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Watching *Solos* in Singapore: Homosexuality, Surrealism and Queer Politics

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Introduction

Figure 1. Boy and a young lover having anal sex. *Solos*, courtesy of Red Dawn Productions

1. In a scene from the Singaporean film *Solos*, directed by Loo Zihan and Kan Lume,[1] the young male protagonist, generically known as Boy (Loo Zihan), is having anal sex with a man of similar age (Figure 1). As the viewers' attention is brought to the penetrator's moving buttocks in the centre of the frame, the two men swiftly reach a vocal orgasm. The distance of the camera dissociates the image from pornography, emphasising the voyeuristic position of the spectator while refusing to grant close-ups of the men's faces and genitalia. As a result, the scene minimises aesthetic sleights of hand and posits itself as an event which could occur between any two men in any bedroom in Singapore. In many contexts, this studiously unremarkable representation of homosexual penetrative sex would be accepted on its own quotidian terms, but as a film shot, produced and destined to be shown in Singapore, where 'gross indecency'[2] between men is still illegal, *Solos* was deemed provocative and even hubristic.

2. The world premiere of *Solos*, the most sexually explicit gay Singaporean film outside the pornography industry, was originally scheduled to take place on 25 April 2007, at the Singapore International Film Festival. In the event it was not screened in order 'to preserve the principle that films at the festival should be shown uncut'[3]; Singapore's Board of Film Censors had previously

awarded *Solos* an R21 certificate with the stipulation that three cuts be made, despite the vociferous objections of its producers. The Restricted 21 Certificate, prohibiting anyone under this age from viewing a film, is prescribed by the government-run Media Development Authority (MDA), which elaborates in its 2011 document on film and video classification: 'Films dealing with mature content (e.g. drug use, prostitution or homosexuality) would generally be classified as NC16, M18 or R21.' This amalgamation of illicit practices evidently reflects anxieties on the part of the Singaporean authorities regarding the (im)morality of homosex and, perhaps more importantly, its discursive circulation in the public sphere. The R21 subsection makes this fear more explicit: 'Films that depict a homosexual lifestyle should be sensitive to community values. They should not promote or justify a homosexual lifestyle.'[4] These elusive and chimaerical 'community values' are only concretised through the ventriloquism of the Singaporean government, which produces the social fabric as a community from which homosexuals are excluded. As its title suggests, *Solos* undermines this putative cohesion by depicting an atomised reality, implicitly questioning the authoritarian formation of a collective by a discourse which claims to represent it.

3. The film depicts the relationship between Boy, Mother (Guat Kian Goh) and his teacher (Yu Beng Lim), Man, with whom he has been in a romantic relationship for some years. As the narrative unfolds, Boy appears increasingly disengaged from his hapless lover, whose sadness is intensified by an unspecified bereavement, and the film ends with the younger man's apparent physical and emotional return to his Mother. In an interview for *The Advocate*,[5] Loo highlighted the content as autobiographical while simultaneously insisting on its wider socio-political relevance: 'I realized it wasn't accurate to say it was my personal life— it was inspired by collective experiences, like people from my generation.'[6] This is borne out by the film's use of generic nouns in the place of names, and much of Loo's work can be seen as an attempt to recuperate the voices which fall outside governmental and conservative notions of community. The short piece *Chancre*,[7] for instance, explores his contraction of syphilis, panning outwards to other 'shameful' individuals and activities which exist beyond the aegis of the respectable nation state. Although films like *Chancre* are even more experimental than *Solos*, some reviewers responded to the latter with a bafflement exacerbated by its formal dimensions[8]: the bulk of its narrative is linear and mimetic, represented in a sepia palette which makes it almost indistinguishable from a black-and-white film. This faded chronicle is punctuated by explosions of colour in the form of surrealist episodes with no immediately apparent relevance, which occur in settings with no analogue in the diegesis, be they a forest, a swimming pool, or an auditorium. Perhaps most provocatively, *Solos* does not provide any dialogue; not quite a silent film, containing as it does sporadic sound effects and a minimalist, dissonant score, it nonetheless refuses to reproduce the speech of its protagonists, even in situations where they are visibly speaking.

4. My argument is that *Solos'* representational strategies are inseparable from the provocation latent in its thematic of the nuances of a gay male relationship and its unabashed depictions of sex between men, although an analysis of the film as political comes with the caveat that its indeterminacy might yield any number of competing interpretations. This polysemy imbues the film with a complexity that is unusual in contemporary queer Singaporean cinema and warrants further investigation. As the inductive example of the MDA implies, Singaporean socio-political narratives tend to frame homosexuality in reductive and detrimental ways while abstaining from outright censure. *Solos* refuses to conform to these terms, in which its intervention will perforce be misunderstood and refracted in the language of conservativism, instead adopting an oppositional politics. Such a politics can be closely associated with the aesthetics of surrealism, as I will shortly elaborate; but this is not to say that the film positions itself strictly outside conventional social structures. The oppressive, realist world of the diegesis is subverted by the presentation of non-normative themes via unorthodox representational strategies. By exploring the interplay between opposition and subversion, I suggest that *Solos'* political power resides in its refusal to inhabit

either position. Before analysing the film more closely, it will be useful to outline the socio-political status quo surrounding male homosexuality in Singapore and the role surrealism could play in political opposition.

Male homosexuality in Singapore: Surrealism and queer resistance[9]

5. Male homosexual penetrative sex remains illegal in Singapore. Section 377A ('Outrages on Decency') of the Penal Code runs as follows:

> Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.

6. Given its derivation from the still-applicable Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, composed under Thomas Babington Macaulay and passed into law in 1860, Section 377A forms part of a discernible pattern of sexually repressive colonial legacies, as explored by Christopher Lane: 'Britain's administrative power over international policy meant that London could disseminate orders for sexual restraint across Britain's colonies with relative ease, regulating local administrations by punitive measures and threats of dismissal.'[10] An oft-cited irony is that in nations like Singapore and India, gay liberation movements frequently conceive of 'the West' as a utopian region of acceptance and GLBTQ activism, while overlooking earlier colonial importations of homophobia predicated on the Euro-American 'invention' of homosexuality as a psychosexual orientation.[11] Unlike in India, where Section 377 is almost exclusively invoked in cases of non-consensual anal sex, Section 377A continues to be mobilised in order to prosecute men who have sex with men in Singapore, although, as Michael Hor notes, arraignment is now contingent on factors like 'consent, age, and venue,' arising primarily in instances of male-male sex in 'public' spaces like toilets and swimming pools.[12] This institutionalised discrimination is reinforced by the church, epitomised by the publication of a pro-377A guide in early 2014, which was believed to have been written by Pastor Lawrence Khong and portrays homosexuality as incompatible with Christian family values.[13]

7. An increased liberalism in Singapore is suggested by the production of recent gay and lesbian themed film and theatre, of which *Solos* is itself exemplary. There has been a proliferation of full-length queer films, including: Yonfan's *Bugis Street* (1995), a Hong Kong-Singaporean production which represents the lives of transvestites and transsexuals in the now-demolished neighbourhood of its title; Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (2007), a docudrama depicting prostitution and same-sex relationships in Geylang, Singapore's red light district, which also starred Loo Zihan; and *Lucky 7* (2008), a seven-director collaboration containing queer themes, which was screened at the Singapore International Film Festival alongside the lesbian documentary *Women who Love Women* (2007) in 2008. Shorter films include: Madeleine Lim's *Sambal Belacan in San Francisco* (1997), a diasporic documentary which depicts the lives of three Singaporean lesbians in the Bay Area; Justin Kan's *The Letter* (2005), a portrayal of male-male unrequited love in junior college; and *Purple Light* (2013), which depicts the love between two Singaporean men performing National Service. Anglophone theatre has also been prominent, especially the lesbian-themed *Invitation to Treat Trilogy* (1995–2003) by Eleanor Wong and Alfian Sa'at's gay-themed *Asian Boys Trilogy* (2001–2007).[14]

8. As a seemingly logical corollary, in recent years there has been burgeoning optimism about the status of homosexuality in Singapore, exemplified by Ng King Kang's monograph *Born this Way But*.[15] Yet here Andrew Lek and Simon Obendorf's decade-old caveat remains pertinent as they stress the *appearance* of increased acceptance, evidenced in 'a sophisticated and self-confident community of gay and lesbian consumers,' the emergence of global signifiers like 'Pride,' and the

proliferation of representations of homosexuality in the arts, especially the theatre. In reality, they argue, the question of gay and lesbian rights is intimately bound up with capitalist concerns, male homosex is still illegal, and Singapore's leaders repeatedly underscore the 'conservativism of mainstream moral values,' resulting in a 'de facto if not de jure tolerance of same-sex sexual acts in private,'[16] which leaves homosexual subjects contented and apathetic about the need for political change. In *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, Eng-Beng Lim explores this ambivalence at length, noting 'the saturation of queer theatre and widely disseminated images of its often shirtless or naked male leads, on the one hand, and the retention of the colonial-era statute 377A (criminalising consensual sex between men), on the other hand.'[17]

9. *Solos* can be interpreted as a coded critique of these inconsistencies. The open representation of anal sex between men in a film destined for mainstream release goes far beyond the titillation of 'shirtless or naked male leads,' problematising the governmental dyad of public and private and forcefully bringing what is acceptable behind closed doors into the general domain. One problematic the film had to face was how to engage with the climate in which it was produced without succumbing to the capitalist co-optation of homosexuals, whom Gary Atkins aptly describes as 'valuable cog[s] in Singapore's economic regime,'[18] and without allowing itself to be constituted by a socio-political discourse which recasts the limitation of civic freedoms as tolerance. If queer Singaporean art aspires to political resistance, it faces another dilemma: how can homosexuality be represented without falling prey to the all-too-easy assertion that the very existence of this representation is proof of Singaporean liberalism towards same-sex love and sex? This surmisal serves to mask the fact that meaningful emancipation would be predicated on decriminalisation and statutory equality, not simply the commodification and circulation of quasi-emancipatory images. Drawing as it does on a resistant genealogy of surrealism, *Solos* can be viewed as a sustained engagement with this problematic.

10. Succinctly defined, surrealism is an avant-garde movement in the arts, beginning in the early twentieth century in Europe, which attempted to liberate the potential of the unconscious via illogical imagery and unforeseen juxtaposition. While surrealism is often confused with magical realism, Maggie Ann Bowers provides the useful distinction that the former is more interested in 'the imagination and the mind' than the 'material reality' which underpins the latter.[19] In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, first published in 1924, André Breton positions surrealism as a movement which is antithetical to literary realism, what he calls 'the case against the realistic attitude.'[20] Proffering a circumlocutionary definition, Breton prizes the dream and the unconscious above the positivist rationality of our waking moments, whose validity he dismisses in no uncertain terms. Yet surrealism, as its name implies, is not opposed to reality itself: 'I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak.'[21] Robert Short notes the importance of Breton's words to the surrealists' approach to film generally, referring to their early belief that the cinema as a medium was inherently surrealist[22] because of strategies like montage and the necessary collusion of the spectator in the production of the image, but this conviction subsided in the face of the banalisation of cinema under capitalism.

11. Diverging from quintessential surrealist works like Dalì and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929),[23] *Solos* keeps its short oneiric episodes apart from the realist diegesis, which engenders a partial separation of dream and reality. In this context, the politics of surrealism depart from what Short calls the 'fertile new strategies of subversion,' which are transposed to the main narrative, and focus instead on 'the revelatory liberation of discourse.'[24] The film's oscillation between dreamlike and empirical realities finds a correlative in its queer politics. While the link between surrealism and queerness remains underexplored and undertheorised, a handful of studies do exist, most notably the work of Peter Dubé. In his introduction to *Madder Love: Queer Men and the Precincts of*

Surrealism, he argues that, despite the homophobia of proponents of surrealism such as André Breton, and much of the movement's anti-feminism, the analogy between surrealism and the potentialities of queerness is compelling: 'Surrealism was a movement—like the stream of Gay Liberation that most interests us here—*with desire at its very heart*; both were self-consciously interested in subjectivity and the way the mind operates; and the two movements share an interest in the way these things—subjectivity and desire—affect the world.'[25]

12. There is a problematic slippage between the ideals of 'gay liberation' and 'queerness' in Dubé's argument, when the latter, especially in its theoretical, social constructionist incarnations, approves of the radicalism but eschews the essentialism of the former, but his focus on subjectivity and desire as a means of resisting queer assimilation and conformism provides a useful recontextualisation of Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*. In his 1924 work Breton does not expound on the concrete political efficacy of surrealism, defining it instead as the negation of positivism; focusing on the dream and the unconscious fortifies the case against the 'materialistic attitude,' by which he implies both an empirical materiality and a dreary fixation on satisfying 'material conditions,' seemingly indissociable from a capitalist economy. But in his 1930 *Second Manifesto*, Breton develops his position on materialism, agreeing with Marx's rejection of German idealist philosophy, emphasising: 'Our allegiance to the principle of historical materialism … provided that communism does not look upon us merely as so many strange animals … we shall prove ourselves fully capable of doing our duty as revolutionaries.'[26] Breton sees surrealism as able to supply the Marxist dialectical method with a much-needed engagement with 'the most immediate realm of consciousness.'[27] Although in subsequent decades many surrealists distanced themselves from communism, the oppositional relationship between surrealism and a capitalist reality is present in much surrealist cinema. The title of Buñuel's magnum opus, *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974),[28] recalls the opening line of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*: 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.'[29] In tandem with the image of the Statue of Liberty transmogrified into a pair of testicles used to advertise the film, this partly suggests the factitiousness of liberty in late capitalist societies.

13. Echoing those of Buñuel, the works of Southeast Asian queer directors like K. Rajagopal in Singapore and Apichatpong Weerasethakul in Thailand explore the confluences between surrealism, evident in techniques like the *cadavre exquis*,[30] and embedded forms of social commentary. *Solos* recalls such precedents, providing a tangential critique of a Singaporean politics which focuses on satisfying the queer subject in solely material ways. What is offered is a liberatory narrative divested of emancipatory potential by its embeddedness in a late capitalist economy, one which fails to investigate queer subjectivities and aspirations, or pay heed to queer voices. The film's oneiric sequences are opposed to this narrative of commodification and a conciliatory materialism, while its focus on the queer unconscious foregrounds the polymorphism of the imagination, recalling Breton's manifesto and obnubilating the 'realism' of statist accounts of homosexuality. At the same time, *Solos* insists on halting its dream episodes abruptly and returning to the realist world of the diegesis; otherwise, it would run the danger of sealing itself off from the world of repressive politics which it seeks to challenge. If this danger is continually circumvented by the forcible return to a recognisable, empirical reality, it is here, in the diegesis, that concrete iterations of power can be subverted, but subversion by its very nature runs the risk of assimilation. As Judith Butler argues in her 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*, 'Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal over time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening cliches through their repetition, and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value.'[31] In other words, to what extent is the subversiveness of *Solos* and, more generally, queer artistic production in Singapore, playing into the hands of a capitalist regime which profits from certain renditions of gender and sexual non-normativity? There are other problems with subversion alone: the political

resistance it offers may be ineffectual or inaudible, and the subversive act of parody, if too successful, can come uncomfortably close to replicating and relaying the terms of the discourse which it is ostensibly seeking to undermine. This inevitable slippage is continually disrupted in *Solos* by flashes of an oppositional surrealism, which is analogous to a queer politics that eschews the statist terms used to define and conceptualise the gay male subject.

***Solos*: Subversion and opposition**

> In the Singapore context, I think the issue of gay identity is even more basic. We have been silenced for so long that we have no words with which to articulate our feelings and/or frustrations. We cannot say what we feel or reply to what is said to us … we cannot live as we cannot begin to vocalise what we want to say about ourselves.[32]

14. The majority of *Solos* is shot using a static camera; the counterpart of this cinematographic uniformity is the palette, which is drained of colour to the point where the film is almost indistinguishable from its black-and-white forebears. The effect of this is not primarily to suggest a diffuse nostalgia of the sort Fredric Jameson associates with postmodernism, but, as a contrast with the technicolour of the surrealist episodes, to imply the lacklustre lives of the film's protagonists. For example, Mother lives in a state of unremitting isolation; consigned to her grief, apparently caused by both Boy's abandonment of her and his homosexuality, she is often depicted in an immobilised foetal position. The film's ashen palette is also the aesthetic correlative of the pathos of the failing relationship between Boy and Man; as the latter sobs and curls up at his lover's feet, he is visually linked to Mother, suggesting a continuum of suffering with Boy as its cause. For most of the film, the only antidote to this dolorous realism is the surrealism of the short, extra-diegetic episodes, which contain vivid colours and vigorous movement—in one scene, for instance, Mother watches a Woman (Peishan Chiew) dancing in a moving display of grace and vitality in an empty auditorium. The final scene, in which Mother and Boy are reunited and the diegetic setting acquires colour, underscores what Kenneth Chan defines as 'the Mother-Boy relationship as the emotional core and telos of the film,'[33] but it would be simplistic to interpret this aporia as a happy ending; rather, its function is to place under scrutiny the affective dimensions of romantic and familial relationships.

15. In the film as a whole, the colourless diegesis is particularised in contradistinction to the surrealist episodes, emphasising the situatedness of its veiled critique of the Singaporean state's accounts of queerness within the climate of late capitalism. More specifically, as Lynette J. Chua argues, 'Basic civil-political liberties are seen as trade-offs for engineering [a] particular vision of social stability and its fruits of economic progress.'[34] *Solos* does not engage with the link between a telos of capitalist success and the suppression of individual rights directly, but it continually suggests the oppressive weight of man-made objects, structures and commodities in the diegesis. Part of the reason why each individual is 'solo' in the film is that they are contained within static frames in claustrophobic apartments, in bedrooms and in bathrooms, with little to no existence in the external world. Bulky objects loom large in the foreground of many scenes, such as the futon in Man's apartment and the sofa in Mother's living room, which is full of suffocating detritus (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Boy hemmed in by objects. *Solos* courtesy of Red Dawn Productions.

16. Many of the film's longshots are overwhelmingly dominated by objects, and human beings occupy but a fraction of these frames. Technology also seems ineffectual and alienating, with a robotic vacuum cleaner, kicked desultorily around the living room by Mother, unable to fulfil its purpose because of the multitude of *things* around it. If the natural world might counteract the relentless asphyxiation wrought by man-made objects and settings, it has no significant diegetic presence until the final scene, in which Mother and Boy are reconciled against a backdrop of apartment buildings brightened by a verdant tree (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Boy and Mother reconciled. *Solos* courtesy of Red Dawn Productions.

17. While abstaining from overt political critique, the juxtaposition does subvert hegemonic accounts of

material emancipation, perhaps allegorising how paradigms of economic progress and harmony are wielded in Singapore to suppress queer rights, mobilisation and protest. As *Solos* implies, the deployment of this apparently irrefutable master narrative is experienced as a curtailment of self-expression, also delimiting in advance the imaginative horizons of queer Singaporean subjects.

18. The decision of *Solos'* directors and producers to remove all dialogue was only taken in the final cut, with the professed intention of allowing the film's audiences to concoct numerous and heterogeneous interpretations. Rather than uniform silence, however, there are sporadic sound effects like the noise of a car, Mother's violent sobbing, or Boy's orgasms with his sexual partner. In a review for *Film Threat*, Niki Foster claims that the expurgation of speech is needlessly confusing: 'Solos' main gimmick, the lack of dialogue, is its greatest weakness.… It seems more like the principals are mute than that the film takes place around and between their conversations.'[35] Perhaps this muteness is *Solos'* greatest strength; when Mother is 'speaking' on the telephone but no words emerge from her mouth, the absurdity stresses the uselessness of speech in a discursive system where the articulations of queers and their families go unheard. If the very act of queer vocalisation, especially in artistic form, is fallaciously taken to signify Singapore's liberal policies towards queer subjects, an alternative means of protest which resists the flattening of difference and the homogenisation of speech must be sought. The film's muteness arouses considerable anxieties, even fears, but in many reviews the significance of noise is elided. Engendering considerable ambiguity surrounding the possibility of verbal articulation, the paralinguistic scream or orgasm emphasises the interrelatedness of *Solos'* aesthetic strategies and its tactics of subversion; the ambivalence surrounding silence as state-imposed limitation or as *refusal to speak* makes room for the abjected queer subject's reconfiguration of oppression as resistance.

19. Given the refusal to name them, the generic Boy and Man/Teacher become indissociable from their archetypal roles, conjuring a Confucian hierarchy and pedagogical system which prioritises age and knowledge over callow youth. However, the neo-Confucian constitution of the Singaporean queer as an 'infantile citizen,'[36] who depends on governmental control and articulation for his or her existence, is problematised by the film's inversion of authority. Eng-Beng Lim contends that the imposition of Confucianism on the Singaporean populace is an essentialising gesture at odds with the official celebration of the nation state's racial diversity and multiculturalism, also arguing that 'East Asian cultural mores or ethical systems such as Confucianism are refurbished to nativize a moralist stance against homosexuality.'[37] He identifies the reconfiguration of the colonial 'white man/brown boy'[38] dyad into the postcolonial relationship between the Singaporean state and the 'Singaporean gay male (of any ethnicity), who, like "native" male bodies under colonialism, is routinely and "justifiably" infantilized as a boy in need of control or corrective guidance.'[39] *Solos* may well be engaging with these socio-political phenomena in its centralisation of the relationship between Boy and Man, deliberatively challenging the Confucian pedagogical model by lingering on Man's impotence as Boy drifts away from him, most poignantly when the former collapses on the shower floor and sobs at his young lover's feet, perhaps imploring him not to end the relationship.

20. Once again, there is no clear allegory here, but *Solos* does interrogate the nature of authority, asking its audience to consider who is teaching whom, and what exactly they might be teaching. In a wry nod to analogous institutional accounts of homosexuality, especially those of the Singaporean church and its prioritisation of the heterosexual nuclear family, Boy comes from a single-parent home with no discernible father figure. In a disquieting scene, Boy and Man are framed in a long shot, sitting at the table on the balcony of Mother's apartment. While she moves in and out of the kitchen to bring the two men the food she has prepared, Boy sits straight-backed and immobile, his face averted from the camera. Man is the only figure facing the camera, and as

he fills the bowls of Mother and Boy from the centre of the frame, he resembles the family patriarch (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Boy Man and Mother eating lunch. *Solos* courtesy of Red Dawn Productions

21. Because of the absence of determinate names and the film's refusal to expound the exact relationship of the protagonists, here Boy's teacher becomes indistinguishable from his father, a troubling ambiguity which pervades the narrative as a whole. Mapping the porosity and instability of familial, homosocial and homosexual bonds, *Solos* subverts hegemonic accounts of domesticity: the normative, nuclear family may well be underpinned by unvoiced queer desires, just as the gay man can 'pass,' intentionally or otherwise, in heterosexual institutions. By accentuating this aporia, *Solos* suggests the impossibility of separating straight and gay existence in order to contain and limit the latter; in other words, queerness is always already at home. Yet this realisation, while potentially politically liberating, also runs the risk of assimilation; if the difference between hegemony and its subversion is at times barely perceptible, subversion itself is always subject to misinterpretation as that which simulates and reproduces power instead of undermining it.

22. The surrealist episode directly after this formal and uncomfortable shared meal deliberately intervenes in this potential slippage, disrupting the etiolated liminality of the subversive and proposing a colourful oppositionality in its place. Boy is represented in a long shot in a forest clearing, wearing only his white underpants. Fluttering into the frame, a length of red silk threatens to envelop him, but instead he performs a graceful dance, albeit on his knees, as the fabric responds to the movements of his body and the wind.

Figure 5. Boy dancing in the forest. *Solos*, courtesy of Red Dawn Productions

23. The camera cuts to two fish gasping and writhing in the dense bushes, subsequently returning to Boy, still dancing but now in a standing position, and the interlude ends with the camera lingering on the pulsating belly of a toad in an extreme close-up. Boy's manipulation of the fabric connotes traditional practices of Chinese dance, specifically the scarf- and long-sleeve-based dances originating in the Tang Dynasty, which remain common in Chinese Opera, and the various forms of ribbon dance (*Cai Dai Wu Dao*), which are often performed with red fabric at Chinese New Year to bring prosperity, luck and happiness. Boy's exaggerated, seemingly un-choreographed movements are diametrically opposed to his physical immobility in the previous scene, spotlighting the regimentation imposed on him in the realist socio-political environment of Singapore, and the surrealist creation of imaginative, dreamlike alternatives emerging from the unconscious. Here acting as a distant echo of surrealism, Chinese theories of dance emphasise the unification of the body and the psyche, as explored by Wang Kefen.[40] The agility and polysemy of scarf, sleeve and ribbon dances are often associated with self-expression and liberty within a society which tends to subordinate individual desire and experience to the importunities of the collective. While it could be argued that choreography itself is a form of social constitution, *Solos'* transformation of these dances into an extemporised performance in a natural setting without an audience, its accentuation of eroticism in the suggestive movements of a semi-naked Boy, and its dispensing with the paraphernalia of stylised ribbons or scarves, suggest a provisional and evanescent intervention which opposes the societal world of the diegesis. The multiplicity of ribbon dances partly resides in the performer's ability to weave indistinct shapes in the air which are transformed into recognisable symbols, such as a broad, slow wave to represent a rainbow. These semiotic codes, because of their constant changeability, may provide a provisional alternative to a univocal and enduring state-dominated language which curtails self-expression. As a catachretic means of speaking without an utterance, such codes can be used to foreground queer existence without subscribing to the terms of the debate which elides it. The signification of the fish and the toad is more ambiguous, perhaps metaphorising Boy's sense of suffocation, entrapment and ugliness, but in their impossibility they draw attention to the episode as an exposition of the multi-faceted unconscious. This is quite opposed to the strategies of containment implicit in the socialisation of queer subjects, as explored in an ashen, realist diegesis circumscribed by the objects and enclosures of a late capitalist society.

24. These surrealist moments, which may indeed be metonymic for an oppositional queer politics, occur intermittently and fleetingly within the film; like the works of a Dalí or a Buñuel, they are too multi-faceted and indeterminate to provide a meaningful political alternative to the repression of queer subjects in Singapore, but they do present the viewer with a hallucinatory realm in which queer subjectivities can find more plural expression, where they are no longer constituted by the unilateralism of statist accounts of homosexuality. The opposition that surrealism represents has no political purchase, however, if it functions as a hermetically sealed system detached from social existence. Instead, it is repeatedly juxtaposed with the diegetic world of recognisable Singaporean reality, reconstituted by *Solos* as the plane of queer subversion.

Conclusion

25. The uncut version of *Solos* has yet to be given a rating, making its public screening illegal in Singapore and underlining the deliberate impossibility of the title of this article. This is not to say, however, that attitudes towards queer cultural production and citizenship have remained static since 2007. In February 2012 at the Singapore Fringe Festival, Loo restaged the controversial *Brother Cane* performance of 1993, in which Josef Ng publicly protested the increasing entrapment of cruising gay men by police officers, trimming his pubic hair and stubbing out a cigarette on his arm, a gesture for which he was arrested and prosecuted. In his justification of the restaging, Loo emphasised its political charge:

> The audience … will allow me to trim my pubic hair in a public space, they will allow me to singe my skin with a cigarette and they will allow me to say that sometimes, silent protest is not enough … I have faith that things have changed, and the artist who chooses to stand for his beliefs will no longer be silenced or exiled. I have faith in the power of art and the persistence of time to bring about this change.[41]

26. If *Solos* is interpretable as a form of 'silent protest' whose politics remain deliberately ambiguous and unstable, shuttling, as I have argued, between latent narratives of queer subversion and opposition without coalescing into either, the re-enactment of *Brother Cane* is an incendiary successor which transforms silence into vocal determinacy. Here Loo may also be alluding to the exile faced by his earlier film, banished from the nation state not for criticising the governmental regime, but for its supposedly pornographic content. Paradoxically, *Solos* had already anticipated its own silencing, lending a pre-emptive edge to its politics, which, however veiled, should not be forgotten amidst praise for the visual subtleties of its domestic and affective narrative. Instead, as Loo's words make clear, the film's meditative aesthetic, most poignant in its technicolour surrealism and faded diegesis, are inseparable from its socio-political message, foregrounding the considerable 'power' of visual culture as a catalyst for change.

Notes

[1] Kan Lume and Loo Zihan, *Solos*, Red Dawn Productions, 2007.

[2] See Section 377A of the Singaporean Penal Code.

[3] Sylvia Tan, 'Gay movie, Solos, pulled from Singapore Film Festival schedule,' *Fridae Asia*, 20 April 2007, online: http://www.fridae.asia/gay-news/2007/04/20/1831.gay-movie-solos-pulled-from-singapore-film-festival-schedule (accessed 20 January 2014).

[4] Media Development Organisation, 'Board of Film Censors Classification Guidelines,' 2011, pp. 3–4, (accessed 3 March 2014),.

[5] Lawrence Ferber, 'Silencing Singapore' in *The Advocate* (4 June 2009), (accessed 20 March 2014).

[6] Ferber, 'Silencing Singapore.'

[7] Loo Zihan, *Chancre*, Loo Zihan, 2011.

[8] For example, see McGarmott, 'Review: *Solos*' in *Cinematic Concerns* (7 November 2007), online: http://filmgarmott.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/review-solos.html (accessed 15 February 2014).

[9] My use of 'queer' focuses on same-sex desiring subjects while also conserving Michael Warner's famous glossing of the concept as a 'resistance to regimes of the normal.' While the blanket usage of 'queer' in many Asian contexts may seem a neo-colonialism, in this instance I deploy the term following the examples of the filmmakers themselves and the self-identifications of many Singaporeans. See Michael Warner, 'Introduction,' in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner, Minneapolis, MA: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. vii–xxxi, p. xxvii.

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[18] Gary Atkins, *Imagining Gay Paradise: Bali, Bangkok and Cyber-Singapore*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 230.

[19] Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magical Realism: The New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 22.

[20] André Breton, 'Manifesto of surrealism,' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007, p. 6.

[21] Breton, 'Manifesto of surrealism,' p.14.

[22] Robert Short, *The Age of Gold – Dalí, Buñuel, Artaud: Surrealist Cinema*, London: Solar Books, 2008, p. 17.

[23] Luis Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou*, uncredited, 1929.

[24] Short, *The Age of Gold*, pp. 31–32.

[25] Peter Dubé, *Madder Love: Queer Men and the Precincts of Surrealism*, Hulls Cove, Maine: Rebel Satori Press,

2008, pp. 31–32.

[26] André Breton, 'Second manifesto of surrealism,' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 142.

[27] Breton, 'Second manifesto of surrealism,' p. 140.

[28] Luis Buñuel, *The Phantom of Liberty*, Euro International Film, 1974.

[29] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, New York: Bantam Classics, 2004, p. 13.

[30] The *cadavre exquis* is a surrealist game of juxtaposition used to assemble a narrative. Each collaborator develops a section of a sequential composition either by obeying a rule, or after watching the end of the previous collaborator's contribution.

[31] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. xxi.

[32] Desmond Sim, 'There is no gay identity, consciousness or values in Singapore,' in *People Like Us: Sexual Minorities in Singapore*, ed. Joseph Lo and Huang Guoqin, Singapore: Select Books, 2003, pp. 37–40, p. 39.

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[36] See Lauren Berlant, 'The theory of infantile citizenship,' *Public Culture* vol. 5, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 395–410.

[37] Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, p. 94.

[38] Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens*, p. 91.

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