nowhere (actually, it was on La Brea Ave.) For me, it was these associations with family memories that gave the bus tour its true weight, and they in fact tied back to the themes of family, loss, and amnesia presented earlier in the trip. Like the best of experimental cinema, Ming-Yuen S. Ma's *Xin Lu* is ultimately less interesting for the *actual* journey the bus travels through, than for the *personal* journeys it requires the viewer to take.

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