Exploring B-Movie Themes in Virtual Reality:
The Woman Who Fell to Earth and Met the Pontianak

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Abstract

The room-scale VR experience *The Woman Who Fell to Earth and Met the Pontianak* (2021) is an artistic experiment and "B-movie" homage that confronts an alien with the unfamiliar environment of a historic early 20th-century Malayan kampong village surrounded by tropical jungle. The kampong is home of the Pontianak, a female vampiric ghost based on Malay folk mythology. The project is loosely based on the Virtual Cinematic Heritage application *Pontianak VR* (Seide, Slater, 2020), which re-created scenes of the lost film *Pontianak* (1957), but in contrast, this project is generating its own non-linear narrative journey.

The B-Movie VR Experience

The audience is invited to explore the virtual village freely, meander around, examine the old kampong houses and the tropical vegetation. The village appears deserted, clothes hanging out to dry, a pot still steaming, it seems the villagers have vanished. In this historic environment the audience will discover an unexpected visitor in the form of a melancholic female Stranger (an Alien/Cyborg), who seems irritated by the village and its artefacts. Who is she? Accompanying the Stranger on her excursion of the village is challenging, she appears here and there and walks right through the walls. While following the Stranger around, a presence is lurking behind the trees and corners, observing the two visitors, it is: The Pontianak. (fig. 1)

Background: The Lost Film Pontianak

This project was formed initially from research into the film *Pontianak* (1957), released by Cathay-Keris Studio in Singapore and other Southeast Asian territories.

Fig. 1. *The Woman Who Fell to Earth and Met the Pontianak*, 2021, Benjamin Seide, still image from VR experience, © 2021, the authors.

This was the first in what would become a massively popular series of horror films that centred around the figure of the Pontianak, a female vampiric creature who oscillates between the physical and spectral, originating in Malay folk mythology. The main character Chomel, who becomes the Pontianak, is both the heroine and villain of the narrative, and her visual transformation into the monstrous Pontianak was a key element in terrifying the audience (Mustafar, 2012). Due to its success, a sequel was produced quickly the same year, *Dendam Pontianak* (1957) and a third film *Sumpah Pontianak* the following year (1958). The first two films are believed to be lost (Barnard, 2011), and there are very few available images of either.

The B-Movie Homage

This project combines three major elements in the VR space: 1/ The kampong (fig. 2), which has been researched and recreated with some

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degree of accuracy; 2/ The figure of the Pontianak, widely known in Southeast Asian pop culture via the Pontianak films of the late 50s and 60s—as well as other media (comics, books, videogames); and 3/ The humanoid Alien/Cyborg who emerges from Western pop culture such as *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (Walter Tevis and then Paul Mayersberg/Nic Roeg) to *Under The Skin* (Michel Faber and then Jonathan Glazer/Walter Campbell), as well as more schlocky B-movie variants of female Aliens in *Lifeforce* (1985) and the *Species* series (1995 onwards).

Fig. 2. *Virtual Kampong Village*, 2020, Benjamin Seide, still image from VR experience, © 2020, the authors.

To varying degrees, these films grapple with the idea of an Alien trying to relate to humanity and struggling to do so, partly because of the inherent corruptions of humanity itself. The idea of an Alien—with a higher technology—clashing with humanity is also explored in other action films, like the *Predator* series (1987 onwards) and its off-shoots. The conceit of the project is that the Alien is 'facing off' against a creature from another era, culture and mythology, a reference to another "B-movie" sub-genre, the *Alien Vs Predator* films, which pitted creatures from different cinematic worlds against each other, an idea dating back at least to Universal Studio's use of their iconic horror characters, i.e. *Frankenstein meets the Wolf Man* (1942). In fact the Pontianak sequels, *Dendam Pontianak* and *Sumpah Pontianak* attempted a similar strategy placing the Pontianak against other "monsters" from Malay folk-tales, including the Polong in *Dendam* and multiple ghosts and creatures in *Sumpah*. So, this notion of contrasting creatures meeting and in conflict is a vital tendency of genre cinema in many cultures, as elements are recombined and re-used. In this way, for this current project, we are following the spirit of this "B-movie/Genre cinema" approach, re-cycling already created assets (in terms of the filmic set of the kampong and the character of the Pontianak), in order to create a genre "mash-up" of different elements, blending different mythologies and cultures in an irreverent manner to open up some new possibilities for an immersive and narrative VR experience.

Acknowledgements

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Biographies

Benjamin Seide and **Benjamin Slater** currently teach and research in Media Art at ADM, School of Art, Design and Media at NTU Singapore. With their experience and specific expertise in the areas of computer animation and visual effects (Seide) as well as film history (Slater), they explore the possibilities of immersive media, especially in regard to representations of culture and heritage.