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A FILM BY YEO SIEW HUA 楊修華 作品

黑犬視 錄

STRANGER EYES


MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024
Official Selection

Written & Directed by	YEO Siew Hua
Produced by	Fran BORGIA, Stefano CENTINI, Jean-Laurent CSINIDIS, Alex C. LO
Executive Producer	Fran BORGIA
Co-Producers	Dan KOH, Jérôme NUNES
Associate Producers	Nicolas BRIGAUD-ROBERT, Denis VASLIN
Co-Executive Producers	Glen GOEI, TAN Bee Thiam
Line Producers	TAN Ai Leng, Chick Mavis KUANG
Director of Photography	Hideho URATA
Production Designer	James PAGE
Costume Designer	Meredith LEE
Editor	Jean-Christophe BOUZY
Supervising Sound Editors	TU Duu-Chih, TU Tse-Kang
Music Composer	Thomas FOGUENNE
Junyang	WU Chien-Ho
Lao Wu	LEE Kang-Sheng
Peiying	Anicca PANNA
Shuping	Vera CHEN
Officer Zheng	Pete TEO
Ling Po	Xenia TAN
Mother Wu	Maryanne NG-YEW
Little Bo	Any a CHOW


Singapore, Taiwan, France, USA - 126 minutes - Colour - 2K DCP - 1.85 - 5.1 - Mandarin

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

STRANGER EYES 默視錄 a film by Yeo Siew Hua



A young couple looking for their missing daughter finds video recordings of their most intimate moments taken by a mysterious voyeur, which sets them on an investigation to find the truth behind the images — and of themselves.



After the mysterious disappearance of their baby daughter, a young couple receives strange videos and realises someone has been filming their daily life — even their most intimate moments. The police sets up surveillance around their home to catch the voyeur, but the family starts to crumble as secrets unravel under the scrutiny of eyes watching them from all sides.



Once I saw a man in a park. He was a little older, not particularly striking. As I was staring at him, I started giving him a narrative. Later, I realised I was projecting my own aspirations onto the older man. I even thought that perhaps that man is me. I must have taken pleasure that I could do all this secretly. Then, I noticed the surveillance cameras all around me. I was being watched all this time. Someone is always watching.

Since the pandemic, the discourse of surveillance has quietly shifted from that of freedoms to social responsibilities. What does it mean to exist as merely an image to be perceived? Do we actually see someone, not as a pattern or type, but as a human with agency, histories, and fantasies? I sometimes wonder if I am not a little nostalgic of human surveillance rather than by a machine...

For a small island-state like Singapore, there is no outside the grid. The act of watching and being watched becomes a part of daily ritual. With its high population density and ubiquitous surveillance, the modern cityscape makes us unsuspecting witnesses to the lives of others — surely this has inadvertent consequences of its own. More curiously, how does the perceiving of others reflect our own actions and how we see ourselves? After all, what is seen cannot be unseen.

Stranger Eyes is a contemplation of these questions and of the relations between seeing and being seen, at a time when our sense of connectedness through new channels of visual consumption feels limitless yet alienated. The knowledge that we are being constantly watched —voluntarily in affirming our existence on social media and involuntarily as an ethical admission for the safety of ourselves and others— continues to shape our identity, through the scrutiny of a glass darkly. After all, the act of seeing is ultimately not a passive one but a reflexive and transformative process; a dangerous game of imitation that could lead to the collapse of stable identities.

Yeo Siew Hua's (楊修華) *A LAND IMAGINED* (2018) won the Golden Leopard at the 71st Locarno Film Festival and was Singapore's entry to the 92nd Academy Awards. The film also won him Best Original Screenplay at the 56th Golden Horse Film Awards in Taipei. He is also the head writer for series and the feature documentary, *THE OBS: A SINGAPORE STORY* (2014). Yeo studied film at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and graduated in Philosophy from the National University of Singapore.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

DEEP END – 2023 | Fiction Series

THE ONCE AND FUTURE - 2022 | Expanded Cinema

- Singapore International Festival of Arts 2022
- New Visions Arts Festival Hong Kong 2023

AN INVOCATION TO THE EARTH – 2019 | Fiction Short

- Opening Short Film | Singapore International Film Festival 2019
- Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum Madrid 2020
- Dharamshala International Film Festival 2020

A LAND IMAGINED – 2018 | Fiction Feature

- Locarno International Film Festival 2018 - Golden Leopard
- Singapore International Film Festival 2018 - Best Asian Feature Film
- Taipei Golden Horse Film Awards 2019 - Best Original Screenplay & Best Original Film Score

THE OBS: A SINGAPORE STORY – 2014 | Documentary Feature

- Singapore International Film Festival 2014
- Festival of Music Documentaries DORF (Croatia) 2016
- Focus on Asia Fukuoka International Film Festival (Japan) 2016

IN THE HOUSE OF STRAW – 2009 | Fiction Feature

- Bangkok International Film Festival (Thailand) 2009
- Singapore International Film Festival 2009
- Sao Paulo International Film Festival (Brazil) 2010

INTERVIEW WITH WRITER & DIRECTOR YEO SIEW HUA

***Stranger Eyes* is your latest feature following up the success to the Locarno Golden Leopard winning *A Land Imagined* (2018), but from my understanding it was initiated before the latter. How did that come about and has the script evolved a lot since?** You got me digging for the first draft, which was dated 2012. I pitched this earlier version of the film but we were hitting dead ends with funding. My producer Fran Borgia and I decided to shelve the project and only came back to it after *A Land Imagined*. I'm grateful that he had really stuck with me throughout all the ups and downs. Since then, I've made significant rewrites to reflect how I have changed as a person from the one who wrote it ten years ago. The characters have grown up as I have and so has the world at large. Let's not forget there was a pandemic in between and it shouldn't come as a surprise that much of the discourse surrounding surveillance has changed so drastically over this time. It feels like we have given up asking for our rights to privacy and instead working on the compromise of how we co-exist in this state of constant surveillance now.

The film is a multi-layered study of life under surveillance but it also feels much more than that. Can you share with me the origin of this project? Living in a densely populated city-state like Singapore, looking at my neighbours through my apartment window has become part of daily life for me. I know when they pick up the kids from school and when they feed the dogs. I expect them to know the same about my routines. At the same, I don't ever forget that the state is also watching me (watching someone else). It's a three-way stare down. But over and beyond the surveillance, I had set out to make a film about the relationship between seeing and being seen. I think it's an important thing to think about in this present moment because I don't think we have ever experienced a moment more intensely interconnected through technologies and more watched by the state, big corporates and each other. I don't think we know enough what living like this is shaping us into as a human race. What does it mean to go about our everyday knowing that we are constantly being watched? What does it do to the way we think of ourselves and what we can become? Conversely, in an age of digital identities, is our existence intricately tied up to being seen and liked by as many people

as possible? Are we increasingly becoming just an image to be seen by others? It seems to me that the images of ourselves have become more real than who we are now.

"The images of ourselves have become more real than who we are now," is quite the declaration of this social media age we live in. Is your use of the various screens within the film alluding to this? As an image maker, I am very concerned by how images affect the way we see ourselves. We live in a time of tension between what we see and what we can trust as truth but yet increasingly all of our connections to the world are mediated through virtual spaces. I don't think we forget that they are mediums of distortion but yet we still hold them up like a mirror — or a selfie camera — to look at ourselves, in pleasure or disgust, and sometimes both. I employ the mirroring of reality through screens in my film to draw out the anxieties of how we see ourselves and what others see of us. I am interested in the dissonance and the disconnects that I find within the uncanny glitches inside all of us.

Truly, reality can sometimes be quite uncanny. Is that why your film is so full of realism without being limited by it. Are these distortions of reality you speak of have to do with the magical realism in your film? I have always been told that my films straddle a thin line between the real and the surreal/ dream/virtual in a way that seems to recall a kind of magical realism. For me, these moments where reality breaks down, helps me to de-familiarise the everyday and puts in question certain assumptions we take for granted. As a Southeast Asian, I think we have a natural predisposition in accepting what is beyond the blatantly visible. It's not something I overly question or find the need to label as "magic". I am more concerned in trying to be sensitive to these ephemeral moments where it reveals itself to me and to then translate it into a visual language coherent to the film.

Can you give an example of such an instance? Somewhere a third into the film Junyang's mother, played by Vera Chen, was passed a binocular by the police officer to look into her own apartment from the block across and she sees a stranger in her own house. I had thought of this dancing girl as a projection of her own past through another kind of viewing glass, this time a binocular instead of a camera. It is the first moment the film proposes a temporal intervention



that will become critical to the way the rest of the film proceeds. It is also the first time the blind old mother of Wu appears, which is not just a coincidence for me. If we are to make a link between Junyang and Wu, then the elder lady could also be some kind of premonition or prophecy. The scene acts as a meeting of past, present and future for me. But of course, only on hindsight.

I guess linearity is not one of the things we expect of you. Like your previous film, *Stranger Eyes* has a similar triptych structure too. It follows almost a temporality between Now—Past—Future, or Past—Past perfect—Now. I am curious how the play of time works with your narrative. I am interested in the way temporal structures fold to elucidate new meanings. This was something I started experimenting with in my previous film, where two characters with very little points of intersection seem to overlap in the final act, producing the effect of a superimposition. With *Stranger Eyes*, I brought in the element of the subjectivity, seeing the characters through the eyes of another. I sometimes think of these phases not so much as temporal but as stages of a dialectic, arriving finally at new identities with new beginnings. I also like how you

frame it through a grammatical devise, positing the now, which is interesting because I think where we find the now gives us an idea of where to begin. In this sense, at the end.

Your films don't seem to end when the mystery is "elucidated". It gives us a sense that the story starts anew and what had happened before may just be a prelude to what is about to happen next. What does this "after-story" serve you here in *Stranger Eyes*? I sometimes think that the aftermath is more telling of who we are than how we behave when reduced to fight or flight instincts. It is also in these moments that we find the space for contemplation and transformation. These are the new beginnings I am interested in exploring because they are often surprising even for myself. It's hard to know where things will go from that moment the plot ends and life begins. As a writer, this is the most fascinating point where the film could pivot to any possible direction. In the case of Junyang, we see that he takes on an obsessive curiosity in the man who was stalking him and begins to take the time to watch him. Unlike before, he is now without the initial reason of finding his daughter. In one sense, his watching has become purposeless, but in the other, that to me is the sincerest way of observing someone,

STRANGER EYES 默視錄 a film by Yeo Siew Hua



sans purpose or reason. One ceases to become an instrument of your gaze and I believe that in these moments of truly seeing someone else, one loses oneself in the other.

Is that why we see Junyang begin to imitate the voyeur Wu, who is himself also a father? But as the investigator in the film also says “you just have to watch someone close enough and keep your eyes on him. At some point, even if he’s not a criminal, he will turn into one”. That’s quite a statement to leave the audience with. I always thought that if you look at someone intently and really observe them for a long time, you start to become like them. It’s a process of imitation that happens even without your conscious knowing. You start to walk like them, talk like them, take on their little gestures and phrases. This process is transformative but surely it is not purely benign either. I don’t believe in neutral unbiased observation because you have to project some form of your own humanity onto whatever you are looking at just to make sense of it. Then it is only natural that you end up seeing what you want to see. Or worse, you end up seeing only yourself. I think that’s what is happening to the two male

leads in my film. There are times I wonder if they are not just the past and future gazing upon each other.

These are very profound ideas layered within the guise of a simple story. I’m guessing this has to do with your studies in philosophy. How did you turn to cinema after that? Actually, it was the other way around. I had come to cinema first. It’s already more than twenty years ago when I was in film school. I knew how to use the camera and push all the buttons but I didn’t feel like I had anything very much to say as a filmmaker. Later, I gave myself the space to contemplate on these ideas of identity and subjectivity, during my studies in philosophy. In practice, my return to cinema after that is really just a continuation of my investigation on these issues. I guess you can say it’s not so much a return, since I never really left cinema. They have just become an expression of each other in my practice.

The film is no doubt very cerebral but what I really appreciate is how you did not let it drown in theory and the film is very embodied. Although the story serves to convey these ideas

I had been contemplating for a long time, but it was only until the actors embodied the roles that I finally understood them rendered in flesh. At the end, I am interested in the human condition and it was important that I did not close myself off to any pre-conclusions before seeing it played out in the yearning looks and the painful vulnerabilities that the actors brought to the characters. These ideas were very much alive on set and negotiated through the actors who thought it through with their bodies and breath. The beauty of cinema is that all of these complex ideas can be articulated in the eyes of the actors. Sometimes, all it takes is one look.

It is very commendable that you managed to bring out Lee Kang-Sheng’s best performance outside of Tsai Ming-liang’s films. How did you decide to offer him the role? I have always admired Lee Kang-Sheng as an actor. Having a large body of work with minimal dialogue, Lee Kang-Sheng has a mastery of his body language and in the power of his gaze. I think in finding someone to play a silent voyeur, there is no one else that can even come a close second to him. In my mind, Lee Kang-Sheng isn’t just another actor who is better than the one before him. He is on a league of his own. There has never been another Lee Kang-Sheng, and I dare say there will never be another. Thankfully, he is a real joy to work with on set and I was not disappointed for even a split second. He is the legend that he is and at the same time a kind and wonderful human being.

It sounds like you care a lot about conveying the simplicity of emotions that cuts through the layers of ideas. Above all, Stranger Eyes is very much a story about family and parenthood, isn’t it? I’m thinking a lot about family and parenthood these days, probably because of the age. It made me think of whether I would have struggled with being a parent when I was younger. Would I have messed it all up? But I guess it’s also presumptuous of me to think that I would ever be prepared for something like that now even though I’m older, not necessarily wiser. Nobody prepares you for parenthood until you’re actually turning into one yourself. I think a lot of these hopes and fears of mine has found its way into the film, since it took me more than ten years to write and rewrite the film. And although I had not focused on directing the film towards my own anxieties, I didn’t

realise until much later on during the edit that it had captured two of my greatest fears — of lonesome and lost time.

I think I felt them most strongly in your use of the unforgettable song “Endless Love” by Tsai Chin that accompanied the scene in the supermarket. Although founded on these fears but yet you turned it into one of the most memorable moments of your film. How did you conceive the scene? It’s a very iconic song for anyone familiar with Chinese pop music and I believe it was first released even before I was born. I remember it having such a hold on me while I was growing up and I was surprised to find out that the kids these days still hum its tune. I wanted to tap into this timeless quality that seems to resonate across generations. It is after all the soundtrack that bridges the two characters Peiying and Wu, with a wide age gap between them. If you think about it, this relationship between them is a purely mediated one, firstly through Peiying’s DJ set and later to be reciprocated by Wu playing a piece of music belonging to his own memory to her. The piece is a serenade of unforgettable love, expressing how Wu is lost in his own past because she reminds him of someone he used to love. I find it both heartbreaking and tender because they never get to meet but through a mediation of cameras, he gets to see her and she gets to be seen. The song returns once more at the end of the film as an echo of all that has come to pass but this time it’s with the younger protagonist. For me, Peiying holds a key central position in all of this.

Talking about the ending, the couple looks at each other but it’s hard to tell if they truly see each other. Can Junyang change his destiny as a father? I would like to think so.

Interviewed by **Wang Muyan**, a film critic and programmer for Directors’ Fortnight at Cannes; he is now based in Paris.



WU CHIEN-HO 巫建和 (as Junyang)

Wu Chien-Ho made his debut in the 2010 TV drama *THE KITE SOARING*, which earned him the Golden Bell Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Drama Program. The following year, he won the Golden Bell Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Mini-Series/TV Movie for *DAYS WE STARED AT THE SUN* (2010), and has been nominated for the Best Actor in a Mini-Series/TV Movie for *DAYS WE STARTED AT THE SUN II* (2018). In 2019, he was nominated for the Golden Horse Award for Best Actor for *A SUN*. Wu's participation in a variety of music videos, television shows, and films has been widely acclaimed, making him one of the most attractive new generation male actors in Taiwan.



LEE KANG-SHENG 李康生 (as Lao Wu)

Lee Kang-Sheng is an acclaimed actor, director, and screenwriter from Taiwan. He made his acting debut in *BOYS* (1991). In 2003, he wrote and directed his debut film *THE MISSING*, which won the Best New Director Award at the 8th Busan International Film Festival and the Best Director Award at the Athens International Film Festival. Lee's second directorial film *HELP ME, EROS* (2007) was nominated for the Golden Lion at the 64th Venice Film Festival. In 2013, he won the Best Actor at the 50th Golden Horse Awards and the Best Actor at the 56th Asia-Pacific Film Festival for *STRAY DOGS*.



ANNICA PANNA 林幻夢露 (as Peiying)

Annica Panna graduated from the Department of Commercial Design at Taiwan Fu-Hsin Trade and Arts School. She made her acting debut in a drama series on Taiwan Public Television in 2018. Later, she solidified her ambition to become an actress after starring as the female lead in the short film *TEMPLE OF DEVILBUSTER* (2020) which was nominated for the 57th Golden Horse Awards. In recent years, she has participated in numerous film shorts, showcasing her versatility through various roles.



VERA CHEN 陳雪甄 (as Shuping)

Vera Chen is a Taiwanese actress, director, and acting coach. She was trained at École Philippe Gaulier, France, and received an MA of Contemporary Performance from Brunel University, UK. In 2019, she and Lau Kek-huat were nominated at the 56th Golden Horse Award for Best New Director with the film *BOLUOMI*. In 2020, she was nominated at the 57th Golden Horse Award and 23rd Taipei Film Award for Best Supporting Actress with the film *THE ROPE CURSE 2*.



PETE TEO 張子夫 (as Officer Zheng)

Pete Teo is a multiple award winning Malaysian musician and actor. As well as being a successful recording artist, he was also the late Yasmin Ahmad's music composer, and has made some of the most influential political reform music videos in Malaysia. As an actor, he is most often seen in the works of Malaysian New Wave directors. Recent work includes Rupert Sanders's Hollywood blockbuster *GHOST IN THE SHELL* (2017), Ying Liang's *A FAMILY TOUR* (2018), and Tan Chui Mui's *BARBARIAN INVASION* (2021). He lives on an organic farm just outside of Kuala Lumpur with his wife and four dogs.



XENIA TAN 娜娜 (as Ling Po)

Xenia Tan is a screen actor. She was trained in New York where she completed courses at New York Film Academy and The Barrow Group. Effectively bilingual in English and Mandarin, and fluent in the Hokkien dialect, Xenia has participated in feature films, dramas, web series and short films. Her notable feature film credits include *WONDERLAND* (2023), which made its World Premiere at the 24th Annual San Diego Asian Film Festival and its Asian premiere at Singapore International Film Festival, and *STRANGER EYES* (2024). Her notable screen credit include the long form drama *SUNNY SIDE UP*, which she was a main cast for 224 episodes, and more recently *THE LANDLADY SINGER*, which she was a main cast in this musical comedy drama.



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