

FILM REVIEW

Hengdian Dreaming, Directed by **Shayan Momin**. 2020. 57 min. Colour.

Nothing is as it seems in *Hengdian* and Shayan Momin, as it subtly drives this point home by alternating shots of a seemingly typical-looking city and the characters he interviews. But *Hengdian* is no ordinary city; it is the home of the largest studio in the world, where the Chinese film industry produces most of its historical dramas. The main characters of Momin's film are but mere extras in this alternative Hollywoodian productions. The 'drifters' arrive here in search of a better life, and what they end up doing is also inventing new trends in the form of short digital productions for their own social media channels. The film thus investigates contemporary means of material and social capital production through smart phones, while also offering a commentary on media and performativity in a Hollywood for the masses type of city.

Hengdian constitutes itself as a chiefly commercial city where social relationships are underpinned by a mercantile dimension. It attracts large investments for period dramas, tourists willing to spend their budget to visit sites they have seen on television, as well as people who flock there to earn a living as an extra, which they argue, does not make them enough money at all. To supplement their living, they script and direct their own digital productions which they then livestream on the internet (while also performing live for the tourists visiting the studios); and it is on these live streams that

they openly ask their audience for gifts or remuneration, having quickly learned that digital spaces are means of production that can be monetized, that digital busking is no different to the physical one.

The few scenes that the director offers as snapshots of a normal city are deceiving; what seems to be a typical urban settlement reveals itself as a fairyland where dreams still wait to come true; to underline this point further, Momin only briefly invites us into the home of one of his characters, where we can witness the living conditions which are generally obscured by the performativity nature of the city, of its inhabitants. It is symbolic that the mini digital productions that the characters engage in are performed in the artifact which in Lefebvre's conception (2003) animates urban life, the street. As if by purposefully embodying Lefebvre's argument that the street is 'a place to play and learn', a space for creativity to roam free, the 'drifters' inhabit these public spaces more than they seem to inhabit any private ones. These arenas for co-creation also become shared spaces of solidarity and cooperation in the artistic act.

The last 10 minutes of the film are an adrenaline-filled stream of consciousness, where every character exhibits their talent on an interplay of street neon lights, once the sun has gone down. Echoing a point expressed earlier by one of the characters who, in his invitation to Barack Obama to star in his production, claims that Chinese culture has successfully integrated the socialist and the capitalist ideologies. The dizzying spectacle of the performers with their phones and cameras, and replicas of

the live audiences in front of them do question what role socialism can still play in the fabric of contemporary urban life.

Reference:

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