

LET US LIVE FOR THE BEAUTY OF OUR OWN REALITY

Scud Films: 6 Utopians (2015)

A Polemical Introduction¹

By comparison with Scud's earlier films, *Utopians* has a comparatively straightforward narrative structure – which is not to say that there is not a lot going on, because there is. It is also a much more polemical film than is usual from him, and as such it has a socio-political context, and it is, I think, helpful to sketch that in at this stage.

Changing attitudes to homosexuality are as old as history. In ancient China, as in ancient Greece, same sex love was not simply acceptable, it was seen as desirable. Socrates was expected to take lovers from amongst his students, and in the ancient Chinese court it was expected that the courtiers should have a boy lovers by their side. In Europe since then attitudes and expectations have differed from one royal court to the next, from one country to the next, and from one century to the next. When Hong Kong was established as a British colony in 1842, the British made homosexuality illegal (trust the British!) and if you were caught you faced severe penalties, and in 1967, which is when Scud was born, all that was still in place. Finally, in 1991, homosexuality was decriminalised, but only if you were over 21. (The age of consent for heterosexuals was 16.) If you were gay and had sex when you were under 21 you had committed a crime, and if you were older but had had sex with an under 21 year old, you too had committed a crime; and when Scud made the film in 2013 / 2014 the age of consent battle was at its height, and since the film features a love affair between a 20 yr. old student who falls in love with his older teacher this has a direct impact upon the unfolding plot, particularly when we get to the denouement.

On another tack – and this is me being polemical – to name something is to call it into existence, and by that argument homosexuality didn't exist before 1858 when the word was first used by an obscure Austrian novelist², and it became common currency some 20 years later when Kraft Ebbing, a somewhat less obscure psychiatrist, used it in his book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*; but once named it became a happy hunting ground for the psychiatrists, who deemed it to be a psychological disorder, and the medical profession who deemed it to be a medical disorder, never mind the religious folk who deemed it be an issue of good and evil, or at the very least a threat to family values – whatever they are. The point is that homosexuality had become a 'thing'. And given the dominance of the religious people in politics, that 'thing' became a political problem – an issue of power and legality, and to fight for your rights you had to get together and identify yourselves as gay, and thus at a personal level you had to decide whether you yourself were gay or not gay, yes or no; and by implication you find yourself being defined by your sexuality, hence much of the commentary on gay films talks about the characters discovering their *true* identity. Scud does not make films about characters discovering their true identity and thereafter being defined by it. To define is to delimit, to contain, to control, but for Scud sexuality is fluid, unlimited, uncontained, uncontrolled, and so it is here in *Utopians*, where the central characters enjoy sex with their own sex, and with the opposite sex, or even with both at the same time!

A Love Story

Back in the old days Hollywood, amongst other things, made love stories – some were good, some were disappointing, but the basic premise remained the same. We start with boy meets girl: they are not sure whether they really are in love and there are problems. Nonetheless they continue to see each other. They go out dancing – cue sequences in night clubs with lots of

¹ I touched on this argument in my introduction to *City Without Baseball*.

² Karl Maria Kertbeny

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colour and spectacular lighting; or they sing to each other: 'It's very clear, our love is here to stay'; or they go on holiday together; or there are lyrical sequences where inviting scenery of great beauty has them running through it until they collapse onto a conveniently placed grassy bank and kiss. They might even find that they share a love for the operas of Donizetti! Whichever. But by this time they have discovered that they really are in love. In last minute revelations, plot twists etc all the problems are overcome and they get married in fabulous gowns – that's the women – have a big party and all live happily ever after. *Utopians* follows much the same trajectory, though it must be confessed that the old Hollywood films did not tend to have lots of naked men running about all over the place, nor did they tend to have masturbation scenes, nor did they tend to conclude with mixed sex foursomes!

The Opening Shot

The opening shot of the movie is a single take which runs under the titles and which starts off on a dimly lit corridor. Masked figures lurk in the gloom. Hins, our protagonist, appears at the end of the corridor and walks towards the camera, he's naked. He passes the camera which turns and follows him into some sort of cell and finds him spread eagled against a cross, the religious imagery is inescapable. The camera circles and finds a masked but otherwise naked young woman who comes in, ties him to the cross, and sets about stimulating him, first with feathers then with a whip. He thrashes about in agony – or is it pleasure? The camera circles again, losing her but now finding a naked man in the doorway, also masked. He pays Hins similar but more vigorous attention and he thrashes about even more. Finally there's an abrupt cut and we find him waking up in bed, he's been dreaming. It's an extraordinary shot, the circling camera means that it's very difficult to work out its geography, which in its turn means that it continues to surprise you – it is only on re-viewing that we may notice a curtain from behind which the woman appears. And at another level, it sums up the movie. He dreams of naked women; he dreams of naked men. Whom does he prefer, or is that a redundant question?

And in passing it's beautifully lit too – freeze frame it and you discover how beautifully the lighting sculpts the bodies. And in a way bodies is the point. Writing about his previous films I have always maintained that, for all that he had lots of beautiful naked men – and the occasional woman – in them, they were not so much about sex as they were about love. But it is difficult to sustain that reading here. Make no mistake, though it touches on love, basically this film is about sex.

Exposition

It is morning. Hins is woken by a phone-call from his girlfriend, Joey, and tells her he hasn't been sleeping too well. She blames the book he's reading, it's insane. The camera pans to find the book on his bedside table – it's Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*. Generally regarded as autobiographical, it is amongst other things a pretty explicit account of Mishima's own sexual history, which in the process rather mirrors Hins' own trajectory through the film. No wonder Hins dreams of masks as he too works out where he is going with his own sexuality. He leaves for college, his mother telling him to bring Joey home for supper: it's the anniversary of his father's death – they have a little shrine set up in their apartment. We gather that he was a seaman and a bit later on Hins will tell her that he dreams of him. But when he suggests that he should go to sea like his father she jumps down his throat. Once at college he finds Joey and relays his mother's invitation to supper, but she's not happy about religious shrines. As we shall discover, she's a Roman Catholic. He tells her she's got to come or his mother will think they've broken up, but she tells him that they have: he's more in love with 'that Japanese author' than he is with her.

They have a guest lecturer, Professor Antonio Ming, who is going to talk about ancient Greek culture and Utopian thought – it's a cultural studies course. A slice of polemic follows as he

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puts a slide up of two naked men embracing. He reveals that he is gay and questions the audience, are any of them gay etc. No-one will 'confess', though some of them, Hins among them, are prepared to reveal that they do know gay people. Joey looks at him in alarm. Ming expounds on the contribution that the Greek philosophers, Socrates et al, have made to our modern ideas of freedom and democracy, and tells them that as well as having wives they all had boyfriends. Joey criticises him for promoting ideas that are contrary to the beliefs of some of the students. Homosexuality is a sin. And when Ming ascertains that she is a Roman Catholic he quotes the Pope back at her: 'If a gay person seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge them?' but Joey is still not happy and leaves.

Interlude 1 A Touch of Nudity

There follows what I have characterised as an interlude as the class head into a café, collecting their food and sitting chatting or reading. Hins sits on his own. The camera starts circling – it's going to be another single take, and while the camera has its back to the rest of the room everyone has taken off their clothes so that when the camera gets back to them there they are, quite naked, but still chatting away. A further circle of the camera and they are back again fully clothed. In the making of the actors gleefully describe struggling in and out of their clothes while the camera has its back to them! Hins has remained clothed throughout: unlike the others he cannot reveal himself.

Man Meets Boy and they Discover that they have Shared Interests, but there are Problems

Hins visits the professor, wishing to apologise for his girlfriend's impoliteness but Ming reprimands him, no one person should apologise for another person's misbehaviour. Hins has the Mishima with him and they start discussing that, why did Mishima and Socrates both commit suicide? Because, Ming suggests, they felt that they couldn't live 'poetic' lives in this world – i.e they cared only about God's appraisal, not that of the secular world. Hins tells Ming that, although he is not gay, he dreams about men; and that he is fascinated by Mishima's interest in his own body and he wants to learn more about that aspect of himself. The relationship develops when Ming asks him his name: Hins Gao, which can be translated as brightness and brilliance. We will be a good match (said in unison). The 'problem' is, of course, that Hins has a girlfriend, and 'isn't gay'. Back at home Hins' mother asks about Joey: he tells her their relationship is a bit rocky at the moment, and taking up the theme of the previous scene she tells him that he must be honest. If he lies he will have to cover up for the rest of his life – a mantra that occurs several times in the course of the film – and by implication he too will not have lived a fulfilled life. Hins now asks his mother if she has anything from her past that she has not told him: a narrative strand that will return at the end of the film as we discover that she too has a lie that she has been living with for most of her life.

The Other Woman

We cut to discover that Hins works in a bar. A new character, Swan, comes in, chats up a customer, and when he leaves she turns her attention to Hins, and we have the beginnings of some sort of relationship? We cut to Joey on the walkway that leads to Ming's rooms, and in another of the those single take circling shots, Joey watches as Ming and Hins come out. They fail to see her. A bit of horseplay and the two of them run off chasing each other – they are already beginning to bond. The circling camera returns to Joey who's been watching all this and she turns and walks away, the camera watching until she is lost in the distant crowd. There is plaintive accompanying piano music and in a nice segue we discover that it is Joey who is playing it. Swan enters, guesses that Joey is Joey, introduces herself as the substitute teacher, and Joey, obviously reflecting on what she has just witnessed, sings about love fading, and goes on to ask Swan which she would rather, that her rival in love be the same sex as her or the

opposite sex. Swan plumps for the opposite sex – another woman would be more shameful. Strange logic says Joey, but Swan tells her that if you apply normal logic to abnormal matters you may never get an answer. And as we shall discover it is no accident that Swan, whom we have just seen chatting up Hins, is now befriending Joey.

In passing, the segue from the previous scene completely breaks the time line – the accompanying piano music is continuous as we move from one scene to the next but in other respects a considerable amount of time must have passed to get Joey from the walkway to the music room. Thematically, however, the link is tight because the ensuing conversation that Joey has with Swan arises precisely because of what she has just seen on the walkway.

The next sequence finds Hins entering Ming's rooms and is surprised, as are we, to find Swan there tidying his books: 'are you looking for Antonio?' the use of his first name suggesting a closer relationship with Ming than we might have expected, and she then asks Hins if he is the Mishima boy. He is to discover that Ming has mentioned him and Swan teases him about having feelings for him, as indeed does she. But what about Hins' girlfriend she asks. He tells her that he would never lie to her, but she tells him that sexual attraction and love can take many forms and be expressed in many ways, and asks him what's wrong with bisexuality: isn't that the Utopian way to live? And as if to prove her point she cosies up to him on the sofa and kisses him, and repeating his mother's mantra tells him that all he needs to do is to be true to himself, that once he's lied he can never again say that he is not a liar. Ming returns and Swan leaves, Hins telling Ming that he finds Swan very attractive. Ming invites him to join him the following Sunday: he will broaden his horizons.

Inviting Scenery – Hins on a Learning Curve

And join him he does, but only to find he's on a boat trip with lots of naked men, embracing, massaging, swimming: inviting scenery indeed, but Hins buries himself in the cabin in a book. He didn't realise it would all be so 'bold'. Ming arrives with Swan and another girl and they relax in the cabin. Up on the deck photos are being taken, and Hins finally emerges from the cabin. They get his clothes off him and he is forced to join in. Inside Joey rings on his cell phone, but Ming doesn't pass it out to him, Joey is to be excluded at this point. Hins dives into the sea. Cross fade and we are into another, un-signalled, dream sequence as we watch Hins waking up on the shore in the dark with the water lapping around him. Scud's ever circling camera finds Ming having sex with another guy and the opening dream sequence of the film is echoed as we, and Hins, watch Ming's face, and again we wonder whether it is expressing agony or ecstasy. The scenario changes as Ming and his companion re-enact the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and Hins watches as the arrows pierce Ming's legs and chest; and the scene ends as Ming lifts up his arm and the three puncture wounds are lined up in his armpit and Hins finds them lined up under *his* armpit too. The identification is complete.

The Other Man

Cut to the 'real' world and Hins is visiting Joey – they are planning to work. When he gets there, however, he finds a naked man in her rooms, but Joey tells him he's just a friend. Hins challenges her but she asks him why he should care, he's a faggot, would he like to be introduced? In response he starts making violent love to her and she responds, stopping him only when he wants to have full sex with her: God won't allow it, they're not married. Shouting he challenges her: 'Is there anything your god actually allows?' Quite so. He leaves and back home, frustrated, lying back on the bed with everything on display, he masturbates, the camera watching him dispassionately until he comes – the scene is not simulated! – as I say, this is not your typical Hollywood romance!

In these two scenes our view of Joey may well have changed. She seems to have no problem with naked men disporting themselves all over the place, and is quite prepared to engage in

sexual activity so long as it doesn't lead to full penetration. Sex is not the problem, God is. What she does want, however, as we shall see in the next scene but one when she visits Ming, is exclusivity. She wants Ming to leave Hins alone, wants to insist that he is not gay, that they have been together for three years, and re-iterates that homosexuality is a sin. Ming points out that Hins sought him out, not the other way around, finds various quotes from the bible to refute Joey's arguments, points out that alongside heterosexuality God invented homosexuality, etc. But, he asks, why should Hins not love both of them at the same time. It is quite possible to love two people at the same time. Perhaps, as well as loving Hins, she could love him at the same time, a suggestion that, not surprisingly at this point in the story, she rejects out of hand. They may be at loggerheads but at the end of the scene they play Beethoven's *Fur Elise* together, Ming pointing out that Beethoven wrote it for a 17 yr old girl with whom he had fallen in love, a relationship that was disapproved of at the time. They continue to play and they end up smiling at each other – Joey and Ming, that is, not Beethoven and Elise, although they probably did too!

Cut to Hins in the bar – the phone goes but he doesn't answer, and cross cutting shows us that it is Ming trying to get hold of him. Swan comes in and Hins talks about wanting to learn more about himself, but is fearful that he will change more than he wants to in the process. Things might be easier if Ming was a girl. Between the lines it seems pretty clear that he fears that he will become gay, and he doesn't want to. Swan starts telling him about Alcibiades, who was a favourite of Socrates, but we don't quite discover what her point is so I looked him up³ and discovered that he too didn't quite know which side he was on, fighting first for the Athenians against the Spartans, and then changing sides and fighting for the Spartans against the Athenians.

The Lyrical Sequence: They Go On Holiday Together

Hins and Ming go on holiday together, to Bangkok, staying at a swish hotel, and Hins goes off to find the gym. Once he's gone Ming invites 'friends' up to his room, friends who turn out to be 6 delectable naked youths (more scenery!) who wait upon him, bringing him coffee, etc. Hins comes back and finds them hiding in cupboards etc. Ming pays them off, and Hins sulks, telling Ming that he intended that he, Hins, should catch them at it. Does Ming want him himself? Yes he does, it would enable him, or even both of them, to live a more 'poetic' lives. Hins strips off his shirt in frustration and throws it over the balcony, and slams out of the door, but we cut to the now reconciled couple on a river boat going sightseeing. They pass a spectacular temple, the Temple of Dawn, which is featured in Mishima's book of the same name, and Hins is delighted, so delighted indeed that he finally kisses Ming. They next take a ride in a huge Ferris wheel, a well-known tourist attraction and find themselves discussing re-incarnation – this is a Scud film after all. They quote a character from yet another Mishima novel⁴ who has a dream about the great wheel of Samsara, the turning wheel symbolising Buddhist notions of birth, death, and rebirth, and to illustrate the point Scud has a shot of the same said Buddhist deities in the heavens turning the same said wheel. They visit the gym, swim in the pool on the roof, and finally make love. As I say, the whole holiday has been a lyrical sequence which has culminated in love making.

Breaking The Law & The Last Minute Plot Twist

In line with his determination never to lie to her, Joey has to be told and Hins phones her to tell her that he has slept with Ming. Swan visits her but she is inconsolable and together they watch a play that dramatizes the situation, and Joey, in voiceover, tells us that she has just done

³ On Wikipedia of course!

⁴ A reference to a character in Mishima's novel, *Runaway Horses* – I had to do a fair bit of searching to chase this one down!

something bad – the ‘least poetic thing possible’ and there’s a cut to a newspaper headline about the relationship between Hins and his professor – we must presume that Joey has alerted the press – and as I indicated at the start of this article, they have, both of them, broken the law, Hins because he is not old enough to have gay sex, and Ming because he has had sex with someone who is underage. And we cut to the both of them in prison. Up until this point in the movie we have had a, predominately psychological, account of our central character’s developing self-knowledge as he works out how to deal with his conflicted feelings and relationships, but at this point there is something of a change in genre as we move from the internal psychological to the external legal, and by implication, we are back to the polemical, and the narrative becomes more straightforward, which is not to say that Scud doesn’t have any further directorial flourishes in his repertoire, because he does.

So A Quick Synopsis

So, a quick synopsis. As I say they are both in prison. In passing Hins dreams of his father, and as a small boy, watches him walk into the sea. It would seem that he committed suicide. No wonder his mother didn’t want him to follow in his father’s footsteps. Hins is released on bail, Joey and Swan have bailed him out. There’s a reconciliation moment as Hins embraces Joey in thanks and it looks like their relationship is back on track. In polemical mode all three discuss the law, comparing the British age of consent, 16, with that of Hong Kong, 21. If only Hins was a year older, etc., etc. And of course in a last minute plot twist we discover that he *is* a year older as, in a courtroom scene with flashbacks in illustration, his mother tells his story: that back in the past her best friend had been about to commit suicide and had begged her to look after her 10 month old baby, Hins himself. Which she did, and she even has the original birth certificate to prove her story if needs be: and in any case her husband has fortuitously been away at sea for ages which means that she is able to pass the child off as his. But then she has to have a second birth certificate to prove that. Hins and Ming are exonerated, and even Hins’ mother who, by creating a second birth certificate, has herself committed a crime, ends up also being released, a fact that we discover from a newspaper headline being read and discussed by a couple of subsidiary characters. Finally we discover that Ming and Swan are actually man and wife. In celebration the four major characters get together for a great sex scene!

We Conclude With Hins’ Final Self-Realisation

In the course of all of this Hins has come round to Ming & Swan’s way of thinking, telling his mother that, though he and Joey are back together again, he is also having an affair with his teacher, who’s a man, echoing Ming and Swan as he tells her that there are many types of love and that, if you love them differently, it’s quite possible to love two people at the same time. As for the gay story, his mother knows about such relationships from her reading and tells him only to love himself and be respectable. She’s not going to worry about it anymore. She does, however, have a photograph of Hins’ biological parents, one of whom turns out to be, as another quick cutaway informs us, the very policeman who had been haranguing them about breaking the law! Hins’ himself recognises him, but only smiles at the irony, telling his mother that he’s not interested. The final scene finds Hins and Joey preparing a meal for the four of them in the course of which they discover that Ming and Swan have been married for 10 years and that they are looking for new excitement and the feel of young flesh. They invite Hins and Joey to join their ‘Utopia of love and lust’. Hins is more than happy to but Joey is a bit more hesitant but finally she joins in, from which we may realise that she too has come round to their way of thinking.⁵ As for Hins’ psychological journey, if you’ve read any of my other accounts of Scud’s films you will know that I have headed them up with a quote from Tom Robbins’ novel,

⁵ I’m not going to describe the scene – if you want to enjoy it, watch the film!

'Even Cowgirls Get the Blues': Let Us Live For The Beauty Of Our Own Reality. That's because I have always thought that that's the aspiration of all his characters even if they don't always get there. Here it could be the very title of the film since the central character does indeed get to live for the beauty of his own reality, that utopia of lust and love that we see in the final scene.

The Making Of

Finally a look at how Scud films it all, how he makes meaning through the medium of film, in a number of places in a totally original manner. There are many sequences in the film that could present one with lots of material that would repay substantial analysis, but I'm going to look at just one shot. It comes from the final act of the film, from the point at which the film starts to concentrate on the telling of events rather than the explorations of psychology and relationships. Ming and Hins have been arrested and are being interrogated by the police. A conventional telling would take place in two separate rooms, fully lit, well established as interview rooms, always with a table between the policeman and the accused, with Hins in one of them and Ming in the other, possibly shown sequentially, possibly cross-cutting between the two. Here the interrogations are filmed in just one minimally furnished room. We see a clock on the wall at the beginning of the shot which then pans down to find a camera which we assume is filming the interview(s). Otherwise the lighting is totally grey – we cannot even see the wall. It is an anonymous space, a purely cinematic space, a metaphysical space if you will. The policeman and the accused are sitting, though we can't even see the chairs that they are sitting on. The camera comes to rest on the policeman who starts to interrogate Hins whom we only see when the camera pans across to him, leaving the policeman out of the shot, and it is only at this point in the film that we discover what Hins' crime is, that he is underage. The camera moves back and forth between the two of them twice, but the third time, when it is back on the policeman, the nature of the accusation seems to change, and when the camera pans back Ming has taken Hins' place and we discover that his crime is that he has slept with an underage boy. The shot has informed us about the crimes, plural, that the two of them have committed, but by shooting this in an unexpected way in a single take in a single space Scud has encouraged us to think about what we have just seen: showing us visually the ways in which the two crimes are interlinked and indeed that they are essentially the same crime, and perhaps in the same process also encouraging us to think more widely about the crime itself and about whether it should even be a crime in the first place. Or maybe he just thought it looked good! Which it does.

END Scud loves to end his movies with shots of the all-embracing sea, so at the end we find our four major characters, happily naked of course, sitting at a glass table by the sea playing Mah Jong, talking about what they are going to do next.

POSTSCRIPT And after the end, a postscript, and we're back in the lecture theatre, but now Hins is the teacher spreading the word, telling the students that an unexamined life is not worth living and asking them if any of them are gay, and this time someone does put their hand up and even takes a bow. Things are moving on.