

NOW STREAMING ON YOUR NEAREST SCREEN

Contextualising new digital cinema through Kusoⁱ

Abstract: Digital cinema, especially the kinds that is produced using mobile devices and travelling on internet social networking systems like youtube and myspace, are often dismissed as apolitical and ‘merely’ a fad rather than a cultural expression and a choice. Moreover, with content that is in non-English language, incomprehensibility or lack of understanding of the cultural context of the production or circulation, leads to easy labelling of the object as frivolous, trivial, or inconsequential. Deploying the aesthetic framework of Kuso – the Japanese term for ‘Shit’; often invoked in anime, manga, and certain kinds of lifestyle choices – as a way of political engagement, this essay analyses the Strawberry Generation in Taiwan, to look at how an ‘aesthetic’ form of expression might offer spaces of political participation and negotiation for these digital natives. Drawing from the emergence of the ‘BackDorm Boys’ as iconic representations of the youth like popular narratives of Stephen Chow’s creation of flawed stardom, and interactions with younger students about their politics, aesthetics, consumption and lifestyle choices, this paper hopes to explore the possibilities that new digital cinema and their circuits of circulation offer for political engagement and participation through cultural expressions and productions, which are otherwise dismissed in contemporary discourse.

New digital technologies, initially developed for surveillance and strategic communication, because of the proliferation of the internet/s and the cyberspaces, have now become freely available at very inexpensive rates around the world. The easy availability of these technologies enables new conditions of production of hitherto privileged art forms. The new globalised circuits of un-contextualized distribution lead to the imagination of a de-territorialized community of consumers who share common systems of making meaning and receiving these objects. As has been noted in earlier cybercultures studies, objects found on the internet/s – the people and the narratives that they produce - are often consumed as outside of time and geographical space. William J. Mitchell (1996) in his now much critiqued conception of the ‘Infobahn’, conflates all geographical distinction in his imagining of the larger neural circuits of digital information and economy. Similarly, in his extraordinary book *Everything is Miscellaneous*, David Weinberger (2007), explores the role that digital dissemination and distribution (as also storage and archiving) play in evolving a new miscellaneous form of sorting and classification, thus deconstructing established coda of knowledge determination. Weinberger, despite the keen insight into the importance of meta-data and user-based personalised galaxies of information, is unable to talk of the entire range of phenomena as rooted in particular geo-political contexts. In fact, as Gasser and Palfresy (2008) make evident in their book *Born Digital*, whenever a body is referred to within cybercultures studies, it is the body of a white, upper class, masculine body; whenever a place

is evoked, it is unequivocally the economic centres of the North-West; Time, which is an affiliate of the space and the body, is also then the linear and historical time determined by these concrete referents.

The West, with its wide consumer base and widespread proliferation of new digital technologies, often becomes the hegemonic legitimising authority as objects produced elsewhere are understood through ‘foreign’ aesthetics and logistics. Imagining the internet/s as residing outside of the time-space continuums, allows for a cyclical re-assertion of the Western paradigms as credible and authentic, and other forms as parodic or derivative in nature. New forms of cultural expression and narrativisation, received outside of the context of their production or the circuits of distribution and reception, are often mis-read and interpreted to fit the existing modes of making meaning.

This paper is an attempt to look at a specific form of new digital cinema in North East Asia that challenges the west-centric modes of understanding these objects. New digital cinema is a category that needs to be more sharply defined. In the last three decades of extensive technological advent and deployment in the fields of cinematic production, many different forms have claimed the space of new digital cinema. Post-celluloid cinemaⁱⁱ, production of movies augmented by technologies, studio house experiments in animation and 3D technologies, distribution of movies and the networks of piracy that come into being with peer2peer networks,ⁱⁱⁱ conditions of reception and movie watching with digitally owned copies of movies,^{iv} the emergence of multiplex cinema and conditions of consumption^v, etc. have been looked upon by different theoreticians and practitioners as new digital cinema.

I use the term ‘new digital cinema’ in the rest of the paper in a very specific sense of the phrase to make a very clear point of departure from the aforementioned approaches, which, though exploring the possibilities that digital technologies offer, still, often, stay with contained and unquestioned understanding of the established cinematic practices of production, authorship, distribution and spectatorship. New digital cinema is located in the new wave of cinematic forms produced by people who are enabled to do so by the easy availability of conditions of production and distribution that are framed by new digital technologies. Instead of looking at movies being produced by ‘film-makers’ or ‘film-studios’,

maintaining the distinctions of authorship, readership and distribution circuits, I explore movies which are produced by people who are otherwise relegated to the realm of spectatorship and consumption. For the scope of this paper, new digital cinema refers to the cheaply produced cinematic forms, shot through inexpensive and slowly-becoming-ubiquitous camera enabled devices. Geared towards an almost obscene abundance of details and demanding an untiring self-narrativisation^{vi}, these sites of social networking and expression have led to the production of videos and distribution of the self in unprecedented ways. These videos are further marked in their distribution through cyberspatial forms like youtube, myspace, and google video, Television based reality shows based that run on user based programming consisting of personal videos, personal webcam sites, and MMS forums, to millions of users who enter into an interaction that is no longer limited to spectatorship.

There are three dialectic processes around the ‘personal’ videos broadcast on such sites of digital social networking and sharing, that need to be mapped in order to understand the impulse of this paper as well as to look at the dialectic reconstruction of earlier categories as understood by non-digital, pre-internet cultural forms. The first trope of dialectic comes in the form of continuity. Histories of technology taking the *When Old Technologies were New* (Marvyn, 1988) approach, often produce these digital moving images as bearing a relational value with the emergence of earlier technological forms and the use of these forms to produce personal narratives – print, camera, video, to name the three most influential forms of self expression and narrativisation. Such a historical narrative, unless carefully inflected with the growth and development of indigenous technologies and the indigenisation of these technologies, reads both, the technological development as well as the cultural forms thus produced, only through a West-centric paradigm of aesthetics, glossing over the differences that might be present in the very process and methods of reading such technologised forms. This non-disruptive, uninterrupted historicisation, while it is fruitful in questioning some presumed categories in the process of cultural production,^{vii} still reinforce these digital moving images as merely a new form of old cinema.

The second tension that needs to be mapped out occurs in the form of carefully maintained distinctions between the Sacred Cow of originality and the much maligned miasma of derivative, plagiarised, copied (left, right, centre), forms that have been facilitated by the

proliferation of copy-paste digital technologies and internet networks. In the public as well as the theoretical discourse around these digital moving images, there is almost a Universal original (generally Western, otherwise canonised by the Western gaze in other geo-political contexts), to which everything else has a relation that is either praeodic or uniformly derivative in nature. Even within the West, these videos on youtube and myspace are easily dismissed as plagiarised or unoriginal, often leading to a wide range of public controversy and exchange.^{viii}

The third dialectic is in the blurring of the pre-digital accepted terms of producers, spectators and processes of reading that these digital moving images produce. It is necessary to realise that the context of not only the production but also that of the reader is crucial to understanding the aesthetics of cyberspatial forms. The author in the digital world is as digital and ephemeral as the object itself. The tension between the corporeal and the digital has been effectively resolved by conceptualising the ‘interface’ – the space between the two conflicting and tense oppositional ideas- as the bearer of thought, idea, meaning and intention for digital objects. Such a complex structuring challenges the earlier crystalised practices authorship, spectatorship, distribution and reception, thus marking new digital cinema as not merely a cinematic practice augmented by technology but as a new form of cinema that challenges, quite radically, the earlier cinematic forms, in very much the same way that, in another historical and cultural moment, the print did to the manuscript.

This paper locates itself in these three dialectical flows to explore new digital cinema as a form of popular and cultural expression in Asia, specifically in Taiwan. It hopes to dismantle the myth of the universal/accessible/west-centric view of new digital cinema and demonstrate the need to assert the geo-socio-cultural contexts of their origin through exploring the aesthetics and genre of Kuso.

Knowing Miso from Kuso

Kuso, though it is a relatively new term, is highly popular in describing the new cybercultural forms that emerged with the proliferation of the internet/s. Anime fans are familiar with Kuso as an expletive or an interjection, used as the English equivalent of ‘Shit!’ Though

Japanese in origin, it was made popular as a word, an aesthetic and a lifestyle in Taiwan around 2000, subsequently spreading to Hong Kong and China. Now, Kuso, along with other N.E. Asian products like Hentai^{ix}, and Manga, is a popular way of identifying cybercultural forms. The wikipedia mentions that

[t]he roots of Taiwanese “Kuso” was *Kuso-ge*’s from Japan. The word Kuso-ge is a portmanteau of *Kuso* and *game*, which means, quite literally, “shitty games.” The introduction of such a category is to teach gamers how to appreciate and enjoy a game of poor quality – such as appreciating the games’ outrageous flaws instead of getting frustrated at them.
(Wikipedia, 2006)

It was an attempt to not only identify or locate flaws but to celebrate them and encourage an active production of them. Kuso, for the younger generation in Taiwan (and the thousands of fans all around the world, who subscribe to Kuso Bulletin Boards and discussion forums) is not just a cursory form of parody but a lifestyle. A Taiwanese artist, Yeh Yi-Li, in her solo exhibition, seems to suggest that as well. Her introduction to her exhibition titled ‘KUSO – Red, Spring Snow, Orange Flower’ says

In Taiwan’s pop culture, internet subculture and video gamers’ communities, it (Kuso) became a trendy term that suggests “making fun of anything, playing practical jokes on everything.” KUSO subverts conventional values and turns things into garbage. It has no limits, history, agendas or logic. Like an amoeba, it is a subculture phenomenon that has no rules.
(Yi-Li, 2006)

Making a list of characteristics of what might be Kuso is futile. As Yi-Li seems to suggest, Kuso, on the surface, is located on the ‘fun’ and ‘hilarity’ of an object. However, Kuso actually resides in the processes of subversion and resistance. Kuso not only makes ‘things into garbage’ but also, by logical corollary, turns ‘garbage into things’. It started as a subculture phenomenon but is now highly popular in mainstream cultures – on reality TV on youth oriented channels like MTV and Channel V, in local performances and spectacles, and in Stephen Chou movies. Kuso seems to refer to not just the discourse around a particular object but a subjective mode of representing the self into different narrative conditions enabled by new digital technologies. Kuso is about the ability to create fluid and transitory spectacles of the self as a trope of social interaction and communication. While Yi-Li might look upon Kuso as without ‘limits, history, agendas or logic’, she forgets that Kuso has been the way for organising political protests, flash mobs and social awareness

collectives in many part of Asia^x. It is in this very ‘free’ and ‘excessive’ structure of Kuso that one can locate the politics and processes by which New Digital Cinema can be understood.

In her *Kuso* exhibition, Yi-Li created the ‘Worm-man’ that

drags its body and slithers in the ever-changing world. In different kinds of worlds, the Worm-man develops into different phases. As phenomena are happening, it is also transforming. The Worm-man has multiple possibilities, multiple personalities and multiple identities. (Yi-Li, 2006)

While Kuso is often understood as parody, trash culture or camp humour, and is even attributed to MTV style movies by enthusiasts, for the large section of Kuso consumers, it is the governing principle for social interaction, dressing and appearance, hair and accessories, consumption of products and modes of expression. Kuso seems to be a way in which they produce themselves as parodic forms of themselves – producing themselves in conditions of constant transformation with ‘multiple possibilities, multiple personalities and multiple identities.’ As Yi-Li suggests in her art, Kuso is not just about producing parodies and mimicking popular art forms but it is also a way of producing the spectacle of the self. It is not surprising then, that Kuso emerges as an aesthetic with the proliferation of technologies and tools which allow for a narrativisation of the self for distribution and consumption in the public.

Contextualising Kuso

I look at two specific instances of Kuso to understand and frame the concept in this paper. The first emerged out of my own involvement with some of the students and their scheduled performances at the annual sports day^{xi}. My Chinese language teacher Mandy Hua, who is an undergraduate student at the NCU, is also a professional hip hop dancer. For her annual day performance at the university, Mandy chose (with some inputs from me) a popular Bollywood song that was creating raves in India at that time^{xii}. Mandy chose the song, edited the audio to make it tighter and shorter in duration and started the practice. Along with a flock of dancers from other schools on the campus, Mandy replicated an ‘Indian’ aesthetic for the song, doing elaborate costumes which included a lot of flowing skirts, veils, sequins and shimmer – the kind that was shown in the song. The female

performers were in a state of erotic relationship – not only in their imitation of the seductive postures and movements of the dance sequence in the original movie song but also in presenting themselves as eroticised objects of glamour and desire to a young audience made primarily of students. The expected reactions of cat calls, of hooting, of lascivious laughter and of gasps of wonder and awe were all present in the crowd. However, a brief minute into the performance, their narrative of seduction, eroticism and obvious parody-imitation was disrupted and somehow harmoniously interrupted by a group of boys, wearing glasses, their bodies far from the perfectly sculpted eroticised bodies of the female performers, wearing clumsy looking ill-fitting karate dresses and making unrehearsed animal movements around the female performers.



Figure 1 Mandy and her dancing troupe



Figure 2 The Kuso boys interrupting the dance sequence

It was the introduction of these dancers that completely displaced the element of parody within which I understood the performance. The male performers, who were completely unfamiliar with the original song, were imitating the female dancers on the ground. They were not interested in replicating either the movements of the female dancers or the sequences they were following. They were more interested in undermining the very aesthetic that the female dancers were trying to replicate or produce. Their movements were jerky, unpractised, bordering on the ridiculous. Their half naked bodies were un-sculpted and un-eroticised. These were not the college hunks or super jocks coming out to parade their masculinities but the ‘geeks’ or the ‘dorks’ who were ravelling in their un-eroticised status and celebrating it with gusto.

What was more interesting was the way in which the audience was receiving these male performers. In spite of the engaged erotic relationship with the female performers, the audience was extremely appreciative of the male performers' attempts at overthrowing the female performers' spectacle. The audience was egging them to constantly be more ridiculous, be more flamboyant, be more self mocking, guiding their movements and actions, leading to a final mock chase sequence, where the male performers chased the female performers off the ground, stripped themselves to their shorts, flexed their un-muscled bodies and made their exit among huge cheering and applause. They were obviously the star attraction of the performance. Such a response was puzzling. It was the women who had put in hours of practice to produce themselves as erotic objects of consumption. The audience, in the beginning had engaged with them at that level. And yet, it was this bunch of slightly 'with an L on my head' guys who emerged in their buffoonery and antics as the heroes of the minute.

My first impulse was to read in it, the dynamics of a gendered space and a certain mock valorisation of this hyper masculinity. While gendered readings of the performance are indeed valuable and might offer an entry into looking at the construction of eroticism, desire, spectacle and the performative self, I am going to focus on the Kuso in this performance. My own gendered impulses were quickly overshadowed by the repeated use of the word Kuso that the members of the audience were using in order to explain the male performances. It was obvious that these male performers, in spite of their actions, were not really clowns but some sort of heroes and embodying this peculiar word – Kuso.

When I started asking around for Kuso, people pointed at several different objects, from Stephen Chou movies to Reality TV on Channel V, from personal videos to popular Kuso shows where people engaged in a set of ludicrous, often bizarre performances to make a public spectacle of themselves. The more I encountered these Kuso forms, the more difficult and incomprehensible it became to understand either the appeal or the aesthetic of the form. It looked like cheesy camp or an extension of a certain MTV aesthetic as a result of vulgarisation of technologies. When I crawled on the web looking at discussion forums that were devoted to Kuso, I found a huge number of people sharing my

incomprehensibility and raised eyebrows at the Kuso objects, trying to figure out what it was that was attracting thousands of users to produce and consume Kuso with such dedication.

Especially in the context of Taiwan, Kuso belongs to the realm of what is called the ‘Strawberry Generation’ (Tsao-Mei Yi-Dai). The Strawberry generation in Taiwan refers to the people born between 1981 and 1991, and, despite its suggestions in English, carries negative connotations with it. The three most popular characteristics of the Strawberry generation – a phrase that has huge currency in popular media – have been severally explained. Rachel, who writes on the National Central University’s (Taiwan) website, explains:

In Taiwan, the Strawberry Generation refers to those who were born between 1981 and 1991, ranging from the 22-year-old university students to the 12-year-old junior high school students. This generation is labeled as “strawberry” due to two reasons: first, this generation of youth was raised in a better environment, as strawberries grown and nourished in a greenhouse, than the earlier generation. Second, strawberries are known for their beauty, delicacy and high price, suggesting that the young people can not withstand pressure, difficulties, and frustration as they grew up in a nice and comfortable environment and are able to get almost whatever they ask for.

(Rachel, 2008)

Henry (2006), a student who also belongs to the Strawberry Generation, writes in his classroom assignment, ‘People of this generation are said to be fragile when facing pressure, just like the strawberries.’ He further goes on to suggest that the problems of the Strawberry Generation are largely economic in nature and might lead to serious problems for Taiwan’s economy. Myr Lim (2006) also looks at the economic and political instability of this generation and describes them as ‘Like the fruit, they look extremely good and sinfully juicy, who wouldn’t want one? But they have a very limited shelf life.’ Built into this criticism is also the understanding that the Strawberry Generation is also in a state of political disavowal.

And yet, when introduced to the different manifestations of Kuso, there was a very clear idea of resistance, subversion and mobilisation. A local incident, which made temporary

heroes of two teenage boys who stripped in Public, on a university campus, was read as a sign of resisting the University's attempts at regulating dress-codes for the students^{xiii}. Other videos which were made for internet circulation had the digital natives refusing the Western models of masculinity or heroism and producing buffoon-like images to correspond with the glorified pop icons from the West – often producing infantile and juvenile forms of behaviour to exaggerate the effect. Other Kuso manifestations were in consumption, as different objects which were seemingly 'cute' (se-jiao) or 'innocent' were invested with sinister or often ludicrous intent.^{xiv} The same kinds of aesthetics were also seen on the 'LOL Cat'^{xv} and 'All your base are belong to us'^{xvi} internet memes which have gained currency online. It is while browsing through these worlds that I was introduced to a Kuso phenomenon which was garnering huge media and popular attention globally. This was a phenomenon which has now popularly been dubbed as the Backdorm Boys.

BackDorm Boys were three graduate students, two of whom became instant celebrities – Huang Yi Xin and Wei Wei - from the Guangzhu Academy of Fine Arts in China, who shot to instant fame when, in a state of boredom, they made a lip-sync cover version of popular Backstreet Boys singles, using nothing more than cheap digital cameras on their computers, in the restrictive space of their dormitories, and distributing them through video sharing spaces like YouTube, MySpace and other blogs (*The Full Plate*, 2008). These weren't, at a first glance, very different from the 'funny' videos that one encounters online all the time – cheaply produced, shot with a webcam mounted on the screen, an almost unedited, uninterrupted full frontal frame, and an exaggerated attempt creating a certain Kitsch video that have gained popularity in the past. However, within my own contexts, the BackDorm Boys had strong resonances with the earlier dance performance I described. Once again, the three students in the videos were not the hyper eroticised masculinities that the boy bands like Backstreet Boys have embodied in popular cultures. Given the Confucian model of academia and studentship, students are not easily granted such erotic value to begin with. These were also not students who were particularly talented at singing. In fact, they were not singing at all, they were lip synching the songs in their videos. The videos did not involve any attempts at shooting but were in the full-frontal, almost pornographic frames of spectacle where the camera was mounted over the screen and the two performers were being caught in that frame. Dressed in identical clothes, the two main performers sang with extraordinary

histrionics, the otherwise mellow and slightly cliché ridden love ballads that the Backstreet Boys had made their signature. In the background, one of their other dorm mates, played a Kuso-ge called Quaker throughout the video. He occasionally simulated the actions of a music mixer or a DJ or sometimes helped them with props.^{xvii}



Figure 3 Backdorm boys in their most famous 'As Long As you Love Me' video



Figure 4 Backdorm boys in their Motorola phones advertisement

There was, at the first glance, nothing spectacular about the Backdorm Boys. As one of the responders on a blog dedicated to the Backdorm Boys very succinctly puts it

Let's face it: it doesn't take a lot of talent to make faces. They didn't write the song, didn't sing the song, didn't play any musical instructions, etc. Their sole accomplishment is they made faces at a camera. That's not talent, man!!! And if they weren't Chinese—i.e., didn't have the freak factor of Chinese boys lip-synching to Backstreet Boys songs—NOBODY will notice this.

Da Xiangchang 2005

And yet, the Backdorm Boys, apart from cults developing around them and various internet memes devoted to them^{xviii}, were featured live on NBC and both dropped out of their academic programmes to become hugely successful brand ambassadors and spokespersons for some of the largest mass media brands in China. They have both acquired a celebrity status and are role models and now popular media persons on TV channels, hosting their own shows^{xix}. In trying to understand these Kuso products in the realm of parody one starts

asking the wrong kind of questions: where is the talent? Several respondents, including Da Xiangchang very pointedly pointed out that ‘it takes very little talent to make a fool out of yourselves.’ The more interesting question to ask would be the question that Yi-Li asked in her exhibition: How does Kuso manage to make garbage out of things? And further, is it possible, to read into Kuso, a new politics which guises itself as ‘fun’ or ‘hilarity’.

Differentiating between parody and Kuso

The Western gaze will only allow Kuso to be understood in a relationship of parody. However, looking at the contexts within which Kuso emerges and its ability to ‘make garbage out of things’, Kuso changes the relationship between the ‘original’ and the ‘discursive’ objects. parody, as a literary and a narrative form, resides more in the object being parodied (original) rather than in the parodic creation (discursive). To understand, appreciate or enjoy the discursive object, it becomes necessary to be familiar with, sometimes at a very intimate level, with the original object. The chief aim of a parody is to invoke the original object by introjecting it into new frames of references and meaning making, establishing a tenuous relationship of invocation between the original and the discursive objects. Parody seeks, not to replace the original but add to the ‘aura’ of the original object. Legends, myths, cult-stories and folklores can be understood as parodic in nature as they add to the understanding of the original or the core object. In the case of cinema especially, parody is not simply a process of poking fun at an earlier cinematic form or object but is an effort to evoke the original as a way of making meaning and seeking sense in the narrative.

The relationship between the original object and the discursive object is one of invocation where the parody invokes, glorifies and seeks justification for its existence through the original object. parody also resides in a certain historical reading of cinema as it produces often unintentional but present residues of earlier forms. parody can be looked upon as enabling a certain genealogical reading of cinematic narratives and forms. In the non-linear consumption patterns of cinema reception, especially with cable television and global distribution, the boundaries between the original and the discursive are often blurred and re-configured. Often the audiences and consumers encounter the discursive before they get

familiar with the original and hence they change the way in which the original object is understood or received, often mis/reading it through the lens of the parody instead of the other way round. Cinema also makes more visible, the ways in which the parody can also work through different genres and media – be it in the production of books that try to appropriate the cinematic language of telling stories or in the production of movies that are based on books or sometimes try to deploy the narrative conditions of books in the cinematic narratives. The only way to talk of parody is to read it in the cinematic object itself and in the invocations that it produces with the imagined or the real object. The concept of an original is necessary to the understanding of the parody.

It is exactly this relationship between the original and the parody that Kuso disrupts from the within. Kuso does not produce the definitive terminal points of the original and the discursive objects that parody requires. In the instance of any Backdorm Boys video, there is no presumed knowledge of either the Backstreet Boys videos or the kind of globalised consumption that they can be contextualised under. While there are many references – almost at the level of invocation, in the clothes that they wear, in the choices they make in songs etc. – they are not necessarily the frameworks through which their videos can be made meaning of. If it was merely a question of parody of Backstreet Boys, their subsequent videos where they also ‘Kuso-ed’ other performers and local artists would not have worked for their fans.

Like a network, the relationship between the original and the discursive objects of Kuso is masked so that each constantly feeds back into the other. Hence, in the case of the Backdorm Boys, if you tried to understand their work as simply a Chinese/Asian parody of a Western form of popular culture, you end up bewildered, unable to account for the huge popularity and success. However, if we place their production as Kuso, it allows us to realise that the objects being parodied in the videos, are not American popular cultural forms or specifically Backstreet Boys videos. What is being parodied is the original self of the performers.

Instead of the framework of parody or intertextuality, we can locate the Backdorm Boys Kuso videos as embedded in a particular lifestyle choices and consumption of cultural forms,

accessories, appearances, class differences, language and most importantly the conditions made available by technologies. The original object is the three boys and their 'real' or 'original' status in their lived practices. The discursive object is also the three boys and their projected selves or desired selves which they are expected to either appropriate or wish for. The Kuso is in exaggerating the differences between these two and celebrating the obvious flaws in them and making them available as a public spectacle. While I shall steer away from discussions of talent, it becomes more evident that Kuso allows for us to recognise the aesthetics, politics and proliferation of these new digital cinema artefacts which earlier notions of parody did not.

Kuso establishes more non-linear, sometimes disruptive relationships, between different objects that it refers to in its production. The relationship between the various objects is not invocative but evocative in nature. The Kuso narrative does not presume specific knowledge of some other object being invoked. Instead, it produces a redolent relationship where the different objects mutually explain each other. Like any cyberspatial form, Kuso seems to produce a system of self-referential, almost cannibalistic meaning making where a range of objects seem to co-exist in improbably frames of non-real and in-credible, each forming a node through which the others are understood. The references Kuso makes in its narrative, are not to the other, original object in a wistfully reconstructed or imagined past but to the other back-tracking objects present in the narrative itself. This produces an almost infinite chain of inter-referencing objects that justify each others' existence. Kuso thus disrupts the more linear and historical constructions that parody (and the subsequent attempts to read parody as a relationship between new digital cinema and Cinema) establishes. It is located in the materiality of the object, its reception, its manipulation, its distribution, its transformation and its ability to escape the more effective-causal circuits of meaning making.

While parody seeks to reaffirm the similarities between the original and the discursive objects, Kuso emphasises the inability of the original to explain the discursive, thus producing a relationship of difference rather than one of similarity. While parody deals with the questions of representation, Kuso enters into conditions of simulation. It is this evocative relationship that allows me to locate Kuso as an aesthetic of understanding New

Digital Cinema in Asia and to materialise it as a lifestyle and as a condition of reception in the body of the Asian consumer.

Politicising Kuso

An uncontextualised notion of Kuso only allows for a relationship at the level of the Parodic. Hence, the discussants of the Backdorm Boys were always in a condition of unintelligibility about why these slightly clownish characters would become imitable heroes for a particular generation. Given the highly polarized nature of political orientations in Taiwan, it has been the despair of many educators and practitioners that the Strawberry Generation, which is also the largest subscriber base to Kuso, has no apparent interest in politics. It is a generation generally lamented as a generation that is unashamedly devoted only to having fun. I propose, in my reading and understanding of Kuso objects and Kuso as an aesthetic, that the participatory and performative nature of Kuso paradigm, offers space for negotiation and expression of political intent. I shall demonstrate this particular argument at two levels – the level of the body and the personal, and at the level of the public and the national.

The question of the body becomes central to almost all representation studies. Analysis of Kuso videos or objects lends itself easily to see how the accessorisation and the freedom to produce unsupervised spectatorial narratives of the self lead to new spaces of negotiation. There is also, very clearly, a definite deconstruction of the traditional, masculine and often imported forms of masculinity, femininity and sexuality which the videos lend themselves to. Cross dressing, excessive make-up, exaggerated actions, etc. all create a fluid world where gender structures used to define the body are dismissed and indeed, enter into parodic relationship with traditional perceptions or expectations. However, for the scope of this paper, I shall more narrowly focus on the construction of the heroic body in the Kuso videos.

The body comes to materialise Kuso through various practices and becomes the site upon which the Kuso self is enacted. As Kuso celebrates the flaws and exaggerates the imperfections, it allows for a certain masked relationship between the private self and the public politics. As is demonstrated in the case of the Backdorm Boys, Kuso, with its self-

referential boundaries, allows for a critical engagement with the very practices of the generation that subjects them to sever criticism. The Kuso bodies or the narratives of self are not longer in relation with the imagined body of the star or the aura of the star vehicle but in masked relationship with the larger politics of its time. The bewilderment or unintelligibility that the discussants of the Backdorm videos exhibit, is not particularly about why or how the video was created but how heroism or stardom was created by the celebration of the un-iconic or the unheroic.

And it is to answer this question that we go back to the Strawberry Generation again. The Strawberry Generation in Taiwan was not merely marked by economic transitions and infidelity. It is also a generation that has seen a severely politicised state of nationalism and national identity in Taiwan. The younger generation that grew up after the removal of the martial law has engaged in serious consumerism as a part of their national identity. As Chen Kuan Hsing (1998) points out, 'From 1994 onwards...the cultural atmosphere was mediated through commodity structures.' Chen further goes on to explain how the political economy and the question of the national are intrinsically linked. Given the hegemonic presence of the West in the cultural galaxy of Taiwan and the constant negotiations between the political position vis-à-vis China as well as the cultural imperialism of Japan, the Taiwanese Strawberry Generation finds itself without a particular model of national identity to follow. Along with these are the allegations of widespread corruption and the complete disinterest of the current political parties in the ill-effects of liberalisation (*Asian Economic News*, 2007) which contribute to a high rate of mental ill-health and suicides in the Strawberry Generation (*The China Post*, 2008). Given such a murky situation, the Strawberry Generation has indeed withdrawn from active political participation of fighting in the streets and has taken to new forms of expression, which, outside of the context, appear as solipsistic or merely for fun.

Kuso, as an aesthetic then, transcends the analysis of gender and sexuality, performativity and spectatorship, and becomes a site of national representation and subversion and the Kuso stars like the BackDorm boys embody these positions for a Strawberry Generation in Taiwan. The notion of flawed heroism, which simultaneously mocks the ubiquitous presence of the pop-culture from the West, the inability of the local cultural industries to produce original works of art, the apathy of the younger generation caught in the mechanisms of a

liberalised globalisation, and the unavailability of spaces for political negotiations that they are built in. This is the defence that many of the Taiwanese and other Chinese speaking individuals produce on the discussions around Kuso. On the discussions on the Sinosplice blog, one of the most vocal defenders, John, who starts with calling this condition, a 'rare talent' goes on to say,

Have you ever tried to make a funny video? It's much harder than you give these boys credit for. The fact that they were able to do it merely by lip synching is testament to their talent. If they're using certain cultural expectations for humorous effect, then that's further evidence of talent.

(John, *Sinosplice*, 2005)

However, John's idea of 'playing with cultural expectation' remains a solitary voice. The other discussants go on to talk about how this particular series is only interesting because of the 'freak value' of the videos. Karen, another participant who introduces herself as a student in the West, writes

I have to reluctantly admit, as politically incorrect and offensive (sic) some of the comments may be, they are mostly valid in my opinion. I'm not saying that the "Back Dormitory Boys" talent doesn't play a part in why it's so funny but the fact that they're Chinese with no doubt plays a huge role in the humour that that you could easily find elsewhere. How hard is it to find a few college students making goofball videos and putting them on the internet?

(Karen, *Sinosplice*, 2005)

The opinions that Karen and XiangChang express, resonate with the general perception of the BackDorm boys on many different discussion groups and media talks around the world. As they gained more popularity and exposure, there were more and more people exclaiming at why these antics were being heralded as heroic. However, there were no explanations which were forwarded. The interesting part is that a similar predecessor called the 'Numa Numa Boy' (Wolk, 2006), who also had a parodic relationship with the Romanian song, while he gained equal amounts of popularity, was not at the centre of any debate. His claim to fame was slapstick humour and very clearly complied with the Western understanding of parody. However, in the case of the Backdorm Boys, the debates continue as the existing

understanding of parody as a universal value fail to account for the aura that surrounds them.

Kuso, as a way of looking at it, offers that the Backdorm Boys were not mere imitators. Imitation would have been in them trying to do a representation of the original Backstreet Boys videos. Instead, the Backdorm Boys are in a world of simulation, where they are simulating the flawed masculinities and identities that are excluded within popular cultures. In this method of simulation, they are able to produce a new and perhaps more believable 'reality' which needs to be dealt with in the larger context of the production.

The reason why Kuso makes garbage of things is because that is the only way to deal with the way things are – demolish them, look at their flaws, and find, within those flaws, interstices of negotiation and interaction, which are no longer available. The Kuso, refuses to identify a homogeneous way of understanding digital cinema on the web and insists on thus, contextualising the cultural products through their geo-political status. Because of the geographical origins of digital technologies – the West, and the generally assumed audience and paradigms of understanding it – the West again, most of these new digital cinema forms are looked upon as derivative or engaging in a parodic relationship with the original which is placed in the West. Kuso is a way of complicating the relationship between the two.

This is the first step in thinking about ways in which one can formulate a digital aesthetic which does not presume a homogenised community online but asserts, not only the physical bodies that are behind the production of these narratives but also the geographical boundaries and socio-cultural locations, without which the objects become incomprehensible and indecipherable. Moreover, it is necessary to rescue such 'popular' 'aesthetic' forms from discussions that confine them to the realms of performance or solipsism and look at the larger potential they have in creating new conditions of political engagement. For Taiwan's Strawberry Generation, Kuso is a lifestyle, by which they are able to establish discursive and subversive relationships with the very actions and practices which subject them to sever criticism. The wave of new digital cinema, streaming on a screen near us, thus emphasise the need to revisit the relationship between aesthetics and politics on the one hand and the connections between the universal and the contextual on the other.

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ⁱ A first draft of this article was first presented at the 'New Cinemas in Asia' conference organized by the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society at the Christ University, Bangalore. The paper owes its gratitude to S.V. Srinivas for his support both for my journey to Taiwan and for the confidence required to write such an essay on cultures and phenomena that I cannot with confidence claim to be my own.

ⁱⁱ The Jadavpur University Film and Media Lab, as recently as November 2008, organized a conference to discuss *The Future of Celluloid*, where, there were many engrossing presentations on what celluloid can mean in the digital age and where its futures reside. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in his key-note speech, made a significant remark that the Celluloid is the original object that the digital shall always invoke in its manifestation; not merely in its aesthetics, which might change, but in the sheer capacity that the digital has to pay unprecedented attention to the moving image and reconstruct it for new meanings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hervé Fischer, in *The Decline of The Hollywood Empire*, arrives in a long line of prophets who have been announcing the demise and the end of Celluloid Cinema as we know it. Fischer announces, quite early in the book, '[d]igital distribution will end this archaic system of distribution and hasten the decline of the Hollywood Empire: Two giant steps forward for film in one fell step!'

^{iv} The large undivided screen gets replaced by a small 'Window' on the right hand corner of the monitor which also houses various other contesting media forms that vie for the users' attention. Sherry Turkle, in her study of MUD users also talks of how the Window has become a metaphor of our times.

^v In a much more measured tone, Kim Soyung, in her formulation of a trans-cinema and new public spheres simulated by Korean Cinema, suggests that 'new digital cinema...attentive to the transformation of its production, distribution and reception modes as shown by independent digital filmmaking and its availability on the net'. She further goes on to propose 'digital and net, cinema LCD screens (installed in subways, taxis and buses) and gigantic electrified display boards (*chonkwangpan* in Korean) should be seen as spaces into which cinema theories and criticism should intervene.' This paper adds to the list, the extremely personalised but virtually public and shared space of the computer monitor and portable media devices.

^{vi} In another essay exploring the aesthetics of social networking and blogging (especially with the increasing implementation of Web 2.0), I make a claim at these sites being sustained through a constant and incessant production of both the virtual persona of the author as well as the body of the author that serves as an anchor to the virtual reality. I further suggest that this process of continuous translation leads to the self as being recognised and gratified only in a state of performativity over inter-looped surfaces.

^{vii} Lawrence Liang, in his forthcoming essay, "The History of the Internet from the 15th to the 18th Century", examines the history of the print and pre-print cultures, to make a brilliant argument around the questions of knowledge, the authority of the knowledge, and the problems of legitimacy or authenticity that have surrounded the Wikipedia in recent years.

^{viii} The anxiety around such objects primarily circulates around questions of copyright infringements and piracy. The Music And Film Independent Association, for instance, claims that due to the re-mix, unlicensed distribution, and/or re-working of their material, they are suffering a heavy financial loss, leading to ridiculous legal cases that seem to hold no legitimacy in their sense or sensibility. Lawrence Lessig looks at a recent controversy on youtube where a mother, who broadcast digital moving images of her 13 month old son dancing to Prince's song *Let's go Crazy* was accused of copyright violation by the License owners who demanded the withdrawal of the video from youtube.

^{ix} In *A short History of Hentai*, Marc McLelland, defines Hentai as follows: "Hentai is a Sino-Japanese compound term widely used in modern Japanese to designate a person, action or state that is considered queer or perverse, particularly in a sexual sense. Unlike the English term 'queer', however, *hentai* does not have predominantly homosexual connotations but can be used to describe any sexual acts or motivations other than what might be termed 'normal' sexual relations. Indeed the loanword *nōmaru* (normal) is sometimes used as an antonym for *hentai*. Apart from this general use of the term *hentai*, it can also be used to designate a specific genre of

Japanese manga and animation that features extreme or perverse sexual content and it is in this sense that *bentai* has become well-known among western fans of Japanese popular culture.”

^x Professor Yu-Fen Ko (2000) at the Hsih-Shin University in Taipei, locates similar receptions of the ‘Hello Kitty’ phenomenon in Taiwan. Yu-Fen Ko examines how, the larger reception of popular cultural artifacts fail to look at the political potential that these objects have in the way they reconfigure the existing relationship between the personal and the political.

^{xi} This paper owes great intellectual and emotional debt to many people. Mandy Hua, who, apart from teaching me Chinese, also helped me get introduced to the intricacies of youth fashion and trends in Taiwan. Ted Cheng, who introduced me to many different Kuso objects and helped, whenever my own skills at access or analysis flailed. Amie Parry, Naifei Ding, David Barton, Chen Kuan-Hsing and Josephine Ho who made my stay in Taiwan so fruitful, providing emotional support, and listened to me patiently, correcting me when I was wrong and directing me to people and resources that helped me frame this argument and understand the entire new digital cinema phenomenon in a new light.

^{xii} After much screening and watching of Indian movie songs from Bollywood, we finally narrowed down to “Kajrare Kajrare” from the movie *Bunty aur Babby*, with Aishwarya Rai doing a special dance number.

^{xiii} The particular video can be viewed at <http://tw.youtube.com/watch?v=9NIzADGPEOg> The original video that is supposed to make this particular kind of Kuso-streaking is the video which also shot two young men into becoming Television celebrities and can be viewed at <http://tw.youtube.com/watch?v=0caIbkYfWTY>

^{xiv} One of the most popular icons of such consumption is in the popularity of Hello Kitty – a young female cat without a mouth (and hence without speech or the need to eat) - and has elicited much popular discourse. An example of how Hello Kitty is used as a way of also resisting the Western, Disneyfied, Barbie concepts of femininity can be seen in the video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFBHPbEtfqA>

^{xv} LOLCat started as an internet meme which displayed a set of cat pictures, with cheeky captions, parodying not only the internet slang known as ‘netspeak’ but also reflecting upon how central internet discussions and arguments were to the lives of the digital natives. Some of the most famous examples of LOLCat captions are ‘I can haz cheezburger’, ‘Ceiling Cat’ and then subsequently ‘Basement Cat’. More information and almost an exhaustive range of pictures can be seen at <http://icanhascheezburger.com/> More interesting LOLCat phenomena also include the under construction LOLCat Bible translation project available at <http://www.lolcatbible.com/>

^{xvi} ‘All your base are belong to us’ started as a successful parody of the obsession with UFO and space travel in the late nineties. The meme borrows this slightly cryptic line from European Sega Mega Drive Version of the video game Zero Wing, where it signified victory and total takeover of enemy territories by aliens, and specializes in putting up the caption on different familiar images taken from contemporary as well as historical times. A large collection of ‘All your base are belong to us’ images can be found at <http://www.allyourbasearebelongtous.com/>

^{xvii} A full list of their videos is available to view and download at <http://twochineseboys.blogspot.com/>

^{xviii} A quick glimpse of their popularity can be obtained on fan and internet monitoring sites like <http://www.milkandcookies.com/tag/backdormboys/> and <http://www.tian.cc/2005/10/asian-backstreet-boys.html>

^{xix} This trajectory from Reality TV to popular cultural icons is not unfamiliar or new. Various popular shows like American Idol in the USA, Big Brother in the UK, SaReGaMaPa in India, and Kuso Kuso in China, have all spawned instant celebrities who have cashed their media presence and fame to bag roles in featured television programming, cinema, etc. This particular ability of making one’s self popular and recognizable, often by using the internet as a medium for the same, and then penetrating more corporatized and affluent mass media markets, is a ploy that many aspiring media professionals are employing these days.