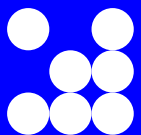


● Queer  
East  
Emerging  
Critics  
Project  
2024



## Index

Introduction	Editor's Note	6
Article 1	Dressing Up/Dressing Down: Gender and Class in A Princess' One-Sided Love	10
Article 2	Haunted Bodies	14
Article 3	Dancing Street	18
Article 4	Incest? Or Saying and Not Saying	22
Article 5	Too Far or Too Close for Comfort?	28
Article 6	At the Intersection of Day and Night	32
Article 7	Queer Ambivalence of The Bathhouse	36
Article 8	Obscure Images: See Less to See More	40
Article 9	A Queer East Diary: A Fish in a Forest	46
Article 10	Eternal Return for Boys: Summer Vacation 1999 and The Heart of Thomas	52
	Credits	56

## 2024 Mentors

---

### Phuong Le

Phuong Le is a Vietnamese film critic based in London. Her writing can be found in The Guardian, Sight & Sound, and other publications. She is also a regular contributor to the Free Thinking programme on BBC Radio 3.

IG/X (@phuonghle)

---

### Ian Wang

Ian Wang is a critic based in London. His writing has appeared in Sight & Sound, The Baffler, ArtReview, Tribune and other publications. His video essay Swimming, Dancing appeared at the Asian Film Archive in 2023.

IG/X (@iantwang)

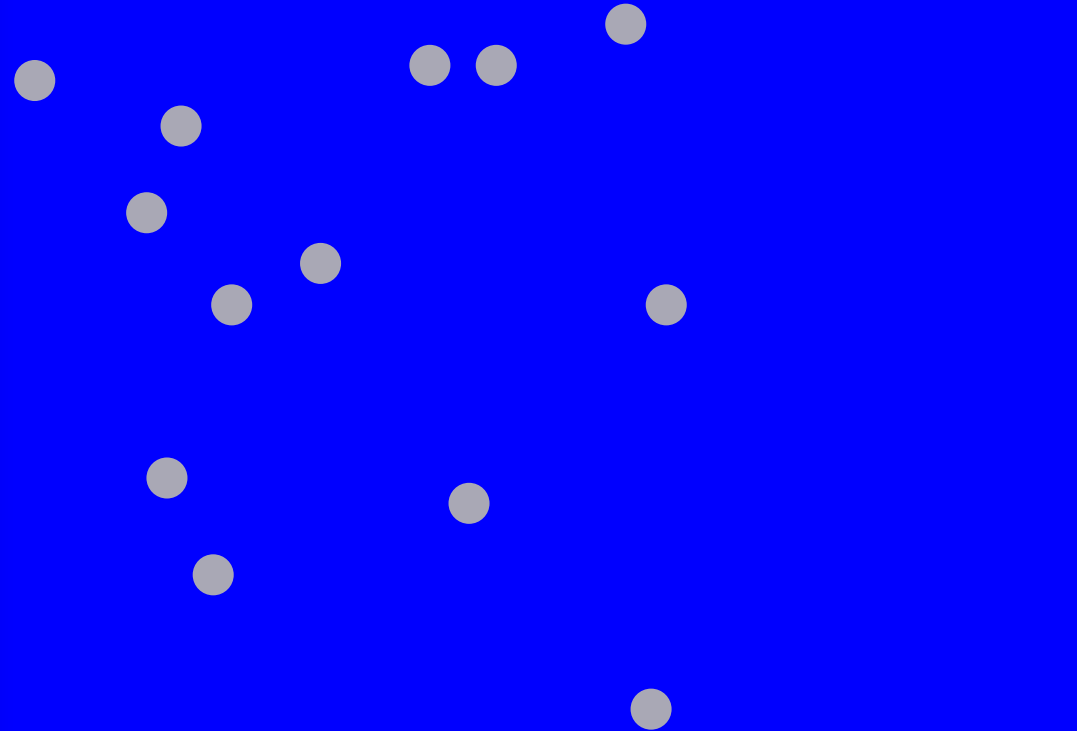
---

### Cici Peng

Cici Peng is a film journalist and film programmer based in London. She has written for British GQ, LWLies, Dazed & Confused, i-D, and led and edited an editorial project for gal-dem. She has programmed screenings and events at the BFI, ICA, and the Barbican among others. She is a part of Sine Screen, a film collective dedicated to highlighting films from ESEA filmmakers.

IG (@icy\_seashells)  
X (@cicipeng\_)

# ● Editor's Note



6 This is our first ever Queer East Critics Project – and it has been incredibly generative venturing out together and making up the rules as we go along.

We worked with 6 brilliant writers who come from many different fields beyond visual arts and film writing. Writing together has involved dreaming beyond formal constraints of the form of criticism. Within this zine, each writer has produced two texts – a review and a ‘final text’ that bears no limits – venturing into fiction and diaristic entries, to essays on incest and personal reflections of the queer sauna space. All the writing is irreverent, vulnerable, surprising. Throughout the project, we’ve been discussing questions around representation and critique from the beginning, especially when writing about films from specific political, cultural and historical contexts in East and South East Asia – from different filmmakers’ creative modes of evading censorship to historical films which are queer in unexpected ways.

On our first workshop day together, we explored in many ways what it means to ‘represent’ and how our writing could seek to move beyond representation. Ian’s presentation explored the question around the term ‘rediscovery’ and how the term is loaded with varying power dynamics – who is doing this ‘rediscovering’ of a specific film

history and for whom are they ‘rediscovering’ these films for? How do these terms shape critical writing and further exoticise national cinemas? Cici’s presentation focused on the sensorial experience of cinema beyond sight as our primary form of contact – from thinking of the historical violence of visibility and representation from the Enlightenment to now, to exploring the unconscious embodied experience offered by sleeping in the cinema. Phuong’s presentation further sought to negate the binaries we often fall into in film criticism (local vs global, arthouse vs popular, East vs West) for a re-evaluation of the canon of film criticism – citing writers including Edogawa Rampo, Jun’ichirō Tanizaki and Mani Kaul. For as long as cinema has existed, there have been non-male, non-white perspectives on film from across the globe.

While writing can be a hermitic process, this does not mean that critics must always face the tyranny of the blank page in solitude. In addition to providing participants with necessary critical and professional tools, what our workshop seeks to emphasise most is a sense of togetherness and camaraderie in a field still fragmented by hierarchy and precarity.

● 403 Kingsland Rd, London (Queer East 2024)



Our outing to a screening of Choi Eun-hee’s *A Princess’ One-Sided Love* (1967), one of the many repertory titles shown at this year’s Queer East, was followed by an equally delightful Korean dinner where conversations, as well as makgeolli, flowed. Our mentoring sessions also aimed to foster this communal spirit. Apart from discussions of outlines and opening paragraphs, what we hope to achieve is an economy of care and mentorship that will last beyond the scope of the workshop.

As editors and mentors, but also as critics ourselves, we are conscious of the difficult and precarious situation young critics find themselves in. Opportunities are scarce, paid opportunities even scarcer; critics are increasingly pressured to eschew rigour, sincerity or adventurousness in favour of producing PR-friendly boilerplate. We wanted our Critics Project to offer a space outside of this prescriptiveness, to share the same experimentation and fluidity that has driven Queer East’s programming.

We hope this is clearest in our critics’ final projects, each of which has taken on a different form and posed a different question.

Cinema is a site of many things in these pieces: of memory, of joy, of embodied experience. But it is not neutral, or simply a tool for empathy or education. Cinema confronts us – particularly cinema which transgresses societal or filmmaking conventions – by making a political provocation, by destabilising our senses and desires, and in the conversations and arguments that continue even after the screen has faded to black. In pushing the boundaries of what film writing can and should look like, our critics have confronted us too.

9 ● Dressing  
Up/Dressing  
Down:  
Gender  
and Class  
in 'A Princess'  
One-Sided  
Love ●

10 공주병 (*gong-ju byeong*) princess syndrome is a term used to denigrate a woman perceived to be narcissistic and spoilt, so ridiculous that she would imagine herself a princess and expect everyone to wait on her beck and call. As a child I would shudder every time I heard the phrase, terrified that I had spoken too loudly or gotten caught looking in the mirror too long lest I be diagnosed. If only I had watched *A Princess' One-sided Love* (1967), wherein the titular princess' affliction with the terrible ailment is in fact what allows her to escape her fate of servitude and misery for one of love and (relative) freedom.

Set in the middle of the Joseon era, the princess Suk-gyeong (a real historical figure from the 17th Century) is the youngest of six daughters, the eldest five all having left the palace to wed mediocre court officials. The princess is determined not to follow in the footsteps of her sisters, proudly announcing that she shall never marry, or rather more radically, that she shall choose her own husband. On this fateful day, she encounters a young scholar named Kim Seon-do and love blooms at first sight. What follows is a playfully wild romp involving cross-dressing and breaking all the rules of polite society, as the princess escapes her gilded cage to explore the dangers and possibilities of life beyond the palace.

The second film by Choi Eun-hee, South Korea's third-ever female director, *A Princess' One-sided Love* is similarly critical of arranged marriage and the obscene levels of obedience demanded from women in Korean society as Choi's first film *The Girl Raised as a Future Daughter-in-Law* (1965). '고추 당추 맵다 해도 시집살이 더 맵더라!' 'They say chilli peppers are spicy but married life is even spicier!' proclaims one of Suk-gyeong's sisters, a line from a song that also appears in Choi's first feature. Released in 1967 in a rapidly modernising South Korea, the film touches on the tensions between the disruption and preservation of tradition, depicting a modern woman who knows what she wants having to navigate ludicrous, outdated laws (princesses were not allowed to leave the palace or interact with commoners). By situating the story nearly three centuries ago, Choi slyly critiques gender and class structures that have changed in name but not in nature whilst also evading the censorship of the Park Chung-hee regime.

On the surface, a black-and-white



● *A Princess' One-Sided Love* (1967) by Choi Eun-hee



● *A Princess' One-Sided Love* (1967) by Choi Eun-hee

11 court melodrama about forbidden love would not have been my first pick for a Friday night. Luckily, Choi brings lightness and humour to what could have easily been dull and heavy-handed. Wandering about the city with no sense of direction, the princess finds herself in a high-class brothel, where she is mistaken for a 기생 (*gisaeng*) courtesan by a gaggle of court officials who expect her to be meekly deferential in the face of their status. Instead, she gleefully insults each one with scathing court gossip, her irreverence exposing the farce of institutions and absurdity of hierarchy. Nam Jeong-im's incredibly charismatic performance is what makes her takedowns so delicious; at times she's coquettish and uses her feminine wiles to get what she wants, but equally she doesn't give a fuck, romping about 한양 (*Hanyang*) old Seoul without a care in the world.

In lesser hands, the princess could have been foolish and naive, a cautionary tale against stepping out of bounds, but Choi portrays her with empathy. Suk-gyeong is clever but not cunning in her quest to get what she wants, a world away from the evil women in other Korean films of the era such as *The Housemaid* (1961) who seduce and use men. Whilst those depictions reflected male anxieties around the increasing socioeconomic power of women at the time, *A Princess' One-sided Love* takes a distinctly female perspective on power structures, showing how women use wit and sly defiance to overcome barriers. Like Nam Jeong-im, Choi Eun-hee herself was also a prolific actress, although she is best known in the West for being kidnapped to North Korea and forced to make films with her ex-husband Shin Sang-ok. Perhaps Choi navigated adversity in her life in a similar way to the princess, indirectly undermining the gaze of men in a male-dominated industry and asserting herself as a director in her own right.

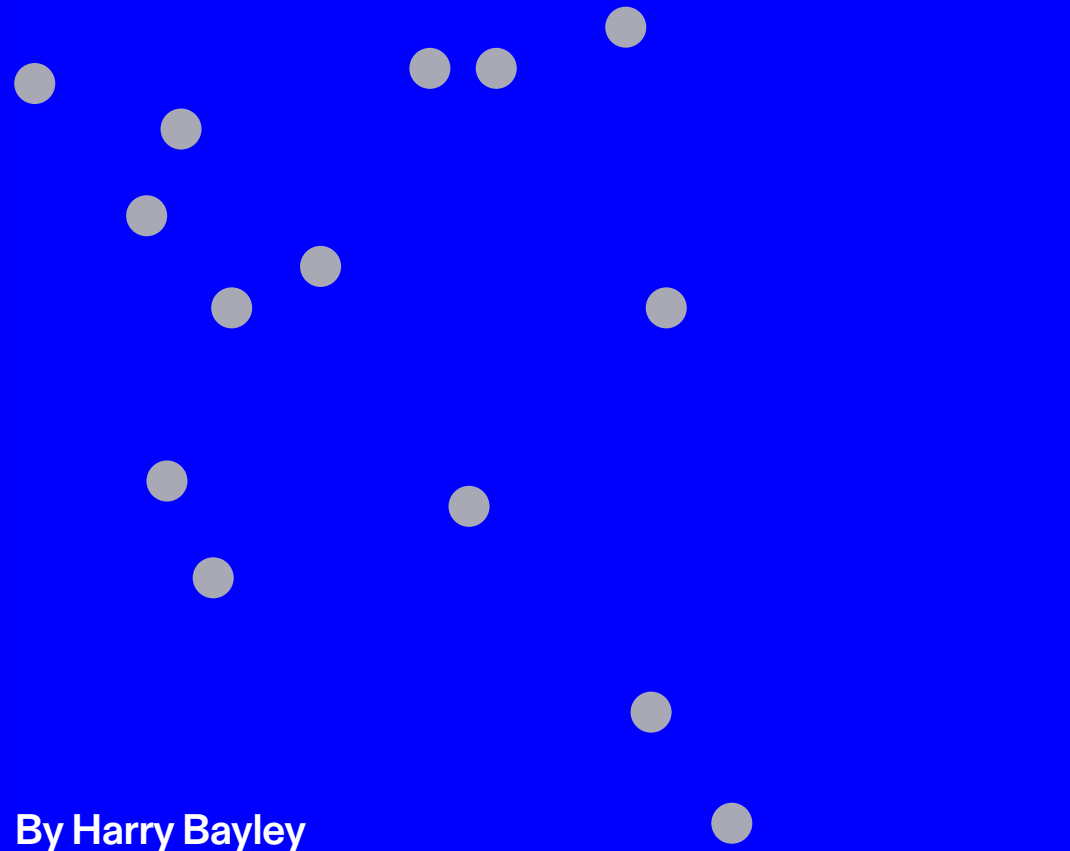
I was hesitant at first how much of a queer reading I could do of the film, considering it never veers into explicitly queer territory. The story for *A Princess' One-sided Love* was inspired by Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, wherein a female character masquerades as a man and pursues a male love interest (only men could be professional actors in Shakespearean times, adding another layer of ambiguity). Even though both works inevitably conclude with heterosexual fulfilment, there does remain undeniable queerness in the moments of

deception and dress-up. When the princess Suk-gyeong in male clothing meets Kim Seon-do, the pair shyly proclaim their great admiration for each other in poetic ways that are slightly hard not to read as gay. 'I am flattered that you would take a poor student like me to be your friend', Kim Seon-do tells the princess who he thinks is a man, except he doesn't say friend, he says 백년지기(百年知己), a soulmate, a century-long companion. Chill, y'all just met!

Also featuring deep brotherly love with homoerotic tones is *The Love Eterne* (1963), the Chinese opera film that screened at last year's edition of the festival. In a reverse-Shakespearean move, both the noble woman who dresses up as a man to pursue her education and the man she falls in love with are played by female actors. The film portrays cross-dressing as a means to an end that can coexist with Confucian values: it allows an exceptionally intelligent woman to attend university, while her end goal remains to become a dutiful wife. Although the casting in *A Princess' One-sided Love* is more straightforward (no bending here), the princess' reasons for cross-dressing are decidedly anti-Confucian. In her first transgression of hierarchy, she dresses as a servant girl to leave the palace – not out of necessity or a desire to study, but rather because she's bored with her assigned role of obedient, decorative trophy and she wants some excitement in her life. When she adorns male drag, it's a split-second decision of survival to help her escape from the brothel. In both of her costume changes, she doesn't try to embody how she thinks a servant girl or a man acts. What's radical about princess Suk-gyeong is her lack of understanding or care about the class and gender systems so deeply embedded into society, which in turn reveals their mutable and subversive qualities.

At the end of the film, the princess is stripped of her title and becomes just Suk-gyeong. The love that was supposed to remain one-sided can finally become requited and the lovers embrace each other as equals. Despite the satisfactorily neat wrap-up, I can't help but wonder what their married life would be like beyond the immediacy of the happy ending. She might not be a princess anymore, but I doubt she can be so easily cured of her princess syndrome.

# ● Haunted Bodies



Cici Peng's "I Will Haunt You Forever: Queer Ghosts Across Time" programme reconsiders what it is to haunt. A disembodied voice, whispers in the forest, bodies moulding together and a revenant flying high above the river.

Composed of 5 moving-image works, the programme features *Ghost Carnival* 鬼的狂歡 (1994) directed by Qiu Miaojin and co-written by Lin Hsu Wen-Er, *Whispering Ghosts* (2008) directed by Taiki Sakpisit, *In Our Being* (2011) directed by Ghislan Sutherland-Timm and Jann Earl Q. Madariaga, *All Trace is Gone No Clamour for a Kiss* (2022) directed by Chirs Zhongtian Yuan and *River is My Hometown* (2021) directed by River Cao.

Ghosts are used in different ways here, ghosts of unfulfilled desire, ghosts of the land, ghosts of ourselves, ghosts of the past and ghosts revisiting home forever changed.

In *Ghost Carnival*, the only film ever made by seminal Taiwanese lesbian writer Qiu Miaojin, the ghost of a young woman comes back to haunt her adopted brother in the days leading up to his 20th birthday. The film is non-linear; we bounce between scenes of the two siblings Si Ping and Jin Yang together and then Jinyang alone at home and on a beach. A cassette player is a constant presence in these scenes, broadcasting thoughts of a love no longer, grief and desire not fulfilled. We learn of Jin Yang's deep adoration of his sister Si Ping and desire to marry her, in one scene confessing

this, he embraces her. In between shots of waves crashing onto the beach and Jin Yang's home we learn Si Ping, unable to cope with this taboo relationship, commits suicide. Jin Yang cannot let go, he sits on the beach lingering in the memory of Si Ping. Jin Yang plays back Si Ping's laughter, a disembodied sound from a past life, the cassette tape an extradiegetic trace of the past.

Through engaging with the siblings' taboo relationship Qiu unexpectedly explores something perhaps more autobiographical. Si Ping's words, "I love you, but we cannot be together" hints beyond the taboo of their relationship but to the impossibility of other kinds of desire. Qiu died by suicide at the age of 26 a year after the film's completion. The disembodied voice from the cassette players feels as though it is Qiu, an otherworldly presence reciting lines on love, desire and loss. Eventually, Jin Yang travels to the coast one final time, the tape is thrown into the sea, and the director casts their feelings to the ocean to be washed away and absolved of sin.

Thai director Taiki Sakpisit's *Whispering Ghosts* uses spirits to tell stories of the land. Taiki takes us through a dying man's

consciousness during their transition to the next life. A veiled woman enters the scene, our rebirth being paused, she talks of confiding treasure in witches, poverty and hate. The next spirit we only hear is shown alongside imagery of landscape being drilled into. Unlike *Ghost Carnival*, the disembodied voice is used to tell a collective history, like an ominous prophet. These whisperers muffle the sounds of the city, echoing into the distance out to whoever listens.

*In Our Being* is a Canadian-Filipino co-production from Ghislan Sutherland-Timm & Jann Earl Q. Madariaga, made on Super 8 combines collage and stop-motion. Having been through a journey of rebirth in *Whispering Ghosts*, *In Our Being* keeps us in this "other" space. The film explores the experience of two queer people of colour by attempting to fit these two perspectives into one body via cut-and-paste. An alien body is made through a collage of segmented parts, in dual projection we watch hands, mouths, and arms blending into the air, once side by side these images flirt with one another, cruising in the dark eventually they converge to touching where they cannot cross both time and space.

*All Trace is Gone No Clamour for a Kiss* exists in the space in between, we see two beings talk of displacement, grief, queer intimacy and the multiple histories embodied within them. Exploring histories of colonial exploitation, its title is taken from Toni Morrisons' 1987 novel *Beloved* where historical trauma becomes a ghost. In comparison to *In Our Being* where historical boundaries are overcome, *All Trace is Gone* grapples with history and its connection to bodies in the present. A combination of computer-generated railways, colonial-era ships and an expansive real-image forest dominates the space re-map architectures of colonialism – from the railways referencing the labour of Chinese immigrants in North America to the colonial ships of the slave trade are contrasted against this dreamy forest, a place of rebirth and reclamation. History is both revealed within colossal structures and at a more embodied level: one of these souls talks of their mother being inside them: "She sighs inside my body, she panics inside my body". History is a lineage of memories, some that cannot be decoded.

We end with *River is My Hometown*, where River Cao employs the ritualistic to

explore grief and loss about their childhood home as a queer person now alienated by their community. A revenant who is brought forward through a veiled mother figure considers family, rebirth and otherness. Through voiceover, we understand they are returning to a home near the water. In contrast to the unseen but yearned-for mother in *All Trace is Gone*, this one talks back. This mother looks at the future rather than the past much like the veiled woman in *Whispering Ghosts* this is a mother of the land, a reincarnated mother. An imagined version of their mother perhaps, one which is queer. We watch as the revenant floats high above their hometown, unable to interact, merely observing. *River is My Hometown*, uses a ghostly revenant to explore the feeling of returning home, changed and unknowable to those who raised you and wishes for a better future.

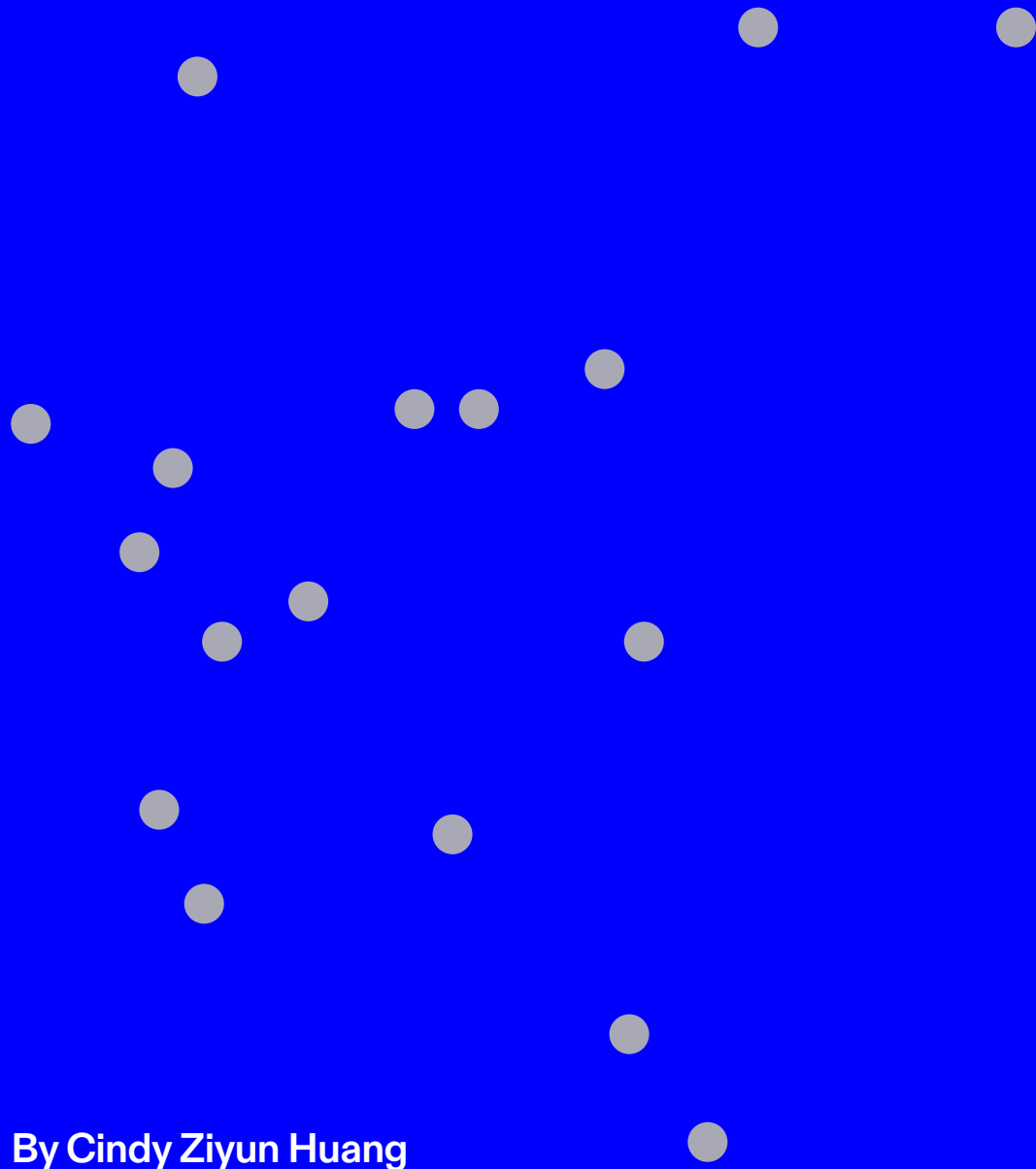
In "I Will Haunt You Forever", ghosts are used as a way of experiencing, processing and understanding the multifaceted histories of queer and Asian people. From Qiu Miaojin's use of a disembodied voice explore her identity to River Cao now a revenant floating above their hometown, ghosts are used as a way of communicating a feeling, a yearning for something to change, the histories that made you and way of resisting what oppresses you.



● *River is My Hometown* (2021) by River Cao



# Dancing Street



18 I met her at Club Lai Lai in the late summer of 1986, just two or three months after Priscilla Chan's *Dancing Street* became a disco hit that all of us went crazy about.

*No need to lower the volume*, Priscilla reassured us. Billowing out, her joyful silk scarf brushed aside all our hesitation.

The 1980s was a decade when people would lose their minds discoing. An endless supply of cassette tapes flowed from the stylish Canton region into every corner of my city and blew all of us away. Leslie Cheung's frisky *Monica* had been a personal favourite, but later I couldn't decide whether I was more attracted to the sophisticated heartbreak pictured in his *Sleepless Night*. Cool kids apparently loved playing *Bo Fung Yat Juk* with their boomboxes wherever they went. Everyone else was head over heels for Fei Xiang and his version of *Winter Fire*. English songs were of course insanely popular – *Colder than Ice*, *Brother Louie*, basically anything from the revered “Hollywood East Star Trax” albums. The trippy tune of *Jimmy Aaja* from an Indian dance film was also an absolute hit.

Many of the tracks we danced to at the time were Cantonese or Mandarin covers of songs that had been adapted into so many languages that their originals no longer mattered. Take *Dancing Street* for example. It was a Cantonese adaptation of Yōko Oginome's Dancing Hero, which was itself the Japanese version of an English song called *Eat You Up* by a singer whose name no one cared enough to know. The song also had a lesser-known Mandarin version and another Cantonese version that had been forgotten completely.

Cantonese, Mandarin, English, Japanese, French, Hindi. Unsure and mostly unconcerned about what language we sang along in, we drowned ourselves in the new and simple excitement brought by the pulsating beats. Those palm-sized cassettes were gifts from a vast, faraway world. We worshipped them. We clung to them as tiny spaceships that would take us to another universe.

The 1980s was a dream we had while napping under a tree on a sunny afternoon. We dreamed of chequered jumpsuits, pink faux-fur jackets, gleaming new cars, and chunky Motorola phones. In this fleeting dream, we were on our way to making our names and big money in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and New York.

*Tomorrow seems so far away, and the world is spinning.*

Club Lai Lai's name – “come, come” – laid a spell on all of us. Night after night we found ourselves showing up at the tiny discotheque, impatient to squeeze into the room that had already got too steamy and crowded. Shimmering shoulders and shuffling feet stirred up the sour smell of sweat, mosquito spray, and spilt beer. Cheap tinsel garlands corniced the room. Strobe lights and stage lights pulsed to the music, and our sequined

19 outfit caught their garish purple, yellow, blue, red, and green.

Every night, we glided into a sea of moist bodies like slimy fish returning to their school. *Do you wanna hold me tight?* Our steps and breaths became synchronised – a kind of synchronisation unlike anything we'd known. It wasn't like the uniform moves of radio broadcast exercises we had been trained to perform neatly at school. Nor was it like the stylised gestures and over-the-top facial expressions that looked exactly the same in all the stiffening “revolutionary ballets” we grew up watching. It was something new, something brighter and freer. Wilder. We thought it was going to last forever.

When I noticed her on the dance floor at Club Lai Lai, her long curly hair was whipping up and down in the haze like a tangled mass of seaweed in a turbulent sea. She was bouncing around bare-footed. I couldn't look away from the quivering shiny fringes of her cropped top as she threw her twitching body in all directions. She wore a pair of flared trousers made of dark metallic fabric that I'd never seen before. Slits on each side of her trousers went all the way up to her hips, and her thighs thrust out from the slits as she hurled through the space. She spun

and fell to the floor, her arms wrestling with her torso.

Thin beams of light reflected by mirror-balls criss-crossed across the ceiling, walls, and floor, like the imaginary lines that join stars in asterisms. She was floating in space. The rotating mirror-balls were her moons.

I thought I'd seen her somewhere before. Maybe just outside Club Lai Lai, after dancing nonstop for a whole night. She took a drag of her cigarette, too energised to go home and too exhausted to keep herself together. The silver jacket draped over her shoulders made her look like an absent-minded assassin from a Hong Kong crime drama. Or maybe I'd once noticed her on the dance floor during the interval between songs. She was panting. Her body froze at the last pose and gradually grew heavy, looking funny and awkward as the breezy music faded out. A menacing hum of laughter, chitter-chatter, and something else returned to the room.

The music ended before we finished dreaming. She had no name. None of us had or needed a name in the 1980s. *The world is spinning; everything is spinning.* We found each other and swam together in a swell of lights and sounds. We had small fires inside us, burning out of control.

21

# Incest? Or Saying and Not Saying

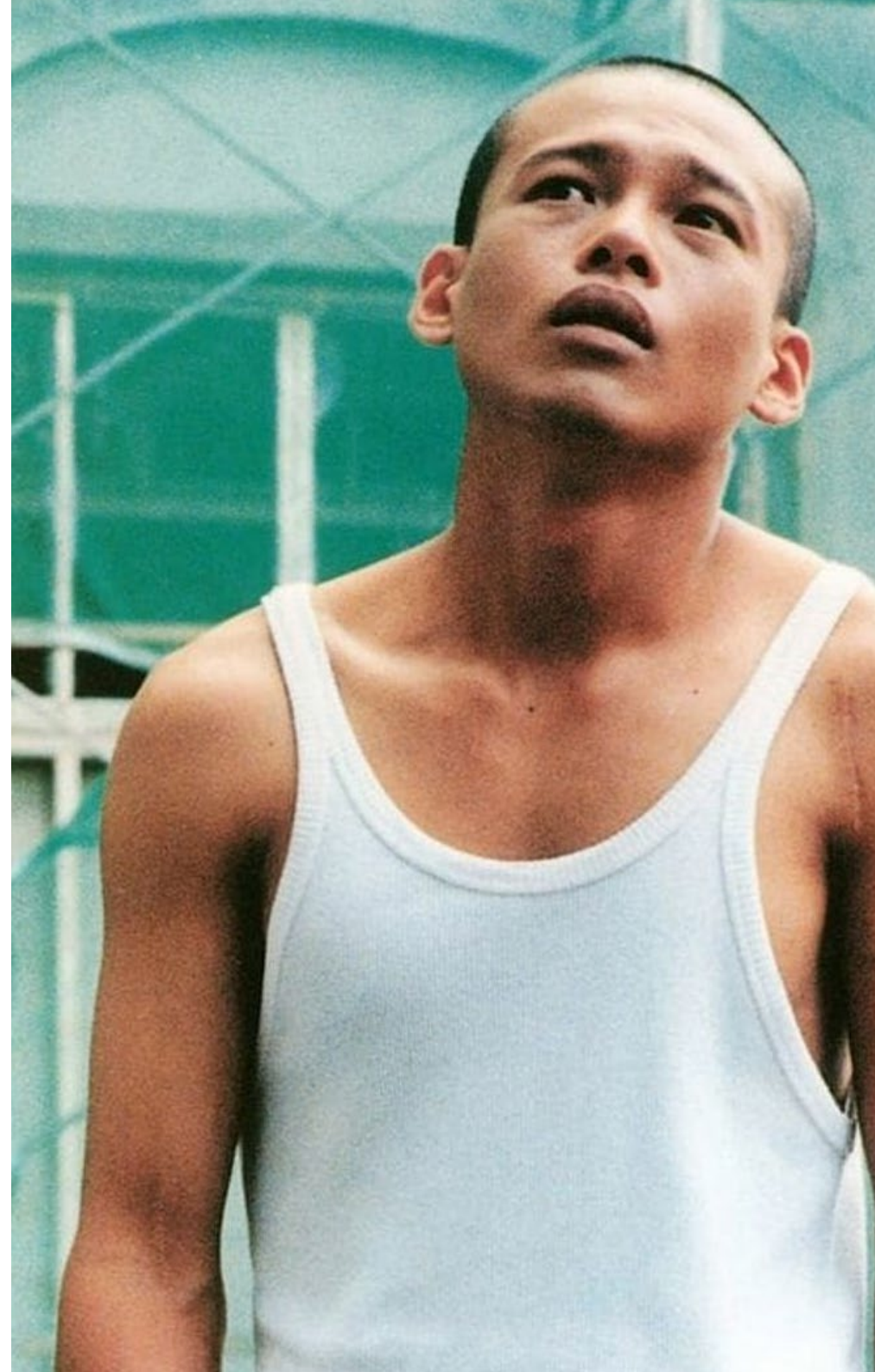
In an all-time bizarre unprompted interview moment, actor Jeremy Irons asked HuffPost Live in 2013 whether a father could marry his son to avoid inheritance tax. “It’s not incest between men. Incest is there to protect us from inbreeding. But men don’t breed, so incest wouldn’t cover that.”

As much as this sounds like reasoning from another planet of poshos obsessed with property, both academics and those keenly interested like Irons have long discussed what implications gay shit (technical term) and traditional family kinship structures have for each other.

It gets more complicated – fantasies around the incest taboo are also a recurring strain in eroticism, across orientations. Pornhub’s front page is made up almost entirely of step-family titles. Jeremy Irons gave that interview in the first place to promote the new series of HBO’s *The Borgias*, most notable for portraying Lucrezia Borgia and her brother Cesare in a sexual relationship. Were his comments some kind of marketing attempt?

Basically, the taboo of seeming to break sexual rules is something that charges, and is something that a few films in Queer East’s programme this year utilised variously to their ends. How do these films exploit and subvert understandings of the family structure in order to highlight dynamics between these characters, and their worlds? I think the at times real, at times imagined spectre of (specifically gay and male) incest in these three films allows them to get at conflicting versions of things at once: to say and duck away from saying, simultaneously.

Tsai Ming-Liang’s *The River* (1997) features an anonymous sexual encounter between a father and son, part of a blood-related, domestic and distant Taiwanese family. Jin Ong’s debut feature *Abang Adik* (2023) centres around two undocumented adopted brothers in Kuala Lumpur, and is wholly concerned with the illegibility of their relationship, for both themselves and the film’s audience. Finally, in *Bold Eagle* (2022), Whammy Alcazaren unsettles and makes political criticism through a cacophonous juxtaposition of daddy kink and a father-son relationship.



● The River - Accidental, Real

In *The River*, Hsiao-Kang (Lee Kang-Sheng) develops an extreme pain in his neck after stepping in to play a dead body, floating facedown in the Tamsui River for an old friend (Chen Shiang-chyi) working on a film shoot. They fuck after his star turn; it's as if there's something carnal-only about this boy, suggestive of a mannequin, that he's just good for his body. Tsai compares his behaviour with that of his dad, going directly from Hsiao-Kang's sex to Father (Miao Tien), a fastidious, fierce-faced man, ignoring the touch of a man of his own age on one of his frequent bathhouse trips. It's not immediately clear they're related, let alone that the family actually lives together: they, and Mother (Lu Hsiao-Ling), barely talk throughout. She works as an elevator operator and is having an affair with a man who copies and distributes porn tapes. There are no overlaps in the family's sexual or indeed emotional lives. As Hsiao-Kang's pain gets worse, to the point of disability, and Father tries to deal with a leak of Biblical proportions in his bedroom ceiling, their atomised existences are only punctured at the moment of crisis and transgression.

As Father touches his son unknowingly in the dark of another bathhouse, on a trip seeking spiritual help for Hsiao-Kang's neck, they're not looking at each other, facing away, to the viewer. Having seen both in sexual scenarios prior to this and with our own view of the scene, we have a more informed idea than the characters of what's happening and why on multiple fronts. It's as long as Tsai's scenes tend to be, and difficult to watch, though it's so tender. Father cleans Hsiao-Kang up gently after, before his turn, which is not shown.

This is the point at which Tsai cuts to Mother, acknowledging the torrential downpour leaking from her husband's bedroom for the first time. Abruptly, Tsai cuts again to Father turning on the light in the cubicle and standing over his son, seeing who he is, just before he slaps him. Neither will reference what has happened after this. Mother, having already entered her husband's bedroom for the first time in the film,

goes further than anyone so far as she climbs into the flat above, finding the tap apparently responsible for the leak all this time.

Tsai's cutting between the bathhouse and Mother back in Taipei seems to suggest that boundaries are being crossed in some definitive way: that things will be different now, whether Hsiao-Kang's neck heals, or whether they can look each other in the eye anymore or not. That tap has been turned off, after all. The two have been forced, though in an unthinkable fashion, to acknowledge the tenderness and need of which the other is capable. It seems to stand in the film both as a metaphor, and as something real and awful that's happened, and must be dealt with, somehow.

● Abang Adik - Perfect Plausible Deniability

In *Abang Adik*, the idea of family is about the only thing worth clinging onto: Abang (Kang Ren Wu) and Adi (Jack Tan), as the two men call each other, meaning 'big brother' and 'little brother', live in hard poverty in Pudu, Kuala Lumpur. They share a bed, food, and a pre-food ritual where they crack a hard-boiled egg on the other's forehead. While Abang is keen on working with social worker Jia En (Serene Lim) to get Adi back on the map, documented, even able to hold a bank account, Adi's head is in the sand. Again and again he screws up, gets mixed up in heavy shit, and Abang self-sacrificingly comes to his rescue, to a fault. It's an overwrought film compared to *The River*'s delicate impassivity, though brutal, featuring some heart-rending eating.

I don't think *Abang Adik* was screened at *Queer East* purely because of Ms Money (Kim Wang Tan), the brothers' stern, affectionate trans neighbour. Just before things start to fall apart, there's this moment between Abang and Adi at a birthday party for Money, who's just been reassuring Adi that he mustn't be jealous: Abang will always love him the most, even if he gets married to the girl he's been seeing, a neighbour from Myanmar (April Chan). We see Adi sometimes with an older woman who pays him for sex, but she wants to leave KL; everyone does.

Dancing among other couples, they hold each other stiffly around the neck, unsmiling and awkwardly staring at each other, before Adi relocates Abang's hands to his waist. Suddenly Adi leans in, as if for a kiss,

but hugs him tightly instead and they stay embracing, Abang's hand on Adi's neck, revolving without seeing the other's face. While Adi starts to smile, Abang remembers the neighbour girl leaving KL with her family, clearly pierced by it.

As a scene, it's a perfect double-bind, able to be read either way, like the whole relationship; at once a hanging and emphatic moment of speechless, ambiguous intensity between the two men, and yet containing within it a reference to Abang's thwarted heterosexual attempt. Directly after this (perhaps fuelled by it), Adi has a pivotal confrontation with Jia En, as she tries to force him to acknowledge his biological father. It's one or the other: whatever Adi and Abang are to each other can't coexist with knowing his blood father, nor with any female love interest.

Would *Abang Adik* have been made if it were any more definitive about Adi and Abang's relationship? It'd lose its plausible deniability and be something else entirely: their wrestling with the exact nature of their bond, unrecognisable to the state and its organisation of social structures, like many queer relationships, is *Abang Adik*'s entire subject.

● Bold Eagle - Whose Daddy?

Alcazaren's short *Bold Eagle* is at first a more familiar, fun and springy treatment of gay male sexuality, which played in April Lin 林森's shorts programme "Harvesting the Fruits of Monstrosity". In a film which has more fun than you'd think possible playing irreverently with meaning-making and methods of censorship, to get past the Philippines' Movie and Television Review and Classification Board, Alcazaren frenetically adopts different styles, but returns insistently to Bold's (credited as @luckymaybe1923) cybersex with strange men, alone with his cat during the pandemic, fathers, and the idea of escape to Hawaii.

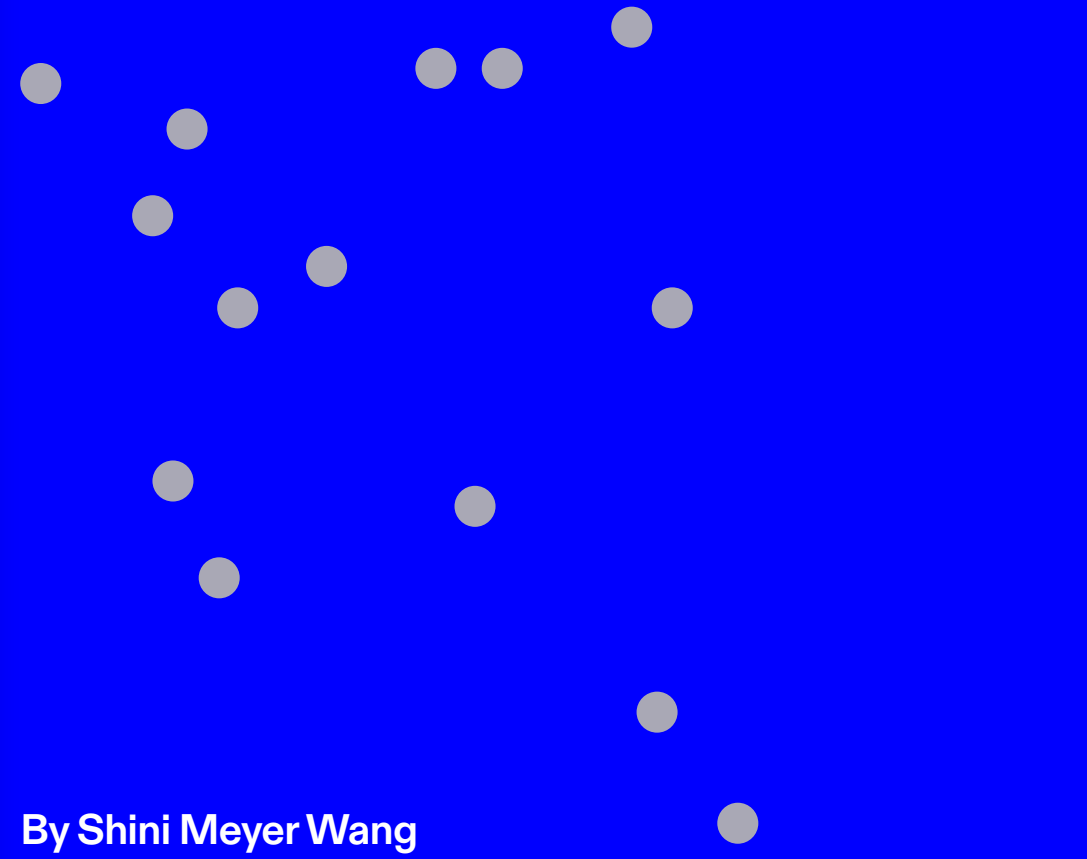
We seem to be on firmer, straightforward daddy kink ground here, listening to the kind of over-explicit dirty talk which implies physical distance, along with a phone on a stand or Instagram-blurred jacking off. At least Bold isn't touching anyone but himself. Voiceover throughout addresses "Daddy", but is uncomfortably accompanied by flash frames of dads (loads of them!) in photos with their kids, smiling LSD-distorted emoji

grins. Informed by this, the voiceover becomes hard not to wonder at: who's the intended recipient of "Am I a good boy, Daddy? Are you finally happy?" We're not sure, though Bold's literal arsehole replies "I love you."

Denying us a clear view of Bold's face, the film plays into an increasing identification of Bold with current Philippines' President Bongbong Marcos, the son of deposed dictator Ferdinand. As the images flick between the dads, digital debris (cats and muscleboys), and details of old porn mags, we also see bits of news articles about the Marcos, quotes from Imelda, toy soldiers abandoned on the floor, and Bold poses in a military uniform, with harness and heels. Does he want to go back to Hawaii, site of the Marcos' family exile? Throughout, a version of the hyper-upbeat nationalist anthem 'Bagong Lipunan' plays, but its lyrics are wrenchingly direct: "If only I were no longer like this / Tired, not knowing what I want."

The effect of putting all this playfully pornographic gay sexuality uncomfortably close to this paternal material both invites you to connect the two inextricably (I want this because of my relationship with my dad), and simultaneously it also defies any easy interpretation. Like the half-there censorship, there's enough for us to come to some conclusions ourselves. Whether this lonely, dick-hungry fag with daddy issues is the President, to some extent, we're left with the same clues of characterisation adding up to something, inconclusively - a portrait of someone, maybe slightly familiar to us.

# ● Too Far or Too Close for Comfort?



**Ben Mullinkosson's film, *The Last Year of Darkness* (2023), begins with the rumble of the subway. We are travelling down train tracks in a shadowy, subterranean tunnel, a void next to the fluorescent-lit terminals we pass. The urban infrastructure of the film's setting of Chengdu, its quotidian landscapes of invasive construction among highrises, doubles as an emotional landscape, where the severity of modern life has been normalised by the city's unrelenting**

Filed over five years and edited down from 600 hours of footage, *The Last Year of Darkness* is shaped around the lives of Mullinkosson's friends: DJs, musicians, drag performers, ravers and queer youth, who do not conform to China's hyper capitalism and social conservatism.

Chengdu, one of China's leading commercial centres, is a city that is being rapidly modernised as part of president Xi Jinping's ambition to push the country towards technological and scientific self-reliance. Against establishing shots of urban development and the throngs of people circulating the city, the film's five main characters emerge from the collective hustle.

Together, they haunt a techno club, named Funky Town, situated in the basement of a block that is about to be demolished for the building of a new subway. Next door, the sounds of construction machines intrude, but in the darkness of the club, the five find some relief from the daily erosion of a hyperfunctioning society. They live out of sync with the rhythms of the city, sleeping during the day while kids in school uniforms exercise to pop in courtyards, a countermelody working against the tunes of the day.



Bicurious Russian DJ Gennady Baranov swipes through tinder on two phones, one with women's profiles, one with men's, at record speed. Skater/musician 647 copes with his childhood by philosophising over the human condition, getting so inaccessible to some that he prompts his friend at the club to exclaim, "Too deep bro, what the fuck are you even talking about?" The sensitive Yihao receives their family's and passerbys' disapproval and disrespect with gentility, contrasted against the expressiveness of their aesthetic and the electricity of their drag performances. The hilariously self-assured DJ Darkle reminisces about the beauty of life, saying, "I feel grateful, I suck a lot of dicks in my life, yeah. I couldn't even count."

In the sanctuary of Funky Town, the film's subjects impulsively hook up and overspill both emotionally and in the literal sense – vomiting. Raw and absorbing in nature, the film feels like a livewire, compelling to watch in its characters who unravel their miseries and revel in their outlets. But because the film is equal parts cathartic as it is exhausting, we begin to question its ethics.

Could the film be considered a kind of misery porn, only centred around traumatic experiences, and if so, what is the value of this? Can the intimacy we see on camera truly be called intimacy when its characters are vulnerable for an invisible audience of thousands of viewers? What does this one-way relationship do to the subjects of the film, who are already vulnerable and overstretched?

The film seems self-aware of the impossibility of facilitating true intimacy. One of the film's subjects Yihao critiques Mullinkosson's film:

*Ben, I don't think your documentary can record me or anyone's real life. I think real life is something you need to feel for yourself. There can't be editing or dressing up. That's what shakes people. It's not political. Nothing. It's a natural state of being.*

Here, reality is defined as a deep sense of connection to oneself, an experiential wholeness that the subjects seem to be looking for. In this sense, the argument made is that there may be degrees of intimacy, but the film cannot get at this real life Yihao refers to precisely because we are not the film's subjects.

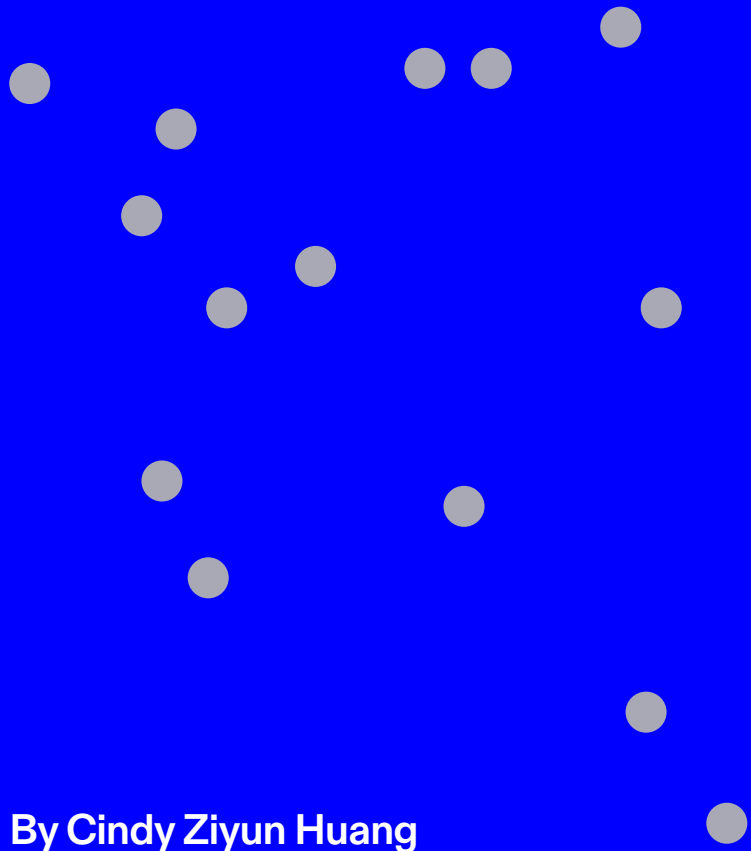
On the matter of the potential harm of documentation, we can look at Kimberly, a guqin player, struggling with a destructiveness that has led her to suicide attempts in the past. Having had suicidal thoughts in the past myself, I wondered if Kimberly's emotionally dampened way of talking about her suicide attempt, the casual way she noted how her worried friends called an ambulance for her and the humour she found in place of grief in recalling how the paramedics mistook her for someone Korean, perhaps gestured towards a deep sense of alienation. The film's camera crew actually intervenes when her usual way of sā jiāo-ing with her exasperated boyfriend (sā jiāo is a Chinese word for throwing a coquettish tantrum) becomes worrying when she threatens him with jumping off the building. My question is does the film crew witnessing their squabbles on numerous other occasions exacerbate this sense of alienation, and thus the situation? But conversely, what might have happened if Kimberly had tried to jump and the film crew had not been there to pull her away from the edge? There are too many factors to consider.

It's in these two moments, the latter and Yihao's address to Mullinkosson, that the illusion of the untouched reality of observational documentary is broken. Mullinkosson has expressed that the film is not so much observational as it is a diaristic, where some scenes of his friends are recreations of their experiences, suggesting a kind of participatory confessionalism.

I suppose whether the film is misery porn depends on if you see the subjects' lives as tragedies or triumphs. I feel them as both. As Mullinkosson is friends with his subjects, we bear witness to them, their strengths and weaknesses exposed, their disempowerment, agency and solidarity in looking after themselves and each other made evident. Friends get drunk together. Friends help each other home. Friends watch sunsets on the rooftop.

The ending – in contrast to the void of the subway tunnel where we started – reveals the characters riding the train, looking much more reserved in the calm anonymity of the subway. Though our relationship is parasocial in nature, by the end of the film, all I want is what's best for these five strangers who now feel like old friends.

# ● At the Intersection of Day and Night





**For you, perhaps, this is an exciting secret chamber. A cave of wild fun, hidden behind construction site hoardings. For me, however, it's one of the many shops I would walk by on my way to weekend math courses, to my grandparents', to a favourite barbeque stall, or to my dentist. Funky Town, an underground queer club in Chengdu, is where Ben Mullinkosson's *The Last Year of Darkness* (2023) anchors itself. Following five individuals – Yihao, Gennady, Kimberly, Darkle, and 647 – in and out of a euphoric nightscape, the documentary paints a subtle portrait of the local queer scene.**

I think it's forgivable, given that I spent my entire adolescence roaming Chengdu's streets, that I'm totally unable to separate the queer underworld depicted in *The Last Year of Darkness* from the shops, road signs, pedestrian railings, and ginkgo trees I'm too familiar with. However, this intertwining of the queer community's nocturnal wilderness and the city's daytime "norm" doesn't just happen in the heads of sappy audiences who, like myself, are emotionally attached to Chengdu. In the film, the sensational spectacle of queer fugitives' lives becomes simply a part of the city. We are shuttled between a dance floor where sweaty bodies melt away into strobe lights and the business-as-usual unfolding of everyday life – sometimes a shot of local elderlies playing badminton in a park, sometimes a sequence about getting a second-hand electric bike fixed. During the daytime, the ravers, DJs, and drag performers who flock to Funky Town every night have to manoeuvre through everyday life in the city. They deliver takeaways, practice DJing, fall out with friends, and deal with childhood traumas and suicidal thoughts. Their pains and pleasures are interwoven with the rest of the city.

The relationship between the two worlds is more complicated than simple contrasts. Yes, Funky Town hosts the city's most outrageous raves for the most subversive people. But the film tells you the club is also just a part of the local landscape, nothing exceptional. Its intoxicated crowd consists of individuals who are just like any other confused and frustrated young people adrift in the city but having fun. Drinking, smoking, having sex, throwing up over and over again.

The protagonists' stories unfold amid a rapidly changing urban space. Their internal struggles coincide with the city's belated coming of age. Up to this point, Chengdu has been referred to in China as a "second-tier city". Unlike "first-tier" metropolises, where metro systems began running as early as the 1970s,

Chengdu didn't have its first metro line until 2010. In the film, this second-tier city undergoes a brutal transformation. Old neighbourhoods are demolished and land is torn open to make way for new properties and infrastructures. In front of Funky Town, heavy construction machines work day and night for a new metro line. Their rhythmic digging and drilling often echo the club's throbbing music. Shown repeatedly from various angles, the lacerated land in front of the club becomes a visual metaphor for painful growths. However, while the muddy construction site successfully turns into the squeaky-clean metro station seen in the film's title sequence and final scene, we are left unsure where the protagonists' desperate search for a way out will take them in the end.

Tension and conflicts arise as the city and its queer community encounter each other and grow intertwined. This is spelt out right at the beginning when the glamourously dressed-up drag performer Yihao gets vexed that no cab driver would pull over for him. Wearing a wedding gown and a fluff-out curly wig, he flips up an angry middle finger as a cab speeds away. After two failed attempts of hailing, with his costume getting too heavy and makeup turning cakey, Yihao finally collapses into the backseat of a cab. He takes a dig at the drivers who refused him: "Neither of them dared to pick me up ... What's the matter? We are all people." The teasing sarcasm can hardly conceal his disdain and fury.

But the film also homes in on sparks of playful kindness that grow out precisely from the intersection of two drastically different and seemingly irreconcilable worlds. One morning in the film, Funky Town's worn-out staff members greet the cleaning lady who arrives at dawn to clean up the mess. "Thanks for working so hard, Auntie!" – to which she replied mischievously by complaining in the Chengdu dialect: "It's so dirty!" As the exhilarating night fades away, the sunrise paints the club's windows soft pink. At the intersection of day and night, a strange sense of compatibility and empathy that doesn't necessarily require mutual understanding permeates the tiny world of Funky Town.

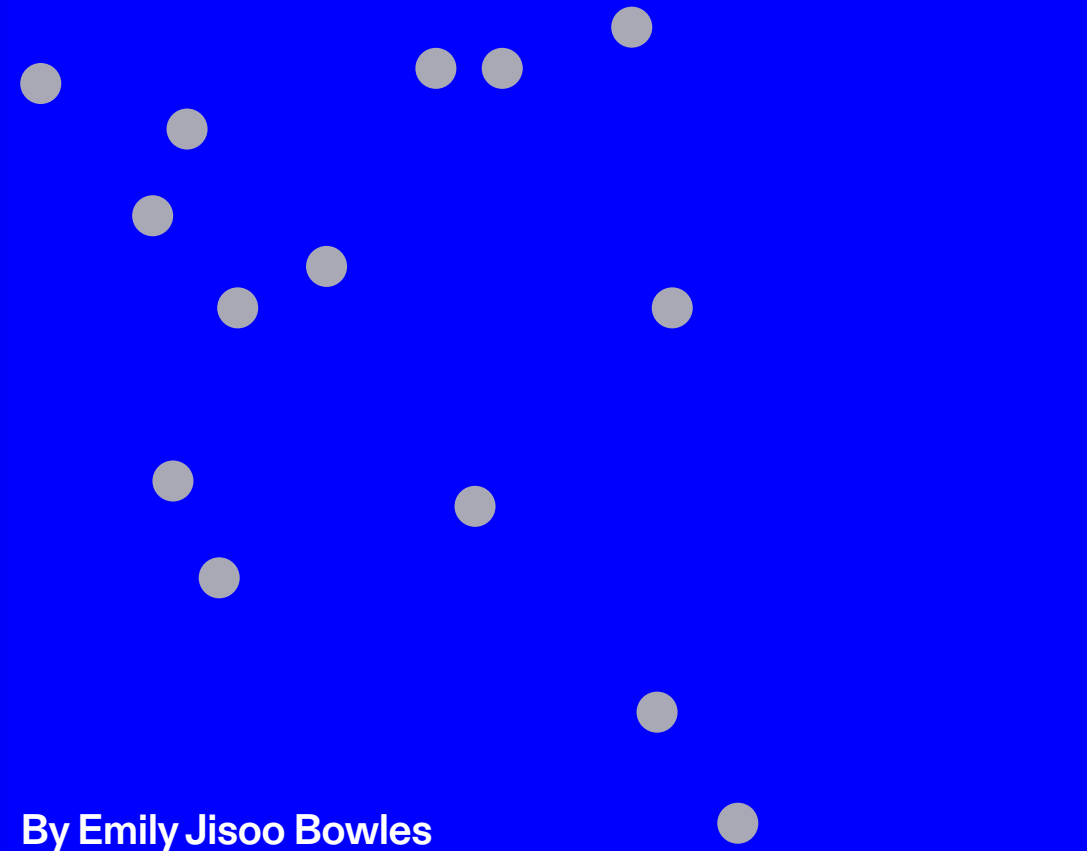
Born out of years of Mullinkosson's immersion in Chengdu's queer communities, *The Last Year of Darkness* tries to highlight the connection between its protagonists and the city. Yet, at times I can't help but feel that

it offers only brief insight into how individuals of these communities have made space for themselves. Chengdu is more complicated than a flat backdrop: it's known for its idle and easygoing atmosphere, as well as the active LGBTQIA+ community that has found acceptance in such non-judgemental openness; but as the city gets regenerated and grows gentrified, the subcultural scene also faces tightening regulations and increasingly repressive silencing. How do local queer individuals negotiate - and collaborate - with their socio-cultural environment? *The Last Year of Darkness* gives us little idea of what being "queer" actually means in the specific context of a city like this, other than feeling lost, fighting internal battles, suffering from marginalisation, and "suck[ing] a lot of dicks", to quote Darkle's impassive declaration.

This generalisation of queer experience becomes most pronounced when it evokes an overused and, dare I say, Western formula of queerness. In a sequence towards the end of the film, David Bowie's *Life on Mars* takes over the soundtrack and creates a climax. We watch the protagonists laugh, confess, and dance as the song morphs from a phone audio of poor quality into a majestic howl, which accompanies Yihao's charismatic performance at Funky Town. Bowie is great, and the sequence does make me a bit emotional, but surely there are more nuanced ways to summarise the toil, fun, hope, hunger, and despair experienced by the Funky Town folks than quoting a deified white British male icon's song, no?

At one point, Yihao might have suggested another reading of the not-quite-right Bowie song. Removing all his makeup and stripping himself bare, he confronts Mullinkosson's camera and announces: "Ben, I don't think your documentary can record me, or anyone's real life. I think real life is something you need to feel for yourself." Out of place, the song might be *The Last Year of Darkness's* self-reflexive hint at its own futility as a documentary. No matter how hard it tries, it's never going to fully, accurately, and objectively capture reality. Instead of an obsessive attempt to get it "right", the film's sincere and delicate portrayal of the people gathered around Funky Town is simply an invitation for us to feel real life for ourselves.

# ● Queer Ambivalence of The Bathhouse



36 **There's an inherent sadomasochism to the Korean bathhouse: pushing your body to its limits by suffocating in the sauna heat then plunging in the ice bath, exfoliating your dead skin so hard it leaves you raw and red but smooth. "Scrub harder!" my mother would tell me, "Think of all the times you hated me and take it out on my back." Despite all the anger I could muster into my arms, it was never quite enough for her.**

My early experiences of going to the bathhouse in Korea with my mother were a mixture of pain, curiosity, and boredom. She would scrub my back, then frustrated with my own weak efforts, the soft parts of my body: the arms, the inner thighs, the tummy. I thought about all the white people who would never have to exfoliate in their life and wished I was them. Released from her iron grip when she was satisfied that I had shed enough grey noodles, I hopped from the hot bath to the cold pool until I could no longer stand the thick air of the dark cave, and waited impatiently outside for my mother to be done so we could finally go home.

The bathhouse is largely populated by *ahjummas* (women over 40). Bustling and loud, they talk shit about their husbands and complain about menopause. It's as if the lack of clothes or makeup make them even more open and honest with nothing to hide, and their bellowing laughter fills the room, vibrating the stagnant water vapour around them. I try not to stare at the sagging tits (dim thoughts of my own ageing begin to take shape at the back of my brain) and inverted bums, black from lifetimes of sitting

on hard surfaces as they splash around in the cold pool back to being steamed in the hot bath, or casually nap for an hour in the dry sauna to emerge like shrivelled lizards. I look at my own young angular body in the foggy mirror and feel a strange sense of dissociation from it.

In Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* (2016), David (Joe Seo) experiences a similar dissociation, almost like he's an observer of worlds he can never really be part of. The Korean spa in LA Koreatown is simultaneously a community space for Korean-Americans to relax and scrub their family members' backs as well as a cruising spot for gay immigrants. He stares at his reflection in a steamy mirror of the bathhouse where he covertly works to help his financially struggling family, exhausted with navigating expectations and his desire for men all in one claustrophobic space. Leaving his drunken dad (Cho Youn-ho) snoring in a massage chair upstairs, he follows a man into the sauna.

The camera reveals the tension between the public and private in subtle ways. It remains still in wide shots of the spa where naked men walk in and out of the frame baring it all. When the camera moves, it's usually following David's lingering gaze, closing up on the sweat beads on men's skin. The more erotic a scene gets, the less of the body we see. When the men get caught, the all-too-brief eroticism evaporates to leave the underlying discomfort. The heaviness of the sauna air and the low hum of the ventilator amplify the oppressive. David becomes a furtive ally for the cruising men, putting up "Cleaning in Progress" signs in front of the sauna after a few suggestive glances wordlessly lead to one man entering after the other. But how much can the lookout, caught between two worlds, partake?

As long as bathhouses have existed, gay shit has been happening in them. What did you think was going to happen with a bunch of naked men in a hot room? Originally built for the public to maintain personal hygiene in times when it was difficult to bathe at home, the normative and the transgressive have coexisted in an uneasy state inside its sweaty walls for centuries. Some bathhouse owners attempted to clamp down on homosexual activity while many others were happy to overlook it in favour of profit (and bribes) from their gay patrons. The establishment of exclusively gay bathhouses in America in the 1950s allowed for safer cruising, despite being subject to police raids

37 and crackdowns. Crucially, this meant that beyond anonymous sex, these bathhouses also became important community hubs for sharing information, even hosting voter registration and vaccinations.

Being undercover in a heteronormative place, especially an insular immigrant community like LA Koreatown, is psychologically taxing to say the least. Queer East is all about celebrating being both queer and Asian, but in many of the films screened at the festival, the characters are faced with an ultimatum: live a double life or be yourself at the cost of exile from your community. It seems notable that the man David cums with is also Korean. After the act, David's attempt to kiss him is foiled by the manager peering into the sauna. No one is there to be a lookout for him. My stomach feels like a bottomless whirlpool watching him finally get what he wants be instantly taken away. In loss, in shame, he scrubs the abs he loves so much with a blue *때수건* (*ddae soogun*) exfoliating towel, notoriously the most abrasive colour of towel, until his skin is peeling, a wound. Instinctively I clutch my sides. I can't help but wonder if this is the scrubbing my mother would be satisfied with.

Near the start of *Spa Night*, David is at the *찜질방* (*jjimjilbang*) with his parents, sharing a bowl of *빙수* (*bingsu*) shaved ice. His mother laments her lack of a daughter and says he needs to get a girlfriend so that she'll have someone to scrub her back. "What if she thinks it's gross?" asks David, tentatively testing the waters. "What if I marry a white girl?" to which his mother, no longer smiling, replies "You should marry a Korean woman and have Korean kids. Wouldn't that be nice?"

I asked my mother (much more directly) how she would feel if I liked girls. Her answer was along the lines of "You can't help being like that, but I would be sad because you would live a very lonely life full of suffering." To throw away your parents' hopes of you living their idea of a good life seems like the ultimate act of betrayal. Why be queer, why go out of your way to be different, when nice is right there?

After the screening of *Spa Night*, we all huddle outside into the chilly April evening and pack ourselves into the small wooden saunas of Hackney Wick Community Baths. Unfortunately, the venue does not allow nudity, and everyone is wearing swimming costumes. The heat opens our pores (and more), and I find myself talking to

strangers. We discuss the film, pretend-retching at the scene where David's friend vomits and shoves it down the drain with his feet (not the vomit toes!). Someone complains about the lack of good food at Sweatbox, London's most popular gay sauna. He proposes a five-storey *jjimjilbang*, complete with *bingsu* stations in its place. When the heat becomes unbearable, I step outside. The world seems a little less distant today.

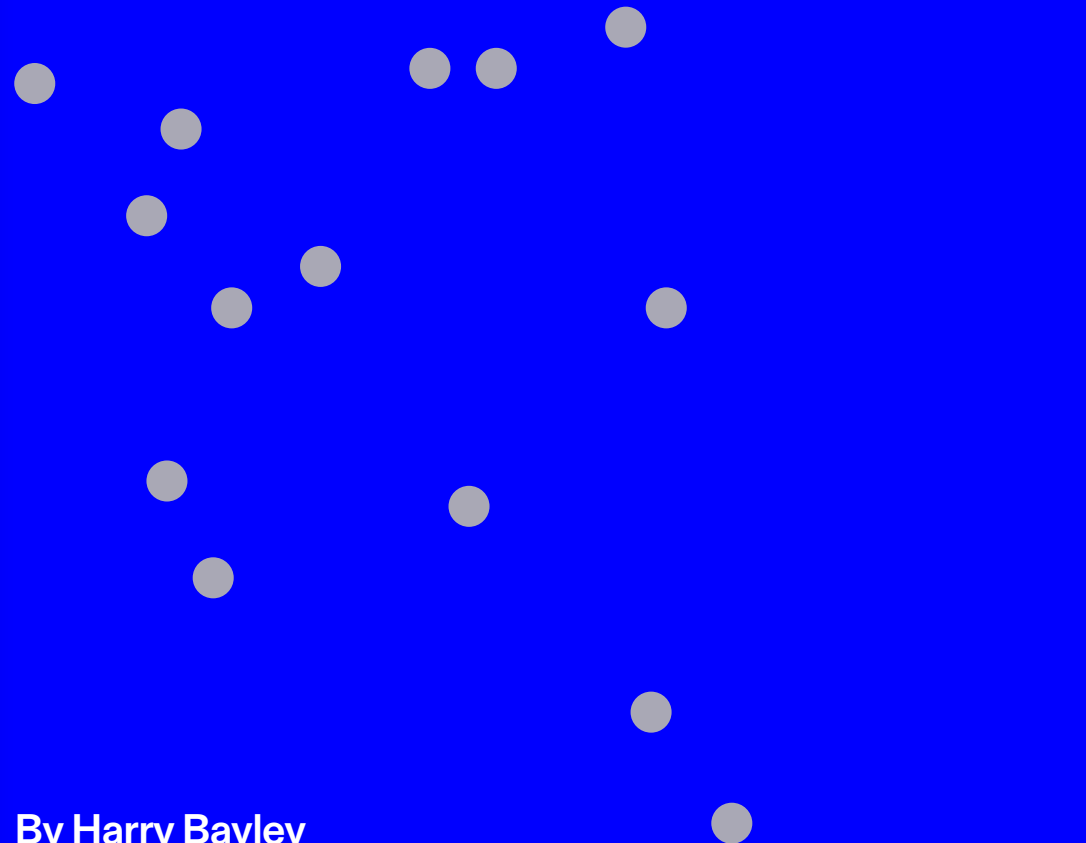
\* *jjimjilbang* is quite different to a regular bathhouse. Whilst the Korean bathhouse is completely gender-segregated and nude, the *jjimjilbang* has a communal mixed-gender and clothed area for recreational activities like eating, sleeping, and watching TV (sometimes even Karaoke!) There is a greater focus on relaxing in the *jjimjilbang*, whereas the main appeal of the bathhouse is its variety of hot baths, designed to tease out the dead skin to be scrubbed away.

● *Spa Night* (2016) by Andrew Ahn



● Emily Jisoo Bowles

# ● Obscure Images: See Less to See More



When I watch a film, I want to see something. It's how we read the screen, and how we construct meaning. A tear across the cheek of a femme fatale designates tragedy, a wide shot of a character in a vast landscape evokes loneliness. What about films that intentionally avoid this, what about those where images are obscure, films that deny easy interpretation?

Throughout *Queer East* we have seen images which resist categorisation. An obscure image could be described as something which is not clear, an image where we cannot see what exactly is going on, one which asks us to look deeper.

Take this image from *The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience* (2021) a Filipino production directed by Mac Andre Arboleda from April Lin 林森's "Harvesting the Fruits of Monstrosity" program. *The Function of Fiction* seeks to abandon temptations to define asexuality, resisting expectation to be "understood" in categorical terms. We see the inside of their room, pages of a book titled *The History of Sex* displayed in close-ups call to the words "our future" and "bodies". Shots blend into one another as we dart across the interior hearing stories of how the protagonists have been interrogated about their sexuality.

This image is obscured with a vibrant glitch taking on the appearance of an oil spill, this texture *feels* wet, as if it is flowing out from inside them spilling out all over the screen. We cannot see the whole image, specific parts: face, poster, and bedframe are all obstructed from view. The quality of the image makes it hard to find much detail in the scene, boundaries are blurred, sharp edges and curves are difficult to make out. You see a person sitting underneath the window whose identity is obscured; we are unable to define exactly who or what we are looking at.

The placement of this obstructive layer in the frame draws a comparison between the two, one appears to be a person, the other something unknown formless, an intrusion, spreading out across the frame. Being about the refusal to define one's sexuality in categorised terms, the use of this amorphous form spread across the screen disregards boundaries and obstructs what the film desires to withhold.

In contrast to *The Function of Fiction* where obscurity is attained through VFX, *Taiwan Video Club* (1999) directed by Lana Lin from the "Glitch! Rewind. Then We..." programme curated by

● *The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience* (2021) by Mac Andre Arboleda



● *Taiwan Video Club* (1999) by Lana Lin



Hsieh I-Hsuan and Chen Huei-Yin uses a more obscure analogue medium. Shot on videotape, *Taiwan Video Club* is a short documentary about Taiwanese immigrants living in the United States exchanging tapes of their favourite Taiwanese opera. The film explores how these low-grade tapes connect these women to their native culture. We hear stories of tapes going missing and anecdotes of how much these operas mean to them. The use of filming onto tape as a medium calls to the clarity of the present which is lost through the recording process, colour and depth is crushed into the cassette's magnetic tape.

By recording directly onto tape the quality of the image is poor, especially in sequences where we are looking at recorded tape footage playing on the TV. The image begins to degrade much like these digital artefacts, and the memories of our protagonists seem to adapt to similar distanced layers – tape on tape. The aesthetic of the film asks us to look harder and become closer to the image to make sense of it so close in fact we can no longer read, mirroring the actions of the protagonist trying to make out the different actors on screen. The digital noise spreads across the image creating faint horizontal lines, colour is constructed in groups of pixels. This brings a significant tactile quality to the image, this tactility allowing us to hold onto these relics from the past being able to better associate a texture, a feeling or experience to the image.

*Disconnect* (2024) directed by E8 and Janice Kei employs a similar strategy in a different way, taking inspiration from the early 2000s and internet culture. *Disconnect* presents itself as two souls reminiscing sexual fantasies, stories and memories together, narration leads us through a hyperpop montage of images. We see a person in a park eating strawberries to explicit sequences of people in bondage. No one image is left alone, each sequence has multiple layers of not only different images but different formats spreading out across the screen at once. Rather than something more subtle like *Taiwan Video Club*, *Disconnect* takes a more maximalist approach. For instance, take this image. Here we have multiple mediums, blending what seems to be digital illustration, 3D modelling, still photography and animation. This scene comes towards the end of the film, as things are reaching their climax.

● *Disconnect* (2024) by E8





● *Taiwan Video Club* (1999) by Lana Lin

We have in the background a rose, a symbol of love and desire, layered behind a digital grid trapping it in the background. These dismembered bodies connected through black scribbles. One scribble spells on the Mandarin Chinese character “to die”. These could be different ideas of self potentially gesturing towards the different kinds of people we have inside of us, some left dismembered, left to die. Somewhere in the centre of the image, there is a spiral, something hypnotic asking us to look further drawing us into the depth of the image.

Disconnect approaches memory as something much more chaotic than *Taiwan Video Club*, rather than something specific and fading, these memories are vivid and multitudinous. In a different way to *Taiwan Video Club* questioning the permanence of memory through the use of a degrading medium *Disconnect*'s obscurity questions not our ability to hold onto images of the past but, where we hold our memories, in a world where we are constantly assaulted with visual information how do we decide what to keep, and more importantly what is meaningful?

By rejecting a rich, high resolution or easily interpretable image these films provoke debate and translation, my interpretation is one of many equally valid readings. I feel as though *The Function of Fiction* wants me to come close and touch the oiliness of the image to have intimacy with this form on screen.

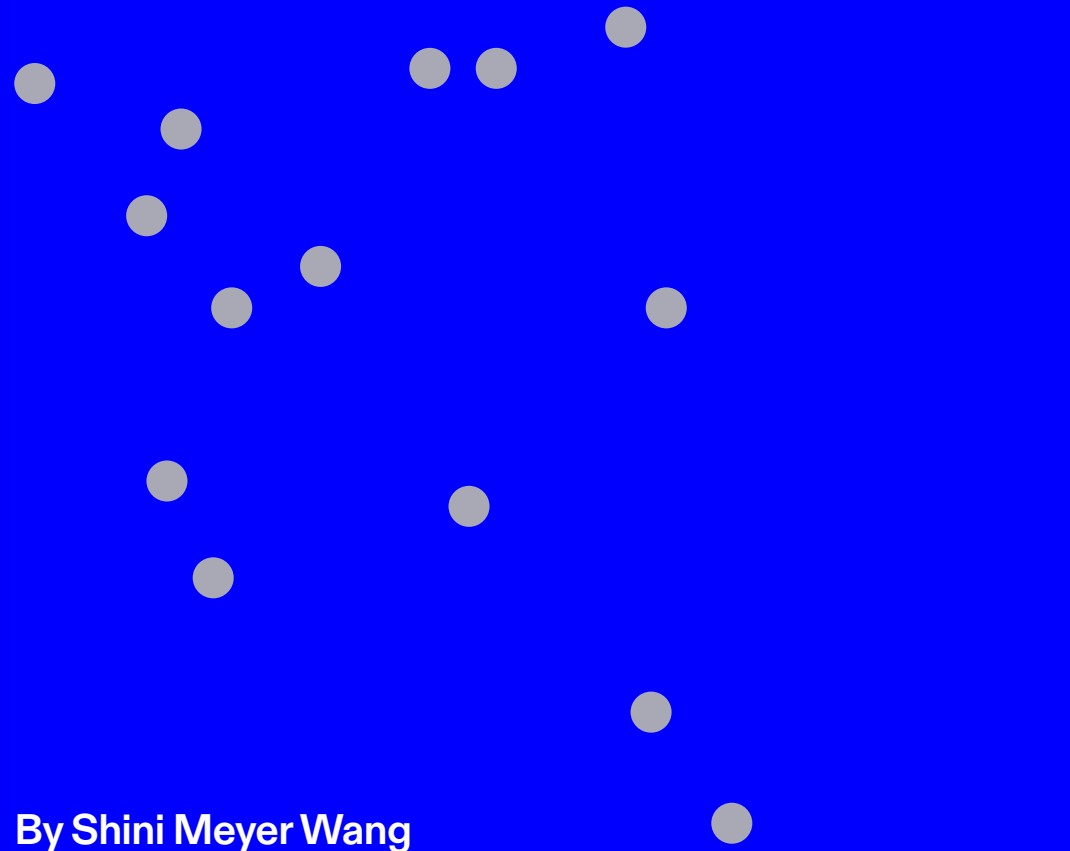
These obscure images challenge film aesthetics and the medium is perhaps the message. To take from Hito Steyerl's *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009):

“By [the poor image] losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the “original,” but on the transience of the copy.”

Illustrated in *Taiwan Video Club*, these copies bring people together to create networks of enthusiasts and shared histories. In a more contemporary way these networks have moved online and contain experimental, excluded, forgotten material but also large amounts of pornography. No online act of militant preservation, file sharing or pirating is free from pornographic material. *Disconnect* chooses not to close the pop up ads but instead to engage with the pornographic image.

An obscured or poor image is attractive due to what it does not say, the many layers of debates and translations it provokes. The space between the creation of the image and an individual's interpretation is what draws me to them, the different possibilities and paths spreading out in front me.

# ● A Queer East Diary: ● A Fish ● ● in a Forest ●



So, I'm at this student flat in Lisbon on holiday. It's where my friend lives and I'm getting to know her flatmates. Seven of us are gathered in her flatmate Martin's bedroom who's an eager host, delighting in distributing wine and cigarettes. During this small party, I'm writing my film review for Queer East. My laptop sits a little protectively between myself and everyone else. Thanks to the necessity of my deadline,

amidst the confusion of new people, new flavours of conversation, funny and enjoyable, I have some thread of thought to dip my mind back into. The party seems to weave its way into the review.



● Just down the street from the student flat in Lisbon, Portugal. Taken by Zeynep Civelek.

They ask about my film review and if they can read it aloud. Martin reads it in his German accent. "...*The Last Year of Darkness* is shaped around the lives of Mullinkosson's friends, DJs, musicians, drag performers, ravers and particularly queer youth, who do not conform to China's hyper capitalism and social conservatism." He scoffs before the words "queer youth", something I let fly over my head, as I like Martin and I don't want things to feel complicated. I'm scared to confront him, but there's also a secret desire to challenge him, so I quickly concede when asked to show clips from the documentary.

Scared to put myself out there at this party, I find myself showing them clips of Yihao, a person from the film who shares themselves with so much vulnerability. Sensitive and uncalledous against the cutting remarks of heteronormative society, they are someone I feel very tenderly towards.

After these clips, Martin without hesitation shares his thoughts. I don't remember

word for word what he said, but I remember thinking that he saw Yihao with pity, not connecting to them or their agency. He seemed to think of Yihao as too far gone. The words that caught me, that Martin said, were "not natural". Hearing them, I almost blew my top. But what do you mean by natural? I asked. How do you define nature? Martin described a scene in the woods: a lone person trying to survive in nature. If you don't *adapt*, you don't survive. Yihao wouldn't survive, as if traditional society was a forest and Yihao was an absurd fish.

There were so many things he was missing. To assume that social norms are an immovable kind of nature – this immutability completely antithetical to nature itself – instead of a particular kind of growth and cultivation, is ridiculous. But I was happy to come across such a fitting word – *adapt*. To have a working definition of nature as a kind of bountifully creative form of adaptation! And is there not incredible beauty in this? These offshoots of growth that burst through wildly.

If I hadn't taken a garden tour, called "The Birds & the Bees: Queer Ecology Guided Walk", as part of Queer East, I don't know if I would've felt as assertive in my point of view. Coming out of a dim screening room at the Museum of the Home, we viewers followed each other into the light of the garden, where ecologist Connor Butler was waiting for us. By the end of the tour, you realise nature doesn't give a fuck about rigid boundaries. There seems to be no rules of what is natural and unnatural. Trees change their sex. Male wasps tunnel out of the fig they hatch in, lose their wings in the process, only to get inside of another fig to mate with female eggs which haven't hatched yet. Then, they either dig an escape or die, spending most of their lives inside figs. From my human point of view, there seems to be both a severity and a pleasure to nature. There must be a pleasure, as each organism is pulled to do as it does.

Slugs have their own violent pleasures. As they are intersex, both parties can inseminate and get pregnant. Doing their best to escape the burden of pregnancy, they each have an in-built venom to kill the sperm. Nature then takes it a step further, the countermeasure required to reach reproduction. Believe it or not, slugs actually have cannons on their bodies which shoot spears into the other slug to neutralise the venom. I wonder how this sexual warfare is experienced?





River Yuhao Cao's *River is My Hometown* imagines what follows when nature takes over what is familiar to us. Cao writes that his film was in reaction to the 1998 Yangtze River flood, which left 15 million homeless and wiped out his hometown, bringing up the question of Cao's identity now that the river had supplanted the place he had grown up. A body lies tranquil in a glowing green grove by a bank. Its arm is placed over the heart. Its face is turned away from the camera. The body is exposed to its external environment, skin-to-skin with the grass, which contrasts with how these two points of vulnerability of the heart and face are protected from our view, as if the body's occupant is turning inwards, deep elsewhere.

The film depicts a mourning ritual. The body in the brush seems like it might be Cao's, as if he is staging his own wake where nature is his attendant. Goddess-like figures tend to his body. They wear mourning attire – a black veil hung off a wire halo, white ribbons (white is worn for funerals in China) and white chrysanthemums, which symbolise grief and lamentation. We hear a breathy flute rasping through the pattering rain.

In the film's beginning shots, we experience a moment with nature uncommon to us due to our lack of night vision. In the pitch black forest, the flowers and dewy leaves that are usually unseen to us have presumably been captured with flash or some other form of artificial light. Looking at wild flowers in the dark, the oddity of our presence is made known to us, as if we're intruding. But am I feeling this intimacy because I've anthropomorphised these flowers? While they don't stare back at me, the white wildflowers seem to glow with a sublime otherworldliness that I can't understand. The inaccessibility of the non-human sustains this wonder.

These tender moments Cao creates, however, are tinged by this prior knowledge of the flood that destroyed his hometown. The film speaks to how you cannot make a simple value judgement on nature, that is at once a destroyer and creator and impersonally so. In this queer transformational space, Cao loses his fear of destruction. Narrated over shots where the camera wanders over landscapes of the river at night, we hear Cao imagining coming home to

his mother. "I saw the river", he says. "Mom. I'm not afraid." The river takes on the tenderness of home due to this familial address, and yet there is also a pervasive sense of absence and loss, since Cao's reunion with his mother is in his imagination. The film suspends us in a moment that is both gloomy and idyllic, just after the end of things and at the very beginning of incipience.

#### ● Conclusion

Circling back to Martin after all this meandering, I wonder what I could tell him. I wonder if there's anything to tell. Perhaps that, used as a metaphor, nature can dismantle our preconceptions, thanks to its complexity and nondualism, meaning its ability to be multiple and sometimes contradicting things at once, showing us that it's all a matter of our perspective, which nature goes beyond. Thinking of how nature reacts and responds, I wonder if maybe Martin and I's natural course is to hit each other's ideological walls and go our separate ways.



# ● Eternal Return for Boys: Summer Vacation 1999 and The Heart of Thomas

Early in *Summer Vacation 1999* (1988), we see the suicide of a child, Yu, from a cliff, featuring a leap that's ludicrously wrong: it's too upwards and outwards, the boy's legs tucked up behind him. Boys similarly hurl bouquets of flowers in his tribute into the same lake later. It's all

Shusuke Kaneko's 1988 loose adaptation of Moto Hagio's early shōnen-ai (boy's love) manga *The Heart of Thomas* (トーマの心臓, *Tōma no Shinzō*) is at first most eye-catching for its casting – with girls playing the part of the boy students – but it's a more elusive, striking beast for choices like that leap. The actors, working from a script by Rio Kishida (a powerhouse of Japanese theatre), are well-animated in Kaneko's nimble early style, taking the passions of early adolescence seriously. It's goofy sometimes, even as the characters deal with their own nebulous, less straightforward sense of loss than that in the manga, because that leap turns out to be a fiction.

While *The Heart of Thomas's* plot is charged from the outset by the real suicide of the titular Thomas, Yu (Eri Miyajima), his equivalent in *Summer Vacation 1999*, reinvents himself as Kaoru in order to punish his crush, Kazuhiko (Tomoko Otakara), for rejecting him. Only the steadier, wiser Naoto (Miyuki Nakano) suspects something; jealous, left out Norio (Eri Fukatsu) sees Yu's death as on Kazuhiko's hands.

Against the sound of children shouting and laughing, Kaneko's camera pans through

empty classrooms and corridors as if running out with students, but we only ever see these four actors. These boys are orphans, spending the summer holiday at the school, picturesque and isolated in their Ralph Lauren for Boys uniforms.

Kaneko's casting choice, together with the smudging of the story's specific setting in time and place, allow for a suggestiveness in keeping with a more evasive, universal interest in nostalgia and return the film reveals itself to have. The softly sci-fi aspect makes things feel unplaceable. Set eleven years in the future and somewhere in Japan rather than Germany, but with deliberately anachronistic western boarding school production design, the boys slouch, with very eighties hair, as they code their schoolwork one-handedly, or use a machine to crack and beat their breakfast eggs.

Kaneko cut his teeth shooting roman-porno for production company Nikkatsu, and though this film is as chaste as they come (despite its kisses!), there's an energy and dynamism which carries over. His camera is super agile as the boys brawl or play. While *Thomas's* suicide takes place in a German snow, the summer in the film feels dreamlike,



everything suffused with warm light and plenty of halation.

Cuts are often comically abrupt, but there's an especially dreadful, livid kineticism to the repeated sequence of a boy arriving by train, accompanied by an electric whoosh: Kaneko cuts from a shot of the track vanishing before the train, to the camera moving up the aisle of the carriage inside and stumbling upon the boy at the window, as he wakes and looks out, as if he's just been dumped into a new body.

Motivations in the film are untethered from the melodramatic biographical detail in *The Heart of Thomas*, leaving characters more mundane and recognisable. Kazuhiko's reserve isn't down to an abusive incident with older students or needing to prove his half-Spanish blood against stereotypes; he just detects a weakness in himself, some cowardice, that the brash, forthright Kaoru helps him begin to get over. The boys describe each other in clumsy terms ("Everyone likes Kazuhiko. He's no good, but everyone likes him. That's why I hate him."), as if only just awakening to things about others, themselves, and how the world works.

Kaneko and Kishida do preserve the manga's complete disinterest in representing

the risks of expressing love between the boys. Indeed, Kaneko didn't see the film as particularly gay: "I wanted the film to deal with 'love' in a very pure or even abstract sense. I've never thought of it primarily as a homosexual story. (...) Anyway, I was aiming for something altogether more androgynous."

Casting girls might heighten the film's sense of unreality for some, but that androgyny is achieved in a generative, expansive way: there's a case for a trans reading in any direction you want. I didn't struggle seeing the actors as simply boys, while a friend noted that all that pining felt very lesbian to them. It's imperceptible, but Fukatsu (Norio, the youngest) is the only undubbed actor - though only Kazuhiko, the one everyone wants, is dubbed by a male voice actor. Otakara's repeated sulky running her hand through her hair would still read as campily self-conscious were a boy playing Kazuhiko.

That casting idea was there before Kishida was even brought onto the project: when Kaneko read *The Heart of Thomas*, he "found [himself] seeing the characters in feminine terms. I mean, the boys in the story were like girls..." Much of the manga's tortured

professions are gone, but are the boys we're left with, dreamy and scheming, particularly girly, or like lots of early teens? More strongly felt is the confusion and determination of early, sexless love, and a growing awareness of loss and time passing shared by all the characters, in patches of retrospective voiceover, reflecting on the significance of this summer for them. We hear one adult voice, but whose is it?

Both Yu and Kaoru have a frightening preoccupation with time and transcendence absent from the manga. Eri Fukatsu voices only Yu, as Kaoru's voice is dubbed by Minami Takayama, but we hear both voices simultaneously in a novel threat, inviting Kazuhiko to die and be reincarnated as children again together at the film's climax. It's the best time of your life, he says. As Kaoru, he tells a dead phone line that he's pretending is his mother that he wishes he could turn his clock forwards while stopping hers, so that they could be the same age. Yu quietly quotes Hermann Hesse's *Demian* to Norio, telling him he wants to break the egg shell of the world and fly to God, and he literally stops the clock in his room before his "suicide".

Grounded Naoto takes a more resigned view than Yu, certain that the best anyone can hope for, knocking down walls in life, is "better walls": not revelation, but more chances, perhaps. In *The Heart of Thomas's* more elegiac sequel chapter, a parent notes that "The lost find their own way back in their own time." *Summer Vacation 1999* ends with yet another identical boy finally arriving again at the school. We actually first see this boy at the start of the film, on the train (in a grey blazer); he isn't Kaoru. He recognises Kazuhiko and is clear that he's someone new, and this time the boys, delighted, don't look the gift horse in the mouth. Who cares who he is? For now he's here, like them, and this time they're ready to meet him.



### Harry Bayley

I'm a queer artist, writer, critic and curator living and working in North London. My overarching goal in my work is to question the form of film and film criticism to better understand our changing relationship with the screen. My practice centres on experimental film, moving image art, documentary film, decolonial thought and minor cinema.

IG (@htfilmt)

### Emily Jisoo Bowles

Emily Jisoo Bowles is a London-based writer, translator (Korean-English), and occasional film programmer. Their main interest is reading Korean films through a critical and historical lens, such as their video essay work which analyses *The Handmaiden* (2016) through a post-colonial framework.

IG (@emilyjisoob)

### Frey Kwa Hawking

Frey Kwa Hawking is a critic, dramaturg and general arts worker/dogsbody. He is from Bristol and lives in London. Theatre writing can be found in Exeunt Magazine, The Stage and WhatsOnStage. He likes David Berman, the witch puppet from 'The Pogles', and jokes about wasians.

IG/X (@absentobject)

### Shini Meyer Wang

Shini Meyer Wang is a half Chinese, half British writer, poet and dancer from Houston, Texas. They read English at the University of Texas at Austin and Film Aesthetics at Oxford. Their research looks at transnational and intercultural cinema and the representation of reality in social documentaries.

IG (@shinsta28)

### Cindy Ziyun Huang

Cindy Ziyun Huang is a London-based writer, editor and translator. Her writings about art have been published by art magazines including ArtReview. Her creative writings can be found in literary magazines such as Sine Theta Magazine and Tiny Molecules. She co-edits Qilu Criticism, an independent online forum formed in 2021 to expand spaces for critical discussions on contemporary art in Chinese.

IG (@cindaymorning)

