

Sawyer Bay

Queer Urban Cinema

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11 December 2020

Bugis Street: Analyzing Queer Cinema and Space

Queer, Hong Kong director Yonfan wrote and directed his first queer film of many in 1995, *Bugis Street*, intending to steer away from the mainstream and bring marginalized stories to the forefront of cinema's narratives. As expected, it was only a minor hit in the box office and was surprisingly passed by Singapore's Board of Director Censors but was subsequently banned for twenty years for its sexually explicit rating- unapologetically portraying trans bodies and queer genitalia on the big screen. Despite depicting the 1960s and being released in a fairly progressive time of the mid 90s, *Bugis Street* was controversial and was met with enormous opposition from the majority ideology of hetero and cis normativity. The film follows the main character, a sixteen-year-old girl, Lien, who migrates from her hometown of Malacca in West Malaysia to find employment in the metropolitan city of Singapore. Lien encounters a major culture shock as she switches from a sheltered, rural life, working as a maid in a wealthy estate and suddenly finds herself working in the Sin Sin Hotel, right along Bugis Street, a fairly run down hotel that operates as a brothel full of transgender women, usually inviting lonesome sailors and Bugis Street's regulars for an hourly or daily rate of \$3. The film is uniquely beautiful and focuses on a historically red-light district in an oppositionally conservative area that centered trans women in its financial success and widespread attraction. Director, Yonfan takes the viewer on a beautiful journey that explores urban space, privatized queer spaces, and queer bodies through a deliberate and skillful lens.

The film opens in an outside dance club on Bugis Street crawling with drunken, horny American sailors headed to serve in the Vietnam war with the intent of having one last night of deviance. Playing on the decades old cliché of navy men coming into a port to experiment and explore queer sexual encounters, usually subsequent of their weeks if not months old abstinence, the sailors knowingly recent red-light districts and are seemingly aware of the queerness operating in the space. In the article of *Imagined Space, Queer Spaces in Shanghai*, the author notes that,

In recent years, shopping centers, restaurants, cafes, and bars have been popular meeting places for relatively well-off young queer people in Shanghai. The density of people in these public spaces make it relatively safe for queer people to meet... These are often sites where fashion, lifestyle, and class distinction are publicly represented and thus often symbolized. (43)

While it might be far-fetched to compare Shanghai to Singapore, though they are both large metropolitan cities in Asia- China and Malaysia- it is important to note that the argument the author makes is fairly universal for all metropolitan cities. In the film, the businesses on Bugis Street became a haven for queer people and invited gatherings nightly. Though the film doesn't give the best indication of class structures operating in Singapore, the particularly party centered lifestyle and elegant clothing the women wear helps indicate a true middle class, given that they still do stay in a hotel and live off of sex work funds. In the opening scene, the women are dressed from head to toe in sexy, seemingly lavish, and overly campy attire. As the camera pans throughout the block and party scene, the women directly speak to the lens, describing their personal beauty and sexual expertise. This is the only moment within the film that the fourth wall is broken and illustrates that the women are- in a way- putting on a show. The performance-based interactions highlight a few possible layers of the women's identity- perhaps

transgenderism and binary alignment in its works, the performance of sex work, or an attempt to align to a class distinction.

An aspect of queer identity and visibility that is metaphorically, yet successfully explored in the film is its inconsistency. The pleasure of queer sex life and open visibility is represented by Bugis Street; its existence is temporary and always under the threat of external forces. According to Lee San, ““pink” gay bars and clubs began to appear in Shanghai in the early 1990s... they shifted their location many times and were closed several times for various reasons” (43). In the film’s opening scene, Singapore’s summer monsoon storms suddenly sweep through the city and send the partygoers on a frenzy to find shelter. The comfort and safety of queer gatherings disappears for the night and the sense of community is lost as the physical communal space becomes unavailable. Yonfan continues exploring this theme throughout the film with earthy shots of clouds passing and patterned rain cycles that cleans and rejuvenate the city. The director’s emphasis on the cycles of nature help mirror the queer identity and suggest that all things that blossom must inevitably be swept away and hidden in certain times. For example, when Lien’s close friend Drago, a transwoman from Paris, visits her dying mother, she goes presenting as a man- free from makeup, a wig, or any sort of feminine aligning clothing. Her mother, accepting and bittersweet tells Drago, “I got used to having a daughter; now you come here as a son.” The moment paired with the film’s opening scene perfectly encapsulates the adaptability of queer identity. Operating in a world or society that has not yet been made for them, queer people often leach on to the moments of euphoria where they can exist openly within a large group in a queer environment, but know all too well how to quickly resort back into their respective shells and “pass” as straight or cis to gain advantage within society.

The film does not give the viewer much historical background regarding Lien's migration and the contrasts between Malaysia and Singapore, but it can be reasonably inferred that Yonfan presupposes a familiarity from the viewer, given that the film was produced locally and involved deep Singaporean culture. However, for the viewer, like myself, who is not well versed on Asian history, it is worthwhile to examine the implications of Queer identity within the societies. The precedent for widespread acceptance of marginalized identities was set by the various racial wars by the PAP and the UMNO. The People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore's dominant political party, and The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysia's dominant political party, had two competing political ideologies. The PAP adopted non-communal politics that promoted equality for all regardless of race or religion. On the other hand, UMNO advocated for the provision of special rights and privileges for the indigenous Malays in Malaysia and formed a racially divided society (Han). In 1973, Singapore continued building on their progressive policies and legalized gender affirming surgery. Continuing on, a policy was created to allow post-operative transgender individuals to change the legal gender on many of their identity cards (discluding birth certificates) and other documents which later followed. Despite the seemingly accepting environment imposed by the government, society views trans people as outside the LGBTQ community and is still actively homophobic today. Same-sex sexual activity between males is illegal, in both Malaysia and Singapore even if consensual and committed in private, and prosecutions under Section 377A occasionally still occur today. (LGBT Rights In Singapore).

The sheltered, naïve life Lein experiences in Malaysia comes to perspective right after the opening scene, as the sailors and their women retreat to the brothels and night quickly turns into day. Lein, being the hotel's maid, knocks on the door of one room to replace the towels. One of

the women is working and calls out to Lein to enter the room to do her own work. Upon entering, Lein is shocked and immediately freezes at the sight of them having sex. She continues on with her duties after the brief moment of hesitation until she takes a closer look at the couple's bodies. In the moment, she realizes that the women working does not have the typical genitalia that cis women are born with and immediately runs out the room, screaming that "the women here are men". She sprints to the side of the building and vomits down two stories. As a perfect parallel to Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), the director makes a deliberate point to include a moment of physical sickness that an unsuspecting cis person feels at the sight of a trans person's body. The director redeems himself, however, in not following Lien in her inappropriate moment of transphobia and instead focuses on the women behind her, laughing and mocking Lien's naivness. Yonfan's intentionality is seen throughout this film, particularly in this opening scene with the various shot perspectives and their meanings. For example, when the film opens up in the outside bar, every shot is at eye level and uses a wide-angle lens, fully immersing the spectator in the scene and highlighting its publicness. Shortly after, when the couples return to the Sin Sin Hotel to have sex, the camera's perspective completely changes and is situated either from a low or high angle, looking up or down at the couple. The voyeuristic perspective of the bedroom scenes, with the camera neatly tucked away in the room's corner, gives the viewer the feeling that they should not be there- that this should not be happening. While there is a community and the tool of public safety, queer relations are camouflaged and existing feels less threatening. However, once the sexual act goes behind closed doors, Yonfan wants the viewer to feel the reality, secrecy, and danger in queer sex in Singapore.

Yonfan's 1995 film, *Bugis Street*, does a surprisingly beautiful job of exploring the topics of transgenderism, a particularly taboo topic in Asian cinema, urban migration, queer space, and

developing identities with skillful, yet fragile methods of storytelling and camera work. Bugis Street's sweet sensibility pays homage to the history of transgender women and their successes in an anti-queer state, who's history and existence has been almost completely erased. Yonfan offers the audience a stark contrast of Malaysia and Singapore's ideologies in terms of progressivism and social acceptance through Lien's character development and offers a cliché that shows the audience that trans people are really not all that different from cis people, and are beautiful physically, intellectually, and emotionally. The topics of urban migration and queer development within the city are illustrated through the lens of genius, conceptualizing visibility, invisibility, and the art of a queer secret.

Works Cited

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