Authentically Inauthentic

Queering Cultural Identity Through the Soundtrack to *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*

William Southerland
Music and the Moving Image 2019
Wednesday, May 29, 2019
Introduction

- Director – Nagisa Oshima
- Score by Ryuichi Sakamoto

David Bowie as “Maj. Celliers”    Ryuichi Sakamoto as “Capt. Yonoi”

Historical context

- Sakamoto grew up in Shinjuku
  - Center of counter-cultural revolution
  - Inspired by New Wave
  - Member of “Yellow Magic Orchestra”
- Composition of the score
  - Sakamoto given complete control
  - Three months to complete the project

Image source: https://www.discogs.com/artist/5087-Ryuichi-Sakamoto
Theoretical framework

• Queer theory highlights artificiality of cultural construction

• Chen: “an array of subjectivities...outside of the heteronormative.”

• Taylor: queerness as post-structuralist critique of identity coherence

• Doty: Queer readings of texts are real readings, not “alternate” readings
Japanese masculinity post-WWII

• Defeat by Allied forces, 1945
• Yukio Mishima and radicalism
• Representations of Asian men in Western media
  • Nguyen: “Oriental Passivity”
  • “Failed masculinity”
Failed Western masculinity

• Iconic Bowie cast under Japanese directorial “gaze”

• Derfoufi: “creative and artistic subjectivities”

• Contaminated the Western hegemonic subject
  • Unidentifiable
  • A “failed” colonizer
Compositional intentionality

• Score as a “dichotomy”
  • Western Christmas bells, set in Asian contexts
  • Neither Japanese nor Western
  • Purposefully exoticized
Queer codes

• **Minimalism**: avoids semiotic constraint of traditional harmonic form

• **Melodrama**: overly stylized, unobtainable

• **Camp**: excess of emotion, mimicry, and overblown identity
Kenjiki

- “Forbidden Colors”
- Reference to Yukio Mishima
- Use of synth “gamelan” to invoke “Asian-ness”
- *Kenjiki* – homosexual novel by Mishima

Figure 1: Primary theme from *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*
Figure 2: Theme from Germination
Germination (Var. 2)

Figure 2: Theme from Germination
Germination (Var. 3)

Figure 2: Theme from Germination
The Sower

Figure 3: The Sower Theme from “Seed and the Sower”
The Sower (1st Appearance)
The Sower (2nd Appearance)
The Seed, The Sower, and Germination

Figure 5: Harmonic pattern from “The Seed”
Bibliography


Conclusion

Questions?