

SOUND *and* VISION

Merry Fucking Christmas: The Insistence of Visibility in Sean Baker's *Tangerine*



When Ashley and I decided to put together this column, films started flooding my thoughts. I have hundreds of favorite films. Seriously. *Tangerine* is just one. But, *Tangerine* embodies the spirit of this series better than most. This is Sound and Vision, so I had to pick something with the most explosive of aesthetics. Cinema is a visual medium, after all. If you just want a story, read one.





I'm not saying plot is unimportant, but I'm personally more drawn to a film if I'm captivated by the sensory elements first. Too many writers, too many viewers in general are focused on the narrative. Why should I care what's happening if I don't like the way it looks? Or sounds? Why would I invest my attention if I don't feel something? Sean Baker's *Tangerine* was a life-changing display of a filmmaker using a visual and sonic aesthetic to both add substance and echo the story. As important as the message is here, it's the cinematic qualities that give it life.



A (Christmas) day in the life of two transgender sex workers, Baker's film explores the complex relationship between best friends Sin-dee and Alexandra. Set entirely over the course of one Christmas Eve Day, the film opens with a celebration completely irrespective of holiday cheer: Sin-dee's first day out after thirty days in jail. The two share a vanilla frosted donut (with sprinkles), but the celebration quickly turns sour, as Alexandra accidentally reveals that Sin-dee's boyfriend (their pimp) cheated during her incarceration. The film instantly spirals into a sure-fire search for Chester (boyfriend/pimp) with Sin-dee immediately breaking her never-actually-sincere promise to Alexandra: "no drama".

While the anything-goes Black comedy narrative anchors the film, the sounds and visual elements emphasize the story's unpredictability and chaotic ebbs and flows. Reading other pieces on this film, it occurred to me that this most enveloping element is also one of the film's least discussed. The first time I watched *Tangerine*, I almost turned it off within the first minute. I had smoked some pot that was probably too strong and caught maybe five words of the first fifty spoken. From the opening "merry Christmas Eve, bitch," the film thrusts you into its inflated world with even less warning than Sin-dee's bad news. Eventually, you settle into the story, but the aesthetic never loses steam.

Regarding the movie's vibrant visual pulse, I don't know where to begin. It's all shot on an iPhone (well, three, to be exact), one of the first film's to do so, which lends itself to the highly documentary feel of the film. The portability of the devices creates an intimacy that so easily allows for poetic faith.



Then there's the color. Oh, the color. I'd like to spend a few days in a world that looked like this. Highly-saturated sunlit images of Santa Monica Blvd are filtered through digital grain, suddenly erupting into wordless follow shots soundtracked by brooding synthesizers. Sean Baker always wears his foreign arthouse influences on his sleeve, but the film's visual aesthetic falls equally in line with such neon-soaked Stateside cuts as *Spring Breakers* and *Zola*, other recent indies whose images and sound design say as much about the characters as they do the world they comprise. Explosive sound and color reflect feelings of outsiders in an intolerant world.

Subdued, almost still shots of Christmas carols, car wash blowjobs and clouds of crack smoke (there's actually only one instance of each, but it reads better if they're plural) allow the viewer a momentary reprieve similar to what the characters onscreen are trying to achieve.

When faced with compiling a soundtrack of outside songs for a film with an already low budget, Baker (I assume, I couldn't find a credited music supervisor) turned to SoundCloud, even going so far as to include all the artists' usernames and social media accounts in the film's end credits.

Two select tracks by White Night Ghosts evoke a similarly propulsive atmosphere to Manual's "Keep Coming Back" (the opening song in Baker's previous film *Starlet*), albeit far more menacing. A woman is dragged through the street by her hair...Alexandra and Sin-Dee become temporarily separated.

Conversely, the use of Federico Cerruti's "The Dream of the Unknown Visitor" during a beautiful moment of reconciliation via makeover emphasizes the dreamlike nature of a film whose fantasy is often imposing.

A breathtaking piece of contemporary classical music, it's the type of composition that finds a sort of rebirth in being paired with an image, elevating the rebirth of these characters' relationship in the process.



Plenty of writers have been quick to point out the power of still, quiet moments in a world this fast and loud. But few discuss them in visual terms.

The secondary plot of *Tangerine* revolves around Razmik, a taxi driver who ends up being a regular john. Razmik going down on Alexandra in a car wash is the most breathtaking moment in the film. The static shot and wave of color end up being far more striking than the public fellatio being performed. It should be noted that this scenario was taken directly from co-lead Mya Taylor's actual experiences.

I'd now like to quote the best essay I read on *Tangerine*, Caleb Gardner's "Merry Christmas Eve, Bitch" (on which the title of this is based, though they are both lines in the movie).

The ways in which Taylor and Rodriguez bring their own experiences as sex workers into their roles adds levity into a film that could have gone into 'misery porn' like so many indies before it. Most trans films even now still struggle with the representation question of how to do positive trans portrayals on-screen without whitewashing and smoothing out certain nuances that make film characters memorable in the first place - something of which Tangerine admirably refuses to even dip into.



Though, again, none of this is performative. Sean Baker is a true champion of the underground, and although it is a fiction film, many of the encounters between the women and their clients are based on stories and experiences of the actors themselves.

That's what this film is ultimately about. Yes, it's about friendship. Yes, it's about sex work. Yes, it's about the trans experience. But more than anything, at least to me, it's about itself. Using extreme, in-your-face, immersive techniques to show the story of characters who just need to be seen as themselves, *Tangerine* celebrates the irreplaceable, essential art of filmmaking. It's a beautiful story, but the success of Baker's filmmaking is the way he tells it. The aesthetic isn't just a point of engagement, it's a multifaceted blend of symbolic storytelling. And, as an accessible, exciting experience, *Tangerine* emphasizes the truth of these characters, not the otherness. It's a perfect example of how, even in the most trying times, cinema's universal language continues to bring us together. A true modern classic.