

YONFAN'S
Bugis Street

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Introduction

Bugis Street as Historical-Political- Cultural Discourse

Bugis Street and Cultural Anxiety

The mere mention of *Bugis Street* (1995) evokes fascinatingly awkward responses, especially among cinema audiences who are familiar with Yonfan's film. So, to begin my book-length analysis of this Hong Kong-Singapore work, I want to reflect upon *Bugis Street* as a cinematic text of cultural anxiety. While it is true that one can isolate moments of cultural and political anxieties in its narrative and thematic foci, I am instead interested here in the film's cultural reception and, consequently, how that response has an impact on the way scholarly critical work on the film is perceived. Allow me to approach this matter, rather unscientifically, by way of a personal anecdote. When I began describing to friends and family members in Singapore that I was working on a project about Yonfan's *Bugis Street*, a common response was one of, first, incredulous bemusement, which was then often accompanied by an involuntary rolling of eyes or a tepid offering of obligatory support

marked contradictorily by condescending indulgence. In fact, even some of my academic colleagues in Asian film studies fared no better in their response, with one individual laughing nervously upon my mention of the film, only to realize that his uncontrolled, knee-jerk reaction was a *faux pas* on multiple levels. I do not draw from these moments any personal offense—though my instinctive desire to defend Yonfan's film and, by association, my project, may betray the permeation of this anxiety into my own consciousness. The film's queer soft-core subject matter—transgender prostitution in Singapore—and its campy, over-the-top, exploitation-style aesthetic approach do tempt many to respond in the manner I have described, justifiably or not. Such nervous responses, thus, demonstrate what Marjorie Garber argues in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, “that *transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (Garber 1992, 17, original emphasis).¹ Transgender politics' interventional possibilities on the questions of gender and sexuality can generate, rather fruitfully, discomfort and unease.

However, this anxiety does not simply rest on the level of responses to the film alone; it is also an extension of the cultural political anxiety surrounding the historical Bugis Street, a small geographical space near the business/commercial district in the island-nation of Singapore that has received much Western media attention in the past, much to the nationalist displeasure of some Singapore citizens. Queer activist Alex Au's diatribe, in his renowned *Yawning Bread* website, against the allusion to Bugis Street in a

1. Transgenderism and transvestitism are distinctive but overlapping concepts that I am not trying to conflate here. Instead, my goal is to draw upon the theoretical lesson offered by Garber that is applicable to transgender politics in general.

Scottish newspaper article about Singapore may be representative, if not symptomatic, of the irritations that Singaporeans frequently experience when Bugis Street headlines as a foreign obsession:

Bugis Street again! Oh lord, won't they ever get off it? I'm old enough to have seen the real streetwalkers, and I can tell you, the transvestites were mostly past their use-by date. In any case, they were shoo'ed away from the area some 25 years ago, in the mid 70's.

To Singaporeans today, Bugis Street means nothing. It certainly doesn't represent any golden age of excitement. It's a hand-me-down memory from lecherous, army grunts on R&R from the Vietnam War, too pissed-drunk even to stumble out of the brothels.

Yet, a generation on, much writing about Singapore still sucks blood out of the Bugis Street reference. It's like a leech forever stuck on a bum, with a view of Singapore grotesquely limited by its fleshy contours. (Au 2002)

Au is correct to identify the nostalgic romantic glow that has enveloped the historical Bugis Street by means of the Orientalist gaze of Western tourists and travelers passing through Singapore's fair shores. He is also probably right, though hyperbolically, in his assertion that this fixation on Bugis Street (because of the sexual tourism it offered) is contrary to the contemporary Singaporean's dismissal of its cultural or historical importance—that "Bugis Street means nothing." What I take away from Au's resistance to the Western obsession with the historical Bugis Street, and the general reaction I received about my project on Yonfan's film, is less a disagreement on my part with their often understandable reaction to the problematic cultural discourses about this geographical space, but more a fascination with the unease, the anxious desire for cultural and historical amnesia, framed by the politics of nationalism, postcoloniality, and queer sexuality. It

is an anxiety that conjures the contradictory specter of not just a messy and unsanitary age gone by, but also the troubling cultural politics that disturb Singapore's slick and squeaky clean image as a multicultural global city for the transnational capitalist set to work and play in. Since undertaking this in-depth analysis of Yonfan's film (and by extension the historical Bugis Street) makes me complicit in becoming one of those who "sucks blood out of the Bugis Street reference," I embrace this (and my own) anxiety with abandonment, to unpack the political, cultural, and cinematic discourses surrounding and inhabiting this space that is Bugis Street. This book, hence, is my small way of confronting and exorcizing the fraught relations that I (and other Singaporeans) have toward the ideological and material contradictions in the country's national cultural politics, as embodied in this seemingly slight "Bugis Street reference."² But on a more ambitious theoretical front, this book of specific filmic and cultural criticism offers a localized case study that inserts itself, I hope productively, into the scholarly conversations about the complications of postcolonial and queer sexual politics within the analysis of transnational Chinese and Asian cinemas. Thus, the central objective of this book is to demonstrate how Yonfan's *Bugis Street*, as a minor transnational text of cinematic

2. Even today, Bugis Street never quite disappears from Singapore's cultural landscape. In his online cataloging of things Bugis Street in the *Singapore LGBT Encyclopedia*, Roy Tan lists a photography exhibition and a series of public talks in Singapore in 2014 by Alain Soldeville. Titled "Bugis Street," the exhibition featured photographs of transgendered women that were, as Soldeville points out, "portraits of these people I had come to consider friends, wishing to show their fragility, their humanity rather than documenting a situation, news style." The photos were taken in the early 1980s before the state closed down the space. Some of the photos are available at <http://www.soldeville.com/data/pages/eng/bugisstreet.htm>, accessed on January 23, 2015. Tan also reports that there is a second television season of a documentary-drama in the works for MediaCorp's Channel 5, which features a segment on Bugis Street (Tan, "Bugis Street: Transgender Aspects").

intervention, offers a playful and fantastical representation of this small street in historical Singapore, not just to expose the cultural anxiety surrounding it, but also to engage the manifold issues of queer sexuality and politics as a means of deconstructing and critiquing the homophobic/transphobic institutional, legal, social, and cultural discourses that permeate postcolonial Singapore. Of course, such an analytical hermeneutic does not intend to celebrate unreflectively Yonfan's film as a politically utopian text, but instead it seeks to identify both its possibilities and its flaws, so as to begin to ask the difficult questions of transnational queer cinema (albeit only through a singular case study), of both its progressive political potentialities and its countervailing neoliberal complicities.

In the remainder of this extended introduction, I inscribe the contextual contours, in which to locate my later readings of the film, by (1) conducting a brief survey of Singapore history in terms of the geographical Bugis Street; (2) focusing on Yonfan's career and place in Hong Kong art-house and transnational cinema; (3) examining why *Bugis Street* as transnational cinema is a productive critical approach; and (4) providing a quick synopsis of the film's plot. Expanding upon these contextual parameters of Bugis Street as a cultural phenomenon, Chapter 1 explores a range of textual genres from a pop cultural archive I have gathered, in order to map out the key political discourses that have also populated the film. Chapter 2 extends the contextual framework to sexuality on Hong Kong and Singapore screens, focusing particularly on transgender prostitution and transgender representations, while also keeping in mind the politics of queer sexuality in these two different locales. Turning finally to filmic representation, I foreground in Chapter 3 the queer politics of *Bugis Street*, by taking on specifically the multifold sexual visualities that the film generates as forms of political intervention. Chapter 4 continues the queer critical analysis with a study of queer space and time as manifested in the film and how they inform a queer ethics of relationality. Concluding

the book is a short chapter reflecting upon the politics of community that the analysis of *Bugis Street* has inspired.

Singapore's Historical Bugis Street

The notorious Bugis Street of yore has been relegated to the dust heap of Singapore's recent historical past, and maybe rightfully so, especially for those who consider it a relic of Orientalist sensationalism (like Alex Au of *Yawning Bread*) or for the older conservative majority who see this rather small space in downtown Singapore as a stain on Singapore's official narrative of neoliberal "progress" toward becoming a world-class global city and nation-state, with its squeaky clean image and reputation. If one were to ask today's younger generation about the old Bugis Street, one would be greeted by bafflement or an indifferent shrug. "Bugis" as a contemporary geographical marker is now associated with a station in the ultra-modern subway train system of the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT). Exiting the station leads one into a series of crowded air-conditioned malls (Figure 1), including the appropriately named Bugis Junction (Figure 2). Across the street is an open-air street mall (Figure 3), the New Bugis Street, which is supposed to mimic the bustling atmospherics of the old Bugis Street. Any knowledge of its predecessor is probably culled from talk-stories passed down from the previous generation, who have lived through Bugis Street's heyday in the 1960s and 1970s; or from access to a pop cultural and literary archive that has reimagined that space into what Rey Chow might call "sentimental fabulations" (Chow 2007), thus filling the public discursive imagination with a version of Bugis Street as a signifier of both national alterity and unspoken desire. In Chapter 1, I will comb through aspects of this archive, to which the film *Bugis Street* obviously belongs, in order to unravel the ideological construction of this mythical-historical



Figure 1 Malls around the Bugis Street area (May 18, 2011), photo by author



Figure 2 Bugis Junction (May 18, 2011), photo by author



Figure 3 The New Bugis Street as open-air mall (May 18, 2011), photo by author

street and the discursive signals it emits about the culture and politics of contemporary Singapore. But, for now, I gather together some scattered historical notes about Bugis Street to, on the one hand, perform the requisite historical contextualization that any interpretation of such an archive conventionally demands; and to, on the other hand, suggest that this historical “facticity” is part and parcel of the cultural political narration and fabulation that go into the (inter)national fantasy that is Bugis Street.

Bugis Street was named after a Malay subgroup that inhabited the Malay and Indonesian archipelago.³ One historian points out

3. The Chinese also called the area “Baishafu” (白沙浮), which is translated as “white sand mounds.” During the Japanese occupation of the Second World War, “Black Street” was also another name used to describe the Japanese clubs present along the street. A 2006 MediaCorp Channel 8 documentary features aspects of this history. Part of this Singapore television program is

that at “the turn of the twentieth century, there were some 35,000 people living in Singapore who were classified as Malays, but within that group, there were ten subgroups, including the Bugis, Acehnese, Minangkabau, Javanese, Boyanese, Bidayuh, peninsular Malays, Madurese, Orang Laut and Arabs.” Hence, “Singapore was the Malay melting pot of the archipelago” (Baker 2008, 106). However, as the grand dame of Singapore history Constance Mary Turnbull recounts, the history of the Bugis presence in Singapore runs all the way back to the early decades of the nineteenth century during the time of the first British Resident Colonel William Farquhar and the founder of British colonial Singapore Sir Stamford Raffles. The Bugis were traders who were caught in the Dutch-British rivalry of the region. When a group of 500 decided to settle in Singapore in 1820, Resident Farquhar allowed them to construct “their kampong on the Rochore River,” believing that this “community of families . . . would attract the prized Bugis trade.” The island “soon became the headquarters of Bugis trade in the western archipelago” (Turnbull 2009, 33–34). Raffles was more wary of the Bugis because of their involvement in the slave trade, which Raffles found repugnant, thus leading him to ban slavery in 1823 (41). He also transplanted the Bugis “further east [of the city center] beyond Kampong Glam,” as part of his redistricting plans (38). By 1826, “[m]ost Indonesian and Arab immigrants settled in parts of the town still bearing their names, such as Kampong Jawa, Kampong Sumbawa, Bugis Street, and Arab Street” (68).

It is difficult to attribute Bugis Street’s later salacious reputation to the ethnic community that once lived there, beyond the fact that the Bugis lent their namesake to the street.⁴ However, one could

now available on YouTube entitled “History of Bugis Street” (Tan, “Bugis Street: Transgender Aspects”).

4. The following coincidental ethnological resonance is worth noting, especially in terms of contemporary theories of gender and sexuality: according to anthropologist Susan Millar’s fieldwork among the Bugis in Indonesia, “a

potentially argue that the area's peripheral proximity to the main commercial district offered a convenient corollary space for the growth of prostitution that quietly catered to the respectable set of British imperialism and Singapore's capitalist elite. Historically, demographics had a central role to play in this social phenomenon, as there was one female to eight males in the gender distribution in 1911, according to the census at the time (Turnbull 2009, 110). Especially in the Chinese community, "[p]rohibition would have been unrealistic in Singapore, where in 1884 there were 60,000 Chinese men but only 6,600 Chinese women, of whom [William] Pickering estimated that at least 2,000 were prostitutes. A ban would also have encouraged homosexual prostitution, which was supplied for many years by the importation of Hainanese boys" (101). This is not to say that the British colonial government did not try. While prostitution was left outside of its legislative net, the authorities managed to shut down brothels in 1930 (150). What is fascinating to me, though, is that the British, like the Americans during the Vietnam War, were not above moral complicity in the complex intertwining of sexuality, racial imperialism, and military might. Japanese reporter Tatsuki Fujii offered in 1938 a depiction

third gender category, composed of male transvestites called *calabai*," exists, thus supporting her thesis of the "nonbiological, or strictly social, Bugis conception of gender." These transvestites have historically "played important roles in the kingdoms as ritual specialists called *bissu*" and, now, also function "as curers or ritual specialists at weddings and other life-crisis events" (Millar 1983, 488). In a more recent study of "gender transgression" in Indonesia, Evelyn Blackwood points to the androgyny of divine entities inhabiting the Bugis religious universe, and where the *bissu* are their offspring (Blackwood 2005, 857). For a more detailed study of the various Bugis gender identities, see Davies (2007). Roy Tan speculates that "it is possible that transgender Singaporeans with a knowledge of this aspect of Bugis society first decided to congregate there in the 1950s because of this association" (Tan, "Bugis Street: Transgender Aspects").

of the sexual dalliances of British men: “For the younger bachelors, life in Singapore was very convenient. They usually started drinking at the Cricket Club, proceeded on to one of the three cabarets where they danced with a pretty Chinese or Eurasian partner and ended up at the cafes which lined Jalan Besar Road and Lavender Street. If the favors of certain dancers at the cabarets were unobtainable, they went along to one of the numerous brothels which served just as well” (Fujii 1994, 241–42). The streets referenced are found in the same geographical area where Bugis Street lies. If Fujii’s representation is considered too jaundiced for some on account of Japan’s aggression during the Pacific war, one can also turn to British travel author Carveth Wells’s equally colorful 1939 description of the area:

“*Pergi Malay Street!*” (Go to Malay Street) used to be the usual order to the ricksha [*sic*] puller after dinner in Singapore. This street used to be the heart of the segregated area of the city, where street after street was devoted entirely to brothels of different nationalities. Malays, Indians, Africans, Arabs, Chinese, Japanese and Europeans were all on view in all their war paint . . . Malay Street and the whole of Singapore’s segregated area has been cleaned up and is now a respectable part of the city. (Wells 1994, 248)

Wells is obviously not quite accurate about the socio-moral cleansing, as much of the area has been restored to “respectability” only in the 1980s by a post-independence Singapore government.

In fact, Bugis Street gained its notoriety specifically in the 1950s as a spot for transgender prostitution, according to Koh Buck Song, literary author and, at a time, journalist for Singapore’s main newspaper the *Straits Times*:

A relatively short lane (about 130 metres long and 8 metres wide), Bugis Street is traversed by the junctions of Malabar

and Hylam Streets, and bounded by Victoria Street and North Bridge Road . . . British, Australian and other servicemen began frequenting the area for the cheap hawker fare in the late '40s and early '50s . . . It was around this time that the transvestites came on the scene and made their presence felt . . . The transvestite prostitutes came from the neighbouring areas . . . [and] were present from about 10pm to 5am. Most of them would appear after midnight, dressed in the women's apparel of the day, such as the Malay *sarong kabaya*, Indian *sari*, Chinese cheongsam and the most common, Western frocks. (Koh 1994, 158–59)⁵

In a series of newspaper articles that appeared in the tabloid-style *New Nation* in 1972, investigating homosexuality in Singapore,⁶ national attention was brought to Bugis Street and the prostitution that was occurring there. The first article notes how “[t]he transvestites who have become prostitutes frequent Bugis Street . . . and Johore Road, in foul-smelling, oppressive hovels, honeycombed with box-like cubicles big enough only for a double bed and standing space for one or two.” For rates at “\$3 to \$20 or more,” they offered their services, “often fleecing European tourists or resident expatriates.” The article observes how local customers congregated along Johore Road, while Bugis Street tended to focus on foreigners (Yeo, Khoo, and Lee 1972, 9).

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5. Koh included a non-fiction section at the end of his *Bugis Street: The Novel* entitled “Bugis Street—A History,” from which this quotation is extracted.
 6. Touted as the first news focus on the taboo subject, this series of four articles (with a fifth featuring responses from the community) tried to cover a range of perspectives and featured interviews with quite a few queer Singaporeans. The articles devoted a substantial (if not inordinate) amount of space to Bugis Street and its transgender denizens—proving Bugis Street to be what Russell Heng has identified as “the first known instance of homosexuality finding expression as a local idiom” (Heng 2001, 82). These articles are available online, thanks to the untiring efforts of Roy Tan and Jun Zubillaga-Pow: http://sporelgbtpedia.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Singapore%27s_first_newspaper_articles_on_the_LGBT_community, accessed January 23, 2015.

The outsized reputation of this “relatively short lane” (Koh 1994, 158) grew to the point that even the British government, in a moment of homosexual panic, had the Royal Navy enact “a secret crackdown on gay sailors and officers in the late 1960s” (Travis 2002). This secret was only revealed in a report by *The Guardian* as late as 2002, a report that also demonstrated “that the 1969 panic over homosexuality in the navy was sparked . . . by concerns over the number of sailors ending up with the catamites of Bugis Street when on shore leave in Singapore” (Travis 2002). (I will return to this notion of homosexual panic in Chapter 1.) There was also an American presence during the period of the Vietnam War, where the newly independent Singapore was, and remains, a significant ally of the United States. Singapore was useful “as a supplies centre” and a port for ship repairs (Turnbull 2009, 304). Troops from Australia did not leave until 1973, with the British following suit in 1976 (312).



Figure 4 Bugis Street (1962). Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

The enactment of the Land Acquisition Act of 1966 “gave the authorities a free hand in urban clearance and renewal . . . The population was dispersed from the crowded central areas where it had hitherto been concentrated” (Turnbull 2009, 317). Later urban renewal and the redeployment of the population to brand new government-built housing development estates in various parts of the island completely transformed the area of Bugis Street, thereby dispersing the transgender prostitution activity. According to one local news report, Bugis Street was shut down in 1986 so that an MRT station could be built (Kwan 1992). Ironically, the cleaning up of the spaces around the commercial district had a negative effect on tourism, as the Singapore government began to realize that “[t]he new towns and clean public housing . . . held little appeal for the tourist, who missed the picturesque spectacle of other people’s poverty” (Turnbull 2009, 318). What Turnbull has so wittily and incisively identified in the touristic gaze and the government’s catering to that gaze is a process of self-Orientalism that, to a certain degree, motivated the practices of cultural and heritage conservation in modern Singapore: “In 1986 the Urban Redevelopment Authority designed six conservation zones to restore the exotic East image of the old Chinatown, Kampong Glam, and Little India and to preserve part of Singapore’s colonial heritage. Even the notorious transvestite haunt Bugis Street was rebuilt” (318). But, as Koh Buck Song observes, “the old nightspot . . . was not to be the same again.” The authorities tried to simulate, in a Disney style, a sanitized version of the street culture by having transsexuals assume the role of “customer relations officers,” a ploy that did not go down well, “following complaints from conservative quarters” (Koh 1994, 161), an ideologically and culturally straitlaced populace that, ironically, the state has very effectively cultivated for its own political gain. These expressions of self-righteous moral outrage were lodged against the new

Bugis Street despite assurances from the management that “[t]he customer relations officers were not allowed to solicit or leave the premises with customers” (Kwan 1992). In fact, a spokesperson for the company even noted how these transgender employees “are watched by closed-circuit TV cameras and plainclothesmen [*sic*] and their services will [be] terminated if they do so” (quoted in Kwan 1992). The paranoiac panopticon of corporate surveillance is thus represented as a conscientious act of public service to protect Singapore citizens from, and to contain, the aberrant sexualities and gender identities that these transsexual customer relations officers represent. However, it also betrays Singapore’s deep-seated cultural anxiety about Bugis Street, with which I began the introduction. As Maggie, one of the four customer relations officers (and who was a former Bugis Street sex worker and who also had a substantial role in Yonfan’s film),⁷ reminisces, “[i]n the old Bugis Street we were very free. The minute we got off our taxis at 10pm, we would fly like birds to our customers. Here we can only sit down at a table if someone calls us” (quoted in Kwan 1992). Her nostalgia for the old Bugis Street and the real material trace that she offers to that now absent social space provide the much-needed critical counterpoint to this cultural anxiety.

7. The transition of Maggie from the original Bugis Street, to the new Bugis Street, and finally to the filmic *Bugis Street* registers a real-to-reel contiguity that ruptures the political, cultural, and institutional desire to erase the abject—which Bugis Street physically and discursively embodies—from Singapore’s collective consciousness. I had the good fortune and privilege to meet Maggie during a talk I gave at FilmGarde Cineplex in Singapore on June 29, 2013, organized by the Asian Film Archive. I wish to thank her for her generosity in sharing her past experiences with me and for the news-related material she provided.

Yonfan as Transnational Hong Kong Filmmaker

The new millennium is seeing a revival of Yonfan's career in the international film festival circuit. A retrospective of seven Yonfan films was held at the 16th Busan International Film Festival in 2011 (Chu 2011a) and another at the 2012 Moscow International Film Festival (Kozlov 2012). Yonfan chaired the jury of the 2011 Asian Film Awards (Coonan 2011) and the jury for the New Currents Award at Busan 2011 (THR Staff 2011). Earlier, he was also a judge for the American Film Institute in 2009 (Yonfan 2012, 106). According to reports, Fortissimo Films will handle the distribution of the newly remastered versions of Yonfan's thirteen films (Chu 2011a): *A Certain Romance* (1984), *The Story of Rose* (1985), *Immortal Story* (1986), *Double Fixation* (1987), *Last Romance* (1988), *Promising Miss Bowie* (1990), *In Between* (1994),⁸ *Bugis Street* (1995), *Bishonen* (1998), *Peony Pavilion* (2001), the documentary *Breaking the Willow* (2003), *Color Blossoms* (2004), and *Prince of Tears* (2009). Of course, this is a great boon for audiences and researchers alike, especially since some of his earlier films are still unavailable on DVD, while others can only be purchased in localized markets in Hong Kong.⁹ This anticipated expansion of filmic distribution internationally will help cement Yonfan's reputation as a significant cinematic voice in both Hong Kong and global cinema, especially ever since *Bishonen* first placed him on the international map when it won the best picture prize at the Milan International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1999.

While Yonfan's artistic talent is indisputable, his critical reputation is much more checkered. Before finding his place in

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8. *In Between* is a portmanteau film made up of three short films, one of which Yonfan directed. Hence, technically, Yonfan has only made twelve full-length feature films.
 9. At the moment, a number of Yonfan's recent films are available for sale on DVD through his website (www.yonfan.com).

the Hong Kong photography¹⁰ and film scenes, the young Yonfan migrated from Hunan, China, where he was born, to spend time in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West.¹¹ In his memoir *Intermission*, he chronicles how his father uprooted the family to move from Mainland China, to Hong Kong, to Taiwan, before returning to Hong Kong again as Yonfan turned sixteen (Yonfan 2012, 22, 41). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yonfan went to America and Europe to study and travel (101). He even hitchhiked in France to visit Cannes, leading him to appreciate how this seaside town “was the best place to earn a reputation for art films” (83).¹² Like many aspiring actors, he worked as an extra in Hollywood, appearing in movies like Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1970) and Tom Gries’s *The Hawaiians* (1970) (110, 121). His diasporic background and his later worldwide travels, in a sense, have granted him license to christen himself “a director of the world,” one whose cinematic influences include Douglas Sirk and Federico Fellini (Li 2010). The Sirkian and Fellinian inspirations are not surprising, considering how Yonfan’s filmmaking career has similarly straddled both commercial and artistic realms. His oeuvre from 1984 to 1994 consisted mainly of Hong Kong romances and melodramas, many with an art-film twist. They were also vehicles for notable star turns from Hong Kong and Taiwan luminaries such as Carol Cheng, Jacky Cheung, Cherie Chung, and Sylvia Chang. Yonfan could also pride himself for casting the then nascent talents of Maggie Cheung and Chow Yun-fat in his second film *The Story of Rose*—this was before Cheung became a Hong Kong superstar in Wong Kar-wai’s critically acclaimed films, and before Chow rose to superstardom

10. His photographic work is also accessible on his website at <http://www.yonfan.com/works.html>.

11. Some of these biographical details are taken from Yonfan’s resume on the Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0948523/resume>, accessed December 13, 2012.

12. All quotations from Yonfan’s memoir are based on my own translation.

a year later in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). Yonfan's accomplishments have led one critic to crown him, retroactively, "a star maker in the Asian film world," particularly in reference to "Daniel Wu, who took his first acting role in Yonfan's *Bishonen* in 1998 after the director spotted him in a television commercial" (Chu 2011b)—Wu has since gone on to become a mega Hong Kong film star, appearing in high-profile productions like *2000 AD* (2000), *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004), *House of Fury* (2005), *Protégé* (2007), and *Tai Chi Hero* (2012).

While Yonfan's directorial work from 1984 to 1994 clearly coincided with what Hong Kong film scholar Stephen Teo calls "the second wave," with films "from 1984 to 1990" by now renowned directors such as Wong Kar-wai and Stanley Kwan (Teo 1997, 160), these earlier films by Yonfan have generated much less attention than those of his more well-known Hong Kong filmmaking peers. One could speculate that the uneven quality and the more mainstream nature of the films might have diverted (and continue to deflect) critical attention away from them, especially in the context of the international film festival circuits and English-language critical circles. This trajectory of his earlier work was clearly not lost on the director himself, as *Bugis Street* in 1995 appears to mark a new phase in Yonfan's cinematic vision and sensibility. In an interview, he characterizes his post-1995 work in cosmopolitan and artistically Romantic terms: "I do not classify myself by region. I do not like to involve myself in commercial markets. In this way, I am freer to make films which have artistic merits" (Li 2010). *Bugis Street*, hence, is pivotal in Yonfan's self-makeover from commercial Hong Kong filmmaker to global art-house director, with *Bishonen* completing the transformation with international critical success. *Bugis Street* began Yonfan's "project" called "the trilogy of the minors" (Yonfan 1995),¹³ which eventually included *Bishonen* and

13. I am citing from the cover of Yonfan's "movie book" for *Bugis Street*. He

Peony Pavilion. In the context of Yonfan's cosmopolitan cinematic makeover, I will go so far as to classify the trilogy as an instance of transnational queer cinema. The politics and problematics of the "queer" in transnational queer cinema will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 2. But for now, it is necessary to attend to, though in brief notational form, the potentialities of the "transnational" as a theoretical category as it relates to Yonfan's *Bugis Street* and his other films that follow.

***Bugis Street* as Transnational Cinema**

In an essay in a recent collection that deals with the now highly popular notion of "Sinophone cinemas" (Yue and Khoo 2014), Sheldon Lu assesses the field of Chinese cinema studies through a historicized and theoretical mapping of "four critical paradigms": (1) the national cinema, (2) the transnational cinema, (3) the Chinese-language cinema, and (4) the Sinophone cinema (Lu 2014).¹⁴ While my goal here is not to engage deeply with Lu's assessments of each of the categories, the theoretical pause I place on each of them is to acknowledge the epistemological and political possibilities of all of these categories, as a necessary route toward the transnational as a critically efficient, hermeneutical frame for *Bugis Street* in this book. Of course, I also do not wish to celebrate the transnational as an inherently "positive" political lens, but to explore instead the complex dialectical relationships it has with the other critical categories that Lu has identified, thereby exposing the contradictory cultural politics it embodies and emits.

included two other presumably nonexistent titles, *New Park* (1996) and *Silver Screen* (1997), which I can only surmise to be his initial plan for the tripartite filmic project. *Bishonen* and *Peony Pavilion* probably took their place in the final form of the trilogy.

14. Lu credits Song Hwee Lim for theoretically listing the first three critical categories. See Lim (2006, 2–7).

Citing the work of Yingjin Zhang (2004) and Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006), Lu rightly argues that “the national will not simply disappear in the current climate of globalization . . . The national persists in the transnational and the global” (Lu 2014, 16). To put it another way, the tensions and the contradictions within the transnational are forged by the persistence of the national, and vice versa. While the work of many Hong Kong–based filmmakers are very multinational/transnational/global in terms of production, funding, distribution, exhibition, and consumption, they can also be national in their diegetic emphasis and cultural identification—and Yonfan’s films are no exception. For instance, his queer trilogy is situated in three different national locales: Singapore (*Bugis Street*), Hong Kong (*Bishonen*), and Mainland China (*Peony Pavilion*). *Bugis Street* is particularly fascinating in relation to a national perspective, especially since it can be thought of as belonging to both the Hong Kong and Singapore national film canons. As the first film that signaled the independent-cinema approach that Yonfan had adopted, it is also one that diegetically steps outside of Hong Kong, despite the fact that the screenplay is written by Fruit Chan, who is now known for directing some important Hong Kong films such as *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), *Durian Durian* (2000), and *Hollywood Hong-Kong* (2001).¹⁵ It is shot entirely in Singapore and fictionally depicts an actual historical street on the island nation. Scholars of Singapore film claim that it belongs to an emerging and rapidly growing corpus of contemporary Singapore cinema. According to Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, in their encyclopedic tome on Singapore cinematic history *Latent Images*, “Singapore’s film revival began in 1991” (Uhde and Uhde 2010, 73),

15. See the synopsis of the rerelease of the film, now entitled *Bugis Street Redux*, on the Fortissimo Film website: http://www.fortissimo.nl/catalogue_lineup_title.aspx?ProjectId=96d36b17-e12e-4eb0-a5ad-9725ed8cf126, accessed December 19, 2012.

which was followed by a thematic focus in the independent filmic scene on “the ‘other’ Singapore, hidden under the surface of the country’s conspicuous wealth and economic success, away from the spic-and-span boulevards and ritzy shopping centres,” of which *Bugis Street* is an exemplary instance (74). Uhde and Uhde took particular care to note that Margin Films, the film’s distribution company in the United States, has pitched *Bugis Street* “as the first commercial, ‘anti-blockbuster’ movie from Singapore.” They also identified Djinn, who is now an upcoming Singaporean director in his own right, as having helped Yonfan in this project (77).¹⁶ Financially, *Bugis Street* is also a Singapore production in that it is listed (on the Internet Movie Database) as Jaytex Productions’ only film title. The company was “run by the Singaporean brother-and-sister team, Godfrey and Katy Yew, who served as the film’s executive producer and producer respectively. The Yews have since moved their business outside Singapore” (Uhde and Uhde 2010, 78). But it is important to observe that the national emplacement of *Bugis Street* needs to be qualified by the fact that it is considered a minor and marginal cinematic text in the narration of Singapore’s contemporary cinema history. How much of this marginality is inflected by the cultural anxiety I discussed at the beginning of this chapter is a subject for speculation. Nonetheless, it is fascinating that this national marginality the film challenges and troubles through transnational channels. To account for its ability to shuttle easily between Hong Kong and Singapore, and to attract global attention because of its queer subject matter, the film requires a more expansive paradigm beyond the national to appreciate its cultural and political potentiality as an interventional text within the national context of Singapore.

16. Djinn went on to direct *Return to Pontianak* (2001)—which also featured the star of *Bugis Street*, Hiep Thi Le—and the critically acclaimed *Perth* (2004).

The “Chinese-language” and “Sinophone” critical models can next be addressed together here, as they both rest on a Sinitic linguistic premise. Sheldon Lu points to a 1998 book review, by Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh in *Jump Cut*, of the collection *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Browne et al. 1994), postulating that this is probably the first English-language instance where the term “Chinese-language cinema” is used to articulate the notion of *huayu dianying* (華語電影). Yeh was following the lead of Taiwanese and Hong Kong critics’ deployment of this concept to resist the nationalist inflections of “Chinese Cinema” (Lu 2014, 19). It was meant to be, as Yeh suggests, “an ad hoc term” that does “not privilege any one of the three cinemas” of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (quoted in Lu 2014, 19; Yeh 1998, 74). Lu concludes his historical chronology of this critical model with his and Yeh’s “definitive anthology,” *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Lu and Yeh 2005). He argues that the term has subsequently become “widely accepted and used in film scholarship” (Lu 2014, 19), no doubt to his and Yeh’s contribution to the field. While I appreciate Lu and Yeh’s earnest intention to critique the nationalist and cultural centrism through this linguistic strategy, I am less confident of its efficacy, especially in view of the trenchant criticism offered by Ien Ang of the essentialism that language discourses are capable of, even in minority circles throughout the Chinese diaspora.¹⁷ In other words, can one not analyze films that are made in other languages but still have these films fall within the cultural confines of Chinese cinemas? On this particular question, I am indebted to Song Hwee Lim’s astute reevaluation of the category of “Sinophone

17. See Ang’s book *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001). Being partly Peranakan myself, and with elementary Chinese-language skills, I find myself identifying with Ang in terms of what it means, for instance, to be relegated to the social, cultural, and institutional margins in Chinese-dominated Singapore.

cinemas.” Vis-à-vis “Chinese-language films,” the Sinophone is a much more complex and politically creative concept that pushes the linguistic premise further by articulating and promoting a minor or marginal positioning that disturbs the essentialism and centrism in discourses about Chinese culture or the Chinese nation. In her book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, Shu-mei Shih conceptualizes the Sinophone in the following manner: “Sinophone articulations . . . contain an anticolonial intent against Chinese hegemony . . . The dominant language of the Sinophone may be standard Hanyu, but it can be implicated in a dynamic of linguistic power struggles. As a major language, standard Hanyu is the object against which various minor articulations are launched resulting in its destandardization, hybridization, fragmentation, or sometimes outright rejection” (Shih 2007, 30–31).¹⁸ Still, the sticking point for Song Hwee Lim is the issue of language as the political tool of choice. “For what is the ‘Sino’ in the Sinophone?” Lim asks. “In Shih’s construction, the Sinophone is defined ‘not by the race or nationality of the speaker but by the languages one speaks,’¹⁹ but isn’t this lingua-centrism itself a form of essentialism that denies access to one’s cultural production and cultural identity via a language that is presumably not one’s own?” (Lim 2011, 38). What does the Sinophone mean for those who “have lost their knowledge of the Chinese language” and “yet somehow identify themselves as Chinese through cultural symbols, rituals and traditions” (38)? Lim further problematizes the Sinophone on the level of the sonic by contending that “[t]he insistence that the Sinophone must sound—however hybrid, impure or creolized—like a Sinitic language, implies that the Sinophone’s

18. The constraints of space allow me only to pinpoint a very brief moment in Shih’s highly complex theorization of the Sinophone in her book, a concept that has also evolved over time in her other publications, as Lu observes (Lu 2014, 20–22).

19. Lim quotes from Shih (2007, 185).

potentialities will invariably be constrained because it must remain univocal and Sino-centric" (Lim 2014, 72).

Obviously, one can comfortably nestle Yonfan's body of work within the critical rubrics of "Chinese-language films" and "Sinophone cinemas." In fact, Mirana M. Szeto insists "that the Sinophone perspective becomes even more important for Hong Kong culture exactly because it is gradually disappearing into an undifferentiated vision of a growing China" (Szeto 2014, 120). Being a part of the Chinese-language and Sinophone cinematic circuit, Yonfan has not been afraid to tackle the queer politics of the Hong Kong-Taiwan-China triangle, as evident in *Bishonen*, *Peony Pavilion*, *Color Blossoms*, and *Prince of Tears*. *Bugis Street* marks an important linguistic departure precisely because it is set in Singapore. While he could have chosen to shoot the film entirely in Mandarin—which some mainstream local filmmakers have done, in line with the Singapore government's Mandarin-language policy—Yonfan chose instead the more politically resistant route to include "Standard" English, Singlish,²⁰ Mandarin, and other Chinese dialects in the script. The main character Lian, played by Vietnamese-American newcomer Hiep Thi Le, speaks a supposedly Malaysian-inflected English, while many other characters speak Singlish with playful abandonment. The only significant character who uses Mandarin exclusively is Maggie, but her placement in the midst of the other supporting cast produces a rainbow coalition of multiculturalism that more accurately reflects the organic linguistic reality on the ground, as opposed to the state's artificially engineered, official four-language policy. (The Singapore government's economically pragmatist approach to culture has led to a linguistic and educational policy that promotes Standard English, Mandarin,

20. Singlish is an English patois that includes a hybrid smattering of Malay, Mandarin, and some Chinese dialects. Yonfan clearly chose to include it for localized linguistic authenticity.

Malay, and Tamil as the nation's official languages, at the expense of Singlish and the other Chinese dialects.) Mandarin is configured as only one of the multiple languages spoken in the film and is, thus, sonically and culturally deemphasized. Foregrounding Singlish and Chinese dialects, especially in the early 1990s in Singapore cinema, was considered a politically radical move. Such a tactic was similarly adopted by some Singapore filmmakers like Eric Khoo (at around the same time as *Bugis Street* in the 1990s), Colin Goh and Yen Yen Woo (in their 2002 film *Talking Cock the Movie*),²¹ and, most recently, Royston Tan (especially in the use of Singlish and the Hokkien dialect in his first feature film *15* [2003] about juvenile gangsters). The point that Song Hwee Lim makes about Tan's *15* is particularly telling about the inadequacies of the Sinophone model, which one could also apply to *Bugis Street*:

If the descendents [*sic*] of immigrants are to be expunged from the Sinophone community once they “no longer speak their ancestors’ languages,”²² given the hybridity of identities and the multiplicity and creolisation of languages of these peoples in their countries of residence, how does one judge at which point these languages are no longer spoken? (Lim 2011, 38)

15's intermingling of Singlish, Malay, Hokkien, and Mandarin renders its “dialogue . . . almost indecipherable to Chinese speakers outside of Singapore and Malaysia.” Hence, “the qualification in Shih’s Sinophone model assumes a certain level of linguistic purity whose boundary will be impossible to police” (38). Again, as in the case of “Chinese national cinemas,” the “Chinese-language films” and the “Sinophone cinemas” are useful in engaging very specific points of cultural critique, though less useful than “transnational

21. For a detailed analysis of the film, see Groppe’s essay “‘Singlish’ and the Sinophone” (Groppe 2014, 158–65).

22. Again, Lim quotes from Shih (2007, 185).

cinemas” in accounting for the border-crossing and interventional potential of *Bugis Street* as a cross-cultural film.

On the heels of Sheldon Lu's groundbreaking *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (Lu 1997b) came much critical analysis in the field of Chinese cinemas, over the past two decades, that engaged the problematics of the transnational—I am thinking specifically of the work of Esther Yau (2001), Kwai-Cheung Lo (2005), Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (2005), Gina Marchetti (2006), and my own book on the topic (Chan 2009), to name just a few—and, hence, it is not my desire to rehash here the key issues and concerns that transnational cinema raises. However, I want to offer two observations that do inflect my categorization of Yonfan's trilogy as “transnational queer cinema.” Firstly, much of Hong Kong cinema (especially films leading up to and beyond the 1997 British handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China), to be financially viable or successful, must consider its place in the global market and its ability to crisscross national and cultural boundaries, especially through the film festival network as a gateway to reach more mainstream international audience sectors. Hong Kong cinema could be considered as transnational through its reconfiguration of localized Hong Kong/Chinese culture for global consumption, another instance of the global/local dynamic at work. It is in this context that I have come to understand Yonfan's wish to “not classify . . . [himself] by region” and to envision himself as “a director of the world” (Li 2010), all of which feeding into the transnationality of his artistic production. Secondly, *Bugis Street* is also important as transnational cinema for a number of reasons. Its cast features Singaporean actors and the Vietnamese-American lead Hiep Thi Le, whose chief claim to fame is her role in Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* (1993). Raphaël Millet makes this same point about the casting of Le by arguing that it helps “better position the movie in the international scene.” He

also notes that because the film “was shot in English, Mandarin and Cantonese,” it allows itself to be marketed as “a regional product with potentially some international appeal” (Millet 2006, 102–3). The narrative of the film also takes on transgenderism, a hot topical commodity since the international triumph of Australian Stephan Elliott’s *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and Hollywood’s version of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995).

These observations of mine are relatively mundane ones, considering the critical ubiquity of the transnational in Chinese cinema studies and the notion that “[t]ransnational cinema in the Chinese case as well as in the rest of the world is the result of the globalization of the mechanisms of film production, distribution, and consumption” (Lu 1997a, 3). The fait accompli of cinema as a transnational medium, hence, begs the question as to what is so significant about adopting the transnational as a critical mode for filmic analysis? The response that Chris Berry provides is that the proliferation of transnational capitalist networks and systems globally in the twentieth century has turned “the transnational . . . [into] a *world order* that . . . plays a role in shaping all Chinese filmmaking activities today . . . In these circumstances, the very widespread usage of the term in the last decade and more is completely understandable, and cannot be dismissed simply as fashion” (Berry 2011, 15; emphasis mine). While it is necessary to critique this new world order and its neoliberal underpinnings, Berry also argues that not “all film-makers operating in the space opened up by the transnational order are operating according to the principles of profit maximisation and accumulation” (13). In fact, as Sheldon Lu points out, “[t]he transnational is not necessarily an accomplice of triumphant transnational capitalism . . . One may speak of commercial transnational cinema, independent art-house transnational cinema, exilic transnational cinema and so forth”

(Lu 2014, 17). Ultimately, Berry's and Lu's conceptualizations of transnational cinema studies gesture toward what Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim have termed as a "critical transnationalism," a theoretical model on which this book aspires to adopt. Their detailed description deserves to be quoted at length here:

In the study of films, a critical transnationalism does not ghettoize transnational film-making in interstitial and marginal spaces but rather interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels—from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation's image of itself. In examining all forms of cross-border film-making activities, it is also always attentive to questions of postcoloniality, politics and power, and how these may, in turn, uncover new forms of neocolonialist practices in the guise of popular genres or auteurist aesthetics. It scrutinizes the tensions and dialogic relationship between national and transnational, rather than simply negating one in favour of the other . . . [I]t understands the potential for local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas. It may also wish to pay attention to the largely neglected question of the audience and to examine the capacity of local, global and diasporic audiences to decode films as they circulate transnationally . . . constructing a variety of meanings ranging from adaptation and assimilation to more challenging or subversive readings of these transnational films. (Higbee and Lim 2010, 18)

It is my hope that the critical interpretations of *Bugis Street*, in this book, as border-crossing modes of queer intervention will ultimately be viewed as modest steps toward this project of a critical transnational cinema studies.

Synopsis of *Bugis Street*

In abiding by the practices of other books in this genre, I deem it necessary to provide a brief synopsis of the film under analytical consideration. Readers who are familiar with Yonfan's film can proceed directly to Chapter 1. Here is the basic plot: *Bugis Street* opens with the transgender prostitute Lola (Ernest Seah) picking up an American sailor (David Knight) along the eponymous street for sex. In the morning, the sailor angrily refuses to remunerate Lola for her services when he realizes that she is transgender. It is only when Lola solicits the aid of triad gangsters that the sailor finally relents and reluctantly pays her. His exit from Sin Sin Hotel coincides with the arrival of Lian (Hiep Thi Le), who has just traveled from Melaka, Malaysia, in order to work at the hotel as a wait-staff, domestic helper, and receptionist. Lian gets to know the hotel manager Mrs. Hwee (Gerald Chen) and the various prostitutes and transgender occupants living there, including Lola, Zsa Zsa (Mavia), Sophie (Sofia), Maggie (Maggie Lye), Dr. Toh (Matthew Foo), and Linda (Linden). One evening, as she enters Linda's room to deliver a bowl of noodles, Lian discovers to her horror that Linda is a man from her waist down. So traumatized is Lian that she almost leaves town, if not for Lola's advice to her to stay on at Sin Sin Hotel. As Lian settles into her new environment, she soon realizes that Lola's boyfriend Meng (Michael Lam) desires her. Compounding Lian's confusion with her sexual awakening is the arrival of Drago (Greg-O), a transgender salesperson from Paris. Drago bonds with Lian over the question of love and romance. She teaches Lian how to desire men, leading Lian to develop a crush on an anonymous schoolboy. One crazy evening during the arrival of sailors on their way to the Vietnam War, a party develops in the hotel. Zsa Zsa, Sophie, Lola, and Drago give Lian a makeover, dressing her up like a transgender prostitute. That evening, after a fight breaks out on Bugis Street, Lian runs back to the hotel only to encounter Meng

again in Lola's room. Lian successfully rebuffs Meng's advances and develops a confident sense of female self because of the makeup and outfit that she has on. But Lian's confusion only deepens and turns into depression when Drago's mother (Lily Ong) dies in her hospital bed and Drago leaves Sin Sin Hotel. Man Kit (Sim Boon Peng), Lian's former employer's son, visits her from Melaka because he misses her. Lian, however, rejects his affections and asks him to return home. After seeing him off at the jetty, Lian encounters the schoolboy whom she has a crush on, only to find out that he does not even know of her existence. These setbacks lead Lian down the inevitable road of losing her virginity to Meng, who immediately abandons her after their sexual liaison. Completely overwhelmed by her troubles, Lian finally turns to Lola for solace. The latter's wisdom fortifies Lian and restores her *joie de vivre*.

Conclusion

Bugis Street as *Un-Community*

As I reflect upon the critical trajectory I have taken in analyzing the historical, archival, and filmic discourses of Bugis Street to arrive at some semblance of a theoretical “conclusion”—I dislike the notion of a conclusion in this context, precisely because of its insistent sense of finality, which goes counter to what I see (in hope) as the open-ended potentiality of *Bugis Street’s* political futurity—I keep returning to Maggie Lye, the actress who portrays the character Maggie in the film, as a physical embodiment of Bugis Street in its various incarnations: Maggie was a transsexual sex worker at Bugis Street during its heyday. She returned to work as a customer relations officer in the then newly sanitized iteration of the street, which the state attempted to revive, rather unsuccessfully, in the early 1990s. And, finally, she appears in Yonfan’s film as one of the transsexual prostitutes living in Sin Sin Hotel, which, for all intents and purposes, could potentially be read as a fictionalized version of Maggie herself. I had the wonderful privilege and (as a researcher) the good fortune of meeting Maggie and having a conversation

with her during one of my trips to Singapore. Generous with her first-hand accounting, Maggie understandably reveals nostalgic longings for Bugis Street in its various permutations, which constitute significant moments in her life. For me, this nostalgia intimates a kind of temporal disjuncture, akin to the temporal dysphoria I discuss in Chapter 4. The slices of personal time that Maggie marries together vibrate anxiously in ethical resonance, to transfigure nostalgia into a form of queer futurity. As she puts it in a local news article about the film:

I wanted to act in Bugis Street because I thought it would give me a chance to do something for my “sisters”—to tell people *our* side of the story . . . But the plot was insubstantial and our roles were shallow . . . The audience may be misled into thinking there is no depth in *our lives* . . . Who knows how many heartaches *we* have suffered? How much ridicule *we* have to put up with? (Koh 1995, 24; emphasis mine)

As my readings in this book reveal, I do not fully agree with Maggie's interpretation of the film. However, I do see in her statement, and in her personal communication to me, a rich understanding of ethical and political outreach and connectivity to her “sisters” as a communal “we,” which I seek to honor here. But who is this “we,” who are her “sisters”? I want to offer a more expansive and inclusive reading of this plural first-person personal pronoun, as a “we” that transcends historical specificity by synaptically leaping across temporal and cultural zones. It is a communalism that circumnavigates the problematic constraints and restraints of Community, with a capital “C.” It is, I theorize, a form of queer “un-community,” connecting those who are queerly *uncommon* and those who queerly *disidentify*.

My analysis of cultural anxiety over Bugis Street, the shifting fabulations in its pop cultural archive, the disidentificatory queer

politics of Yonfan's transnational film, and the cinematic projection of Bugis Street as queer space and time can be similarly summed up as a politics of "un-community." Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has warned us of the burdens that community, as an ideological construct, imposes on us and what that burden can result in, in terms of the political subject, and the rights and freedoms to which it is entitled. Esposito draws from the etymology of the Latin word *communitas* to arrive at the following theoretical conclusion about community: "The subjects of community are united by an 'obligation,' in the sense that we say 'I owe *you* something,' but not 'you owe *me* something.' This is what makes them not less than the masters of themselves, and that more precisely expropriates them of their initial property (in part or completely), of the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity." Esposito further argues that community should not "be interpreted as a mutual, intersubjective 'recognition' in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity," but is a coercive structure that induces "a spasm in the continuity of the subject" (Esposito 2010, 6–7). In the same vein, Judith Halberstam's contention "that quests for community are always nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity reveals the conservative stakes in community for all kinds of political projects, and makes the reconsideration of subcultures all the more urgent" (Halberstam 2005, 154). Therefore, for queer activism to be true to its queerness, one must continue to be watchful of the urge to embrace community in its clarion call to an imagined queer utopia of cultural homogeneity. So, instead of the more categorical and binary-inducing "anti-community," I have opted for the neologistic formulation "un-community" to articulate Esposito's suggestion that we "immunize" ourselves against the ideological pressures of community, "to negate the very same foundations of community"

(Esposito 2010, 13), without sacrificing the political possibilities and necessities of relating and connecting to one another.¹

Yonfan's *Bugis Street* as a political project of filmic intervention challenges the interpellative call to return to normative community, a community that once rejected the transgender and sexual alterities of Bugis Street, forcibly erased them from its social map, and suppressed their discursive presence through various modes of censorship. The flow of life in queer time and space that the film envisions circumscribes the essentializing strictures of community, even queer community. *Bugis Street*, hence, forces viewers to think differently about an ethics of relationality, in the hope that queer activism in Singapore, and around the world, can more effectively combat the imperatives of heteronormativity and resist the temptations that the assimilationist logics of homonormativity pose. Or, as Leo Bersani so elegantly puts it, "*homo-ness itself necessitates a massive redefining of relationality . . .* There are some glorious precedents for thinking of homosexuality as truly disruptive—as a *force* not limited to the modest goals of tolerance for diverse lifestyles, but in fact mandating the politically unacceptable and politically indispensable choice of an outlaw existence" (Bersani 1995, 76). Only then can a truly egalitarian space and time be found for queer individuals of all stripes and colors.

1. Halberstam's "subcultures" seem to suggest this alternative construction to community that I am positing.

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