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The City's Ins and Outs: Queer Locations on Screen

In her study of media depictions of Brandon Teena's murder in Falls City, Nebraska, Judith Halberstam critically analyzes the "metronormative" tendency in narratives about sexual minorities (2005). In such accounts, the queer subject only comes to be recognized as such through his/her spatial movement from a rural environment or small town to the metropolitan city, without which s/he risks perpetual repression at best and violent destruction at worst. Yet, when we turn away from North America and towards Asian media culture, the picture looks somewhat different. Even though visible queer spaces are clearly possible only in metropolitan cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, Bangkok, or Manila, these cities do not serve as the exclusive settings for imaginary queerscapes. In Chinese-language cinema in particular, there are celebratory or nostalgic portrayals of rural and small town queer sexual experiences on the one hand, and critiques or questionings of urban queer lives on the other. Through a study of films from Sinophone contexts, I will explore the global narrative of LGBT liberation and its metronormative tendency, the (relatively) local queer sexual culture emerging in Chinese-language cinema, and the questions these raise for our understanding of cities, queer experiences, and Asian screen culture.