Proceedings of the Whither the Orient:

Asians in Asian and Non-Asian Cinema Conference

Kimdajeung Convention Center
Gwangju, Korea
28-29 October 2006

Edited by Joel David

Digital Edition
Copyright 2019 by Amauteurish Publishing
Editorial material © 2019 by Joel David
Individual articles © 2019 by the Individual Authors
All Rights Reserved
ISBN xxx-xxx-xxxxx-x-x

Published by Amauteurish Publishing
Lot 17 Blk 2 Walnut St.
West Fairview Park Subd.
Quezon City 1118
Philippines

Print Edition (OOP)
Published 2006 by the Asia Culture Forum
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by the Editor .................................................................................................................. V

Keynote Lecture 1: The Orient Within

City Branding and Cinema: The Case of Hong Kong
Laikwan Pang (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) ............................................................ 1

Session 1: Nations in Transition

The Portrayal of Multiculturalism in Malaysian National Cinema:
A Case Study of Yasmin Ahmad’s Sepet
Beh Chun Chee (University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia) ................................................ 25

Imitation and Indigenization in Filipino Melodramas of the 1950s
Jovenal D. Velasco (University of the Philippines Film Institute) ........................................... 35

Rewriting the Martial Arts Movie in the Global Era:
A Study of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
Jing Yang (Hong Kong University) ............................................................................................. 47

Cinema and Nationalism: The Case of Singapore
Tan See Kam (University of Macau) and Jeremy Fernando (Nanyang Technological University) ........................................................................................................................................ 57

Session 2: Industry Studies

Consumption and Reception of Asian Films by Filipino Viewers:
An Exploratory Study
Violeda A. Umali (College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines) . 83

The Turn to Digital: Revival of Film Culture in the Philippines
Ramil de Jesus (Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Philippines) .................................................... 96

Film Preservation and Promotion by Public Aid Mechanism:
Asian Lessons from the European Union Model
Luo Qing (Communication University of China) ........................................................................ 106

ACF Travel Grant co-winner for Best Graduate Student Paper:
Market Reforms, Nationalism, and War Films: A Case for Historical Continuities
Kishore Budha (University of Leeds) ....................................................................................... 122

Session 3: Auteurs and their Legacies
In the Mood for Love: Romance as Allegory
Giorgio Biancorosso (The University of Hong Kong) ............................................. 140

ACF Travel Grant co-winner for Best Graduate Student Paper:
Prefiguring the Future:
Tezuka Osamu’s Adult Animation and its Influence on Later Animation in Japan
Gan Sheuo Hui (Kyoto University) ............................................................................. 142

Haan (Hatred), Han (Koreanness), and the Deleuzian Line of Flight
in the Films of Hur Jin-ho
June Lam Pui-wah (The University of Hong Kong) .................................................. 154

Imitation, Indigenization, Assimilation? No, Globalization!: The Cinema of Bobby Suarez
Tilman Baumgärtel (University of the Philippines Film Institute) ............................ 160

Keynote Lecture 2: The Orient Without

Perturbing Transnationalism: Between Japanese and “Asian” Cinemas
Jonathan M. Hall (University of California Irvine) .................................................... 184

Session 4: Sex and Gender in Asia

“Feminized” Heroes and “Masculinized” Heroines:
Changing Gender Roles in Contemporary Philippine Cinema?
Jovenal D. Velasco (University of the Philippines Film Institute) ............................ 186

Indochine and the Dynamics of Gender
Joel David (Hallym University, Korea) ...................................................................... 198

ACF Travel Grant co-winner for Best Graduate Student Paper:
The Carnal Hand and Fetishism in Wong Kar-wai’s The Hand
Nicholas Y.B. Wong (The University of Hong Kong) ............................................. 219

Articulating Alienation: 3-Iron, Gender, and (Post)modernity
Ho Ka Hang Jason (The University of Hong Kong) ............................................... 232

Session 5: Identity Crises

ACF Travel Grant runner-up for Best Faculty Paper:
“I Grew Up in a Colonial Environment”: A Study of Tsui Hark’s Early Films
Tan See Kam (University of Macau) ........................................................................ 240

Goodbye America: Postcoloniality, Feminism, Ethnicity, and Race
Christine Carlos (University of the Philippines Film Institute) ........................... 263
The Culture of Piracy in the Philippines  
Tilman Baumgärtel (University of the Philippines Film Institute) 298

The East is (Mis)Red: Transcultural Misperceptions in Selected North American Scholarship on Hong Kong Cinema  
Sean M. Tierney (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) 319

Session 6: Memory, Despair, Transcendence

ACF Travel Grant winner for Best Faculty Paper: Transnational Tamil Cinema as a Foucauldian Heterotopia: Diasporic Narratives, Identities, and Malaysian Indians  
Gopalan Ravindran (Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, India) 334

The Presence of the Returnee in Contemporary Philippine Cinema  
Eduardo Lejano, Jr. (University of the Philippines Film Institute) 363

Postcolonial Traces in Philippine Experimental Film Practice  
Anne Marie de Guzman (University of the Philippines Film Institute) 375

“Small-fry”: Suburban Despair and Redemptive Space in Recent Asian-Australian Cinema  
Helen Grace (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) 385

About the Editor 395
Foreword

The turn of the current millennium marked the arrival of modernity in many countries in Asia. Part of this gift package from the West was cinema. By the time film observers celebrated the first centennial of the medium, its history was inescapably linked with the contributions of the peoples of Asia – from the record-setting productions of India, the festival prizewinners of East Asia, the impact of Hong Kong practitioners on Hollywood, the countless art-house releases from the entire continent...the list could fill up a whole book in any multi-volume history of cinema.

Just as substantial (for better and worse) is the depiction of Asians in non-Asian films, primarily from the West. In fact, before Asians were able to make their presence felt in global cinema, they were already being represented onscreen in varying degrees of accuracy, from clever comics like Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, through seductive Dragon Lady temptresses and insidious “yellow-peril” masterminds (including the other “Charlie” of the Vietnam War films), to the assimilable characters of the model-minority depictions in US popular culture.

These issues of representations and self-representations constituted the concerns of “Whither the Orient,” a conference sponsored by Asia’s Future Initiative and Asia Culture Academy in coordination with the Institute for Communication Arts & Technology, Hallym University. The event was held in the city of Gwangju, Korea, on October 28-29, 2006, as part of the larger event titled Asia Culture Forum (October 26-30). “Whither the Orient” had aimed to provide a healthy and open forum for academicians and professionals with shared interests to meet and interact with each other and initiate meaningful dialogs that would continue far into the future. With the enthusiastic participation of the conference’s keynote speakers, paper readers, panel chairs and discussants, and staff members, the over-all experience was always thoroughly exhausting, but never short of memorable.

Joel David, Ph.D.
Conference Coordinator & Proceedings Editor
Keynote Lecture 1
THE ORIENT WITHIN

City Branding and Cinema: The Case of Hong Kong

Laikwan Pang
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

In this paper¹ I analyze how cinema has become a part of the knowledge economy through globalization discourses like city branding and creative industries. This situation is most obvious in the case of Hong Kong, whose internationally known cinema is rapidly on its decline and desperately looking for new financial injections. In the last few years the Hong Kong SAR government has been trying hard to catch up with other Common Wealth and adjacent Asian countries to develop its creative industries, with the aim to wean the economy off its heavy dependence on the financial sector, which is easily toppled by even minor global financial ebbs and flows. Cinema becomes an essential component in the new plan of economizing culture. This paper examines how cinema is solicited to promote city branding by promoting the city's tourism on the one hand and the city as a regional media center on the other hand. The result is the emptying out of the actual cultural signification and productions, making the movies not as an end in themselves but as a means to secure other kinds of capital, therefore drastically redefining the cultural meanings of Hong Kong cinema.

¹ A conference paper draft; not to be circulated. A part of this paper is derived and expanded from Laikwan Pang’s “Jackie Chan, Tourism, and the Performing Agency,” in Hong Kong Film, Hollywood, and the New Global Cinema, ed. Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
Gerard Wigmans’ overview of the urban policy in Rotterdam in the last three decades might help us begin our discussions of city branding. He begins his paper in this way:

A new approach to city planning in the inner city of Rotterdam was introduced in 1974. This strategy was based on a coalition between organizations of local residents and local authorities, known as “building for the neighborhood”... In this participation model there was a strong commitment between the citizens of the city and the urban policy based on social democracy. Solidarity and equality of opportunities were expressed in the statement of “the city as a collective arrangement for living” which had to be equally accessible for every citizen. However, in doing so, economic activities were driven out of the districts.²

The last statement of the above quote is the key problem Wigmans deals with in his study, and the beautiful egalitarian picture he draws in the previous sentences is precisely the source of the problem. Wigmans demonstrates that a corrective policy change was resurrected in the late 1980s, which was able to promote an economic and cultural revitalization in Rotterdam. According to Wigman, the previous policy based on social democracy only engendered a parochialism, which fortunately had been corrected by a cosmopolitan and globally-minded economy. Wigman tries to demonstrate in his case study a direct relationship between economy and culture: only a certain culture would lead to a flourishing economy, and this global metropolitan culture can be compartmentalized and summarized thus: “[t]he availability of an attractive housing environment and cultural climate, a complete and varied package of facilities, adequate services, and good accessibility.”³ Culture is understood only in two ways related to capitals: a culture which can attract visitors and consumers – a comfortable lifestyle, and a culture which can attract investments and produce profits – the development of leisure and entertainment businesses. This paper is devoted to study these two aspects of the city branding discourse.

This connection between culture and economy is particularly prominent in recent studies and policy related to the city, as the current new economy is increasingly organized around global cities. The internet has attained a partial overcoming of geographical boundaries, and it promotes a new kind of international economy based on the capital and commodity flows among global cities. The economic strength of these global cities, contrasted to traditional industrial cities, rests mainly on “facilitation” instead of “production.”⁴ As our global economy has become an economy of affect and persuasion, the discourse of global city is inevitably linked to its own branding. As

³ Wigmans, “Contingent Governance,” 208.
Wigmans summarizes: “The city’s main task was to show itself off, to develop as an attractive area, a place worth visiting, worth living in, worth investing in.” Economy and culture most ideally converge in these global cities, whose culture is one of a performance, a performance to lure investment. To put it in another way, culture can only be seen as an instrument of tourism, to attract both short-term visitors as consumers and long-term visitors as investors.

Under the discourse of city branding, a city’s culture, therefore, has to be understood in radically different ways. Culture is no longer a natural manifestation of the collective taste and values of a given people. The 1970s Rotterdam policies which emphasize “the city as a collective arrangement for living,” according to Wigmans and the kind of city branding discourse his work represents, only deteriorated the city’s economy. Simply speaking, culture cannot exist on its own as ordinary reflection of the ways the people live, but it must be engineered and monitored, with specific purposes in promoting economic opportunities of the city in general.

The Recent Decline of Hong Kong Cinema

With the drastic and the continuous drop of the number of annual production, the demise of the commercial Hong Kong cinema is evident to all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Numbers of Chinese Films Screened in Hong Kong</th>
<th>Box-Office Revenues of Chinese Films (in HK$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>383 millions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>476 millions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>350 millions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>366 millions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>383 millions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>284 millions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: C2, Ming Pao Daily, September 26, 2006)

The rise of other film industries in Korea, Thailand, and even Singapore directly challenges the domination of Hong Kong cinema in the region, while the failure of Hong Kong filmmakers to come up with new ideas as well as new talents also makes Hong Kong films less and less attractive. But preceding the rapid downfall of the number of productions, there was a clear decline in cinema attendance among Hong Kong people. Hong Kong’s average annual cinema admissions per person dropped from 11.05 in 1987, at which point it was one of the highest in the world, to 4.29 in 1997 – a drop much sharper than most other countries experienced during the same period.

---

5 Wigmans, “Contingent Governance,” 208.

clearly no longer a key entertainment form in local life. It is generally believed that the prime time of Hong Kong cinema has passed, and it might head toward the perpetual slump to which Taiwanese cinema is now condemned. Hong Kong might sporadically impress international film critics with eye-catching films, but it is no longer East Asia’s dream factory. In other words, the kind of popular cinema acclaimed by critics like David Bordwell is really disappearing, thus fulfilling Ackbar Abbas’s controversial prophecy of the demise of Hong Kong cinema in some sense: Hong Kong cinema may be dying, but not due to political causes.

However, current Hong Kong cinema is really not analogous to that of Taiwan: the city is still producing a steady stream of commercial films, although in much smaller numbers than it did in its prime. While annual film production peaked in the early 1990s – with 242 films in 1993 – its rapid decline has not yet substantially weakened Hong Kong’s role as regional film center. In 2000 Hong Kong’s film industry, with an annual output of 150 films, still ranked third in Asia, after India’s and Japan’s. In spite of the steady decline, Hong Kong still qualifies as a leading film production site of Chinese-language cinema. Most importantly, there are also a few commercial hits, like *Infernal Affairs* (dir. Andrew Lau and Mak Siu-fai, 2002), *Kung Fu Hustle* (dir. Stephen Chow, 2004), *Initial D* (dir. Andrew Lau and and Mak Siu-fai, 2005), and *Seven Swords* (dir. Tsui Hark, 2005), which have miraculously swept local and/or regional box offices. This has created a difficult situation for Hong Kong’s movie industry: many cultural workers and a considerable amount of new investment are attracted to a risky industry seeking commercial returns, but many disheartened workers and investors left the business quickly. In 2002, there were 1,730 establishments in the film sector, employing about 8,620 persons. Hong Kong still has a fairly intact film industry. But this industry is gradually merged with those in the neighborhood, as we continue to see

---


8 Abbas’s main argument is the 1980s and 1990s rise of a “New Hong Kong Cinema” trying to grasp a cultural identity on the verge of disappearing, which was largely a collective pessimist response to the city’s unification with the PRC. The notion of disappearance, according to Abbas, refers not to nonappearance but to misrecognition, misrepresentation, and replacement, so that under the pre-1997 postcolonial situation, Hong Kong and its cinema are never able to (re)present themselves accurately. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 7-8, 16-62.

9 Centre for Cultural Policy Research, the University of Hong Kong, *Baseline Study on Hong Kong’s Creative Industries* (Hong Kong: Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2003), 105.

10 By the late 1990s, the older studio system dominated by Shaws and Golden Harvest was rapidly replaced by the rise of smaller independent production houses and the giant China Star. See Zhong Baoxian, *Xianggang yingshiye bainian* (One Hundred Years of Hong Kong’s Film and Television Industries) (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 2004), 398-431. Entering the twenty-first century, China Star continues to be active in Hong Kong cinema, but many new companies, such as UFO and Best of Best, are not active anymore. Hong Kong film studios have very short life spans.

a heavy traffic of capitals and personnel among various Asian film industries. Hong Kong producers are particularly keen on exploring the mainland market as a light at the end of the tunnel. With its sheer size and population, China is likely to become a market larger than that of the U.S. or India; Hong Kong’s domestic market might either become negligible or just a part of China’s own.

This scenario shows that the importance of Hong Kong cinema to the city’s economy no longer resides on traditional industrial figures like the number of employments or the amount of actual revenues produced. This fits well with the overall tendency of knowledge economy, in which city branding is a part, which no longer views individual cultural industries as disparate, but they should form a larger conglomerate to generate cultural capitals in general. Under the discourses of knowledge economy and city branding, I think there are two ways to continue to understand the ongoing development of Hong Kong cinema. Firstly, the values of Hong Kong cinema are not calculated according to the actual profits generated but the abstract image built for Hong Kong. Secondly, Hong Kong cinema would continue to attract investments, but not necessarily in the form of the making of local Hong Kong films, but Hong Kong would be seen as a hub for capital exchange facilitating transnational media productions and consumptions. In other words, under the discourse of city branding, the well being of Hong Kong cinema does not matter to itself alone, but it is also related to the city’s international image and business environments. The connection between movies and city image is particularly obvious in Hong Kong cinema, as most people around the world know Hong Kong through its films. Hong Kong cinema is given the burden to save itself and the city by attracting, on the one hand, more tourists to visit the city, and on the other hand, more investments to itself. In the following, I focus on these two manifestations by examining the relation between Hong Kong cinema to the discourse of tourism and the discourse of creative industry.

**Hong Kong Cinema and Hong Kong Tourism**

Although Hong Kong has been a tourist city since the Second World War, tourism after 1997 is loaded with the political burdens of “postcolonializing” a “global” city. In Eastern Europe, the post-Soviet bloc nations strove to define their new identities by reconstructing their history and heritage, which is most blatantly revealed in their new tourism. Similarly, tourism helps legitimize Hong Kong’s postcolonial reforms carried out by the new government, which however must not be read as “nationalist.” Such emphasis on tourism for local/global development inevitably implies the self-objectification of Hong Kong. The fifteen-year transitional period (1982-97) as well as the 1989 June Fourth event has taught Hong Kong to subject its social and political future to the mercy of the international mass media, which is interested less in the

---

colony than the volatile diplomatic relationship between China and the West.\textsuperscript{13} Such external gaze can easily be internalized, so that the desire to meet curiosity of the global media has created a meticulous and omnipresent eye that serves as the most powerful self-defining self-surveilling apparatus. The 1997 media frenzy subjected Hong Kong to a tremendous amount of global attention, which also influences its post 1997 identity, in the sense that Hong Kong is meaningful to Hong Kong only in terms of its connotation to the “world tourist.”

Being the most widely accessible local products globally, Hong Kong cinema is a major component of the city’s image. Hong Kong has been known by the world largely through the fantastic images projected by its famous movie industry. Recognizing the great global success of \textit{Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon}, the local government is now even keener on using films to advertise Hong Kong. One of the biggest tourist attractions built in Hong Kong in recent years is the Star Avenue, an imitation of the Hollywood Avenue, featuring handprints of Hong Kong’s movie celebrities. In general, there are intrinsic links between tourism and popular cinema: excitement, escapism, and desire. John Urry in his seminal study of tourism argues that the logic of tourism often functions along the basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary, that tourists travel with the aim of seeking experiences in contrast to their everyday lives.\textsuperscript{14} Tourist practices therefore always involve the notion of “departure,” of a break (however circumscribed) with established routines and practices of their quotidian life. To many world movie-goers, Hong Kong films, as the quintessential entertainment cinema, satisfy precisely such desires; they are often considered as providing a “mood-altering, mind-bending, adrenaline-pumping rush.”\textsuperscript{15} There are hardly any other countries or places that present such an intrinsic link between cinema and tourism. Hollywood of course portrays a specific image of the United States to the world viewers, but this image is composed not only of appearances but also values, ideology, and ways of living. However, Hong Kong cinema is often identified as a cinema of spectacle instead of a narrative cinema, that Hong Kong filmmakers are criticized of not able to handle plot well.\textsuperscript{16} Hong Kong’s most accessible images to the West are fragmented ones comprised of actions and hysteria, instead of through coherent narratives where values are embedded.

The relation between Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kong tourism is most spectacularly shown in the stardom of Jackie Chan. As Hong Kong’s tourism campaigns change through the years, Jackie Chan continues to be the spokesperson of Hong Kong’s


\textsuperscript{16} Bordwell, \textit{Planet Hong Kong}, 178-79.
tourism, even in the midst of his adultery scandal in 1999 when the public urged Chan to step down from the position. Other than Chan’s own enthusiasm, the major reason of the government’s continual reliance on Chan to represent Hong Kong is obviously the sheer number and international popularity of his films, which make him arguably the most well-known Hong Kong person around the world. Most importantly, the image of Jackie Chan in his films has been so consistently positive, allowing himself and others to see him as a “safe” icon of the Hong Kong people.

Jackie Chan claims that he has not received a single penny from the government; he promotes Hong Kong out of his own good will. During the last few years, he has gone to different places for Hong Kong’s tourism internationally. He was most devoted to promote Hong Kong after SARS, and he also spoke for the Hong Kong International Airport as a stately tourist hub. In turn, people all over the world associate Jackie Chan with Hong Kong. The Discovery Channel invited Chan to be the host of a one-hour program for Hong Kong. He is also most conscious in intertwining the promotion of Hong Kong with the promotion of his new films. One of the two premieres of Rush Hour 2 was arranged on a flight of the United Airline from Los Angeles to Hong Kong, sponsored by Hong Kong Tourist Board. He also invited fans all over the world to Hong Kong for the premier of Highbinders, and through the event he advertised both the film and Hong Kong’s tourism. Most symbolically, he was conferred the title of Honorary Professor from the School of Hotel and Tourism Management of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2004. Jackie Chan as the widely accepted icon of Hong Kong’s tourism is irrefutable.

Many fans and scholars familiar with Jackie Chan’s works could easily trace the Hong Kong identity in his films. Many of his films in the 1980s and 1990s, like the famous Police Story series (1985, 1988, 1992, 1996) and Project A series (1982, 1987), feature Chan as Hong Kong’s loyal civil servant, and these characters could be seen as salutes to Hong Kong’s colonial identity as 1997 pressed. Yet in the previous decade, as both Chan enters his Hollywood phase and Hong Kong enters its postcolonial phase, his

---

22 MD, August 8, 2003.
obsessive concern for Hong Kong shifts from the city’s colonial identity to the city’s international image.

Jackie Chan has been known to Hong Kong’s and Asian viewers since the late 1970s with a very consistent screen image: a cheerful, spirited, but relatively docile neighborhood boy who will fight fancifully only when pressed. But entering his Hollywood period, he always assumes the submissive role of a servant, ranging from Hong Kong’s civil servant in Rush Hour (1998) and Rush Hour 2 (2001), the royal guard of the Chinese Imperial Court in Shanghai Noon (2000) and Shanghai Knights (2003), and most symbolically the attendant of his Western male master in The Tuxedo (2002) and Around the World in 80 Days (2004). In all of these films the characters played by Chan are content with his subordinate role, and he is forced to fight only upon the solicitation of his master who is in danger. It is his undeterred loyalty to his master that constitutes his low-key heroism.

This humble and submissive characterization of Jackie Chan so consistently seen in his Hollywood films is contrasted to his paternalistic public image in Hong Kong, accompanied by the decreasing box-office records of his Hollywood films locally. The Hong Kong viewers might find his Hollywood films unattractive and his roles disgraceful, yet many are also repelled by his increasing didactic attitude to the Hong Kong people. Being called as the “Big Brother” by Hong Kong’s media, Chan is always lecturing Hong Kong people how to gain respect from others, in the same ways that he had gained respect from people around the world, particularly in Hollywood. He assumes a heavy Chinese paternal voice when he speaks to Hong Kong’s media. He hates hip-hop, and he claims that if he sees his son (a new singer) singing hip-hop, he “would beat him to death.” He also despises those new Hong Kong singers who could only sing Japanese or Western songs. There is also a strong nationalist dimension in these lectures, particularly after the 1997 reunification. He is proud of his Chinese clothing, which he believes has influenced the taste of certain Hollywood stars. He also criticized Taiwan’s recent presidential election as a farce, which angered the Taiwan’s Democratic Progress Party so much some congress members launched an anti-Jackie Chan, anti-Hong Kong campaign.

24 As this paper focuses on Jackie Chan’s Hollywood period, I am not going to go into his prior career. For Chan’s autobiographical account of his career development, see Jackie Chan, with Jeff Yang, I am Jackie Chan: My Life in Action (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).
So, who is the true Chan, the humble servant or the didactic big brother? Interestingly, Chan’s moralizing is largely surrounded around a discourse of “acting,” that one has to present one’s best image and act self-respectfully in order to be valued by others. And he persistently translates this notion of “respectable self” to the good media image of Hong Kong. He keeps instructing the Hong Kong people how they should present the best image of Hong Kong to the world tourists. He is particularly keen on teaching the Hong Kong people about the importance of the media: when the camera is around, acting must begin. For example, the Christmas Eve has always been a chaotic night in Hong Kong, when hundreds of thousands of the residents and tourists wander around the main streets; youngsters would create troubles, and rubbishes are left all over the street. In the year of 2002 the amount of rubbish accrued after the Christmas Eve was so enormous that was reported by the international press, which outraged Chan, and he lectured the Hong Kong people how to behave properly in order to not loss Hong Kong’s face. He also criticized the Hong Kong soccer fans who hooted to the then Chief Executive Tung Chee-wah who launched a ballgame featuring the British team Liverpool, as Chan stated that these images will be beamed to places all over the world and damage Hong Kong’s image. He even criticized the five hundred thousand people rally on July 1 of 2003, which he explained would scare tourists around the world from visiting Hong Kong.

As I mentioned earlier, under the discourse of city branding, culture is given the role to perform. A hybrid, rich, and accessible cultural life is only a calculated means to invite capitals, be they manifested in the actual amount of investment itself or indirectly in the number of tourists, creative workers, or businessmen attracted to the city. Although there are always connections between cinema and tourism, the discourse of city branding tremendously fortifies their mutual conditioning. Hong Kong’s economy increasingly relies on services instead of actual productivity, making both the image of Hong Kong and its creative industries ever more important in its economy. Jackie Chan’s different acts on-screen and off-screen can be seen precisely as a city branding performance: while he lectures the local people the importance of performance, he himself performs the actual shows to entertain his clients. Accordingly, Jackie Chan schizophrenic attitudes are not mutually contradictory at all, as the persona of the actor is often structured in the bi-polar positions between facing oneself and facing the viewer. In other words, under the general discourse of city branding, the culture of a city is necessarily dichotomized: the face to itself is a painstaking struggling for discipline and ordering, while the face to the “viewer” is one of submissive gaiety.

Contemporary tourism also works under a similar mechanism. There is a common criticism to tourists’ superficial consumption of the images of a place instead of trying to understand the history, culture, and the social life of the destination. Tourists

31 OD, December 30, 2002.
33 OM, Sept 1, 2003.
visiting Hong Kong are particularly prone to this criticism, criticized largely for seeking a superficial entertainment-oriented experience. Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle” typifies such criticism of the contemporary culture, in which the act of seeing is pushed to the limit and mushrooms into the sole component of reality. According to Debord, the spectacle is not only a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is completely mediated by images and commodification.

However, over-emphasizing the power of the city branding/tourist discourse over the autonomy of the culture itself ignores the difficult negotiations and coercions involved. If we consider city-branding largely a show, what is the position of the performative agency? To what extent Jackie Chan, therefore Hong Kong, is in control of such performances? As a muscular hero, Jackie Chan, unlike his Hollywood counterparts, is constantly being looked at. In order to escape from detective Carter (Chris Tucker), Lee (Chan) in the beginning of Rush Hour jumps onto a traffic light post in downtown Los Angeles, and a group of Asian tourists on a bus watch his acrobatic performances in awe. In Shanghai Noon, the residents of the small American town cannot take their eyes off from Chon Wang (Chan) because of his weird traditional Chinese costumes, and they heartily laugh at his painstaking efforts to speak English. In Rush Hour 2, Lee and Carter scramble across Hong Kong in their naked bodies, and their ungainly acts draw all the attentions of the surrounding people. In The Tuxedo, Jimmy Tong (Chan) jumps onto the stage to clumsily imitate Afro-American singing and dancing, cheering up the entire audience. In Shanghai Knight, many times Chon Wang and O’Bannon (Owen Wilson) attract the condescending gaze because of their mismatched outfits. The entire Around the World in 80 Days is as much about how Chan sees the world as how he is being seen by the world.

These acts of looking do not match any one in Laura Mulvey’s classical analysis of mainstream cinema: narcissistic (the male viewer identifying with the male character), voyeuristic (the male viewer watching the female character through the eyes of the male character), or fetishistic (the male viewer seeing the female character directly as fetish), because to Mulvey the male character in mainstream Hollywood films can only be the viewer instead of the performer. Obviously Jackie Chan does not present himself as sexually queer; neither can we interpret the gazes Chan attracted as racially driven, as demonstrated by the looks of those Asian onlookers in Rush Hours, Rush Hours 2, and Around the World in 80 Days. In fact, we can associate the looks featured on screen with those among the film viewers, that the latter pay to see Jackie Chan’s films because he is laughable. In all of these scenes he attracts his viewers through the performance of his own clumsy body. Central to his action designs there are always moments, however brief, of weakness or paralysis of movements, in order to emphasize his enormous efforts to perform. With Chan’s indebtedness to Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, many of the funniest moments of his action scenes are those implying his inability to control his body and the environment (in spite of the vice versa that makes these

---

movements possible). In *Shanghai Noon* for example, several comic scenes featured Chon Wang failing to command the horse, the very symbol of the Western. *Around the World in 80 Days* constantly highlights Chan’s body as a cyborg, struggling to dress the new technology on his own mismatching athletic body. In spite of the highly impressive acrobatic movements he is capable of, Chan is also the clown. There is always a sense of “embarrassment” featured in these scenes, which can be persistently traced in his Hong Kong and Hollywood films. Jackie Chan is never in full control, although this partial incapability is highly calculated to earn the trust of his masters/clients.

One interesting consequence of this emphasis on performance is Jackie Chan’s ambiguous identity, referring specifically to his servant identity: is he the real servant, or is he performing it? This is most clearly shown in *Around the World in 80 Days*, as the character is in fact using the role of the servant to mask his real identity. Chan’s emphasis on performance also explains the contradiction between his subservient roles in his Hollywood films and the paternal voice he assumes in front of the Hong Kong people off the fictional film space. As I have delineated above, Chan constantly reminds the Hong Kong people to “perform” well in front of the global media. The performances are only for the consumptions of others, which might have nothing to do with the real Hong Kong. Similarly, he is the Big Brother in reality, although he continues to be a servant in Hollywood films.

We must recognize that in most tourism, the performance is highly self-conscious. While the spectacle plays an increasingly important role in Hong Kong’s tourism, the Hong Kong people, who engineer the performances themselves, do not need to see Hong Kong accordingly. As Kwai-cheung Lo argues, Hong Kong people never conceive their city as a place of innocence that would be contaminated by the invading U.S. culture, so that the Disneyland is not seen as a cultural imperialism. Disneyland is too faked a culture to affect the local lives. Both the local people and the tourists are in full awareness of its simulacra, and this awareness, contrary to what Shi argues, reminds us the danger of conflating tourism with the everyday life of the people. In Debord’s formulation, the society of the spectacle is a totalizing one, in which nothing is left behind irrelevant to the spectacle, and the people inside are completely passive and vulnerable. But in Hong Kong’s tourism discourse, the city seems to be highly aware of and adaptable to the changing and demanding gazes. The direct implication of agency and control in any performance is irrefutable; a more complex question is the level and the success of such control.

Seemingly, the Hong Kong tourism embodied by Jackie Chan does not agree with the society of spectacle theory, as the tourist spectacles and the people’s reality are calculatingly separated through “performances.” However, this strategy of splitting tourist performances from everyday reality is not always effective. How can Chan guarantee that behind the beautiful and cheerful city featured in its tourist promotion

---

materials, the allegedly hidden reality is unrelated to tourism? If Debord and many other Marxist critics are right that the social cannot be independent from the ideological, no performances can at the end escape the overall capitalist control. I do not believe that by granting a certain sense of performing agency to Jackie Chan and Hong Kong, the two can be freed from capitalist control. Quite the contrary, they continue to perform within the scope of self-commodification, in which self-control can only go so far. To further explore the performative dimensions of Hong Kong’s tourism, let us take a closer look at Chan’s performances in his Hollywood films.

Among these six Hollywood films he made, I think he is shown most ill at ease in the massage parlor “Heaven on Earth” in *Rush Hour 2*, in which Hong Kong tourism is most directly yet shamelessly displayed. The first thirty minutes of *Rush Hour 2* were set in Hong Kong, which, accordingly to Chan, was the result of his own persuasion. When Chan was invited to make *Rush Hour 2*, setting part of the film in Hong Kong, according to Chan, was one of his conditions.

My principle is [that my films could have] no pornography and no violence…. I suggested to the producers to set part of [*Rush Hour 2*] in Hong Kong. There are two major reasons. First, I am Hong Kong Tourism Ambassador, and I should introduce the best images of Hong Kong to people all over the world. I want the story to be set in the most representative places of Hong Kong; those hotbeds of pornography and violence in Yau Ma Tei and Tsim Shan Tsui are places I avoid…. Secondly, more foreign productions in Hong Kong mean more employment locally.36

If one of Chan’s terms were to associate Hong Kong with no pornography, the film clearly suggests otherwise. The film starts as Carter’s vacation in Hong Kong, with Lee’s promise to be his tour guide. Lee, however, is suddenly given an assignment to investigate the recent bombing of the local American Consulate, and he brings Carter around to track down the suspects. Among these places they visit are a bar, a massage parlor, and a crew ship party, in which sexy girls gather around Carter. Carter’s sexual consumptions were suggested most blatantly in the massage parlor Heaven on Earth, when Carter indulges in the visual display and the actual services of the sexy massage girls, while Lee is shown embarrassingly not knowing exactly where to direct his gazes. The roles of the three parties in this scene are very clear: Lee, as the local comprador, brings Carter, the American tourist, to consume the girls, the tourist services provided by Hong Kong. It is in this self-reflexive scene that the Hong Kong Tourism Ambassador role that Jackie Chan has so proudly assumed is stripped to its rotten core. In this scene, Lee is placed in the background, shown either out-of-focus or smiling embarrassingly. This Tourism Ambassador cannot look at Carter or the girls, as if he dares not to look directly at the scene presented in front of him – the very Hong Kong its tourism is only trying to hide.

---

Hong Kong Cinema as Creative Industry

Under the aegis of knowledge economy, cinema is solicited to promote an abstract image of a city or a place, so that the function of cinema is magically expanded to include new fetishistic values. Therefore, although Jackie Chan’s films are no longer hitting the local box-office, his international stardom is still treasured as a tremendous piece of cultural capital of the city. However, if we consider cinema only a venue for tourism, we would have taken the power of this knowledge economy on cinema too lightly. As I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, under the city branding discourse, culture is given two functions, to attract consumers and to attract investors. Hong Kong cinema is therefore also given the tasks to lure not only tourists but also more diversified international investments. Knowing that his films are no longer popular, Jackie Chan, for example, needs to maintain his values by emphasizing his ability in attracting not only tourists in general, but also other kinds of media investment to Hong Kong, as shown in his recent involvement in the local media conglomerate Emperor Group. In other words, he must replace his fainting stardom with his lingering comprador influences. Similarly, the staggering Hong Kong cinema also needs to locate a new “servicing” position to substitute its traditional role in “production,” and the traditional place-based identity of Hong Kong cinema must therefore be revised. Because of this new economic and social environment that demands strong governance and coordination, the meddling from the policy level also becomes ever more intense. This is most evident in the way Hong Kong cinema is now restructured as a part of creative industries.

The notion of “creative industries” first appeared in UK policy circles in the late 1990s, specifically in the Labour Party’s 1997 election campaign, which promised to renew Britain’s cultural image. The term “creative industries” referred to nearly all culture- and craft-based activities with economic value, and spread quickly to other Commonwealth and European countries – and Asia soon after. I call creative industries a discourse because its immediate popularity among governments attests to a strong discursive power, and various governments adopt and repackage it to cater to their own national situations and give the term specific national appeal. Many critics are attracted by the discourse of creative industries and its celebration of individual creativity, and they find in the discourse rare opportunities to articulate new forms of cultural politics and creative activities even within a capitalist framework. Creative industries, in general, has been dubbed neo-liberalist. John Hartley argues that it elicits, and is the result of, many cultural tranformations: “Among the changes must be counted the vociferous refusal of some among the potential audience to play with corporate creativity at all, even while they poach the possibilities.” Ellie Rennie also claims that creative

---

industries acknowledge that “creativity is not just for the talented few, but a dynamic being up and pursued by people and groups in a range of contexts. So although ‘creative industries’ deals with the vast, prevailing ramifications of a global economy, it is also an idea that works from the ground up.”\textsuperscript{39} In other words, creative industries as a discourse is embraced not only by governments but also by many skeptical cultural critics, who find it an economic policy most congenial to creativity, allowing many hitherto financially disadvantageous cultural activities and individuals to gain a foothold in our ever intensifying capitalist world.\textsuperscript{40}

Creative industries became particularly valued in East Asia after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which taught the governments how volatile global finance is, and how vulnerable their relatively small national economies have been under globalization. A strong industrial infrastructure for the new knowledge economy is considered a reliable safety net to protect smaller national economies from another global financial crisis. Inspired by British, Canadian, and Australian success, many Asian countries have begun to investigate creative industries in recent years. Taiwan, for example, named 2003 the “Creative Industry Year.” Recognizing the cross-institutional nature of this “new” economic sector, many Asian governments have set up their own think tanks or agencies, modeled in large part on the UK’s Demos think tank, to investigate development strategies suitable for their own national situations. High-profile structures such as Taiwan Thinktank Cultural Forum, the Korea Culture & Content Agency, and Singapore’s Workgroup on Creative Industries aim to integrate culture, industry, and public policy to boost their national creative industries. Creative industries is also slowly gaining currency in Japan, specifically through the current “Japan’s Cool” boom, which refers to the recent trend of young Japanese starting their own companies around various cultural industries. There are at least 7 government committees and organizations set up in Japan between Years 2000 to 2005 to promote popular culture.\textsuperscript{41} The protection of IPRs, not surprisingly, always enjoys great attention in these projects.

In Hong Kong, the SAR government has also taken initiative to investigate how to strengthen Hong Kong’s economic infrastructure by emphasizing creative and entertainment products. Various recent Policy Addresses by the Chief Executive emphasize cultural industries as a key component of Hong Kong’s economic restructuring.\textsuperscript{42} The Hong Kong government’s Central Policy Unit completed the


\textsuperscript{40} I am not suggesting that CI policy concerns are the same as scholarly concerns, particularly given the latter’s focus on cultural diversity. But both tend to take the most fundamental question for granted: Can creativity be industrialized?

\textsuperscript{41} Koichi Iwabuchi, “Useful Culture, Usless Media and Cultural Studies.” Paper presented in “Cultural Studies and Institution” Symposium, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, May 27, 2006.

Baseline Study on Hong Kong’s Creative Industries (hereafter Baseline Study) in 2003, and the research Hong Kong Creative Industries in the Pearl River Delta in 2006. The Baseline Study clearly states that in order to develop Hong Kong’s creative industries, the people must learn how to transform creativity into tradable deliverables and services, and the linchpin in this transformation is the deployment of intellectual property. This is an almost word-by-word reiteration of the UK model, demonstrating the mimetic nature of the entire global creative industries phenomenon.

Cinema, straying between culture and commerce, is situated easily yet uneasily within this creative industries discourse. Cinema is often included in governments’ creative industries master plans, less for its “creative” dimension than for its profitability. In the eyes of film producers, creative industries inject new energy into a declining cinema; for policy makers, cinema makes creative industries more attractive. Accordingly, filmmaking converges with other new media and entertainment to create new synergies and new markets; government and public support for such industrial convergence and market exploration is justified by the creative industries discourse in spite of the commercial nature of cinema. In spite of its previous success without any public support, Hong Kong cinema has actively sought government backing in recent years. A new Film Development Committee was set up in October 2005 to respond to the industry’s heavy lobbying, and one of its major tasks are the legislation and enforcement related to Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs).

Traditionally, film scholars and critics disfavor government meddling in cinema. To many of these, while negative measures such as censorship are easily criticized, protectionist policies such as subsidies prevent films from being responsive to the market. Direct government support for the film industry is often criticized as a device that protects an economic sector from its own internal weakness. State control in Third-World cinema is particularly criticized for its totalitarian intentions and results, which often become causes of national cinema’s waning artistic and commercial vigor. But such concerns are largely cast aside in the recent ascendancy of the creative industries discourse in cinema. A recent “triumph” of this industry-government
collaboration in Hong Kong cinema is an IPRs case. On January 12, 2005, a jobless thirty-eight-year-old man, Chan Nai-ming, was arrested at his home by Hong Kong customs officers. He was accused of uploading the initial BitTorrent (BT) “seeds” – data that can be used to download a media product – for the Hollywood releases Daredevil, Red Planet, and Miss Congeniality onto the bt.newsgroup.com.hk forum just two days before his arrest.47 Online, the copyright infringer refers to himself as Guhuo tianwang (King of the Tricksters [hereafter the King]),48 a tribute to the movie series Young and Dangerous (Guhuo zai 古惑仔), which features young street gangsters as heroes. The news made local headlines for being the first arrest for BT piracy in the city. Three months later, the case attracted even wider media attention, because the Hong Kong government and the Hong Kong film industry worked together to bring a criminal case against the King for copyright violation of the three Hollywood movies. Unsurprisingly, he was soon found guilty and sentenced to three months in jail.49 The case is the very first criminal conviction for international online film piracy, and will likely set an important precedent.

The case of the King must be situated against the background of the ascendance of the creative industries discourse in cinema. The arrest took place in January 2005, and the criminal charge was released in an April 27 press conference, attended by famous directors and movie stars and organized by an ad hoc committee composed of filmmakers, the Film Industry Response Group (Dianying gongye yingbian xiaozu 電影工業應變小組). The arrest of and criminal charges against the King served as a climax to a series of international events jointly organized by the film industry and the government to position Hong Kong as a regional center of creative industries and IPRs. With a theme of “Multimedia Convergence,” the first Hong Kong International Film and TV Market (FILMART) was held in June 2004.50 Designed to be a platform for global cross-media cooperation, FILMART was intended to reposition Hong Kong as the finance center of the new entertainment industry. Following the first FILMART, Entertainment Expo Hong Kong was launched in 2005, and represented the government’s will and efforts to upgrade Hong Kong’s creative industries through the regeneration of cinema.51 The Expo featured the 29th Hong Kong International Film Festival (March 22–April 6), the 24th Hong Kong Film Awards (March 27), the second FILMART, and the first Hong Kong–Asia Film Financing Forum (HAF) (March 21–24).

---

47 Mingpao, April 28, 2005. The newsgroup is hosted by iAdvantage Limited, and is arguably the most popular BT site in Hong Kong.

48 The alias is translated as the Big Crook in some newspapers.

49 He was found guilty on October 24, and sentencing was announced on November 7. South China Morning Post, October 25, 2005, November 8, 2005.


There seem to have been two major purposes for this Expo: to attract international media attention to Hong Kong cinema, and to develop Hong Kong as a new media finance center. The two missions are related, in that the first purpose furthers the second. Given that the glamorous nature of cinema naturally attracts media attention, it is reasonable to speculate that this BT criminal charge, which was announced immediately after the Expo, was part of the creative industries’ program. That Entertainment Expo Hong Kong ended with a BT arrest demonstrates the intricate link between city branding, IPRs awareness, and creative industries.

The recent recession and the rise of the creative industries discourse are giving Hong Kong cinema a new, or an empty, face. While the branding of Hong Kong cinema is highlighted, Hong Kong cinema is tokenized and dematerialized, but only as a means to attract media attention and investment. As Hong Kong is repositioned as a finance center as opposed to a production center, Hong Kong’s interest in the arrest of the King is manifested on the abstract plane of “advertising effects.” The global branding of Hong Kong cinema needs the lure of award-winning directors and stars, like Wong Kar-wai and Tony Leung, as well as an IPRs-loyal image, as demonstrated in the arrest of the King. The rise of creative industries can be seen as a result of the fall of cinema as a traditional cultural industry. The arrest of the King shows that Hong Kong filmmaking must refocus its efforts on attracting intellectual property investment, instead of being nostalgic to its former image of the “Eastern Hollywood.”

As I mentioned in my previous work, the IPRs regime is a necessary, but largely strained, legal structure to counter media’s natural predisposition to piracy; the IPR regime has been highly inefficient and expensive to enforce.\(^52\) Ironically, this inefficiency also always makes IPRs one of the most urgent and appealing issues on the creative industries agenda. In order for creative industries to garner maximum profits, their products must be protected from illegal reproduction and distribution, which is made extremely easy by new technology. This explains the embarrassment surrounding the high-profile arrest of the King in Hong Kong: it is reported that there was only a 20 percent drop in online file-sharing activities in Hong Kong immediately following the widely discussed arrest, meaning that this case had only a minor deterrent effect against online piracy.\(^53\) There is no current data available, but obviously BT movie piracy is still taking place in Hong Kong.\(^54\) The case might have attracted worldwide media attention, particularly among the netizens, but its real effects have yet to be seen, attesting to the extreme inefficiency of legal action against online copyright infringement.

\(^{52}\) See Pang, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia*, 31-46.

\(^{53}\) Legislative Council, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, LC Paper No. CB(1)863/04-05 <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr04-05/english/panels/ci/minutes/ci050118.pdf> accessed (September 12, 2005). Some claim that there was a 95% drop in locally posted BT seeds, which I find highly doubtful. See *South China Morning Post*, October 25, 2005.

\(^{54}\) Following on the heels of the film industries, in September 2005, Hong Kong’s music industries also tracked down about one thousand netizens performing illegal music downloads, to whom warning letters were sent. But data show that the number of illegal music downloads has not decreased at all. See *Mingpao*, October 7, 2005.
I highlight the arrest of the King as a turning point in Hong Kong cinema’s transition to a new creative industries epoch not because of its protective effect on the film industry per se but because it points out the great threat of digital piracy to the new knowledge economy, which can only survive with intensive surveillance of the distribution and reception of cultural goods. The current creative industries model cannot but ignore reception rights, which are largely alien to the concepts of ownership and profits defined by IPRs. We do not see, for example, the Baseline Study reporting the decreasing number of venues in Hong Kong that show non-mainstream films, nor does it analyze how to extend social access to a wider range of films.\(^{55}\) According to some critics, the recent shift in terminology from cultural industries to creative industries in UK cultural policy is also due to the shift in policy emphasis from the relatively autonomous sphere that culture enjoys to culture’s economic value.\(^{56}\) Creative industries’ heavy investment on profitability discourages people from exploring values beyond property rights, and questions of social and cultural value, such as exclusion of voices or equal access to global networks, have become most difficult to articulate.

The discourse of creative industries has excited worldwide public and government imagination largely because of the large amount of capital accrual it promises,\(^{57}\) and it is its deliberate restructuring of culture and economy that allows them to interpenetrate. While a cultural turn in the business sector has been observed, dialectically culture itself has also become more commercialized. A new managerialist discourse has arisen in the international business community that increasingly co-opts a cultural discourse of flexibility, relationships, and knowledge – a dangerous and inevitable consequence of this is the transference of the functionalist conception of the human subject from the business mindset to the cultural sphere.\(^{58}\) The creative industries discourse demonstrates precisely such a tendency of economizing culture.

Such quantification of culture also dries culture out. Although the creative industries discourse is legitimized by its aim of enriching the cultural life of a people, creative industries also fears cultural diversity, particularly one made up of imported

\(^{55}\) The situation in Taiwan is similar; its Council for Cultural Affairs is also criticized for focusing mostly on industrial development and ignoring the community’s cultural base. See Han Pao-teh, “Developing the Creative Industry,” *Taipei Times*, March 3, 2003.


\(^{57}\) According to Greg Hearn, Stuart Cunningham, and Diego Ordoñez, the “knowledge consumption service” sector – in which creative industries are the main components – represents 25% of exemplary economies, while the new science sector (agricultural biotech, fiber, construction materials, energy, and pharmaceuticals) accounts for only about 15% of these economies. See Greg Hearn, Stuart Cunningham, and Diego Ordoñez, “Commercialism of Knowledge in Universities: The Case of the Creative Industries,” *Prometheus* 22, no. 2 (June 2004): 192.

\(^{58}\) Nigel Thrift, “Capitalism’s Cultural Turn,” in *Culture and Economy after the Cultural Turn*, ed. Larry Ray and Andrew Sayer (London: Sage, 1999), 135-61.
products. Local audiences and their access to cultural products continue to be ignored. Even when cultural diversity is discussed, it is a means instead of an end in itself, leading to purposes such as city branding, cultural literacy, or social cohesion that might attract investments. Focusing on economic issues like finance, markets, public support, and employment, creative industries are not well equipped to discuss more complex cultural issues of cinema, such as the balance between a strong local film industry and people’s access to a wide array of imported and alternative films. Annette Hamilton once remarked that “the average viewer in Thailand or Singapore has been exposed to a much wider range of visual material in style, genre, and cultural code than is the case for any ‘average Western viewer.’” In the creative industries model, diversity becomes a burden. Criticism of the hegemonic dimension of national cinema – that it fails to either achieve cultural diversity or pronounce cultural specificity – most uneasily reverberates.

This brings us back to the case of the King, which seems to indicate that Hong Kong cinema and Hollywood share the frontline against piracy. Hong Kong’s local film market was hailed as one of very few in the world that could face up against Hollywood, in that its local films were more popular than American products. However, the domestic market in recent years has witnessed how rapidly the local film industry is losing ground to Hollywood films. Similarly, most of the BT files available on Hong Kong’s BT forums and newsgroups are also Hollywood films, along with games and computer software from other countries – and only a few of them are local productions. Hong Kong people – both the online community and the ordinary theatergoers or disc buyers – are less and less attracted by Hong Kong films. While the major rival of Hong Kong filmmakers was and will continue to be Hollywood, in the campaign of anti-piracy the local film industry helps its American counterparts – and itself to a lesser extent – to eradicate copyright violation.

New Meanings of Hong Kong Cinema

As I have elaborated, in the age of knowledge economy, Hong Kong cinema has meant much more than itself. Although its success as a film industry is waning quickly, its glamorous past and sporadic recent hits are still attractive enough to promote the image of the city, both in terms of its tourist image and more abstractly its IPRs image, in order

62 According to MPIA’s 2004 annual report, the total box office receipts of foreign films in Hong Kong was 460 million HKD, while that of local films was 383 million HKD. The top three films were all Hollywood productions.
to increasingly fortify the status of Hong Kong as a global city. As the above two case studies indicate, Hong Kong cinema has increasingly become an empty brand name. Under the city branding discourse, Hong Kong needs to continue to produce films, but they are no longer the two hundred of something local commercial films catered to the domestic and regional markets, but they should rather be selected award-winning films to be featured in the international media. More importantly, they could be easily flattened into simple images which can be circulated globally to attest to Hong Kong’s abstract “film power” like the seductive stills of Zhang Ziyi published in the New York Times. As a brand name, Hong Kong cinema can organize and participate in many transnational productions aimed at global markets. Hong Kong cinema has been transnational for decades, but only recently do we see Hong Kong cinema turning into an abstract brand name instead of concrete place-based productions. The most successful film company in Hong Kong is indisputably Edko Films, which financially managed the making of Crouching Tigers Hidden Dragons (2000), Hero (2002), House of Flying Daggers (2004), and Fearless (2006), which are all international hits, but they could hardly be called Hong Kong films anymore.

Let us take Jackie Chan as an example again. Other than being a representative of Hong Kong, Jackie Chan is also constantly changing his identity for different “markets.” Other than being Hong Kong Tourism Ambassador, Chan is also an honorary citizen of Chicago, Paris, as well as Seoul and Tongyong of South Korea. He spoke for Beijing’s 2008 Olympic, Xi’an touristic ancestral rituals, New York’s China Town after the September 11 event. He also visited Indonesia after the recent tsunami and promised the Indonesia’s government to promote its tourism. Chan grasps every opportunity to show his loyalty to people around the world, in a similar way of Hong Kong cinema trying to promote transnational film productions. Of course, the key to these transnational facilitations is still a strong local city image, as in the case of the superimposition between the image of Jackie Chan and that of Hong Kong. The city and the global, therefore, mutually condition each other.


66 Singapore also has a similar situation. In 2003, the Media Development Authority of Singapore began to promote the exportation of “Made-by-Singapore” media and film content, which features products with Singaporean money, so that many of those “Made-by-Singapore” films have nothing to do with the culture, location, and people of the country. Singapore Film Commission, “SFC Launches Two New Film Development Initiatives: $350,000 Boost for Local Filmmaking Talents,” Singapore Film Commission News Release, 3 December 2003.

67 TK, April 18, 2001


70 MP, April 20, 2005.
City branding demands the city to perform. Jackie Chan and Hong Kong cinema are both highly conscious of one’s performance to satisfy the changing commodifying gazes around. According to Judith Butler, there are two levels of meanings of gender performances. On the one hand, the body produces gender in its very iteration and performances, so that our gender norm is constructed precisely through gender performances. Similarly, the tourist performances of Hong Kong and Jackie Chan will also somehow confer them their Hong Kong “identities.” On the other hand, as performance is a process and is transformative, there is also a subversive dimension. Identity is forged through performances, yet performances can also reveal the performative nature of identity, allowing the construction process to continue.\(^{71}\) The gendered body is performative because “it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”\(^{72}\) The remaining question we need to ask, therefore, is whether the performances demanded by the city branding discourse allow Hong Kong cinema to acquire new identity.

There are two general scholarly positions on national culture or national cinema, which take opposite directions. The notion of national culture may be considered exemplarily hegemonic, because it suppresses and defines those manifestations of cultural diversity within and beyond national boundaries.\(^ {73}\) Yet it can also be considered subversive if placed against a hegemonic other, either against the West/global as the imperialist other,\(^ {74}\) or within a postcolonial context that legitimizes collective identity. Interestingly, recent studies of Hong Kong cinema have overwhelmingly taken the second approach, probably due to the assumed dichotomy between China and the cosmopolitan/postcolonial Hong Kong. The fear surrounding the 1997 turnover has been considered by critics as defining and enlivening the wonder of 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong cinema – forcing its reflection on the city’s fragile identity, and resulting in a unique and vigorous self-reflexive meta-cinema.\(^ {75}\) A favorite topic of recent Hong Kong cinema scholarship is the relationship between the city and its cinema, and how the


films directly or indirectly bear the collective identity of the people. Some critics even conclude that Hong Kong cinema has never been so obsessed with Hong Kong as it is today. Much of this scholarship coincides with the traditional national cinema model, in that the meanings of the films are largely conditioned by the actual happenings in the place and by the people’s collective emotions, which naturally give topics, incentives, and style to Hong Kong filmmaking. The hegemonic dimension of Hong Kong cinema as a collective construct, however, is seldom discussed.

The new city branding discourse taking shaping “unintentionally” challenges this “traditional” understanding of Hong Kong cinema. It is true that there is an intimate connection between creative industries and national economy: “creative industries” is largely a policy discourse, and there must be enough national interests at stake to propel governments to take an active interest in the hitherto marginalized sphere of culture. However, the global culture of the new knowledge economy tends to diffuse geographical boundaries, so that Edko Film is a Hong Kong company making non-Hong Kong films. With its shift in emphasis from the films themselves to the capital attracted and accrued by them, the creative industries discourse discards the traditional notion of the “national” to favor the new economy based on global cities. Unlike traditional industries, creative industries are often city based. Even the esoteric New York city recently launches a “Creative New York” program to promote its taken-for-granted creative industries. The national identity of global cities is meant to be loose, and the economy formed is meant to transcend traditional nation-based politics and society, which new economic discourses like creative industries favor.

What does this mean to Hong Kong cinema, which began to shift from the more traditional place-based industrial model to the new creative industries discourse? As I mentioned earlier, city branding creates the draining effect, that Hong Kong cinema no longer produces the wide arrange of works intimately tied to local lives. However, it is also increasingly difficult to fit Hong Kong cinema in the hitherto postcolonial model, in which the films of Hong Kong assert the identity of Hong Kong against a certain hegemony other. Postcolonial scholars might be anxious about the disappearance of Hong Kong cinema because of various political or economic pressures, but a dangerous


78 There are a few studies addressing the regional hegemony of Hong Kong films. See, for example, Li Ding-Tzann, “A Colonized Empire: Reflections on the Expansion of Hong Kong films in Asian Countries,” in Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 122-41.

result is the legitimization of the enforcement of border and order, indirectly echoing with IPRs’ anxiety about the disarray of global digital culture. In the studies of Hong Kong cinema, the ascending city branding discourse, due to its high performativity, at least reminds us not to take the creative agency of Hong Kong for granted.

The Author


Session 1
NATIONS IN TRANSITION

The Portrayal of Multiculturalism in Malaysian National Cinema: A Case Study of Yasmin Ahmad’s Sepet

Beh Chun Chee
University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper will touch on the national films of Malaysia, with the focus on Sepet, a beautiful film directed by Yasmin Ahmad. The film won numerous awards in the Malaysian Film Festival, as well as international awards. However the film also aroused arguments among members of the censorship board and government due to the unconventional approach taken to deal with the racial interaction and multiculturalism in Malaysia. Hence, I am particularly interested in redefining the notion of national cinema in the Malaysian setting: Who shapes Malaysian national cinema? The government or the filmmakers?
Malaysian cinemas were made known to the world during its golden era of black-and-white films from studios like Malay Film Production and Cathay-Keris Film Productions in the 50s and 60s; notably, albeit embarrassingly solely, through the film auteur – P. Ramlee and his films that examined the social conditions among working class Malays during that time. Painfully obvious, majority of Malaysian films, even until recent time, provide discourses for a monolithic Malay community ignoring Malaysia’s multiethnic nature. Peripheral ethnic groups such as Chinese, Indian and aboriginal groups are often under-represented in films or finding inadequate means of cultural enunciation.

Ironically, the domination of Malay films in Malaysian national cinemas is the discursive result of the government’s effort of “Malaysianizing,” or controversially “Malay-nizing,” through the National Cultural Policy (NCP) to shape the national identity through films and to counter the cultural imperialism of imported films from Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong. Malay culture was made the core culture, therefore legitimizes the marginalization of other cultures within the nation.

There was a handful of films that diverged from the major trend though. Hafsham (Othman Shamsuddin) directed Mekanik (1983), the first Malaysian film to have multiethnic cast and few major parts to be acted by non-Malays. Although the theme of the film does not reflect the conflict between ethnic groups, it allows actors of different races to use their own language in dialogue. This film has become box-office hit winning a few awards in the 4th Malaysian Film Festival and was patronized by, finally, multiethnic audience. On the other hand, Rahim Razali’s Tsu-Feh Sofiah (1985) was the first to have Chinese lead actress in the film. It talks about how a Chinese woman converted to Muslim and possessed better moral than some of the villagers who were born Muslim.

At the end of 1990s and early 2000s, an increasing consciousness of filmmakers to produce multiethnic narratives with theme not limited to Malay community only has emerged with the increasing involvement of non-Malay filmmakers in the film industry. This situation was made possible by the television advertisement practitioners’ interest to venture into the more fulfilling filmmaking industry after they have benefited enough from the advertising business.

Teck Tan’s Spinning Gasing (2001) chose interracial relationship as its theme. Apart from using all ethnic groups in its cast who speak in their own language respectively, it also explores the issue of drug abuse, Eurasians’ identity crisis, homosexuality and religion differences. Adman Salleh’s Paloh (2003) explores interracial relationship alongside communist issue during Japanese occupation period. It has also won a few awards in the 17th Malaysian Film Festival, including the Best Picture. The latest films that joined the above regime are Sepet (2004) and its sequel, Gubra (2006) directed by Yasmin Ahmad. The similarities found in these films are not only the theme of interracial relationship, but multiethnic casts and crews, and their
uses of multilingual dialogues, which are the elements much needed to formulate the contemporary Malaysian national cinema.

Both Sepet and Gubra won the best film award in the 18th and 19th Malaysian Film Festivals respectively. As much as they are loved by a significant number of audience, film critics and media, they suffered censors and banning threat from Lembaga Penapisan Filem, Malaysia’s censorship board; and later received enormous criticism for “contaminating the culture.”

On 22nd April 2006, the topic of discussion on a local television forum “Fenomena Seni” [Arts Phenomena] was “Sepet dan Gubra mencemar budaya” [Sepet and Gubra corrupt our culture]. Film critic and journalist Akmal Abdullah worried that the message and portrayal of the characters and their interracial relationship might corrupt the (Malay) culture and potentially have negative influences on the audience. Echoed to that view, film producer Raja Azmi was not convinced that the film portrays the reality of multiethnic Malaysia. At the end of the programme, 59% of the audience through SMS-polling agreed with the topic (that these films indeed corrupt our culture).

On a more positive note, another panelist of the forum, film director Hassan Muthalib commented that Yasmin’s films have successfully attracted non-Malay viewers and provoked the audience to think and learn something from their life. Some viewers called in affirming that the films do portray the reality. Hence, with the contradicting perspectives, let us scrutinize Sepet and analyze how the multiethnic and multicultural society of Malaysia has been portrayed.

The Opening Sequence & the Heterogeneity of Characters

Sepet is a story about the love relationship between a Chinese VCD peddler, Jason, and a Malay schoolgirl, Orked. Unlike most main characters in conventional Malay(sian) films that consist of only Malay casts, Jason and Orked, the hero and heroine of Sepet are from two different ethnic and social backgrounds (Orked from middle class liberal Malay, while Jason from middle-lower class conservative Chinese).

The film opens with an Arabic sentence superimposed over a black screen, which is immediately followed by a male voice reciting poetry in Mandarin. The camera slowly pans to reveal a Chinese woman dressed in baju kebaya, a type of Malay costume, listening to the poem. Sitting next to her is Jason, with dyed hair resembling a samseng (Malay term with connotation of Chinese bad boy). There are few contradictions presented in this scene, namely the discordance of the Malay costume wore by the Chinese lady, and the gentle recital of poetry by a rebellious looking kid whom visibly lack the depth to appreciate great poem by Tagore. It gets weirder when the mother-son duo converse with each other in two totally different languages, where the mother speaks in Malay, and the son in Cantonese. The disharmonies are too obvious to be missed.
The next scene shows a Malay girl dressed up in telekung (Muslim ladies’ prayer cloth or veil) reciting Koran in Arabic. When done, she opens the closet to reveal posters of Takeshi Kaneshiro, a Taiwanese-Japanese star, sticking all over the doors. This revelation, again, clashes with our typical perception of a religious girl. Then we hear an off-screen sound of the mother speaking in Malay calling the girl for meal. The girl answers in English.

These disharmonies of characters were shown in so many plots of the film, as if aim to challenge, or more precisely, dispute the stereotypic perceptions of certain communities in Malaysia, and the stability of common classifications or boundaries to define ethnic groups. With as little as three characters in the prologue, the heterogeneity of the multiethnic population is articulated where all groups (at least in this prologue) in some ways assimilate and adapt other cultures.

Liminal Space of Cross Cultural Interaction

[There] exists only political and economic cohesion among the three races, not social or cultural. In practice, an Indian, Malay or Chinese can live in his own social and cultural milieu in complete isolation from the other communities. (Muthalib, 2002:329)

Considering the above statement, it holds some truth about some Malaysians, at some time, at some place. In fact, if we observe the film closely, there is no real social interaction among the characters of different races. Both Jason and Orked have their own group of friends of the same race and socio-cultural locales that do not intersect. It may seem the two will never get involved in each other’s life.

However, the director has created a third space, a liminal space, for the characters to interact. For example, the school is where the much younger Jason and Orked met each other; the marketplace is where the two met and fall in love at first sight; the fast food restaurant and roadside stalls become the place where the couple started to understand each other and love each other. Takeshi Kaneshiro, Wong Kar Wai, and John Woo have been utilized as icons for cultural intercourses among the characters.

Mother Tongues & the “Untransferability” of Language

The usage of multilingual dialogues is not alien to Malaysian national cinema anymore, as observed in films such as Mekanik, Spinning Gasing, Paloh, Sepet and many other recent independent films. The multiethnic casts are allowed to converse on screen in their mother tongues and hence added verisimilitude to the portrayal of the true multicultural nation psyche. The Chinese characters in Sepet were shown converse in many languages and dialects – Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, English, Malay and even Baba Malay (a mixture of Malay and Hokkien, spoken in the film by the Peranakan
mother). The switching back-and-forth of multiple codes is a normal practice in accordance to the roles played by different languages at different time. English is widely spoken as the result of the colonial past, and is often used in conversations among different ethnics. Malay, the national language, is used in formal occasions or in communicating with other ethnic groups. Usage of dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese is often regional or ethnical. Therefore, switching back and forth between these different languages is both conscious and intuitional.

The scene which best exemplifies the above phenomenon has to be the dinner scene of Jason’s family. Jason’s father speaks only in Cantonese, most probably because he is from Cantonese-Chinese ethno-background, or also could be due to the fact that Cantonese is the main dialect among inhabitants of Ipoh (the diegesis world of the film). Jason’s mother on the other hand takes pride of her Peranakan root; therefore she speaks only in Baba Malay. Jason’s brother and his Singaporean wife converse in Mandarin, the typical Singaporean way. It is like a melting pot of diverse languages, where everyone speaks in different languages but still able to understand each other. But once the brother picks up the phone and reckons that the caller is Malay, he instantly switches to speak in Malay.

Another portrayal of the heterogeneous use of languages is the often condemned “rojak” language. The term describes the common practice of mixing few languages in one sentence. Due to the multiethnic setting and the inevitable cross-cultural activities, Malaysians often employ single term from other languages which has specific usage and meaning, which cannot be translated into another language or will often lose the metalanguage. “Party” was used in Orked’s parents’ conversation without translating it to Malay, simply because there is no equivalent term to substitute, and there is no “party” in Malay culture.

Investigating the “untransferability” of language often enables us to understand the cross-cultural interactions in Malaysia. Certain terms and lingoes of which the meaning and usage are vivid would be borrowed, from other languages other than their own mother tongues, by Malaysians in their daily conversations. “Cun,” a Malay colloquial expression for beautiful woman with a little sexual innuendo, was used by Jason and Ah Keong in their conversation. Lin, Orked’s Malay friend, teased Jason as “Takeshi Kanena” to mock his little resemblance to Orked’s favorite Takeshi Kaneshiro. The word “kanena” is a vulgar Hokkien swear-word. Lin must have picked up the word through her interaction with Chinese friends unaware of the vulgarism culturally attached with the word, in view of her joking gesture and soft tone.

Certain lingoes convey intimacy and hence should be preserved in its original state. For an example Orked calls Jason “sayang.” If it was to be translated to English, which literally means “darling,” it will lose the sense of sincerity, subtle indigenous hint of acceptance of the other race. Besides, it is also awkward for a Malay girl like Orked to convey intimacy in a foreign language like English, which will often sound “forced.”
The director’s portrayals of such perplex diversities and, at the same time, transfusions of language further reinforced the heterogeneity and multilayeredness of our nation makeup. Through deliberate design of complex characters and their association or detachment with each other, the director shrewdly extends the idea of the absence of “pure culture” or “pure ethnic group” in a multicultural nation, and that culture is indeed constructed. Through constant interactions among ethnic groups, cultural hybridization is unremitting.

**Peranakan and Marginal Communities**

Apart from the main characters, Jason’s Peranakan mother appears prominent albeit her appearance only in limited screen time. Peranakan refers to the descendants of the very early Chinese immigrants who have partially adopted Malay customs in an effort to be assimilated into the local communities (Wikipedia, n.d.). Portrayal of Peranakan character in this film is important in several ways.

Portrayal of this unique ethnic group on one hand addresses the success of intercultural integration, and on the other complicates and weakens the rigidity of strict racial classification, i.e. is Peranakan Chinese or Malay? Their physical traits are Chinese, but they behave like Malays and practice Malay customs. In the film, Jason explained to Ah Keong that Peranakans came about because of the interracial marriage of early Chinese migrants with local Malay women. This is of course folktale that lacks expert endorsement. The director redeems herself by explaining, through Jason, that that information was sourced from a menu of Nyonya restaurant and not from a formal history book. However, she exploited this (mis)perception to project her skepticism and cynicism to the many restrictions of modern time interracial marriage, as grunted by Ah Keong, “but today, when we’re supposed to be civilized, it’s so hard.”

The director spent a great deal of time explaining the origin of the Peranakan through Jason, which has no importance in pushing the narrative forward. When asked by Jason whether he know what Peranakan means, Ah Keong inattentively answered, “not really lah.” One may suspect that this is the director’s indictment of the ignorance and indifference of Malaysian in general towards the many cultures inherited by the nation. Other cultures, subcultures and minorities are reduced to mere labels, their rich ethnocultural history and development are never (fully) comprehended. Hence, by employing a Peranakan character, the film serves as a medium to preserve certain disappearing unique culture, or at the least, call for attention to the same.

The official construct of Malaysia as consisting of the “ethnic trinity,” i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian, is a gross misrepresentation of the ethnic reality in Malaysia. There are over 80 ethnic communities in Malaysia, including hybrid ones. (Nadarajah, 2004: 4)
For long, Chinese and Indian ethnicities have suffered from under-exposure or total wipe-out from national cinema, let alone other minorities and marginal ethnics. While some of the films did employ Chinese and Indian casts, they were often been objectified into certain stereotypic characters. For example, Chinese are always businessmen who will do nothing more than investing money, or speaking in such Hokkien-accented Malay that degraded them into slapstick comedians. Such portrayals not only misrepresent but accentuate the “foreignness” of the Chinese communities, and further marginalize them. In respect of this, Sepet serves as an antithesis to break the normalization of stereotypic Chinese images by Malay films.

While Teck Tan’s Spinning Gasing briefly delved into the identity crisis issue of Eurasian, other minorities and marginal groups such as aboriginals, Mamak (Indian Muslim) and migrants are still being left out from local mainstream films. Bluntly speaking, even the Malays are being misrepresented in the form of homogenizing, due to the fact that “Malay” is actually an imagined community made up by communities. There are indeed differences among Kelantanese, Minangs, and Acehnese, although they are all classified as Malays. Mamaks, who are racially Indians but Muslim, officially belong to Malay classification. Simply put, it is impossible to locate a homogeneous Malay ethnic group.

In response to “the direct and indirect urge to stop messing about with the culture and to start preserving it,” the director wrote four elaborated articles on her weblog to contest the view of the existence of “pure” Malay language and culture. According to Yasmin, most languages originated from or crossbreed with others, so do cultures and people; especially when she reckons a vast number of Malaysians are from multiple ethnocultural backgrounds. Stated herself as half Javanese, a quarter Bugis and a quarter Japanese, and a long list of casts and crews on her set who are also “racially impure” (in the director’s own words), I guess she has made her point loud and sound.

**Theme of Love Overcomes All Obstacles**

The theme of Sepet has been spelled out in the prologue when the Peranakan mother casually told Jason, “I really like this poem... Strange, a different culture, a different language, and yet we can feel what was in his heart.” By writing about romance of a couple from different ethnic groups, it is obvious that the director uses it as a metaphor to reflect the multiethnic Malaysia. Typical melodramas often dramatize interracial relationship as forbidden or impossible quest. Take Spinning Gasing as an example, the main crisis and failure of the interracial relationship is deeply rooted in the religion differences and cultural incompatibilities.

---

1 The four articles are “Pure Malay?,” “If ‘Bahasa’ Came from the Urdu ‘Bhasha,’ Shouldn’t our National Language be Hindi?,” “My Recent Article, Uncut Version,” and “In Praise of Mongrels” from <http://yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com/>. 
According to Yasmin, viewers have always been fed stories that advance interracial relationship as problematic until such notion has become a commonly accepted point-of-view, but such objections and problems have neither occurred to her Malay family nor her Chinese or Indian boyfriends’ families (Al-Attas, 2004). Undoubtedly, the director is aware of the taboos or presumed consequences of interracial relationship. The director said, “I had to make it obvious at the beginning that these kids were of different races before I could ignore the fact with any degree of aplomb.” However, in Sepet, the conflicts unveil, and were quickly resolved.

A few scenes could sum up the director’s intention here. First, when Orked was confronted by Lin’s boyfriend who accused her of looking down on her own race, and that she is ironically only good for a slit-eyed Chinese. This accusation, instead of tearing her down, was quickly turned down by her own defense by putting forward the fact that for many years, Malay males have married outside of their own race, but it has never been questioned. Immediately, Lin’s boyfriend was tagged a male-chauvinist and his accusation made invalid.

When Jason arranged for a meet-up for Ah Keong and Orked, Ah Keong showed his reluctance stating that “Chinese boys should not go out with Malay girls.” He then backed up his point highlighting the hard cold fact that when Chinese marry Malay, they have to surrender their names, convert to Islam, have circumcision, and are forbidden to eat pork. Incapability to carry the family name and continue the bloodstream is often seen as a mortal sin to conventional Chinese. But in the reversal of event, the moment Orked stepped into the restaurant, Ah Keong was clearly charmed by her. In later scene, Ah Keong explained that his ignorance was due to his lack of interaction with Malay community.

The other characters that are directly affected are perhaps both main characters’ parents. Jason’s Peranakan mother was shown supportive, so was Orked’s liberal mother. The only possible objectors would be both fathers. Jason’s father was on wheelchair hence deemed powerless. Orked’s father has had faint objections towards Jason (although not clearly racist) but was again tactfully shown as father’s jealousy, a universal trait of fathers.

All these are probably the director’s conscious efforts to normalize the acceptance and tolerance of cross-ethnic relationship. Yasmin stated,

It is important to note here that the last thing I wanted was to make the central crisis in Sepet a racial one. I have never believed that race was ever a real issue when people hated one another. I have always found, without fail, that racism was just surface stuff. When I scratched that surface and went just a little deeper, I invariably found that that prejudice was rooted in more basic human weaknesses like Fear or Greed. (Ahmad, 2004)
The director’s themes of acceptance, negotiation, and love conquers everything, could be implied into the multiethnic and multicultural setting of Malaysia, that the heterogeneity co-existence of all ethnicities in harmony can indeed be achieved if we could see beyond physical, cultural and socially constructed differences.

**Representation of Film Discourse: Reality or Fantasy?**

People might criticize the director for being too idealistic, that her portrayal of the multiethnic society is merely an Utopianism. But it is a much awaited fantasy by the audience, as a Chinese panel of the censorship board after viewing the movie declared, “That’s a Malaysian movie.” Responses flooded the local movie chatrooms, forums, and the director’s weblog, both positive and negative.

However film is not mirroring the society without any distortion and bias (Bennett, 1998). It cannot be seen as an absolute reflection Malaysia. No matter how verisimilitude or autobiographical the films are, they conceal the director’s subjective perception and interpretation of the issue, rather than simply passively reflecting an existing reality. It is the director’s own reality through recollection of memories and observations, and reconstruction of plots.

One function of art is of course to reflect reality as we know it. But another much-neglected function is to propose other realities, to portray the exceptions, because these lead us to imagining possibilities. (Sa’at, 2005)

The positive and apologetic portrayal of the tolerance and acceptance of diverse cultures in *Sepet* can then be seen and interpreted as the director’s ideal psyche of our multiethnic and multicultural nation.

Multicultural and multiethnic themes and stories are up to now not conditioned to flourish. Even so, with the recognition of the multilayeredness of cultural-historical formations, they leave powerful yet intricate impact, and provide endless possibilities of contents for filmmakers. Internationally-acclaimed director Tsai MingLiang reportedly claimed to return to his homeland to shoot *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) due to its multiethnic and multilingual setting.

Emergence of these oppositional films, although late, as if agreeing upon the non-essentialist conception of nation-state cinema and response to the recent accounts of national cinemas which seek to resist the homogenizing fictions of nationalism and to recognize their historical variability and contingency, as well as the cultural hybridity of nation-states. (Crofts, 1998:386)

*Sepet* demonstrates to us that a film would be able to transcend from a mere medium of cultural discourse to an active plane of discussion. National identification thus can be a
proactive process, through film medium or national cinema, rather than a unidirectional myth-creating process by the dominant group. Through its theme and messages, and the portrayal of multicultural ethnicities in their indigenous settings, lifestyles, languages and interaction with each other, Sepet is able to show a possible Malaysia as a nation consists of multiethnic communities living in harmonies, not without problems but willing to understand each other, resolve the problem, and to the extend of tolerating each other.

Works Cited


Nadarajah, M. (2004). Another Malaysia is Possible. KL: NOHD.


The Author

Beh Chun Chee holds a BA in Communication and an MA in Screen Studies, both from University Science Malaysia (USM). He is currently lecturing on Broadcasting at the University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia. He was previously involved in postproduction of TV commercials, TV programs and films.
Imitation and Indigenization in Filipino Melodramas of the 1950s

Jovenal D. Velasco
University of the Philippines Film Institute

Abstract

The paper traces the origins and development of the studio-, genre-, and star-systems in Philippine cinema and investigates whether, with the importation of film technology from the USA, Filipino filmmakers likewise imported Hollywood ideologies. Subject films are Sino’ng Maysala? (Who’s to Blame?) and Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak (Wayward Maidens), both produced in the late 1950s by Sampaguita Pictures, Inc., a major film studio in the pre- and post-war years. These films adopted many of the external conventions of the Hollywood model, notably the iconography, as well as the films’ internal conventions of plot and theme. It cannot be claimed, however, that these features are completely and solely coming from Hollywood, for Filipinos have had a long melodramatic tradition in their Hispanic-influenced theater and literature. The tradition is carried over in present times not only in theater and film but also in television and radio dramas. Neither are ideological values Hollywood imports. They are long-lasting results of the Filipinos’ earlier historical and colonial experiences even before Hollywood was introduced into their culture. Here is where indigenization enters.
One of the unquestioned assumptions regarding the introduction of film in the Philippines by the Americans at the turn of the 20th century is that Filipino filmmakers wound up importing not only the technology but the manner of producing and promoting films as well. Moreover, with the rampant imitation of Hollywood film genres and stories, some believe that even the ideology of Hollywood has been imported. This is especially true of the narrative fiction or feature film.

Foremost in the Hollywood style of producing and promoting films that Filipino producers readily adopted were the studio- and star systems. They came in a package, wrapped in film-genre segmentation as marketing strategy. Each studio specialized in a particular genre or two and the exclusive participation of particular actors from the studio’s stable of contract stars distinguished one genre from the others. The genres, moreover, had specific territorial/geographic, as well as gender-oriented targets. In the Philippines, a similar set-up had been established.

The concern in this paper, therefore, is as follows: In adopting the form and presumably the content of foreign models, have early Filipino genre films likewise imported the social and cultural values of their models? How valid is the assumption that with the importation of the technology, the ideology came in the package, as well? This is important because the Philippine experience in this regard is not an isolated case but common among several Asian cinema cultures, notably of those nations with colonial experiences and/or was introduced to motion pictures by the Americans.

Specifically, we shall evaluate two Filipino melodramas of the late 1950s as subject films and compare them to Hollywood models under three criteria: content, consisting of the internal conventions of the genre that include story theme and subject, characters, and plot development; ideology and cultural values that they carry and promote, including the position of women; and formal, expressive substance that would include the external conventions of the genre adopted by the films, as manifested primarily by their mise-en-scène elements.

Melodramas of the 1950s are chosen because the period marks the heyday of the studio system in Philippine cinema that emerged in prewar (WWII) years and flourished in postwar years. *Sino’ng Maysala?* (Who is to Blame?, 1957), and *Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak* (Wayward Maidens, 1959), the subject films of this study, were both produced by Sampaguita Pictures, Inc., one of the “Big Three” movie studios of postwar years.

It was also in the 1950s when the valuation of Hollywood formula films was de riguer, notably with the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, along with the psychological suspense thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock and the crime-detective movies that starred James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, as fetish actors of the genre. The Sirk melodramas, such as for example, *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), and *Imitation of Life* (1959), were popular among Filipino moviegoers, notably the women who go for the so-called “weepies” or “tear-jerkers.”
Neither of the subject local films were inspired by any specific Douglas Sirk film, however. *Sino’ng Maysala?*, at best, took off from Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), and remotely, Elia Kazan’s screen adaptation of the John Steinbeck classic novel, *East of Eden* (1955). But both films starred James Dean, the young American film-star sensation of the 1950s who became a cult icon following his early death in a car crash – after making only three major films. And here lies the Hollywood inspiration.

Alive or dead, Dean commanded hordes of fan following the world over, or wherever Hollywood films were shown. In the Philippines alone, there were at least three James Dean clones whose star personas were patterned after that of the Hollywood teen idol. One of them was Romeo Vasquez, the juvenile male lead in *Sino’ng Maysala?*, a family melodrama. The James Dean clones projected the “misunderstood youth” or “bad boy image,” which up to this time is a lucrative market positioning in Philippine cinema.

*Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*, on the other hand, though purportedly a gangster film, foregrounds the gangster’s various relationships with the female characters who gravitate toward him, rather than his career in crime which merely takes off practically on the second half of the film. In fact, it is the criminal connection and activities of the *femme fatale* that are given more prominence; she was the one who recruited to the criminal world an ingenue character. In effect, the film is more of a site for women issues and position as Hollywood melodramas are.

### The Hollywood Melodrama

Melodrama in Hollywood became popular in two eras that both bore the impact of two global wars: the pre- and post World War II; the 1930s-’40s and the 1950s-’60s. In both instances, the men who earlier went to the battle fields came back home to their families in a significantly altered domestic situation (Hayward 1996: 121).

The American woman or wife had taken a job to eke a living, whether as a factory or office worker or as an entrepreneur. Generating her own income, the woman subsequently became economically self-sufficient, independent, and assertive. In some cases, the woman became liberated as well from her traditional gender role of subservience to her man and family, as well as from patriarchal or feudal sexual mores, in some cases. Such was Mildred Pierce, a character portrayed by then come-backing Hollywood movie queen, Joan Crawford, in the film that bore the main character’s name in its title. She became a successful entrepreneur and single parent after her husband left her.

In contrast, the American male was starting to feel inadequate and insecure as a result of his stripped domestic power. Often, he stayed home, relying on his postwar
pension. He was no longer the chief provider nor did he continue to exercise economic dominance.

On screen, in the so-called male melodramas, this inadequacy was depicted as emasculation that made the family patriarch incapable of providing his sons proper guidance and, more important, a sterling example of manhood; the father figure suddenly crumbled. Such was the case of the father-of-James Dean characters in the films *East of Eden* and *Rebel without a Cause*. In some films, like in Sirk’s *Written on the Wind*, male inadequacy, despite economic and industrial power, is strongly suggested as sexual impotence that tragically got bequeathed as an heirloom from the family patriarch to his scion, as sexual aberration was bequeathed from the mother to the daughter.

Still the position of the woman was nothing enviable vis-à-vis that of the man. While she enjoyed economic independence and power, she has not been completely liberated from her traditional servile role; she continued to be the homemaker and caregiver, the manager of household chores, the self-sacrificing nurturer of her children. Hence, the martyr wife and mother complex (Hayward 1996: 204), played up in the melodrama, as exemplified again by Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *All that Heaven Allows*, recently remade and deconstructed by Todd Haynes as *Far from Heaven* (2002).

Worse, in film noir, the woman takes a negative image as a femme fatale (Hayward 1996: 120). The mysterious female is dubious and dangerous, sly and treacherous. She is the main suspect in a crime under investigation and subsequently declared the culprit, sent to prison, or eliminated outright. Such is the character Brigid O’Shaughnessy, played by Mary Astor, in John Huston’s classic film noir, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). In both cases, the woman, despite her new familial and societal position, continues to be oppressed and repressed on the big screen. For her newfound subjectivity, she has to pay a stiff price.

What ideology and cultural values, on the other hand, do the Filipino subject films carry and promote? What is the position of the woman in these films?

*Sino’ng Maysala?: A Showcase of Feminine Pulchritude and Power*

**Privileging the Star Persona.** Armando Garces’ *Sino’ng Maysala?* tackles the social issue of juvenile delinquency and its lead actor, therefore, was a young actor being built up by Sampaguita Pictures as a young matinee idol. He was given overwhelming star support by the studio’s brightest luminaries, such as Paraluman, Rogelio de la Rosa, Gloria Romero – the reigning movie queen then – Lolita Rodriguez, Ric Rodrigo, and Luis Gonzales. The female stars, moreover, were then the glamour queens of the studio that was known best for its stable of film personalities generally regarded to have the prettiest and handsomest faces in the local film industry.
The Star is so-celebrated that in this film, for example, the characters assumed the star’s screen names rather than the other way around. Needless to say, the female stars – along with their love teams – were among the biggest, if not the brightest, box-office attractions of the studio and as such would not be content in playing mere support roles. Actually that was more of a studio decision than of the stars themselves. Each of the three female leads who play sisters were given sub-narratives of their own, intentionally and cleverly plotted in flashbacks and intercuts to give practically equal screen exposure and significance to the female leads. The resulting convoluted plotting, in effect, makes for a five-in-one story, including that of the juvenile delinquent, and that of the family as a whole. Being a family melodrama, that was not much of a problem. The subplots were simply the stories of each sibling in the family, and thematically, the three sisters’ respective love experiences have had tremendous impact on the young brother and contributed largely to his delinquency.

Bourgeois Ideology of the Filipino Family. The dramatic inquiry of Sino’ng Maysala? covers how a middle-class Filipino family rises up from bankruptcy and copes with the individual problems of its members that affect the whole family. As in most melodramas worldwide, the story is family- and class-centered. The family is the site not only of the dramatic conflicts among characters but also of ideological contradictions (Elsaesser in Grant 1986: 280-81). On the one hand, there is the high cultural value of keeping a family whole and intact at whatever cost; on the other, there are the various self-and selfish interests that threaten that value.

In foreign models, these values have been identified as bourgeois, since the beginnings of melodrama as a theatrical genre, is the morality play, and as a fiction genre, the French romantic novel (Elsaesser in Grant 1986: 279-80), both identified with the bourgeoisie. In Philippine setting, that value seems to be common among all social classes. Uncommon are the concerns that haunt the middle-class to no end: marrying someone from at least the same class or preferably from the higher class – social mobility should always be upward, not downward – and hypocritical moral uprightness. These local values and concerns are shared by the Hollywood models, for ultimately, the melodrama genre promotes the ideology of capitalism and patriarchy (Hayward 1996: 203).

It cannot be hastily claimed, however, that the ideology is an influence of the Hollywood film genre model alone, for these values had been present even in the markedly hispanic-influenced theater and literary traditions in the Philippines. The Hollywood influence is more of a reinforcement of existing values.

Where lies the difference then?

It is in the position of women. Although initially blamed for the suicide of the family patriarch after his bankruptcy that resulted from the misguided extravagance of
the women in the family, the latter are nevertheless presented as possessing strong character spines. The eldest daughter took over the administration of the family finances; furthermore, although initially bothered by moral qualms, she eventually defied societal conventions and ostracism by resuming her aborted romance with a former boyfriend initially beneath their class and social standing but now more affluent than they are after he married a wealthy woman. Another daughter, whose boyfriend was sent abroad by his family, waited not in martyr-like, masochistic stance but rather in stoicism. The third one, on the other hand, rebelled against accepted mores and decided to take matters into her own hands. She took another boyfriend over whom she was not at all serious.

Even the accusation of the women characters’ guilt and responsibility over the delinquency of the youngest sibling was more of a recognition of their authority and moral ascendancy and the attendant responsibility rather than an approbation of character flaw and weakness, unlike in Hollywood melodrama and film noir.

In contrast, the male characters were less etched. The family patriarch died in his own hand at the beginning of the film. The male suitors, portrayed by big stars in their own right, were virtually relegated to “partnering the prima ballerinas,” so to speak. The male juvenile delinquent was no wall to lean on, either; in fact, it was he who needed to be protected and guided. It was only the mother figure whose presence was unusually minimal, but this was probably because she was portrayed by a character actor, the quintessential *mater dolorosa* (Our Lady of Sorrows) of the Sampaguita lot – who had to take a back seat to the stars. Nonetheless, the maternal character accepted in great humility and nobility her responsibility over her family’s and her son’s fates.

*Mise-en-Scène and External Conventions.* Melodrama’s formalist expression is found in a film’s *mise-en-scène* elements. In the Hollywood model, especially in the Freudian films of Sirk – notably *Written on the Wind* – what could not be said or explicitly shown on screen were expressed in symbols and metaphors (Elsaesser in Grant 1986: 288-89). Initially, the device was used to circumvent stiff censorship laws – even before Sirk. In time, it became a conventional formalistic practice. Hence, colors, objects, and settings expressed externally the inner turmoils and conflicts of the characters. Harsh reds and yellows were used by Sirk to express the passion and the repression of his characters, for example, as replicas of an oil-drill tower made into an executive-table piece became a phallic symbol and a small pistol, a metaphor for impotence. Less Freudian but stylistically melodramatic as well are opulent interior house decors of the bourgeoisie, complete with large mirrors – not just one but several – and even larger closed windows, presumably of similar number, framing the rains that fall outside. In addition, huge, winding stairs with iron-grill balustrades are conveniently used as set for characters who go up and down the stairs as the family experiences reversals of fortune (Elsaesser in Grant 1986: 298). All these are replicated in Filipino melodramas, from the 1950s as in those of Sampaguita Pictures, to recent
times, as in the glossy melodramas of Viva Films and even those of Lino Brocka’s small-town family melodramas in the late 1970s and ’80s.

In many Sampaguita productions, moreover, the female leads were dressed in elegant gowns designed by the fashion czars of Philippine haute couture then – Ramon Valera, Pitoy Moreno, and Ben Farrales, complete with sparkling jewelry. And they were photographed and made incandescently beauteous in approximated glossy Hollywood glamour shots.

Excess, indeed, is a stylistic hallmark of melodrama (Gledhill 1991:212-13), Hollywood or local, most especially in the Philippines where many things are apparently overdone. Excess is evident not only in production design and lighting but also in music-and-sound scoring.

*Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak: Power-Sharing Onscreen between Man and Woman*

**Film Noir Iconography and Internal Conventions.** Tony Cayado’s *Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak* takes off from the classic Hollywood gangster-film noir, primarily because it largely adopts the iconography or external conventions and visual style of the genre: black-and-white cinematography; images of the seamy side of the city, such as esteros, isolated streets and under-the-bridge settings; nightclub and safehouse scenes made even more mysterious and foreboding by sharp-contrast, low-key, chiaroscuro lighting; and a final scene showing the tragic death of the gangster protagonist in a tableau-like, curtain-call blocking.

Similarly, in the film we find the genre’s internal conventions of organized criminality, manifested primarily in drug-pushing; duplicity and treachery; the presence of underworld characters with menacing faces, such as the ganglord, the up-and-coming pretender to his throne, the gang moll or femme fatale, the sidekicks and bodyguards perpetually holding either pistols or big-power guns, and the initially innocent-looking recruits or ingenues to the criminal world; violence; and the absence of the family (Harvey in Belton 1996: 171-82).

While a gangster movie in adopting both the external and internal conventions of the genre, the film can also be considered a melodrama for the dominance of the female characters and the foregrounding of women’s position, as strongly suggested by the film title, both in the society that it depicts and in its screen representation. *Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak* is actually of mixed-genre, and here the representation of women is not necessarily singular. The traditional co-exists with the progressive or radical.

**Reinforced Ideology Despite Revisioned Internal Conventions.** The protagonist of a Hollywood gangster film is invariably male. Even in film noir where the femme fatale is accommodated a relatively fore-grounded screen position, the
protagonist, the detective, is still male. In *Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*, however, screen and narrative positions are apparently equally shared by both the male and the female protagonists, Greta and Conrado. Still, if we take into account the other significant characters in the film, it may be said that the balance is actually tipped in favor of the female gender. As in *Sino’ng Maysala?*, the women take central exposure in the second film. In *Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*, the adult women characters – except for *femme fatale* Greta (Bella Flores) – take traditional women roles in that they pine for the man of their love, waiting for him to shower them attention and affection, in his own time and in his own pace; in his own pleasure, in short. Moreover, the man, in exchange for love, and presumably sex – if censorship laws were more relaxed then as in today – commands unquestioning obedience and loyalty, right or wrong. Projected on the screen is the woman as amorous conquest and slave, definitely an unflattering chauvinistic image of the female gender.

On the other hand, Greta represents a progressive image of the woman: she is in control. Although initially presented in an unflattering light because of her criminal occupation and illicit preoccupations, she proves to be nobody’s pawn till the end. Moreover, she demonstrates nobility of character when, risking her life, she decides to save an innocent friend whom she herself had earlier introduced to the criminal world, the film’s ingénue (Susan Roces). This is a revisionist image of the *femme fatale*, or in local cinema, of the female villain, who in this film possesses redeeming values.

The male protagonist Conrado (Eddie Garcia), on the other hand, simply plots his action and dramatic premise: to succeed, to reach the top, wherever he may be. The characterization of his Hollywood counterpart is more defined and fleshed out: the gangster is of humble beginnings, an outsider dreaming of a better life, and in America, “the land of opportunities,” anyone is encouraged to improve his lot by dint of hard work. But the gangster wants to accumulate the most in the shortest time possible, so he resorts to illegal means. Society will not allow this and so in the end he must die to impress that “crime does not pay.” This is wishful thinking because in real life, at times and seemingly getting more frequent nowadays, crime *does* pay. The obligatory death of the ganglord at the end serves as the mythical function of the genre (Mitchell in Grant 1986: 163-65). Although the local subject film failed to etch in high relief the social and psychological circumstances of the gangster protagonists, it nonetheless serves the mythical function of a crime film story – Conrado dies; Greta also dies but is forgiven, it is strongly suggested, because she demonstrated “heroism” in the end. In this regard, the genre film follows the Hollywood model. After all, who will quarrel with such traditional capitalist “moral lesson?”

**Shared Value and Concern.** In the case of both subject films, there is a shared value and concern: the proper guidance and unconditional protection of the youth. Adult characters – and viewers – are admonished to be upright models of the youth. The depiction of the characters’ erring ways constitutes a stern warning against negative behavioral examples and a nagging reminder of social and moral responsibility. The first
film, right or wrong, identifies adult responsibility over a contemporaneous social problem – juvenile delinquency. The second, on the other hand, seems to point out that the corruption of the youth constitutes the worst criminal act. Maybe the pontifications sound uptight especially to contemporary cinema audiences. But those were the days of relative innocence; those were also the days of rising youth unrest. Embodied in the genre film is a society’s wishful thinking, the articulation of present fears finding vicarious resolution and assurance awaited in the film’s finale. As the curtain draws down, the consumers know if the film that they have watched has served its mythical function. That consideration precedes all others, including a film’s artistic or literary merit.

**Indigenization**

The melodramatic tradition in Philippine drama and storytelling is not the sole influence of Hollywood. Filipinos had a similar tradition in theater even before Hollywood was introduced. Euro-Hispanic culture of an earlier colonizer had beaten Hollywood to the draw in this regard. Traditional Philippine theater has its own conventions, foremost of which is the presentational, expressionistic style, something unlike the more realistic or the naturalistic representational style of the West (Tiongson 2000: 29-30). Excesses therefore are carried in convoluted plotting, stock characters and characterizations, “mask-acting,” and generally indicating performance approaches. The tradition is carried over not only in contemporary Filipino films but in radio and television dramas or soap operas as well. To a particular aesthetic sense and taste – for example, the Western, idealist, Aristotelian aesthetic sense – these may be negative features, but not necessarily so. Fortunately for Filipino films of this mold, post-classical critical frameworks such as those of the structuralist “deep structure” and archetypal characters of myths and legends, as well as that of genre film studies that value film primarily as a site of a culture’s ideology or dominant cultural values have been more appreciative and accommodating of indigenous styles and aesthetic sense.

Of course, additional inspirations for indigenization, Tiongson also points out, come from popular sources like history, folk narratives found in oral literary tradition and in the more contemporary comic book materials of fantasy and tales of the underworld, and even sensational human-interest stories found in the tabloids. They account for the increasing “Filipino-ness” of the content of local film stories that provided the counter flow to sheer imitation of Hollywood.

**Toward a Future**

Undoubtedly, Hollywood models have had tremendous impact and influence in Philippine cinema. It starts with the economic model: filmmaking as a commercial concern, developed through the years as an industry engaged in the production, marketing, and distribution of consumable cultural artifacts made in a factory-like, assembly-line set-up. Yet it is also a profound cultural activity. It engages in the
production and interpretation of meaning. Genre films fulfill both economic and cultural functions, notably in a society’s mythical imperatives embedded in narratives and symbolic images.

The two subject films adopted many of the external conventions of the Hollywood model, notably the iconography. The same thing may be said of the genre’s internal conventions, although it cannot be claimed that these features are completely and solely coming from Hollywood. Even before the filmmaking technology came to the Philippines, Filipinos have had a long melodramatic tradition in their Hispanic-influenced theater and literature. Here, indigenization largely enters the picture.

The question of ideology is a similar case. Melodrama extols the virtues of capitalism as it reinforces the ideology of patriarchy and the bourgeois family. Yet it cannot be said that the ideological values are Hollywood imports. Rather they are long-lasting impacts of the Filipino people’s earlier historical, colonial experience even before Hollywood was introduced into Filipino culture. Happily, specific cultural values rear their enlightened heads amidst the negative impact of dominant ideologies. We particularly refer to the deferential regard for women despite patriarchy. The attitude indicates largely the true position of women in Filipino native culture. And in addition, the welfare of the youth is a major societal concern.

Works Cited


Mitchell, E. “Apes and Essences: Some Sources of Significance in the American Gangster Film.” In Grant, B.K. *Film Genre Reader*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986:159-68.


**The Author**

Jovenal D. Velasco is currently finishing a master’s course in Media Studies at the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, where he taught film studies and production courses at the institution’s Film Institute (UPFI) for over seven years. He also taught Broadcast Communication at St. Scholastica’s College, Manila. He conducts workshops in film appreciation, scriptwriting, video production, and acting. He has been a member of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) since 1980. As one of the resident directors at the PETA Broadcast and Film, Inc., where he was also once a head writer, Velasco has written and/or directed teleplays and telecines, two of which have won awards. For the GMA Telesine Specials where the PETA BFI had line-produced movies made for television, he directed *Oriang: Ang Marangal na Dalit ng Lakambini*, which won the Bahaghari Awards in 1996, as well as the Star Awards for Television that same year as Best Movie Made for Television. At the Bahaghari Awards
this telecine dominated the major technical awards. The following year, he directed and co-wrote *Relikaryo: Ang Agnos ni Maria Clara*, which also won the Best Movie Made for Television at the Star Awards for Television in 1997. In 2001, he wrote and directed an advocacy docudrama on youth in conflict with the law, titled “ONNOY.” Jointly produced by the PETA-BFI and the Episcopal Commission on Prison Pastoral Care of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, it was a recipient of a production grant by the Cinema Values Committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Joven was also once in charge of publication in PETA; was head of the Special Publications Office at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, which published the prize-winning *Tuklas Sining* series; and was one of the managing editors of the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. He has in addition written several articles/papers on aspects of Philippine Cinema published in academic journals, popular magazines, as well as papers read in international and local conferences. At present he is working on a book project titled *Hulmahan/Huwaran: Reading Stars, Icons, and Genre Films in Philippine Cinema*. He also served one term as Acting Head of the Cinema Committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.
Rewriting the Martial Arts Movie in the Global Era: A Study of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Yang Jing
*Hong Kong University*

**Abstract**

As a transnationally produced film merging the martial arts genre with a feminist touch set in a fictionalized 19th-century China, Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* appeals to a global audience. I argue that the film translates the Chinese legend into the western world by “feminizing” the masculine genre to fit into the ethnic minority discourse in the United States. Since Hong Kong martial arts movies successfully constructed the myth of Chinese masculinity and patriarchy, which is often connected with Chinese nationalism, Ang Lee manages to re-package the genre in a less threatening tone. The movie’s commercial and critical success exemplifies that the strategy of flexible encoding enables the film to reach mainstream audiences. On the other hand, it arguably reinforces the Asian Americans’ marginal status as outsiders and strangers to the mainstream American society due to its exotic representation of China and its people.
The roots of the martial arts movie genre can be traced back to Shanghai in the 1920s where filmmakers attempted to combine the new western medium of film with Chinese cultural forms — mainly Beijing Opera and martial arts novels. Integrating operatic music and martial arts into folk tales of heroism and chivalry, martial arts movies reached their peak in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 70s, as many filmmakers left Mainland China for Hong Kong because of political upheaval in the Mainland and the constraints it placed upon their creativity both ideologically and economically, according to Hong Kong film critic Law Kar. The Shaw Brothers Studio produced hundreds of martial arts films directed by King Hu, Chang Cheh, Chor Yuen, and Law Kar-leung. These films established the basic formula of the martial arts genre: the theme of revenge and the battle between good and evil, extensive fighting scenes with stunning choreography and quick editing, period costume and stock characters. With a few exceptions, the martial arts movie is generally regarded as a male-star-driven genre featuring the righteous swordsman as an exponent of Confucian ethics.¹

In the 1970s, these Chinese tales of masculinity were trans-nationally received as low budget productions with B-movie status consumed by non-mainstream audiences in the West. According to David Desser, American screens were “flooded with Hong Kong imports, hastily and inexpertly dubbed, but among the season’s box-office champs” (Dixon, 2002:82).² Although martial arts cinema produced international kung fu stars and some successful films, as a genre it was initially received as a campy “chop-socky” targeted at Chinatown theatres and cult video stores, characterized by excessive violence, cheesy special effects and poor sound dubbing and editing. However, in the past decade, the martial arts aesthetic witnessed a mainstream shift following a surge of Hollywood blockbusters like Rush Hour (1998), The Matrix (1998) and Charlie’s Angels (2000), which combined martial arts sequences with computer graphics technology and the thriller/detective genre. As the contemporary globalized film culture embraces creative personnel from different regions, Asian talents like John Woo, Yuen Wo-ping, Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Chow Yun-fat increasingly began reinventing themselves as crossover artistes who successfully made the leap into Hollywood.

Among the crossover filmmakers, Ang Lee is a noted for his subtle handling of Chinese immigrant life in America and mainstream Hollywood projects of western thematic issues in different genres. In a study of Ang Lee’s father trilogy,³ Shih Shu-mei

---

¹ Some martial arts movies used female stars but represented them regularly as men, such as Cheng Pei-pei in male disguise in King Hu’s classic Come Drink with Me (1966) and Chang Cheh’s The Golden Swallow (1968), and Suet Nei in Paragon of Sword and Knife (1967).

² Stephen Teo argues that martial arts movies are divided into two categories: the sword-fighting films and the kung fu (fist-fighting) films. The former often feature heroes using swords and imaginary weapons in a fantastic pre-modern China, whereas the latter emphasize the body and training to defeat the evil in a realistic society, as in the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. In this paper they are generally regarded as martial arts movies.

³ Despite his academic training of theatre and film at the University of Illinois and New York University, Ang Lee could not find funding for his film projects of Chinese-related themes in the United States. His three Chinese language films, Pushing Hands (1991), The Wedding Banquet (1993) and Eat Drink Man Woman (1994), were
observes that the strategy of “flexible encoding” is employed to enable differential translations for differently positioned audiences. In the trans-national context of cultural exchange, the notion of flexibility is often used to describe the emergence of flexible subject positions in the late capitalist world. The mass migration of people and free flow of money and commodity across various boundaries result in a blurred distinction of national and cultural spheres. During the process of migration into the western cultural space, the Asian cultural subjects would inevitably face “profound ambivalence and efficient policies of containment” (Shih, 2000). Therefore Ang Lee’s previous Chinese language films, despite their sympathetic portrayal of the traditional patriarchy which might appeal to the Chinese audiences, display a stereotypical representation of Chinese martial arts, banquet customs and exotic oriental food from the perspective of ethnic minority for western consumption. In a similar vein, the martial arts epic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) is subjected to flexibility and adaptation to be “contained” by the mainstream American discourse. Loosely adapted from a 1920s martial arts novel written by Wang Dulu,\(^4\) funded by various sources from different regions and produced by a multi-cultural cast and crew, *Crouching Tiger* re-writes the martial arts genre by casting three female leads in a dynamic relationship of dependence, romance and direct conflict with a not-so-traditional male lead. Despite the presence of this strong male character, the film gives significant space in the cinematic narrative to the three female subjects and explores their characters in-depth in a significant departure from the conventional norms of the genre.

My argument is that the film “feminizes” the masculine genre of martial arts to fit into the ethnic minority discourse of Chinese American in the United States. Since Hong Kong martial arts movies successfully constructed the myth of Chinese masculinity and patriarchy, which is often connected with Chinese nationalism (Yuval-Davis, 1997), Ang Lee manages to re-package the genre in a less threatening tone. He interprets the movie in terms of western melodrama, “[Family] dramas and *Sense and Sensibility* are all about conflict, about family obligations versus free will... (the martial arts form) externalizes the elements of restraint and exhilaration. In a family drama there is a verbal fight. Here you kick butt.”\(^5\) Although it is arguable whether the emotional drama of the strong female characters enhances the “feminine” dimension of the movie, the film encourages multiple interpretations which are contradictory sometimes. In this paper, I would examine the marketing discourses and cinematic narratives to explore how the film is flexibly coded towards a global audience.

**Marketing Discourse**

---

produced by the Central Motion Picture Corporation in Taiwan and won commercial success worldwide.

\(^4\) As Lai observes, martial arts novels and films featuring man and woman warriors, secret manuals, mysterious kung fu masters and sword fighting in a *Jianghu* underworld were the rage in 1920s and 1930s Shanghai. The cult reached its height in Hong Kong bestsellers and martial arts movies in the 1960s and 1970s (Lai, 2002:6).

As the contemporary film industry becomes more international with creative personnel and financial backing from different countries, it is necessary for a film to target a global cinema audience (Buck, 1992:122). The production of *Crouching Tiger* exemplifies a globalized film culture under the framework of world capitalism. Following a five-month on-location shooting in Mainland China with the assistance of Beijing Film Studios, and the subsequent soundtrack recording in Shanghai, Ang Lee brought the film stock back to Hong Kong for postproduction and later to New York for editing and subtitling. To build up word-of-mouth, Lee then brought the film to various international festivals where it was exhibited and subsequently nominated for prizes.

Lee explained his promotion tactics in this way, “[In] Asia I have to deliver the film like a summer blockbuster, like a Jackie Chan movie; but afterwards I have to bring the movie to the west and release it like an art-house film, because of subtitles. I try to please everyone.” In packaging the film as a big-budget action movie for mainstream consumption in the Asian market, and following the ethnic trajectory of Chinese language films often categorized as art-house movies in the west, Ang Lee’s fluid subjectivity in different cultural discourses is clearly demonstrated. The film’s North American release exceeded the director’s modest expectation, and after winning four Oscar awards, the film boomed at the Asian box office, especially in the Taiwan and Singapore markets. To break the habitual association of martial arts movie with B-movie action flicks, advertising campaigns described the film as “a mix of Jane Austen lovemaking with Bruce Lee butt-kicking,” “Sense and Sensibility in martial arts,” and “a kung fu Titanic” (Pappas, 2001). The marketing materials attempt to neutralize the ultra-masculinity of the genre by highlighting the emotional side with reference to Jane Austen and Titanic, which arguably appeal to female audiences in particular. Combining the western way of storytelling and the eastern spectacle of marital arts, the film is encoded as an exotic love story, a feminist tale, a sword fighting thriller, as well as an art-house movie.

Ang Lee deems flexible coding essential for a cultural text to be received in the transnational flux, “[W]ith *Crouching Tiger,* for example, the subtext is very purely Chinese. But you have to use Freudian or western techniques to dissect what I think is hidden in a repressed society—the sexual tension, the prohibited feelings. Otherwise you don’t get that deep.” The staple masculine genre is refreshed with a western discourse

---


7 Since the late 1980s, Chinese language film started hitting the festival circuits and was classified as art-house movies, the “alternative” to Hollywood mainstream feature productions. Mainland directors like Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993) and Zhang Yimou (*Not One Less*, 1998), Hong Kong director like Kar Wai Wong (*Happy Together*, 1997) and Taiwanese directors like Hsiao-hsien Hou (*Shanghai Flower*, 1998) and Edward Yang (*A One and a Two*, 1999) made highly crafted auteur movies which were mainly consumed as art-house movies with meagre box office.

of femininity, which arguably appeals to global audiences. The film embodies a duality in constructing a “classical China” of a bygone era where patriarchy governs the society in harmony, as well as taking a pseudo-feminist stance in portraying the rebellious women with sympathy. Compared with the western audiences’ passionate reception, Asian audiences viewed the film with certain ambivalence, as revealed by the unimpressive box-office in Hong Kong and Mainland China. In Taiwan, *Crouching Tiger* swiftly broke the domestic box office record, though not without sharp disparagements of its pseudo-Chinese and pseudo-American characteristics. It is, therefore, safe to assume that the ambivalence results from a “cultural nationalism” which led people in Greater China⁹ to share the film’s triumph in Hollywood, as well as a suspicion of the film’s self-orientalizing tendency to satisfy a Western gaze in the Chinese cultural unconscious (Chan, 2004).

**Re-writing the Martial Arts Movie**

The dominant female trio of Jen, Shu-lien and Jade Fox functions as the driving force of action and narrative which is often reserved for masculine types like Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Jet Li. Kenneth Chan is right in reading the film as a “subversive moment in the gender history of the genre” (Chan, 2004). Though strong female warriors can be found in traditional martial arts cinema, the heroine is often pushed onto stage “by default, due to either the absence or enfeebled condition of a male heir in the family” to assume “the role of the avenger for an unjust death in the family and of the guardian of a community under external threat” (Zhang, 2001:53). The female characters in *Crouching Tiger* need no such excuse to enter the male-dominated Jianghu underworld. They embody a female desire in pursuit of independence, though not unbound by social obligations and class hierarchies. For instance, Jen steals the sword to test her martial arts skills and returns it to protect her family; Shu-lien supports herself by running a security agency but she suppresses her emotions; Jade Fox has mixed feelings of love and hate towards her disciple Jen. The depiction of multi-layered female characters as strong women arguably exemplifies a proto-feminist stance.

The film creates an elegant atmosphere of eastern tranquility in a watercolor painting in the opening scene. The image of pre-modern China, with abundant cultural icons in the *mise-en-scène* and peculiar social customs and lifestyles, establishes the ground rules for a mythical world of martial arts and sets up feudalistic social restraints. The narrative exposition introduces Shu-lien’s arrival in Beijing and her meeting with Jen at Sir Te’s palace, Jen’s self-introduction as an aristocratic daughter facing an arranged marriage yet yearning for a wild-roaming swordsman life, and the quick friendship nurtured between the two women. The cinematography establishes Shu-lien’s independence and mobility by shooting her moving freely from countryside to city and riding a horse across a busy street, and the camera following her point of view in

---


⁹ Referring to Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Chinese diasporas in South-East Asia and other regions.
observing people and places. The female perspective and detailed dramatic set-up distinguish the film from traditional Hong Kong martial arts movies, which often feature straight punch-ups between swordsmen.

Jen is depicted as a self-contradictory character who rebels and upholds the overpowering patriarchy simultaneously. Though her elaborate Manchurian costume represents the supposedly ornamental and domestic role of an aristocratic woman, Jen disobeys the assigned female role by intruding into Sir Te’s study – a male space symbolizing knowledge and power. She disregards the hierarchical and ethnic boundaries and sees Shu-lien from a lower status as her “sister,” yet she treats her kung fu master Jade Fox like a maidservant and sends her away to avoid family scandal. Moreover, the flashback scene of Jen’s indulgent affair with a desert bandit signifies sexual and class transgression which directly confronts Confucian ethics of female repression. This daring presentation of female sexuality is rare in traditional martial arts movies, which always constructed heroic masculinity through blood and courage. Yet the narrative restores Jen to the “proper” female role by letting her agree to marry in exchange for her father’s promotion. The discrepancies in Jen’s personality signify the entanglement of woman empowerment and Confucian female submission.

Jen’s running away on the wedding night marks a change in the mise-en-scène from the domestic setting to the open space of the Jianghu underworld. The teahouse fighting sequence pays homage to the classic scene in King Hu’s Come Drink with Me (1966). Jen hides her gender in male clothes and encounters a bunch of roguish swordsmen who want to teach the unruly youth a lesson. Being stock characters in the martial arts genre, these characters have frightening names like Iron Eagle Sung and Shining Phoenix Mountain Gou. Equipped with heavyweight weapons and fond of exaggerated posturing, the gang displays a kind of ultra-masculinity which is subsequently subverted by Jen. Accentuated by the lively flute, Jen flies up and down, derides the men’s pompousness, defeats the ugly mob one by one, and almost demolishes the teahouse. The female subjectivity and the swordswoman’s spectacular ingenuity add a proto-feminist touch to the otherwise masculine genre which is deeply entrenched in Chinese patriarchal power.10 However, the cinematic narrative has to wrap Jen up in male disguise to grant her legitimate freedom in the public space, following the convention of Hong Kong martial arts movies.

If Jen and Shu-lien face the dilemma to fulfill social obligations and to search after freedom, Jade Fox represents the radical rebel subverting the patriarchal order. As a middle-aged, treacherous criminal without family, she could not be contained in the

---

10 As Kenneth Chan notices, whether one attributes this choice to the source material for the screenplay (Wang Du Lu’s novel) or to Chow Yun-Fat’s lack of martial arts experience, Lee decided to shift the action sequences away from Chow Yun-Fat’s character. “The Guardian/NFT Interview.” However, one can still credit Lee and James Schamus for wanting to pursue a project that deviated in its gender conventions from the genre. Chan, Kenneth. “The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” Cinema Journal 43, No. 4 (Summer 2004): 3-18.
patriarchal framework. To Jade Fox, female sexuality is but a tool to obtain martial arts skills, hence she sleeps with Li Mubai’s master and murders him when he would not teach her because of her gender. Female submission is a mask to enter Jen’s family as a governess to survive in the hostile world, and moral laws are replaced by the jungle rule of kill or be killed. She urges Jen to discard family and enter the exciting Jianghu where they can do “whatever we [they] want” and kill anyone in the way, including Jen’s father. She whispers to her “[W]hat good’s a home? ...We’ll be our own masters at last.” Jade Fox rejects the female space assigned to women by Chinese patriarchy and sneers at so-called female virtues. Her manifesto signifies a strong desire to overthrow male-centered society and master her own fate. The casting of Cheng Pei-pei as the female villain adds a layer of pro-feminist slant. It serves as a self-conscious parody of the martial arts genre, since Cheng is a renowned 1960s Hong Kong kung fu star often playing the role of a detective or an avenger. In a bow to the film’s underlying but controlled sympathy to the rebellious woman, the casting lends rich inter-textuality to the movie.

However, the seemingly woman-centered narrative condemns the strong women for their transgression and re-affirms patriarchy authority in the end. The most powerful and skillful swordsman Li Mubai is depicted as a symbol of benign patriarchal power. He sees Jade Fox as the corrupting force in turning Jen into a “poisoned dragon,” and he is the only right person to redeem her. When the semi-illiterate Jade Fox finds that Jen surpasses her in martial arts skills and conceals this fact, she tries to murder her, while Li Mubai saves Jen at the expense of his own life. The long-held master-disciple relationship between Jen and Jade Fox cannot overcome peer jealousy and class divides, to say nothing of forming an allegiance against the male-dominated world. Neither does the female bonding between Shu-lien and Jen last long when the two women break into a death-defying battle for feeling betrayed by each other. Finally, when Jen kneels before Shu-lien in the aftermath of Li Mubai’s death, she submits to the patriarchal world which Li stands for and the tradition which Shu-lien upholds. To the western-educated film critic Pham, “[This] is the moment of feminism’s failure” (Pham, 2004:122), signified by the taming of the once rebellious Jen and the continuance of the prevailing social order. The final shot of Jen jumping off a mountain cliff and flying through the cloud might be understood as the literal escape, the tragic impossibility of female freedom in patriarchal China.

The three female characters are trans-nationally regarded as a representation of a modern struggle between traditional femininity and professional development, according to Matthew Levi.11 In this sense, the film translates the Chinese martial arts genre successfully into the western cultural forum with feminist discourses. However, the construction of powerful women is to reassert male subjectivity, because sympathy for the repressed female characters is entangled with nostalgia for a benevolent

---

patriarchal world order in a fictionalized China. The narrative ambivalence of woman empowerment and patriarchal benevolence illustrates the flexible coding of the film text to cater to differently positioned western and Asian audiences.

Conclusion

Esteemed as a “cultural chameleon” with expertise in presenting “a perfectly tailored, ‘unthreatening’ portrait of the Chinese and Chinese social habits’ to world audiences,”12 Ang Lee re-writes the martial arts genre with female subjectivities yet maintains the patriarchal discourse. Shih believes that Ang Lee’s being an Asian American and Chinese simultaneously effects an adaptable subject position “with seemingly flexible gender and race politics” (Shih, 2000:91). The cinematic narrative of Crouching Tiger represents such an effort to appropriate a Chinese masculine genre into an Asian American minority discourse for mainstream consumption. According to Lo, the “feminization” of the genre functions to “lessen the masculine nationalist dimension of the Hong Kong genre, thereby containing its threat to American masculinity” (Lo, 2005:185). The movie’s commercial and critical success exemplifies that the strategy of flexible encoding enables the film to reach mainstream audiences.

On the other hand, Crouching Tiger embodies the dilemma of a cultural texts’ boundary crossing in a globalized film culture. The west audiences’ perception of the film as a Chinese but not entirely foreign product forms a contrast with the Chinese accusation of it as a calculated exotica for the western gaze. Asian American cultural scholars also argue that the film reinforces the Diaspora’s marginal status as outsiders to the mainstream American society due to its exotic representation of Asians. However, the critical discourse within the binary framework of East vs. West no longer applies to the film well since it is a transnational-produced film targeted at global audiences. It might be concluded that Crouching Tiger’s re-writing of the Chinese martial arts genre represents an effort of cultural appropriation and reconfiguration in the global era.

Texts Cited


Filmography

Charlie’s Angels (Columbia Pictures Corporation/Flower Films (II)/Global Entertainment Productions GmbH & Company Medien KG/Tall Trees Productions, 2000 dir. McG, 100 min.).

Come Drink With Me=大醉俠 (Shao Brothers Hong Kong Ltd., 1966 dir. King Hu, 91 min. 邵氏兄弟(香港)有限公司, 導演: 胡金銓).

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon=臥虎藏龍 (Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia/Sony Pictures Classics/Good Machine International/an Edko Films/Zoom Hunt production/China Film Co-Production Corp/Asian Union Film & Entertainment Ltd, 2000 dir. Ang Lee, 119 min.).

Golden Swallow=金燕子(Shaw Brothers, 1968 dir. Chang Cheh, 104 min. 邵氏兄弟(香港)有限公司, 導演: 張徹).

Rush Hour (Warner Bros., 1998 dir. Brett Ratner, 97 min.).
*Sense and Sensibility* (Columbia Pictures & Mirage, 1995 dir. Ang Lee film, 136 min.).

*The Art of Action: Martial Arts in Motion Picture* (TV, 2002 dir. Keith Clarke, 105 min.).


**The Author**

Yang Jing is a current Ph.D. student in the School of English at the University of Hong Kong. She is on leave from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Mainland China), and has taught various courses on American Literature, Twentieth Century British Novels, Advanced English and English Writing. She was awarded a Master of Arts with Merit in film studies by the University of Westminster (UK) in 2004. Her research interests include comparative cultural studies, feminism, postcolonial and postmodern studies, and Hollywood film.
Cinema and Nationalism: The Case of Singapore

Tan See Kam
University of Macau

and

Jeremy Fernando
Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

In this paper, we limit our discussion to Singapore cinema of the last ten years or so; a period coinciding with this cinema’s revival. We argue that three modes of nationalisms precipitate this cinema’s development, and that they do so in varying degrees of urgency, expediency, even ambivalence. As they wander its contours and traverse its terrain, they mark out their respective boundaries, concurrently fostering links with the local, the national and the transnational in situational and strategic ways. Not fixed, or fixable to particular loci in a determinate way, they are always in motion and never settling; full of contestations and contradictions and yet never reaching a state of aporia. And it is through this constant movement and the refusal to be pinned down that contemporary Singapore cinema comes to being, within the context of a three-nationalisms continuum. One strand pertains to cultural nationalism, which in striving as far as possible to be locally attached, has delved deep into localisms for cultural and national symbolisms. We call the second strand technocratic nationalism, and argue that it primarily grows out and collates around the notion that Singapore is first and foremost a globally-connected marketplace of ideas and commodities. In this instance, Singapore’s legacy as an entrepot port plays a definitive role. The logic of economic imperatives predicated on notions apropos to film as merchandise for transnational transaction accordingly holds sway, while matter of cultural considerations – that premised on the idea that film be first and foremost regarded as having cultural significance expressive not only of particular time and space but also of local ingenuity and industry – would take a backseat. Though contentious, the two strands are not always mutually exclusive. Technocrat-nationalists have as much vested interest in the nation’s self-image as cultural-nationalists: both are concerned with the matter of national distinctions in Singapore films – What makes Singapore Singapore? What makes its cinema distinctively Singaporean? – but they differ starkly in terms of approach(es), perspective(s) and emphases.
All national cinema...simultaneously [has both] a local and international form....[It] attempts at some point to turn its national distinction into an asset, not liability. It strives at some point to be locally attached ... [with content about] the local people-among-themselves framing their histories, their stories, their lifeways, their locations ... Going local at some point is a way of securing the resources with which to compete at home and abroad.¹

[The] idea of “national cinema” has given way to “transnational film studies” ... [Instead] of following the rush to abandon the national altogether, we [ask] what happens to the national in transnational film studies. We [call] for the final abandonment of the old national cinemas model, which assumed nation-states were stable and coherent and that films [of a particular nation-state] expressed singular national identity.²

Singapore on screen testifies to the fact that Singapore has both benefited from, and paid the price for, its historical position as the premier port in South-East Asia; the gateway between “east” and “west,” even “north” and “south.” This has made it territory to and for the global traffic in people, ideas, images, cultures, and capital, including film. Inbound and outbound movies run into each other here, just as Singapore films that go local are bound to collide with those which swim with the ebb and flow of translocal fashions and sensibilities, at some point: no film is an island. Because of this, Singapore cinema would always have a simultaneously local, national and transnational dimension – much like the way the country’s multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic environments would ensure that this cinema be continually diverse and multiple. The corresponding matter of cultural and national identities, as it is played out in this cinema then, would inevitably be complex, even contradictory.

In this paper, we limit our discussion to Singapore cinema of the last ten years or so; a period coinciding with this cinema’s revival. We argue that three modes of nationalisms precipitate this cinema’s development, and that they do so in varying degrees of urgency, expediency, even ambivalence. As they wander its contours and traverse its terrain, they mark out their respective boundaries, concurrently fostering links with the local, the national and the transnational in situational and strategic ways. Not fixed, or fixable to particular loci in a determinate way, they are always in motion and never settling; full of contestations and contradictions and yet never reaching a state of aporia. And it is through this constant movement and the refusal to be pinned down that contemporary Singapore cinema comes to being, within the context of a three-nationalisms continuum.


One strand pertains to cultural nationalism, which in striving as far as possible to be locally attached, has delved deep into localisms for cultural and national symbolisms. We call the second strand technocratic nationalism, and argue that it primarily grows out and collates around the notion that Singapore is first and foremost a globally connected marketplace of ideas and commodities. In this instance, Singapore’s legacy as an entrepot port plays a definitive role. The logic of economic imperatives predicated on notions apropos to film as merchandise for transnational transaction accordingly holds sway, while matter of cultural considerations – that premised on the idea that film be first and foremost regarded as having cultural significance expressive not only of particular time and space but also of local ingenuity and industry – would take a backseat. Though contentious, the two strands are not always mutually exclusive. Technocrat-nationalists have as much vested interest in the nation’s self-image as cultural-nationalists: both are concerned with the matter of national distinctions in Singapore films – What makes Singapore Singapore? What makes its cinema distinctively Singaporean? – but they differ starkly in terms of approach(es), perspective(s) and emphases.

In his 1999 National Day Rally speech titled *First-World Economy, World-Class Home*, former Prime Minister (PM) Goh Chok Tong discerned two types of Singaporeans, which provides an analogue to the two nationalisms and their inherent tensions, within the context of globalization.³ For Goh, one type belongs to the cosmopolitan paradigm: Singaporeans who “speak English but are bilingual,”⁴ and “have skills that command good incomes – banking, IT, engineering, science and technology.” They also “produce goods and services for the global market,” “use Singapore as a base to operate in the region,” and finally “can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world.”⁵ In short, they are the elites. For Goh, the “heartlanders” by contrast are less adaptable and high-flying. “They make their living in the country,” observed Goh who then elaborated:

Their orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish.⁶ They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors…. . If they emigrate to America, they will probably settle in Chinatown, open a Chinese restaurant and call it “eating house.”⁷


⁴ In the discourse of Singapore officialdom, a bilingual person is one who is fluent either in any two of the country’s official languages—Mandarin, English, Malay and Indian—or in combination with internationally recognized languages such as Japanese, French and German, to the exclusion of Chinese dialects and Singlish.


⁶ Singlish is shorthand for Singapore-English, or English with local characteristics. See discussion in the final part of this paper.

That last condescending remark notwithstanding, Goh’s particular privileging of the cosmopolitan over the heartlander in binary logic reveals much; not least of which is the matter of institutionalized social divisions along the line of class, language, education and occupation in contemporary Singapore society. This elitist bias for the cosmopolitan, as the chief purveyor of the country’s national and cultural identities from the local to the global, lies at the core of technocratic nationalism: “Singapore is Singapore only because our national spirit is a cosmopolitan one,” as George Yeo, the Minister of Information and the Arts (1991-1999) for the Goh government once famously pronounced, in another context. This sense of cosmopolitanism, a technocrat nationalistic one no less, has indeed been a major guiding force for the Goh government’s push to transform Singapore into a regional/international hub for commerce and the arts since the early 1990s, and remains evident in the corresponding efforts by Lee Hsien Loong’s successor government (2004-present), to remake the island state into a “global city of the arts.” Against this background, contemporary Singapore cinema develops.

The last strand is what might be called ambivalent nationalism. Where cultural and technocratic nationalisms are antagonistic and interdependent, ambivalent nationalism – as the term suggests – is by definition ambivalent about nationalistic matter. Films that wander with last strand, at best, draw tangents with those associated with the other two strands. Indeed the matter of Singapore national distinctions is at its most nebulous in such films, even though some like Evans Chan’s documentary, Sorceress of the New Piano (2004), have received partial local funding. Much the same can be said of those that feature a Singapore national, either as director – as in Jonathan Foo’s The Song of the Stork/Vu Khuc Con Co (2001) and Meng Ong’s Miss Wonton (2001) – or as protagonist – as in Gough Lewis’s Sex: The Annabel Chong Story (1999) and again, Chan’s Sorceress of the New Piano. Miss Wonton is a US-funded production about Chinese immigrants in New York, and is a fictional film like The Song of the Stork, a Singapore-Vietnam co-production about Vietnamese youth during the Vietnam War. Lewis’s documentary explores Annabel Chong’s notoriety as a porn star and a graduate student in Los Angeles, while Chan’s sorceress is Margaret Leng Tan, now a renowned avant-garde musician based in New York. Although these films all contain local involvement and participation, in one way or another, they do not feature high levels of specific local knowledge. Indeed, and as we shall see later in this paper, the level of local attachment in films as such stops short of yielding to national or nationalist contexts that anchor films found in the technocrat-nationalist and cultural nationalist paradigms.

Our positioning of contemporary Singapore cinema in relation to the three-nationalism continuum, and correlates such as heartlandism and cosmopolitanism, has two significant expositional goals. First, and as already might be surmised, it offers a

---

platform for problematizing the “trans” and “national” in both national and transnational film studies. That is to say, while recognizing that the “trans” has made the “national” a fuzzy concept, we are hesitant to henceforth make a quick exit from the “national” for the doorway of the “transnational.” Here we heed Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar’s advice (epigraph 2). At another level, we are mindful of Homi Bhabha’s reminder that while the borderless world, a purported consequence of globalization, promises much freedom in terms of mobility for people, ideas and cultures, this very freedom is at the same time “limited by the authority and locality of the nation whose presence may have somewhat diminished, but whose power to determine the lives of its citizens through national economic policy and political regulation should not be underestimated.”

In Singapore, technocratic nationalists have continuously ruled the country since independence in 1965. Their agendas thus dominate the political landscape, and in the context of Singapore cinema, have had a significant shaping influence over the ways it has developed. In this chapter, we examine this influence through a close examination of related governmental policies and regulations, state-funded film bodies such as Raintree Pictures, and finally, the matter of politics and language with regards to Singapore’s mediascape, including independent filmmaking. While hegemonic, the influence is by no means absolute.

Our second expositional goal stems from this stance. Turning to the arena of conflict and negotiation wedged in the three-nationalisms continuum, we examine the contradictions therein. These are contradictions fostered at the nexus of a highly regulatory, and for some repressive, state keen to subsume the local, the national and the transnational under the rubric of global cosmopolitanism; a state-controlled film sector that for the most part, has danced to the tune of technocratic nationalism; an independent film section anxious to break away from state determinisms of any kind, usually via recourse to cultural nationalism and primarily by producing films noted for their social and political critiques; and finally, an exo-dimension noted for making “Singapore” films characterized by ambivalent nationalism. Understanding contradictions in recent Singapore cinema is therefore concurrent to our present study of this cinema’s key moments from around 1998 onwards. This approach which combines political economy analysis and cultural studies enables us to examine closely the cinema’s local, national and transnational locations and dislocations with respect to state-funded productions such as the films of Rain tree Pictures, and independent productions, from highly commercial fare to “very personal films.”

The Parable of Money No Enough and Forever Fever

---


In 1998, in spite of the Asian financial crises that unsettled much of East and Southeast Asia that caused businesses in this region of the world to topple like domino cards, euphoria descended on Singapore’s struggling filmmaking community when two independent films, Jack Neo’s *Money No Enough* and Glen Goei’s *Forever Fever*, made local film history. The first – a biting satire about money-obsessed Singaporeans which stars TV comedian Jack Neo (and his team) – became the country’s top grossing local film of all time, a record it stills holds, when it chalked up S$5.84 million at the box-office.\(^{11}\) *Forever Fever*, on the other hand, became the first local film to be taken up by Miramax, which subsequently distributed it in the United States, Canada and Britain, under the new title of *That’s the Way I Like It*. It then traveled to Europe, and finally reached Australia, New Zealand, Japan and other countries. It reportedly earned S$4.5 million in worldwide distribution rights alone.\(^{12}\)

Despite its phenomenal success at home, *Money No Enough* was less successful in finding an audience abroad. This is perhaps not surprising since *Money No Enough*, considered by some locals as “a very true-blue Singaporean movie,”\(^{13}\) required a significantly higher level of specific local knowledge which in turn would leave most non-local viewers out on a limb. That is to say, *Money No Enough* contains strong appeal for heartlanders, while *Forever Fever* has the allure of global cosmopolitanism, including retro-chic, which endears the film to a wider audience outside Singapore. That is also to say, if the former film accedes to cultural nationalism, then the latter film would be found somewhere between cultural and ambivalent nationalisms.

Set in the late 1970s, *Forever Fever/That’s the Way I like It* goes local and global simultaneously. Its scriptwriter and director is Glen Goei, a theatre figure with international credentials, while the cinematographer, Brian Breheny of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* fame, was hauled from Australia, where sound-mixing for the film was done. The film’s affinity vis-à-vis transnational pop-capital of that period is more than apparent. In the film, protagonist Hock (played by Adrian Pang) both indexes and personifies this affinity, and by extension, the country’s connectivity with the transnational economy of the global popular. This character is firstly an avid fan of Bruce Lee; later enchanted by a John Travolta/Tony Manero-look-alike screen character (of John Badham’s *Saturday Night Fever* [1977]) who appears in the film-within-film, also called *Forever Fever*, Hock starts to kung-fu-groove to the disco music of the Bee Gees and others, and then goes on to win the dance competition at a popular


discotheque. Local boy Hock thus becomes a transnational and transcultural mimic by association with the global popular: this particular mimicry has helped push the film’s transnational gallivanting. This however has not endeared it to the local box-office. Made on a budget of S$1,200,000, nearly twice the production cost for *Money No Enough*, it collected only about S$800,000, or about 13% of what the local chart-topper brought in.

Directed, scripted and acted by local TV celebrity Jack Neo, *Money No Enough* is a “feel-good” film like *Forever Fever* which similarly contains the theme of the triumphant underdog: where grocery clerk Hock walks away as the disco king, the three protagonists in *Money No Enough* – an office worker, a building contractor and a coffee-stall assistant – become successful entrepreneurs. But *Money No Enough* has a noticeably stronger local flavor and focus: it is set in what is known in Singapore as the HDB heartland where the vast majority of working-class Singaporeans reside. The film narrates the problems and pains of these average everyday people, within familial and brotherhood-friendship contexts, and celebrates their little triumphs. Most distinctively, it employs highly localized humor, mostly of the “Ah Beng and Ah Lian” type; this lends to parodic self-referencing in a more sustained way than *Forever Fever*. It also features a richer sociolect smorgasbord, from standard English or Mandarin to Singlish (Singapore English) and Chinese dialects such as Hokkein. This, together with humor of the “Ah Beng” and “Ah Lian” kind, imbues *Money No Enough* with a significantly stronger sense of national distinction. While celebrated at home, local idiosyncrasies as such constrain *Money No Enough*’s ready circulation abroad.

In Singapore, “Ah Beng” and his female counterpart, “Ah Lian,” are caricatures of shallow, superficial, materialistic, and anti-intellectual urban Chinese-Singaporeans. They strive hard to be trendy, or in step with the whims of (transnational) fads and fashions, but from the point of view of the cosmopolitan, they ultimately fail to make the grade, or worse, are embarrassing testimonies of “good taste” gone horribly wrong. They are therefore deemed off-beat – people with outlandish, if not downright inappropriate, tastes. In terms of appearance and mannerisms, they often seem oafish and loud, even – as the monikers “Ah Beng” and “Ah Lian” so readily conjure up hickish. When it comes to music and other pop-culture matter, they have a distinct preference for “things” associated with the Chinese-Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong pop scenes, and to a certain extent, “J-pop” and “K-pop” cultures as well. In this sense, they are akin to Hock in that they would most likely take to Bruce Lee and other Asian pop-stars warmly and enthusiastically; but unlike Hock, they would keep a cool and respectful distance to equivalent “Western” pop-icons such as John Travolta. In terms of outlook and mind set, they are seen to be conservative, unlike the liberal “airheads” who tend to look “West” for ideas and inspirations. For these reasons, they are sometimes derogatively referred to as “Chee-nas” – Chinese of peasant stock. As aberrations to modern sophisticated

---


15 HDB is acronym for the Housing Development Board, the national provider of public housing.
Singapore, these stereotypes – including their older “Uncle” and “Auntie” counterparts – are thus ridiculed and mocked accordingly. They come from all walks of life, and commonly live in the heartlands. They may be rich or poor, but are usually not highly educated or “academic under-achievers.” They are generally not fluent in standard English, and habitually speak in Mandarin, Chinese dialects such Hokkein and Cantonese, and/or Singlish – a homegrown language which Singapore officialdom has consistently dismissed and vilified as the tongue of the uneducated and the uncultured, and accordingly sought to eradicate along with Chinese dialects (more in last section).

Living in the shadow of the country’s elites, largely composed of people who have done well in school, and who now hold key positions in officialdom, take up technocraticism as their “religion,” and readily know the difference between “effect” and “affect,” these academic under-achievers – or as *Money No Enough* portrays them are neither scum nor losers. Instead they are survivors of the proactive kind, and in their own ways, successful achievers too. In celebrating the little triumphs of the average Singaporean – the everyday people who courageously face life’s adversities – *Money No Enough* is a crowd-pleaser: the film’s three protagonists are down but not out; they dream the “Singapore dream,” and eventually become successful entrepreneurs. Although successful in overcoming the 1997-98 financial crisis, and also although successful in procuring joint capital venture from American investors to expand their car-care business, money is never enough for the three “Ah Beng” mimics. This is not because they wish for spiritual well-being which money cannot buy, but because they persistently find the cash in hand draining quicker than they can ever hope to replenish it. Hence money no enough – in a society obsessed with material pursuits.

While marking the locations and dislocations of the local-global continuum, *Money No Enough* and *Forever Fever* precipitate the revival of contemporary Singapore cinema. For a time, their combined successes generated much local media hype. It also engendered a sudden, albeit brief, flurry of investor interest which resulted in a record number eight feature films the following year. This gave hope for a filmmaking renaissance. The revival was initially slow, and could be partly attributed to the growing call from cultural nationalists that the government supported the local art scene, including Singapore filmmaking, partly due to initiatives of private individuals like Eric Khoo of Zhao Wei Films, and partly due to the novelty factor of local film productions, with some attracting the attention of international film festivals such as Cannes – for example, Khoo’s *MeePokMan* (1995) and *12 Storey/Shi Er Lou* (1997). Those that manifested a high degree of local attachment in the areas of casting, characters, stories

---

16 In *Money No Enough*, Jack Neo plays an office worker known as Keong. Although an able and proven worker, Keong is sidelined for promotion. His boss wants a fluent English speaker as the company’s manager, and so offers the promotion to a young but untested university graduate instead. As a result, Keong becomes upset, and so decides to tender his resignation. But he is not sure if he should do that with immediate “affect” or “effect.” After much deliberation, he gives his resignation notice with immediate “affect.”

and situations like *Army Daze* (dir. Ong Keng Sen, 1996) and *Teenage Textbook* (dir. Philip Lim, 1997), including Khoo’s films, generally found modest local box-office success, the exception here being chart-buster *Money No Enough*. Concurrent to this period, films featuring translocal participation, by contrast, all bombed at the local box-office – namely, *Bugis Street/Yao Jie Huanghou* (dir. Yon Yan, 1996), a Singapore–Hong Kong co-production about transvestite sex-workers in late colonial Singapore; *Tiger’s Whip* (dir. Victor Khoo, 1998), a local-funded comedy about an American who comes to town in search of a magic cure for his shrinking manhood; and finally *Medium Rare* (dir. Stan Barrett and Arthur Smith, 1991) and *God or Dog/Dabayao Shatongan* (dir. Hugo Ng, 1997) which are both loosely based on real-life occultist Adrian Lim and his murderous crimes. It would seem that local audience generally stayed away from films that eroticize, exoticize or demonize Singapore.

The revival coincided with the government’s concurrent efforts to boost the country’s service sectors from the late 1980s onwards, which led to the establishment of the Ministry of Information and the Arts (or MITA in 1990; later renamed Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts in 1999, or MICA in 2004) as the chief architect for arts-related policies. In the area of cinema and mass media, MITA/MICA has continuously maintained the push for Singapore to become an Asian cine-hub, with state-of-the-art production and post-production facilities for film, sound, video and multimedia.

In the wake of MITA, tertiary institutions started to offer media-related programmes for the first time, including film, video and TV studies. An age-based film classification system was formulated and put into place:¹⁸ this has allowed for more product variety which in turn led to the mushrooming of cineplexes throughout the island, with Hong Kong’s Golden Harvest, Australia’s Roadshow Entertainment and local film distributors and exhibitors such as Shaw Organisation, Cathay Organisation and Eng Wah Organization as the main players. Meanwhile the government’s “pioneer status” tax-break carrot attracted film and media entrepreneurs near and far, variously seeking production opportunities, negotiating co-production deals, and offering postproduction facilities.¹⁹ With the impending handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997,
the authorities additionally looked forward to catching the “flight” of filmmaking capital from Britain’s last colonial outpost in the Far East, including key film talent and production personnel. As Yvonne Ng puts it sardonically, “The authorities, ever pragmatic, decided there was economic value in artistic activity [including filmmaking].” That state technocrats’ economic agendas has indeed prevailed is a conclusion of Lily Kong’s study of the cultural policies of this period; this leads Kong to coin the term, “cultural economic policies,” as a way of highlighting the economic imperatives in the state’s cultural policies for “the arts.”

**Raintree Pictures and Singapore’s Technocratic Universe**

We seek to be a global city ... [that is] lively, vibrant, and fun to live and work in.... We want Singapore to have the X-factor – that buzz that you get in London, Paris or New York.... [If] we become a backwater, just one of many ordinary cities in Asia, instead of being a cosmopolitan hub of the region, then many good jobs will be lost, and all Singaporeans will suffer. We cannot afford that.

Founded in the midst of the Asian financial crises, Raintree Pictures, together with the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), also established in 1998, the year of the *Money No Enough* and *Forever Fever* success stories, marks a culminating point of public initiatives progressively put to place with respect to the arts, since the late 1980s. These moves and subsequent ones, including MITA’s *Renaissance City Report* (2000) and MDA’s *Media 21 Report* (2003), are all in tandem with the government’s push to develop Singapore as a regional cine-hub in the global marketplace for media products and services.

Raintree Pictures (or more precisely, Mediacorp Raintree Pictures) is the filmmaking arm of the state-controlled national broadcaster, the Media Corporation of Singapore (MediaCorp). It too has been looking for the X-factor that would set its productions ablaze and its name abuzz in the world market of films. So far, of its...

---


productions, only *The Eye/Gui Yan* (2002), a horror flick, has come close to doing so. But this Singapore-Hong Kong co-production features low local involvement: Raintree Pictures partly financed the production; local names are all cast in minor roles; the film is mainly shot in Thailand and Hong Kong where the story-line unfolds; it is directed by Hong Kong directors, Oxide and Danny Pang, and stars Angelica Chan of Taiwan. These characteristics render the film’s local/national distinctions fuzzy. This notwithstanding, *The Eye* co-production nonetheless fits in with Raintree Pictures’ strategy to produce “borderless films for the international viewer” that has “the right mix of local and regional talents” and that can “travel beyond Asia.”

Raintree Pictures is now Singapore’s most major film studio, accounting for about 40% of the total output since 1991, when *Medium Rare* – the first “revival” film – hit the screens. It is the biggest recipient of state funding for filmmaking. At the local box-office, it enjoys that which other local production houses can only wish for: the “Hollywood terms” which translates to a 60 percent cut of the receipts; its position as a state body gives it bigger bargaining muscles. It makes only fictional films which run the gamut of comedies, thrillers, horror films, social drama and other genre films, and presently has a mixed corpus of 10 “local” films and six “regional” films, with seven more in the pipeline; one of which is its first “transregional” co-production, *One Last Dance* (dir. Max Makowski [US]; starring Chen Tianwen [Singapore], Vivian Hsu [Taiwan] and Harvey Keitel [US]) – this film involves a trans-Pacific passage to North America, drawing on talent from outside the region.

Its “local” film paradigm is the most locally attached in that it predominantly draws on talent and resources from the local filmmaking community, including national broadcaster TCS to which it is affiliated. As a result, the productions would typically feature a preponderance of local personnel and talent, before and behind the camera. They are almost invariably shot in Singapore, and if not, would frame the story within a Singapore context. The film director is always local, while the script is written and developed by locals. Finally Raintree Pictures commonly seek out a local producer as collaborator. In this regard, J Team Productions turns out to be Raintree Pictures’ most frequent co-producer: together the two have made *I Not Stupid I & II/Hai Zi Bu Ben 1 & 2* (2002, 2006), *Homerun/Pao Ba Hai Zi* (2003), *The Best Bet/Hu Ran Fa Cai* (2003) and *I Do I Do/Ai Dou Ai Dou* (2005) – all scripted, acted and directed by Jack Neo of *Money No Enough* fame, who is also a well-known Chinese TV comedian, frequently works in TCS’ Chinese variety shows, and now owns J Team Productions.

---


26 TCS is the acronym for the Television Corporation of Singapore, the television arm of Mediacorp.
Regional names occasionally act in Raintree Pictures’ local (co)productions. This fosters a link to its “regional” film paradigm. Raintree Pictures typically co-produces and co-finances them with a Hong Kong production house – Applause Pictures (e.g. *The Eye*), Media Asia (e.g. *Infernal Affairs II/Wu Jian Dao 2*, 2003), and Milkyway Image (*Turn Left Turn Right/Xiang Zuo Zou Xiang You Zou*, 2003; also made in conjunction with Warner Brothers Asia). Invariably shot outside Singapore and written by non Singaporeans, they contain translocal stories that occur elsewhere – Thailand, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. They typically use Hong Kong directors – for instance, Oxide and Danny Pang (*The Eye*), Lau Wai-Leung and Mak Siu-Fai (*Infernal Affairs II*) and Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai (*Turn Left Turn Right*). The cast characteristically manifests an overwhelming East Asian presence, with local names – if they are cast at all often playing second fiddle to their regional counterparts. Regional collaborations as such have the advantage of at least one “ready-made second market” to circulate in; but as might be surmised, the more translocal connections, the fuzzier local and national distinctions become.

Financing varies from production to production. It would seem that Raintree Pictures usually allocates around S$1 million per local (co)production, while the studio’s stake in regional co-productions is significantly higher – for example, the tab for *AD 2000* and *Turn Left Turn Right* was S$3 million and S$3.1 million, or about 50 and 30 per cent of the total production cost of the respective films. Beyond having an investment interest, the extent to which Raintree Pictures has creative control over its regional co-productions is unclear: in all probability, its influence is not significant. However the studio seems to have a firmer hold over its local (co)investments: Jack Neo’s *The Best Bet*, for example, was released with a “happy ending,” after negative reactions from focus groups during test screenings with the original “unhappy” ending.

Daniel Yun is CEO of Raintree Pictures and admits to being “very commercial and very marketing driven.” Yun believes that “[producing] good mainstream, commercial movies is an art.” For him, they are “infinitely more difficult [to] produce than out-and-out arthouse films.” Yun also believes that the local film has a useful social

---

27 The only exception in this regard would be *The Truth about Sam and Jane*, film, directed by Derek Yee. Singapore: Raintree Productions & Film Unlimited (Hong Kong), 1999 which starred local TV personality Fann Wong.

28 Nayar, “Mr Yun-inverse.”

29 Ong, “Scream King.”

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid. *The Best Bet* is about three close friends who strike lottery. Their friendship is put to test when one of them decides to keep the winning all to himself. In the revised version, the theme of a dishonest and greedy friend turns out to be a bad dream after all; the film thus ends happily with the three sharing the winning.

32 Ibid.

33 Nayar, “Mr Yun-inverse.”
function in that they can “create debate ... debunk myths about Singaporeans, and ... tell
the truth – even when it’s a little unpalatable as in [I Not] Stupid.”34 This is because
“[every] country needs to use films as a way of talking about itself.”35 Yun’s passion
seems to lay with “pan-Asian films” though. “I’m not just making a movie for
Singapore,” says Yun in an interview, elaborating:

I’m looking at Asia – and beyond – as a market ... It’s a blinkered point of view to
think of a Singapore film only as one that’s by and for Singaporeans. We
[Singaporeans] have to broaden our view. I’d say a film is Singaporean if at least a
quarter of the investment is from here and/or there’s a meaningful involvement
in front of or behind the camera.36

This type of partial participation strategy is a defining trait of Raintree Pictures’
translocal co-productions. It is also in tandem with the government’s position that
“Made-by-Singapore” media products need not be “entirely made in Singapore or made
for the Singapore audience only.”37 As Raintree Pictures’ trans local co-productions
make clear, the turn to the regional or the global has entailed a corresponding negation
of the local – be it pertaining to local input, resources or storylines – in direct
proportional ways, and in so doing, puts technocratic nationalism on a collusion path
with ambivalent nationalism. On the other hand, and in particular respect to its local
(co)productions, technocratic nationalism seems to converge with cultural nationalism;
but as we shall show in our concluding section, that convergence is a soft one.

Politics, Language, and “Very Personal Films”

I’m not guided by what Human Rights Watch says. I am not interested in ratings
by Freedom House or whatever ... Look at the humanities index in last week’s
Economist, we’re right on top. You look at the savings index, World Bank, we’re
right on top. Economic freedoms, we’re on top. What is it we lack?38

We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish.39

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
    (LexisNexis™ Academic). MDA is the acronym for the Media Development Authority (founded in 2002), a
    statutory board of MITA/MICA. It is the government’s media watchdog and is responsible for granting the
    broadcasting license.
38 Lee Kuan Yew; cited, Michael Elliott, Zoher Abdoocarim and Simon Elegant, “Lee Kuan Yew Reflects,”
    2006).
Singlish is especially fashionable these days among Generation Y, in part because it gives uptight Singapore a chance to laugh – at itself.  

In the arena of contemporary Singapore cinema, the struggles between cultural and technocratic nationalisms have many fronts. The three epigraphs for this concluding section give an inkling with regards to where state technocrats have drawn the lines. Now we zoom in on three contending areas with respect to Singapore’s mediascape: namely, film and politics, film and language, and film and censorship.

In technocrat-nationalist Singapore, the locals have long learned that it does not pay to be (found) on the “wrong” side of PAP’s politics. The PAP is now synonymous with the government, and the state, by virtue of the fact that it has ruled the country continuously since coming to power in 1965. This government has consistently, relentlessly and perennially remained hostile to all potential contenders. Over the years, political opponents have variously been held in custody without trial, faced harassment, been sued for defamation, made bankrupt, and even jailed, with some having to resort to permanent self-exile. For James Gomez, this has created a climate of fear, and “[when] it comes to politics, it’s pure paranoia.” The overwhelming majority of the population therefore avoids politics, and for those who are not declared opponents of the PAP like Gomez, but who are nonetheless public figures, they would be quick to disassociate themselves from any suggestion that their work is, or can be read as, political. An example would be Eric Khoo whose films are notorious for showing the underbelly of affluent Singapore. As Gina Marchetti found out in an interview with the filmmaker, rather than political, Khoo insists that his films offer “slice[s] of life” for viewers to take “home and try to think a bit more,” if they so wish. This turn of phrase points to the location and dislocation of the political in contemporary Singapore society.

In local filmmaking, Martyn See’s smack at giving political repression a human face in Singapore Rebel (2005) was smacked with an outright ban on the grounds that his short documentary breached the Films Act pertaining to party political films – a term which encompasses all audio-visual formats which advance the cause of any

---


41 PAP is the acronym for the People’s Action Party, founded by first-generation leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew.


particular political party in the country. This policy was formulated and implemented in 1998, with offenders – that is, anyone convicted of importing, making, reproducing, exhibiting, or possessing for the purpose of distributing party political films – risking a fine of up to S$100,000 or a prison-term of up to two years. Apparently the censors deemed See’s film about Dr. Chee Soon Juan, an opposition leader, as biased and partisan, and so amounted to a “party political film.” Subsequently, See was called in for questioning by the police, and asked to surrender his video camera, including unused footage for the documentary. No charge was laid against him however. See, on the hand, has maintained firmly that his 26-minute-long documentary was non-partisan and that it was about Dr. Chee the private citizen. (At the time, Dr. Chee was a bankrupt; a consequence of the defamation suits filed him against by PAP leaders.) Like the censors, MICA made no distinction between Chee the private citizen, and Chee the leader of Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), reiterating the official rationale for the ban thus:

“Party political films” are disallowed because they are an undesirable medium for political debate in Singapore. They can present political issues in a sensational manner, evoking emotional rather than rational reactions, without affording the opportunity for a meaningful rebuttal or explanation to audience and viewers.

See’s supporters then started a petition expressing their concern with the ban. For them, “the harassment of Martyn See, the threat of his prosecution under the Films Act, and restrictions on freedom of expression, including artistic freedom” is antithetical to the “freedom of expression” section in the Constitution of Singapore. The ban was never lifted, and those have seen the documentary at the “Open Source Video” site on the internet, or at human rights film festivals overseas, would probably find the censors’ paranoia intriguing. When asked about the ban, MM Lee Kuan Yew, dubbed “The Man who saw it all,” responded curtly: “To hell with it,” he says, “But the censor, the enforcer, he [sic] will continue until he is told the law has changed.” Modern Singapore’s most prominent founding father then divine the future: “And it will change,” he adds finally, while washing his hands.

That remains to be seen, of course. For the time being, PM Lee Hsien Loong’s call for an “open and inclusive ... society that is compassionate and caring ... [inhabited by] people with clear minds and warm hearts” at his swear-in speech (2004) as Singapore’s

45 Martyn See (Blog), “No political films Please, We’re Singaporeans” <http://singaporerebLblogspot.com/> (accessed 3 March 2006); and also Zakir Hussain, “Film Probe: Activist Called for Interview,” Straits Times 22 September 2005.

46 Cited; Cherian George, in See (blog).


third Prime Minister, is on hold.\textsuperscript{49} It would be a mistake, however, to regard the controversy over See’s documentary as an isolated incident. It is not:\textsuperscript{50} the ban is yet another instance that demonstrates the hegemony of the technocrat-nationalist agendas over Singapore’s political life. If members of the opposition parties appear to be invisible in Singapore’s public sphere, this is because they have been largely denied equal access to public media, from press to broadcasting. There is no hindrance, on the other hand, for programs featuring members of the PAP-led government, whether locally-made or foreign-produced; they have, for instance, been regularly passed as “current affair” items on local TV. Members of opposition parties indeed live a precarious, albeit defiant, existence in the margins of technocratic nationalism.

An analogue to this is Singlish. Cultural nationalists support this street language precisely because it bears the irrevocable mark of local ingenuity and industry (in that Singlish is created by the locals for communication purposes). In this sense, it has the mark of national essence. But nothing seems to irk the technocrat-nationalists more than Singlish. In this connection, the annually held Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), spearheaded by former PM Goh in 2000, is constitutive of yet another attempt at weeding out the basilect. Its launch expectedly became an occasion for Singlish bashing. Singlish is “poor English,” says acrolectal Goh, it “reflects badly on us ... and makes us seem less intelligent or competent.” In short, it tarnishes Singapore’s national image. For Goh, Singapore would suffer a further crippling disadvantage, if Singaporeans do not speak standard English – “the essential language of commerce, science and technology” – since “Singlish is incomprehensible to outsiders,”\textsuperscript{51} thus turning a national distinction into a liability. Here Goh does not take into account the scenario that not all outsiders are standard English speakers – for example, these outsiders may be French merchants, Japanese scientists and Indian engineers who know not a word of English. Neither does he take into consideration the fact that every country, if not city, has its own manner of speaking English–in this sense, standard English is a myth of sorts. The reductionism inherent in the speeches of technocrat-nationalists, as seen in this instance and elsewhere, clearly strives on the convenience which linear deductionism and quick determinism afford.

In technocrat-nationalist Singapore, Singlish has a lowly status akin to Chinese dialects. Like English, Chinese dialects are imported languages which primarily came along with emigrants from southern China, who settled in the British colony of


\textsuperscript{50} In 2001, Vision of Persistence, a 15-minute film about long-time opposition politician J.B Jeyaretnam, was banned because it was deemed a party political film. See Agence France-Presse, “Local Film Makers Go ‘GaGa’ in Battle to Present Alternative Singapore” (20 June 2005) <http://singapore-window.org/sw05/050620afhtm> (accessed 15 July 2006).

\textsuperscript{51} Cited; Tan, “A War over ‘Singlish.’”
Singapore (1819-1963); they were already part of the language-scape when Singapore became an independent nation some four decades ago. Today, they are largely the tongue of the working class, including “Ah Bengs” and “Ah Lians.” Singlish, on the other hand, came to being in colonial Singapore occurring when English – the language of Singapore’s erstwhile colonial master – came into contact with Malay (the language of the colony’s indigenous population), Mandarin (standard Chinese), Chinese regional dialects and other immigrant languages, including those used by Indian settlers. Over time, creolization occurred and Singlish stabilized as an independent English creole, a street language, which the different races then picked up “natively”; this situation persists to the present-day. Though frowned upon by technocrat-nationalists and other snobs, Singlish is now the most widely used basilect in contemporary Singapore.

Singlish was not roped in as one of the official national languages for post-British Singapore; only English, Malay, Chinese and Indian enjoy this status. Thus recognized, the four are subsequently institutionalized as the acceptable language medium for instruction at schools. Meanwhile the bilingual policy for education dictates that English be the common language for all students who then learn their “mother tongue” Chinese, Malay and Indian – as a second language, according to their nominated race. Chinese dialects are disallowed; so ethnically Chinese students all have to learn standard Mandarin, in addition to English. For a time, they were a broadcasting language, alongside the official languages. This changed around 1979 when former-PM-now-MM Lee Kuan Yew launched the yearly Speak Mandarin Campaigns. As a result, Chinese dialects were banished from broadcast media. The ban also applies to cinema, compelling film exhibitors to import Mandarin or Mandarin-dubbed Chinese films for the local Chinese film circuits.

Singlish has never been a broadcasting language, but started to appear in the media-scape in the 1990s, through local films like Army Daze and local sitcoms like Phua Chu Kang, perhaps taking a cue from the theatre scene where Singlish was making a much welcome comeback for young audiences. Chinese dialects, on the other hand, remain pretty much in the can. But like Singlish, they have become part of the film revival-scape. Though uneven, the manifestation of officially marginalized languages in film and theatre and on TV enthralls local audiences, especially cultural nationalists, with the allusion of “homely flavor.” This type of spectatorial identification crucially accounts for their increased use in Singapore’s popular culture in recent years. They

---


53 MM is the acronym for Minister Mentor.

54 The most notable would be the SARS public education announcements which made a brief appearance on national TV, during the SARS epidemic.

55 Kelvin Ha, God or Dog: Hugo Ng’s Film on Adrian Lim <http://inkpot.com/film/godordog.html> (accessed 15 July 2006).
contain the promise and delight of forbidden fruits – consuming them amounts to gestures of defiance, little acts of rebellion. Perhaps more pertinently, they speak the language of localism, a defining moment for the Singapore of the cultural nationalist imaginary. Finally, locally attached films would dip, in one way or another, into the language smorgasbord which Singapore’s multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual environments dish up.

With particular respect to Singlish, the authorities, or technocrat-nationalists, initially, turning a blind-eye, tolerated its manifestation in the media. For a while, this played to the government’s advantage: the Goh government (1990-2004) was keen on projecting an image of liberalization, perhaps as a way of marking a distance from the preceding Lee Kuan Yew government. In 1999, or to be more precise, during his National Day Rally speech for that year, former PM Goh picked on the immensely popular sitcom *Phua Chu Kang*, or more particularly, the sitcom’s Singlish-speaking Phua Chu Kang character (played by Gurmit Singh). By then the sitcom was well into its fourth season, having made its debut in 1996. In that speech, Goh notes that the sitcom had spawned Phua Chu Kang mimics among the young and that this made “the teaching of proper English more difficult” in schools. So he advised the sitcom’s producer, TCS, to send contractor Phua to remedial English classes. “We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish,” he adds firmly and finally. National broadcaster TCS heeded the advice. The following year, or more exactly, at his 2000 National Day Rally speech, PM Goh thus took care to express his delight at the new Phua Chu Kang, going as far as publicly redeeming him as a role-model: “You’re never too old to learn,” the acrolectal Goh therefore reminds his listeners gently.

Needless to say, Singlish is now lingua non-grata in the broadcast media. However like Chinese dialects, it continues to find breathing space in local films. Then again, perplexing hurdles have been known to pop up from time to time. This Colin Goh found out when he submitted his directorial debut, *Talking Cock* – *The Movie* (2002), to the twilight zone of film censorship for clearance. Goh’s innocuous comedy about the lives of ordinary Singaporeans celebrates Singlish culture. But the film censors were not amused. They reportedly slapped it with the “R(A)” classification at first, but upon appeal, lowered it to “NC16” which effectively excludes viewers under the age of 16 from watching the independent production. For a film which does not have a single sex

---


58 Colin Goh, founder of the Singaporean website, Talkingcock.com, is a foremost proponent of Singlish culture. This website satirizes current affairs and politics, while pushing for free speech in Singapore. He is also the author of the bestseller, *Coxord Singlish Dictionary*, which chronicles the comic eccentricities of Singapore’s argot.

59 “Talking cock” is a Singlish expression for idle talk or nonsensical chatter. It derives from the Hokkien expression, “kong lan jiao weh,” which trans literally means to speak (kong) cock (langjiao) speech (weh), with *lanjiao* referring to the male genitalia (as in cock).
scene, violence or other unsuitable content for the young, both classifications would seem disproportionately high. If the treatment meted to *Talking Cock – The Movie* is intended as a strong signal from the Board of Film Censors that it does not condone “excessive use of Singlish” and that producers of locally themed films should accordingly exercise self-restraint or self-censorship, then it also exemplifies the vigilance and the failure of cultural censorship.

Jack Neo’s *I Not Stupid* adds more splashes to the Singlish pool when it makes a passing reference to the Goh-Phua episode. This occurs in the short scene where seven white-collar workers casually discuss the problems they face as advertisement designers. They comprise numerous ethnicities and nationalities: four are Chinese-Singaporeans, while the other three are non-Singaporeans – a Caucasian, a mainland Chinese and a Chinese person from elsewhere. None of them speak in Singlish in this scene, and they all switch with ease between standard Mandarin and English. (Elsewhere in the film, Singlish and Chinese dialects appear occasionally and eventfully.) Singapore’s censorious environment restricts creativity, they lament during the course of the conversation, thereby providing an occasion to refer to the *Phua Chu Kang* incident in an intertextual way. The Chinese mainland interjects, saying: ads in China often use slang because slang has “*qin qie gan*”; that is, it affects warmth and better connects people. The Caucasian then turns to his Singaporean colleagues and makes the suggestion that they could tell the government that. Jack Neo’s character, Mr. Liu, suddenly tells a joke.

Mr. Liu: Actually Singaporeans take the fishes in Singapore as their role model. The rest: What do Singapore fishes have to do with this?

Mr. Liu: Haven’t you heard that it’s difficult to catch fish in Singapore?

The rest: Why? Why?

Mr. Liu: ’Cos Singaporeans are like Singapore fishes: they never open their mouth [to speak or take the bait].

All laugh out heartily, but speak no further on the matter. The joke, while amounting to a gesture of defiance, is reminiscent of tactics used in guerilla warfare; it is a kind of hit-and-run dissension. The particular mode of dissension, together with that silence, indirectly speaks volume about Singapore’s political climate.

---

60 Tan, “A War of Words over ‘Singlish.’”

61 In Chinese the punch-line is “*tamen si ye bu kaikou*” which would more properly translate as “they would rather die than open their mouth.” In Singlish, it would go something like this: “they die-die also won’t open mouth.”
Oblique criticism indeed characterizes *I Not Stupid*'s style of social commentary. It uses subtlety, humor and pathos, and is akin to Tan Pin Pin’s notion of a “shadow dance” which can enable local filmmakers to criticize without actually naming the object of critique. In *I Not Stupid*, the shadow dance has enabled a hard-hitting swipe at the elitist education system which forms the film’s narrative focus, and the attendant policies which empower primary schools to stream students solely based on their academic performance. The subsequent segregation has resulted in divisive school cultures, including uneven distribution in the matter of teaching resources. This has adverse psychological impact for both students and parents who then put undue pressure on their child or children to achieve academically, while students who do not perform well academically develop an inferiority complex. The most damning sign indicting the system is when a 12-year-old contemplates suicide after receiving a fail grade for a class paper. In a film where fathers are caught up in the rat race of their own kind, portrayed as a consequence of Singapore’s turbo-capitalism, mothers thus wield the stick (at home). This occasions a parody which mocks benevolent authoritarianism, with the overbearing Mrs. Khoo (played by Selena Tan) as an allegory for the PAP nanny state. Mrs. Khoo is a control freak, and is reminiscent of the older bossy brother character, Meng (played by Koh Boon Peng), in Eric Khoo’s *12 Storeys*. Both Meng and Mrs. Khoo regularly express care and concern for their charges in heavy-handed ways: where school teacher Meng is given to citing government slogans, when chastising his two younger siblings, Mrs. Khoo – perennially dressed in what seems to be “PAP white” – constantly applies the carrot and stick method to bend her two seemingly unruly children to her wishes. As Neo says in an interview, “Just as [the] mother [character] wants to run her kids’ lives, the Singaporean government has been slow to let its own children grow up.” Needless to say, *I Not Stupid* is a hit with the local audience.

By Singaporean standards, *I Not Stupid* is a bold film. It is conceivable that Singapore officialdom would find the film’s satire – to use Daniel Yun’s term – a “little unpalatable,” perhaps even feel unsettled by the film’s more than enthusiastic reception at the movie-houses. If so, relief came when former PM Goh openly but belatedly praised the production some six months after its release, at his National Day Rally Speech (2002). *I Not Stupid* has since spawned a TV series and a film sequel of the same name, co-produced with TCS and Raintree Pictures respectively, while Jack

---

62 Agence France-Presse, “Local Film Makers Go ‘GaGa’.”

63 PAP leaders and members commonly wear white when appearing in national occasions such as the National Day Rally, or when canvassing at election rallies.


65 Nayar, “Mr Yun-inverse.”

Neo went on to become the first cultural medallion (film) recipient in 2005. The extent to which the film, the sequel and the TV series, or for that matter, Neo’s cultural medallion, are constitutive of a successful form of state co-option remains a moot point. For one, Jack Neo made the following clear in an interview, while promoting *I Not Stupid Too* in Hong Kong: “I have my own philosophy, my own thinking,” he says, “I will never stop pinpointing my problems and I will put it in a movie.”\(^{68}\) Besides if Daniel Yun’s strategy in regards to the principle of “get[ting] permission [from the authorities] afterwards” strengthens the logic of the gatekeeper for state-funded productions such as *I Not Stupid* and *I Not Stupid Too*, and if this logic completes a process of self-regulation of the panoptical kind, then those spin-offs that *I Not Stupid* and other Jack Neo-Raintree Pictures co-productions have engendered, both symbolically and symptomatically, would seem to point to the presence of sustained dissent within the constraints of the nanny state’s media environment.

Beyond this environment, the government’s control as primordial nanny is even less certain – for example, both *I Not Stupid* and *I Not Stupid Too* eventually have a Cantonese export version. While this fulfils the technocrats’ dream that “made-by-Singapore” media products generates export revenue for the country’s GDP, it also rubbishes the government’s concern that media products not made in standard English or Mandarin have little, or no, transnational currency. In any case, since the release of *I Not Stupid*, the Ministry of Education has reportedly put a halt to that divisive streaming system for primary school students. On that, Neo has this to say:

...they [the authorities] know they have made a mistake – they will not admit it, but they will quietly change it.... Some people say it is because of the movie, but I say no: it isn’t only my effort, I just played my part.... I think [the change is for the] better – for people so young, if you label them stupid, it’s very difficult for them.\(^{69}\)

In addition to *I Not Stupid*, Jack Neo’s comedies generally have an acerbic satirical edge; they include *Money No Enough* (about money-obsessed Singaporeans), *One More Chance* (about people with criminal records and social ostracism), *The Best Bet* (about gambling addicts), as well as *Homerun* (about nostalgia and Singapore’s lost innocence), and *I Not Stupid Too* (about the importance of showing mutual appreciation and kindness, offered as a building block for people bonding in school, at work and at home). Mostly co-produced with Raintree Pictures, these films all conform to the genre film format, and have in common the moralizing theme of the triumphant underdog. The happy ending that typically comes with a theme as such puts Neo in the realm of “court jesters” in that he seems to know where and when to draw the line for his satires and so


\(^{68}\) Jack Neo; cited Clarence Tsui, “Screen Test,” *South China Morning Post* (Review), 18 June 2006, pp. 4.

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
gives the mocked ample room to save-face. The particular “win-win” situation, together with the matter that Neo is the most bankable film and TV personality in Singapore, would endear him to powerful politicians and other technocrat-nationalists. Therein lays the crucial point of divulgence between Neo’s films and other locally attached films, especially independent productions that keep an unblinking critical eye on contemporary Singapore society. With regards to the latter paradigm, representative examples would include Eric Khoo’s Mee Pok Man (1995), 12 Storey (1997), and Be with Me (2005), and Royston Tan’s 15 – The Movie/Shi Wu (2004) and 4.30 (2006). Elsewhere Daniel Yun has referred to critical films as such as “very personal films.”

The label, “very personal films,” is technocratic language. It both denotes and connotes highly subjective and emotional filmmaking on the part of the filmmaker concerned. In ideological terms, this has the effect of relegating social issues which critical films frequently raise – be they about dysfunctional families, alienated individuals, disenchanted youth, street gangs, disabled people or alternative lifestyles to the realm of personal concerns. The label thus works to “neuter” the films’ symbolic potency as social critiques, rendering the issues therein as non-issue, or more precisely, as irrelevant topics for public discussion and debate, since they are “very personal” ones to begin with. (Unlike party political films, there is no legal proscription against “very personal films.”) The neutralizing capacity that the label has is a standard tool for technocrat-nationalists to manage the nation’s public sphere, and regulate the boundaries of political participation. It also helps them to maintain a grip on the country’s socio-political agenda, and to both determine and limit the scope of, and range for, public discussion and debate.

As it turns out, “very personal films” or critical films tend to travel well in the international film festival circuits, occasionally winning awards. This is largely because they do not abide by the genre film format. Simultaneous with this is their characteristic attempt to break into new terrain through form experimentation and stylistic innovation. They accordingly manifest a certain courage for taking on risqué subject matter which mainstream commercial producers such as Raintree Pictures and J Team Productions would eschew – for instance, necrophilia (Mee Pok Man), child abuse (Mee Pok Man, 12 Storey), incest (12 Storey), lesbianism (12 Storey, Be with Me), bisexualty (Be

---


71 Nayar, “Mr Yun-inverse.”

72 See discussion in Tan et al., “Contemporary Singapore Filmmaking.”

73 The theme of child abuse also appears in The Tree/Hai Zi Shu, film, directed by Daisy Chan. Singapore: Raintree Productions, 2001, starring Zoe Tay. The child’s adopted father abuses his charge sexually; he is exposed and arrested by the police eventually. In Mee Pok Man and 12 Storey, the abuse likewise occurs at home. It is not sexual in nature, while the abusers – a father and an adopted mother respectively – escape the law, leaving psychological trauma for the grown-up child. For discussion, see ibid.
with Me), euthanasia (Be with Me), real-life teenage gangsters (15 – The Movie), loneliness and boredom (4.30), and Singlish culture (Talking Cock – The Movie). This gives them the aura of alternative filmmaking which brings them into contact with highbrow art cinema. But it would be hasty to suggest that they are made with the festival circuits in mind, and their producers’ “festival filmmaker[s].” In Singapore, they walk a thin line. To give a most recent prominent example: a winner of several festival awards, Tan’s 15 – The Movie, a semi-documentary and semi-drama about drug culture and real-life delinquent gangsters, gained notoriety, both locally and internationally, when the police labeled the film “a threat to national security.” At first, the censors banned it, but relented only after Tan agreed to make the prescribed cuts. Even then, the R(A)-classification ensured that the film was unavailable for retail distribution and public broadcasting. In the meantime, Tan ploughed his frustrations into a 12-minute musical film titled Cut (2005). Made on a minuscule budget of about S$15,000 (Tan’s own savings), Cut features a cast of 180, including the who’s who Singapore’s creative community such as director Eric Khoo, actress Beatrice Chia and fashion photographer Geoff Ang. It has a simple plot: a chance encounter between a film buff and a censorship board official in a supermarket leads to a rant on films the board has cut and then a song thanking the board for “saving the country” by making the cuts. Finally the acerbic spoof shows the vigilance and failure of censorship. Unlike 15 – The Movie, Cut has no nudity, rude language, teenage gangsters or drug scenes – that is, Tan made sure the film remained within the “PG” classification so that there was nothing for the censors to cut. Tan’s shadow dance upsets the establishment though: “The producer may think it is funny, but I’m afraid that I don’t appreciate such unbecoming attempts to undermine the standing of a public institution,” states MICA Minister Lee Boon Yang humorlessly.

---

74 The film portrays incest implicitly. It contains the suggestion that older brother Meng desires younger sister Trixie sexually and he has raped her. For discussion, see Michael Lee, “Dead Man Gazing: Posthumous Voyeurism in 12 Storeys, or ‘Splacing’ Singapore’s Official and Unofficial Discourse,” Asian Cinema (Fall/Winter 2000), pp. 115-24.

75 In Be with Me, this theme is overt, while it is implicit in 12 Storey. For a discussion of covert lesbianism in the latter film, see Tan et al., “Contemporary Singapore Filmmaking....”

76 Cf. Berry and Farquhar, China on Screen, pp. 217.


Eric Khoo’s *Be with Me* (2005) is no spoof. It is not a “talk-cock” film. Nor is it a party political film. It recounts the life-story of Theresa Chan, a real-life deaf and blind woman, who plays herself in the film, interweaving it with reel-life stories of fictive characters. It received the “M-18” classification, presumably for adult themes like alternative life-styles such as lesbian and bisexual behavior. The censors objected to the image of two women locked in an embrace in the original publicity poster, so Khoo replaced one of the women with an androgynous looking male, but retains the original design for overseas use.

Human speech is almost superfluous in *Be with Me*: people hardly speak or talk to each other; they seem to have nothing to say, and if they do, a perfunctory word or two – for example, “You’re fired!,” “How much?,” and “Chia!” (the Hokkein expression for the command “Eat!”). Most live alone; intra-familial communication looks strained for the most part. As people move about silently or stay in a spot, using their body to convey emotions, desires and needs, technology takes over human speech as a major form of communication medium; this applies to the able and disabled alike. A social worker files his reports through a computer, and when not spending time with his perennially quiet father, would call him on the phone periodically. Young schoolgirls exchange words of love in cyber chat rooms or via the SMS, while Theresa writes her autobiography on an old-fashioned typewriter. When the camera is not trained on the typewriter, excerpts of Theresa’s memoirs would appear as (English) subtitles, sometimes functioning as segues that connect the jumps between situations or locations. She thinks, and writes in (standard) English, and remembers the few Cantonese words which she learned as a child. She was in fact not born deaf and blind – she lost her hearing suddenly around 5, and gradually lost her sight after she turned 14. She picked up standard English, first at the Singapore School for the Blind (where she now works), then at the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston, and finally through her late “partner” who was also deaf and blind and whom she still loves dearly. Presently she lives alone in a HDB flat and usually cooks her own meals. The social worker character visits her regularly and takes her out for her weekly grocery shopping. They communicate by scribbling on each other’s palm; he sees the words, while she feels them. Otherwise she would speak to him in English (and occasionally in Cantonese as well). Her deafness has impaired her speech ability, and so she speaks in a scratchy and screechy voice. Towards the end of the film, she finally meets the social worker’s silent father, in person. Up to this moment, she only knows of his existence from the son, and from the meals which the father character cooks for her and which the son then brings to her. The meeting is an unanticipated one. In an earlier scene, the social worker has called his father, asking if he would help him out by visiting Theresa on his behalf since he had an unforeseen and urgent matter to attend to elsewhere. His father agrees and so goes across town with the dinner-box he has prepared for Theresa. Whilst sitting on a chair in Theresa’s living room, he suddenly burst into sobs. A quick flashback takes the viewers to the hospital first seen at the beginning of the film: the father character sitting by his sick wife’s bedside quietly at first; then she makes a gesture in the direction of her face; finally he
placed his hand over her mouth and nose slowly and hesitantly. This flash hints at a loving but reluctant act of euthanasia which goes towards explaining the father’s silence and self-imposed isolation after his wife’s death. Meanwhile sensing the father’s distress, Theresa moves towards him and upon reaching him, hugs him. A fade to black then brings on the closing music and credits, signaling a curtain call for Be with Me, a silent postmodern film, which parodies and mimics past silent movies in a most refreshing way.

Be with Me has received rave reviews and won numerous festival awards. For a while, it was an Oscars hope – the first for Singapore – in the “Best Foreign Film” category until the Academy Award of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences decided that it had too much English in it. On this matter, the country’s most ardent promoter of standard English, most enthusiastic supporter of globalization and most foremost pusher of a global market for Singapore films has strangely chosen to keep mum, turning a blind-ear and a blind-eye to the academy’s sad and ironic decision. But the irony did not escape blogger Brian who posted a tongue-in-the-cheek comment in the cyber world: “And poor Singapore!” writes Brian, “The country has a hard enough time already trying to settle on its official language(s) and now the Oscars come in and try to define it for them.”

The Authors

Tan See Kam (Ph.D., University of Melbourne) is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Macau, Macao SAR, China, and has taught in Australia and Singapore. He has been Vice Chair of the Asian Cinema Studies Society since 1997. He has journal articles in English and Chinese, as well as book chapters in Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade (2000), Between Home and World: A Reader in Hong

---


Jeremy Fernando teaches at the Division of English of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
Session 2
INDUSTRY STUDIES

Consumption and Reception of Asian Films by Filipino Viewers: An Exploratory Study

Violeda A. Umali
College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines

Abstract

The fairly recent increase in popularity of Asian films in the Philippines indicates a shift in the self-identification of a native population that had been Europeanized and later Americanized for the greater part of its available history. Where earlier generations of Filipinos preferred Western-sourced cultural products, and nationalists during the last century insisted on native and “Filipino-first” principles, the current generation of Filipinos would seem to be an altogether alien breed, open once more to foreign influences, but not to the West. This paper seeks to inspect this phenomenon by focusing on young Filipinos’ film preferences, as reflected in the postings of an Internet group site called PinoyExchange. It will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses to answer some basic questions such as “What do young Filipinos think of Asian films?” – but perhaps more important, it will also seek to raise issues on the perception and consumption of non-Filipino and non-Western film products.
In the Philippines, as is perhaps also the case in many other countries, the emergence of “Asian film fans” is a fairly recent phenomenon. Asian films, however, have long been part of the Filipinos’ viewing fare, but these films were seen mainly on television and not in the cinemas.¹ And for the most part, these films were Chinese films originating from Hong Kong. In the late 1970s and early ’80s, these Chinese films were, more often than not, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan martial arts films dubbed in English, and shown regularly over Channel 13.² Other Chinese martial arts films were soon added to the TV viewers’ choices, among these my all-time favorite Once Upon a Time in China series starring Jet Li. But these movies made up a very small fraction of TV programming in the country; US-produced programs have always dominated the scene.

Until recently, hardly any Asian film was shown in “mainstream” Philippine movie houses. If any non-Hollywood films were showing, they would most likely be Hong Kong films. Other Asian films did get their share of public exhibition, but mainly during film festivals that featured “art films.” But, just as Asian films – particularly East Asian films – were getting more and more popular internationally, these films soon gained a following (albeit still small) in the Philippines. One concrete proof that these films have made sufficient impact in the country is the fact that commercial movie houses now occasionally include (East) Asian films in their lineup, primarily the horror films from South Korea and Japan.

Alongside the increasing presence of Asian films in the country, Asian film fans were born. Previously, it might have taken these fans time to find and link up with one another. But through the Internet, these fans have sought or set up online communities where they can regularly communicate with each other. This paper looks at one of those communities – the internet site PinoyExchange (URL at <http://www.pinoyexchange.com>).³ There are many discussion forums in this site, one of which is dedicated to international movies and TV. Within this forum is a discussion thread for Asian movies. This discussion thread was started in June 2003 by topnotch97, an avid fan of Asian movies. From the time it was set up until July 2006, 1,569 messages coming from 243 members have been posted in this discussion thread, and it has registered more than 19,000 hits. While it is true that other forums have many more messages, posters and hits, these figures are noteworthy, considering that Asian films are not as widely marketed and as easily accessible as Hollywood films are in the country.⁴

¹ This statement is based solely on anecdotal evidence and personal experience. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any material that documents the “arrival” of Asian films in the Philippines.

² I know there were other Asian films being shown on TV then, particularly Japanese “samurai” films, but it was the Jackie Chan films that kept me glued to the screen. I did not particularly like Jackie Chan and I got turned off by the slapstick humor, but I loved the kung fu scenes. I still do, and I remain a big fan of Jet Li and his pre-Hollywood movies.

³ PinoyExchange describes itself as “an online community populated by Filipinos from around the World.” It has more than 35 discussion areas and 181,700 members.

⁴ It must be pointed out, too, that the discussion thread on Asian movies is just one of the many threads in
All the 1,569 messages posted from June 2003 to July 2006 were included in the analysis. Quantitative and qualitative textual analyses were used to identify concepts and themes that describe/illustrate the forum members’ consumption and reception of Asian films.

**The Posters**

As mentioned, approximately 243 PinoyExchange members posted messages on the discussion thread on Asian movies. Because posters use a pseudonym, it is hard to guess their socio-demographic profile. It is easy to infer, however, that the posters are generally young and educated, given the specific concerns they raised in their posts, their choice of words, their familiarity with the English language, and their adeptness in using new media formats and technologies.

Most of the forum participants are based in the Philippines. Although several members did not indicate where they are located, it can be seen from their messages (e.g., asking for directions on how to get to a particular place in Manila that sells DVDs, complaining about the speed of their Internet connection) that they are based in the Philippines. A few of the members are based abroad (USA, Canada, South Korea, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Italy, and Taiwan).

Expectedly, the members’ extent of participation in the discussion is uneven: there are regular posters, i.e., they have postings throughout the three-year period covered for the analysis; there are occasional posters, i.e., those who were actively sending messages for a certain period of time only; and there are one-time posters, i.e., those who only had one or two postings in the forum. The latter made up approximately 22% of the discussants. Most active among the members was topnotch97 with 299 messages, followed by altair with 108 messages and Avonlea with 57 messages.

**The Postings**

The messages posted covered a range of topics – places where one could by DVDs/VCDs of Asian films; film screening schedules (on TV or in the cinemas); film reviews; internet links for particular movies, actors or actresses; trivia about movies and celebrities; images such as movie stills and pictures of actors/actresses; personal opinions about certain movies, actors and actresses; gripes about household members whose viewing preferences differ from theirs (i.e., the posters); and film soundtracks, among others.

---

5 “Pinoy” is the colloquial term for “Filipino.”
More than half of the messages dealt with access to Asian films, i.e., where to buy copies, where/how to download copies from the Internet, when a particular film is to be shown/released. Quite a number of postings focused on recommendations about films to collect or watch. There are several discussions on the comparative merits of one Asian film vs. another, or of Asian vs. Hollywood films. The other topics are only marginally discussed in the forum.

The Asian films discussed are mostly East Asian films – Korean, Japanese, and Chinese (Hong Kong and mainland China). A few posts mentioned Thai and Singapore films, but for the most part, the discussions left out Southeast Asian films and films from other parts of Asia, e.g., India and the Middle East. Further, only one posting put Filipino films side by side with other Asian films, suggesting that Filipino films and filmmakers – at least as far as the forum discussants are concerned – have not yet made it to the league of noteworthy Asian films and directors.

**Mapping the Online Fans’ Consumption and Reception of Asian Films: A Caveat on Methodology**

The analysis of the postings on PinoyExchange can be done at two levels: first, by identifying consumption and reception patterns in a “conventional” way, i.e., not yet taking into consideration the nuances of consumption and reception in an online context; and second, by looking at consumption and reception issues that are tied up with the use of new information and communication technologies (internet and digital technologies).

In this paper, I have focused more on the first approach, and dealt with the second only marginally. This is mainly because, as mentioned earlier, the emergence of Asian film fans is a fairly new phenomenon in the Philippines. There seems to be no formal research that has been conducted as yet about the Filipino audiences and fans of Asian films. I bring into the analysis my training in communication research, and an attempt to incorporate concepts and arguments that I picked up from the related literature on fandom that I was able to review. At the same time, I have also taken note of “admonitions” from Hills (2) about “theorists [who] follow their own institutional and theoretical agendas, and use fandom within these theory wars and theoretical skirmishes.” Finally, I have approached the analysis painfully aware of the fact that I am (to use Hills’ terms) neither a fan-scholar nor a scholar-fan.

**The Filipino Fans’ Consumption and Reception of Asian Films**

*From Television to Films, From Asia to Hollywood: Asserting Asian Films’ Superiority*

In mapping the Filipino fans’ consumption and reception of Asian films, it is but appropriate to start with how they got introduced to these films. From the postings, it
appears that television played a significant role in this regard. From watching anime and other Asian (or more accurately, East Asian) programs on television, the posters eventually branched out to watching Asian movies in VCD/DVD format. For some posters, the introduction of cable apparently was an important factor. Several forum discussants said that they first encountered Asian movies and other programs in the cable channels, particularly Star Mandarin and Arirang:

_Ako naman [In my case], I just recently discovered asian movies thru Star Mandarin. Just got tired watching local shows and started surfing the different cable channels, and there got hooked already. (geczar)_

_ako naman ay nagsimulang manood sa arirang [I started watching Arirang] since I was 2nd yr high school and now, i’m already 3rd yr. in college and i’m still watching the movieworld, nonstop and k-dramas being aired in arirang. i started to watch in arirang when i saw hyori and that squareface man. they are so hilarious that i can’t stop laughing and it got me hook [sic] on watching korean shows.(marzo5)_

The role of television in facilitating access to Asian movies has simultaneously brought problems to the posters who have to share the TV set with their household members. Conflicts in TV program choices, and/or in using the TV for watching DVD/VCD movies vs. watching broadcast programs, have led to animosities between the posters and their housemates. Because they are usually the only one in the household who are into Asian movies, the posters lose out to their housemates. Being the “other,” the posters become defensive of their choices; however, unlike other popular culture fans, they do not regard their choices as inferior to their housemates’ choices. The following posting by _Solidus_Alpha_ illustrates this sentiment:

_Hilig pa man din nila ang cinema 1, at dos, yun lang ang alam nila na channel, talk about stereotype audiences. tawag ko tuloy sa kanila mga no brainer creatures. kasi ang alam lang nila na tama ay laging galing sa dos, da best ang tv patrol, meteor garden etc. [They only watch Cinema 1 and Channel 2; talk about stereotype audiences. I call them no brainer creatures because for them, the only good programs are those from Channel 2, TV Patrol, Meteor Garden, etc.]_

For _Solidus_Alpha_ and the other posters in the same situation as he is in, their viewing choices are superior to their housemates’ preferences. Here, the divide goes two ways: a) between the posters’ channel choices and those of their housemates’ (cable channels vs. free channels) and b) between Asian movies/programs in cable channels and Asian soaps, particularly _Meteor Garden_, that air over the free channels. To a certain extent, it can be said that _Meteor Garden_’s association with the free channels (perceived by some of the posters as too commercial and profit-oriented) resulted in its being viewed as an inferior quality program. Programs of the same format that are not
shown over free channels seem to be regarded as better, as can be seen in the following exchange between Jel and Subway:

*Jel: pag nanonood nga ako sasabihin, “Arirang na naman, la nmang kwenta yang pinapanood mo”…. ano may kwenta sa kanila? Yung mga teleserye na wala ka naman matutunan na kahit ano? puro naman di makatotohanan… [Whenever I switch to Arirang they will say, “Arirang again; their programs are worthless.” What do they consider good programs? The series that they watch, that have nothing but unrealistic plots?]

*Subway: Lam mo? Pagdating ng araw na sumikat ang mga korean movies/dramas sa Philippines, sila na ang mangungulit sa iyo na “LIPAT MO SA ARIRANG… gusto ko manood...” [Know what? When Korean movies/dramas become popular in the Philippines, they will be the ones to insist that you “SWITCH TO ARIRANG” because they want to watch the programs there.]

Subway’s comment shows yet another dimension to the posters’ sentiments about their “otherness” – i.e., that they are ahead of their time, that they are setting a trend that will soon be the norm for the rest of the viewing public to follow. This shows that the Asian film fans do not only regard themselves as different; they also see themselves as better than the average viewer. Among these fans, thus, there is a high regard for Asian movies. And this perception about the superiority of (East) Asian movies extends to the posters’ comparisons of Hollywood and Asian movies. *Kuroi_Sabato*, for example, argues that:

*yes asian movies are really creating waves now. Hollywood is running out of ideas and they’re making a bunch of remakes of asian hits namely Ringu, My Sassy Girl and Infernal Affairs. Topnotch97 is less optimistic, but her/his belief in the quality of Asian films is still evident: some [people] are not even ready for Asian movies and tv shows. they still have this mentality that american shows are the best. what a bunch of ******. Asian movies and tv shows have evolved into better form of entertainment.*

Such is the posters’ belief in the quality of Asian movies that they are generally cautious of Hollywood remakes of these films. The quotes that follow are illustrative of their sentiments:

*Remake ng My Sassy Girl (as in hollywood version)? Naku, di yata kayang mapantayan yung original korean version. (Subway) [Hollywood is making its version of My Sassy Girl? I don’t think it can equal the original Korean version.]*

*balak nilang iremake ang My Wife is a Gangster & My Sassy Girl. so far si Queen Latifah ang gaganap ng role ng My Wife is a Gangster. (they plan to remake My*
Sassy Girl and My Wife is a Gangster with Queen Latifah in the lead role. Yuck!!! think about butchering this [sic] good quality films!!!! (topnotch97)

Ever seen Shall We Dance? It’s a cute Japanese movie. I heard that Hollywood is gonna remake it starring Richard Gere, Susan Sarandon and (ugh) JLO. Why ruin a good thing? (gokou)

These comments from the posters are interesting to juxtapose with Xu’s points about Hollywood remakes of Asian films: “While the originals are ethnically specific, albeit Hollywoodized, representations, the remakes are completely severed from the original ethnic soil and become solely the product of Hollywood homogenisation.” Xu goes on to argue that remaking is basically driven by the profit motive, both on the part of the East Asian filmmakers and Hollywood producers. On the one hand, Hollywood pays generous fees for remaking rights, so much so that East Asian filmmakers “now have a built-in ‘remaking mentality,’ which self consciously measures the films against Hollywood standard and actively exercises self-censorhip.” On the other hand, Hollywood producers have come to realize that, “thanks to transnationalism...whatever proved successful in East Asia would most likely succeed in North America as long as the original ethnicity is changed to that of Caucasian” (all emphases mine).

If Xu’s arguments are correct, Hollywood remakes of Asian films are “watered down” versions of their original because of collusion between the filmmakers and the Hollywood producers. Based on their comments about Hollywood remakes, it appears that the posters are, as yet, oblivious of this collusion. It would be interesting to find out what they think of the argument that Asian filmmakers are “selling out” to Hollywood producers.

**Movies, Stars, and Directors: The Fans Pick their Favorites**

The list of films that the posters identified as their favorites is long, but three titles stand out:

- *My Sassy Girl* (topnotch97: this movie really inspired me to start this thread about Asian Films.)
- *Battle Royale* (most posters say “it rocks!!!)
- *Infernal Affairs* (sugarplumfairy: an action film that made you think)

Other titles that were mentioned by several posters are: *The Returner, Ringu, The Quiet Family, Shaolin Soccer, God of Gamblers, PingPong* (altair: other movies are download, watch, then erase. PingPong is download, watch, then burn. It’s THAT GOOD.), *My Wife Is a Gangster, Ju-on, Iron Ladies* (a Thai film), *Naked Weapon, Oh Happy Day!, The Irresistible Piggies, The Classic, My Tutor Friend, Il Mare, Love Letter, Peppermint Candy, Chungking Express, Tempting Heart,* and *Chingu.*
Some posters professed to being fans of the movies of Stephen Chow, Michelle Yeoh, Jeon Ji Hyun, Jackie Chan, Jet Li (before Hollywood), Takeshi Kitano, and Andy Lau. A few said they were fans of Akira Kurosawa and Wong Kar Wai. Still others said that they liked all Korean, Japanese and/or Chinese movies:

There is, obviously, a whole range of film genres that appeal to the posters – from action to horror, from comedy to drama. This indicates openness among the posters to try different types of films and not to just restrict themselves to certain genres. Moreover, many of the posters have gone beyond associating certain countries with certain genres (e.g., action films with China and horror films with Japan). The following exchange between *Kuroi_Sabato* and *Pandaemonaeon* shows an attempt to correct the “typecasting” of Asian countries’ film productions:

*Kuroi_Sabato: the formula is like this: horror movies = japanese, action movies = chinese, drama movies = koreans*

*Pandaemonaeon: Uh no offense, but have you watched a lot of asian movies enough to form that conclusion? All countries have their own fair share of movies on all the classifications you mentioned – they don’t focus or specialize on one specific category. Korea has action movies that could give Hong Kong (and even Hollywood!) a run for its money.... And please, there’s more to Hong Kong movies than guys in suits running around shooting people while posing.*

In the same way that the posters are able to see Asian films vis-à-vis their Hollywood counterparts, they are also able to relate these films with local films and the local entertainment industry. Such “musings” are less common among the posters (than their comparisons of Asian and Hollywood films), but in the few instances that comparisons between local and Asian films come up, there is the sentiment that the local entertainment scene will benefit from an “infusion” of Asian films and programs:

*I think it’s awesome that Pinoys/Pinays get a taste of what other Asians have to offer in their movies to give us inspiration, rather than those damn Spanish based telenovelas being too fatalistic.(emeraldragon7)*

*I hope ABS or GMA would not just stick to Chinese teleseryes, but give Korean and Japanese ones some exposure here. Even in Taiwan, Korean and Japanese series are aired alongside their locals. This shows their pulling power to the viewers. Sana mas ma-broaden ng ABS or GMA programming yung options nila sa mga Asian teleserye, at mabura na nang tuluyan yung mga Mexican telenovela na di naman angkop sa atin. [I hope ABS or GMA would broaden their programming options to include Asian drama series so that we could finally get rid of the Mexican telenovelas that are not suited to our culture]. (edching908)*
The commercial nature of the entertainment industry is, again, not lost on the posters, however. This commercialism poses a threat to whatever benefits having Asian films and programs might bring:

*ay agree ako diyaan!!! ang hirap kasi sa ABS at saka GMA eh naghahatak lang sila ng ratings. hindi nila inintindi ang quality ng ibang drama series.* [I agree with you! The problem with ABS and GMA is that they are only after the ratings; they don’t care about the quality of the drama series.] (topnotch97)

*I agree on [sic] your statement... pero [but] I hope they won’t create another “PHENOMENON” by overpromoting their shows, just like what they did with MG and MVP.* (Subway)

Since these messages were posted (in 2003) Korean drama series have “invaded” the country’s free channels. How these programs were repackaged and marketed for the local audience would make for an interesting study. Specifically, it would be interesting to find out similarities and differences in strategies that the networks adopted in promoting the Taiwan and Korean programs. It would also be interesting to find out how viewers, who have previously seen these drama series in Arirang (or other channels), compare the “localized” version with the “original” version that they saw.

**Access and Authenticity: The Fans’ Preoccupations**

As mentioned earlier, the bulk of the messages posted in the “Asian Films” discussion thread dealt with access to copies of the films. Access mainly means finding out where one could buy pirated DVD/VCD copies of the films – specifically the names of shops, their location and how to get there, the DVD/VCD prices, and tips on how to select the best DVDs and get value for one’s money. Clearly, the sales and purchase of pirated DVDs/VCDs is illegal, and yet, the posters discuss this matter with much candor. In fact, there are occasionally postings about raids that have been/will be conducted in the shops selling the DVDs/VCDs.

Access via sharing and downloading of digital files is also discussed in several postings, but not in the same scale as the purchase of pirated DVDs/VCDs. This is because the computer hardware system and internet connections of many of the posters cannot efficiently handle digital file sharing/downloading. Another access concern updates on film screening schedules, film releases, film reviews and press releases, and internet links where one can find images and information about one’s favorite movies, stars, and directors.

In her study of online Chinese fans of Japanese TV dramas, Hu (171) argued that Chinese fans, regarded as “minority audiences who are not targeted as the objects of capitalist interests,” turned to digital technologies to “[carve] out alternative practices in the circulation, production and consumption of Japanese TV dramas.” The same can be said of the Filipino fans of Asian films. Such films are hard to find in the legitimate
DVD/VCD outlets; if available, they are priced beyond what the ordinary could afford to pay. Thus, these fans have looked for alternative ways and means of acquiring copies of, and information about, the films. And even as they acknowledge that selling/buying pirated DVDs/VCDs is illegal, some posters are quick to point out that this practice is not completely bad:

some people never know [sic] korean movies if it wasn’t for the pirated vcds that are circulating today... but one advantage of this is that people would still [buy] the original copies if they really enjoyed the movie. they would also look for other korean movies and they would start watching films in the cinemas. (ayamanika)

Thus, although they are presently behaving like “guerilla fighters” who use digital technologies “as a way of resisting the aloofness from marketing strategies” (Hu 171) of film distributors, the Asian film posters seem optimistic about the prospects of Asian films eventually becoming part of the mainstream film industry. This optimism probably stems from the fact that Asian films are already a regular offering in several cable channels, and have gained notice in Hollywood.

Next to access, authenticity of the film viewing experience is another important concern among the posters. Taking off from Barthes’ distinction between the work and the text, Cubbison (46) argues that “the form of the work affects the experience of the text” and that “when works are produced in alternate languages and formatted as different kinds of objects, the textual experience alters.” This gives rise to the authenticity of the viewing experience, which essentially entails the search for “the best way to experience the work in order to gain the fullest experience of the text” (Cubbison 49).

For the fans of Asian films, authenticity concerns manifest in their arguments against dubbing the films (as well as all other Asian programs) in Filipino and in their discussions about the which version of a film to buy. In connection with the former, the posters have these to say:

Yung mga [The] current fans ng asian shows, i believe mas gusto manood with subtitles [they prefer to have subtitles] rather dub [sic] in Filipino. It does not mean to degrade or neglect the Filipino language... it is just to preserve the cultural aspects of the said asian show.(Subway)

am not against the filipino language or anything pero pls lang sana wag nila itagalize... english subtitles na lang ok na... minsan kasi di maganda yung dubbing nila e... nawawala yung parang nuance ng language pag nitranslate mo into filipino e... [Please do not dub the programs in Filipino. English subtitles are fine. Sometimes the dubbing is not good, and the nuances of the language are lost.](axaryl)
The debate over the relative merits of dubbing and using subtitles is not a new one. What is quite odd, however, is how the posters seem to readily accept that the English translation is able to capture and preserve the nuances in the original text. What they have apparently overlooked is that the English version is not the original text, but another version of it. And because something is always lost (or added) in the translation, it is highly debatable that English subtitles are better than Filipino dubbing in preserving the authenticity of the text.

The latter concern comes up when a film is released in several versions: the fans would then have to look for that version that will give them the “best” viewing experience. The following postings are examples:

*btw, alam niyo ba may deleted scenes sa movie [My Sassy Girl] na ito? maraming versions daw itong movie [did you know that some scenes were deleted from My Sassy Girl and that there are many versions of this movie?]... kaya [so] if you guys are looking for several versions take note: Korean, HK, and International Version!!! (topnotch97)*

*Still on My Sassy Girl]: all I know is that the difference between the Hk version and the Korean version, they were playing “My Girl” during the high heels scene. I think the HK version is similar to the regular version, they omitted the balcony scene from the restau and the other scene. The director’s cut has everything on [sic] it, including the deleted scenes. kaya [so] I prefer the Director’s Cut. (topnotch97)*

*...in other countries, Asian teleseryes [TV series] were aired [sic] in Bilingual Language, meaning if you have a TV set that accepts dual audio channels, you have the option to switch the audio between the original language and the dubbed one. That technology is now used in many Asian countries, including Indonesia. However, such TVs are not yet available here, so the networks have not adopted that yet. But it’s a very good system. (edching908)*

**Conclusion**

Asian films, particularly East Asian films, have certainly arrived in the Philippines. This phenomenon is not an isolated case; rather, it is a manifestation of a global trend marked by the rise of Asian cinema. Earlier exposure to Asian programs shown on television might have triggered the fans’ interest in Asian films, but this interest would have been hard to sustain if production and distribution of these films did not evolve into the large-scale international operation that it is now.

Perhaps because in the past, Asian movies (with the exception of the martial arts films) were shown as “art films” and/or perhaps because the newer ones are closely
identified with Hollywood, Asian film fans regard themselves as superior to the non-fans. Unlike pop culture fans who feel that they are frowned upon, the Asian film fans take pride in being the trend-setters that the rest of the movie-viewing public would soon follow.

There are nuances in fans’ consumption and reception of Asian films that reflect their ability to situate themselves – and the films – in the global context. First is their skill in harnessing digital technologies to facilitate their access to the films. Another is their consciousness of the implications of alterations, in the format and the text, on the authenticity of their viewing experience. Still another is their sense of the interrelationships between Asian films and Hollywood films, and between Asian films and the situations in the local entertainment industry.

However, some nuances of the global context of the production and consumption of Asian films are not evident to their fans. One of these is the close working relationship between Asian filmmakers and their counterparts in the West. Thus, the fans are unable to discern that remakes are the product of collaboration/collusion between said parties. Also not quite evident to the fans is the fact that “Filipinization” is not the only thing that stands in the way of an authentic viewing experience. More often than not, what they regard as the “original” text of the work is actually the product of another layer of “translation,” whose faithfulness to the original has not been verified.

Finally, it is indeed noteworthy that a consciousness of Asian films has finally begun to form among Filipino viewers. This consciousness, however, is mainly associated with East Asian films. There is, as yet, very little consciousness of Southeast Asian films, or of Asian films as they encompass the various regions of the continent. Without the support of the same market forces that propelled East Asian films to their current status, other Asian films might not enjoy the same international recognition that East Asian films now do. How much influence the fans can wield on these market forces is difficult to assess. But the East Asian experience could provide information and insights as to how fan communities – and the Asian countries – may be able to negotiate their position vis-à-vis the hegemonic tendencies of these market forces.

**Works Cited**


<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/34/remaking_east_asia...>.

**The Author**

Violeda A. Umali is Assistant Professor at the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP-CMC). She is also currently the Chairperson of the UP-CMC Department of Communication Research. She holds a B.A. Communication Research degree and M.A. Demography degree from the University of the Philippines, and a Master of Mass Communication degree from the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
The Turn to Digital: 
Revival of Film Culture in the Philippines

Ramil de Jesus
Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Philippines

Abstract

This paper will trace the digital development of cinema in the Philippines primarily its transition from celluloid. 2006 has been a crucial year in this period as digital films have overtaken celluloid films in terms of production output and aesthetic recognition, which in turn has given a shot in the arm to what many practitioners and scholars perceive as a dying industry. Digital technology has changed the way we produce, distribute and market Filipino movies. Case studies include a major studio (Viva Films), a National Artist for Film (Eddie Romero) and exhibition venues (mall-type theaters like those of Shoemart) embracing the new medium. This paper will also attempt to content analyze three recent digital Filipino films; Paolo Villaluna and Ellen Ramos’ Ilusyon (Illusion) Mike Sandejas’ Tulad ng Dati (Just like Before) and Aureus Solito’s Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros) using arguments developed from Christian Metz’s idea of the “super-genre” film.
The much-debated “crisis of Philippine cinema” began in late 2000 when the steadily dropping box office returns of Filipino films, the currency devaluation brought on by the Asian economic crisis, and prohibitive government taxation (30% of a film’s profits go to the national amusement tax) caused the industry to flounder against the tickets sales of Hollywood fare. Film financing in the Philippines has been hit hard over the last five years. Records from the government’s Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) show a decline in the number of films made from over a hundred a year down to a handful (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Celluloid films produced from 2000 to 2006 in the Philippines*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Films Produced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the advent of affordable digital video cameras and the prospect of making films inexpensively and independent of the big studios have generated a lot of excitement in the Philippine film scene. Whereas traditional filmmaking requires huge investments in film stock alone, digital movie making is possible for a fraction of the usual production budget. Therefore many Filipino filmmakers have, by themselves or with the support of the grant-giving bodies like the Cinemalaya festival or the Cinema One competition, started making movies without relying on the resources of mainstream production companies. The output of digital films from these two organizations alone have overtaken the commercial celluloid output in the Philippines for 2005 and 2006 (see Figure 2) with a total of 23 films as of this writing.
**Figure 2. Digital Films by Cinemalaya and CinemaOne**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cinemalaya</td>
<td>Ang Huling Araw ng Linggo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pepot Artista</em></td>
<td>Batad, sa Paang Palay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros</em></td>
<td>Donsol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ICU Bed #7</em></td>
<td><em>In da Red Korner</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Big Time</em></td>
<td><em>Mudraks</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Baryoke</em></td>
<td><em>Rotonda</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Roomboy</em></td>
<td><em>Saan Nagtatago si Happiness?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Laspongghols</em></td>
<td><em>Tulad ng Dati</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sarong Banggi</em></td>
<td>[6 films currently in production]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Isnats</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CinemaOne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sitak</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sa North Diversion Road</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anak ng Tinapa</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dilim</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sandalang Bahay</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ang Anak ni Brocka</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros), in particular, has reaped critical acclaim all over the world, including a nomination for the 2006 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, the first Filipino film to ever do so. Moreover, 2006 was dubbed as the “year of the Filipino digital feature film” (Torre D3) as digital films have trounced commercially-produced celluloid films in almost every category at the Urian awards (see Figure 3), widely regarded as the Filipino version of the Oscars.

**Figure 3. Urian Awardees for 2006 (* Digital Film)**

Best Movie - *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* *
Best Direction - Mes de Guzman, *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* *
Best Screenplay - Michiko Yamamoto, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* *
Best Actress - Jaclyn Jose, *Sarong Banggi* *
Best Actor - Robin Padilla, *La Visa Loca*
Best Supporting Actress - Hilda Koronel, *Nasaan Ka Man*
Best Supporting Actor - Ketchup Eusebio, *Sa Aking Pagkakagising Mula sa Kamulatan* *

Best Production Design - Mes de Guzman, *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* *
Best Cinematography - Nap Jamir III, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* *
Best Editing - Clarence Sison and Kanakan Balintagos, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* *
Best Music - Vincent de Jesus, *La Visa Loca*
Best Sound - Raffy Magsaysay, *Big Time* *
With the launch of digital cinema, the Philippine film industry is facing a revolutionary upheaval which has created a major impact on its modes of production, distribution and exhibition.

Production

The digitization of the cinema permits filmmakers to a level of artistic control previously unattainable in film. Digital cinema can tell us traditional stories in new ways, or force us to think about narrative in completely new terms. The transition from celluloid to digital video is still in process, in an industry where creative goals are always balanced against economic necessity. But by working with digital data instead of chemical celluloid, filmmakers can edit scenes together and alter images with much greater ease and lower cost.

The availability of affordable filmmaking equipment for a lot of people means getting out there and making a film, is within their reach. Critics like Baumgärtel may argue that this will result in a surplus of no-budget, poorly made films and this is undeniably true. As Melvin Van Peebles mentioned: “Let’s go back to the most primitive technology. Everybody can talk, but that doesn’t mean some people aren’t boring.” But on the other hand, it will allow a generation of future filmmakers to practice their skills and develop their talent within the safety of their home, rather than on the set of a multi-million peso movie. The accessibility of the means of filmmaking, is possible with this single most significant aspect of the “digital revolution” but it is not limited to first-time filmmakers and amateurs.

Many experienced professionals are turning to digital for a number of reasons. 80 year old National artist for Film Eddie Romero was able to take advantage of the cheapness of the technology to finance and make his first digital feature Nasaan ang Pagibig? (Where is the Love?). In an interview, he said that he views digital movies as a venue for directors taking on untried subject matters that big studios would rather not touch. A concrete example of such film is Sarong Banggi (One Night) written and directed by UFO picture’s Emmanuel Dela Cruz who concurrently is also a part of Star Cinema’s Writers’ Pool. A few years ago, Dela Cruz had the vision of making a film showing the Bicolano culture but knew there was no way that Star Cinema would finance such movie. With the Cultural Center’s Cinemalaya grant in 2005, the accessibility of the equipment had enabled Dela Cruz to realize his vision. This is just one case where digital technology, in enabling the filmmaker to overcome financial obstacles, has given a cinematic voice to an otherwise unrepresented culture.

In addition to facilitating the creation of movies by new or disadvantaged filmmakers, the affordability of digital technology is leading to new ways of filmmaking. Where previously, the costs were prohibitive of the number of takes and the amount of footage shot, the minimal costs of digital videotape is seeing a radical change in the way a film is shot. A 150-peso digital videotape compared to the development and printing
costs means that the director doesn’t have to be happy with second best, he or she can
do the take one more time in the pursuit of perfection or experiment with shooting the
take in a slightly different way. These takes can also be fitted into similar length
shooting schedules because of the less time it takes to set up the shot.

Digitization is similarly good news for most of the actors who have enjoyed the
freedom of shooting digitally. The most significant aspect of this is the diminishing
presence of the camera. With many directors filming rehearsals and more takes, there is
less of a separation between before and after the director cries “action.” Together with
the smaller size of the digital cameras and in some cases a number of different cameras
shooting simultaneously, actors are finding that they are no longer able, or no longer
have to, act for the camera and that the presence of the camera and filmmaker is easy to
forget.

The freedom to improvise and experiment with their performances without the
pressure of “getting it right” for the take is also a benefit. As the veteran actor Eddie
Garcia in Rica Arevalo’s ICU Bed #7 says:

Every time someone you were interacting with changed their character, you
ended up changing yours to meld in or conflict better. We were trying out new things all
the time and it was a really beautiful and completely different way of working.

It has already been noted that there is a growing difference for actors between
shooting conventionally and digitally. A situation which could possibly lead to a new
generation of “digital” actors, at home with the freedom and flexibility of shooting
digitally.

In two scenes in particular from Kubrador (The Bet Collector), the first digital
film by Jeffrey Jeturian, the flexibility of shooting digitally was exploited to improve the
performances. One is where the character is hallucinating and exhausted, wandering
endlessly around a depressed area. To achieve the highest performance they were able to
continue shooting for five hours inflicting the very characteristics on the actor. Later on,
on the same shoot they were able to use the flexibility of digital to take advantage of an
actual event (all souls day) in a cemetery and shoot a verité scene with the actors
physically brushing against real people. Whether or not the greater freedom to repeat
takes will result in less attention being paid to preparation and the adrenalin that
getting it right for the one take brings will remain to be seen, but the advantages of
liberation and freedom for the actors are indisputable.

In addition to moving the power from the financier to the filmmaker and lifting
restrictions, digital technology is having an effect on film style itself. Most noticeably,
the lightweight, portable cameras are at last providing the most flexible and versatile
cameras possible. As Eddie Romero spoke of his earlier dreams, he now had a “camera
with wings.”
Other filmmakers are also taking advantage of the digital cameras’ flexibility and ease of use. Take the case of the final showdown scene in *Tulad ng Dati* (Just like Before) where the band “The Dawn” was playing. Director Michael Sandejas used five cameras simultaneously taking from different angles for greater coverage and to facilitate easier non-diegetic audio synching during post production. The unusual nature of the collated footage is reminiscent of some of the Soviet Montage editing by the likes of Eisenstein, except that in this case, they were able to capture the material in far fewer takes.

It is apparent that digital technology is not only changing the technical side of film production, it is also bringing with it new approaches to filmmaking. In allowing an unprecedented freedom of expression it is giving filmmakers the time and liberty to experiment with many aspects of filmmaking and not since the coming of sound has film culture had such an opportunity to evolve and reinvent itself. With the advent of digital technology the opportunities within the medium are huge, as we are breaking into the second century of cinema.

**Distribution**

Digital technologies have also revolutionized the distribution sector of the film industry. The ubiquitous nature of the internet and the opportunities it present for a global audience have seen a rise in the use of the Internet as a platform for marketing, not just for major studios but also for smaller filmmakers (Alfonso).

Mario Cornejo launched www.arkeofilms.com to promote *Big Time*. It was an online venue where one can download its trailer, read articles and other facts about the film, or browse through its picture gallery. Similar to its publicity approach was Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil’s [www.pusanggala.com](http://www.pusanggala.com) (currently inactive) showing the synopsis of the digital film *Pusang Gala* (Stray Cats) and screening schedules locally and abroad.

Because of the relative ease of transferring digital movies to digital versatile disc (DVD) or video compact disc (VCD) format for distribution purposes, one of the major studios Viva Films established a subsidiary digital arm aptly called Digital Viva in 2004. It created a new pathway into the industry, giving previously independent filmmaker Jon Red to break into the industry with *Astigmatism* as its initial offering followed by Mowelfund’s Paolo Villaluna and Ellen Ramos’ *Ilusyon* (Illusion) in 2005. Each film was funded by Digital Viva with a shoe string budget of 900,000 pesos (18,000 US dollars). The filmmakers were given total creative independence provided that the cast must come from Viva’s pool of stars. Rival major studios such as Star Cinema and Seiko have also jumped on the digital bandwagon, acquiring local distribution rights to *Maximo* and Cris Pablo’s *Bathhouse* respectively.
Digital films do not star glamorous and big-budget stars like Sharon Cuneta, Judy Ann Santos, Jericho Rosales and Piolo Pascual. But the digital films have made it possible for less well-known but talented actors and actresses to shine. In particular, they have put outstanding performers on the legitimate stage like Irma Adlawan (Pusang Gala), Bodgie Pascua (Pagdadalaga Ni Maximo Oliveros) and Jamie Wilson (Big Time) in the limelight.

Exhibition

The final battleground of digital technology vis-à-vis celluloid is the recent acquisition of SM and Robinson’s Malls of their respective digital projectors. Digital Films can now be played and shown directly from disc or tape, bypassing the expensive 35mm kinescope transfer. Malls command majority of the movie theaters in the Philippines and this movement to digital exhibition is a welcome development for digitization.

Another factor not to be overlooked is the integration of film appreciation courses into collegiate programs all over the country. This huge student audience is potentially the biggest market for alternative digital films. If digital films could win over the student audience, their producers would not have to depend on financing from the traditional financiers who do not want to put their money on what they call “risky” productions.

Implications and New Directions

Most discussions of cinema in the digital age have focused on the possibilities of the interactive narrative. This is obvious since the majority of viewers and scholars equate cinema with storytelling, digital media is understood as something which will let cinema tell its stories in a new way. Yet as exciting as the ideas of a viewer participating in a story, choosing different paths through the narrative space and interacting with characters may address one aspect of cinema which is neither unique nor, as many will argue, essential to it, which is the narrative.

The challenge which digital media poses to cinema however extends far beyond the issue of narrative. Digital media redefines the very identity of cinema. Andre Bazin’s assertion of realism in film is now provocatively equated with flat images projected on a screen. Today one can “enter” a virtual three-dimensional space, and given enough time and money, almost everything can be simulated in a computer, to film physical reality is just one possibility. This “crisis” of cinema’s identity also affects the terms and the categories used to theorize cinema’s past. French film theorist Christian Metz wrote in the 1970s that “Most films shot today, good or bad, original or not, ‘commercial’ or not, have as a common characteristic that they tell a story; in this measure they all belong to one and the same genre, which is, rather, a sort of ‘super-genre.’”

In identifying fictional films as a “super-genre” of twentieth century cinema, Metz did not bother to mention another characteristic of this genre because at that time it was
too obvious: fictional films are live action films, i.e. they largely consist of unmodified photographic recordings of real events which took place in real physical space. Today, in the age of computer simulation and digital compositing, invoking this characteristic becomes crucial in defining the specificity of twentieth century cinema. From the perspective of a future historian of visual culture, the differences between classical Hollywood films, European art films and avant-garde films (apart from abstract ones) may appear less significant than this common feature: that they relied on lens-based recordings of reality.

During cinema’s history, a whole repertoire of techniques (lighting, art direction, the use of different film stocks and lens, etc.) was developed to modify the basic record obtained by a film apparatus. And yet behind even the most stylized cinematic images we can discern the bluntness, the sterility, the banality of early nineteenth century photographs. No matter how complex its stylistic innovations, the cinema has found its base in these deposits of reality, these samples obtained by a methodical and prosaic process. Cinema emerged out of the same impulse which engendered naturalism, court stenography and wax museums. Cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint.

What happens to cinema’s indexical identity if it is now possible to generate photorealistic scenes entirely in a computer using 3-D computer animation; to modify individual frames or whole scenes with the help a digital paint program; to cut, bend, stretch and stitch digitized film images into something which has perfect photographic credibility, although it was never actually filmed?

The directions which were closed off at the turn of the century when cinema came to dominate the modern moving image culture are now again beginning to be explored. Moving image culture is being redefined once again; cinematic realism is being displaced from being its dominant mode to become only one option among many.

**Works Cited**


Romero, Eddie. Personal Interview. 7 October 2006.

Sandejas, Michael, screenwriter and director. Tulad Ng Dati, 2006.


Villaluna, Paolo, co-screenwriter and co-director. Ilusyon. Ellen Ramos, co-screenwriter and co-director, 2005.

The Author

Ramil de Jesus is a lecturer teaching film production and broadcasting at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran in Manila. He was graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Film and Audiovisual Communication at the University of the Philippines – Diliman, where he is currently an M.A. Film candidate. Previously, he had worked as Senior Producer for Probe Productions, Inc. (URL at <http://www.probeprod.com>), the first and most awarded independent production group in the Philippines. In 2005-06, he co-produced GMA-7’s “Pinoy Abroad,” touring the Middle East, Australia, South Korea, Malaysia, the
Micronesia Islands, and Thailand to document issues concerning Filipinos living and working overseas.
Film Preservation and Promotion by Public Aid Mechanism: Asian Lessons from the European Union Model

Luo Qing
Communication University of China

Abstract

Chinese film has just celebrated its 100th-year anniversary. With the rapid evolution of digitalization, transformation from planned economy to marketing economy system and China’s entry into WTO, the audiovisual industry of China is witnessing great opportunities as well as challenges in the history. This growth in the sector poses two challenges. First, it is necessary to ensure that the legislative framework allows the audiovisual sector to maximize its potential for growth and job creation in China, while continuing to safeguard general interest objectives. Second, the community must maximize the competitiveness of the Asian audiovisual industry in order to ensure that digitization does not simply result in a flood of imported or archive (repeated) material. The Asian audiovisual industry must remain capable of providing quality audiovisual content that is of relevance and importance to Asian citizens. However, Promotion and preservation can neither just come from the traditional pure governmental-驱动 system nor pure marketing-驱动 system. Measures of both marketing and government should be mixed into a mechanism.

After exploring the situation of the China’s nowadays audiovisual industry’s production and circulation, this article will give further emphasis on the “Bottlenecks” of industry development. The main consequence of digitization and media system reform will be an explosion in demand for audiovisual material. The question for China, therefore, is really the following: Will this explosion in demand for audio-visual content, especially films, television drama and documentaries, be met by archive and imported material, or will it be met by new, high-quality, home-produced programming? If it is to be the latter, then there is an absolute need to create the conditions for a competitive European audiovisual industry both in economic and cultural point of view.

In this way, the EU experience for protecting as well as promoting EU community value by public aid mechanism is worth learning more from. Public Aids mechanisms in audiovisual sector originated in Europe after the First World War when American films as well as American values dominated European markets.
Film, as one the most important part of cultural heritage and principle power in social-value-constructing, was not able to be regarded as other common products like shoes and caps in the framework of free trade regulation of WTO. “Public Aids mechanism, supporting system of cultural diversity is one of the most important contribution to the audiovisual sector of the world by Europe.” However, the cultural diversity of EU model is not only generated as protectionism, as criticized by the USA, but a mechanism of preservation and promotion through both marketing measures and regulatory measures.

This research comes after the two field investigations of the author during 2003-05, as a visiting scholar in EU and its member countries such as Germany, France, Italy and Belgium. The project, organized by European Audiovisual Observatory, the Council of Europe, conducted more than forty in-depth interviews with European experts and professionals, such as the Media Division of the Council of Europe, various public foundations like Eurimages, Strasbourg’s regional aid for audiovisual production, film investigation section of television like ARTE, FranceTelevision, as well as some communication colleges of the university. The research, submitted to SARFT China (State Administration of Radio Film & TV), as legislatures for reference, will contribute to the reviewing of Chinese as well as Asian broadcasting regulations by explaining the basic values of audiovisual policy and helping to understand the wide range of national film landscapes and regulatory models.
1. Background: 100\textsuperscript{th}-year Anniversary Witnessed a Potential & Dynamic Film Market in China

From 1905 when the first film in China \textit{Dingjunshan} produced by a private photo studio called Qingfeng, which is memorized as the foundation milestone in Chinese film history, to nowadays, Chinese film has celebrated its 100\textsuperscript{th}-year anniversary with thorns and flowers. In particular, cinema is undergoing something of a rebirth in the new century: total cinema admissions and gross income continually rose fast in the past three years. According the yearly report from SARFT,\textsuperscript{1} the gross income of China mainland in audiovisual sector (including radio, broadcasting and film) was 88.876 billion RMB (about $10.84 billion), net margin 76.494 RMB ($9.33 billion) in 2005, of which 4.8 billion RMB\textsuperscript{2} ($585.3 million) was the contribution from film sector. The domestic box office of Chinese film market was 2.0 billion RMB (243.9 million$), with 50% growing more than the corresponding period of last year. This increase would appear to be due at least in part to the growth in the number of cinema screens (multiplex) as well as improved facilities at cinemas. In parallel the video market in Europe, particularly for the sale of videocassettes, is continuing to grow. Furthermore, the market for film value-added sector, whether DVD, film music or film sightseeing, is also undergoing explosive growth.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Chart 1: Turnover of Chinese Audiovisual Industry and Proportion of Film (billion\$, 2005)}
\end{center}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
TV Ad & Cable & Pay-TV & Film & Radio Ad & Others \\
\hline
4.96 & 1.95 & 0.04 & 0.59 & 0.62 & 2.28 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Source: SARFT, 2005}
\end{table}

\textbf{Market Report of 2004 & 2005 of Chinese Film}

\textsuperscript{1} In 1982, the Ministry of Radio and Television (MRT) was established, taking over the leadership of the National Broadcasting Bureau, which had been exercising authority since 1949. It was changed to Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT) in 1986, when the film industry was merged in. It then became State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in 1998, after re-organization.

\textsuperscript{2} National Film Conference (Nov.24, 2005), working paper from Film Bureau of SARFT.
Here we use three indexes summarizing the market of Chinese films:

◆ **Productions**

Chart 2: Feature Film Production in China (SARFT, 1992-2005 年)

The average number of feature films produced from 1997 to 2002 was just 92 in China; however since year 2003, three years continually witnessed the increase in feature film production with 140 for 2003, 212 for 2004, and the highest-record 260 for 2005.

Besides fiction feature films, 2004 also struck an overall strength in production, with 10 feature documentaries, 4 animations, 110 TV films, and 30 education and science films.

Chart 3: Film Production Genres (source: SARFT)

**Gross income:**

The turnover of Chinese film market nowadays mainly comes from three parts: domestic box office, overseas box office and TV broadcasting. With 2.2 billion RMB for year 2003, 3.6 billion for year 2004 and 4.8 billion for 2005, we can see a healthy increasing market and dynamic audience. (This data excludes the turnover form DVD, Internet broadcasting and advertising, due to the difficult accounting of the data.)

However this doesn’t mean it can be neglected, for some films of Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang reached 40 million RMB for advertising.

Chart 4: Gross income of Chinese film market (billion RMB)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Overseas</th>
<th>TV and broadcasting</th>
<th>Gross</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SARFT
Distribution & International Exhibitions:

The traditional distribution system based on the administrative districts has been replaced by a new distribution system called Cinema-line system, which is kind of a trans-regional economic entity based on the market. By the end of 2004, cinema screens in activity are organized for 36 serials of cinema-lines with 1,188 cinemas with 2,396 screens, among which 5 cinemas earned over 50 million RMB and another 15 cinemas reached 10 million RMB. A breakdown of 166 digital cinemas could be considered “modern” (i.e. renovated or newly built) creating records of more than 40 million RMB. Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Sichuan rank the highest increase in admission to films in China. Moreover, there are 69 Chinese films exported to 24 countries and areas in 2005. A total of 263 films attended 101 international film festivals, among which 18 films won 32 international film festival awards.

Evaluation of System Reform and its Influence on the Audiovisual Industry

Like all the other audiovisual industries, film followed and experienced three most representative development periods along with the Chinese political and economic system, which can be summarized as the following:

50s-78: Government-Sponsored Institutions in Planned Economy

Long before the opening policy and reform of the 1980s in China, the social structure, which matched the political system, also influenced and determined the operation of the Chinese media system. Media organizations fully sponsored by government, politically as “the throat and tongue” of the Communist Party and government at all levels, economically had nothing to worry about the basics. The sole function of Propaganda Machine of media, which resulted in an authoritarian, monopoly player position and planned economic management for income and expenses, was assured of avoiding harsh competition, but it also lacked the motive of pursuing business profits for film productions.

78-90s: System Transformations & Reform

A miracle in Chinese film history, that of 27.9-billion potential ticket admittances to film, happened in 1979, the first year after the 10-year-long Cultural Revolution, with 70 million admissions every day, though the production of that year was only 50 fiction

---

3 As Professor Guo Zhenzhi explains: “Before China’s reform and opening up, politically, the media were the mouthpiece of the Party and followed the party line to such an extent that any variation of thought was impossible. Under such guidelines, the media could not develop an independent voice.” Television Regulation and China’s Entry into the WTO,” ISBN of the working paper at hand 168e:3-934156-59-2, Institute for Broadcasting Economics, University of Cologne, Germany.
films. Since 1978, great changes had taken place in the media sector with the process of economy system reform in China. Mass media are undergoing a transformation process from planned economy to market economy, from the fully government-sponsored organizations to cultural enterprises.

In 1993-94, two important regulations were released, which started the system’s transformation and reform. The original monopoly film distribution system, the Chinese Film Issuing & Distribution Co., was destroyed since then. And the foreign-exporting film policy in 1994 also was one of the most important stimuli for the traditional closed film market in both producing style and marketing.

◆ Late ’90s till Now: Industrialization & Pluralism

The principle of industrialization of mass media in China nowadays doesn’t mean that it has been the same as the commercial system of Western countries, but holds such dual identities as public organizations as well as commercial enterprises. Public responsibilities such as news and other sensitive content were still under the control of government, while commercial assets were allowed to be distinctively operated within a market economy and under the management of enterprises. The so-called Industrialization Reform resulted in a serial revolution promoting policies and regulations for film such as: “encourage all kinds of capital from both inland and abroad, to participate in the development of industry, and continuously promote the socialization of film industry value-train starting from ending film censorship. In 2003, SARFT issued a document: Opinions about Promoting the Industrialization of Radio, Film and TV in China which pointed out that,

The encouraging phenomenon in the Chinese film industry since the new century is the pluralism in the section of investment production and distribution. Only 30 out of 212 films in year 2004 are produced by the state-owned film company, and the other 80% are all produced by unofficial organizations (with 50 films by a private production company and 37 co-productions between Chinese and overseas including Hong Kong, Macaw, Taiwan and foreign countries).

---

4 “Protocol on System Reform of Film in China” issued on Jan. 1993 and “Announcement on further Deepening System Reform” in 1994 by SARFT

5 These covered such sections as advertisements, distribution, network operation, production of non-news programs especially entertainment, sports, drama, etc. (notes from author).

6 Regulation Department of the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (annual, 2003), unpublished. See also the official website of SARFT <http://www.sarft.gov.cn>.

7 Cf. footnote 3.
2. Two challenges of the Audiovisual Policy in the Digital Age – Promotion and Preservation

2.1 Promotion: Industrial Growth and Competitiveness in the Global Market

The audiovisual industry's growth potential is in large part due to the development of innovative services based on digital technology. In particular, cinema is undergoing explosive growth in China and the rest of Asia as we can see in the above descriptions: continually increasing total cinema admissions, investments for production, growth in the number of cinema screens, improved facilities at cinemas and film-themed pay-TV channels. Furthermore, the potential to create hundreds of thousands of highly skilled job opportunities also increases.

One the other hand, the strong presence in the global audiovisual markets of American productions is a familiar characteristic of this century. The American industry is in fact becoming increasingly reliant on exports for its revenues, which now account for 43% of the income of the American “majors” compared with 30% 10 years ago. Moreover, the motor behind this growth is sales to non-American television channels, in particular pay-TV channels. Earnings from pay-TV now account for 25.7% of the American majors' total revenue.

The question for Asians, therefore, is really the following: Will this explosion in demand for audiovisual content, especially films, be met by archival and imported material, like Hollywood? Or will it be met by new, home-produced programming? If it is to be the latter, then there is an absolute need to create the conditions for maximizing the competitiveness of the Asian film industry in order to ensure that digitization does not simply result in a flood of imported or archive (repeated) material. The Asian audiovisual industry must remain capable of providing quality audiovisual content that is of relevance and importance to Asian citizens.

*Source: SARFT*
2.2 Preservation: Social Value Construction and National Heritage Protection

Film, as a medium and also a heritage of social life, plays a fundamental role in the development and transmission of social values. This is not simply because movies influence to a large degree which facts about and which images of the world we encounter, but also because they provide concepts and categories – political, social, ethnic, geographical, psychological, and so on – which we use to make these facts and images intelligible. They therefore help to determine not only what we see of the world but also how we see it.

Due to its unique social impact and cultural role, film is not only an industry like any other and does not simply produce goods to be sold on the market like other goods. It is in fact a cultural industry par excellence. It has a major influence on what citizens know, believe, and feel, and plays a crucial role in the transmission, development, and even construction of cultural identities. Preserving Asian’s cultural diversity means, among other things, promoting the production and circulation of quality audiovisual content, which reflects Asian cultural and linguistic identities. So the question then is: Will this arduous task of construction of cultural identities be met by free market choices? Or by the mechanism of a supporting system?

3. Bottlenecks in Audiovisual Production in China

3.1 The Administration Dominates the Market

Film as an industry in China still has the tradition of depending on the superior orders to carry out tasks, such as delivering administrative instructions, issuing “redheaded documents with the feature of interior directive control, flexible policies, apparent personal ideas of the leaders and so on. Many policies in China were not made public but conveyed within the internal doctrines.”

And most film production foundation is executed not transparently but with administrative intervention according to political interests or social private connections. The measures of marketing management are much more reliant on the administrative than on the economic.

3.2 With Production Market, but without Production Industry

On the one hand, a mind-boggling bazaar of China, with high expectations on investment returns, seems beyond question. Moreover, a recent survey from Pricewaterhouse Coopers issued on August 2006 shows that China has become one of the fastest growing countries in media and entertainment consumption, with a growth rate of 25.2% forecast for the next five years. On the other hand, the number of films

---

8 Guo Zhenzhi, Television Regulation and China’s Entry into the WTO,” p. 8, ISBN of the working paper at hand 168e:3-934156-59-2, Institute for Broadcasting Economics, University of Cologne, Germany.
produced is severely overspent in relation to the numbers that actually show up on the cinema. In other words, 2/3 films have become the overstocked goods, and with the average cinema admission growing once per five years, even the showing of any film cannot be too optimistic for recovery.

3.3 Supporting Measures and Cultural Diversity

With nearly 28% box office admissions come from top four films directed by Zhang Yimou, Feng Xiaogang & Zhou Xingchi, and nearly all the investment coming from the eastern rich district of China, most of the small- and medium-sized companies, especially independent producers, are not able to survive in the monopolizing market. How has the extensive rural area been promoted? How can the great variety of topics be enriched by a vast territory, 55-minority-nationality, multilevel culture and devised folk arts? How have the potential young directors, full of profound humanism but with less money, been supported?

Public intervention should, as a matter of principle, be limited to areas where there are clear market failures. Moreover, public support must take account of the diversity of national situations, by seeking to act in a complementary way to national policies and by bringing the added Asian dimension. The question, then, is what form should this support and intervention take to achieve optimal results? The Asian audiovisual industry must remain capable of providing quality audiovisual content that is of relevance and importance to Asian citizens. However, promotion and preservation can just come neither from the traditional pure administrative-driven system nor the pure marketing-driven system. Measures of both marketing and government should be combined into a new innovative mechanism.

With the rapid evolution of digitalization, economic restructuring, and China’s entry in the WTO, the film industry of China is witnessing great opportunities as well as challenges in history. In this way, the EU’s experience, when confronted with the strong American performance in European audiovisual markets, of protecting as well as promoting EU community values by public aid mechanism, is worth learning more from.


Public intervention has been necessitated by the domination of the international film market by the Hollywood giants since the end of the First World War, as well as the economic weakness of national film industries and the political and cultural issues associated with the production and distribution of images.⁹

⁹ Foreword of Wolfgang CLOSS, Executive Director of the European Audiovisual Observatory, Public Funding Bodies in Europe, Strasbourg, May 2004.
Each year, more than 500 million ECU is allocated by the national and regional funding bodies of the European Union, of which 300 million ECU is allocated to France and 130 million to Germany, and the remaining 70 million being spread among the other countries. Among these is the United Kingdom where, since the establishment of the National Lottery in 1995, the financial involvement of the public authorities has grown very considerably.\textsuperscript{10}

4.1 France Characterized by Re-Distribution Fund: From the Market, for the Market

The National Center for Cinema (CNC) administers the state support fund for the cinema and television industries, as well as grants from the Ministry of Culture and Communication. In the cinema sector, the CNC allocates automatic support for film production, distribution, and exhibition, and selective support for all other sectors of the industry. It contributes to professional training schemes, festivals, public education, and promotion of French cinema abroad, supporting technical industries, and providing backing for research and innovation in cinema, television and multimedia.

Chart 6: 2005 Yearly Budget of CNC, France\textsuperscript{11}

Funding support managed by the CNC amounted to 490.96 million ECU for the 2005 budget, mainly from the turnover tax paid by TV broadcasting companies and the tax on cinema ticket admissions. The support fund has two sections:

- **Section 1:** cinema and video, which redistributed 160 million ECU in support in 2005; and
- **Section 2:** television, set up under the provision of the 1984 Finance Act, which redistributed 338 million in 2005.

\textsuperscript{10} Public Aid Mechanisms for the Film and the Audiovisual Industries in Europe, European Audiovisual Observatory.

**Automatic Support**

**Producers:** producers have been able to benefit from financial support allocated on the basis of a sliding scale of return on box office for their films. Automatic support is also granted for TV screenings of films and their sale on the video market.

Chart 7: Automatic support ranted to feature film production (EUR M)$^{12}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Payment of credit</th>
<th>Preparation of films</th>
<th>Investment in production</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>48.73</td>
<td>52.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>51.82</td>
<td>55.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>52.46</td>
<td>55.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Distributors:** This is proportional to their films’ box office performance, according to a sliding scale.

**Cinema operators:** This support is proportional to the amount of tax imposed on the ticket price, according to a sliding scale that redistributes in favor of small- and medium-sized cinema operators. This support is aimed at financing new equipment and modernization, as well as the opening of new cinemas.

**Selective Subsidies**

**Advances on receipts:** This started in 1959 and takes the forms of an interest-free loan repayable with the film’s receipts or using the automatic support fund generated by the film. The commission, mainly on the basis of the script of pre-production, selects the films.

**Support for script-writing and development:** This is responsible for granting re-writing scripts to writers and producers and those who have already made their first full-length feature film. Furthermore, 2002 saw the creation of the “First Script Trophy for Promoting New Talent” that is open to all writers who have not yet written or directed a feature film.

**Assistance for international co-productions, for European works:** This is for European-language films shooting mainly on Europe with a working team mainly from Europe.

---

$^{12}$ P. 71, CNCinfo, May 2004.
Support for short film production: Known for encouraging new talent, this provides aid for music scores, re-writing, new production technology, and TV broadcasting.

Support for regional production: This encourages production on 18 regional councils.

Support for educational initiatives: This provides children and teenagers – the future TV viewers and movie-goers – with real art education. These various initiatives involve over 8,000 teaching establishments, 30,000 teachers and over 1,000,000 school children.

Film industry heritage and the film archives: Tasked with preserving and promoting more than 80,000 films, a long-term plan to save and restore old films has been in action since 1991, especially involving films produced between 1895 and 1950.

4.2 United Kingdom: Unusual Funding Through the National Lottery

United Kingdom is unique in having recourse to funding via the National Lottery. Various financial measures for loans and the requirement for complete openness for accounts and the receipts of supported films are administered by principal public funding players such as BSF (British Screen Finance), BFI (Production and the regional funds) and the Greenlight Fund of the National Lottery, mainly involved in investing in co-production. Thus, films receiving loans from the fund are required to set up a collection account to enable control to be kept of accounts and receipts. This helps the BSF to be in the lead in a little-known competition, that of the best level of returns (some 70%, while many national or European funds fluctuate between 2% and 10%).

4.3 Italy: A System Based on Mechanisms of Loans and Bank Guarantees

The Italian funding system has genuine peculiarities as delegated to the national bank, Banco Nationale del Lavoro (BNL), the administration of all grants allocated in the form of a credit. The remittance of the Instituto Luce (known as a private production receiving state support via the FUS, the single fund for entertainment.) is used to support all the arts and to directly administer the funds which are given in the form of grants.

13 Public Aid Mechanisms for the Film and the Audiovisual Industries in Europe, European Audiovisual Observatory.

14 The state provides the largest amount of money from the public purse, 88.15 million ECU, which accounts for 92% of the finance of the Italian public funds. Note from Public funding for film and audiovisual words in Europe – A comparative approach, by Andre Lange and Tim Westcott., Council of Europe.
4.4 Germany Characterized by its Regional Structure

Regional public funding is a good support for fork art promotion and regional development resources re-organization. The German system of public funding for film is a typical case by the existence of the Länder. These regional funds are comparatively stronger than the federal agencies, actively involving in the regional planning and development and taken place almost in competition, as they try to attract productions into their regions. ALSAS Film Region is another good case in the cultural exchange near the frontier of German and France.

4.5 TV investment for film (the regulation of support film industry by TV)

The fast-growing TV industry has the responsibility to support film production, and meanwhile benefiting from the support. The production sector is being increasingly financed by the broadcasters in Europe, from 30% to 74% depending on the country, and in the forms of direct contributions to the budgets of the funds, via a special tax or also in the form of co-production or a pre-sale agreement.
Chart 8: Direct Contributions to Public Film and Audiovisual Bodies by Broadcasters (in thousand EUR, 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributor</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Amount contributed</th>
<th>Funding bodies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NDR</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>7 649</td>
<td>FF Hamburg, MSH, Nordmedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProSieben Sat 1</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>4 327</td>
<td>FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTL</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>1 180</td>
<td>FilmFernsehFonds Bayern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWR</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>3 462</td>
<td>Medien- und Filmgesellschaft Baden-Würtember GmbH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZDF</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>6 093</td>
<td>FFF Bayern, F Berlin Brandenburg, FF Hamburg, MFG, MDM, Nordmedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Cymru Wales</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>Sgrîn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Scotland</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Scottish Screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC West</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>SW Screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel Four</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>Film London, Scottish Screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Media Group</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>Scottish Screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV4</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>1 114,93</td>
<td>Svenska Filminstitutet, Nordisk Film &amp; TV Fond</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Conclusion & Experience

◆ Funding, Originating from the Market, Supports the Market

Aid resources, originating from both public organizations and market basis, carry on both economic and political bases. New support resources can come not only from government contribution but through a wide variety of economic re-distribution measures like tax relief on income, granting of preferential credit, financial guarantees to cover risks of investment in production, financial transformations of resources (from television to production), interest-free loan, national lottery, etc.

◆ Public Intervention to Finding a Balance Between Economic Considerations and Cultural Aims in Selective and Automatic Funding, in Areas of Clear Market Failure
The film industry can benefit from automatic financial support on the basis of a sliding scale of return on box office or grants for TV screenings and the video market. Selective subsidies should be provided mainly on the basis of cultural diversity: an assistance-construction fund for new talent, market weakness, and locally enriched talent for old heritage and the next generation.

◆ Public Aid which Is Independent between both Government and Private Sectors

Public aid mechanism is unique because it remains the meeting point between state and industry in promoting diversity, with its aims of providing a better quality of market service while integrating the essential requirements of government reforms. It also has the responsibility to provide backing for market research, investigation, study, and innovation from third parties for better understanding and transparency in a dynamic industry.

◆ For the Development of the Asian Cultural Community and a United Market

Digitization does not simply result in a flood of imported Hollywood film or archive (repeated) material. As an entire cultural community with a long history of exchanging and mingling with one another, might Asian audiovisual industries create a mutual-benefit cultural united market? Could a series of public-funds assistance be set up for more Asian-co-productions and distributions in the world? Might a supporting mechanism promote Asian films (Asian cultural heritage, Asian languages, Asian new talents, Asian scriptwriting, Asian regional locations, etc.)? Might a united film market with public favors and tax exemptions be promoted, to remain capable of providing quality audiovisual content to Asian citizens and maximize the competitiveness of the Asian audiovisual industry throughout the world?

Works Cited


Assembly of National Television & Film Audience Survey in 1993-2003, China Radio and Television Press.

General Office of the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television, Radio Film and Television (1993-2003), Selective Assembly of Important Documents on Radio, Film and Television Work (annual), unpublished.

Lange, Andre and Tim Westcott, *Public Funding for Film and Audiovisual Works in Europe – A Comparative Approach*, published by European Audiovisual Observatory in cooperation with the European Investment Bank.

*Public Aid Mechanisms for the Film and the Audiovisual Industries in Europe*, European Audiovisual Observatory.


Tongbing, Director of Film Bureau of SARFT, working paper for National Film Conference 2004 (unpublished).

**The Author**

![Image of the author]

Luo Qing (email address <eileen_luo@cuc.edu.cn>) is Assistant Director of the European Media Institute of the Communication University of China (CUC) and organizer of the international cooperation with European media communication project. She obtained a Ph.D. in International Communication and Master in Journalism at CUC and had been a visiting scholar in Europe (Germany, France, Italy and Belgium) from Dec. 2003 to April 2005. She had experience as a journalist in CCTV5 and producer at Beijing TV Station. Her main research fields are media industry, regulation, and policy of media and international communication. As the expert and consultant for CCTV World Cup as well as some sports event like Tour of Beijing Cycle Track, Luo keeps close connection with sports communication and has much experience in international media cooperation. She is also the executive organizer of the media research project Sports Communication.
Market Reforms, Nationalism, and War Films: A Case for Historical Continuities

Kishore Budha
University of Leeds
ACF Travel Grant Best Graduate Student Paper (co-winner)

Abstract

Film criticism in the media has played a key role in sustaining Indian cinema. Indeed, in the absence of journals such as Cahiers du cinéma or sustained academic study, journalistic criticism and reporting has helped shape the industry. Higson places film criticism as one of the ways to explore national cinemas. Furthering this approach, Darrell William Davis has proposed three “models of reflections” – or criticism – about a national film industry. These are: the reflectionist model, which evaluates a national film industry in relation to national politics; the dialogic model, which examines the similarities and differences between a national cinema and other national cinemas; and the contaminated model, which considers national cinema to be a compartment of a larger international institution. The study of national cinemas in an age of globalization is considered essential to examine perceived threats of assimilation within larger transnational systems of entertainment, culture, and economics. It has been argued that Indian economic deregulation, ushered in the early nineties, has impacted the media industries to cause historical disjunctures. It is in the above-mentioned contexts that this paper examines discussions of the war film in English-language newspapers between 1997 and 2006. The public space is a rich site to understand the collective of interest groups. These discussions reveal in various nuances the concepts, concerns, and themes about the war film in industrial, aesthetic, ideological, cultural, and political terms. Thus, through a discursive analysis of statements and journalistic criticism published in newspapers, this article reveals three major themes: nationalism; state, economics, and cinema; and aesthetic criticism of form and style. The discourse substantiates historical continuities in cinema’s relationship with dominant socio-cultural formations, late capital’s inability to formally subsume cinema, and journalistic criticism obsessed with western realism. It is suggested that the film industry needs to put forward an institutionalized class of texts by setting rules and expectations about the concerns of the genre, instead of letting the vagaries of India’s relationship with Pakistan prevail on film production and aesthetics. This would require working closely with journalist-critics, who are well placed to counter dominant political discourse.
Not only do industrial and journalistic labels and terms constitute crucial evidence for an understanding of both the industry’s and the audience’s generic perceptions in the present; they also offer virtually the only available evidence for a historical study of the array of genres in circulation, or of the ways in which individual films have been generically perceived at any point in time. (Stephen Neale, 1990)

We have never had a war film... all we have had are love stories told against a backdrop of a war. (Aamir Hussain, 2003)

Film criticism in the media has played a key role in sustaining Indian cinema. Indeed, in the absence of journals such as Cahiers du cinéma or sustained academic study, journalistic criticism and reporting has helped shape the industry. Higson places film criticism as one of the ways to explore national cinemas.

1 Furthering this approach, Darrell William Davis has proposed three “models of reflections” – or criticism – about a national film industry. These are: the reflectionist model, which evaluates a national film industry in relation to national politics; the dialogic model, which examines the similarities and differences between a national cinema and other national cinemas; and the contaminated model, which considers national cinema to be a compartment of a larger international institution. The study of national cinemas in an age of globalization is considered essential to examine perceived threats of assimilation within larger transnational systems of entertainment, culture, and economics. It has been argued that economic deregulation, ushered in the early nineties, has impacted the media industries to cause historical disjunctures. It is in the above mentioned contexts that this paper examines discussions of the war film in English-language newspapers between 1997 and 2006. The public space is a rich site to understand the collective of interest groups. These discussions reveal in various nuances the concepts, concerns, and themes about the war film in industrial, aesthetic, ideological, cultural, and political terms. Thus, through a discursive analysis of statements and journalistic criticism published in newspapers, this article reveals three major themes – nationalism; state, economics, and cinema; and aesthetic criticism of form and style. The discourse substantiates historical continuities in cinema’s relationship with dominant socio-cultural formations, late capital’s inability to formally

1 Higson argues that national cinema can be explored as a) production-centred industry, via “an exhibition-led” or “consumption-based approach”; b) from “a text-based approach”; or c) by way of “a criticism-led approach” (1989).


3 Globalization here is understood as an age of accelerated flows of people, capital, technologies, images, and ideas. Malcolm Waters (2001) provides a good overview of the various discussions surrounding globalization. For discussions about globalization and national cinema see, for example, Kinder (1993); Semati et al. (1999).

4 Madhava Prasad’s work (2005) is one of the most significant arguments for a relationship between capital, ideology, and aesthetics. For specific inquiries into other media in the post-90s era see Kumar et al. (2002); Scrase (2002); Dhareshwar et al. (2000).
subsume cinema, and journalistic criticism obsessed with western realism. It is suggested that the film industry needs to put forward an institutionalized class of texts by setting rules and expectations about the concerns of the genre, instead of letting the vagaries of India’s relationship with Pakistan and right-wing patriotism prevail on film production and aesthetics. This would require working closely with journalist-critics, who have historically countered dominant political discourse.

In their seminal study of “classical” Hollywood, Bordwell et al. (1988) demonstrated how, besides mode of production and norms of narratives, discourse played a crucial role in setting the rules and expectations about the concerns of a cinema – such as film form, genre, and modes – in the form of statements and assumptions found in trade journals, technical manuals, memoirs, and publicity handouts. The repeated articulation of these notions helped the industry to cement a distinct approach to film form or style. Examining the case of the Hindi film industry, Madhava Prasad (2005) and Pendakur (2003) have argued that the Hindi film’s disaggregated nature is the cause of fragmented ideological nature of the Indian state; the mercantile nature of capital in the film industry; the role of state in regulating cinema, especially through the instrument of censorship; and the elite nature of film criticism biased towards verisimilitude. They have argued that late capital would formally subsume the production process thereby rationalising film form. Here it is important to glance at some of the key arguments about the relationship between industry and genre development. Altman (1984), Neale (1999), and Schatz (1981) have argued that genres are defined by the industry and accepted by the audience and the genre reaffirms what the audience believes at both individual and communal level. Altman (1984) states that genres negotiate the relationship between a specific production system and a given audience. This implies that greater managerial and professional control over the way film texts are conceived, produced, discussed, and sold would lead to stable genres and new aesthetic possibilities. In the case of India, professional management of the industry is indeed referenced to the broader economic trends in which cinema is seen as a subset of a larger scheme of industrial “deregulation” and inevitable assimilation into global production and consumption. For example, Sudip Talukdar (2004), writing in The Times of India argued that the film industry was a mismatch with other industries, which had been globally competitive. Talukdar links cinema with other industrial sectors and uses Saving Private Ryan and the aesthetic of “verisimilitude and realism.” Talukdar’s viewpoints can be considered symptomatic of the larger media desire to see Indian cinema eventually realizing a global aesthetic of realism. The phenomenon this paper seeks to highlight is the dichotomy of this position with the reality of the way the industry sees itself — firmly embedded in the ideology of nation-state. A close examination of the journalistic discourse, industry statements, and right-wing politics reveals positions that are

---

5 In this context it is important to highlight the efforts by RGV films, Yash Raj Films to consistently work towards production of a type of films, thereby associating such films with their production companies as well as creating an institutional space for their signification and consumption. This, they have achieved through an elaborate process of promotion – directly through advertising or through statements to the media.
continuous with the period preceding deregulation. Late capital has been unable to certify the genre and this makes the war film open to interpretations and cooptation by right-wing politics. Different interest groups push competing agendas and fears of political-commercial propagandist takeover are exaggerated, though, if we conceded the fears expressed by filmmakers such as Mahesh Bhatt, the threat cannot be considered to have disappeared. This can be attributed to the fact that despite active journalistic support for change, the industry has been unable to advance a stable war genre structure(s). Instead, sporadic success of jingoistic films made by independent filmmakers gives them a larger space in the media though the war film in its current form has been proven to be unreliable at the box office. This has significant implications for industry practices as negotiating the genre with the audience and critics would help reduce the linkages between production and right-wing politics. Some answers lie in the success of films made by newcomer directors aimed at urban audiences that challenge the dominant war film form. The article is divided into three sections – right-wing politics and cinema; economics and war film; and journalistic criticism.

**Nationalism, Patriotism**

*The Context: Border and Right-wing Politics*

Discussions of the war film have to be placed in the context of the rise of right-wing politics during the 1980s and the eventual electoral victory of the BJP in 1998 and the box-office success of *Border* (JP Dutta: 1997). After *Haqeeqat* (Chetan Anand: 1964), JP Dutta’s *Border* is considered a landmark film. On release, it played to packed houses while generating protests amongst Muslims as far as Bradford in the UK. While denouncing the film for its “concomitant rancor against the more brutal, less intelligent and unduly aggressive opponent” (Nikhat Kazmi cited in Varma: 1997), critics were mixed in their reaction to the film. Mitu Varma argued that the film was after all a “Bollywood film” with its formulaic fare of romance and songs. On a more critical note, Firoze Rangoonwalla and Nikhat Kazmi played down the film’s media effects (Cited in Varma: 1997). Despite the critics playing down the film’s significance, Mitu Varma reported that the film had generated concerns in certain quarters about the timing of the film, given the ongoing diplomatic engagement. There is clearly anxiety and excitement over the perceived power of mass media – on one hand it warrants anxiety and fears, while belief in media-effects makes it a target to be co-opted for propaganda purposes. This creates the conditions for filmmakers to take sides with those in power and undermine the industrial development of genre.

*War Films, Right Wing Politics, Patriotism*

Right wing politics has always seen mass media to propagate conservative ideas of nationalism and patriotism. Their arguments stem from belief in media effects as well as

---

6 Dir J. P. Dutta (1997).
the soft-power of Hindi cinema in creating and sustaining imagery, myths, and legends about the nation. Pratibha Advani, daughter of BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani, produced a documentary on the “essence of patriotism in Hindi films.” The documentary, Ananya Bharati, stressed the role of Hindi films in promoting patriotism.7 Writing in the journal of the BJP’s ideological mentor, the RSS, she explained:

As an art form that strikes the chords of both emotion and intellect, the power of cinema is unmatched. Naturally, Indian cinema has contributed immensely to the cultivation of this uniting and uplifting feeling of nationalism. Patriotic films, as a special and much-admired genre of Indian cinema, have had a tremendous impact on our people, cutting across religious, regional, linguistic and economic identities. Moreover, they have also proved their unsurpassed power of communicating both to educated and illiterate masses.

For most Indians, cinema is the enduring source of the image of their nation as a vast and diverse land bound by the Himalayas in the north, surrounded by oceans on three sides, girdled by sacred rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, and Godavari, and blessed with captivating natural beauty and rich resources. For them it is also the primary source of knowledge about our national heroes, martyrs, the struggles and sacrifices of our forefathers, the work of our social reformers, the wars of the pre-and-post-Independence era, including the recent and ongoing war against cross-border terrorism, and our achievements as a free and democratic nation.

Thus, few can contest Indian cinema’s, particularly Hindi cinema’s, unmatched contribution to strengthening the bonds of national integration, countering divisive feelings, educating the people about our shared national history and, through all this, re-enforcing in them pride and love for the Motherland.

(Bharati:2005)

Filmmakers such as J.P. Dutta echo piety to this argument and remind the industry of its patriotic duties and obligation towards the martyr:

I don’t care about the industry.... They would rather have me shoot inane films in Switzerland. I only care for the mother of a dead war hero who rings me up and blesses me. (J.P. Dutta cited in Unnithan: 2003)

J.P. Dutta’s enthusiasm was fed to a large extent by the production assistance he received from the Indian army and by his proximity to politicians who found his sympathies useful to further their own goals. In return for his patriotic championing he

7 See Pisharoty (2005).
received production support from the Indian army while hobnobbing with right-wing politicians helped him gain publicity for his film. Key ministers from the BJP government cabinet, including Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee and deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, turned up for the premiere of *LoC Kargil*. News reports observed that the promotional events preceding the release of *LoC:Kargil* played up the militaristic posturing. The release of the film music was marked by the presence of officers who took part in the Kargil war, fiery speeches, and a degree of nationalism not “normally seen in the otherwise bubblegum world of Bollywood.”

**Commodified Nationalism**

News reports indicated that the television and film industries had appropriated the Kargil conflict by announcing a slate of films, producing chat shows, insertion of war into existing soap plots, and releasing patriotic music compilations. The retail industry too organized special sales towards the war veterans fund, while painters, fashion designers organized fund-raising events. “Kargil is a cake and everybody wants a slice” (Jain et al.: 1999). Some editorials sarcastically commented that the film industry’s fixation with the war reflected an attitude to cash in on the situation rather any genuine effort to develop a war film aesthetic. This was based on a comparison with Hollywood films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, which such editorials argued were a “masterpiece.” The Hindi war film was criticized for its “absurdity, clumsiness, bizarre plot twists, and canned nationalism as a prop for the standard mundane love story.” This judgment rested on comparisons with what was considered true representations of the Vietnam War with fears that comparative representations in Hindi films led to “the trivialization of the issue by well-meaning but entirely misguided individuals.”

**Economics, State, and Film Industry**

**Pakistan as Market – Threats vs. Opportunities**

In comparison to the enthusiasm shown by the media industries to capitalize on the anti-Pakistani rhetoric unleashed by the extensive media coverage of the Kargil war, the lowering of tensions by 2004 led to a dramatic turnaround. The Indian film industry today is no longer considered an unorganized sector that is funded, managed, and organized by mercantile capitalists. Well integrated into the economy and recognized by government and industry bodies the new capital seeks to maximize itself rather than

---

8 Dutta is reported to have stated that the Indian army, impressed by the success of Border, encouraged him to produce *LoC-Kargil*: “I didn’t want to go back and shoot another war film. But the Army asked me to come over and placed the facts before me. After that, I couldn’t say no.” See Nair (2002).

9 See Gelder (2004).

10 See Mirani (2003).

11 (Anon:1999).

12 For example, since 2001 “Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry” has been hosting
occupy itself with concerns of genre development. In the lowering of the rhetoric against Pakistan, producers see economic opportunities in a large Pakistani market. However, it is only through a shift in discourse that permits voicing such opportunities. The Film Producers Guild of India, a significant industry body has been emboldened by developments to openly confide about the opportunities offered by the Pakistani exhibition market. Komal Nahta, a trade analyst, claimed that the Pakistan exhibition could provide the leading producers excess revenues of Rs 50 million.\(^\text{13}\) Not only does this reflect the new liberal economics of the country, but also masks the hegemonic ambitions of the Hindi film in the region. Pakistani producers are acutely aware of this threat, but unable to acknowledge their own vulnerability to the soft power of Hindi films they raise alarms of “damage to moral fabric of Pakistani society.” The problem has been exacerbated by satellite television and home video, which have undermined the local exhibition sector. Though exhibitors stand to gain from screening of Hindi films, analysis of policy statements of the Pakistan Culture Ministry reveals that Hindi cinema is viewed with hostility, requiring intervention by the state by encouraging tie-ups with other film industries – even when the proposed tie-ups are with film industries that have little or no aesthetic similarities. In a recent national conclave on the future of the film industry, the Federal Culture Ministry invited producers and filmmakers to find ways to arrest the decline of the exhibition sector. Given that distribution and exhibition sector woes could be benefited by allowing access to Hindi films, it appeared odd that their representatives were kept out of the conference. Said minister G.G. Jamal: “…the government would encourage Pakistani filmmakers to co-produce films with those from other countries such as Iran and China, and the culture ministries of Iran, China and Pakistan would hold talks in this regard soon” (Ahmed: 2006). The official support for production partnerships with countries other than India within a week of declaring that no more Indian films would be screened in Pakistan betrays the fears of a cinema that is perceived as hegemonic.\(^\text{14}\)

**Film Industry and War Films**

Despite the opportunities offered by the Pakistani market, the Indian film industry is unable to leverage a position of strength. This is partly due to governmental control via the instrument of censorship, which has created a culture of self-restraint and the proximity of influential independent filmmakers who are reported to be close to political elites. Evidence demonstrates that filmmakers have historically reconciled to governmental control over what can and cannot be shown on film screens. Thus, cinema functions as a reflector of the political establishment instead of acting as an independent intellectual force. Given the powers of Central Board of Film Certification, which by its

---

\(^\text{13}\) See Ansari (2004).

\(^\text{14}\) For more see (Anon: 2005), (Anon: 2006a; Anon: 2006b), Kamal (2004).
own admission argues that censorship is “not only desirable, but also necessary,” the film industry finds it necessary to acquiesce to the dominant political ideology. Pendakur and Prasad have adequately highlighted the role of censorship in regulating cinema. This leads to constant shifts about what constitutes a successful film, largely dependant on political dispensation. The dependence between reception and production, which Neale (1999) and Schatz (1981) argue is driven by mutual negotiation leading to genre development, is instead manipulated by political discourse. Thus, genre development is based on the sporadic success of films that are linked to political events. Trade analysts attributed the rash of war films in 2001 to the success of anti-Pakistani rhetoric Gadar and the colonial-era nationalist film Lagaan. In contrast, by 2004, while the political discourse became amiable to relations between India and Pakistan, producers were “busy working cross-border camaraderie into their scripts” (Ansari: 2004). That year, Times of India reported that Nitin Manmohan’s Vande Mataram on the 1971 war has been shelved and Sarhad Paar, a war film starring Sanjay Dutt, was:

being adapted to the peace mood, even though the film was largely in the can...
More significantly, director Anil Sharma, whose last two films – Gadar-Ek Prem Katha and The Hero – unabashedly rode the jingoistic wave, seems to have amended the tone of his latest film, Ab Tumhare Hawale Watan Saathiyon. (Ibid.)

Filmmakers such as Mahesh Bhatt, considered uncompromising in their stand against right-wing politics, see the mellowing as hibernating patriotism. “If right-wing Hindus come to power on anti-Pakistan rhetoric, then this wave will fade away. I would say that we’re on the edge. Hatred is a very difficult emotion to neutralize” (Bhatt cited in Browne: 2004). Given the change in relations between the governments of India and Pakistan, filmmakers were quick to distance themselves from positions that were cheered earlier. Director Farhan Akhtar took pains to clarify that Lakshya merely used the war as a backdrop to explore struggles of individuality. This change in tactics can be attributed to change in political climate, coupled with extensive media coverage of the Indian cricket tour of Pakistan, which portrayed lay Pakistanis positively. Some filmmakers completely re-shot parts of their films and toning down the anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Notwithstanding the differences of opinion surrounding genre theory, filmmakers’ constantly shifting arguments about the structure of the war film indicates a general inability to put forth “an institutionalised class of texts” – films that are systematically negotiated with the audience through conceptualisation, production, marketing, and modification based on extent of success. Steve Neale (2003) stresses the financial advantages to any film industry from an aesthetic regime based on regulated difference, contained variety, pre-sold expectations, and the reuse of labour and materials. He refers to the commodification of mass-art, a necessary requirement for economic exploitation. Thus, the film industry’s inability to develop a stable structure to

15 See <http://www.cbfcindia.tn.nic.in/>.
16 See Bamzai (2001).
17 See Ansari (2004), Kumar Singh (2004 ); Singh (2004 ).
the war film not only highlights managerial shortcomings but also the overall nature of capital within the film industry.\textsuperscript{18} The discourse of war films shows that genre in Indian cinema is not subject to advanced capitalist conditions of production, distribution, and exchange. Instead of producers and managers, the agenda of its production is defined by influential independent filmmakers, trade spokespersons, and politicized members of the industry. The chair of Central Board of Film Certification has been particularly prone to partisanship as it is a political appointment, characterized by eminent publications such as \textit{The Hindu} and \textit{Frontline} as a seat reserved for “friends or sycophants.”\textsuperscript{19} Nothing reflected this more than the arguments of Anupam Kher, its chair between 2003 and 2004. He argued that filmmakers ought to make films that benefited political realities. Dev Anand, brother of the late Vijay Anand who vigorously campaigned for reformation of India’s cinema laws, was the only voice that argued that the reality of history required wars to be examined from different sides as long as it was not propaganda.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Journalistic Criticism}

Film critics with major publications such as \textit{The Indian Express}, \textit{India Today}, \textit{Hindustan Times}, and non-Indian ones such as \textit{Observer} and \textit{Variety} are critical and insightful in writing about Hindi films. This criticism is informative and often refers to a wide body of films within and outside India films outside of India, widening the scope of the discourse. For example, Kermode (2004) finds similarities in representation of Pakistanis as wicked adversaries in \textit{Deewaar} (Luthria: 2004), \textit{Maa Tujhe Salam} (Verma: 2002), \textit{Mission:Kashmir} (Chopra, Vidhu Vinod: 2000), \textit{Lakshya} (Akhtar: 2004) similar to the “Boche of British war films or the ‘gooks’ of American Vietnam films.” While being critical, they also instruct readers to look beyond the “typical Bollywood film.” This should not be read as a generalization of the entire English-language press, though reviewers with smaller newspapers are considered pliant in their writing.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Critics and the Rhetoric of Modernization}

Film critics in media categorize the film industry as unresponsive and rigid while a quiet audience revolution is taking place. Critics characterize the industry as being obsessed

\textsuperscript{18} Pendakur (2003) offers an excellent overview of the Indian film industry – unorganized and criminal financing, star-heavy production, infrastructural shortcomings – and its role in shaping the discourse and politics.

\textsuperscript{19} See Gangadhar (2004) and Narain (2004) for detailed coverage of the Anupam Kher’s removal from chairmanship of the Censor Board, particularly the controversy surrounding the extraordinary delay in release of Anand Sharma’s anti-right wing documentary \textit{Final Solution}.

\textsuperscript{20} See (Anon: 2004b).

\textsuperscript{21} Pendakur (2003) has argued that this kind of journalism “serves the function of creating demand for the films rather than providing any sustained critique of film and culture.” Criticism of \textit{Lakshya} in the media tended to focus on the hype surrounding the director and its production quality. For illustration see (Anon: 2004c).
with formulaic themes that are no longer relevant to contemporary audience who, they claim, are part of “a new unfolding reality” of changes taking place in society. Popular cultural production is argued to be out of touch with changes taking place in Indian society. While periodically admonishing the big three production houses – Yashraj Films, Mukta Arts and Dharma Productions – they cite low-budget filmmakers such as Mani Shankar, Mohit Suri, and Onir, advising the big three to not “cling to old habits.” Saibal Chatterjee (2005), in particular, has consistently riled at what he sees as the film establishment, calling it an “iron grid” of ideology that refuses to confront reality. In a particularly scathing instance, he accused it of choosing to remain in the safety of palliating productions of “action, romance, emotions and comedy.” With particular reference to war films, filmmakers are charged with overuse of the jingoistic formula and not attending to the changing expectations of young spectators. Such critics, responding to what they perceive as the interests of their readers, actively promote an alternative aesthetic. This is illustrated in the discussions surrounding the success of Rang De Basanti in 2006, which recommend narratives of reflexivity instead of taking spectators for granted.

The continuing disapproval of Hindi films by newspaper critics has shepherded filmmakers into a guarded relationship with the former. While courting mass media during pre-release for publicity, they are careful to stress that their particular film is not a reissue of the war film formula. In Farhan Akhtar’s interviews to the press he was keen to distance his film Lakshya from earlier war films and stress that the Kargil war was merely a plot device to narrate a coming-of-age story. Despite his box-office success with Dil Chahta Hai (Do Your Thing) and the film’s critical acclaim, Lakshya met with limited box-office success, though it earned the critics’ praise for its style and production values. A key factor behind the emerging cracks in the Hindi film form is the entry of multiplex operators in the exhibition sector, which allows producers to also make urban-specific films. The emergence of multiplex exhibition provided exhibitors and distributors opportunities to juggle capacities and tap into segmented urban audiences and therefore explore newer aesthetic possibilities. This audience is seen as enmeshed in the culture industry driving the film industry to court “elite” critics. The producers of Tango Charlie chartered a 20-seater plane to ferry television and print journalists to the Indo-Pakistan border. This worked to mutual benefit, generating publicity for the film’s producers while providing “news” for the media.

---

22 See, for example, Chatterjee (2005).
24 In post-film release analysis, critics have argued that the time-tested formula of patriotism and bellicismo should be eschewed in favour of cinematic realism. See, for example, Doval (2006), Tyagi (2004).
27 With the earlier system of single-screen large-seating theatres, films would be made for audiences spanning large populations. Since regional distributors subsidised production costs, they would have considerable say in film narratives given their perceptions of their audiences.
28 See Kazmi’s (2005) report on the event organized by the film’s producers. The event was covered by all leading news publications.
Form and style

Sustained informed critique of the war film genre, or for that matter any film genre, is seen to be absent in film criticism. Whatever critique remains, relegates cinematic discussion to polemics of aesthetics. Sudip Talukdar wonders how, in the age of television and DVD when audiences encounter the realism and verisimilitude of Hollywood war films, the disaggregated form of the Hindi film can fit with a genre such as war. He argues:

A potential cinematic milestone has been sunk by the deadweight of songs, flashbacks and expletives, out of sync with a battle zone, where survival alone dictates every other consideration.... In other words, Bollywood, by its very being and circumstance, is rather mismatched with a genre configured on a different set of skills, attitudes, aptitudes and expertise. (Talukdar: 2004)

For Talukdar, the central organizing feature of war films is verisimilitude and he is representative of the English language critics’ yearning for “cinematic realism.” For such critics Indian cinema is destined to ultimately unshackle itself from the dominant – and by implication – backward film form and join the inevitable global aesthetic of realism, the same way as other industries have been unshackled from economic controls. Such critics draw parallels between film producers and other Indian industries that service global customers and exhort the former to set “higher goals for themselves.” For only in the realist aesthetic can Hindi film depict true and meaningful representation. This polemic is part of a historical continuity of media discourse that is divided between a preference for continuity editing versus star publicity and gossip. Though it is Pendakur (2003) who informs us of this distinction, this research shows a new trend intensified by a rapidly expanding mass media and the influence of capitalist concerns. Previously an elite concern, contemporary mass media discourse is inclusive of producers, distributors, and exhibitors shunned earlier. The entry of capitalists into what was the preserve of left-leaning intellectuals has led to the legitimisation of “mass appeal” and the logic of free market. It is pertinent to note that beyond arguing for mass appeal there is little analysis of aesthetics in a free market. Nevertheless, the insights of industry spokespersons appear to validate the case for active spectators. They are significant players in the shaping of the film aesthetic and underscore the gap between

29 Here I refer to the term forwarded by Madhava Prasad to describe the Hindi film form. Prasad argues that the Hindi film form is a direct result of the economic nature of production. After the collapse of the studio system, the new capitalists in the industry were mercantile in nature who were unable to aggregate production, distribution, and exhibition, as in Hollywood. The producer, financier, distributor, and exhibitor were often separate entities. Producers were on one hand did not own the production process and relied on the various independent professionals who were hired to put the film together. This resulted in a film form that was not been conceived by, strictly produced, and directed at specific audiences. On the other hand were the regional distributors and exhibitors who bore upon the producer plot, character, narrative, and style imperatives that they perceived as satisfying the tastes and preferences of their regional audiences. For more see Prasad (2005).
what the industry considers economic reality and elite view of cinema and society. Commenting on the box office performance of LoC:Kargil exhibitor Yogesh Oza said: “The film has a lot of ingredients to make it look very real and impressive. But it is not like Border which had mass appeal.” Clearly, spectators do not share the critics’ aesthetic opinion and seem unimpressed by realism. Some trade critics even suggest sticking to the Hindi film form and style. Komal Nahta argued that there was “so much realism in the movie because of which it seems like a documentary on war. It is too repetitive, too realistic and too lengthy.” What follows is the prescription to stick to the “escapist form of entertainment rather than something so real.”

**War Film Canon**

There is little contention that Haqeeqat is the canon for war films. Eminent film journalist Bhawana Somayya signals it as a “pathbreaking” and “first widely-acclaimed war-film.” However, this criticism is more an exercise in auteurism than a desire to group, classify, and finding typicality – time honored traditions in the acquisition of knowledge – to evaluate subsequent films. Thus Haqeeqat and Border are praised for their directorial vision and faithfulness to the motif of heroism of the Indian soldier. Talukdar (2004) emphasizes that Haqeeqat should be recognized for its portrayal of the soldier’s psyche, both in war and in peacetime, is unmatched for realism. Stark shots of jawans in Haqeeqat, bereft of equipment, numbers, supplies, artillery or air support, who die defending their posts in sub-zero temperatures against an external enemy.

Unnithan (2003) credits Border with validating the war-epic as a genre in the industry. Similarities are drawn with Haqeeqat for its motif of valor. However, unlike Haqeeqat’s motif of unflinching gallantry in the face of defeat, heroism in Border culminates in victory over the adversary. The film’s box office success is attributed to the novelty of this closure and the fact that a war film had been made after a long hiatus. Border is reported to have grossed Rs 400 million. Dutta’s auteurism in straddling “the two worlds of art and commercial cinema” was emphasized (Varma: 1997), while Unnithan located Dutta’s individual style in lavish budgets, harsh terrains, and casting excesses. Readings of film criticism in mass media since 1997 demonstrates a tendency to append facts and legends about auteurs and their films rather than build an informed discussion. There was no discussion about the vast array of subjects – war, history, nationalism, masculinity – that could have been debated. Though critics were generally unanimous in critiquing the Hindi film form, the success of films such as Border was met with unenthusiastic acknowledgement with the customary veering off into film

---

30 Yogesh Oza and Komal Nahta’s comments are in response to the failure of LoC Kargil at the box office. See Tyagi (2004); Kumar Singh (2004 ).

When subsequent war-films failed at the box office, critics were quick to point to the rhetorical excessiveness. Remi Fournier Lanzoni argues that auteur-narrated films have a greater sensitivity towards contemporary situations and that they force audiences to be an active force (2002). The fixation with verisimilitude appears to turn the focus of mass media to criticism of form and style, rather than question ideological fantasies of such films. What follows is a blind spot of film criticism. The constant clamor for visual realism whittles away Alexandre Astruc’s argument of the tyranny of what is visual – image for the sake of it, serving the demand of the narrative, achieving the goals of realism and social fantasy (1968).

A New Reflexive Cinema?

While it would be tempting to raise the specter of right-wing communitarian politics, productions such as Swades (Gowariker: 2004) and Rang De Basanti (Mehra: 2006) have not only buckled the trend, but avoid jingoism and anti-Pakistani rhetoric. Swades adapts Nehruvian ideology in the globalized age. Its plot has the protagonist Mohan Bhargav stumble into India’s forgotten hinterland in search of his childhood nanny. This starts off a process of self-identification with rural India, which forces him to confront the bleakness of life there. Having led an economically and intellectually rewarding life in the west, he decides to stay on and help “his people.” In his interactions with the village residents Mohan concludes that the solution to their problems lie in empowerment through self-sufficiency. Mohan demonstrates that prosperity can be attained by scientific and engineering interventions, which provides the village water and electricity. This hyphenated identification with both the individualistic wages of economic migration and the need to contribute with actions to alleviate rural poverty are attempts to re-contextualize Nehruvian ideology in an era of globalization. Gowarikar’s interviews to the media confirm this hypothesis: “If you have the opportunity, you must go abroad, study, work and make your money. But after a substantial amount of time, look back at what you’ve left behind and see if you can contribute in any way” (Gowarikar cited in Anon:2004a). Swades advocates benefits of the Nehruvian ideological state apparatus through a clearly defined program of rural development through motifs of modernity, application of science and technology, and self-sufficiency. In such relations, rural Indians are the bearers of the incomplete nationalist project. Such portrayals ignore the reality of the radical rural movements such as Naxalism and Maoist insurgencies. Instead, their politics is defined and acted out by the returning scientifically-educated, nostalgic, and “activist” Indian. Critics such as Saibal Chatterjee argue that a market for self-reflexive Indian cinema is slowly unfolding by keeping the budgets low and focusing on niche exhibition. This middle class market is the space where small-scale experiments in cinema are taking place.

Conclusion

32 For readings on criticism of the war film see Talukdar (2004), Tyagi (2004), Pearson (2003), Somayya (1997), Kumar Singh (2004 ), Mirani (2003),
This article has studied the lack of unity in discourse of various interest groups, demonstrating the inability of organized capital to set the agenda and institutionalize the war film. As a result, the war film is dependent on the repetition of a formula that is bound by an inextricable fate to the politics of the nation-state. This is not only an industrial weakness but also bodes ill for the politics of the country, which is vulnerable to right-wing ideologies. As argued by Pendakur and Prasad, journalistic criticism has been unable to play a constructive role in the development of the war film. Instead it continues to focus on form and style, though there is some evidence of critical discussion and suggestions. The film industry does not appear to be able to utilize the media as a space to advance the war film as a stable genre. As a result, all critical discussions of the war film lead to the repetition of *Haqeeqat* and *Border*, leading to a creative despair. This eventually closes all opportunities for further examination of the genre. All these point to historical continuities that demonstrate that far from modernizing, the Hindi film continues to be influenced by the socio-political formations. However, the success of films on war and conflict, which have avoided basing their plots on Pakistan, shows that spectators are open to newer forms of narrative. However, to capitalize on this opportunity will require sustained discourse and negotiation of the space between production, promotion, and criticism to explore newer cinematic possibilities.

**Texts Cited**


“Bollywood’s Oscar Nominee Director Returns to Tackle Indian Brain Drain.” Agence France-Presse, 16 Dec 2004.


“India, Pakistan End Culture Talks.” Agence France-Presse, 2 June 2006.


Scrase, Timothy J. “Television, the Middle Classes and the Transformation of Cultural Identities in West Bengal, India.” Gazette 64.August (2002): 323-42.


**Filmography**


The Author

Kishore Budha is nearing completion of his Ph.D. research titled “Market Reforms, Media Deregulation, and the Indian Film Industry” under the supervision of Dr. Graham Roberts at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, UK. He aims to further his interest in the field of international cinema by focusing on the study of film industries, particularly the rapidly evolving production and distribution scenarios. Specifically, he would like to examine contemporary Indian and Asian film industries by studying the way they respond to local, regional, and global developments in markets, technologies, aesthetics and audiences. In doing so, he has established wide contacts in the Indian film industry and co-founded an interdisciplinary research network on Indian Cinema across the UK, Canada, the US, and India. This has resulted in a collaborative book on representations of India-Pakistani enmity in Hindi films. His forthcoming publications include *Historical Dictionary of Indian Cinema*. He is also hoping to organize conferences and seminars on the Asian film industries, which would result in a collaborative volume.
Session 3
AUTEURS AND THEIR LEGACIES

In the Mood for Love: Romance as Allegory

Giorgio Biancorosso
University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Hong Kong, 1966. Three years after her “separation” from Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu Wai), So Lai-chen Chan (Maggie Cheung) returns to the old flat where her aborted romance had started only to find it empty. Upon asking the whereabouts of the landlady, Mrs. Suen (Rebecca Pan), Lai-chen is told that because of the riots she has left Hong Kong to join her daughter in the USA. Looking out the window, she can hardly hide her tears. It would seem intuitive to interpret her reaction as an expression of regret for a missed opportunity and nostalgia for happier times. But the dynamics of Lai-chen’s sudden breakdown are more complex and signal a subtle yet unequivocal intrusion of politics into what up to that point had seemed a rather narrowly conceived, if extremely sophisticated, romance. For the “missing” landlady was the objective, if unwitting, enabler of Mo-wan and Lai-chen’s encounter and she had come to stand for the environment – personal, social, and political – that had nurtured and protected the growth of their feeling of love. With Mrs. Suen gone, and with the disappearance of a whole communal and societal network associated with her, symbolized by the intricate close quarters of her flat, Lai-chen now knows that the love story has truly come to an end -- hence her despair. While the romance takes shape during a period of relative political stability, its end thus coincides with a moment of political turmoil. Like that other great film about passion and solipsism, Oshima’s The Empire of Senses, In the Mood for Love poses as a mere love story only to open up, in a brilliantly off-handed fashion, a scenario of political devastation against which romance becomes all but impossible. For all its casual tone, then, the remark about the 1966 riots is a shivering revelation of the social and political conditions that have made possible the protagonists’ solipsistic absorption in their feelings as well as the fragility of Hong Kong’s status as a geographical and political island.
Giorgio Biancorosso is an Assistant Professor in Music and a Member of the Film Culture Project at The University of Hong Kong. Biancorosso studied Music History and Film Studies at the University of Rome and King’s College, London, before moving to Princeton University, where he obtained a Ph.D. in Musicology in 2002. In 2001-03, he was a Mellow Fellow at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University. Biancorosso has published in the area of film and musical aesthetics for the UCLA-based journal *ECHO* and the international journal *AAA/TAC* (Acoustical Arts and Artifacts/Technology, Aesthetics, Communication), and has contributed essays to the volumes *Bad Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) and *Il melodramma cinematografico* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005). His book project, currently under way, is titled “Where’s the Music Coming From?”: *Studies in the Aesthetics of Film Music*. His research interests include Film Music Theory, Film Criticism, Opera, and the Psychology of Music. Biancorosso is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Film Music*, a regular contributor to the international journals *Il saggiatore musicale* and *Music & Letters* and writes monthly columns on China and Asia Pacific for the Hong Kong Magazine *Muse* and the Italian monthly *Il giornale della musica.*
Prefiguring the Future: Tezuka Osamu’s Adult Animation and its Influence on Later Animation in Japan

Gan Sheuo Hui
Kyoto University
ACF Travel Grant Best Graduate Student Paper (co-winner)

Abstract

This paper examines several of the experimental animations among the eight produced from 1962 to 1968 by Tezuka Osamu’s Mushi Production. Until today, discussion about Tezuka’s animation tends to focus on *Tetsuwan Atomu*, the company’s foremost television animation series. Even though Mushi Production failed to become a non-profit company fully involved in exploring the various possibilities of animation that they had originally intended, the company brought out eight interesting experimental animations for non-commercial use. The study of these animations is important because it represents an entirely different image of Mushi Production which has been long ignored, even though it is indispensable for gaining a thorough understanding of their works. The major characteristic found in these works influenced their later animations. *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1971), and *Belladonna* (1973), the first feature-length adult oriented theatrical animations in Japan, explored new possibilities in animation that were ahead of their time. The study of these works reveals Tezuka’s attempt to establish a directorial identity unusual among the anime productions of the late sixties and early seventies. Most significantly, the adult-oriented approaches employed by Mushi Production in these longer works established a foundation for the later development of the adult animation genre in today’s Japanese animation.
This paper examines several of the experimental animations among the eight produced from 1962 to 1968 by Tezuka Osamu’s Mushi Production,\(^1\) a group of works that influenced the formation of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1971), and *Belladonna* (1973), the first feature-length adult-oriented theatrical animations in Japan. The adult-oriented approaches employed by Mushi Production in those works helped to establish a foundation for the later development of adult genre in Japanese animation. Yet, both the experimental animations and these three adult-oriented animations have long been overlooked, even though Tezuka’s attempts to establish a directorial identity were obviously unusual among the animations of the late sixties and early seventies. Even today, those works mentioned above are little known in Japan and elsewhere.

This discussion will focus on the examination of characteristics found in Tezuka’s experimental animations that played a key role in shaping the artistic approach and expression of those three feature-length theatrical animations. However, due to the time constraint, detailed analysis will be limited to *Tales of the Street Corner* and *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The former depicts with poetic sentimentality the everyday life of a peaceful street corner represented by major characters such as a male violinist, female pianist and bartender, who inhabit wall posters, a little girl and her teddy bear, a mouse, a street lamp, a playful moth and a plane tree are shown. The narrative is a loose narrative that evolves around the daily life of living things and inanimate objects and how they were affected by war. This is shown by the increasing appearance of a dictator’s posters that occupy more and more space on the wall until they take over the whole street corner, and ruin the town in the end. On the other hand, *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a combination of ten omnibus animations; each part was compartmentalized following the inspiration of Modeste Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* suite composed in 1894. Mussorgsky composed the work after visiting the exhibition of his recently deceased friend, the architect and artist, Victor Hartmann. Tezuka followed the original order of the suite, creating ten individuals to represent the different occupations of a critic, an artificial landscape gardener, a plastic surgeon, a factory owner, gangsters, a champion, a television talent, a Zen master, soldiers, and sculptures. The animation critically interrogates their roles to reveal the unwholesome nature of contemporary society.

Today’s presentation ties into my bigger project that aims to re-evaluate the historical importance of Mushi Production’s three feature-length animations in the development of modern Japanese animation, as well as to reconsider the controversial and legacies of Tezuka and Mushi Production.

Tezuka established Mushi Production in 1961. His intention was to gather a group of artists to explore various possibilities in animation. Due to economic

constraints, however, the company decided to be temporarily involved in projects to raise funds for the company in order to reduce its dependence on Tezuka’s income from manga. At that time, Hanna Barbara’s animation series such as Flintstones and The Jetsons were being well received on Japanese television, and that stimulated Mushi Production’s staff to produce similar programs. In 1963, they adopted Tezuka’s most famous long-running manga, Tetsuwan Atomu\(^2\) (a.k.a. Astro Boy) into animation. Tetsuwan Atomu was extremely popular and created much income for the company from the spin off merchandising. Mushi Production became the country’s pioneer in producing thirty-minute animation series for weekly television programs. These animation series were produced with an exceptionally low number of cels. This technique is usually referred to as limited animation. Movement in limited animation is not so smooth and appears simplified when compared to standard animation produced in Japan. Yet, the feeling of eagerness to see the first locally produced animation series in Japan coupled with the name value derived from Tezuka and his manga successfully attracted a huge audience. Later on, Mushi Production became fully engaged in making animation series for television and slowly drifted away from its initial intention to explore the possibility of experimental animation. Until the company declared bankruptcy in 1973, they only managed to bring out eight short experimental animations.

Despite having pioneered animation for television series, Tezuka was denounced for introducing negative influences such as the limited animation technique and comparatively complex narrative structure that emphasized the storyline that are still part of the standard pattern for television animation today. Other common criticisms included Mushi Production inauguration of the practice of adaptation, which became the standard in the seventies, when most television animation series tended to adapt famous literature and other established sources that carried name value instead of creating their own original scripts. Regardless that critics and animators from major studios had been upset and critical about Mushi Production and their limited animation techniques, their commercial success immediately motivated other production companies. Toei Animation, the leading production company, who started to produce their feature-length animations in 1958, was inspired by Mushi Production and used similar methods to produce their first animation series for television Wolf Boy Ken (a.k.a Okamishonen Ken).\(^3\)

Even today, discussion about Tezuka’s animation tends to focus on Tetsuwan Atomu, the company’s foremost television animation series. Even though Mushi Production failed to become a non-profit company fully involved in exploring the various possibilities of animation as had been originally intended, it is also true that the

---

\(^2\) Tetsuwan Atomu was aired from 1 January 1963 to 31 December 1966, a total of 193 episodes on Fuji Television Network.

\(^3\) Wolf Boy Ken was aired from 24 November 1963 to 16 August 1965, a total of 86 episodes on TV Net (now TV Asahi).
company did bring out eight interesting experimental animations for non-commercial use. Like other independent works, these animated shorts also faced limitations of time and budget, but nonetheless they were free to try any theme, style, and expression that they desired. It is also important to point out that the production of *Tales of the Street Corner* took more than a year, and was wholly funded by Tezuka’s income from *manga*. Even though *Pictures at an Exhibition* was produced in 1966 five years after Mushi Production was established, this project was still completely sponsored by Tezuka income. Tezuka’s willingness to pour his own resources into these projects illustrates his passion towards experimental animation. Moreover, the study of these animations becomes even more important because it represents an entirely different image of Mushi Production that is indispensable for gaining a thorough understanding of their organization and its influence on later animations.

In an interview a few years after the bankruptcy, Tezuka said that *Tales of the Street Corner* and a few of the early episodes of *Tetsuwan Atomu* were crucial works for Mushi Production. Both works embodied the staff’s enthusiasms, and matched the image and spirit of Mushi Production that he had intended to establish (Yamazaki, 1978:8). Tezuka’s comments revealed the level of importance he placed on these works. The basic principle of the production of *Tales of the Street Corner* was for the staff to be creative and maintain quality while using as few cels as possible in order to cut down on the cost (ibid., 1978:6). In other words, these experimental animations may provide a strong argument for the creative possibilities of limited animation techniques, which have more often been seen as a negative influence from Tezuka. Tezuka’s experimental animations also reveal how these simplified forms, symbols, and static formulas were further developed as a means to provide a more mature expression and meaning for his three theatrical animations, *One Thousand and One Nights, Cleopatra* and *Belladonna*.

The most significant characteristic found in these animations is that their subjects and styles are situated in-between abstract experimental animation and conventional commercial animation. They employed and mixed distinct characteristics from both genres, revealing a sense of artistic experimentation, yet were still based on responded strongly to various established forms of story-telling. This hybridization shows their intention to view animation as art, as well as an entertainment medium.

Indeed, in an introduction written for 1966 *Pictures at an Exhibition*, there was a statement stressing that there was a lack of animation that catered to the general public beyond the established children and avant-garde (abstract) experimental animations. Accordingly, their *Pictures at an Exhibition* intended to fill this gap by being neither too childish, nor full of obscurities (ibid., 1978:110). They chose Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* suite and tried to visualize the music. What Tezuka intended to do was somewhat similar to Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940), an impressive piece that created visual effects illustrating classical music. The design and flow in the beginning sequence of *Fantasia* where Leopold Stokowski conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra in live-action footage, was clearly an effort to make the event look highbrow, and emphasized the
adult quality and seriousness of the work. These live-action segments featuring Stokowski, the orchestra, and the host the American composer and music critic, Deems Taylor, were meant to suggest the audience was attending the recognized high culture event of a formal concert. Besides using classical music as an effort to attract an adult audience, Disney also tried to raise the cultural tone and imagined the potential of what an unusual animation could achieve through style and expression rather than narrative content. The live-action segment found in the beginning of Tezuka’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* was meant to serve a similar purpose as Disney’s concert format. In fact, according to Tezuka, they were conscious about the orchestra segment in *Fantasia*, and actually shot a similar live-action segment showing the Tokyo Orchestra in the original version. However, it was omitted later when they intended to send the work to the Venice Film Festival (ibid., 1978:7). Eventually the live-action segment was replaced by an animated version of the orchestra, and ends with comical but ironic images of our so-called “heroes of today” heading towards destruction.

The opening sequence and narrative of this animation visualized Mussorgsky’s feelings walking from painting to painting while visiting the exhibition. This is shown by a tracking shot employing a subjective viewpoint walking along the sidewalk heading towards a western-style building, presumably resembling the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, where Hartmann’s exhibition was held. This live-action sequence ends with a zoom-in shot showing the entrance to the building, and then cuts to an animated image showing various paintings hanging on a wall inside the building. Later on, the narrative basically develops from one painting to the other, connect by musical interludes. This arrangement focuses on Mussorgsky’s visit to Hartmann’s exhibition that stimulated his production of the “Pictures at an Exhibition” suite.

The use of classical music becomes a feature in animation capable of alluring different audience, who are not originally familiar with the works. A detailed analysis regarding references to fine art and art history, an effort to expand the audience through this type of hybridization, will be further discussed below. What I want to point out here is the combination of highbrow classical music with conventional story-telling throughout these omnibus animations. Due to this narrative structure, the flow and rhythm of the animation would not contain many unpredictable surprises. Yet, besides using the narrative to sustain audience interest, each section still raised certain concepts on controversial topics including references to sexual topics, and to highbrow culture and contemporary events which are more commonly found in experimental animation.

In the following paragraph, I would like to demonstrate how Tezuka uniquely developed his opinion about war in four-minute sequence nine that was originally titled “Baba-Yaga.”

---

4 In Russian, “Baba-Yaga” is, in Slavic mythology, the wild old woman, the dark lady, and mistress of magic. She is also seen as a forest spirit, leading hosts of spirits. It is believed that the pictorial basis that became Mussorgsky’s inspiration for “The Hut on Hen’s Legs” in *Pictures at an Exhibition* was Hartmann’s drawing of an elaborately carved clock representing the hut of the Baba-Yaga. Retrieved from
into a little hut on top of a hill, where they find the drawn and haggard face of a woman lying on a bed. Out of sympathy, the first soldier goes out to get the woman some water in order to ease her pain. In the mean time, the second soldier enters the room. He examines the woman, and offers her some water. Not long after, the first soldier returns happily with the bottle fill with water, however he is soon ambushed by the second soldier, the enemy. In the end, their fight eventually leads to their deaths, including the helpless innocent woman.

The most distinctive characteristic of this animation is its visual narrative that moves in a straight forward story-telling manner together with graphic, illustration and torn paper collage. The graphic techniques such as the application of fast-pace flashing of different bright colors, formation of lines and shapes that resemble the operations of war in the opening and ending shots are eye-catching. Meanwhile the ongoing music with a marching tone also helps to strengthen the theme. The encounter of the soldiers and the woman that finally leads to a depressing ending is mostly shown in still illustration, and occasionally a limited amount of animated gestures. The main motion comes from the manipulating of camera movements such as pans, tilts and zooms, as well as the fast-pacing editing technique that helps to create an illusion of movement. Besides the music, there is no dialogue or any other form of explanation added to these still images. Yet, the emotions of the animation are still effectively communicated, despite the lack of fluid movement.

An earlier example Tales of the Street Corner dated 1962 also raise the controversial war topic without condemning of any particular party, or sounding like propaganda. Instead, the depiction centers on how the living beings and inanimate things that exist in a peaceful street corner are affected, and then destroyed by war. For instance, in one scene, an unknown character that is shown wearing army boots forcefully removes the poster with the bartender. Once the poster of the dictator is put on the wall, it immediately kills the cheerful atmosphere. Indeed, the switch means that the dictator not only takes over the bartender’s place, but also the bartender’s role to be the person in charge. Even though the other posters’ characters are not willing to follow and are frustrated, they are too vulnerable and are forced to obey, pained observers to poster of the bartender being slowly blown away, and disappearing from view.

One can easily point out the use of established forms of camera work, composition and editing techniques throughout the whole narrative arrangement. However, the melancholy depiction of the male violinist and female pianist, whose feelings for each other are shown to be extinguished by both of their posters being burnt in the air by due the fires of war, avoids clichéd depiction. The foreseeable tragedy of the moth that was always drawn to a lamp is similar. The drama of the sad little girl picking up her lost teddy bear and walking through the ruins after the war, leads the audience to witness the destruction. This is followed by the camera panning to a few growing

sprouts as the little girl disappears at the end of the animation. Until this moment, there is only the sound of the wind accompanying this eye-catching scene. Unfortunately, cheerful music was brought in to accompany the imagery of the new sprouts in the ruins, producing an overly bright ending to the animation. The development of the narrative may seem typical and lead to a convenient solution, yet, the theme contains atypically sophisticated elements that assume the audience possesses the adult experiences necessary to comprehend the meaning while the beautiful imagery and powerful characterization still make for a unique animation for that period.

Another distinct characteristic of these animations are their references to fine art and art history. For instance, the drawing technique and style in Tezuka's *Tales of the Street Corner* seems to be modeled after a style in contemporary oil painting that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. The treatment of the architectural background mimics the use of a spatula in oil painting, which produces an uneven and rough texture to the colored surface. Street scenes were drawn with angular compositions, also an influence from popular oil painting techniques of the time. On the other hand, the human and animal figures were presented in flat single color tones, which produced a striking contrast to the background. Although aspects refer to western art, the use of spatulas and angular composition had also become popular in contemporary Japanese oil painting and graphic design.

Tezuka's adoption of these techniques assumed the audience will understand and appreciate them. In other words, Tezuka expected this animation to be viewed by comparatively cultivated audiences with a general art background that could appreciate his work. This high aesthetic level, including excellent graphic design and compositions, shows their intention to create animation catering to adult audiences instead of children, the stereotyped targeted audience for animation.

The last characteristic for discussion is the mixed use of full animation and limited animation techniques. The main characters from Tezuka's first experimental animation, *Tales of the Street Corner* consist of a group of poster figures. As these figures appear on posters, it seems logical not to expect them to move or act like living people. Not only was the company able to cut down on the number of cels, restricting movements to save cost, the limited animation technique seemed an appropriate method to express action within posters. The movements of the figures were generally limited to mechanical and repetitious motions like blinking eyes, clapping hands, tilting heads up and down and so forth. While the movements of other living creatures, such as the mice and moth, were depicted smoothly with an effort to portray realistic motion.

A similar approach is also found in *Critic*, the first segment in the *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The drawing of the critic was done with simple sketching and monotone coloring. Most of the time, the background was presented plain, with occasional still photographs of real scenes. Simple signs or partial drawings were added to suggest the existence of specific locations and situations. The second segment of *Pictures at an*
Exhibition, An Artificial Landscape Gardener tells the very simple story of a tired bee who felt trapped and helpless when he was not able to find anything to ease his hunger and thirst in the artificial garden. Later, this bee, as a living being who clearly does not belong in this artificial garden was thrown out by the gardener. Yet, this half-dead bee was saved by a dew drops from a wild plant outside the artificial garden.

Both of these segments were presented in limited animation. Even though the background and movement found in the Critic were simplified, the whole sequence still looks very interesting with the combined use of live-action photographs and its satire towards critics, who always apply double-standards, and most importantly, know how to speak in a clever fashion. Mushi Production intended to create the satirical content with limited movement. In An Artificial Landscape Gardener, the opening sequence contained impressive drawings that give a sense of film noir with angular compositions of the city landscape. Since it is about an artificial garden, the flowers, plants and insects that appear in the garden were all drawn motionless. It is thus natural for the audience to expect very limited movement from the whole sequence. Even though all ten episodes varied in style and content, they generally share one characteristic, the presentation of the stories in an interesting manner without employing fully animated imagery. Tezuka and his staff tried to shape their narrative and character design in a way to legitimately use limited animation techniques.

A noted animation critic, Mori Takuya disagreed with Tezuka’s referring to these eight short animations as experimental animations. According to Mori, these works were not unique and just seemed ordinary to him. Moreover, he also regretted that Tezuka was not able to express in animation the themes that he consistently employed in his manga. Mori also thought that Tezuka’s animations were dull, repetitious, lacking the beauty of movement, and did not achieve the joy of metamorphosis that Tezuka always emphasized in his essays (1989:180-82). Mori raised two issues that are worth discussing in detail. The first concerns the themes used in experimental animation. Fundamental differences between experimental animation and theatrical animation lay in their structure, planning, and audience expectation. For instance, most people go to see experimental animation as a collection of works usually screened at a film festival or an art theatre. Therefore, the author has the potential to do something different from the usual commercial approach which cannot risk alienating the audience. In other words, the main intention for the author is to attract attention from the selection committee and to surprise critics with a unique manner of storytelling that maximizes the potential of animation.

Mori may not have considered Tezuka’s animation as experimental because he compared them these works with the avant-garde animations by Kuri Yoji, Manabe Hiroshi, and Yanagihara Ryohei, a group of pioneers of Japanese experimental animation who were active in the early sixties. Their animations engaged issues such as male and female relationships, ironical views of the manners and customs of 1960s Japan, satires on human society and sexual related topics that were considered very
daring at that time. In terms of style and expression, they also explored various techniques such as combining animated images with live-action images. On top of that, the experimental use of vocal music, especially by Kuri Yoji, was astonishing.

Naturally, Tezuka’s animations look conventional when compared with those works. Yet, his animation should be still considered experimental animation because there were meant for film festivals and independent screening, and were not generally used commercially in theatres. Even though his themes were not as daring as Kuri Yoji and his colleagues, Tezuka and his staff also raised a number of controversial topics, including references to sexual themes, highbrow culture and contemporary events. There was a certain jealousy that caused Tezuka’s animations to be neglected due to his fame as a manga artist, as well as preconceived ideas of the audience who wished his animation to match their familiar image of Tezuka.

Tezuka was famous for being a big fan of Disney’s animation. When Bambi (1942) was screened in Tokyo in 1952, Tezuka said that he saw it more than a hundred times in the theatre and roughly thirty times during the revival screening. In the beginning, he paid very close attention to each single movement, the dialogue, the music and so on. When he was familiar with the flow and content of the animation, he started to pay attention to the different reactions of the audience to different scenes (Tezuka, 1977). At the same time, Tezuka also often talked about how the word “animation” related to “living thing,” and as movement is a prime characteristic of living beings. Therefore, animation is an art for drawing these movements and animation that does not involve movement can hardly be considered animation. Movement is the major point that differentiates animation from manga and painting, and Tezuka emphasized that movement could mean physical motion, growth and metamorphosis (Tezuka, 1980).

Generally, it seems like a reflexive action for the audience, as well as critics, to have expected something more from Tezuka. One reason is that Tezuka talked so much about motion in animation. Secondly, his status as one of the most influential manga artists in Japan after the war, he initiated story manga, and most significantly had adapted cinematic expressions, such as the point of view, framing, close up, composition and so on to successfully create a stylish look and lively flow in his manga which had never been done before. As Takeuchi Osamu has summarized (1998:209-12), the major characteristics that appeared in Tezuka’s manga were a mixture of different elements that came from several mediums, although mainly from cinema. Tezuka was able to adopt them and add his own touch to it. In short, when Tezuka started to become involved in making animation, everybody was excited to see what he would produce.

Reading Tezuka’s statements and watching his experimental animation, it seems like his experimental animations may have been a failure for Tezuka and his staff, who were not able to produce the type of animation they had intended due to economic constraints. Even Tezuka once commented that, he often sighed and closed his eyes when he looked at Tetsuwan Atomu at the beginning stage when it hardly has any
motion (1977:158). It is also common for Tezuka to openly comment on the poor quality of their later television animation series, critiquing the later works of Mushi Production as having moved into a totally different direction from what he had intended. This created a negative impression of the overall value of Mushi Production’s work. Yet, if we put aside these preoccupations and carefully examine these experimental works, we can discover a number of interesting elements that have been overlooked.

It becomes clear that the mixture of different style and approaches found in Mushi Production’s *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Cleopatra* have a connection to the approaches used in their earlier experimental animations. In other words, each section of these theatrical animations can be seen as an independent sequence with a unique interesting approach. Tezuka was ambitiously employing those techniques developed earlier in their short experimental animations to give a different look to his theatrical animation. Therefore, there are moments when some of the compositions and approaches employed do not support the development of the storyline, or contribute to the coherence of the overall structure of the film, but were done to satisfy the staff’s aesthetic sensibility. These animations reveal an exciting and beautiful visual form from beginning to end, yet, their episodic structure shows Mushi Production was not ready to take a specific set of new experimental techniques and expand them into a consistent feature-length movie. However, there was a significant change when they produced their third work, *Belladonna*, whose drawing style and coloring method were united and consistent throughout. The coherent style and expression kept the audience focused on the storyline, as well as providing more room for character development.

Among the eight experimental animations, there is one work, *Memory* that sarcastically points out stereotypes, and the unreliable memories of human beings. In order to appreciate this work, one really needs to have extended experience of society to share Tezuka’s sardonic gags. Sexual imagery and fantasy about women were also employed in a playful manner. This animation provides a glimpse of the later development of the sex and humor combination that was widely used in *One Thousand and One Night* and *Cleopatra*. It is obvious that Tezuka used sex and humor to attract a large audience in his first two theatrical animations. This mixture of lowbrow and highbrow culture was very popular in the 1960s. Indeed, the humor is an important part of the appearance of animations in general. There was no intention to sexually arouse the audience, rather the sexual elements were more of a marketing strategy to draw a broad audience. Therefore, the majority of the sexual scenes do not directly depict sexual activities, and the emphasis is placed on the expression of desire through metaphor, metamorphosis of line and color, and various manipulations of camera and editing technique that are abstract and imaginative. Sexual behavior is conveyed subtly through allusion found in the dialogue, gestures, and personification of objects with suggestive female and male forms. However, when they produced *Belladonna*, humor was almost eliminated, and replaced with a more sexually intense drama employing a historical background that contributed to the serious tone of the animation.
Mushi Production became bankrupt and was not able to produce the adult-oriented, yet less sexual animation that they had aspired to create. However, as Tezuka and Mushi Production achieved their initial dream to become independent and continue to be active in the industry, they successfully prepared the ground for the rapid development of the various types of adult-oriented animation that were to come. In the development of postwar animation in Japan, there was a growing division between those who viewed the future of animation as focusing on the production of ever more smoothly animated motion and realistic detail, as opposed to those who emphasized aesthetics and the inventiveness of unconventional imagery. The various forms of limited animation employed by Mushi Pro were first done as mere short cuts calculated to save production costs. However, many animators were inspired by their creative freedom, and the exploration of new designs and animation techniques spring up from these beginnings.

Works Cited


**The Author**

![Gan Sheuo Hui](image)

After receiving her MA degree, Gan Sheuo Hui was a lecturer with the school of Mass Communication at Han Chiang College in Penang, Malaysia. She is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Human and Environmental Studies at Kyoto University. Alongside her general research in cinema studies, she focuses on animation and *manga*. 
Haan (Hatred), Han (Koreanness), and the Deleuzian Line of Flight in the Films of Hur Jin-ho

June Lam Pui-wah
University of Hong Kong

Abstract

It can be said that one of the obsessions of Korean cinema is the depiction of an entrapped situation and the way in which the entrapped responds to it. This situation mainly takes the forms of physical entrapment (e.g., the protagonist of Park Chan-wook’s Old Boy is forcefully locked up in a room for 15 years without knowing why), and psychological entrapment (e.g. the protagonist of Lee Chang-dong’s Peppermint Candy is haunted by the memory of Gwangju Massacre in which he killed a local girl by mistake). This paper aims to focus on the latter dimension and its significance by examining the three feature films of Hur Jin-ho: Christmas in August (1998), One Fine Spring Day (2001), and April Snow (2005).
In *Christmas in August*, the protagonist Jung-won desires nothing more than a simple life of a townsman. However, this simple wish is thwarted by the leaving of his teenage-lover who left for the city and married a city man. There seems nothing that he can do except hanging her photo outside his photo shop and wait for her return.¹ Time just freezes in this blank waiting and during which he is confirmed to have cancer. Jung-won is entrapped both psychologically and physically. However, instead of responding to the situation actively like expressing his feeling to the girl or seeking for alternative medications, he chooses to accept the situation passively by concealing his feeling and receiving the standard treatment – not without the faint hopes that the girl will return to him one day and the cancer will be cured. However, these hopes are broken one by one by the “return” of the girl who asks him to take off her photo (which means another goodbye), and his own deteriorating body. It is only by then he expresses his feeling externally one night by yelling “Why should I shut up?” at the police station after taken over by alcohol.

In analyzing the sentiment of the entrapped or the oppressed *han* (or *haan* as coined by Son Chang-Hee²), Andrew Sung Park gives it a framework with three axes: individual (subjective) versus collective (objective), active versus passive, and conscious versus unconscious.³ In the case of Jung-won, one may say his response to entrapment is that of individual-passive-conscious. Park uses the word “resignation” to describe this type of response. However, as put by Son, there is still hope in the state of resignation – though it is a “frustrated” one.⁴ Thus the response of Jung-won to entrapment can be described as endurance – keeping his good temperament and living his routine, with the hope that the good old days will come back in the end. However, this faint hope is broken by the harsh reality and after being taken over by alcohol, Jung-won abandons

¹ The girl *does* return in the end – only to ask him to take off her photo. And when she asks Jung-won why he didn’t get married, he replies half-jokingly, “I was waiting for you!”

² Son Chang-Hee coins the word *haan* for the sentiment of the oppressed in the place of *han* in order to reserve for the latter as the original nature of the Korean before being oppressed. See Chang-Hee Son, *Haan of Minjung Theology and Han of Han Philosophy: in the paradigm of process philosophy and metaphysics of relatedness*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000.


⁴ Son traces the genealogy of the Korean *haan* back to the myth of the founding of the Korean nation. Tangun, the legendary founder and the first king of Korea, leaves his divine father Hwan-in for the mankind and marries a bear-woman, whereas their offspring form the Korean nation. The bear-woman is originally a bear that turns into a woman by eating a bunch of mugwort and 20 pieces of garlic and keeping out of the sunlight for 100 days. During these unbearable, entrapped and *haanful* 100 days,

[t]he all sovereign god, Hwan-In, answered the animal’s cries of discontent by revealing how *haan* can be a means to reach a higher state of being. Ever since the installment of this mythical story of *haan* and Korea’s beginning, Koreans have lived with the frustrated hope – a hope nonetheless – that their *haan* does have meaning, and purpose, that it is a means to a greater end, not doom. (Chang-Hee Son, *Haan of Minjung Theology and Han of Han Philosophy*, p. 23)
himself to another response to entrapment – resentment (the individual-active-unconscious type in the Park’s schemata) – as seen in his violent behavior in the police 

station.

If the goodly response to entrapment – endurance, keeping one’s virtues and waiting for the return of the good old days – is imperfect in the case of Jung-won since he abandons himself to resentment in the police station, we find a purer manifestation in the grandma character in *One Fine Spring Day*. In it, she is the one who is betrayed by her husband but relentlessly waits for his return even to the point of madness. Her purity is exemplified by her pink *hanbok* (the traditional Korean dress) which she used to wear in her good old days. She keeps it in a drawer with great care like treasuring her untainted memories and virtues. But in the end, it is only by leaving this world that she can return to her good old days – as symbolized in her wearing the *hanbok* once more and leaving home for the last time.

Here, we find many resonances in the two characters of Jung-won and grandma – they are the ones who live in the past, and the present to them is a standstill vacuum that they have to endure; they keep their virtues in endurance and their innocence is symbolized by the past objects that they keep (Jung-won’s old photo, grandma’s *hanbok*); however, this blank waiting proves to be unbearable that distorts and harms them (Jung-won’s getting of cancer, grandma’s insanity); and they can only return to the good old days by leaving this world (the final smile of Jung-won in his last photo, the leaving of grandma with her *hanbok*).

As mentioned earlier, Son coins the word *haan* (*hanja*: 憤, which means hatred), the sentiment of the entrapped or the oppressed, and contrasts it with *han* (*hanja*: 韓, which means Korea), the original nature of the Korean before being oppressed. When viewed from the Park’s schemata, one may regard the *haan* response to oppression as the counterpart of that of individual-active no matter in the conscious form (revenge) or the unconscious form (resentment); whereas the *han* response to oppression corresponds to that of individual-passive no matter consciously (resignation) or unconsciously (helplessness). From this combined perspective, one may regard the response of Jung-won and grandma to entrapment is that of *han* – and no matter it takes the form of resignation or helplessness – the traditional Korean virtue (*han*) is kept with the hope that the good old days will return in the end.

If Hur gives a pessimistic depiction to the practice of *han* of Jung-won and grandma, he gives a positive one to that of the protagonist in *One Fine Spring Day*, the sound engineer Sang-woo. Sang-woo leads a quiet life before his encounter with the local DJ Eun-soo. They soon develop a relationship and have a wonderful time until he asks for commitment – the very thing that she cannot offer. Then, she asks for separation which throws Sang-woo into the void since he has already fallen for her. Sang-woo is torn between the choices of waiting for her, or letting her go. In the end he chooses the latter and manages to get back his life. Here, we can say Sang-woo makes a
wise choice for “the good” to keep – instead of waiting for the return of the good old days with Eun-soo, he chooses to get back to his old quiet life again – and he manages to do so by the act of dan.

Dan (hanja: 斷, which means cut) – or daan as put by Son – is a way to resolve haan proposed by Kim Chi-Ha. It is by letting go of the entrapping object that one can cut through the vicious circle of haan. In the case of Sang-woo, his quiet life can only come back to him by letting go of the bygone relationship with Eun-soo. In One Fine Spring Day, the act of daan is expressed by Sang-woo twice: one in his singing “I know I shouldn’t have loved you. I’d be willing to try it again, but goodbye...” during their first separation, and another in his scratching Eun-soo’s car with her key after discovering that she dates with another man during their second separation. Here, one may take the second act as that of haan – the individual-active-conscious revenge in Park’s schemata – nevertheless, it is more an act of daan since after this “revenge,” the way of resuming a relationship between the two is blocked for good.

If we could locate a haanful figure in Hur’s films, it would be the ambiguous character Eun-soo. One Fine Spring Day is narrated from the perspective of Sang-woo, who knows nearly nothing about his lover. Eun-soo is to him forever an enigma and a femme fatale. From the bits and pieces of Eun-soo’s life depicted in the film – a divorced woman who refuses to commit in a relationship, a regular alcohol user, a DJ of a sentimental program, a praying Buddhist although no one knows what she prays for – we may imagine and “reconstruct” her life as a once warm-hearted woman but disillusioned by a failed marriage, then becomes a modern lover who refuses to commit in relationships.

If the han response to evil oppressions is to keep one’s good nature and wait for the return of good old days, the haan response does the opposite: to abandon one’s nature and embrace that of the oppressor, thus becoming an evil-doer. In the case of Eun-soo, one may say her response to her failed marriage is to abandon the hope of a trustful relationship and embrace the very way that wronged her – the modern way of love. And even though the “good old past” does return to her as Sang-woo offers her a traditional love, she refuses to take it cause she already chose the other way. If Eun-soo was hurt by a bad love in the past, now she becomes a bad lover herself and does harm to Sang-woo – who might in turn become a bad lover and further the vicious circle of haan – nevertheless, he chooses to keep his own good nature and daan with Eun-soo. The mixed act of han and daan saves Sang-woo from the snare of affection and the vicious circle of haan.

So far we have reviewed the haan, han and daan responses to entrapment in the films of Hur, there is yet another response untouched in literature – the Deleuzian response of line of flight. If haan is the evil response in which the oppressed adopts the

\[5\] Cf. ibid., pp. 58-59.
way of the oppressor and becomes an evil-doer, and han is the good response in which the oppressed keeps one’s good nature and waits for the return of good old days, the Deleuzian line of flight is a way “beyond” or “in-between” these two poles of response. We may call this “in-between” way as guile (good + evil = guile), and we find its manifestation in the latest feature film of Hur, April Snow.

In April Snow, In-su and Seo-young encounter each other after a car accident in which their respective partners are involved. After knowing their spouses have been having an affair, they are thrown into a psychological impasse in which they suffer from being betrayed without knowing the reason why (their spouses are in coma). However, instead of responding to the entrapment in a goodly way like keeping the love for their spouses and wait for their recoveries, or in an evil way like betraying their spouses by throwing themselves to casual relationships, they respond in a “in-between” way that they still keep their faith in love – only this time not to their spouses, but to each other. In a way, one may say their developing a relationship is indeed the perfect “revenge” to their spouses. However, the crux of this “perfect revenge” is they could not have the idea of revenge in the first place. “Revenge” is just the effect of their act, and not the intention.

We can say what they do is something between evil and good – evil in the sense that they betray their spouses by having a relationship, but good in the sense that they still keep their innocent hearts in love. In effect, they manage to accomplish an impossible task by doing two incompatible things together: to avenge the evil doings of their spouses; but on the other hand, to keep their good faith in love. It is by this act of guile – doing an evil thing (an affair) in a goodly way (with true hearts) – that saves this miserable pair from the impasse – and more than that, brings a new way of life to them. Indeed, it is exactly the message conveyed by the film’s title – April Snow – making compatible of two incompatibles (the film ended with the reunion of In-su and Seo-young in a snow storm in the springtime April).

To conclude, three major responses to entrapment – han, hann, and the Deleuzian line of flight\(^6\) – are discerned in the films of Hur Jin-ho and only the third type can be regarded as constructive. It is by accomplishing an impossible task between good and evil that the entrapped can get out of the impasse – and more than that, start a new life by constructing a new world (e.g. the new life and world composed of In-su and

\(^6\) The Deleuzian line of flight accomplishes a “disjunctive synthesis” between two incompatible individuals which brings forth something new between-the-two that can neither be reduced to one or the other. A concrete example is given by Deleuze in his construction of the concept Face from two different concepts White Wall and Black Hole. White Wall belongs to the domain of art which is different from the domain of astronomy of Black Hole. However, Deleuze manages to perform a disjunctive synthesis between the two by creating the concept Face which expresses White Wall and Black Hole simultaneously through a third dimension (political). In this example, Face is the guile that unites White Wall and Black Hole and expresses them simultaneously without compromising their differences. For the example of the creation of Face out of White Wall and Black Hole, see Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues (1977), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London: Athlone Press, 1987, pp. 16-19.
Seo-young in *April Snow*). In effect, it is the purpose of this paper to bring forth this guileful response to entrapment—no matter in the form of psychological, physical, filmic or real-world entrapment—as a new kind of constructive politics of the oppressed.

**Works Cited**


**The Author**

June Lam Pui-wah is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature Department of the University of Hong Kong. Her research area is the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari. She was the editor of *Film Bi-Weekly*, the cultural section of *Sing Tao Daily*, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival’s publications. Her website is <http://junelampw.blogspot.com/>.
In my presentation I would like to define a post-colonial theoretical framework for reading the films of Philippine director Bobby Suarez. While virtually unknown in his home country, he has produced Quentin-Tarantino-certified cult movies such as *They Called her Cleopatra Wong*, and most of his productions have been commercially distributed in Europe, the United States, the Middle East and South East Asia. I want to locate the cinema of Bobby Suarez vis-à-vis a post-colonial and predominantly local cinema as that of the Philippines on the one hand and a “glocal” cinema as that of Hong Kong on the other hand. Philippine cinema has indigenized influences of the Spanish Zarzuela, Hollywood film and other world cinemas to create a cinema that caters predominantly to the local market. Hong Kong cinema on the other hand is the product of a region that has been de-colonized only recently. Its post-war cinema never catered exclusively to the local audience, but also to the Nanyang (south of mainland China) community in South East Asia, and has increasingly reached audiences beyond that group. It amalgamates Chinese cultural traditions with international influences in a way that – according to critics like Stephen Teo – created a transglobal cinema. The cinema of Philippine director Bobby Suarez is a quite different animal altogether. Schooled in the film business of Hong Kong of the 1960s, but based in Manila for most of his career, his films were always made for an international market, with English instead of Tagalog dialogue. Most of his films were produced for a specific country/producer, and Suarez tried to accommodate this market, while at the same time catering to an assumed lowest common denominator in the international moviegoers’ taste. In this process, he created a flamboyant parallel universe of female Chinese martial artists, German expats, Philippine thugs, Mexican drug lords and American super cops, who fight their way through an assortment of film genres. It is partly cheerful cock-and-bull story a la Feuillade, but it is also partly postmodern pastiche. The cinema of Bobby Suarez implode any notion of a national cinema. Coming from nowhere in particular, it turns the concept of national identity into a fun house. His films are examples of a globalization avant-letrre. While trying to emulate international action cinema,
he has produced a peculiar filmic account of globalization beyond international business and economics. Only recently art house directors as diverse as Wim Wenders (in *Till the End of the World*), Fruit Chan (in *Public Toilet*) or Wong Kar-Wei (in *Happy Together*) have consciously embarked on a comparable venture. In my presentation I will look specifically at his film *Rose Tattoo*, a Philippine-German co-production, that takes place in the German expatriate community in Manila.
I first encountered a film by Bobby Suarez in the middle of the 1980s, in a video store in Düsseldorf, Germany, when I was a literature student at the Heinrich-Heine-Universität there. On the cover of the VHS tape was a glamorous-looking Asian Woman in a long, floating gown, wearing a turban on her head, and pointing a gun towards the viewer. Left and right of her, forming a fierce triptych, were two other women; one donning a semi-automatic rifle while the other one was about to shoot three arrows from a large bow. On closer examination, these three women seemed to be the same person, wearing different tight dresses, which must have been fashionable in the late 1970s. In the background was a big building exploding and a helicopter crashing – a dynamic, if slightly tacky composition. Its power was only underlined by the title that was splashed across the cover: “They called her... Cleopatra Wong.”

The movie seemed to be one of the martial arts flicks from Hong Kong that were flooding the video stores in Germany back then. Little did I know that a director from the Philippines shot this film in Singapore and in the Philippines (and that I would end up in the latter country two decades later). This was not only very probably my first encounter with a film from any of these two countries. I am convinced that this was also the only film from any of these countries (or any other South East Asian Country, expect for Hong Kong, for that matter) in the whole store. I borrowed it, watched it, and found it off-beat and amusing. And for some reason the film, unlike many other b-movies that I saw during this period of misspend hours in video stores and in front of the VCR, stuck with me.

Looking back from today, it is strange fact that I never spend a thought on where this film was made. Seeing it again after twenty years and after having moved to the Philippines, I notice that the protagonists mention such city names as “Singapore,” “Hong Kong,” and “Manila.” Back then however, I never thought about these locations. To me it took merely place “somewhere in Asia” and the film might as well have been an American or even European production.

It wasn’t, because Asia was so far away for me as a young student (I had already travel to Japan), and I therefore didn’t care about geographic details. Rather this film seems to come from a generic action movie country, a parallel university, where people of all races, nationalities and creeds spend their days hunting each other through narrow alleys or abandoned factories, up and down staircases or through the jungle. In this action movie universe, people constantly chase each other with motorbikes, convertibles, race cars, or beach buggies. They speed through streets, over fortifications and construction sites. They keep shooting at each other with arrows, pistols, machine guns and hand grenade launchers. They break down doors, crash through windows and jump from flying helicopters, all the while cracking smart-ass remarks. When women appear in these movies, they usually are quickly whisked away as hostages to some hideout in a dark basement, a secret laboratory or a remote fort. The men who do this spend a lot of time laughing diabolically, when they are not busy shooting at their pursuers. Sometimes they do both at the same time.
Films from a great many countries have contributed to the creation of this violent never-never land where everybody seems always to steal something from somebody else (diamonds, wonder weapons, computer disks with the secret for world domination) and than hound each other for it. Of course, most of these plots are generic and are done to death in a lot of movies. What sets the films apart, which I am talking about here, is their geo-spatial vagueness.

These films are usually low-budget productions that simply do not have the money to use spectacular locations. They include European thriller co-productions as well as American B-movies, and the Spanish and Italian cannibal films or horror films, which delight in vaguely exotic locations full of crime lords, sadistic prison guards and cruel jungle tribes. Most of them are from the 1970s, but the recent, international productions of Jackie Chan (such as *Who am I?* or *Armour of God*) take place in a similar parallel universe, that is “somewhere out there” and chock-full of crooks, henchmen and goons.

Often the nameless never-never land where these films take place is actually the Philippines. In the 1960s and 1970s, American producers such as Roger Corman used the Philippines as an exotic backdrop for formulaic, low-budget action films, which took advantage of the natural beauty of the archipelago, in addition to the cheap, English-speaking labour and the comparatively high film productions standards of the country. The Marcos government that hoped for both income and international exposure actively supported these American-Philippine co-productions. The Marcoses did not interfere with the making of these movies, (as opposed to their control of the local film industry), and the American film producers enjoyed comparative artistic licence in the Philippines.

The Philippine film history and criticism has so far taken little interest in these productions. Busy with promoting quality films, the major publications on Philippine cinema (Guerrero 1984; Lent 1990, 149-84; David 1990; Tiongson 1994; David 1998; Vera 2005) do not concern themselves to a great extent with the Tagalog action cinema that was a very popular genre during the 1970s and 1980s, much less with this strange episode in the history of local film making. Bobby Suarez does not figure at all in these accounts of the development of Philippine cinema, even though most of his films – as well as most of the American-Filipino co-productions mentioned earlier – were shown in the Philippines and sometimes were quite successful.

Before I address these co-productions in greater detail, I have to return to the subject of this paper, the Filipino director Bobby Suarez. This director, who retired in the late 1980s from film making, is virtually unknown in his home country, even though he has written and directed 12 films and produced five more films, most of which were commercially distributed in Europe, the United States, the Middle East and South East Asia. This is quite a feat for a director from an Asian country that – unlike Japan, India, Hong Kong or recently South Korea – has never made a big international impact with its
films. Some of the films of the Philippine social-realist directors of the 1970s and 1980s – such as Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal or Mike De Leon – were screened at international festival such as Cannes or Berlin. And more recently independent films such as Magnifico (2003), The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros (2005) or Kubrador (2006) won international awards. But the interest in these films has been limited to a small worldwide audience of art-house film buffs and critics.

Bobby Suarez’s movies have little in common with these art films. They were fodder for grind house theatres around the world, late night cable television or the direct-to-video market of the late 1970s and 1980. Most of his productions are action films, pulp fiction in the truest sense of the word. They have simple stories that allow for a lot of fight and chase scenes, they are hard-hitting and fast-paced, and they try to make the most of the limited resources that were available for their production. Just consider the titles of some of his movies: They Call Him Chop-Suey (1975), Master Samurai (1974), Asia Cosa Nostra (1973), One-Armed Executioner (1983). Most of his films were made in the Philippines, with the exception of four films, including Cleopatra Wong, which were shot in Singapore with the hope to launch a series of films with a pan-Asian appeal. All of them are low-budget productions, and all of them had some international funding.

Meanwhile, there is a new, international interest in Suarez’s films by b-movie buffs around the world. An American company recently picked up the DVD rights for Cleopatra Wong and two other films, and at least two writers have expressed interest in writing a book on his films. Suarez himself is currently pitching a sequel of Cleopatra Wong to different financiers. (Suarez 2006)

His films have been shown at the film festival in Brisbane and at the Singapore film festival, where Cleopatra Wong and Bionic Boy in particular received a lot of interest, because they were the last film productions from the Lion City, before the local film industry there went into a hiatus of almost two decades. (It was incidentally not the first time that talent from the Philippines played a part in the movie production of Singapore and Malaysia. The Malay classic Sarjan Hassan [1955] was directed by Lamberto Avellana, a director that went on to become a National Artist of the Philippines, and the Filipino director Ramon Estela made two of the popular Malay Pontianak-horror films in the 1950s.)

On the Internet, there is plenty of fan material and raves especially about Cleopatra Wong and The One-Armed Executioner in blogs and on sites dedicated to international “trash cinema.” Just consider this comment from the Internet Movie Database: “This was my favorite movie when I was young (6 or 7 years),” writes an Isabelle Stephen from Québec, Canada. “All I remember of this movie is that the actress is beautiful and that she fights well! I try [sic!] to find this movie for years” (Stephen 2006).
Two things about this entry are remarkable. First of all, that it has been written by a woman, who is usually a non-entity in the universe of martial arts and action-films fan-boys. And second of all, that a co-production between the Philippines and Singapore reached an audience in Canada at all, a privilege for an Asian film of that time that was almost exclusively bestowed upon martial arts films from Hong Kong in the 1970s. This fact speaks to the popular appeal that the movie had all over the world. (Another one is the fact, that a 1980s Australian independent band, a side project of the better known Go-Betweens, actually named themselves after the character Cleopatra Wong.)

The comment from the Internet Movie Database can serve for me as a starting point to formulate the hypothesis of this paper. In this essay I want to locate the cinema of Bobby Suarez vis-à-vis a post-colonial and predominantly local cinema as that of the Philippines on the one hand and a “glocal” cinema as that of Hong Kong, that is local and global at the same time, on the other hand. I will try to position the films of Bobby Suarez in a theoretical post-colonial background that will take into account how other filmmakers from Asia have dealt with the dominant influence of Western, especially American, movies. These strategies have been characterized as follows: imitation, indigenization, parody, acceptance and resistance.

Both Hong Kong and the Philippines are Asian post-colonial countries. Both had to come to terms with the cinema of their respective colonizers, and more generally with Western, especially Hollywood, cinema. Both were for a certain period very successful in offering its audience a popular alternative to American productions. Yet, apart from that these two national cinemas could not be more different. The Philippine cinema has indigenized influences of the Zarzuela, a light comedy of the Spanish colonizers and other dramatic traditions (Tiongson 1983), Hollywood and other world cinemas to create a cinema that caters predominantly to the local market.

Hong Kong cinema on the other hand is the product of a region that has been “de-colonized” only recently. Unlike in the Philippines, the post-war cinema of Hong Kong never catered exclusively to the local audience, but also to the “Nanyang” (south of mainland China) community in South East Asia, and it has increasingly reached audiences beyond that group. Hong Kong cinema amalgamates Chinese cultural traditions with international influences in a way that – according to critics like Stephen Teo – created a “transglobal” cinema (Teo, “Local and Global Identity”).

The cinema of Filipino director Bobby Suarez is a quite different animal altogether. Schooled in the film business of Hong Kong of the 1960s, but based in Manila for most of his career, his films were always made for an international market, with English instead of Tagalog dialogue. Most of his films were produced for a specific country/producer, and Suarez tried to accommodate this market, while at the same time catering to an assumed lowest common denominator in the international moviegoers’ taste. In this process, he created a flamboyant parallel universe of female Chinese martial artists, Singaporean spies, Philippine thugs, Mexican drug lords, American
super cops and German expats, who fight their way through an assortment of film genres. It is partly cheerful cock-and-bull story a la Feuillade, but it is also partly post-modern pastiche. All of his films were released not only in the Philippines, but also in various international markets.

The cinema of Bobby Suarez challenges any notion of a “national cinema.” Coming from a vaguely localized, yet highly exotic and at the same time hyper-modern Asia, where Asians, Americans and Europeans are hunting each other through a number of colourful locations, it blends elements from a number of different genres: the martial arts movie, the action movie, mystery, thriller, “eastern,” spy and revenge movie. In the process, it turns the concept of “national cinema” into a fun house. Suarez films then are examples of cultural globalization avant-lettre.

Of course, Suarez never wanted to make a statement about globalization. His films are marked by the opportunistic effort to participate in the success of other Asian and American film genres, that were thriving at that time: Cleopatra Wong is an attempt to cash in on the success of the James Bond movies, American Commandos (1983) is a Vietnam movie along the lines of Rambo, and Warriors of the Apocalypse (1985) is a film in the mould of post-apocalyptic movies such as Mad Max, that enjoyed a brief spell of success in the middle of the 1980s.

In these films, the all-out combat of the protagonists from Europe, Asia and the US might seem like a metaphorical foretaste of today’s globalized market with its brutal, pitiless competition of everybody against everybody else. But at the same time, these films – both in their content as well as in the way they were produced – give a glimpse of another, earlier form of globalization. It is not the globalization of multinational corporations and conglomerates that we witness today. It is the globalization of a number of shrewd businessmen with medium-size film companies that started to collaborate internationally in the 1970s.

Even the fans of these films take notice of this process. An Internet reviewer of Suarez’s Warriors of the Apocalypse has picked up on the “trans-national” nature of this film. He calls the film “one of the strangest examples” of the “post-apocalyptic genre,” and continues:

For one thing, it’s impossible to determine the movie’s country of origin. We have a predominantly Caucasian cast (that’s dubbed), a director with two names that are English and Spanish, and it’s filmed in some country with a lush jungle. [...] My best guess is that WOTA was backed by either a Mexican, Filipino, or Italian production company, using the resources and people of different countries to get the best deals and make the movie marketable in these countries. (Bad Movie Planet Review)
Corny as many of these productions appear today, they provided an alternative to the dominance of American cinema. Hollywood has since more or less wiped out this type of filmmaking that tried to challenge American filmmakers on their own territory. While most of these action films were made mainly for their respective national markets, some productions of this nature – such as the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s – actually became internationally successful in a genre that was previously monopolized by Hollywood.

It is highly questionable if film productions like those of Bobby Suarez would still find a niche in the highly risk-adverse and streamlined media market of today. Yet, in the 1970s, Bobby Suarez was able to distribute most of his films around the world. How did a Filipino director get such an international recognition? Since Bobby Suarez is not only virtually unknown in his father country, but also not an internationally recognized director, some brief biographical background is in order.

Let me quote from the biography that Suarez (1942) distributes with his company profile and that reads like a treatment for a rags-to-riches movie:

Roberto A. Suarez, commonly referred to as “Bobby,” hailed from a poor descent necessitates his living in the temporary refuge known as the “Manila Boy’s Town.” From being a nobody, he was able to get a Bachelor’s degree in Commerce from Far Eastern University, while being employed as janitor-messenger for the Philippine Branch of Arthur Rank Film Distribution, Inc. He was able to prove dependability and resourcefulness, and through sheer labour and persistence, he was promoted to various capacities, until he was given the post of Asst. Sales manager for the company in 1963. (B.A.S. Film, Press Release, 2)

In 1965, Suarez became Sales and Marketing Director for the Philippine Production Company Fortune Films, before he went to Hong Kong. There he produced several versions of Chinese movies, that were dubbed into in English, and sold these movies in the Philippines and later internationally, too. In Hong Kong he encountered a film industry, which – very unlike the Philippines of that time – would have never been able to sustain itself by producing for its “local market,” the city of Hong Kong. This “Hong Kong Connection” is very important for the approach Suarez would later develop to make his own films.

While the post-war “Second Golden Age” of the Philippine movies was over by that time, the country still had a thriving film market, and film producers could make their movies with little consideration if they could be sold abroad. Therefore the Philippine cinema in the 1960s was (and still is) is an almost exclusively national cinema, where films are made without thinking about the possibility of international distribution. In Hong Kong on the other hand, no film could have been produced without the budgets that came from pre-sales to other territories such as Taiwan, Singapore and other South East Asian countries with large Chinese audiences. In fact, many of the studios that
Suarez worked with were not even originally from Hong Kong. Both Shaw Brothers and Cathy were originally founded in Singapore, and moved to Hong Kong only in the early 1960s, while maintaining offices and even production facilities in Singapore, Taiwan and other Asian countries (Wong 2002; Wong 2003; Wong 2006).

In his time in Hong Kong, Suarez also made valuable business contacts in Europe, the Middle East and Latin America, and some of the producers and distributors that he worked with would later go on to finance his productions from the Philippines (Suarez 2006). One of the contacts also served as the introduction to actual film directing for Suarez: the Spaniard Antonio Isasi-Isasmendi, who had produced and directed action movies and thrillers since the 1950s. Some of his productions – such as *The Adventures of Scaramouche* (1963), *That Man in Istanbul* (1965) or *They Came to Rob Las Vegas* (1970) – were big-budget affairs for European standards and reasonably successful in Spain. Suarez garnered his first experiences in actual film production, when he worked as a “gofer” for Isasi’s movie *Un Verano para matar* (*Summertime Killer*, 1972) in Spain (Suarez 2006).

Suarez did not only pick up on the style of Isasi’s movies that were often fast-paced, rough action films. Isasi’s films from late 60s and early 70s also provided a blueprint for the methods of production and financing that Suarez would later employ in his own movies. Isasi had already made films for the predominantly Spanish market for over ten years, when he began to try and reach out for the European and the international market in the late 1960s. The cast of his films started to include non-Spanish actors to attract audiences from different countries in order to appeal to the audiences in these respective countries: *That Man from Istanbul* featured the German stars Horst Buchholz, Mario Adorf and Klaus Kinski. *They Came to Rob Las Vegas* had German actress Elke Sommer and Americans Jack Palance and Lee J. Cobb. And *Summertime Killer* starred Karl Malden (*The Streets of San Francisco, I Confess, On the Waterfront*) and Christopher Mitchum, the son of Robert Mitchum and later a lead in some of Suarez’s productions.¹

With the know-how in film distribution from Hong Kong and his first-hand experience of film directing from Spain, Suarez set out to produce his first movies: *Asian Cosa Nostra* (1973) and *Master Samurai* (1974), both featuring Christopher Mitchum. With these two films he established the production methods that he would later employ in all of his films. They were generally shot in the Philippines (often with scenes filmed in other Asian countries for added exoticism). They are generally action movie with an international appeal and at least one non-Filipino actor, preferably an American. And they were generally shot in English, a practise that was highly uncommon in the Philippine cinema. (While English is the second language in the Philippines, the local movies are almost without exception in Tagalog.)

---

¹ The theme song of *Summertime Killer* was later included in the soundtrack for Quentin Tarantinos *Kill Bill*, a safe way to indicate cult status....
Bobby Suarez is however not the first or the only producer who tried to cut costs by using the Philippines for shooting films. As mentioned before, at the time, when Suarez made his first films, a number of American producers had used the Philippines as a cinematic sweatshop for almost ten years. These producers took advantage of the English-speaking crews that worked for relatively small talent fees and the fact that the Philippines provided a wide range of locations from tropical jungles and beaches to vaguely European-looking churches and forts to the modern metropolis Manila.

The difference between most of these productions and Suarez’s films is that Suarez always was the producer of his own films, while the Americans most of the time commissioned the mentioned American-Philippino co-productions. They were sometimes shot by American directors with a predominately US-American cast, with bit parts as police officers and goons set aside for local actors. (Some of them feature actors that were or still are stars in the cinema of the Philippines, such as Eddie Garcia or Vic Diaz.) Examples of this approach include Jack Hill’s women-in-prison films The Big Doll House (1971) or The Big Bird Cage (1972), both featuring Pam Grier (an African-American actress who would go on to star in Blaxploitation films such as Coffy [1973] and Foxy Brown [1974], and more recently in Jackie Brown [1997] by Quentin Tarantino).

But local directors, some of them highly regarded in the Philippines, directed the majority of the Philippine-American co-productions of that time. Eddie Romero, who went on to become a National Artist of the Philippines and made some of the most high-profile nationalist Filipino classics of the late 1970s and 1980s (such as Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon? [1976] or Aguila [1979]), directed horror films such as Mad Doctor of Blood Island (1968), a take-off from the Island of Dr. Moreau movies, and the similarly themed Beast of the Yellow Night (1971), the women-in-prison film Black Mama, White Mama (1973, again with Pam Grier) and Women Hunt (1973), a movie based on Richard Connell’s jungle-hunt classic The Most Dangerous Game (1930).

Gerardo De Leon, another National Artist for Film and probably the most accomplished filmmaker in the history of Philippine cinema, made The Blood-Drinkers (1966), Brides of Blood (1968, with Eddie Romero), Blood of the Vampires (1971) and Women in Cages (1971) for American distribution companies. All of these productions were drive-in-cinema-fare for a thrill-seeking young audience, and are typically full of grotesque violence and gore. Some of them are currently enjoying a comeback as cult films among a younger crowd of trash film buffs, and many of them have recently been re-issued on DVD (The Blood Island Vacation, not dated).

This period also saw the emergence of a group of American expats in the Philippines that were regularly involved in the production of this type of films. One of them is John Ashley, who had started his acting career in the late 1950s in “kids-in-
“trouble” melodramas, monster movies and in the Beach Party series before carving a lucrative niche for himself as producer-star of a series of Filipino exploitation pictures. (He went on to become the producer of several American TV series, including The A-Team [1983] and Werewolf [1987]). Another name that frequently comes up in this context is Ken Metcalfe, who was a screenwriter, producer and actor in many of these films. He also worked as a locations scout or casting director for major American war films such as Apocalypse now (1979), Born on the Fourth of July (1989) or Hamburger Hill (1987), where the Philippines stood in for Vietnam during the war. Metcalfe also worked with Suarez on a number of occasions. For example he co-wrote and acted in American Commandos (1985) and Warriors of the Apocalypse (1985).

This tradition continued well into the 1980s, with obscure action movies such as Fireback (1978) or Ninja Warriors (1985). Many of these films were produced by K.Y. Lim’s Silver Star Film Company (called Kinavesa in the Philippines), and typically directed by the Philippine directors Teddy Page (who is now directing television shows under his real name Teddy Chiu) or John Gale (also known as Jun Gallardo). Silver Star was a notorious but prolific producer of extremely low-budget action films, characterized by very low production values, poor screenplays, technical shortcomings and bad dubbing. Many of them feature the same recurring set of European and American expatriates in the Philippines, who often also acted for Bobby Suarez, for example the former mall-owner Mike Cohen, James Gaines, Mike Monte and occasionally even the former Spaghetti Western stars Richard Harrison and Gordon Mitchell.

Many of the American-Filipino films I have mentioned above might have been standing right next to the copy of They Called Her…Cleopatra Wong, which I discovered in the video store in Düsseldorf in the middle of the 1980s. What made these films different from Cleopatra Wong however was that films such as Black Mama White Mama or Big Doll House were financed by American companies such as Roger Corman’s American International Pictures. These companies distributed them internationally, and that’s why they ended up in my neighbourhood video store.

Cleopatra Wong however was a production from Singapore, by a producers and director from the Philippines. That it ended up in the said video store in Germany nevertheless is quite a triumph considering that the majority of Asian action movies – with the exception of HK martial arts films – had not the slightest chance to make it into any European market. The process that is termed “globalization” today was starting to garner momentum at this time, and Cleopatra Wong is a strange filmic ricochet of this process. Therefore I would like to focus on this film and on The One-armed Executioner to flesh out some characteristics of the cinema of Bobby Suarez.

Cleopatra Wong
“She purrs like a kitten, makes love like a siren. This side of the Pacific, she is the meanest, deadliest and sexiest secret agent,” reads the tag line of *Cleopatra Wong*. Starting with the title, the film is a strange pastiche of very different influences and inspirations. The name of the protagonist has obviously been lifted from the *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), one of the most successful Blaxploitation films of the 1970s that starred Tamara Dobson as an African American “Special Government Agent.”

The story itself tries to take advantage of the growing socio-economic interdependence between the countries of South-East Asia, and is heavy on the attempt to give the movie a pan-Asian appeal. Cleopatra Wong is an Interpol agent whose mission in this film is to crack an illegal counterfeiting group who aims to destabilize the currencies of ASEAN countries Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. During the credits we see Cleopatra Wong first on the dance floor of a discotheque, then in bed with her lover, when she gets a phone call from her superior.

She is assigned to investigate counterfeit money that has been appearing all over South-East Asia. Her mission takes her to Singapore, where she has her first encounter with the criminal organization that has been faking currencies of various South-East Asian countries. Needless to say, that these encounters include the first lengthy chase and fight scenes, that will continue throughout the film. In the harbour of Hong Kong, her next stop, Cleopatra Wong encounters another clue about the counterfeiting ring: a jar of strawberry jam, filled with counterfeit HK dollars(!), that comes from the Philippines.

The region where the film was supposed to be released therefore figures from the beginning of the film less as a cultural, but rather as an economic and political unit. Both Singapore and Hong Kong are shown as modern metropolises’ with shopping malls, motorways, high rises and international hotels, that do not look particularly “Asian.” This perspective on Southeast Asia might have actually been much more unusual to its anticipated audience in the region than the highly exoticized perspective of most of the American and European films shot in the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

Movies as diverse as Richard Quine’s *The World of Suzy Wong* (with location shots done in Hong Kong in 1960), Robert Wise’s *The Sand Pebbles* (partly shot in Hong Kong in 1966) or Peter Bogdanovich’s *Saint Jack* (shot entirely in Singapore in 1979), the various James Bond films and the European soft-sex *Emmanuelle* movies, which take place partly in the region, take an inevitable delight in the more “bizarre” aspects of their South East Asian locations. *Saint Jack*, for example, documents the nightlife and a seedy underworld that has since more or less disappeared from Singapore. *The World of Suzy Wong* and also Bruce Lee’s *Enter the Dragon* use locations such as the Aberdeen harbour with its female *bargees*, the old squatter areas and the temples of Hong Kong as colourful backdrops.
Nothing of this nature in the first half of *Cleopatra Wong*! Only when the story finally moves to the Philippines, Suarez starts to make use of exoticism of his locations. Cleopatra Wong investigates a strawberry farm in the Cordillera mountains on the Philippine main island Luzon. The viewers are treated to a scene in the strawberry fields where farmers in traditional Ifugao dresses (an anachronism even in the late 1970s) draw Wong’s attention to a convent where the majority of the strawberry produce in the area is made. The convent is built in a Spanish baroque style, which appears highly unusual in an Asian country, at least to viewers not familiar with the specific culture and the colonial history of the Philippines.

As *Cleopatra Wong* finds out, the nuns of the convents are being held as hostages by the criminal ring, which uses the convent as a place to print counterfeit money. That all the leaders of the gang dress in dark-brown cowls as disguise might serve as a memento. They look like the Spanish friars that were the main agents of colonial suppression in the Philippines during the almost 400 years of Spanish colonization.

A shootout ensues, and eventually *Cleopatra Wong* and a group of Interpol agents manage to kill or arrest the whole gang and free the nuns. As if the whole plot was not bizarre enough already, the platoon of Interpol agents has to dress up in nun’s habits during the final showdown, while firing automatic weapons and blowing up half of the building. (Eddie Romero in *Black Mama, White Mama* also got some mileage out of the fact that nun habits were still quite a common sight in the Philippines at that time.)

The whole film is full of references to the James Bond movies that were doing very well at the box office in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Bobby Suarez was not the only Asian filmmaker who tried to cash in on this fad. Especially the Hong Kong film industry with its knack for quick ad-hoc-replications has produced its own subgenre of Eastern spy movies. The Hong Kong ersatz-007s include Ryo Chiao, Jimmy Wang Yu or the “James Bond of Hong Kong,” Paul Chang Chung, who starred in the action movies *The Golden Buddha* (1966) (complete with a theme music eerily similar to John Barry’s famous 007 theme) and *Black Falcon* (1967). Even Bruce Lee’s international breakthrough *Enter the Dragon* (1973) contained some references to the genre of international action and spy movies.

In 1977 Suarez, in search of new business opportunities and trying to capitalize on the Asian action-flick craze of the 1970s, took the initiative for the Southeast Asian regional collaboration, which resulted in *Cleopatra Wong* and three other films. He partnered with Malaysian Mohamed Ashraf, director of Zahraine Films, and with Singaporean Sunny Lim Peng Hock, from Intercontinental Distributors. They incorporated a new company, B.A.S Films International, the “B.A.S.” referring both to the initials of Suarez’s name and the first names of the partners.

The company intended to produce only English language films – a first in Singapore film history, where Malay- and to a lesser extent Chinese-language films had
been the norm. With these English language films they wanted to reach out to an international audience. The company produced a series of B-movies, starting with *Bionic Boy* (1977). The film starred the nine-year old tae kwon do black belt, Johnson Yap, from Singapore. Suarez had read about him in the newspaper, and believed that there would be the commercial potential in a child with martial arts skills. The film was loosely based on the TV action series *The Six Million Dollar Man*. The film has the nine-year old martial arts master taking revenge for the death of his parents by taking on an international group of gangsters (Millet 2006, 180ff).

In 1978, the company went on to produce two films: *Cleopatra Wong* directed by Bobby Suarez under the screen name George Richardson, and *Dynamite Johnson* directed by Bobby A. Suarez under his real name. *Cleopatra Wong* featured the nineteen-year-old Singaporean Doris Young, who answered a newspaper ad by the producers. Young, who had no experience in either acting or martial arts, was christened Marrie Lee – a name Bobby Suarez had invented to cash in on the international Bruce-Lee fad. After one month of acting and martial arts lessons, she played the lead in the movie, which was shot in Singapore, Hong Kong and various locations in the Philippines for a micro-budget of 70,000 US dollars. *Cleopatra Wong* became the most successful of all the Singaporean productions of B.A.S Films. Not only was the film sold to and distributed in Germany, the USA and a number of other territories: *Cleopatra Wong* became a minor phenomenon across Asia.

*Dynamite Johnson*, the next film from B.A.S. Productions, is in a sense a sequel to both *Cleopatra Wong* and *Bionic Boy*. In *Dynamite Johnson*, Bionic Boy Johnson Yap joins forces with Cleopatra Wong to track down and defeat a Nazi named Kuntz. Cleopatra Wong’s final appearance was in the film *Devil’s Angel* (1979) where she is sent on a mission to Manila. The young daughter of a gangster from Hong Kong is kidnapped by his former goons, who take their hostage to the Philippines. The crime lord is forced to ask Cleopatra Wong for help. After that film, B.A.S. Films International stopped producing movies in Singapore, because the venture ultimately did not prove to be as financially rewarding as the founders had expected.

**The One-Armed Executioner**

*The One-Armed Executioner* was produced in Manila, five years after *Cleopatra Wong*. The experiment with the Singapore-based actions films had come to an end, and it was the second movie that Suarez – with his relocated company B.A.S. film – made in the Philippines. Unlike some of his other films, this production does not feature any American star, but a number of Caucasian expats, some of whom Suarez had supposedly discovered in the bars of Manila’s nightlife district Malate.

The star of the film is Filipino Franco Guerrero, who acts in most of Suarez’s movies. Here he is Interpol agent Ramon Ortega, who runs afoul a group of drug smugglers. The criminals make him watch when they kill his wife, and then chop of his
arm with a Samurai sword. This causes Ramon to slide into a deep alcoholic depression. Only after his friend Wo-Chen takes him through a rigorous training program, where he learns to defend himself and to fight with only one arm, Ramon finally finds the courage to take on the criminals that mutilated him.

Again, the film is an obvious pastiche of Western and Eastern sub genres of the action movie. It blends story ideas from American revenge movie such as Michael Winners *Death Wish* (1974) – featuring Charles Bronson – and his sequels with motives from Hong Kong martial arts films. The movie *Death Wish* stirred considerable controversy both in the US and in Europe at the time it was released, because many saw the movie as a thinly disguised call for vigilante justice. It has been read as the beginning of a reactionary backlash in the relatively liberal United States of the 1970s. Despite its pronounced political incorrectness and its disregard for the law, the film gave rise to a whole sub genre of revenge films, and *One-armed executioner* is an example of that.

The other obvious inspiration for the story is Cheh Chang’s Hong Kong classic *One-Armed Swordman* -series: *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *Return of the One-Armed Swordsman* (1969) and *The New One-Armed Swordsman* (1971). In these films, a Chinese Swordsman has his arm cut off during a fight with some of the disciples of his martial arts school, a result of an intrigue among the students.

The reoccurring motive of intrigue and revenge in the Hong Kong action and martial arts movies of the late 1960s and early 1970s has been read as a cinematic reflection of the uncertain and chaotic situation of Hong Kong in this period, when a number of riots disturbed the city and both government corruption and general lawlessness peaked. It has been called “a period that did not provide a consensus for commonly accepted moral standards or social order” (Tai-lok/Wai-hung 2003, 171). The repeated defeat of the hero of the film in *The One-Armed Swordsman*, including the loss of his arm, signifies the impossibility of a principled individual to survive unscathed in an anarchic world:

Chang [the director of all the *One-Armed Swordsman* movies] depicts a turbulent chaotic world which provides no sense of security. There exists in this social condition a grey area where the world of the martial arts is fractured, giving rise to power struggles in the *wuxia* world and exploitation of the weak.... In traditional Chinese society, the unique rank of knights-errands is closely related to turbulences, chaos, political turmoil, and corruption. Knights-errands are worshipped by the people because they express the needs and social ideals of the people themselves. The stirring solemnity of heroism in Chang Cheh’s films stands in strong contrast to the corrupt system and temperament of the bad and evil. The climatic episodes where the heroes sacrifice their lives are solemn displays of heroism but at the same time, they mock the system that allows
villainy to subvert goodness and justice. Under such a system, no one dares to guarantee that one’s strength is one’s merit. (Tai-lok/Wai-hung 2003, 171)

David Bordwell has pointed out that the topic of dismemberment and mutilation is a reoccurring motive in most of Chen Chang’s films (Bordwell 2000, 249f). For example, his later film Crippled Avengers (1978) revolves around a group of handicapped martial artists, who turn their weakness into strengths: the legless fighter uses his steel legs to fight etc. In many others of his films, suicide or murder by disembowelment is a frequent motif. This killing method is used to an extent that the topos of disembowelment has been discussed in a number of essays on Chang Cheh’s film (Lam 2003, Teo 2003), either as having a subtext of castration or repressed homosexuality. The director himself talks about the subject in his autobiography (Cheh 2004) in a way that suggests that there is more at issue here than the disenchanted heroism of the protagonist. I will return to this topic in my final remarks on The One-Armed Executioner.

Formal Traits of Suarez’s Films

Done on shoestring budgets, both Cleopatra Wong and The One-Armed Executioner are not sophisticated films. Their scripts, the dialogues are often corny, the acting is poor, the martial arts scenes are mediocre compared to many Hong Kong productions of the same period. But they make up with wit and with ingenuity for what they lack in production values and in technical polish. Bobby Suarez himself has pointed out that he feels that his films are formally superior to the Philippine action films of the same time, because he avoided the master shots of action scenes that were prevalent in these productions (Suarez 2006).

Rather he adhered to the montage techniques that had started to emerge in the Hong Kong martial arts cinema, where – starting with King Hu’s Come Drink with Me (1967) – action scenes were chopped apart into sequences of brief close-ups and medium shots for greater visual impact (Bordwell 2000, 199 – 247). Similar techniques can be observed for example in the training scene in The One-Armed Swordsman or in the opening sequence of Cleopatra Wong. So apart from the production methods, there is also a formal influence of Hong Kong cinema in Suarez’s films.

His films take the clichés they employ to often-absurd extremes. It would be far-fetched to read any coherent message into both films discussed here. Whatever they say, they say in the murky and impromptu way that is typical for this type of B-movie. They are, first and foremost, exploitation films, which show and say the things they show and say, because they try to appeal opportunistically to the assumed expectation of a mass audience.

That these films were made for an either all-Asian (Cleopatra Wong) or even international audience (The One-Armed Executioner) – and not for the Chinese
Diaspora community, as the Hong Kong films of the same period – is part of their fascination. These films say a lot about the notions of the cultures of the respective target markets that their makers held. These films were not international phenomena like the films of Bruce Lee a couple of years earlier. Their comparative success in the international market is less a symptom of them touching a nerve in Asia, the US or in Europe, which can account for the triumph of *Enter the Dragon* or the *Chinese Connection*. It might be attributed more accurately to the appearance of new distribution channels for movies that emerged with the proliferation of home video and cable channels in the USA and in Europe – and their demand for new product.

Then again, the films of Bobby Suarez made it into the international market, not the many Tagalog action films of the same period. How do we account for that? First of all, Suarez’s connections with international distributors – that he formed during his time in Hong Kong – played an important part. Unlike most Philippine producers he not only had these contacts, but also saw the opportunity to cater to the markets, that these distributors had access to. And he tailored his movies to the perceived requirements of this international market.

This was very close to the methods of the big Hong Kong studios such as Shaw Brothers and Cathy. For example, these studios would create lavish Huangmei Opera films in Mandarin for the Taiwanese market, while producing Cantonese melodramas and comedies for the audiences in Hong Kong. At the same time, they would ideally make those films attractive for their other markets too, for example by adding drawn-out fight scenes to the opera film. Suarez describes a similar strategy: “Sometimes I think: Can I sell this (film) to Europe? If I can sell this to Europe, they might not like it in the Middle East. So it got to be in-between. Therefore I prefer this Latino-Central-American style: love-story, drama, action, because I can sell this to Europe, and I can sell this to the Middle East and to Africa” (Suarez 2006).

**Imitation, Indigenization, Assimilation?**

How do we situate the films that were produced by Suarez in Singapore and the Philippines in the framework of a post-colonial cinema? They are clearly not product of a national cinema, yet they did not emerge in a cultural vacuum.

The emerging literature on Hong Kong cinema has time and again pointed to traditional Chinese values and aesthetic concepts that inform Hong Kong films – even films that are on the surface as “Westernized” as John Woo’s action films. For the Philippines, the situation is quite different. There seems to be a consensus among many critics that influences from the Spanish colonizers (Tiongson 1983, Deocampo 2004) and the European movies that Spanish business men imported into the Philippines made an important impact on the local film culture in its early days. In addition to that, the cinema of the American colonizers started to make a dent in the 1930s and after World War II started to dominate the local cinemas, and has continued to do so until the
present. Even in its “Golden Period” in the 1950s, Tagalog cinema always had to compete with Hollywood productions, and in many instances indigenized or localized the genres that US-American films put forward.

Considering this background, where can we place the films of Bobby Suarez? Post-colonial theory has come up with a number of different concepts to look at post-colonial cinema. Teshome H. Gabriel, a noted theorist of a “Third Cinema,” has outlined three “phases of Third World Cinema.” According to him, there is a first phase, where colonial cinemas show an “unqualified assimilation” or identification with the “Western Hollywood film industry” (in itself a highly questionable concept).

Needless to say, he does not approve of this tendency: “Aping Hollywood stylistically, more often than not, runs counter to Third World needs for a serious social art” (Gabriel 1989, 31). This phase of uncritical imitation of Western movies is followed by “Phase 2: The remembrance phase,” when Third World cinemas start to indigenize these influences. While they do not come up yet with a style distinctively their own, they start to control their own film industry and begin to address indigenous folklore and mythology, the clash between urban and rural life, tradition versus modernity etc. Ideally this leads to “Phase 3: The combative phase,” when filmmaking has become a “public service institution,” where the film industry “is also managed, operated and run for and by the people” (Gabriel 1989, 33).

Frankly, I have yet to see a national cinema of any Third World country which adheres to these neat categories and I am not sure a lot of people would enjoy films that come out of “public service institutions” run by “the people.” Especially the history of the Philippine cinema provides ample material to counter this simplistic account of a Hollywood-infested early period, that later gets replaced by a national cinema for and by the people. Therefore I am not mentioning these ideas, because I subscribe to them. They are lacking in concrete examples and they do not justice to the multi-faceted reality of the film history of a country such as the Philippines. I only mention this concept because this kind of thinking has provided the theoretical underpinnings for discarding many highly original and immensely popular movies from Third World countries. In Gabriel’s terms, Bobby Suarez’s films would be a mere “aping” of Hollywood standards, a reading that does not do them justice.

Other critics such as Nick Deocampo have provided a more nuanced approach to colonial and post-colonial cinemas (Deocampo 2004, 288-95). He puts forward the categories of imitation, indigenization, parody, acceptance and resistance towards Western cinema as a framework to read the cinema of post-colonial countries such as the Philippines. Without the moralizing and elitist approach that Gabriel is taking, this methodology allows for a much greater theoretical flexibility towards the exploitation movies of directors such as Suarez. They clearly indigenize international influences – not just the “Western” influences that Gabriel is so concerned with. Suarez’s films are clearly indebted to the Hong Kong martial arts movies of studios such as Shaw Brothers.
or Golden Harvest. In turn, these films from Hong Kong are clearly influenced by concepts and cinematographic techniques that stem from the Italian Spaghetti Western, the Japanese Samurai films and even the US American thriller – even if they were on the surface pre-occupied with genuinely “Chinese” subject matters such as Kung Fu or court intrigues in ancient Chinese!

From a contemporary, post-modern perspective, Suarez’s films might appear as mere parodies of genres such as the spy movie, the revenge movie, the action movie or their “Eastern” counterparts, the wuxia film or the more contemporary Enter the Dragon-style productions of Golden Havest. His films would then be an all-out plundering of all the clichés that these films put forward, a tongue-in-cheek camp-appreciation fest a la Tarantino.

Of course, this perception would be a grave misreading that relies on our contemporary perspective. What makes Suarez’s films unique is precisely that they still take the clichés they are making use of seriously to some extent. Suarez’s protagonists are pastiches of various influences, but paradoxically at the same time, they truly embody these influences. On the one hand, Cleopatra Wong is a pop-culture product and The One-Armed Executioner yet another remake of Eastern and Western revenge movies. On the other hand they are for real.

If there is a characteristic achievement in Suarez’s films, it is his capability to make the influences, the power struggles and the conflicts that have moulded his films his own – before selling them back to the rest of the world with some sort of success. His films amalgamate Western spy movies, American action films, a Bruce-Lee-style pan-Asian nationalism and Hong Kong martial arts into a jittery concord. Cleopatra Wong combines the black-chick superhero power of Cleopatra Jones, the gadget-laden internationalism of James Bond films, and the popular antics of Hong Kong martial artists. The One-Armed Executioner pooled the vigilante-attitude of Charles Bronson with genuinely Hong Kong movie protagonists such as the One-armed Swordsman and a very vaguely nationalist message of rediscovering one’s own roots – a stance that is so vague, that every almost everybody should be able to identify with it (Jackie Chan uses very similar transcultural strategies in his newer films such as Who am I?). Yet, a gang of thugs that is lead by a Caucasian boss carries out the severing of the arm that can be read as a metaphor for castration and certainly means permanent disablement. His revenge can therefore also be read as a getting back against a “Western” bully (the national origin of the thugs is never disclosed).

Conclusion

Their bearings catapulted Suarez’s films out of the trappings of a “national cinema” and into the borderless, never-never land of international action movies without a defined “country of origin” or a proclaimed “national identity.” This in turn launched his films into the international media distribution channels of the world outside the Philippines –
including the video shop not far from my university in Düsseldorf and other similar shops all around the world. These establishments carried Cleopatra Wong without any interest in the circumstances under which this film was produced, or even where it came from. All that mattered was that they provided some escapist and thrilling entertainment.

These films are not mere imitations of Hollywood cinema, because they invade and exceed the convention of Western and Asian genres at the same time they are trying to mimic them. They are also not an indigenization of Western film formulas, simply because they do not stem from a particular national culture that could be used to assimilate those “foreign” influences. If any of Deocampo’s categories applies here, it is the category of acceptance. Bobby Suarez’s films are among the first films from Third World countries, which accepted the fact of an increasing globalization of world cultures. They do it both the level of story and production, but they never preach it. They leave “national culture” and local market behind, and search for new markets for their idea of a transglobal cinema.

Again, these films are not product of the globalization of the multi-nationals that we experience now, but rather a prelude of today’s globalization, when the process of globalization still provided nooks and fissure for non-corporate players. The rag-tag teams of good and bad guys of all races in his films can be read as one metaphor for this phase of globalization. Just look at the bad guys in Cleopatra Wong, who want to manipulate the currency markets: With their cheap suits, their bizarre ’70s-style haircuts, their moustaches and their pouches, these “international crime lords” and their henchmen seem quotidian and ordinary. They are a far cry from the bad guys of today’s action cinema where even the lowest villain looks like he came straight from the gym. While these athletic gangsters seem to signify the frictionless, globalized capitalism of today, the clumsy, awkward crooks – with their failed ambition to make good with currency manipulations, among all things! – look like the embodiment of a globalization that was not yet as smooth and perfected as it is today. Most likely, these crooks – as well as heroes such as Cleopatra Wong or the One-Armed Executioner – would not stand a chance on today’s market anymore. When we see them now, we do it with a sense of nostalgia. Globalized capitalism has left these movie characters behind that were among his earliest promoters.

Works Cited


Suarez, Bobby: Personal Interview. 12 August. 2006.


Wong, Ain-ling, ed. *The Cathay Story.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002.


**The Author**
Tilman Baumgärtel lives in Berlin and Manila. He is an art and media critic and curator. He contributes to German and international reviews, newspapers and magazines, and his writing has appeared in Die Tageszeitung, Die Zeit, Die Woche, Intelligent Agent, Telepolis, Kunstforum International, et al. He studied German Literature, History and Media Studies at the Heinrich-Heine-University in Düsseldorf and the State University of New York in Buffalo. His Ph.D. thesis was a monograph of the German avant-garde film director Harun Farocki. He has taught media aesthetics and media history at the University of Paderborn; Technische Universität, Berlin; the Mozarteum in Salzburg (Austria); and is currently teaching at the University of the Philippines. He has lectured internationally, and gave presentations at the Palais Tokyo in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and at the Goethe Institut in Moscow, Barcelona, and Montevideo (Uruguay). He was a founding member of mikro e.V. 

<http://www.mikro.org>, an organization for media culture in Berlin, and co-founder of rohrpost, a German-language mailing list for digital culture. He has curated a number of exhibitions focusing on media art, including “Games,” a presentation of computer games by artists, at Hartware (Dortmund 2003), "Install.exe," the first solo exhibition of the net art group Jodi (Basel, Berlin, New York 2002), and a section of the Seoul Media City Biennale in 2004. His recent publications include: Games: Computerspiele von KünstlerInnen (Games: Computer Games by artists; exhibition catalogue, Frankfurt, 2003); net.art 2.0 – Neue Materialien zur Netzkunst (net.art 2.0 – New Materials towards Art on the Internet, Nürnberg, 2001); net.art – Materialien zur Netzkunst (Nürnberg, 1999), Vom Guerillakino zum Essayfilm: Harun Farocki – Werkmonographie eines Autorenfilmers (Berlin, 1998).
Keynote Lecture 2
THE ORIENT WITHOUT

Perturbing Transnationalism:
Between Japanese and “Asian” Cinemas

Jonathan M. Hall
University California, Irvine

Abstract

Ours is an era of a discursive monopoly. The allied discourses of Asian cultural regionalism, of the naturalized transnationalisms that follow closely upon conservative models of national growth, and of increasingly globalized definitions of replaceable cultural “contents” have emerged as a dominant order within Asian visual studies—either through an insipid mirror of the logic of late capital, through a politicized critique of global imperialism, or through a risky post-national triumphalism. Subjects to such an era, we must articulate the competing political and cultural values that underlie the global and transnational imagination within Asian cinemas and their studies. Is it only coincidental that the discourse of the transnational within the Asian visual field is, for the most part, limited to the dominant terrain of television and studio feature filmmaking? What are the relations of minor cinemas (experimental, queer, documentary) to the discursive dominance of this “Asian transnational”? And what are the historical alternatives of the global? Relying especially upon examples from Japanese mainstream studio, independent, queer, and experimental cinema from the late 1960s to the present, I argue for a “perturbing transnationalism” that privileges the visual and narrative distortion of global space and time.
The Author

Jonathan M. Hall teaches in the Departments of Comparative Literature and Film & Media Studies at the University of California Irvine. His research addresses Japanese independent and experimental film, critical theory, and psychoanalytic and queer criticism. In 2003, he co-curated “Queerly Chinese Cinemas” at the University of Chicago. In 2004-05, he co-curated the large retrospective *JPEX: Japanese Experimental Film & Video, 1955-now* that toured seven cities in the United States and Canada.
Session 4
SEX AND GENDER IN ASIA

“Feminized” Heroes and “Masculinized” Heroines:
Changing Gender Roles
in Contemporary Philippine Cinema?

Jovenal D. Velasco
University of the Philippines Film Institute

Abstract

This paper concentrates on the projection of contemporary Filipino men and women in three Filipino films of the 2000s and points out an apparent change in gender roles resulting in the “feminization” of the Filipino macho and the “masculinization” of the dalagang Filipina (the coy Filipina maiden). The subject films challenge traditional views on sex identities and gender roles in contemporary Philippine society. For example, with the phenomenon of the Filipino migrant worker, additional burdens seem to have been loaded on Filipino women’s shoulders, both as wives and mothers left at home, or as migrant workers themselves. Similarly, the phenomenon also partly accounts for the increased absenteeism of the influential father figures in many Filipino homes, in the case of male migrant workers. This phenomenon has resulted, in several ways, in reverse gender roles. Despite the commercial imperatives of the mainstream Filipino film industry, some films of the 2000s have effectively foregrounded fundamental gender issues through the projection of altered images. Even on the conservative local film screen, gender identities and roles are changing, reflective of current constructions of realities.
If you want to know a community’s cultural values, go see its genre films, a site of a people’s aspirations, not merely of a single visionary artist. There a culture’s dominant ideology, as well as the position of men and women, are generally manifested. This is especially true for film genres in their classical phase of development. But, despite a set of conventions which the audiences look for in a particular film genre, the genres themselves undergo changes or permutations. At times, moreover, two or more genres mix. More significantly, at other times, a film may question the ideology or values of its genre. These are the revisionist genre films, which infuse an alternative vision, a revisioning of its classical ideology (Grant 1986).

Of particular interest to us are three contemporary Filipino films with several commonalities among them, all relevant to the genre-, studio-, and star-system mix crucial in the promotion of new or in the reinforcement of existing values among the moviegoers. These are Kailangan Kita/I Need You, Milan, and Sabel. First, all three films produced in the early 2000s can be properly classified as romantic melodramas. Second, all are produced by established film studios in the Philippines. Third, the films feature the brightest young female stars in contemporary Philippine cinema, at least with established, marked star/screen personas, if they have not yet joined the ranks of stars turned cultural icons, of which there are a few, including the late Fernando Poe, Jr., Dolphy, Nora Aunor, Vilma Santos, or even Sharon Cuneta.

Claudine Barretto is the female protagonist for both Kailangan Kita and Milan of Star Cinema, while Judy Ann Santos plays the title role in Sabel of Regal Entertainment, Inc. Male leads are Aga Muhlach (Kailangan), Piolo Pascual (Milan), and Wendell Ramos (Sabel). Of the three, both Aga and Piolo have established star/screen personas. Wendell, on the other hand, is starting to get noticed for lead dramatic roles just recently.

In addition, these films were directed by foremost young filmmakers who joined the mainstream industry in the 1990s and now have established names and reputations: Rory Quintos for Kailangan Kita, Olive Lamasan for Milan, and Joel Lamangan for Sabel. These young bloods have infused innovations in both content and style not only in the subject films but in their other films as well.

This paper focuses only on the gender roles of the protagonists and their relationship with each other, although all three films are multi-faceted and polysemic. They are rich in texture and issues confronting contemporary Philippine society.

Both Claudine Barretto and Judy Ann Santos, the leading young female stars of this generation, are also known as the drama queens in local television soap opera, making their influence and clout among local audiences of even wider reach. As television stars, both by design (of their studios and career managers) and necessity (in the context of what constitutes popular drama in local television), they have acquired through the years the small-screen persona and image associated with soap-opera
female lead characters, the quintessential young, martyr and oppressed woman of family melodramas, notably as in *Mara Clara* and *Esperanza* (Judy Ann Santos); *Mula sa Puso* and *Saan Ka Man Naroroon* (Claudine Barretto). Both actors have extended these images onto the big screen, if only because their more popular television soap operas have subsequently been adapted into film.

Of the two, it is Claudine Barretto who had the earlier opportunity to play transgressive character roles or those that go against the grain of the *mabait-at-api* (good-natured and oppressed) “role model.” Apart from playing middle-class adolescents in Star Cinema’s youth-oriented movies, she was an arrogant daughter and sister to two same-faced siblings (they were triplets) in the TV soap, *Saan Ka Man Naroroon*, and a similarly haughty and rebellious daughter to an OFW domestic who took drugs and engaged in premarital sex in the movie *Anak/Child*. On the other hand, it was only recently that Judy Ann took a quantum leap from her sweet, wholesome image in *Sabel*.

But first, Claudine and her leading men.

**Claudine’s “Lena” and “Jenny”: The Filipina as Martyr Plus**

Two recent film roles that established not only Claudine’s reputation as one of the country’s finest young actors but also as a cinematic symbol of the contemporary Filipino woman were those of “Lena” in *Kailangan Kita* and “Jenny” in *Milan*. As Lena, she is the ignored, Bicolana daughter relegated to the kitchen and dining-room chores, who suffers in comparison to her more intelligent, accomplished and celebrated sister, a supermodel based in New York and now about to go home to get married to her Filipino celebrity chef boyfriend, Carl (Aga Mulach). Like his fiancée, Carl is also an expatriate who is coming back home ahead of her to meet the latter’s family and personally attend to the early preparations for their wedding. Actually, this is a homecoming trip for him, back to the land of his birth and growing up years which he has not seen in 17 years.

Lena here is still the obedient, servile, and soft-spoken daughter. But she transcends this stereotypical image because she possesses great, if stoic, character strength, more formidable than any of her siblings or even of her sister’s fiancé. Although self-sacrificing in that she has chosen to stay with her family than join her fleeing dissident boyfriend of the New People’s Army (Jericho Rosales), she continues to be a faithful and staunch defender and supporter of the political conviction and revolutionary cause of her lover, defying the rigid feudal order of the family patriarch (Johnny Delgado) and risking the latter’s continuing ire and condescension.

This strength does not go unnoticed by Carl who, in fact, is initially taken to task by Lena because of his pesky comments and brattish, “Amboy” (American Boy) ways, as well as because of his seemingly apolitical stance yet manifesting a quick-to-condemn and uninformed bias against the NPA rebels. It took Lena’s passion and conviction to
open Carl’s eyes, not only to many questions about the social realities in his birthplace which he has left for a better life in the USA, but also to an apparently forgotten Filipino identity. Lena is also instrumental in making Carl understand and forgive the father (Dante Rivero), who had earlier left them, his family, for the underground, revolutionary movement based in the mountains of Sorsogon. Carl’s initial stance to shut off from his consciousness any references to his father and their family’s earlier life in Bicol, is symptomatic of a heavy emotional baggage that he has been carrying all these years. Lena’s passion and conviction about matters of the heart and social justice, on the one hand, and Carl’s playful, passive, and apolitical stance even as he is quick to prejudge ideological radicalism, on the other, create the polarities that provide the romantic tension that draw the two lonely souls to each other. Although later, Carl’s fiancée apparently manifests that she holds her career as a priority over her forthcoming marriage to Carl by not appearing at least a day before her wedding, as she was busy with a fashion pictorial in Europe, it would no longer matter to Carl, who has by that time fallen deeply for the younger sister Lena whom he thinks of liberating someday soon from her father’s feudal treatment.

This is a contemporized, rehashed theme of the story of Adam and Eve. This time, however, where in the patriarchal biblical version Eve is seen as a temptress that leads Adam to damnation after biting the fruit of wisdom and knowledge, in Kailangan Kita, Lena’s Eve is an eye-opener to Carl’s Adam, who offers the true fruit of wisdom and enlightenment. This is the biblical, patriarchal myth revisioned altogether.

A similar pattern of female-male relationship is extended and reconfigured in another Star Cinema film, Milan. This time, the woman becomes a defender-protector to her ward who subsequently becomes her lover. Barretto plays Jenny in this film, an OFW domestic working in Milan, Italy. She is intelligent, world-wise, and resourceful, making her a dominant figure among the other OFWs who have decided to stay together in one dormitory-like house that, in addition, provides sanctuary – for a fee – to other Filipinos who have illegally come to Italy for some work. A recent drifter is Lino (Piolo Pascual), a young, good-looking but naive groom looking for his bride (Iza Calzado) of several months in Milan. A mechanical engineer who has lost his job, he decides to follow and look for his wife in Italy on borrowed money and through illegal entry via the Swiss border. Lost in a totally new place, he eventually lands in Jenny’s dorm, recruited by the grand signorina herself, where he meets a motley of overseas Filipino workers with varied types of angst (thankfully depicted non-melodramatically). Amidst a backdrop of poignant subplots of the difficulties and loneliness endured by self-sacrificing (for their respective families back home) overseas workers, Jenny and Lino’s romance blossoms. What is interesting, however, is the dynamics of their characters that illustrate contemporary Filipino gender roles that not only blur boundaries but more significantly cross over borders.

Claudine Barretto’s Jenny is spirited, even flamboyant, when Lino first sees her. He mistakes her for a native Italian for she spoke the language fluently. She is also well-
connected; we find out later, among other Filipino workers’ groups all over Italy. Although she takes two or three jobs at any single time, she brokers for jobs that other Filipinos look for, and sells cell phone cards on the side. She is, needless to say, hard-working and driven, primarily because she works not only for herself and her upkeep in Italy but more so for her family back home, specifically for a mother and a spoiled brother who depends on her even for the purchase of a tricycle or a pedicab, which she originally refused to pay for but in the end gives in and sends money for due to the insistent intercession of a mother she can’t refuse. Later, we learn that she is college-educated, although a dropout, and belonged to a family that used to own a car; in other words, well-off and middle class – until the father was imprisoned for swindling or using other people’s money fraudulently for a business where his partners duped him. Due to this reversal of family fortune, she had to work overseas as a domestic in Milan after she tried odd jobs, including “modeling” for an adult girlie joint. In Milan, while during most of her waking hours she is preoccupied with hard work, she nevertheless finds time for some fun such as taking an Italian boyfriend, about her age, from whom – it is suggested – she also gets some convenient arrangements for her upkeep. For instance, once she gets from him a pair of winter clothes, one each for Lino and her younger brother (Ryan Eigenmann) who subsequently visits her in Milan.

To Lino, Jenny has been initially a mother hen. Although she gets from him rental money more than what is fair (she places him in her own room that has a big curtain for a divider between his bed and cabinets and hers), she is the type who would worry earnestly and look for him frantically when he gets lost in the city, or solicitously accompany him during her days off from work as he looks for his wife, tap her network of connections in search of the woman, guide him on how to properly cross the streets, takes him to his rides, as well as prepares snacks for him during these wife-searching trips, looks jobs for him, even as she admonishes and reprimands him whenever he would go into temper tantrums over unwanted jobs, or nags him about the necessity of finding work if he wanted to stay longer in Milan until he finds his wife. Later, she protects him from hurting when she finally gets a lead to where his wife is and discovers that she has married an Italian for convenience and bore the latter a child, prompting the young wife to totally cut ties from her Filipino husband to spare him from sharing her “already shattered life.” Jenny keeps this a secret from Lino, who meanwhile, has slowly begun to fall for Jenny herself.

Later, Jenny becomes lover to Lino, solicitous and thoroughly understanding, to the point of spoiling him; self-sacrificing, to the point of keeping up with his subsequently-acquired bloated ego and attitude problem; and martyr-like, to the point of willingly giving him up when she learns that he has not completely forgotten his wife. She tells him her secret and brings him to the wife to see for himself what has become of her. Of course, the ever-confused guy takes this previous knowledge but kept secret by Jenny as an act of betrayal.
Piolo Pascual’s Lino, in contrast, is a young boy to protect and cuddle. A laid-back underachiever among other family members, he decides to leave the country and follow his wife in Milan who has gone there for work shortly after their marriage (she had this planned even before Lino insisted to marry her before she could leave) but who has since missed communicating with her young husband. Directionless and mindless, he was oblivious to the great difficulty about to confront him in a strange land, especially with meager money in his pocket. He is confident that he will find his wife, and that he can persuade her to go back home. But Lino is no decisive, strong man who is in control. He has, in fact, not grown up and alternates being continuously childlike and childish. Yet he has a good heart, and even better physical looks, both in face and physique. One’s impulse is to cuddle and protect him, and Jenny is no exception. Appropriately so because the young man is lost without a guardian and needs to be constantly reminded how adults should behave. Jenny provides that role. And sooner than they both expect, he is falling for her. First, he is thankful for all her help. Later, he must have realized how helpless he is without a woman beside her. The wife originally provided the crutch. Now it’s Jenny and what a great and able replacement for a loss. He himself tells her; that she has provided him direction and purpose in life. She has taught him to be patient and motivated. Things turn sour later, however, when childish tantrums become violent fits of jealousy over Jenny’s attention and solicitousness that she gives to her visiting brother; when newfound self-confidence monstrously develops into a bloated sense of self-worth. And then the final blow: he loses both women, apparently.

By themselves, “Leny” and “Lino” are memorable Filipino-film characters, but what makes their relationship riveting are the dynamics between them. They are a perfect match in so far as character spine, desire, will, and motivation are concerned. Moreover, they amply illustrate the changing image of the Filipino woman and macho.

If Barretto’s contemporary Filipino woman’s image remains nurturing, servile, and martyr-like, even as she crosses over traditional lines of gender role usually assigned to the Filipino macho as protector and provider which she now is to her ward and man, not to mention to her entire family (as projected, too, by Vilma Santos in both Bata, Bata Paano Ka Ginawa? and Anak), Judy Ann’s contemporary Filipino woman is even more violative of the traditional. As Joel Lamangan/Ricardo Lee’s “Sabel,” Judy Ann redefines the modern-day Filipina’s obligation to herself first, and then to others outside of herself, second; a contemporary Filipina’s individuation as a woman and as a person.

**Judy Ann’s “Sabel”: Individuation of the Filipino Woman**

Judy Ann’s “Sabel” is multi-faceted, a complex, multi-dimensional character; the audiences initially suspect that she is schizophrenic. We first see her as a nun on apostolate work in a penitentiary, an unconventional one given to unbuttoning her habit and exposing her undergarment to pacify a restless inmate by diverting his attention and energy from fits of violence. Definitely a curious if not a weird stance, this however
is a foreshadowing to a more unexpected and baffling disclosure that she later confesses to her spiritual adviser: she has “cooperated” willingly in her consummated “rape” by an inmate played by Wendell Ramos, because she wanted “to reach out to him who is full of hatred in his eyes and in his heart” for having been imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. The “rapist” is subsequently found “not guilty” of the crime he was originally accused of and gets acquitted. After his release from prison, he looks for and finds her, now out of the nun’s habit and thoroughly hip and transformed in looks and demeanor. He professes love for her. They subsequently live in together, are happy for some time, until she would go into melancholic fits and hallucinations that finally prompted her to leave him--perplexed, needless to say. In his search for her, he would see and talk to different people, related or acquainted with her, and their accounts paint Sabel in varying lights, mostly unflattering. To her mother, who is herself an unconventional character, Sabel is a dutiful and loving daughter to her father but a difficult one, intransigent even to the mother with whom she is at constant odds in a love-hate relationship; to a boyfriend, she is aggressive and fiercely expressive of her sexuality regardless of what people may say, rather promiscuous and self-destructive. He agrees with Sabel’s mother that she is prone to destroy relationships such as that between her mother and a suitor, as well as that of her friend and her boyfriend whom Sabel has snatched away from the friend. All the more the faithful and patient lover gets confused, for the picture that they paint is the complete opposite of the Sabel that he has known. On the other hand, Sabel’s spiritual adviser—himself a controversial man of the Catholic church, with a wife and a son—collaborates with the lover-searcher’s better impression of the woman he loves: she is a “good” person, a nun worthy of her calling.

His untiring search leading him to nothing, the patient lover is finally diverted from his seemingly futile preoccupation when another woman distracts him and makes him agree to marry her. He begets her a son and an unborn second child. Just as he has given up his search, the man chances upon Sabel once more in the Cordillera highlands, where she is presently being tried in court for the murder of a lawyer from a lowland city. She now lives with an ethnic community, the Ibalois, along with her seven-years-old-or-so boy whom she introduces to her former lover as his son, and her present doctor-spouse who, the man soon discovers, is another woman. She is subsequently acquitted for lack of solid evidence and largely on the basis of the testimony of an Ibaloi who covers up for her. The cover-up is a consensus reached by the whole community. Finally, Sabel confesses to her former lover that she indeed killed the victim—an abusive lawyer of a lowland estate-development corporation grabbing ancestral land from the natives—after the lawyer brutally raped Sabel’s lesbian lover. They part as friends for she opts to stay with the Ibalois with her woman-spouse and her son. Sabel also makes peace with her mother, whose other more pleasant facets gradually unravel as did her daughter’s, as we come to know them better.

Joel Lamangan’s Sabel is indeed intriguing and perplexing for the most part. Never content with just painting an intimate portrait in his films, this filmmaker invariably opts to paint large canvases instead, expansive societal murals. And he paints
his broad strokes and details in styles unconventional and innovative, leaving confused
the average audience steeped in conventional linear storytelling and fixated with
realistic and naturalistic cinematic treatment. More so in this film where the director
employs a series of flashbacks that are actually visualizations of present-time oral
narrations or dialogues between characters that, in addition, alter spatial order and
temporal chronology. Lamangan also uses his narrative and characters as
expressionistic, symbolic representations of concepts. In Sabel the stylistic treatment is
thematically motivated and appropriate.

More philosophical and sociological rather than literary and psychological, Sabel
questions and challenges the traditional way Filipinos look at things. It probes into their
long-held premises about people and the social order. It questions establishment canons
and standards. The film is peopled with transgressive characters none of whom may be
taken as a “role model,” for it challenges our essentialist viewpoints about people: what
a man or a woman should be, how a religious should behave, how a woman should
handle her sexuality; or of the social order: what constitutes morality or crime, where is
justice truly served, whether inside or outside the courtroom, and other similar issues. It
underscores the symbolic interactionist/social constructivist view that reality is socially
constructed (Jay 1995:272–73). People who constantly interact and communicate define,
determine, and create reality, the meaning of their lives, experiences, and environment,
and where there is no shared meaning, they negotiate for one.

“Sabel” as a character is not coherent and consistent in the Aristotelian-aesthetic
sense, neither because she is schizophrenic nor is her characterization poorly developed,
but because she is seen in the eyes of different people with their own respective biases
and interests, their own realities. Perhaps, she is a composite of all those viewpoints;
maybe as a woman and as a person she is continuously defining and redefining her
individuality and only towards the end of the film do we witness her individuation as a
subject. In Lamangan’s societal mural, Sabel represents the contemporary Filipino
women who have gone through similar experiences and are confronted with realities
about themselves not necessarily compatible with the traditional view of what a
woman’s essence is, or how she should behave as one. The contemporary Filipino
woman is as multi-faceted as her variegated experiences in the modern –
postmodern? – world, as complex as the issues that confront her are. To peg her in a
particular code of conduct or gender role is to limit her vast potentials. The same
principle applies to her male counterpart. The character played by Wendell, while most
of the time sensitive, patient, responsible, and in control, is also shown as violent,
irrational, and prone to childish tantrums, and easily succumbing to female wiles. A
similar peg would be just as confining.

Changing Image of the Filipino Macho on Screen

The sensitive male has gradually replaced the traditional macho image on screen.
Traditional machos were the action heroes of the late 1950s and ’60s, exemplified by the
likes of FPJ, Joseph Estrada, Lito Lapid, and Rudy Fernandez, among others. Their manliness was hinged on their physical strength and skill in hand combat, on their hero- or redeemer-like resolve and daring. They were the mythical or the working-class heroes out to redeem their townspeople from oppression and bondage caused by “evil forces” in mythical films or by the ruling class and forces in films of social realism.

Also traditional macho was the debonair matinee idol of romantic films and musicals of the 1940s, ’50s, and early ’60s; they were the morally upright male who may not have been spared from temptation but after succumbing to one if ever, has the courage and dignity to amend and atone for his sins. Christopher de Leon (Relasyon, Broken Marriage) and Richard Gomez (Ikaw ang Lahat sa Akin) continued the tradition even as they also started the sensitive male image on screen, fraught with as much emotional problems as his female counterpart, openly shedding tears – as none of their earlier and older counterparts would be caught doing on the big screen – or rage in brattish tantrums and irrationality. Man enough to admit his faults and oftentimes a good family provider, it is when he is not the latter that he undergoes personal emotional crisis of self-worth. In other words, still traditionally feudal and patriarchal in outlook, ever protective of his macho pride as family head and chief provider.

Aga Muhlach’s sensitive male is somehow a cross between the suave, debonair and the man-child types, unembarrassed in showing some “feminine” qualities (Ano Ba ang L8test, Kung Ako Na Lang Sana, Kailangan Kita) naturally starting with sensitivity and extra tenderness and sweetness, close to being soft, expanding to but not limited by engaging in what are traditionally regarded as largely female preoccupations such as cooking and housekeeping, but more significantly, willing to share with his woman some limelight, especially as partner and contributor to the family’s material upkeep. Here, somehow, traditional boundaries set for gender roles and demeanor are transgressed and blurred.

Another local screen macho is the misunderstood “bad boy,” the James Dean clones like Lou Salvador, Jr., Romeo Vasquez, and Zaldy Zhornack of the mid 1950s through the ’60s, and Robin Padilla of the ’90s to the present. He is the man-child given to juvenile delinquency.

Still another Filipino screen macho is the beefcake-actor who showed more muscles and flesh in sex-oriented movies of the late ’70s through the ’90s and even up to now, notably in gay-oriented films. Thought to be a symbol of virility and sex liberation, the male sex symbol on screen is now deemed “feminized.” By stripping him of his clothes, he is consigned to an object position, no better than where the naked woman on screen has been and about which Laura Mulvey earlier protested in her seminal work on feminist film criticism, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975). Mulvey had complained that there, the woman becomes a willing or unwilling victim of the subject male’s voyeuristic pleasure and sex fantasy. The stripped male similarly becomes an object of the controlling gaze, but this time not of the patriarchal male but of the
liberated female as well as of the gay, some of whom have joined the ranks of film directors and writers, and many of whom now stand to be openly counted among the audiences for films showing naked male bodies, unlike before where they silently sat among the other members of the cinematic audiences, mum about their true sex fantasies and desires. Could this be the reason why erstwhile Seiko male sex symbol, Gardo Versoza, stripped in many of his contract films with the studio, has become more acceptable to the local audiences in gay roles than as the action hero that he aspired to be when he decided to change his screen image after his studio contract expired?

Just as androgynous, if not more so and in a different sense, is the Filipino male screen image that Piolo Pascual represents. “Beautiful” is how this creature is best described, the Filipino answer to both Adonis and David. Anytime, he could answer the bid of Glenn Close’s Marquise de Merteuil for her Keanu Reeves’ Chevalier Danceny in Stephen Frears’ Dangerous Liaisons. Or of Greek and Roman strongmen like Alexander the Great, for a boy toy after a weary war, or of Thomas Mann’s hero in the novelette, Death in Venice, for his own Tadzio. Never before has any local male film hero been so beautifully and tenderly photographed and gazed at on screen as the cameras did on Pascual in Milan, making him the object of desire and pleasure, more than Barretto. And the iconography did not start in that film; in fact, the image is the same representation of the actor in many of his publicity shots for his films or for his music records and CDs – languorously lying on his back and staring back intently but meekly at his admirer with a faint smile. In short, a male ingénue, the boy a mother or a girlfriend instinctively protects and leads by the hand. The actor’s character as Lino in Milan strongly reinforces the image.

**Summing Up**

In so far as the projection of the image of the contemporary Filipino woman on the big screen is concerned, the film Sabel is doubly significant in that it was Judy Ann Santos who played the protagonist. Her dominant screen image and star persona evoke sweetness and light, everything nice and wholesome; in other words, all things that the female role model is – the very qualities that her fan followers and admirers like her for. That she consented to play such a violative character as “Sabel” is a daring career move that is cognizant of present realities and value changes. The film while a critical success, award-winning moreover, was a box-office flop. Maybe the ordinary movie audiences are not yet ready to accept her change of image. Yet this is important in so far as the revisioning of prevailing values regarding gender identities and roles are concerned. As pointed out earlier, genre films and film icons are crucial in the promotion of new values among the larger number of members in a community or culture – or in the reinforcement of existing ones.

It may be argued that Sabel is remotely a genre film where community aspirations and dominant ideology are found; it may not even be of the revisionist variety that the two other subject films are. Perhaps, it is more of a filmmaker’s private
visionary film. But even in *Kailangan Kita* and more so in *Milan*, that compromise with the dictates of a studio set-up and demands of a conservative movie-going public steep in formula films (for example, that romantic dramas and comedies should have the obligatory happy ending, where hero and heroine invariably end up together no matter how realistically far-fetched), it is shown that altered social realities and relationships have slipped into the Filipino social fabric. For example, the phenomenon of the Filipino migrant worker seems to have loaded an additional burden to our women’s shoulders, both as a wife and mother left at home, or as a migrant worker herself. Similarly, it can be accounted for an increased absenteeism of the crucial father figure in many Filipino homes, in the case of male migrant workers, making masculine influence tenuous among Filipino sons.

The women directors Rory Quintos and Olivia Lamasan have to be congratulated, for despite the commercial imperatives with which they have to contend, they have effectively privileged fundamental gender issues through the projection of altered images. Suffice it to say that even in the conservative Filipino film screen, gender images and roles are changing, reflective of current construction of realities. Traditional notions, identities, and roles are starting to be questioned, and alternatives are being presented. Time to reconsider or discard altogether the stereotypical, starting with labels such as “feminine” and “masculine” or “feminized” and “masculinized” as in the title of this critique.

**Works Cited**


Grant, Barry K. *Film Genre Reader*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.


The Author

Jovenal D. Velasco is currently finishing a master’s course in Media Studies at the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, where he taught film studies and production courses at the institution’s Film Institute (UPFI) for over seven years. He also taught Broadcast Communication at St. Scholastica’s College, Manila. He conducts workshops in film appreciation, scriptwriting, video production, and acting. He has been a member of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) since 1980. As one of the resident directors at the PETA Broadcast and Film, Inc., where he was also once a head writer, Velasco has written and/or directed teleplays and telecines, two of which have won awards. For the GMA Telesine Specials where the PETA BFI had line-produced movies made for television, he directed *Oriang: Ang Marangal na Dalit ng Lakambini*, which won the Bahaghari Awards in 1996, as well as the Star Awards for Television that same year as Best Movie Made for Television. At the Bahaghari Awards this telecine dominated the major technical awards. The following year, he directed and co-wrote *Relikaryo: Ang Agnos ni Maria Clara*, which also won the Best Movie Made for Television at the Star Awards for Television in 1997. In 2001, he wrote and directed an advocacy docudrama on youth in conflict with the law, titled “NONOY.” Jointly produced by the PETA-BFI and the Episcopal Commission on Prison Pastoral Care of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, it was a recipient of a production grant by the Cinema Values Committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Joven was also once in charge of publication in PETA; was head of the Special Publications Office at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, which published the prize-winning *Tuklas Sining* series; and was one of the managing editors of the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. He has in addition written several articles/papers on aspects of Philippine Cinema published in academic journals, popular magazines, as well as papers read in international and local conferences. At present he is working on a book project titled *Hulmahan/Huwaran: Reading Stars, Icons, and Genre Films in Philippine Cinema*. He also served one term as Acting Head of the Cinema Committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.
Indochine and the Dynamics of Gender

Joel David
Hallym University, Korea

Abstract

Although filmic discourses on the Vietnam War have been associated with American filmmakers and producers, the last internationally celebrated film release on the subject was French. Fittingly, Indochine (1992) dealt with the French presence in Vietnam and the Vietnamese’s struggle to free themselves from their colonizers. With the benefit of hindsight, the filmmakers were able to present their film as a critique on the apologetic limitations of US productions, as well as on the hypocrisy of American inattentiveness toward France’s predicament only to be followed by the US’s attempt to succeed the French as Vietnam’s subsequent colonizing power. The film’s political agenda, however, is ruptured via its use of female protagonists to represent the two warring nations. Where and how this rupture occurs can be better understood using discourses on gender.
The existence of a Vietnam War movie genre has been traced to the official withdrawal of the United States from the war of colonization in that country. Film historian Robert Sklar observed that in earlier film-era wars (World Wars I and II and the Korean conflict), “[American] motion picture companies cooperated with the government in producing a variety of films [...] that explained, dramatized, and aided war aims” (335). Rare pro-war films (such as the John Wayne vehicle *The Green Berets*),

anti-war documentaries, and “echoes and shadows” of the conflict reflected in genre and exploitation movies were the only possible means for the Vietnam issue to be tackled in American films, but “after the Communist victory [in 1975], it became possible to look back” (Sklar 337). It is the manner of this looking back that occasions this paper’s consideration of the French production of *Indochine*,

as well as its insertion into a matrix of ideologically problematic US film practice, that makes the Régis Wargnier film appear innovative, at least initially, in comparison. After assessing how the film fares vis-à-vis US filmic discourses on the Vietnam War, this paper will then look more closely at how the politics of gender are worked out in the film, especially within the context of colonial and postcolonial relations.

The Vietnam film genre, to begin with, is itself a matter of careful periodizing and qualifying, as the above account demonstrates. Writing from the perspective of the present, Michael Selig enumerates that, although the so-called Vietnam movies share an “appropriation of the language and iconography of a particular historical moment (usually from the ‘60s and early ’70s) and the subordination of that moment to ‘traditional paradigms’ which are decidedly not exclusive to the so-called Vietnam film genre,” the use of such a type of imagery “merely masks the attempts to reestablish a traditional cultural and political identity” to the way in which the American defeat “created a cultural crisis among the American people” (2). Wargnier himself, in *Indochine: Un film de Régis Wargnier*, declared as much when he maintained that his objective was to undertake a more responsible retelling of the nature of the colonial conflict (“au milieu de l’Histoire et de voir comment l’Histoire infléchit ces destins”) with his recollection “des grands films romanesques, américains pour la plupart” (*Indochine* 82).

Significantly, the film won a raft of institutional prizes in France (Césars for performances and technical achievements), Europe (Goya for Best European

---

236 All crew and cast information on films listed in this paper were derived from the Internet Movie Database, with search page address at <http://us.imdb.com/search>. Video availability was confirmed mainly through Amazon.com, including (when necessary) its European sites; Asian videos not listed at Amazon.com were searched in various appropriate sites, starting with Poker Industries (web address <http://www.pokerindustries.com/>). I wish to acknowledge the assistance of two students from the spring and fall semesters of 2006, namely Yu Taeyun and Ham Jongsuk respectively, for their unstinting and indispensable resourcefulness and good cheer.

237 All mention of *Indochine* in this paper refer to the Columbia/Tristar Studios identical laserdisc and DVD releases, with English translations as provided in the video’s subtitles.

238 The French passages may be translated as follows: “within the course of History, to see how History determines [human] destiny” for the parenthetical remark, followed by [Régis Wargnier’s recollection] “of the great film romances, especially the American ones.” I am not in a position to determine whether any perceivable irony in each of these statements was deliberate or not.
Film), and the US, including the National Board of Review, Golden Globe, and Oscar for Best Foreign Film ("Awards for Indochine [1992]," Internet Movie Database), plus Time magazine citations as one of the best films of the year as well as of the decade. Yet most individual US critics have professed only moderate appreciation, if not outright dissatisfaction, toward the film. Perhaps the most favorable review by a major American critic, outside of that of Time magazine’s Richard Corliss, has been that of Roger Ebert, who nevertheless concludes that the screenplay is "long and discursive and not very satisfying," while the movie itself is "an ambitious, gorgeous, missed opportunity – too slow, too long, too composed" (Ebert n.p.).

The reluctance on the part of American film critics to acknowledge another Western nation’s take on the Vietnam War could stem in part from an unarticulated yet understandable pride in the US’s own store of Vietnam War films, one of the many peaks in what observers have described as a post-Classical Hollywood Golden Age in American Cinema. After the aforementioned embarrassment of The Green Berets and allegorical explorations in exploitation projects, American filmmakers deduced that the US pullout from Vietnam could now allow them to produce critical discourses on the war without seeming anti-American.

Perhaps the most celebrated instances of these productions would be those of two Oscar best film winners with opposed ideological readings, Michael Cimino’s allegedly illiberal The Deer Hunter from 1978 and Oliver Stone’s better-received Platoon from 1986. The depiction of American soldiers as innocent victims peaked during the year of The Deer Hunter’s release, as evident in such titles as Sidney J. Furie’s The Boys in Company C and in Ted Post’s Go Tell the Spartans; even Ted Kotcheff’s 1982 entry First Blood, the original Rambo film, observed this liberal-humanist dictum of portraying US soldiers’ trauma without demonizing the Viet Cong. Other titles that might clinch the argument for 1978 as a watershed year in Vietnam War film discourse (argued effectively in Desser 81-102) is another Oscar prizewinner, Hal Ashby’s Jane Fonda-starrer Coming Home and Karel Reisz’s Who’ll Stop the Rain, the adaptation of Robert Stone’s novel Dog Soldiers; plus Francis Ford Coppola’s much-delayed Apocalypse Now, finally released the year after. Even Ted Post’s Good Guys Wear Black, a Chuck Norris potboiler, has the lead character state that the Vietnam adventure “was a war that never should have begun, and a country we never should have entered [...]. Thousands of victims died without really understanding why, mainly because the reasons for the war were beyond any rules of logic” (“Memorable Quotes from Good Guys Wear Black [1978],” Internet Movie Database).

239 Film scholar Raymond J. Haberski, Jr. (122-43) goes as far as claiming that the period, roughly the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was as much a Golden Age for film criticism as it was for film production. That the period, also known as the New American Cinema, coincided with the intensification of the US’s involvement in the Vietnam War and ended in 1975 with American defeat and the release of the first summer blockbuster, Steven Spielberg’s Jaws, is now commonplace enough to be considered standard knowledge; see Godfrey Cheshire, “Apocalypse Again,” on which more later.
Enter Indochine

In terms of the aforementioned liberal perspective, Indochine’s narrative raises not only the issue of the usefulness of such an approach, but more important, the question of how gender has been configured on separate levels – that of cultural texts, cinema in particular, and that of historical practice, from both sides of the conflict; there is of course the danger, in the latter category, of on the one hand using Vietnam as a synecdoche of the Other; and of on the other hand conflating the US and France into the West. One admittedly simplistic way of resolving this predicament would be to further qualify the Vietnam-as-Other approach as the East, which was the manner in which the war was consistently regarded in cultural texts, and delineating whenever possible which “West” between the two colonial adventurers is being referred to, whether France or the US.

Indochine’s initial distinction from the Hollywood Vietnam War film project is its farther periodization, the ’50s era of French colonial administration being challenged by the southward advance of Communist liberation fighters. Eliane Davries, a single middle-aged woman, adopts Camille, a “princess of Annam,” after the latter’s parents die in a plane crash; along with Camille, Eliane agrees to oversee Camille’s parents’ plantation. Eliane conducts herself according to strict rules of civil and secular propriety, raising Camille as she would a European child (Camille never speaks Vietnamese even toward the end of the narrative) but also arranging to eventually turn over the plantation to her as well as marry her off to a similarly wealthy native merchant family. Discreetly, Eliane carries on a passionate affair with a French naval officer, Jean-Baptiste, but lets go of the dalliance when the latter insists on his freedom. Unaware of the affair, Camille also falls in love with Jean-Baptiste, prompting Eliane to forbid him from seeing her and rushing Camille’s wedding arrangements with Tanh, who has also been rebelling against his parents’ (and his country’s) excessive authoritarianism. Camille and Tanh decide to break up and run away from their respective families, and Camille treks all the way to the far-flung destination that Eliane had arranged for Jean-Baptiste. To get near him she agrees to be sold to slavery, but in his rescuing her she shoots and kills his naval superior, and the two become fugitives who take advantage of the disguises worn by roving theatrical troupes. The couple are separately caught and Jean-Baptiste is found dead (officially ruled a suicide) on a day-pass at Eliane’s house to see his and Camille’s son Etienne, while Camille suffers six years in prison where she emerges as a hard-line Vietminh cadre. The war ends with the 1954 Geneva Conference which Camille attends and to which Eliane brings Etienne, but the two never get to see Camille.

The use of female protagonists to represent the two warring countries may be the film’s most significant contribution to Vietnam-film generic tradition.240 Even by

---

240 Alison Murray’s comparative review of Chocolat, Utremer, and Indochine describes the Vietnamese national narrative in Indochine as inscribed in the major women characters’ bodies.
standard “positive images” feminist requisites, the figures of Camille and Eliane hold up admirably, particularly in relation to the male characters in the film. Paradoxically, the larger generic framework, that of (European) art-epic production, also ensures that the men do not suffer from lack of sympathy either. Tanh gallantly agrees to allow Camille to seek her true love and later assists the two of them by recommending them to a Communist-sympathetic theater troupe; expelled from a Paris university for protesting the Diên Biên Phu massacre, he declares to his mother, “The French have taught me freedom and equality; I’ll fight them with those.” Jean-Baptiste is of course the fiery and desirable object of passion shared by mother and daughter, who undergoes a domesticizing transformation when he renounces his freedom for the sake of Camille. The most extreme instance of the movie’s insistent humanism is that of the character of Eliane’s unrequited suitor Guy Asselin, a ruthless counter-insurgency expert who resorts to torture and employs mercenary rebel-hunters, but who offsets such damaging traits by a keen wit, his devotion to Eliane and his job, and his fall from grace with the authorities where he remarks, with consciously ironic self-reference, “The innocents are kicked out, the guilty will go free.”

Complications

The problematic of this narrative strategy is twofold in nature, one building up from the other. To begin with, it would be difficult to accept as historical fact that women were the major political players in the Vietnam conflict, whether involving the French or the Americans. In giving prominence to the participation of its women characters, however, Indochine manages to extend viewership identification and sympathy with the real-life power players, the men. The role of women in political life derives from the concept of difference, and the nature of their participation originates with the function of their bodies. Monique Canto relates that, to the questions of how the city can maintain itself and ensure that it satisfies its citizens’ desires,

woman-as-political-animal provides an answer. With woman, a place can be found in political theory for both procreation and the representation of desire – and hence also the satisfaction of desire. Procreation and representation are related questions, moreover; taken together, they indicate the difficulty of conceptualizing, within a given political framework, the possibility of reproduction: reproduction of the real in order to satisfy desire, and reproduction of human life so that the city may endure. (340)

At first glance, this assignation of political value to women on the basis of their bodily difference may seem at odds with the “narrative and visual reconstitution of a heroic male subject, a prerequisite for which is the devaluation and abuse of the feminine” in Vietnam-film texts (Selig 3). Furthermore, it may not necessarily be possible, though Selig makes the positive assertion,
to account for the films’ consistent effacements of the issues of race, class, nationalism, and gender (their historical misrepresentations, we might say) by focusing on their all too conventional concern with the narrative and visual reconstitution of the male subject and their almost always violent repression of the feminine. (Ibid.)

If one were to pursue this line of inspecting the physical valuation of women’s bodies in *Indochine*, there would appear to be the rupturing of its benevolent-because-motherly colonialist capitulation: although it is Eliane who gets depicted as a repressed yet ultimately passionate matriarch, it is Camille who is undressed twice, without her even being sexualized in both scenes the way that Eliane charges her scenes with Jean-Baptiste with her desire for him. What this implies, using standard Orientalist lines of reason, is that the body of the Other can be gazed at with more clinical regard; within the terms of the film, the seemingly indulgent undressing of Camille may also perhaps have been intended to balance her character’s eventual domination of the political narrative, in which it is Eliane’s (and Guy’s and Jean-Baptiste’s) people who are forced to negotiate with hers.

Some degree of reductionist danger might also be present herein, though, in that this reading might be too close for a text that operates both as a self-contained attempt at providing high-cultural pleasure *and* as an insertion into a highly involved mode of film practice. On the one hand, Hollywood and even mainstream American literary texts on the Vietnam War can hardly defend themselves from charges of feminizing the enemy in “reducing the Vietnamese to mere ‘gooks’ – something between a woman and an animal” (Lawson 23; also cf. Selig 7-8) and in exploiting “the fear of becoming a woman (of losing one’s ‘balls’) [as] one of the indoctrinational weapons used by the military in preparing young men for battle” (Lawson 22). On the other hand, the configuration of Eliane and Camille’s sameness, overshadowed by their difference from men, is inflected not merely by the obvious category of gender but the even more crucially political one of class. To use an outmoded application of body discourse, Eliane and Camille can be seen to constitute the head or rational element in fictional interventions on the Vietnam War, in contrast with the hysterical young males of the standard Hollywood fare who may in this context be seen as obsessed with masculinity precisely because of their feminized function within the historical dramaturgy in their losing to (and thereby being symbolically raped by) the enemy.

This opens up a more troubling possibility on the use of gender in *Indochine*: are Eliane and Camille, in their both being privileged members of their respective national bourgeoisies, masculinized in terms of their respective historical agencies? There would be ways of carefully contextualizing the question and advancing answers for each character – i.e., in their portrayal in formal terms (where they function as both mother and lover and are considered in those same terms by the male characters), in their narrative insertions (where class privilege renders them superior to the men around them), in their intertextual contributions (where they serve to “rectify” the feminization of the political players in Vietnam-film discourse yet function as a rationalizing
alternative to the same tradition), and in their significations within historical accounts of the war. This last category may not necessarily encompass certain areas of the previous ones, but the nature of the discursive complications it presents makes it ideal for further pursuing the issues already raised thus far.

Nations and Boundaries

*Indochine* in this respect can be seen as falling within a development in ’90s global film practice of the internationalization of the Vietnam-film genre – i.e., it can be situated within a spate of works unified by their political specificity in the Vietnamese nation (including Hong Kong and Australian “boat people” texts and the French *L’Amant*, released the same year as *Indochine* – cf. Devine 357-58), not to mention the phenomenon of films on Vietnam, notably Tran Anh Hung’s *Mùi du du xhan* (The Scent of Green Papaya) and *Xich lo* (Cyclo), making an impact in American and European arthouse circuits along with other Asian productions. Within such a globalized awareness, the roles that Camille and Eliane perform work not merely as dramatis personae, but as allegorical figures. In this respect, Camille’s sexuality is distinguished by its racialization through a “strategic, rather than merely tactical, deployment of a peculiar ‘silence’” described by Abdul JanMohamed as crucial to the construction of a Manichean allegory “which functions as the currency, the medium of exchange, for the entire colonialist discursive system. The exchange function of the allegory remains constant, while the generic attributes themselves can be substituted indefinitely (and even contradictorily) for one another” (JanMohamed 103, 106). The question not only of how Manichean Indochine as an allegory is, but whether Manichean applies in the first place, should not preempt the consideration at least of the two women characters as representations of their respective nations. Within this framework, the danger of appreciating them first of all as bodily entities within the body politic can be expressed in these terms: “When a society or political order speaks generically about ‘the body,’ it can deny the needs of bodies which do not fit the master plan” (Sennett 23).

In fact this can be seen in how standard definitions of what constitutes a nation have sought to elide categories of race, language, and religion, relying on the significantly less-political category of geography though ultimately falling back on an even more charged requisite of “a soul, a spiritual principle” (Renan 19). The underside – in fact, a consequence as well – of this desire for understanding one’s own nation and that of others is manifested in the fact that, in terms of Asian scholarship at least,

the negative image of the people subjugated by Western colonial powers, which dominated the colonial ideology, was drawn on the basis of cursory observations, sometimes with strong built-in prejudices, or misunderstandings and faulty

---

241 Among the films cited by Devine (357-58) are Ann Hui’s *Tou bun no hoi* (Boat People), Stephen Wallace’s *Turtle Beach*, and Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *L’Amant* (The Lover).
methodologies [...] Those who proclaimed the people of the area indolent, dull, treacherous, and childish were generally not scholars. They were monks, civil servants, planters, sailors, soldiers, popular travel writers, and tourists. (Alatas 112)

In the formation of resistance to such gross misrepresentation, what has been described as the Janus-faced nature of nationalism has resulted in a quandary for the female subject: on the one hand, the emancipation of women has been represented in and from the West as one of the many promised benefits of modernity; on the other hand, resistance to the West has entailed with it a resistance to the project of modernity as well, and along with it the vaunted emancipation of women:

Wherever women continue to serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic and religious collectivities, their emergence as full-fledged citizens will be jeopardized, and whatever rights they may have achieved during one stage of nation-building may be sacrificed on the altar of identity politics during another. (Kandiyoti 382)

The collapse of the French colonial system in Indochina bisected not just France’s colonial malaise, particularly in the subsequent emergence of Algerian resistance, but also the larger trend of a decline in Western supremacy in Asia through the 1970s (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars 3), except for the US and its strongholds, Korea and the Philippines. Predictably, the right-wing version of the story listed the following differences between, on the left, the sources of French defeat and, on the right, the causes of the Vietminh’s success:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor intelligence</th>
<th>Communist mass indoctrination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underestimating the enemy</td>
<td>Singleness of purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of a positive political program</td>
<td>United and continuous leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacillating politicians</td>
<td>Ruthlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-wing propaganda and sabotage</td>
<td>Good intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive-minded attitude</td>
<td>Good planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to get into the jungle</td>
<td>Support from Red [sic] China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undue reliance on air support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(O’Ballance 255)

The list evinces not just a willingness to provide more positive (and quantifiably greater) rationalization for the author’s side, but also lays blame on the solidarity of Others – a fact that calls for eventual qualification in the wake of the now-known differences within the then-seemingly stable alliance comprising the former Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and North Vietnam. In fact, the French pullout from Vietnam can be more usefully expressed as “a welcome escape from an impossible situation” wherein “in this proxy confrontation between the superpowers France’s colonial sovereignty was of secondary concern” (Jenkins 162-63).
Moreover, as Benedict Anderson has commented, whatever transnational solidarity had transpired occurred primarily as “an understanding that linked colonial rulers from different national metropoles, whatever their internal rivalries and conflicts” (152-53). More significantly, Anderson maintains that the phenomenon of reverse racist discourse was never expressed in the literature of colonial resistance, proving his point by quoting the Constitution drawn up by Macario Sakay for the latter’s rebel Philippine republic – a text that starts by declaring that no citizen “shall exalt any person above the rest because of his race or the color of his skin; fair, dark, rich, poor, educated and ignorant – all are completely equal” (ibid. 153-54).

Vietnam Connection

Applying this principle to Camille helps to delimit the character’s actual political progression from wealthy and Westernized native to unwavering freedom fighter who retains enough measure of affection for her adoptive mother in breaking down and telling her to leave, since “Your Indochine is no more.” The difference in spectatorship response to the film somehow betokens this less-than-radical desire for the Other to perform within the codes of Western honor and loyalty, notwithstanding the fact that even in the film, it is the Western figure of Guy Asselin who spearheads, consciously and remorselessly, the violation of all the rules of conduct that he claims to stand for. Thus just as much as the film was appreciated in the US for its acceptable, politically (though definitely not historically) correct re-gendering of the Vietnam narrative, the movie was also known to have turned its Camille performer, Linh Dan Pham, into a media star in what is perhaps officially the most openly anti-Communist Asian country, South Korea. Although primarily France-based (her starring role, Monica Teuber’s Jamila, was in German, while her latest film, where she plays an immigrant concert pianist, is Jacques Audiard’s De Battre mon coeur s’est arrêté, the well-received remake of James Toback’s Fingers), in the mid-1990s Linh appeared in a number of Korean prestige productions. Among these were Seo Yun-mo’s 1994 film Lai Daihan (a derogatory term for a Korean-fathered illegitimate Vietnamese child), and the then-concurrent TV series on Korean soldiers’ experiences as US allies during the Vietnam War, Meonameon Ssongba-gang (The Distant Songba River), from the novel by Bak Yong Han.

In this sense, and through Linh, Indochine may have played a vital role in the political discourse of the current Korean cultural wave. The critical self-examination of the occasionally controversial role played by Korean troops in Vietnam (Lee Kim 622-35) preceded – in a sense, heralded – the more urgent, and internally more controversial, tackling of the issue of reunification with Communist North Korea; it were as if the breaking down of a relatively mild taboo (the Korean military’s overseas performance)

242 I am grateful to Professor Kim Shin Dong of Hallym University for confirming this insight, unavailable as of this writing in English- and French-language print and internet information sources, as well as to Messrs. Won Myung Ho, Moon Jeong Woo, and Kim Jong-il for assisting my searches.
enabled the culture to confront the more traumatic issue on the homefront. Here it becomes possible to see, in a strictly delimited sense, how conflicts arising from ethnicity (in this case the potential rejection of a pro-Vietnam text by a presumably anti-Communist viewership) are resolved through the creation of a separate but related internal conflict (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry 116-17); in particular terms, these would involve the affinities between Indochine’s liberal politics and the South’s aspiration to handle the threat of North Korea in a manner that would be of mutual benefit to the two states and that would hopefully result in their reunification.

One final, admittedly minor, aspect of the triangulation among Vietnam, the US, and Korea involves the use of the derogatory term used by American troops to refer to the Viet Cong. The term “gook” was first used against Filipino revolutionaries during the Philippine resistance against American colonization (again, an instance of déjà vu: the US sought to replace a European occupation force, at that time that of Spain, with its own). Possibly a corruption of the Tagalog word for tutelary spirit, “gugu,” that might also account for the phrase “goo-goo eyes,” the use of “gook” was reinforced during the Korean War by the fact that it means “country” in Han-gul. From its derogatory application by US soldiers to refer to Koreans and Chinese, it was finally brought over to Vietnam, thus securing its status as the “[Orientalist] racial epithet emblematic in describing […] the ubiquitous and invisible enemy” (Lee, qtd. in Pearson n.p.). As the First-World country whose history is linked with the three Asian regional territories – in chronological order, the Philippines in Southeast Asia, Korea in East Asia, and Vietnam in Indochina – the US had consistently justified its interventions by identifying itself as each country’s savior. It purportedly set out to rescue the Philippines (and Cuba) from Spain, and subsequently liberated South Korea from the Communists. Its avowed project in Vietnam was similar to what it did for Korea, in that the Communists (also from the North) had to be prevented from taking over the country. Yet unlike in Korea, it did not allow for a territorial compromise; and as in the Philippines’s experience, the natives read its intention as a colonization attempt that called for nationalist resistance; for just as the Filipinos were looking forward to savoring their hard-won freedom from Spain, so were the Vietnamese eager to move forward after having expelled the French.

243 At least one study, Lee Hyangjin’s Contemporary Korean Cinema, argues that “Korean films from both sides subtly adopt the rhetoric of ‘one nation,’ justifying the necessity to reunify the country. This rhetoric, in a way, reflects the genuine aspiration of the Korean people to restore their cultural homogeneity and solidarity, which, they believe, transcends the current ideological confrontation. The idea of ‘one nation’ is deeply valued by the public on both sides, as it appears to be grounded in their firm sense of ethnic homogeneity” (4).

244 William Manchester’s account of Douglas MacArthur’s father’s experience during the Philippine-American War describes an alliterative opposition “between the ‘goddamns,’ as GIs of that era called themselves, and the ‘gugus,’ their word for natives, a precursor of ‘gooks’” (42; ascribed to Leech 405 and Lee and Henschel 20). One further connection among Koreans, Vietnamese, and Filipinos is a practice routinely condemned in the West: that of dog-meat consumption. Although ascribed (perhaps erroneously in certain specific instances) to Chinese influence, and existent in some parts of China, dog-eating is more commonly associated with the three “gook” nationalities – cf. the “Dog Eater/Dog Muncher” entry in Wikipedia’s “List of Ethnic Slurs.”
French Leave

This critique of the US’s role in Vietnam, while extraneous to the plot of Indochine, is nevertheless fundamental in terms of both its timing and its content. Crucial to the trajectory of the film’s international marketing strategy is the figure of France in the film. Undoubtedly the casting of Catherine Deneuve as Eliane Davries was intended to proceed from the play on her renown as the model of Marianne, the symbol of France.\(^{245}\) Similarly as relevant to the narrative would be her persona as a woman whose cool exterior conceals simmering, even dark, passions (notably in Luis Buñuel’s 1966 film Belle de jour, reissued in 1995). In Indochine the burden of her representational function is demonstrated not so much in the relative respect accorded her body (as opposed to the “humanizing” of her emotions) but in the astounding narrative curve Eliane undergoes, all the while retaining the very same function – that of mothering – with which she first appears in the film and proceeds to render the tale of the triangulated relations with her and her daughter’s lover. At the point where Camille rejects her vision of a happy-ever-after existence in the plantation and where she retrospectively realizes that Camille had planned to abandon her marital commitments, the plot flash-forwards to a now aged Eliane telling the story to a young man, about the age of her lover Jean-Baptiste, but distinctly Vietnamese in features. It is Etienne, her grandson, Camille and Jean-Baptiste’s son, who at one point became entwined in his parents’ legendary exploits when Jean-Baptiste, captured and separated from Camille, had asked villagers to suckle his infant son; so, the legend goes, did the tale of how all Vietnamese women, even those who no longer lactated or who were too young to do so at the time or who had not even seen Jean-Baptiste and Etienne, claimed to have nursed the child.

At the point where we first see Eliane and Etienne, however, their intimacy, the low-light situation, and the still-recent memory of Eliane’s story of Jean-Baptiste (before even he and Camille became lovers) drive home the impression that Etienne is Jean-Baptiste’s latter-day substitute. The second flash-forward, after Eliane relates how Jean-Baptiste was captured and had to enlist, as it were, the women of Vietnam to nourish his son, distinctly identifies the relation between Eliane and Etienne as grandmother and grandson respectively; the scene is succeeded by Eliane’s acquisition of Etienne from Jean-Baptiste through local colonial and religious authorities, and how she insists on the Oriental practice of slandering an attractive child, in the presence of the bewildered white soldier and nun, in order not to arouse the jealousy of evil spirits. When she explains, “The evil spirits are listening,” however, she casts a glance at them that suggests how she might not hesitate to include them in the category. The last appearance of Eliane and Etienne (whose names at this point suggest sibling, if not twinborn, relations) is at the Geneva convention where Camille, unseen since her rejection of her mother and her mother’s country, and destined never to be seen by

\(^{245}\) This insight was pointed out in a generally unappreciative review of the film by Vincent Canby in the New York Times, which nevertheless opened with the statement, “Catherine Deneuve reigns in Indochine.”
either Eliane and Etienne or the film viewers, is negotiating for the Vietminh side. Eliane, who could not bring herself to see Camille, instructs Etienne to look for his mother; Etienne realizes the absurdity of his difference and alienation from his biological mother, and rejoins Eliane outdoors. When Eliane expresses regret that mother and son did not find each other, Etienne replies, “Ma mère, c’est toi,” upon which Eliane feigns an accident with the heel of her shoe and turns away so Etienne would not see her expression. The fact that in doing so she turns her back on the audience as well makes it impossible to see her face, and at the same time facilitates the audience’s speculation of what she was feeling – grief? happiness? both or neither? – while the official loss of the French colony is being negotiated. Moreover, although the English-language subtitles render what may be literally translated as “My mother, that’s you” into the flatter “You are my mother,” the moment resonates painfully (for all the characters as well as with Other audiences) with an early scene establishing Eliane’s character as a plantation master: after she flogs a worker for attempting to escape and tells him how much it hurts a mother to punish her children, the peasant answers, literally in French, “You are my mother and my father.”

That Eliane and Etienne’s dramatic high point should be made synchronous with the 1954 convention brings in the added reading of how the French had retained a feeling of bitterness toward their expected ally, the US, along with a respect for the Vietminh, for a succession of reasons:

for Roosevelt’s initial opposition to the reassertion of French control in Indochina after World War II, for [the US’s] subsequent grudging admission that the area lay in the French domain, for its lukewarm diplomatic support during the 1954 Geneva conference, and for its readiness to assume France’s place in Vietnam immediately after Geneva. (Sullivan 56-57)

Thus the textual production of Indochine itself can be read as a nationalist rebuke to the gung-ho representations of the Vietnam conflict from Hollywood, but whether this was made at the expense of their making what may be considered a reverse gung-ho presentation may be an issue that could only be settled in historical retrospect, once, say, other participants in the conflict (the Vietnamese first and foremost) come up with their sobering reassessments of what they believed had actually transpired.

The act of making public what in Western culture is gendered as private (Canto 349-50) – the story of Eliane and Camille – might perhaps provisionally explain why Eliane-as-France should be overvalorized in the multiplicity of her functions – as lover, sister, and grandmother; yet it is as mother, first to Camille (Vietnam) and then to Etienne (the part of Vietnam that France brought home), that her character serves to modify two related points that have been raised about mothering in feminist discourse. First is the claim that mothers identify more with their female infants than with their male ones, but nurture female infants less because of their ambivalence about growing up in a patriarchy (Hirsch 182-83). Such a typology gets glossed over in Indochine
because of the aforementioned agglomeration of other feminine functions ascribed to the Eliane character; further, if we concede that in Catherine Deneuve-as-France the fuller representation would include French men, then her inability to identify with Camille’s cause is in danger of being conflated with her effectiveness as plantation manager. Her relationship to Etienne would seem to be less qualifiedly ambivalent, but it is the Etienne figure that is in question here, particularly in Jessica Benjamin’s suggestion that the son’s rejection of the mother would not necessarily constitute a refusal of her omnipotence as it would entail an attempt by the son to claim the phallus (140). What Etienne rejects would be the omnipotence of his biological mother, Camille; what he claims as the phallus would be, ironically, his refusal to reject his spiritual mother, Eliane.

**After Indochine**

Hence in employing gender as a masquerade in much the same way that femininity operates in its phase of performing the masquerade even without being aware of it, *Indochine* conducts its critique of the imagining of Vietnam by the US without acknowledging the radical potential of the Vietnamese’s anti-colonialist project, much less admitting the masculinist nature and cause of the French involvement.246 The narrative thread of the representation of Vietnam in the Western imaginary awaits a further and far more unsettling unspooling. So far, since the film’s release, two developments may be provisionally “read” in its wake, one intertextual and the other historical.247

The first event would be the reissue of Coppola’s 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* twenty-two years later, as *Apocalypse Now Redux*. *Apocalypse Now* was the first Vietnam War film to win the top international film prize, the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, even though it was originally screened as a work in progress.248 Of the

---

246 Kim Worthy’s review in *Cineaste* criticized the movie for deploying the “simplistic dichotomies [that] often mark narratives of colonization, particularly those produced by the imperialist colonizer” (38).

247 I must confess to a fear of exceeding my grasp, as well as unduly distending the boundaries of this paper, if I were to include a third event, so complex in its intertextuality and casually perverse in its formal, temporal, and sexual premises that it demands an article all its own. In the bravura opening sequence of Brian DePalma’s *Femme Fatale*, set during the Cannes Film Festival, Régis Wargnier appears as himself during the premiere of his next Catherine Deneuve-starrer, *Est-Ouest* (East-West). His date gets seduced by another woman, which sets off the metaphysical-thriller plot mechanism of *Femme Fatale*. What would Wargnier, a specialist in conventional epic humanist cinema, have to do with this theme? The key, as I see it, lies in Deneuve who, though absent during the premiere, enjoys (so to speak) queer-icon status, to the point where the US’s most successful lesbian publication, *Curve*, had originally named itself after her (Belge n.p.).

248 Although *Apocalypse Now* dealt overtly with the Vietnam War, other US-produced previous Cannes Grand Prix winners were already referencing the conflict: Robert Altman’s *MASH*, although ostensibly set during the Korean War, situated its sensibility squarely in the countercultural 1960s through the nihilism and morbid humor of the screenplay of former Hollywood blacklist victim Ring Lardner, Jr.; while Travis Bickle, the lead character in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, although based on the story of a man who attempted to assassinate an American presidential candidate, is introduced as a mentally unbalanced Vietnam War veteran — inspiring in turn a real-life mentally
nearly fifty minutes added to the new version, the longest sequence, nearly a half hour, consisted of Capt. Benjamin L. Willard and his crew discovering a hidden French plantation on their way to terminate “with extreme prejudice” renegade Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (practically all the “Redux version only” cast members are in fact French – cf. “Full Cast and Crew for Apocalypse Now [1979],” Internet Movie Database). While having dinner with the plantation family, Captain Willard is harangued by the owners, who maintain that Americans like him should know better about attempting to colonize Vietnam (which they describe somewhat enigmatically as “the biggest nothing in history”) after the French had suffered their loss of the colony. Later he retires to the parlor for a tryst with the heiress, who tells him ominously, “The war will still be here tomorrow” (“Memorable Quotes from Apocalypse Now [1979],” Internet Movie Database).

The second event appears to fulfill the heiress’s prediction, this time from a different aspect of French colonial experience. After France withdrew from Indochina in 1954, it had to contend with an even fiercer struggle for independence from the Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front) of Algeria, then as now a highly politicized Islamic population; among the FLN’s luminaries during that moment was revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon. All accounts of the Algerian–French conflict acknowledge that it was far more ferocious and debilitating, especially for the French, than the Indochine experience; the filmic account of the war, Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers, remains a more unqualified achievement than Indochine, with one critical assessment describing it as “a great incendiary epic [...about an] event that triggered a seismic wave of anti-colonial movements across the Third World, serving [...] as a more practical lesson in the violent means deemed necessary to win” (Matthews 6).

One would be merely echoing widespread conventional opinion in pointing out how the US, in messing around with a number of Islamic peoples, has once again failed to learn, or more likely, opted to ignore, the French example. And where Algeria had proved to be more traumatic for France than Vietnam had been, one can only look back and anticipate with further dread what consequences await the US’s ongoing military adventures.

---

unbalanced individual who would also attempt to assassinate an American President. Francis Ford Coppola was not a newcomer to the Cannes Film Festival either – his film The Conversation had earlier also won the Grand Prix.

249 In the Independent Weekly, film critic Godfrey Cheshire states that “What these colonial holdouts seem to be saying is that Americans will lose the war because they don’t have the strong, gut-level reasons for holding onto Vietnam that they, the French, still feel.” The logical uncertainty of this reading stems from its implication that any colonizing country with “gut-level” attachment to its colony will succeed in “holding onto” its territory, contrasted with the historical reality that, at this point in Apocalypse Now Redux’s narrative, the French had already actually lost the war that the Americans were then striving to win. In any case, even if we grant, as Cheshire argues, that this had been right-wing scriptwriter John Milius’s intended slant all along, the precedence of Indochine’s impact – of the French criticizing the US’s role in Vietnam by referring to their own experience as precursor – remains.
Works Cited


The Author

Joel David is an Associate Professor (on leave) at the University of the Philippines, where he was the country’s first baccalaureate graduate in film. After completing his Ph.D. and M.A. (as Fulbright full scholar) in Cinema Studies at New York University, he was appointed founding Director of the UP Film Institute, where he helped implement the country’s first M.A. Film program. His book publications include *The National Pastime, Wages of Cinema*, and *Fields of Vision*, which won the Manila Critics Circle’s National Book Award. He has also produced prize-winning short films and short fiction. Currently he is an exchange teacher at Hallym University in Korea.
The Carnal Hand and Fetishism in Wong Kar-wai’s The Hand

Nicholas Y.B. Wong
The University of Hong Kong
ACF Travel Grant Best Graduate Student Paper (co-winner)

Abstract

My paper presentation will look into two specific representations of the human hand in Wong Kar-wai’s latest production, The Hand (2004). The character Snowball in George Orwell’s Animal Farm says that “[the] distinguishing mark of man is the hand, the instrument with which he does all his mischief.” This interestingly mischievous hand in Wong’s short film induces sexual desire and fulfills sexual pleasure. The portrayal of this particular body part as both a mischievous and a carnal tool initiates a detailed discussion on the relationships among the hand, the skin, and the touch, with insightful propositions put forward by Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. In this section, I will also bring up my observation on the differences between the male and female hands in the short film. Zhang (a tailor) uses his hands to make cheongsam for his clients, one of whom is Ms. Hua (a call girl). His hands derive eroticism to relieve his repressed sexual desire towards the woman not only by producing fine cheongsam especially for her, but also by being a tool of measurement of her body figure. On the contrary, as a call girl, Ms. Hua primarily uses her hands to seduce the opposite sex. In a way, her hands are blunter and more aggressive in providing and re-inviting sexual desires. The second part of my presentation will take off from the carnal hand and move to various observable fetishes – the gloves, the cheongsam and ultimately the hand itself. I will argue that the black gloves (which appear in only one short scene) are a symbol of nostalgia, which stands for the irretrievable romance between Chow Mo-wan and So Lai-chen, all the way back to In the Mood for Love (2000) and 2046 (2004). The cheongsam can also be a fetish in the sense that it forms a second skin of the wearer thanks to its tight and revealing cutting. Finally, by using Freud’s idea from his 1927 essay “Fetishism,” I am going to suggest that the hand could be considered a substitute of the male penis in the short film.
The Carnal Hand

The Hand Is All about Touch

*The Hand* was made in the middle of the shooting of *2046*. Thanks to the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong and other Asian countries, the project of *2046* was temporarily suspended. Wong states that he originally planned to shoot *The Hand* in Shanghai and the background should be the 30s. His plan, however, was altered because of the epidemic. Finally, it was shot in Hong Kong and the background was changed to the 1960s. There is only one hint that the movie is set in Hong Kong. A weather report can be heard off screen announcing a typhoon is approaching the territory and typhoon signal one has been hoisted. Even though the SARS epidemic seems to have brought so much inconvenience to the production of *2046* and *The Hand*, it indeed shapes the theme of the short film, which is all about touches and the inhibition against touching each other.

During the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong, the health authorities kept advising Hong Kong people to wear a mask and to wash hands as often as possible with disinfectant liquid. It would be best if we could avoid any physical contact with any foreign objects. This inspires the director to make a short film on touching. The opening of the short film already addresses directly the issue of the epidemic. It starts with a scene when Ms. Hua (Gong Li) is heavily infected with tuberculosis and she is visited by her tailor Zhang (Cheng Chen). She asks Zhang not to visit her anymore because the disease is contagious. The same scene is shown again near the end of the film. How she contracts such a deadly disease is not told clearly; however, I would speculate that it is caused by her numerous nights waiting for the customers at the waterfront. This marks a breakthrough in Wong’s films as almost all of his films in the past are thematically about alienation between individuals and the ineffectiveness of their mutual communication. The romances appear and die out simply naturally. It is therefore interesting to notice that *The Hand* is his first movie in which the physical death of a protagonist ends a romantic relationship.¹

**The Desire to Touch and Pleasure in Being Touched**

Reay (2002: 133) writes that “the touching of hands [is] a means of revealing character. The ‘soul’ [is] declared in the hand as well as in the face.” Unfortunately, such a character is getting lost in (post)modernity. The alienation between individuals makes touching such a rare treasure that everybody longs for:

¹ Strictly speaking, the other film that involves the notion of death to terminate a romantic relationship should be *Happy Together* (1997), in which Lai Yiu-fai (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) commits suicide by cutting himself at the throat with a blade in his run-down apartment in Argentina. Yet, this scene was cut finally from the version shown in the cinemas. One can refer to the numerous deleted scenes of *Happy Together* in *Buenos Aires Zero Degree* (1999) directed by Kwan Pun-leung and Lee Amos, which is a post-production record of *Happy Together*. 
The endless appeal to the sense of touch one finds in contemporary visual imagery, unaccompanied as it is by actual tactile gratification, may have helped make touch the hungriest sense of postmodernity. The inability to touch the subject matter of the images that surround us, even though these have a tremendous impact on our lives, produces a sense of alienation, the feeling of being out of touch with one’s society, one’s environment and one’s cosmos – an isolated fragment in an indifferent universe. (Classen, 2005: 2)

Since the touch has become so cherished, the desire for it also changes to be more urging and the pleasure, if fulfilled, would be more satisfying. As Montagu argues, a person “can spend his life blind and deaf and completely lacking the senses of smell and taste, but he cannot survive at all without the functions performed by the skin” (quoted from Tuan, 2005: 74). One use of the skin and the hand is to strive for desire and pleasure on touching and being touched:

The greatest happiness that love can give is the first hand-pressure of the woman one loves. (Stendhal, 1822: 105)

One day, while jointly correcting a piece of work, [my colleague] touched my hand. This produced a sweet and pure sensation of thrill through the whole system. I said nothing, in fact, was too thrilled for speech; and never to this day have shown any responsive action, but...I have experienced the most pleasurable emotions. (Ellis, 1905: 9)

---

2 Tuan is citing Ashley Montagu’s Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin (New York: Harper & Harper, 1978) in which the sense of touch is positioned over other senses. Tallis and Napier also compare the touch and the sight. Tallis (2003: 37) writes that “the eye is richer in information: it is estimated that 90 per cent of the sensory information that reaches us comes from vision. The eye, however, is literally a transparent organ of cognition: it has no separate presence, except when it has been injured and in the minor events of gaze redirection and blinking. The eyes are not active, even less interactive, in the way the hand is; the gaze has no retroactive presence to itself, unlike the grope of the active – manipulative, exploratory – hand. Proprioception from the eye is largely unconscious and takes the form of reafferentation to counter any illusion of instability of the world that might come from the movement of the head and the eye. If the eye has come to be seen as the quintessential appurtenance of the subject, and the gaze has come to be seen as the subject’s archetypal power, this has, I shall argue, been established on the back of the subject-object divide opened up by the cognitive hand.”

Napier (1980: 8) also believes that the hand is superior to and more principal than the eye: “With the eye, the hand is our main source of contact with the physical environment. The hand has advantages over the eye because it can observe the environment by means of touch, and having observed it, it can immediately proceed to do something about it. The hand has other great advantages over the eye. It can see around corners and it can see in the dark.”

Benthien (2003: 195) also records a similar thought in George Berkeley’s An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision (1709), which asserts that “[the] eye itself is capable only of detecting surfaces and colors; three-dimensionality and corporeality, on the other hand, can only be experienced through touch.... It is only the sense of touch that teaches the eyes ‘to see... outside themselves.’”
On his first visit to Ms. Hua, Zhang is both seduced and intimidated by the
masturbation, which brings him an ultimate amount of pleasure, as experienced by
Stendhal. Also, Zhang becomes speechless and timid like a dog inside Ms. Hua’s
bedroom, proving Ellis’s reaction that a sensational touch surpasses the power of speech.
The verbal language is too thrilled to be expressed; instead, the intimacy and desire
triggered by the carnal hand could only be felt by the hungry skin. The masturbation not
only marks the first encounter with the erotic female hand, but also defines the hand as
motioned and sexually inquisitive in nature. As Tuan (2005: 75) remarks, the hand is
“restless; indeed, it is tempting of [it] as curious.”

Reay (2002: 133) states that “[hands are] a badge of occupation and class.” Ms.
Hua’s hands help her make a living by pleasing her clients sexually. She is deeply
obsessed with them, which can be proved by a scene that she always holds the receiver
up high and exposes them in front of the camera.³ There is a courtship scene between
her and Mr. Zhao (her client) that takes place in her bedroom. The camera remains on
the waist level of both characters. Their faces cannot be seen, but audience can see very
clearly how their hands touch each other’s clothed bodies, suggesting that the hand is
the true central character in the film.

_The Hand_ is adapted from a short story named _Twilight of a Ballroom Dancer_,
written by the Shanghai-ese writer, Shi Zhe-cun.⁴ The short story pays a lot of attention
to the hands of the ‘ballroom dancer’ (wu nu, meaning a call girl) named Su Wan. Her
hands are usually represented as an authority to tame her pet:

> Although Su Wan’s hand is massaging her timid pet, her eyes stared with guilt at
the newly replaced bed sheets. They were so white. Purity took over evilness.

> At that time, Mou Sha [her pet] was squatting next to the cushions. Su Wan
extended her hand and touched its soft hair. It was flattered and as usual, it made
some sounds of comfort. It even raised its head and licked its owner’s fingers
hungrily with its little red tongue. [My translation]

One interesting point about the presentation of hand in the short film is that the
female hand is always represented in its singular form while the male’s is in plurality.
Ms. Hua masturbates Zhang and holds the receiver with one hand. Her lust, pride and
beauty all hide, yet remain restless, in one single hand. The singularity points out the
passion she devotes to Zhang cannot meet the demand exerted by the plurality of the
male’s.

---
³ The scenes in which Ms. Hua exhibits her hand by holding the receiver are actually what make the short
film similar to the original story. In the original short story named _Twilight of the Ballroom Dancer_ by Shi Zhe-cun,
the call girl talked on the phone for four times. The four phone calls are vaguely included in the short film. What
Wong Kar-wai has done is to portray the life of Ms. Hua before and after those four phone calls through adaptation.
⁴ The short story is printed in Chinese in _INK Literary Monthly_, issue no. 20, April 2005, pp. 46-55.
For Zhang, his two hands are for the creation of art – making cheongsam. The seductive art of cheongsam lies in the demand that it clothes the body but to reveal the eroticism of the wearer obscurely. As a result, Zhang is literally tailor-making the cheongsam that touches Ms. Hua’s body in the way that she wants her body to be touched. The tightness of cheongsam is very challenging to women because they have to make sure their bodies do not get slightly out of shape. If any part of their bodies becomes bigger or smaller, the aestheticism and eroticism of cheongsam will be destroyed because it is worn as one whole piece. Critics of Wong Kar-wai also express their views on the use of cheongsam in his films. Teo (2005: 123) argues it “denotes…that the evil in So Lai-chen is external; it stems from the husband’s betrayal and his affair,” while Brunette (2005: 106) regards it as a temporal marker: “we often find out we’re in a different day solely by virtue of the fact that [Bai Ling] is wearing a different cheongsam.” Either way, the core of such erotic clothing still has not been addressed. A cheongsam half reveals and obscures the shape of a female body and forms an outer skin, or I shall say it is almost the wearer’s skin. Whitman calls the skin ‘a form complete’ – in this way, the cheongsam would be a completed form covering but also disclosing another form of complete. It is precisely this spirit that enthrones it an erotic label, which allows it to become one of the fetishes in the short film (see the next section of this article).

The hand can be carnal and mischievous by taking its prestigious function of being able to touch and to be touched. Snowball in Orwell’s Animal Farm proclaims: “The distinguishing mark of man is the hand, the instrument with which he does all his mischief” (quoted from Sims, 2003: 149). Mischief always brings along pleasure, which is “[one] side effect of hand’s survival-related sensitivity” (ibid., 152). When two hands touch on each other, the sensations induced are extreme. It is either eroticism and pleasure, or intimidation and shock. Edmund White indicates in his Proust biography that handshaking could reveal the French writer’s sexuality. Proust rejects to shake hands in a firm manner for fear that “people would take [him] for an invert” (ibid., 154). In spite of this, the hand, through the touch, is an organ of sensation that gives us

---

5 Benthien (2003: 24) historicizes the representation of the human skin as clothes in the Bible. She points out that the use of such metaphors grounds on the postulation that the skin could be put on and off, like clothes, when dirty to be cleaned: “Central to the clothing metaphor is the process of putting on and taking off the bodily garment. Biblical language, for instance, has the expressions ‘to put on flesh’ and ‘to put on a body’ but also ‘to put on the human being,’ which describes the assumption of human form or, as in the last phrase, a change of attitude…The body garment, as the garment of the soul given by God, must remain unstained; should it become soiled, it must be cleansed by penance (col. 978).”

6 The intention that a handshake can possibly reveal one’s sexuality can also be evident by Wilde. Reay (2002: 137) writes that “[one] of the markers of his degeneracy, interestingly enough, [is] the largeness of his nose” and “his limp hands.” Reay also records what Frank Harris says about shaking hands with Wilde: “He shook hands in a limp way I disliked; his hands were flabby, greasy.” Correlating the limpness of one’s hand to that of the penis, a handshake with no masculine power could be considered as a sign of effeminacy, and therefore, possible homosexuality. Reay’s book also have interesting passages on the role of hands in Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray and Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, in which this unique body part (becoming “the homosexual hand” [139]) is
pleasure differently from other means. The hand replies on the apparatus of reciprocity to operate:

The touching itself has a clear location on the body: when I palpate an object, the palpation is clearly touched on my fingers. The location of, say, seeing in my eyes is only inferential and indirect and depends upon the discovery that if I love my head or close my eyes, my visual experience changes. Touching breeds touches in the toucher: the touch of the touched. And being touched, which is located in a part of one’s body, draws attention, awareness, to that part of the body. To touch someone is to make them be a touchee and a toucher whose touches focus them on the touched place. (Tallis, 2003: 141)

Although Heidegger has founded amusing philosophy on the hand, there seems to be a blind spot of the carnal hand that induces desire: “nothing is ever said of the caress or of desire” (Derrida, 1987: 182).

Tallis could supplement the inattention:

[the] caress localizes, or aims to localize, the other’s self in the part of the body that is touched and thereby endeavours to take hold of the other’s self. The caress that delights in the texture of the other’s body does so because in so doing, it enjoys the other’s enjoyment of her body, and hence of the caress which signifies that he or she is present (or consent to be present) at the point where the caresser touches and is touched. (Tallis, 2003: 142)

To define the existence of one’s body through caressing another’s body originates from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943), in which the idea concerning the co-existence of touching and being touched can be observed:

it is my body as flesh which causes the Other’s flesh to be born. The caress is designed to cause the Other’s body to be born, through pleasure, for the Other – and for myself – as a touched passivity in such a way that my body is made flesh in order to touch the Other’s body with its own passivity. (Sartre, 1943: 507, emphasis of the text)

Desire, in Sartre’s words, is “not only the revelation of the Other’s body but the revelation of my own body” because consciousness “attempts to subordinate itself to its own contingency – as it apprehends another body… as desirable” (Sartre, 1943: 505). Sartre views desire as the reduction to one’s own body:

Desire is not only the desire of the Other’s body; it is – within the unity of a single act – the non-thetically loved project of being swallowed up in the body. Thus the final state of sexual desire can be swooning as the final stage of consent to the

---

described as a signifier of “aberrant sexuality” and “sexual ambivalence” respectively (136-37).

7 I am referring to Derrida’s essay “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand.”
body. It is in this sense that desire can be called the desire of one body for another body... The being which desires is consciousness making itself body. (ibid., emphasis of the text)

In other words, the hand that desires is also a hand conscious of making itself a hand, in addition to the fact that both active and passive sensations would take place upon caressing. Such desire has become “the desire to appropriate a body as this appropriation reveals to me my body as flesh” (ibid., 506). One example of this appropriation would be the caress. Deustcher (2005: 103) points out “[the] meeting of two desiring bodies is theorized as a complicated game of entrapment,” meaning the touch is more than simply a physical contact. To use Sartre’s words, it is “not a simple stroking; it is a shaping” (Sartre, 1943: 506, emphasis of the text).

Sartre (1943: 507) furthers to write beautifully that “[desire] is expressed by the caress as thought is by language.” Both characters in the film caress each other’s body through the ‘hand language’. Zhang derives the eroticism by measuring Ms. Hua’s body and he does it twice. The first time is using pins to locate areas of the cheongsam that need to be tightened. In the second time, we can finally see the mutual touches of Zhang and Ms. Hua. It happens when Ms. Hua is abandoned before her marriage. She then moves into a run-down room in Palace Hotel. Not having seen each other for a while, Zhang uses his own hands to measure her body size. Before this scene, mutual touches have never happened.

Ms. Hua uses her own hand to masturbate him on their first encounter. Later, there is another scene when both of them are sitting at a table and Ms. Hua wants to thank the loyal tailor for his dedication. She stands up and moves away from her seat and heads towards the shelf to get some glasses and a bottle of wine. On her way, she slides her hand on the left shoulder of Zhang, followed immediately by a close-up shot of Zhang, full of surprise and bewilderment. The touches in these two scenes are both seductive and communicative. They reveal the repressed feelings that are unable to be expressed by words. In these scenes, the hands (both the male’s and female’s) being a non-sexual zone, are where the sexual pleasures, anticipation and eroticism can be found. The film desexualizes the human bodies but sexualizes the hand, which, according to Reay (2002: 135), has become a sexual object since the late twentieth century. The displacement and replacement of sexual desires and eroticism from the erogenous zones to a pair of hands makes the male’s and female’s hands a fetish.

**The Fetishized Hand**

---

8 It is observed that the hand was a unit of measurement in some ancient cultures, “including among the Greeks, Egyptians, and Hebrews.” For example, “[during] the time of Henry VIII, a decree established the official width of the hand as four inches” (Sims, 2003: 155).
In *The Hand*, the opening masturbation scene invites us to regard the male’s hand as a substitute of a male penis. Zhang, is his early age as an apprentice (indicated by his lack of moustache), sits alone at a table in the dining room of Ms. Hua’s flat. The mourning derived from sexual intercourse can be heard. After her client has left, she calls upon Zhang and asks him to enter her bedroom. This is followed by a medium-shot of Zhang’s profile and audience can clearly observe that he is having an erection under his trousers. Ms. Hua queries the reason for his erection. She asks him to lower his hands, which are covering the embarrassing erection and to take off the trousers. She then asks him to give her his hand. As told, he extends his arm and she caresses it with her eroticized and delicate hand. The lowering of the male’s hand reveals antagonistically the erection. The way Ms. Hua touches his hand and forearm symbolically foreshadows of the whole masturbation scene that comes afterwards. This scene establishes the hand of the tailor as a fetish.

In “Fetishism” (1927: 357), Freud suggests that “the normal prototype of fetishes is a man’s penis, just as the normal prototype of inferior organs is a woman’s real small penis, the clitoris.” The hand is a fetish simply because it is a substitute of the penis, which is nominally present, but practically unattainable under different circumstances. There is a displacement of sexual attention and desire from the male genital to his hand.

The female’s hand also becomes a fetish as it replaces the vagina of Ms. Hua. In the short film, Zhang has never seen Ms. Hua naked. All he sees is a clothed woman’s body eroticized by the *cheongsam* and gloves that ultimately outline the figure of the wearer’s body. Bodily sexual intercourse is absent in *The Hand* and it is impossible to happen because Ms. Hua only goes for money instead of real passion. Her return to Zhang in the final scenes can be explained by the fact that his long time presence can confer on her a sense of dignity as a desirable woman. Her vagina is only opened to men with money. Therefore, it only exists in Zhang’s mind as an imaginary vagina that he can never get close to. Instead, the sexual desire is displaced onto her hand.

The hand is not the only form of fetish in the short film. Hobson (1998:111) states that “[fetishism], or the particular fetish, has to have its own counter-quality, the particular ‘truth,’ for which it has been substituted.” Then, one may ask, what is the

---

9 In Reay’s *Watching Hannah* (2002), the author discusses the collections of Arthur F. Munby, a poet, civil servant and a connoisseur of working women. According to Reay, Munby is fascinated “with the big-bodied working women whom he interviewed, befriended, sketched, photographed, catalogued and described in numerous diaries and journals” (8). Among all the body parts with which Munby was obsessed with, the hands of those women “were on of [his] special fetishes” (127). Not only this, the hands in Munby’s collection feature “slipping masculinity” (132), by which Reay means the size of one’s hand cannot be used to judge one’s gender since those women possess hands “twice as large and strong.” He wrote the following diary entry: “… it was the hand of a slight girl to that of a big man of low class: only hers was the man’s. absurd contrast! I, a bearded man of more than average height & bulk; she, a woman, still young, and scarcely so tall as my shoulder: and yet, without hyperbole or self-flattery, my hand was white and small and frail-looking as a lady’s beside that thick and clumsy mass” (ibid., emphasis of the text). The reason why a man’s hand could be more fragile and delicate than a woman’s is that, observed by Reay, “the hand [is] particularly important as an indicator of class and refinement” (133).
counter-quality of the hand at this point? If Zhang’s hands are to make cheongsam for women, then the counter-quality of his hands (as a maker) will be the clothes (as a made product). If hands are to be considered part of a body, which means they can be clothed as well, then the counter-quality of them (as the inside) should be the pair of black gloves (as the outside) that Zhang puts into a brownish paper bag on his last delivery visit to Ms. Hua. The sexiness of the gloves lies in the warmth that is trapped in the interiority. Tallis (2003: 127-28) examines the amazing relationship between gloves and the human hand:

The hand warms itself by enclosure in gloves which capture its own heat and feed it back to it. Clothes in general and gloves in particular remind us of our extraordinary relationship to our own body, whereby we see it as an object that has to be tended, not only episodically, as in feeling or grooming, but continuously to ward off potential as well as actual hazards, as in protective, clothing and shelter.

He also points out that the warmth is, as a matter of fact, interactively produced between the hand and the fiber: “the hand warms the glove so that the glove can warm the hand” (Tallis, 2003: 128). In this sense, the reason why the same black glove worn by Black Spider (a.k.a. So Lai-chen) in 2046 becomes a fetish may go beyond the fiber itself. It is the heat released by the numerous So Lai-chens that makes the glove more intimate, personal and therefore erotic. It is reasonable to argue that it would be the residual traces of the female heat that both Chow and Zhang are hungry for. Of course, the fact that gloves have been a prevalent fetishized item should not be ignored. As noted by Steele (1996: 133), the glove has become a symbol of eroticism because of a several reasons. First, quoting Philippe Perrot, the gloves “[cover] the organs of touch...[and therefore] emphasize sexual insinuations by simultaneously reining in and stimulating desire.” Second, in the nineteenth century, it was improper and immoral to “touch a lady’s bare hand.” Hence, the repression of direct intimacy has in return strengthened the erotic nature of gloves as the barrier. Third, in the Middle Ages, scented gloves were sometimes used to refer to the female genitals, some of which were even “exchanged between lovers, much as engagement rings are today” (ibid.). Gloved hands, in short, have become “a symbol of power much as a booted foot,” bearing a certain “erotic charge” (ibid.).

The gloved hand(s) is/are the inside one(s). Nonetheless, such an insider can also turn into an outsider. In the first masturbation scene, before Ms. Hua touches Zhang’s penis, she slides her hand between his legs to reach his buttocks. This symbolic movement departs from the inside and extends to the outside. The camera shoots the scene from his behind and we can see how her hand marks the sexual difference on the sexless buttocks.

---

10 Steele is referring to the book written by Edward Podolsky and Carlson Wade called Erotic Symbolism: A Study of Fetishism in Relation to Sex (1960), New York: Epic. p. 117.
The last observable fetish I want to discuss here is the cheongsam. The eroticism of this traditional Chinese style of clothing, as I have argued before, remains in its cutting that it reveals the slender body line of the wearer, almost forming a second layer of artificial skin. Interestingly, there is a scene of orgasm reached simply based on the interaction between two fetishes, that is his hand and Ms. Hua’s cheongsam. In this scene, Zhang slides his hand into the dress half way up. Then, there is a slow motion on the action to represent the emotional sublimation. His hand fondles inside the dress and touches and feels the texture, as if he was feeling her skin and body heat and looking for her body, which is neither present nor absent, visible nor invisible. A tailor’s job is to make a perfect and seamless dress for women. A perfect cheongsam, once it is worn and buttoned, the only gaps that exist should be the openings for the head and the legs. Hanif Kureishi writes an interesting quote about desire and gap in his novella The Body. He says:

Desire can find the smallest gap, and it is hell to live in close proximity to and enforced celibacy with someone you want and with whom contact, when it occurs, is of an intimacy that one has always been addicted to. (Kureishi, 2002:48)

This quote best fits Zhang’s situation. What he has with Ms. Hua is only the nostalgic intimacy and the cheongsam, as a fetish, somehow projects the woman’s body shape. Her body is not physically present, yet her bodyline is. The absence is what he cannot see while the texture of the clothing could be felt and allow him to imagine her presence. Putting his hand and forearm from the bottom of the dress makes a highly erotic and fetishistic scene in the way that he is trying to fill the gap with his desire, which is similar to the way a penis is trying to filling a hole in the mouth, vagina and anus in different sexual modes. In other words, the tailor is faking a “fetishistic” orgasm.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue the female hand is the hand in the film seeing that it consolidates the foundation of sexual desire slowly and romantically built up between the two characters. The hand is carnal and mischievous in nature. It induces desire and eroticism upon caressing both the sexual and non-sexual regions on the body of the other. In this regard, the dialogues of the male and female hands could be regarded as a

11 Steele (1996: 57-90) discusses the fetishism of corsets, which have been “praised for [their] erotic appeal” (57). She furthers to suggest that “[the] corset, like the shoe, [is] one of the first items of clothing to be treated as a fetish, and it remains one of the most important fetish fashions” (58). The erotic nature of the corset stems from many areas. To name a few, it is the tight binding (like the shoe-binding culture in ancient China) of the wearer’s waist and the connotation of discipline and punishment (as in S&M corsets) that make this piece of clothing erotic and fetishistic. Though I believe the notion of punishment might be missing in the culture of cheongsam, I find the idea of discipline and its nature of being so tight to expose the bodyline very similar to the purpose and cultural background of the corset. This similarity could back up my perspective of regarding the cheongsam as a fetish.
tango about the desire and pleasure of the characters to touch and be touched at the same time. The impossibility to reveal the female’s erogenous zones channeled the male’s desire towards fetishism. When her hand and body are unavailable, the craving lingers within the glove and the cheongsam. In Wong Kar-wai’s *The Hand*, the mouths do not speak; the hands do the speeches in the language of caressing. Love could not be guaranteed, but lust fills almost every single frame. The characters do not forget each other because their hands remember it all.

**Works Cited**


Nicholas Y.B. Wong is currently an M.Phil. candidate supervised by film scholar Gina Marchetti in the Department of Comparative Literature, School of Humanities in The University of Hong Kong. His thesis focuses on body parts in relation to desire and fetishism. The texts are chosen from different cultures and periods, including Wong Kar-wai, the Pang Brothers, Georges Bataille, Nikolai Gogol, Hanif Kureishi, Will Self, and Huraki Murakami. Besides academic papers, Wong has also published poetry in Yuan Yang (HKU, 2001), Moving Poetry (HKU Press, 2001), Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity (HKU Press, 2002), Fe/male Bodies (Kubrick, HK, 2006) and Karawane (University of Minnesota, expected 2007). In his two-year candidature, Wong has also spoken in the 27th Annual Meeting of the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Popular Culture at Albuquerque, New Mexico (February 2006) and The Film Scene: Cinema Arts and Social Change conference at HKU (April 2006) on Wong Kar-wai and Johnnie To respectively.
Articulating Alienation:  
3-Iron, Gender, and (Post)modernity

Ho Ka Hang Jason  
The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Korea – a rapidly developed country with an equally vibrant and breathtaking filmmaking industry. Among its outstanding directors, Kim Ki-duk stands out as a groundbreaking and philosophical one, depicting the solitary city lives of many. His interest in the theme of alienation makes him special and unique in the context of Korean cinema, especially in contrast to some of the tear-shedding and melodramatic motion pictures and soap operas. Kim is fond of using the camera lens to portray the tensions between different genders and sexualities under a (post)modern scenario. This paper will first investigate this interesting bracket: the world Kim presents is seemingly a modern, city-like, realistic one, yet simultaneously the time and space in his works are very often dubious and surrealistic – and this is the part that postmodernism visits. 3-Iron (2004), in particular, is an excellent piece to demonstrate this dilemma of the tug-of-war not only between modernity and postmodernity, but also the intriguing relationships between the two sexes in question. The New Korean Cinema has been characterized by its rather explicit and outrageous manifestations of sexual intercourse and taboo, gender-related issues. Kim’s 3-Iron, on the other hand, does not rely so much on the depiction of the erotic realm; rather, the muted male and female protagonists provide a brand-new angle to decipher the lonesome city, the solitary urban life, and the alienations surrounding a (post)modern metropolis. The muteness in question can even further trigger discussions and debates concerning feminist and psychoanalytic theories that the silent woman is always to be dominated by the man – in Kim’s “sensational playground” (the literal meaning of the Chinese title of 3-Iron) where human touch is vital, that is certainly not the case. Drawing on the famous cultural critic Raymond Williams’ “The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism” and a range of Korean cinema scholars, this paper will look at how Kim Ki-duk, 3-Iron, and many of his works exhibit modernity, in Jürgen Habermas’ words, as an “incomplete project,” as well as the way sexuality and gender relations play alternative roles in contemporary Korean cinema. I shall conclude that it might be unwise to maintain a clear-cut line between modern/postmodern films, and argue that the subject matter of alienation can actually be a vehicle traveling between modernity and postmodernity to rendezvous with their interconnections.
Throughout modern history, there has always been a thirst to represent, articulate, and manifest what modernity is in our contemporary society; and on top of this search, some may even argue that there is such a need to rearticulate modernity as postmodernity in view of the many incongruent and inexplicable phenomena going on around us. Whereas we have traditional paintings, writings, sculptures etc. being regarded as modern art, we also have technologized art forms like the cyborgs in digital culture, and cyber networks indeed provide a huge arena for new and alternative forms of art. And when we come to the understanding of cyber culture and its relation to the postmodern era, it can be comprehended that there are indeed a lot of new forms and alternative languages to speak of modernity. Among all, cinema should serve as the prominent one. It is usually hard to distinguish between modern and postmodern films, even given filmmakers like Lars von Trier, David Lynch or even Wong Kar-Wai who might be considered as postmodern directors. The aim of this paper, therefore, is not to ponder about the split in modern/postmodern cinema, but to see how cinema, Korean cinema in particular, is able to translate the many faces of (post)modernity onto the cinematic screen by means of the subject matter of alienation vis-à-vis gender relations. 

Korean cinema, sometimes addressed as the New Korean Cinema, is actually very comparable to many cinema movements worldwide. It is concerned about social reality, and very often a lot of extreme visual images and social issues are employed. In the context of Asia, it makes a lot of sense to see the resemblance among Korean New cinema and her neighborhoods, including that of Japanese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong, in which the new cinematic forms of these places feature explicit uses of outrageous images and subject matters that have rarely been touched on by previous filmmakers. Korea as a small nation produces cinema of a small nationhood, and this would call for attention the case of Denmark, Danish cinema and the Dogme 95 movement. Mette Hjort notes that as a small nation, the Danish has a vision to combat against mainstream Hollywood cinema so as to survive in the global film industry, and this is one of the reasons why the Dogme 95 movement emerged and materialized. I am mentioning this because, for instance, the many uses of handheld camera in contemporary Korean cinema remind me of the possible dialogues between these two so-called minor cinemas. We have been observing a trend from Asianization to Americanization (where the local colors of regional cinema give way to consumerism and are vanishing), and then from Americanization to globalization in which films are now said to be one of the vehicles to travel across national boundaries. 

In other words, I am putting these two entities together in this paper, namely (Korean) cinema and globalization-driven alienation. Globalism, as a matter of fact, is already a very alienated concept. The global village, congested with peoples of all sorts, is lonesome and full of despair; it also echoes with the many scenarios in the cyber world, online chatrooms for instance, where a lot of people gather together without knowing one another. This exactly captures Ackbar Abbas’ notion of “proximity without reciprocity” (51), and the lack of intimacy as a source of alienation will be one of the central arguments here. Within the many cinematic works in Korean cinema in the last
decade, I find Kim Ki-duk a very outstanding example in manipulating the above as such, and of course, with the injection of gender relations under the influence of (post)modernity.

I observe that Kim has a tendency to borrow the city and its city dwellers to decipher the theme of alienation and solitude. He takes loneliness not at all in a negative manner but displays isolation neutrally or sometimes even positively, that solitude is not necessarily something heartbreaking. This serves as a contrast to some of the tear-shedding melodramas that many Korean televisions produce. Although the element of the metropolis is important in Kim’s films, some of the settings of his works are rural ones, though the essence of alienation can still be captured – like the case of The Bow (2005) which takes place in the middle of the sea. An example from Hong Kong cinema that I see much relevance is gay director Stanley Kwan’s The Island Tales (1999), in which the plot takes place on a remote island but the core of the film is about alienated figures exiled out of the city. So, whether alienation is a modern city phenomenon is indeed debatable. Back to Kim, he has several interests that associate him with gender and alienation.

Julian Stringer, a film scholar interested in the studies of Korean cinema, notes, “Film historians and movie-goers alike remain fatally ignorant of the North Korean cinema for one perfectly good reason – it has yet to emerge on to the world stage” (3). The cinema of North Korea may be serving us propagandistic, ideological and political tools, and audiences outside the context of Korea have lesser chance to rendezvous North Korean cinema. Thanks to Kim, however, who is absorbed in some of those issues central to the conflicts, tensions yet close relationships between the Southern and Northern boundaries, and how individuals are alienated from one another in terms of the national discourse. This point is then related to the subject matter of diaspora as well, in which people are very often rooted out from their original belonging place that results in lonesomeness. Sexual indulgence is also prominent in Kim’s texts, but I would argue later on that gender and sexuality issues are presented rather differently by Kim to manipulate not merely promiscuousness but precisely alienation in the (post)modern city. His latest film, Time (2006), has posted a captivating dimension on timelessness. It is about plastic surgery and how looks are unreliable, that one is distanced from his/her pervious, perhaps younger look. To me, this brand new piece suggests a rather philosophical perspective in seeing alienation not only spatially as mentioned above, but also temporally – as the film title hints. What’s more, Kim Ki-duk is able to transmit terror and discomfort beyond already extreme and outrageous visual images, and this offers ample room for imagination – and it is this imaginative space that serves as the source of shock that is predominant in many of his works. For example, the violence and brutality employed by his protagonists are symbolic, in the sense that sadomasochist relationships imply much more than pure cruelty or so-called aesthetics of violence held by Quentin Tarantino or Hong Kong filmmaker Johnnie To.
One last point to note concerning New Korean Cinema before we go into Kim’s piece is this characteristic suggested by Isolde Standish, “One of the most striking characteristics of the Korean cinema toward the end of the 1980s was its increasing concern with contemporary social issues and its commitment to realism” (77). For Kim, nevertheless, he expresses the social realism and estrangement in question by way of surrealist representations, say, a setting that one may not experience and encounter in real-life situations. This narrative distance deliberately created on screen can already be taken as a channel to transmit the alienated atmosphere under consideration to audiences.

In the following sections, I am going to discuss Kim’s 3-Iron (2004) in connection to renowned cultural critic Raymond Williams’ “The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism” and see the traces of modernity, gender and alienation in the film. Williams notes, “[...] the people in the crowded street are unknown to the observer,” and that there is an “interpretation of strangeness as ‘mystery’” (86) – using this viewpoint, we can already discover that the male protagonist can be read as a detached and indifferent observer who does not belong to the crowd, but at the same time someone who tries to invade his individuality into others’ private sphere. One thing very central to the many Korean texts consisting bits and pieces of alienation is the male intrusion of a domain, very often a female domain. This can simply be sexual intercourses between heterosexual couples in the physical realm, or neighborhood in the metaphorical sense. A very intriguing example would be Cho Chang-ho’s debut The Peter Pan Formula (2005) in which peculiar eroticisms occur between a male adolescent and a housewife living next to him, and it is revealed later on that the two of them are both forlorn figures trying to survive amidst of their solitudes in the city. These protagonists echo with Williams’ notion that each of them is “an individual lonely and isolated within the crowd [...] in the newly expanding and overcrowded modern city” (86) – and I have to add that these figures are not essentially gendered. In other words, the alienation being discussed, at least through the camera lens of Kim Ki-duk, can be regardless of the solitudes created via gender and sexual mismatches and disparities. Instead, it is the city, the metropolis, and the (post)modern condition that results in the alienation and solitude many of them experience.

Williams furthermore describes the city as an impenetrable one, which is teeming and maze-like. Kim’s 3-Iron serves as an alternative response to such claim. The irony is that while the city is seemingly and supposedly closed and self-contained, it is the male protagonist who intrudes and breaks into these households, as if a “new figure of the urban detective” (88). From the standpoint of the female protagonist, the director of the film once made this claim:

We are all empty houses
Waiting for someone
To open the lock and set us free.
One day, my wish comes true.
A man arrives like a ghost
And takes me away from my confinement.
And I follow, without doubts, without reserve,
Until I find my new destiny

("3-Iron: Sony Pictures Classics")

And the male protagonist, in the form of an uncanny yet tender urban detective, opens the heart of the locked doors of the female protagonist; while their relationship is not eroticized in essence, their solitudes in the city are cured by one another. To recall what I mentioned earlier that Kim Ki-duk has his distinctiveness in depicting gender relations, the connection between the two of them is so different from the many clichéd and banal ones portrayed in many other motion pictures. And I particularly find the way the male protagonist being obsessed with fixing and repairing other people’s stuff at their homes astonishing—it is precisely the act of this behavior that highlights the (post)modern condition—metaphorically peoples’ hearts are wounded, and this angel coming from nowhere arrives and comes to mend them. That can then justify the apparently odd scene when the female protagonist sees him mending the clock, she observes and remains silent instead of being shocked by this intruder.

Talking about the muted woman, there are indeed a lot of feministic and psychoanalytic theories that regard the silence of women as signifiers of passiveness and submission to men. Take the frequently cited example from Laura Mulvey for instance. She argues that “man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman” (29)—the uniqueness of 3-Iron, however, lies on the very fact that both the male and female in the film are muted. This has already demonstrated how Kim the director skillfully manipulates gender relations out of standardized expectations. Alienation very often results from the lack of human and sensational touch, but in the world between the two protagonists, their kisses, eye contacts and touching are far more important than any verbal communication. This can also account for the Chinese title of the film, which literally means “sensational playground”—this is exactly the place where the two of them have entered into. In the postmodern era, many argue that language no longer plays an important role, and we have things like language games. Raymond Williams, on the other hand, has this observation, saying that language is

in many ways arbitrary and conventional [...] language was more evident as a medium—a medium that could be shaped and reshaped—than as a social custom. Even within a native language, the new relationships of the metropolis [...] forced certain productive kinds of strangeness and distance. (92)

We have a lot of cinematic texts employing the difficulties in communication to bring about alienation, and language barriers in exotic settings may “enhance” so, so to speak. Take for instance Sofia Coppola’s Lost in Translation (2003), in which the two Westerners bump into one another in the flamboyant Tokyo. In 3-Iron, in contrast,
silence leads to unison and harmony. The voicelessness can thus be interpreted as a response to the chaos of (post)modernity, which is a new form or an alienated language to represent alienations in the modern city. Silence itself has also become a language as an alienated form to manifest alienation, and this could actually be observed in many absurd dramas throughout the century. One theatrical play, albeit not an absurd one, can be reminded of when we see 3-Iron: Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. And the hysterical wife Nora is translated into this quiet, seemingly submissive female protagonist who is equally trapped in a big, showy but soulless house. Kim Ki-duk once claimed that he wanted to “make a film about a man who goes in and fills that emptiness with warmth” – and this has obviously materialized. With reference to this point, the film title 3-Iron is extremely telling. A 3-Iron is one of the clubs used in golf, yet one of that which is the least used. To put it in another way round, it is always left aside, and it serves as a very nuanced metaphor of the female protagonist, who is abandoned likewise. Yet, the significance of the film also rests on this particular abandonment that shapes her alienation from the metropolis outside as well as from a fruitful gender relation, which creates a positive and promising version of solitude when the male protagonist visits.

Given the surrealistic setting of 3-Iron (especially its second half), many may wonder and question whether it is a postmodern film, and whether Kim Ki-duk can be perceived as a postmodern filmmaker. To conclude, I would like to stress that these are certainly rather trivial questions; and, to borrow from Jürgen Habermas’ terminology, modernity is an “incomplete project.” In other words, the modern condition is still and will always be in progress, and the ongoing cultural innovations, including but not limited to films, will continue to thrive though not necessarily in a well-defined postmodern era. To analyze 3-Iron and Kim Ki-duk vis-à-vis Raymond Williams’ piece written a century ago as well as other critical essays makes a lot of sense, and this is precisely where the fun and excitement of not only Korean but world cinema lies under the impact of globalization. Meanwhile, gender and alienation, I believe, will maintain as imperatives to be tackled in various forms of representation and manifestation of (post)modernity.

Works Cited


**The Author**

Nicholas Y.B. Wong is currently an M.Phil. candidate supervised by film scholar Gina Marchetti in the Department of Comparative Literature, School of Humanities in The University of Hong Kong. His thesis focuses on body parts in relation to desire and fetishism. The texts are chosen from different cultures and periods, including Wong Kar-wai, the Pang Brothers, Georges Bataille, Nikolai Gogol, Hanif Kureishi, Will Self, and Huraki Murakami. Besides academic papers, Wong has also published poetry in *Yuan Yang* (HKU, 2001), *Moving Poetry* (HKU Press, 2001), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity* (HKU Press, 2002), *Fe/male Bodies* (Kubrick, HK, 2006) and *Karawane* (University of Minnesota, expected 2007). In his two-year candidature, Wong has also Ho Ka Hang Jason is currently a demonstrator in the Department of Comparative Literature (School of Humanities) at the University of Hong Kong. He obtained his M.Phil. degree in February 2006 and his thesis is a close study of Hong
Kong gay director Stanley Kwan’s films. He examines and compares Kwan’s films before and after his coming out and explores the queer filmmaking experience in question. Ho has published in *Fe/male Bodies* (Hong Kong, 2005), *Cinemaya* (India, 2006), and a book on Stanley Kwan’s films (Hong Kong, expected 2007). So far in 2006, he has spoken in two conferences on films and on gender equity education, at the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Institute of Education respectively spoken in the 27th Annual Meeting of the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Popular Culture at Albuquerque, New Mexico (February 2006) and The Film Scene: Cinema Arts and Social Change conference at HKU (April 2006) on Wong Kar-wai and Johnnie To respectively.
Session 5
IDENTITY CRISSES

“I Grew Up in a Colonial Environment”: 
A Study of Tsui Hark’s Early Films

Tan See Kam
University of Macau
ACF Travel Grant Best Faculty Paper (runner-up)

Abstract

This paper offers a study of Tsui Hark’s early films, from The Butterfly Murders (1979) to Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain (1984) within the context of new Hong Kong cinema, of which Tsui is a major progenitor. It positions them in relation to Third World filmmaking practices. This in part takes a cue from Third World cultural commentator Roy Armes, and also in part from Tsui’s professed interest in making films that document issues such as American imperialism, ethnic minorities and human rights from “a distinctive Third World perspective.” Or as he puts it, “I grew up in a colonial environment.” In short, the personal is the political. Tsui’s early films instantiate a filmmaker’s ability to co-opt and bend a Western-originated technology for local applications in highly instrumentalist ways. If they deliberate on what Armes has noted elsewhere as “the often shattering and always dislocating impact of Western [colonial] values and culture[s],” then they also concurrently, judiciously and eclectically enlist Chinese culturalism, Hong Kong localism and other “native” traditions as various points of counter. This has sparked the production of counterdiscourses that challenge the colonial on the one hand, and on the other, that of postcolonial sensibilities which point to a decolonized future. Finally this paper also shows that Tsui trains a critical eye on the nativist, the culturalist as well. In any case, and for Tsui, critical self-determinism seems most crucial.
Three men and a woman flee from a coastal village inhabited by cannibals, on a raft made of tree trunks and leafy branches. One is a secret agent, the other a thief, while the third is the woman’s younger brother. The woman is the mistress of Security Chief who ruled the village with an iron fist, and whom the secret agent kills just before taking off, during a fight. On the raft is a fourth man – he hides behind the leafy foliage. Like the woman and her younger brother, he is also from the village. Suddenly, he springs at the woman. The ensuing struggle causes her younger brother to fall off the raft. He can’t swim, so the thief jumps into the river to save him, forgetting momentarily that he too cannot swim. The fourth man then trips and falls to his death, impaled on the pointed branch which the woman happens to hold; his blood splatters on her. The secret agent quickly turns to the two drowning men. As he pulls them towards the raft, the woman thrusts the dead man’s still-pulsating heart at their face. Smiling somewhat gleefully, she says to the secret agent, “Look, it is the heart.” This gift of a human heart – which happens to be her favorite meal, and for her fellow-villagers in general, the most prized human part – as an expression of love closes Tsui Hark (Xu Ke)’s We’re Going to Eat You/Diyu Wumen (1980). It marks a most surreal moment, representing a culmination of the film’s unrelenting play with incredible juxtapositions, ridiculous behaviors, hallucinatory reality, delirious jumps, and other distortions of the recognizable that simultaneously make the familiar strange and the strange familiar – a play that adds to the film’s surrealism.

We’re Going to Eat You is Tsui’s second feature. It is less an exploitative film about human perversion per se than a sometimes comedic and sometimes striking parable about the “human-eat-human” world. It can also be read analogically as a forceful critique of the early 20th century “Chinese nation” – its heart of darkness, so to speak. Mired by an underdeveloped economy (in the modernist sense of the term), and populated by a people resigned to dictatorial governments and caught in internecine struggles, this “nation” was rendered even weaker by the combined processes of foreign invasion, colonial subjugation and western modernity. We’re Going to Eat You analogizes such a place, in more ways than one. Its tale about cannibals and cannibalism unfolds surrealistically in an unnamed coastal village somewhere between Hong Kong and Guangzhou, circa early 1900s. This village is economically undeveloped: the inhabitants have no visible means of production – no agriculture, no cottage industry, no trade, no market. They hunt outsiders for food – people who inadvertently stumble into the village, or as the film’s Chinese title suggests, the gateless hell. They do not kill their own, but would not hesitate to make meals out of unfortunate comrades who die in action. Security Chief, an agent of a certain Central Government, is not of the village; with the help of his small group of followers, he has managed to bully the villagers into submission. He wears military garb of sorts. He always demands the choicest cuts, including the human heart, while they – the followers included – do all the work, from hunting to chopping. Kept on the verge of perpetual hunger, they generally dance to his whims and fancies. They all resent the autocratic leader, but lack the will to dispose of him. The villagers are in turn superstitious and fatalistic, and given to frequent squabbles. This makes the “tribe” or “race” weak. They are thus at the mercy of external
forces – those which the secret agent (otherwise known as “999”), the unnamed thief and other outsiders, including Security Chief and his anonymous followers, variously personify. The villagers are ethnical Chinese, as are the outsiders. If the unequal power relation between the villagers and outsiders suggests intra-racial strife (Chinese fighting Chinese) and internal colonialism (Chinese from outside the village subjugating those inside the village), then the foreign-accented Cantonese which Security Chief speaks, together with the passing reference to colonial Hong Kong, would hint at the presence of foreign powers in the vicinity of the village.

Elaborating on these intricate relationships between colonialisms, ethnicities and nationhood is a major concern of my present study of Tsui Hark’s early films, or the first six films which Tsui made between 1979 and 1984, whilst a freelance director. This period coincides with the emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave, of which Tsui is a major progenitor; this wave precipitated the formation of the new Hong Kong cinema from around 1980 onwards. This study correspondingly explores the cinematic imaginaries of late colonial Hong Kong within the twin-context of surrealist cultural studies and Third World filmmaking with respect to historical specificities, genre-mixing and collage practice. Finally it argues that surrealist practices, as they manifest in Tsui’s early films, represent an endeavor, an effort, an energy to break habits of minds, resulting in a critical rethinking of the norms, both colonialist and culturalist, and so play a vital part in facilitating social change and transformation.

**Historical Specificities, Genre-Mixing and Collage Practice**

As in the case of the new cinema, Tsui’s filmmaking practices cannot be ascribed solely to artistic aspirations. There are a host of other contributory, even contending, factors. As might be surmised, British colonialism was one. It determined Hong Kong’s governance and administrative structure, among others. Another swaying factor would be Chinese culturalism, a paradigm of cultural practices and beliefs which include varieties of contentious Chinese nationalisms – be that of the Confucianist (historical China), socialist (PRC) and republican (Taiwan) modes. The two in turn marked out spheres of control, subjugation and resistance, and correspondingly circumscribed arenas of contestation, negotiation and mediation characterized by tensions and conflicts of varying degrees of intensity on the one hand, and processes of mutual absorption and cooption on the other. Whether as a British colonial trading outpost with a laissez-faire economy and a predominantly Chinese population, or as a newly industrializing Third World “Chinese” society under British colonial rule, Hong Kong had at the same time been territory to and for global traffic in people, ideas, images, cultures, and capital – one which had fermented and fostered the territory’s simultaneously local, cosmopolitan and global tastes and outlooks.

Then there is the factor of Western-educated elites from Hong Kong and other colonial provenances working in the territory’s film industry. According to Third World cultural commentator Roy Armes, this type of elites is “prime movers in cultural
production” who in some contexts would find the film medium a catharsis for “the psychic damage of colonialism,” and so would use it to fester anti-colonial sentiments and/or postcolonial sensibilities.¹ This, as we shall see below, is evident in the work of new wavers such as Tsui Hark. Though separated by geography, Vietnam-born Tsui – like his Western-trained Hong Kong-born contemporaries – too is a child of colonialism, having first grown up in colonial Vietnam, and then bore witness to the American-led Vietnam War in post-French Vietnam. Later as a high school student in Hong Kong (1966-69), he found himself coming face to face with the civil strife that erupted in the territory consequent to the 1967 riots, a spill-over of the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic. Before this decade was over, he left for the United States where he soon studied film and filmmaking, making his forays into the Hong Kong film industry towards the end of 1970s.

This industry has had a long history of supplying films to diasporic Chinese communities around the world and, for a time in the 1970s, even broken into Western domestic markets. What this also means is that the industry has repertoires of filmmaking traditions, established or otherwise. These are traditions that have developed over the years, sometimes in conversant with and sometimes in resistant to intra-regional filmmaking practices and cultural influences (e.g. mainland China to Taiwan and Japan), and at other times, in engagement with inter-regional ones (e.g. Britain and the United States), including and especially Hollywood. This force of traditions was an item which Tsui Hark had to vie with, as he carved his niche variously as a film producer, director, and scriptwriter and to a much lesser extent, an actor, against the background of what Abbas and Dissanayake have noted as “a new cultural and political space ... where the problems of colonialism were overlaid with those of globalism in an uncanny way.”² In sum, the competing forces between colonialism, culturalism, localism and globalism are as crucial to understanding the forms, significances and contradictions of this new cinema as those stemming from the matter of individual background, talent, ingenuity and creativity.

My concurrent positioning of Tsui’s early films here with respect to Third World filmmaking in part takes a cue from Roy Armes who has studied Hong Kong cinema with respect to histories of colonialisms, under the rubric of – as indicated by his book’s title – Third World Filmmaking and the West (1987).³ It also partly draws on Tsui’s professed interest in making films that document issues such as American imperialism, ethnic minorities and human rights from “a distinctive Third World perspective.”⁴ Tsui

---


³ Armes, Third World Filmmaking and the West, pp. 154-61.

⁴ Cited; Cheung Chi-sing and Cheuk Pak-tong (11 November 1998), “Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark: Three Hong Kong Film Archive Interviews,” trans. Margaret Lee, in The Swordsman and His Jiang Hu, pp. 174-75. Note: The
developed this interest whilst a student in the United States (1969-1975), where he first stood witness to, and then became involved in, the growing Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and civil rights movements as a student activist-cum-budding filmmaker. For Tsui, this type of political participation “gave meaning” to his life because it addressed a past and lingering experience: “I grew up in a colonial environment,” says Tsui rather pointedly in an interview.5 Tsui’s stance here dovetails with Armes’ observation that “the personal experience of the colonized” be the “starting point” to any “understanding of Third World filmmaking.”6 In short, the personal is the political.

This kind of heightened political awareness appears Tsui Hark’s subsequent Hong Kong films as well. Driven by that affinity for Third World filmmaking practices, they instantiate a filmmaker’s ability to co-opt and bend a Western-originated technology for local applications in highly instrumentalist ways. If they deliberate on what Armes has noted elsewhere as “the often shattering and always dislocating impact of Western [colonial] values and culture[s],”7 then they also concurrently, judiciously and eclectically enlist Chinese culturalism, Hong Kong localism and other “native” traditions as points of counter. This sparks the production of counter-discourses that challenge the colonial on the one hand, and on the other, that of postcolonial sensibilities which point to a decolonized future. But as shown my early discussion of We’re Going to Eat You in the terms of an analogue to a pathetic “Chinese nation,” Tsui trains a critical eye on the nativist, the culturalist as well. In any case, and for Tsui, critical self-determinism seems most crucial.

Tsui is an ardent advocate and supporter of ethnic self-determination, self-empowerment and self-emancipation. For him, habits of minds are a major hinder: Chinese should overcome this stumbling block, and “strive to achieve self-determination” instead of constantly bemoaning their fate or blaming others for modern China’s “historical crises” – regardless of the cause, be it about weak leadership, colonial domination or economic underdevelopment.8 Tsui’s early films like The Butterfly Murders/Die Bian (1979) and Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain/Xin Shushan Jianxia (1983) would seem a rendition of that maxim in praxis. The former film is Tsui’s directorial debut. Its repeated references to three early Chinese inventions, paper-making, block printing and gunpowder, fester ethnic pride in a retroactive way. The reminder recalls past Chinese ingenuity and industry, with the inventions functioning as

---

5 Ibid., pp. 174-75.
6 Armes, Third World Film Making and the West, p. 7.
7 Armes, p. 8.
8 Cited; Cheung and Cheuk, “Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark,” p. 174; and also Yu et al., “Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark,” p. 183.
veritable testimonies of the race’s historical capacity for innovation, wonderment and above all, scientific thinking. This careening of the terrains of the historical, the nativist, the culturalist, does not end in a sinking longing for bygone civilisational glories however. The buoyant wuxia (warrior-chivalry) film paradigm to which The Butterfly Murders belongs prevents that drop. This belies a paradox. Wuxia films are a fertile place for producing and sustaining ethnic nostalgia since they typically have period settings, usually found in ancient China. Yet it is precisely the film’s association with the genre that gives the film its contemporary bounce – in the sense that, unlike paper, printing and gunpowder, the wuxia film is a modern Chinese invention! This fact, together with that pertaining to the genre’s status as Hong Kong cinema’s most distinguished contribution to world cinemas, further festers ethnic pride, engendering discourses of self-determination. Where The Butterfly Murders touts past and present ethnic achievements, Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain points out future possibilities for cultivating ethnic self-determination. There is no doubt that Tsui has garnered much cultural kudos from this wuxia film, also his fifth feature, in that it is the first Hong Kong production to feature Star Wars-type CGI special effects, from laser animation to motion control photography. Tsui’s decision to take on the Hollywood challenge crucially lifts the wuxia genre out of its habitual context. But in throwing Star Wars’ leit-motifs into the wuxia melting-pot, it subverts the sci-fi genre – a pride of Western (Hollywood) cinema. Equally crucial too is the fact that his decision has rested on a purposeful undertaking to thwart the self-defeating mindset, prevalent in the early 1980s Hong Kong film industry, that costly CGI special effects are “for foreigners and not for the Chinese.” That Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain would contain explicit and repeated calls for a change of old mindsets is therefore not fortuitous: “On the Yangtze River, the rear waves push those in front/The new replaces the old (Changjian houlang dui qian lang/yi dai xinren huan jiuren)” – so goes the cry which takes nativism as a rallying point.

Tsui’s notion of self-determination has a quasi-nationalist dimension, but stops short of making a simultaneous call for the creation of post-British Hong Kong as a nation independent of “China.” The very fact of Hong Kong’s sealed destiny as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic consequent to the 1984 Sino-British Declaration would indeed mark Hong Kong as an anomaly in the nationalist discourse of Third World politics predicated on the notion that decolonization leads to nationhood. This anomaly shows that the Third World, though historically conjoined by the common fate of Western colonial subjugation, does not necessarily always have – following Cammack, Pool and Tordoff – “a shared and uniform history”: “[The] danger in excessive generalization” in regards to the Third World, warn Cammack et al., is that it glosses over “regional specificity and historical background” of particular places.

This insight is crucial to any study of Third World filmmaking as well. In the particular

---

9 Cited; Ho and Fu, “Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark,” p. 191.

case of Hong Kong cinema, historical specificities too have yield anomalous trends and idiosyncratic practices vis-à-vis other world cinemas. Given this, it is perhaps, even therefore, not surprising that Tsui Hark, a filmmaker with veritable Third World sensibilities no less, would generally steer clear of the nihilistic impulse of “Third Cinema,” though his third feature film, *Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind/Diyi Lei Xing Weixian* (1980-81), arguably comes close in terms of its anti-colonial sentiments and anarchistic attitude. *Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind* gives inkling to Tsui’s characteristic penchant for reworking film genres that yields cinematic anomalies and idiosyncrasies. It begins with what seems to be a standard social drama about Hong Kong delinquent teenagers but ends up in the realm of action movie, featuring violent clashes between local gangs and foreign gunrunners. By his own admission, the film is “something subversive that hovers between fantasy and reality” – a fertile ground for festering surrealist images and imageries. Genre-mixing is also a trait of his five other early films. Conceived as “an expose on human nature,” *The Butterfly Murders* is also a “sci-fi martial arts film”: it both updates and upgrades the swordplay or warrior-chivalry film with pyrotechnics wizardry, and brings the genre into close contact with the mystery thriller. *All the Wrong Clues (for the Right Solution)/Guima Zhiduo Xing* (1981), Tsui’s fourth film, is “a comedy with an Al Capone flavor.” it draws on Hollywood film noir but dances to the beat of slapstick mayhem. *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* and *Aces Go Places Part III: Our Man in Bond Street/Zhujia Paidang III: Nıühuang Miling* (1984) dazzle the senses with high-tech spectacles, razor-fast editing, hyperkinetic quick cuts, and campy comic-book characters. Made with the help of Hollywood special effects experts, the former film takes viewers into the Chinese cosmological world of surreal mysticism, while the latter, a buddy movie of sorts (featuring an unlikely partnership between a police officer and a professional thief), spoofs Western macho icons like Kojak and James Bond – right down to the silly gadgets and flashy cars. This film plays with surrealism of the parodic kind to hilarious effect. For instance, it features a submarine that looks like a great white shark. This cheeky reference to Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) gives an acerbic twist to First World filmmaking of the Hollywood kind. Tsui’s eclecticism is likewise evident in *We’re Going to Eat You*. Here horror meets kung fu on the grounds of “black comedy.”

While variously expanding generic boundaries and correspondingly fostering new or hybrid film genres, Tsui’s six early films – all made prior to Tsui’s founding of Film Workshop in 1984 – bear the indelible marks of “collage practice” which for Ben

---

11 Armes, *Third World Filmmaking and the West*, pp. 87-100.
12 “Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark,” 176.
13 “Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark,” 176.
14 Ibid., 176.
15 Ibid., 191.
16 Ibid., 176.
Highmore is a central tenet in surrealist cultural studies.\textsuperscript{17} According to Highmore, collage practice first and foremost aims to break “habits of minds” – that which have trapped the known (e.g. conventional film genres) within “normalizing impulses.” To undo the trap, practitioners then deliberately place the known into surprising contexts, or in unusual combinations. That forcing of the known out of its habitual context act renders the known strange, yielding estranged entities and phenomena useful for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended. For Highmore, this negation of the control of reason links collage practice to surrealist practice. He explains its significance thus:

Crucial to surrealist practice is the production of juxtaposition ... What is at stake here is the production of the “spark,” generated by the juxtaposition of different materials ... The more difference there is between the two (or more) ingredients, the greater the spark. Slight differences remain within a familiar world; massive differences produce shocks and sparks that jolt us out of the familiar. As such it becomes the perfect foil for habits of minds that have become blinkered by routinized thought.\textsuperscript{18}

In other words, surrealist practice seeks social change and transformation by using unusual juxtapositions to make sparks that shock routinized thoughts out of their stupor. The Surrealist Movement which originated in Europe in the 1920s is antecedent, says Highmore who then adds that “a dual perspective” drove its politics: “[t]ransform the world”; “change life.” “These two watchwords are one for us,” Highmore finally quotes Andre Breton, a most foremost founder of the movement.\textsuperscript{19}

Put contextually, social change and transformation are indeed key issues in Third World filmmaking. They circumscribe the premise for locating Tsui’s push for ethnic self-determination in the colonial world of Hong Kong, against the background of nativism and globalism. Tsui’s cocktails of hybrid genres or mixed-genre films, including his relentless play with incredible juxtapositions, ridiculous combinations and hallucinatory blending of situations, themes, images and sounds, are all in tandem with the politics of collage practice. Predicated on the intention to break habits of minds by collapsing “distinction between adventure and everyday existence, dreams and consciousness, art and life, essence and appearance”\textsuperscript{20} this form of politics yields “a radical questioning of norms” as well as “a leveling and a reclassification of familiar categories.”\textsuperscript{21} These questioning, leveling and reclassification crucially point to the

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p. 50-51.
\textsuperscript{19} Cited; ibid., p. 49.
possibility of rethinking and re-imagining the social, and when specifically linked to the matter of cultural formations such as Third World filmmaking, that of rereading the colonial and the cultural from a “global cross-cultural perspective” based on “a reflexive awareness of the possibilities of psychic and social liberation.” The next part of this paper draws on this insight, and further elaborates it in relation to Tsui’s early films, via a brief discussion of the European Surrealist Movement.

**Wars and Surrealisms**

US-trained Tsui Hark surfed into the Hong Kong film scene as a new waver around 1980, and then goes on to become a prominent Hong Kong filmmaker with a transnational following. He is no avant-garde filmmaker like early European surrealists such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali of *Un chien Andalou* (1929), typically regarded as the precursor of surrealist cinema. Though separated by time and place, uncanny parallels nevertheless exist between Tsui’s early films and Dali’s surrealist work, *Un chien Andalou* included. For example, the severed hand on the cannibalistic villagers’ chopping table or the hand that wriggles in pain between two slammed doors in *We’re Going to Eat You* is reminiscent of the hand (and other dismembered) motifs in *Un Chien Anadalou*, while the skull-like moth in the latter film finds a new and strange, albeit transmogrified, leash of life as not one “deadly” butterfly but a multitude of them in *The Butterfly Murders*. If the decaying carcass of a cat on a spike fence in *Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind* is a throw to the recurrent rotting donkey theme in *Un chien Andalou* and also in Dali’s surrealist paintings such as the *Great Masturbator* series, then the sometimes freakish and sometimes innocent-looking dolled-up woman-child nymphomania (played by Xiao Jin, a large and tall actor in a cross-sex role) in *We’re Going to Eat You* would seem to index, in an equally twisted way, Dali’s neurotic fear of castration, sexual excesses and vagina dentata.23

As a producer of cultures, Tsui has a prosopographic background common to that of early European surrealists such as Dali, Buñuel and Breton who variously co-founded the Surrealist Movement: all are survivors of war, and harbor anti-war sentiments. This movement emerged in the aftermath of World War I which left much of Europe in a wreck, with many survivors struggling to overcome the psychic damage of war. Disenchanted, its founders and supporters turned against the bourgeois rationality, seeing it as instrumental in legitimizing the war. They accordingly rejected the then-commonplace understanding of reality: that it be “seen as simple or continuous, describable empirically or through [rational] induction.” They also loathed established Art-forms which contained cherished notions of transcendental truth and beauty. So

---

22 Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, p. 57; and Gardiner, Critiques of Everyday Life, p. 35.


they strove to find “anti-Art” ways instead – those concurrently subversive of mainstream cultural norms, expressive of their era and its follies, and reflective of historical contradictions and irrational social conditions. In short, they sought to effect social change and transformation through the arts. This led them to the unconscious mind: “the main goal of all Surrealist art is the liberation of the expressive powers of the unconscious from the inhibitory and rational powers of the conscious mind.”

Premised on Freudian concepts, from the unconscious to psychic automatism, from free association to delirious interpretations, the Dalian “paranoiac-critical method” offered a radical alternative, a new way of thinking about and imagining past and future possibilities. This method “provokes the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.” The particular provocation then yields collages of curious objects and fragments that are divorced from their habitual contexts. Highly deformed and distorted imageries that create perceptual disorientations and situational confusions thus become the signatures of Dali’s work and other early surrealist arts. Associated themes of destruction, death and rebirth; decay, putrefaction and metamorphosis; paranoia, obsessions and grotesqueries are now standard to the horror film, the anarchist film and other surrealist cinematic formats.

European surrealists called imageries and themes as such “irrational knowledge” because their creation involved bypassing the control of reason (or the conscious mind in Freudian term). This irrationality was politically expedient because the alterity inherent in the new ways of seeing both challenged and countered the bourgeois rationality by pointing out its conscious mechanisms of suppression. It also revealed, as it exposed – in a by sleight of hand manner – this rationality’s complicity with the perennial, pernicious, perspicacious and preposterous in the social unconscious of a place and era. To European surrealists then, World War I was a symptom of bourgeois rationality gone terribly wrong – a testimony of its barbarity and corresponding denial. In sum, if surrealism then was about an effort, an energy, to make the bourgeois rationality strange so that its strangeness could be recognized and acted upon, then surrealism today – as it manifests in Tsui’s early films – would additionally aim to make vivid, both literally and metaphorically, the strangeness of the colonial everyday. It is a moot point whether films as such become an end in themselves, or if they are used for a


“training ground” for altering consciousness in everyday life. They are no doubt both at times.

Of Tsui’s early films, *Dangerous Encounter — 1st Kind* arguably contains the highest “in-your-face” calibration in terms of an anti-war stance. Tsui’s militancy here recalls the European surrealists’, but as just referred to, differs in one crucial aspect: it manifests a firm political stance against colonialism and imperialism of any kind.29

The divergence is to be expected since much has occurred, politically, socially and economically, in the intermittent years between Dali’s generation of cultural producers in Europe and that of Tsui’s in the Far East. About half a century has since passed during which time the world stood witness to, among others, the rise of Nazism in Europe and Japanese militarism in Asia and their fall, the collapse of European empires with independent Third World countries emerging from their ashes, the entrenchment of the cold war which precipitated the ascent of American neo-imperialism, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic and its demise, and the rise of economic dragons in the Far East, including Hong Kong to which Vietnam-born Tsui Hark relocated, via United States. In short, Tsui is the product of another era. But like Dali and other early European surrealists, Tsui is a collage/surrealist practitioner of sort who would likewise use the method of unusual juxtapositions and unlikely combinations as a radical way to break habits of minds, collapse routinized distinctions, question the norms, and finally encourage critical (re )thinking so as to foster social change and transformation.

*Dangerous Encounter — 1st Kind*, a film about disenchanted youth in modern-day Hong Kong, would most probably be remembered as Tsui’s most anti-establishment film. The film’s graphic portrayal of delinquent violence and troubled cross-race relations brought the filmmaker into loggerheads with the colonial censors. To circumvent the ban, Tsui subsequently re-scripted, re-shot and re-edited part of the film.30 But he was as defiant as ever, claiming that the revisions in actuality made his allegory about “time-bomb” Hongkongers “more complete.”31 As I have noted elsewhere,

29 The twin-theme of war and colonialism, as exemplification of Tsui’s Third World filmmaking sensibilities, is a recurrent preoccupation of Tsui’s film corpus. In addition to those specifically discussed here, it appears in his later films as well, such as *Shanghai Blue/Shanghai Zhi Ye* (1984), *A Better Tomorrow III: Love and Death in Saigon/YingsiZong Bense III: Xiyang Zhi Ge*, 1989, the *Chinese Ghost Story/Qiannu Youhun* series (1987, 1990, 1991), and the *Once Upon a Time in China/Huang Feihong* series (1991-1993). These films are however outside my present scope of discussion. For a related elaboration in regards to *Shanghai Blues*, see Tan See Kam, “From South Pacific to Shanghai Blues: No Film is An Island,” in Gina Marchetti and Tan See-Kam, eds., *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2006.


31 Tan, “Ban(g)! Ban(g)!,” pp. 103n6 and 103n12.
“Tsui’s modern day fable of ultra violence” underscores a simultaneously “militant and cautionary anti-colonialist tract.”

Tsui’s encounter with colonial censorship shoves the almost anarchistic film into the political surreal of contemporary Hong Kong, a surreality which, among others, throws open the Pandora’s Box of laissez-faire politics. If laissez-faire has enshrined the ideology of a free-market economy (without or with only minimal governmental intervention) as normative and natural, then the quarrels which the colonial censors had with Tsui over that film also show that the free-market economy that oiled the colony’s tremendous economic success in the 1980s was nervous of anti-colonial dissent which deals the race card. The censors’ subsequent hypocritical attempt to censure and seize Tsui’s bag of red paint based on a rational reasoning that goes something like “the majority of the general public will find it difficult to put up with the film’s socially irresponsible content” belied the colonial government’s benign efforts to regulate dissent, construed as irrational behavior, in the name of social responsibility. But as Frantz Fanon reminds us, to the colonial master, the natives’ challenge would always be anything but rational. That is to say, issues of rationality or irrationality are a matter of perspectives. This recalls the “irrational knowledge” of the European surrealist configurations which takes bourgeois rationality as its counterpoint.

Profoundly disturbing images depicting irrational behaviors and situations literally run amok throughout Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind which opens and closes with the same scene: some unidentified children hurl a bag of red paint from the top of a decrepit public housing apartment block (a symbol of colonial housing policies for the poor); the bag misses the unidentified pedestrian below; upon recovering from the shock, she bellows hysterically, cursing the children. While showing an instance of playful mischief, a moment of public nuisance, and an act of disturbance to the public order of things in colonial Hong Kong, this small incident foreshadows the blood-splatters that follow. So relentless is the splash that they make the bloodless conflict between the English Police Superintendent of the Royal Hong Kong Police, and his local subordinate, Police Constable Tan, looks like a well-worn cliché about colonial power and resistance. More crucially, the splatters leave a trail of blood that beats a path to colonial Hong Kong’s political unconscious, or heart of darkness, and in the process, helps unravel the bizarre, the monstrous and the grotesqueries that reside within. The related hallucinatory imageries of stupendous terror and senseless violence give the film its surreal saturation: a white mouse with a pin in its head squeaks a slow and agonizing death; a dead cat rots on a spike fence; a hooker’s chopped up body lays on the side of a street; suspended on a chain, with hands tied to his back and his mouth stitched up with

32 Tan, “Ban(g)! Ban(g)l,” p. 84.
a wire, a gangster chief is punched and flayed by turn – he thus mumbles a tortuous death.

If these surreal constructs represent a symbolic display of irrationalities and absurdities that shadows colonial Hong Kong’s political unconscious, then it is the fatal encounter between a group of Hong Kong adolescents and a group of white American men, also the film’s central plot, that pries the barbarous heart of Hong Kong’s laissez-faire economy wide-open; in this heart lurks the hypnagogic specter of American neo-imperialism. Wan-Chu is the leader of the former group; she is the kid-sister of Police Constable Tan, and is responsible for the death of the mouse and cat. In the latter group, the men are arms-traffickers, all white Vietnam War veterans; they are in post-Vietnam War Hong Kong to sew up a transnational deal which involves the delivery of leftover arms from the Vietnam War to Japan, and are variously responsible for the hooker’s and gangster chief’s death. (Both the hooker and chief are locals.) The two groups cross path by chance, but big trouble befalls Wan-Chu and gang when out of mischief, they run off with a bag belonging to one of the Americans. They did not know at the time that this white man was an arms-trafficker, and that the bag contained bank drafts worth a total of 800 million yen. The drafts which oil a transnational laissez-faire economy that spans Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and the US ironically turn out to be the gang’s death warrants. The other surrealist irony is that none eventually profits from the drafts. All except for one teenager (in Wan-Chu’s gang) die in the final surreally staged carnage at the cemetery where the living makes battles in the full view of “the dead,” in broad daylight. Traumatized by the senseless violence, the lone survivor goes mad, spraying a machine gun into the air. This shot is swiftly followed by quick flashes of old newspaper clippings about real-life violent crimes in contemporary Hong Kong; this montage is cut to the rattling bullets segue, an aural spillover from the immediately preceding scene. The parasocial connection here intensifies the film’s surrealism, while the frenzied juxtaposition of real-life crimes and reel-life racial wars offer cathartic vents to people marked by the psychic damage of wars and colonialisms such as Tsui Hark.

Yet Tsui’s early films are not all awash with bloodbaths of the Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind: All the Wrong Clues and Aces Go Places III are slapstick comedies chiefly based on playful battles of wits, with occasional violence. Most are bloody like, but not to the same extent as, Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind in which the internecine carnage crosses national and racial boundaries. Although there are no overt scenes showing what the Vietnam War veterans had done in pre-socialist Vietnam, the battle lines in the film nonetheless cut a swathe from Hong Kong to Bangkok where, as depicted in a quick flashback, the arm-traffickers’ leader had once executed a Thai “double-crocker” in cold blood. If the flashback analogizes the uneven playing ground of American neo-imperialism, then the various “wars” between American arms-smugglers and local gangs who chance upon the former’s money trail would amount to a resounding amplification in regards to issues of resource inequity.

35 The film makes a reference to “Bangkok” as a trafficking point for arm-dealers.
The former has heavy firearms-automatic rifles and machine guns. The Hong Kong adolescents, on the other hand, create mischief with Molotov cocktails. As for the local gangsters, they primarily rely on switchblades, batons and chains to carry out, and occasionally through, their threat of brutal terror. Of the locals, only Police Constable Tan has access to gun-power: a small service revolver, that is.

*The Butterfly Murders* offers surreal contrasts of another kind. Set in mythical China, some time in the 36th year of a fictive New Era, this film shows internecine warfare among warriors in the martial arts world who are more or less equally matched in terms of fighting skills and resources. Based on the memoirs of itinerant scholar Fong (Fang Yehong), the story-line unfolds linearly, but appears to be told in the past tense; this produces temporal confusion. The film opens with Fong coming into view as he tracks across a barren desert-like location (towards the camera; extreme long shot). Fong’s voiceover provides the contexts for the diegesis’ spatial-temporality, and the diegetic motivation for his present trip to the Shum Castle: Master Shum (Shen Qing) has issued him an invitation to help investigate the sudden appearance of killer butterflies at his castle. While there, Fong met Boss Tien (Tian Feng) and others, including an uninvited guest, Green Shadow (Qin Yingzi); all except Fong were martial arts experts. The meeting occurred in an underground chamber; the killer butterflies had driven Master Shum, his wife and their “mute” maid to seek refuge in the castle’s belowground habitat. Mysterious warriors soon appeared, sometimes in the thick of the night. The plot thickens with the sudden death of Master Shum: the killer butterflies attacked and killed him in his own bedroom, or so it seemed. As it turned out, all these were in actuality part of Master Shum’s elaborate trap. Apparently he wanted to become the most supreme warrior of the martial arts world. To achieve this goal, he felt compelled to get rid of Boss Tien and other top-class warriors, including those mysterious swordsmen who turned out to be his *shi xiong di*, or fellow-students of their late master. So he concocted the killer butterfly hoax as a lure. In his final showdown with Boss Tien and Green Shadow, he unleashed a tiny bird at them. Green Shadow leaped into the air and grabbed it before Boss Tien could stop her. The bird turned out to a flying bomb. The ensuing explosion caused the underground to cave in, burying all. Thus only Fong lived to tell the tale of yet another senseless warfare.

The sunny and windy desert which opens the film is reminiscent of Dali’s surrealist paintings: they typically have a barren desert-like location with bright blue skies in the distance; against this background are commonly found hallucinatory objects which Dali retrieves from his unconscious, using the paranoiac-critical method. In *The Butterfly Murders*, the underground habitat with its maze of secret-saturated tunnels parallels, in an uncanny way, the Freudian unconscious. Master Shum’s twisted ambition lurked in the soft whispers of this treacherous maze in which shadow death laid its ambush. The killer butterflies, a symbolic manifestation of the delirious and the irrational in the unconscious mind, add to the film’s surrealisms: they paved the way to and fro the conscious realm (the aboveground) where rumors of their lethality terrorized the living, and the hallucinatory unconscious (the underground) where the rumors
began. These dream-like creatures of the nightmare kind were otherwise harmless creatures which Mistress Shum regularly played with by the underground pools, not like the innocuous looking bird-bomb. In the film, the butterflies became lethal through juxtaposition: they were often found next to human corpses swathed with strange toxic “bites,” or burns.

In *The Butterfly Murders*, living things such as butterflies and living space such as a dwelling acquire a surreal quality primarily via free and delirious association of the paranoiac-critical kind. This first involves freeing them from the constraints of past associations – for example, butterflies as symbols of love and romance, or dwellings as a place of homely comfort. This intentional disassociation then permits a new framing and different positioning, yielding new associations that engender conceptual surprises (killer butterflies, or a deadly home), perceptual disorientations (butterflies that kill, or an abode that is anything but home), and situational confusions (e.g. the living dies in a domicile swarmed with killer butterflies).

The final part of this paper extends my discussion of cinematic surrealisms with particular reference to *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*. It focuses on the film’s intricate connections with the nativist and mystical aspects of Daoism.

**Mystical Surrealism: “Reversal is the Movement of Tao (Dao)”**

Similar to *The Butterfly Murders*, *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* has a Dali-like barren landscape in the opening sequences: a sandy beach, with a clear blue sky in the distance, on which a horse with a rider gradually gallops into view, from afar. Also similar to *The Butterfly Murders*, *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* has two main settings which might be read against the conscious and unconscious divide in the Freudian figuration of the human mind. In the former case, and as mentioned, one setting is the aboveground (conscious), the other the belowground (unconscious); the access-way between the two realms is the trap-door on the floor of the castle. In the latter film, the cave at the foot of Zu Mountain serves as a gateway between the human world (conscious) and the supernatural world (unconscious). The Freudian conceptions of human mind and consciousness and those in Daoism are not equivalent however. So, adjustments are necessary.

In Freudism, human consciousness is generally seen as a rational extension of the conscious mind, construed as sensible and logical; it actively represses the mind’s unconscious, construed as highly irrational, from the plane of tangible, concrete reality. But as surrealist works have shown, the unconscious has, on occasions, slipped through the policing nets of the conscious mind, generating forces that challenge the rational

---

world produced by the conscious mind. Ultimately though, in Freud’s version of the world, rationality holds sway, and so rules human consciousness.

In Daoism, the key to understanding human consciousness lays not the mind alone, but the mind, the heart and the cosmos whose energies create the universe (yu-zhou), heaven (lien), earth (di), and all myriad things therein, the mind, the heart, and human beings (ren) included, based on the yin-yang principle of mutual transformation and destruction, and the five-element theory about mutual regeneration and subjugation. The mind comprises that which knows Dao (the Way) and that which does not, or for simplicity’s sake, the dao mind and the dao-less mind. The two coexist contentiously, and their battles for control over human consciousness are eternal. The dao-less mind is the selfish mind: it seeks physical satisfaction, material comfort and worldly knowledge. In this, it knows no limit. The dao mind aims to keep excessive behavior in check; at the same time the dao-less mind can overwhelm the dao mind, but only up to the point when it falls venerable to its own excesses. When this occurs, the dao mind would soon regain control. The struggles between the dao mind and the dao-less mind therefore circumscribe circles of antagonisms; they both have the capacity to oppose and counter-oppose each other, in multifarious ways. In the midst lurks dao-xin, or the heart of Dao: the dao heart contains “pure moral consciousness.” The dao heart is antidote for the dao-less mind, and provider of the means by which the dao mind finds its way to Dao. The dao mind thus strives to be at one with Dao. The dao-less mind, by definition, would reject Dao. It also tries to pull the dao mind away from Dao. Its capacity for excessive behavior can tip the (cosmological) balance with devastating consequences — for example, the dao-less mind is thought to be responsible for creating wars, while the dao mind wants to prevent them from happening. The dao heart, on the other hand, is always at one with Dao, and the cosmological forces, yin and yang, that make the Universe (yu-zhou), Heaven (tien) and Earth (di) as well as all myriad things therein. If Dao is therefore the source of all creations, then from the perspective of the created, the way (back) to Dao would involve reversing the creation process. Hence the Daoist maxim: “Reversal is the Movement of Tao (Dao).”

Put contextually, in Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain, the storyline unfolds linearly in the present tense, but ultimately has a circular structure in that the film begins and ends in the mortal world torn-apart by internecine warfare involving five armies. Dong Zi, at first a reconnaissance soldier for, and then a deserter of, the Eastern Zu Army, falls over a cliff and stumbles upon the opening of a cave at the foot. This cave leads to the supernatural world of the Zu warriors. Dong Zi’s journey through the cave takes viewers into the surreal universe of Chinese (Daoist) cosmology. Here Dong Zi encounters celestial beings who are as equally, if not more, prone to strife and violence as their mortal equivalent. Bizarre mayhem indeed characterizes the comings and goings in the supernatural world. The combination of Hong Kong-developed wire-

---

action choreography and Star Wars-type CGI animation intensifies the film’s surreal dimensions even more. Warriors soar through the air (without spaceship, of course), as slug-like cannibalistic creatures roll about on the ground; they have vessel-like exoskeleton and eyes that glow eerily in the dark. Nearby is a giant tongue: it slithers about, ever ready to pounce on its target. At some distance away is a lush oasis; here over-sized carps skip and slide on the surface of a lake like bouncy balls, chuckling as they swiftly scurry away from the omnivores Dong Zi. Elsewhere in an underground tunnel, an elderly warrior lives in a rock: he can propel the sticky ends of his long and extendable eye-brows into the air to catch a passing object—not unlike the way a frog seizes its prey with its elastic tongue. On a faraway mountain peak is an equally eccentric god: he glides and slides on a suspended net-like structure made of heavy chains, a huge spherical rock tied to his back.

Dong Zi’s trip over this surreal landscape ends with the discovery of Dao, or the mind that has the Way (Dao), which eventually puts a stop to the wars in the human world, as well as the feuds in the supernatural world. From the time of Dong Zi’s accidental discovery of the cave onwards, the rest of the movie may be divided into two parts, or what I would call as “the foibles of the elders” and “the united front of the young” segments. These two segments track the Dao of (neo-)Daoist cosmology, via Dong Zi (first as a casual observer of Dao and then as a committed agent of Dao), with neo-Confucian precepts and Buddhist teachings riding in the side-car. Taken together, Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain would amount to Tsui’s attempt to translate his following world view.

Leaving behind the mortal world, Dong Zi encounters benevolent deities and evil demons. The deities have anthropomorphic characteristics and are all eccentric, in one way or another. They roam Heaven and Earth and the Zu Mountain in-between, usually alone—except for Abbot Xiao Ru who has a young disciple, Yi Zhen (literally meaning One Truth), and Jasper Lake Countess who lives in a grand palace with her loyal female followers. Dong Zi encounters Ding Yin first, occurring when this supernatural swordsman rescues him from the slug-like creatures, the giant tongue and other surreal nasties. Though initially reluctant, loner Ding Yin eventually takes Dong Zi as his disciple. He has a self-appointed mission to track down Xue Mou (Evil Blood Monster). In this, the abbot is a companion-in-battle, but the two squabbles perennially: pride comes between them. Jasper Lake Countess has the gift of miraculous cures, and is a firm believer of fate and destiny: she thus treats the unwell selectively, giving remedy only to those whom she believes are “destined patients.” Eccentric behavior as such, as well as the lack of humility, prevent the deities from coming together as a united force against Xue Mou who eventually succeeds in claiming Ding Yin for the dark forces.

Xue Mou seems omnipresent and has followers who would appear suddenly out of nowhere, anywhere and everywhere. This creates the illusion of a permeating evil force in supernatural world— one which is united in intent and purpose. Xue Mou takes many shapes and forms, from the anthropomorphic (e.g. a Jasper Lake Countess look-a-
like), to the symbolic (e.g. a drop of evil blood), or the abstract (e.g. a ball of red light); it is usually red in color and as such, a fire element. It is also a yin entity and is most powerful during the time of a full sun eclipse. It normally nourishes on yin energy from the moon; however, for a “balanced diet,” it feeds on virgin males, construed as yang. In Daoism, a wholly yin or yang entity indicates a state of stagnation – the former would be completely still, while the latter in a constant state of perennial movement. To effect change, both need the countering forces of yang qi (energy) and yin qi, respectively. This type of yin-yang interactions both fosters and leads to growth, transformation and regeneration, thereby producing the myriad things. As such, the myriad things would spot varying degrees of yin-yang combinations.38

In the film, the Daoist notion of the yin and yang forces as sometimes mutually nurturing and sometimes mutually destructive is most obvious in the combat scenes between Xue Mou and Deity Chang Mei (literally Long Eyebrows) who dresses in white and has white eyebrows and beard. In one such scene, after a spell of intense combat at Mt. E-Mei, the two find themselves in a stalemate. Rooted to a spot and within close proximity of each other, they then engage in a battle of wills. The scuffle here gives a good glimpse to the contestations between yin and yang, evil and good, and fire (red) and metal (white). To protect itself from the battering yang light-energy that emits from Chang Mei’s sun-mirror, Xue Mou hides inside a thorny (masculine/yang) egg-like shield (feminine/yin) which it assembles with the virgin skulls (male/yang) that litter the battle arena. It concurrently manufactures sturdy spike-like horns (masculine/yang) inside the shield, and pushes them through crevices (female/yin) between the skulls, covering the holes in the shield. This cuts off the sun-mirror’s yang beams completely. Both fire (Xue Mou) and metal (Chang Mei) are equally potent and deadly since fire can melt metal, and so causes it to disintegrate, while metal on the other hand can withstand heat of the fiery kind (up to a point), and if melted, can extinguish fire. The intention to destroy the other is therefore concurrent to considerations of self-preservation since the act of destruction in regards to the other is concomitant to putting the self at risk of obliteration. This demands a balancing act: to ensure its own survival, both fire and metal must not overexert their destructive power; they must instead bid for the most opportune moment to act instead. Locked in a stalemate, the “cocooned” Xue Mou thus waits anxiously for the moon (yin) to eclipse the sun (yang) fully, a time when it can recharge itself fully with the most potent yin qi from the moon. Weary of the upper hand which Xue Mou would gain during the forthcoming sun eclipse, a time when the yang qi will lose its strength, Chang Mei hastens Ding Yin, Xiao Ru, Dong Zi and Yi Zhen to seek the help of Super Wondergirl Li Yiqi. Apparently she has the “Purple and Green Twin-Swords” (double yang) which can eliminate Xue Mou. They should, of course, return with the twin-swords before the eclipse.

But Abbot Xiao Ru is injured: he has fallen victim to Xue Mou’s evil blood which now spreads in his body, like a virus. The abbot tries to keep it in check with his yang qi

---

but this proves to be a losing battle since the evil blood (yin) finds regenerative energy upon contact with “virgin blood” (yang); the abbot, one might safely surmise, is a virgin. So, Jasper Lake Countess has the remedy, so the four head for the Jasper Lake Fairy Palace first. At the palace, the countess (a clear-cut water element) deems the abbot a “destined patient” – that is someone she is destined to cure – and so takes him into her treatment room. The room is designated yin, in three principal ways: one, the high aerial shot gives it the semblance of a womb; two, the curer is a female; three, the instruments of cure are female deity statues. The countess eventually cures the abbot, using a concentrated beam of yin energy culled the room and the statues. The beam renders the otherwise powerful virus-like evil blood stagnant, “killing” it in the process. That is to say, the beam helps turn Xue Mou’s evil blood into a wholly yin thing with static characteristics.

But the search for reclusive Super Wondergirl Li Yiqi is to be delayed once again. After leaving the palace, Dong Zi accidentally cuts Ding Yin while playing with the latter’s sword. Since the sword has a drop of Xue Mou’s evil blood, the accident causes Ding Yin to become infected. The four are thus compelled to back track. Although still exhausted from the last session, the countess agrees to treat Ding Yin, but fails this time. She fails because the yin qi in the treatment room has not yet been fully restored to the level where she could wield another potent concentration of yin beam to nullify the evil blood in Ding Yin. A few statues explode from overexertion, while the countess collapses from exhaustion. As she gradually regains consciousness, she can see that the viral attack in Ding Yin has run its course. To prevent the now fully possessed Ding Yin from leaving, she decides to break the Freeze-Mirror, hoping that this last resort strategy would hold him in frozen captivity. As the palace freezes over, Ding Yin – now a yin concentrated entity – manages to flee in time. So do Dong Zi and Yi Zhen, alongside with one of the countess’ young disciples. Everyone else is sealed within the frozen palace, the countess and the abbot included. Yin qi thus completely enshrouds the palace.

Thus begins the film’s “united front of the young” segment. The three young people are on their own: they are now in charge, not their respective shifu (masters) – “On the Yangtze River, the rear waves push the front waves/The new generation takes over from the old.” As they make their way to Heavenly Blade Peak to look for Super Wondergirl, they reflect on their masters’ mistakes, and realize that they need to stay a united force: their masters were given to eccentric behavior and petty squabbles – a severe handicap when it came to combating Xue Mou and his followers who are determinately united in purpose and intent. This realization, together with their collective agreement to shoulder the responsibility that comes with the mission (to look for Li Yiqi and thence to eliminate Xue Mou), put them on the track to Dao.

At the peak, they first come face-to-face with Heavenly Blade who keeps a stem watch over the gateway that leads to evil-dom, while the star of Super Wondergirl shines nearby, in the distant sky. In the context of Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain,
this metaphysical location marks a most distinct yet ambivalent border between the
good and the evil; distinct because those who enter the gateway would become
irredeemably evil entities, and ambivalent because the good and the evil co-exist here,
and also because the evil has a last chance at redemption, while the good is always at
risk of being sucked into the evil gateway. That is to say, the distinction between good
and evil is thread-thin and precarious. That is also to say, evil lurks where goodness
resides, and vice versa. This thinking is common to Daoist, (neo-)Confucianist and
Buddhist teachings.

Presently, the fully possessed Ding Yin makes an unannounced appearance. He is
red (in color) through and through—a sign of Xue Mou’s total possession of the
otherwise righteous swordsman (who used to wear white or off-white attire); in this
instance, fire (red) has vanquished metal (white). This is an omen that the fire force is in
ascendancy, and in a para-diegetical way, suggests that victory is within grasp for Xue
Mou, even though he is cocooned up in an egg-like shield at Mts. E-Meri. Evil Ding Yin
then tries to enter the gateway to evil-dom, but Heavenly Blade and Dong Zi block the
way. In the ensuing battle, Heavenly Blade dies. Dong Zi survives. Here he shows
himself to be a bravery warrior with a strong sense of righteousness: he would rather kill
Evil Ding Yin than allow his shifu (master) to cross the threshold to eternal-evil; though
he fails, the deed in itself is an honorable one. As for Yi Zhen, the battle shows up his
cowardice: he runs away at first. He subsequently redeems himself in two ways. First, as
a penance, he relinquishes his “right” to be the Zhang men ren, or leader, of his late
shifu’s temple—an honor which the abbot had earlier conferred upon him. Secondly, he
returns to help Dong Zi fight Evil Ding Yin. Both acts make him honorable and righteous.
Thus redeemed, he becomes a worthy recipient of the Purple Sword, while Super
Wondergirl gives Dong Zi the Green Sword. In the Chinese scheme of colors, purple and
green belong to the same spectrum; this means that the Twin-Swords are of the wood
element.

As separate entities, Dong Zi (now a righteous human), Yi Zhen (a now righteous
deity) and the Twin-Swords (two heavenly objects) are no match for Xue Mou. To
eliminate the latter, the four must blend into one collective force. This entails a reversal
of the metaphysical order of things, or as Laozi the founding father of Daoism might say,
“Reversal is the movement of Dao.” That is to say, the two boys can only kill Xue Mou
with Dao, and Dao would reveal itself only when all the qi under Heaven and Earth and
within the whole Universe, including the qi of the boys/swords, return to their originary
moment, via reversal. That is also to say, the boys/swords must become Dao themselves.
In the film, the boys spark off the reversal process when they successfully fuse the
swords. This seemingly simple task however demands utmost care and precision: since
the Twin-Swords would “self-destruct” upon actual contact, the boys must ensure that
this never happens during the fusion process. With this in mind, then, Dong Zi and Yi
Zhen soar into the heavens with the Twin-Swords, taking the form of two separate balls
of highly concentrated yang energy; they then prepare for a “contact-less” fusion of the
swords, closely following the instructions which Super Wondergirl and Chang Mei
(presently still in a gridlock with the “cocooned” Xue Mou in faraway Mt. E-Mei) transmit to them telepathically. Alarmed by the development, Evil Ding Yin quickly intervenes. Instead of entering the gateway to evil-dom, he transforms himself into a ball of highly concentrated yin energy. Propelling himself into the heavens, he thus firmly plants himself between the two yang energy balls, thereby impeding the Twin-Swords’ smooth and final fusion as the “One” (which can bring about the reversal process and which can kill Xue Mou).

At this point of the film, the sun eclipse begins, slowly and steadily casting a pall of yin qi over the Universe. This makes Evil Ding Yin more powerful by the minute, while the boys-swords energy composites loose their strength in an inverse proportional way. Meanwhile back on Earth (in the metaphysical dimension), Chang Mei too has to deal with the diminishing supply of yang qi in the Universe, fully aware that he would be no match to Xue Mou once the moon fully recharges the latter’s yin-energy supply. In the human world, the earth trembles. For Daoists, earthquakes occur when humans upset the balance of qi in Heaven and Earth:

The qi of Heaven and Earth does not lose its order. If it exceeds its order then it is because people have disturbed it. Yang bends down and cannot go out; yin is forced and cannot breathe out; thus there are earthquakes ... yang has lost its place and is oppressed by yin.39

Put contextually, the earthquakes in Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain are linked to destructive human activities such as wars which contribute to the imbalance of qi-forces between Heaven and Earth. The simultaneously occurring battles in the metaphysical world further aggravate the imbalance, giving rise to more earthshaking tremors, while the sun eclipse exacerbates the trembles even more. The quakes are therefore an omen that the world of matter – whether this-worldly and other-worldly – is in utter chaos.

From the deeply frozen Jasper Lake Fairy Palace, the countess (a yin water element) watches the unfolding chaos. Suddenly, she bursts through the layers of ice, like a propelled projectile. Riding with whatever yang energy that the sun still emits (the moon has not yet eclipsed the sun fully), she heads straight for Evil Ding Yin. Similar to the way she cures the abbot, her strategy of using yin to counter yin has the consequence of increasing the pool of yin qi in Evil Ding Yin to the extent of rendering it static. In the abbot’s case, this strategy saves the abbot’s yang body from a yin assault. In regards to the Evil Ding Yin situation, the impact upon sudden contact knocks the yin from the yang orbit. As a water element, Jasper Lake Countess additionally can restrain fire.40 Characterized by swiftness, the forceful contact between Jasper Lake Countess (water)

---

39 Bo Yang of Zhou; cited, Zhang, Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy, p. 84.
and Evil Ding Yin (fire) also leads their mutual destruction – like two spacecrafts colliding head-on. With the yin obstruction out of their way, the two yang energy balls thus successfully merge as the “One.” From the heavens, the “One” then quickly directs a lethal beam of highly concentrated yang qi at Xue Mou; this deals him a fatal blow. The use of yang to counter yin strategy here succeeds because the combined yang qi from the “One” is stronger than the resurgent yin qi in the thorny egg-like cocoon. This occurs in the nick of the time, as Xue Mou is on the verge of breaking out from the cocoon completely. That the boy-sword composite is wood element helps: although wood burns in fire, wood can (be used to) thrash out fire as well. What we see here is in actuality a reversal of the Daoist notion that wood generates fire. Unlike the countess, the boy-swords survive because there is no actual “physical” contact between the wood/yang-body and the fire/yin-body.

Meanwhile, in the human world, the countess’ young disciple (celestial/female/feminine/yin) stops the war almost single-handedly. From the top of a cliff, she makes an eagle-like dive for the warlords (human/male/masculine/yang). Scooping them off the horseback, she then flies back to the cliff-top with one in each hand, and the third between her feet. This superhuman feat stops the warring soldiers in their track: they are numbed with shock. It is not clear which Element she is. Given her close association of Dong Zi and Yi Zhen, the omen would seem to be this: that wood-power is on the ascent in the human world. Yet one cannot be sure: if the countess’ young disciple is wood by association, and if the three warlords represent water, metal and fire (they are variously dressed in black, white and red respectively), then earth (yellow) is clearly the missing element in this tug-of-war. In any case, order soon returns as the qi of Universe, Heaven and Earth regains its harmonious balance, once again.

However Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain ends on an unexpected note: rather than the image of peaceful and everlasting tranquility on earth, the closing sequences have a montage depicting pockets of fresh but small-scale fighting between the surviving soldiers. As Daoist followers might say, nothing ever stays static and unchanging, for long. In that final montage, Tsui Hark makes a sudden cameo appearance as a soldier whose opponent happens to be Dong Zi’s deserter-friend, first seen at the opening of the film. The two cross swords, as the sun eclipse comes to pass – naturally and surrealistically. This combination of the realist and surrealist aesthetics recalls the final scene in We’re Going to You: while the offer of a human heart as a token of love would amount to a surreal act, it seems natural for a cannibal to do just that!

41 Ibid.
Tan See Kam (Ph.D., University of Melbourne) is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Macau, Macao SAR, China, and has taught in Australia and Singapore. He has been Vice Chair of the Asian Cinema Studies Society since 1997. He has journal articles in English and Chinese, as well as book chapters in Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade (2000), Between Home and World: A Reader in Hong Kong Cinema (2004), Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes (2004), and Outer Limits: A Reader in Communication across Cultures (2004). He has co-edited a special journal issue on Gender in Asian Cinema for Asian Journal of Communication (2001), and two anthologies, Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and New Global Cinema (Routledge, 2007) and Chinese Connections: Critical Perspective on Film, Identity and Diaspora (Temple University Press, forthcoming). He is currently working on a book about Tsui Hark’s Peking Opera Blues (Hong Kong University Press).
Goodbye America: Postcoloniality, Feminism, Ethnicity, and Race

Christine Carlos
University of the Philippines Film Institute

Abstract

In the West, perceptions of the Orient or the East came from various sources, primarily from direct contact between colonizers and the colonies. Other sources of these perceptions came from the portrayal and representations of the Orient through the visual arts, the performing arts and literature. The representations of Asian women described above were originally all created by Europeans, who in this case would be considered Orientalists. This whole process of the West creating images of the Orient is at the heart of Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism. A film that a Western filmmaker creates can partake of Orientalism while challenging it at the same time. The film Goodbye America is such a text. Goodbye America is about the US Subic Naval Base in Olongapo, Zambales set during the pullout of the US and turnover of the base to the Philippine government in 1986.
One of the earliest works in Filipino literature which discussed interracial relationships between Caucasian men and Filipinas was the novel *Noli Me Tangere* by Jose Rizal. Padre Salvi, a Spaniard, was in love with the mestiza (half breed) Maria Clara. He burned with desire at the mere sight of her ankles as she and her friends frolicked by the river. Maria Clara was the daughter of the Spanish friar Padre Damaso and a Filipina. Filipina women who married Spaniards and saw this as a means for social mobility were personified in Dona Victorina who married Don Tiburcio; and Dona Consolacion who married the Guardia Civil. Long before skin whitening creams, the likes of Dona Victorina were slathering white paste on their skin to appear “white” and Caucasian. She even used ancient forms of herbal hair dyes to make her hair reddish. The Spanish men featured in the novel were considered the dregs of Spanish society. Those who could not make it in Spain came here as carpet baggers, as adventurers of some sort ready to strike it out in the colony. Don Tiburcio personified the nobody in Spain who suddenly becomes part of Philippine high society simply because he is white. Today, many Filipina women still see marrying a white man as a means for social mobility – not to mention having a mestiza/mestizo baby who will one day be a model or actress/actor is also goal and status symbol for some of these women. And in our land of morena (brown) women, skin whitening creams are heavily endorsed in huge billboards, in magazines, and on TV in every nook and cranny of the country. These only serve to reinforce the idea that having fair skin or white skin is more beautiful and more attractive than and superior to the brown natural skin color which majority of the Filipinos possess. This also reinforces the subliminal message that has gone on for centuries that being Filipino and brown is not good enough compared with being Caucasian.

In the West, perceptions of the Orient or the East came from various sources. Already mentioned was direct contact with colonization and the colonies. The other sources of these perceptions came from the portrayal and representation of the Orient through the visual arts, the performing arts and through literature. During the latter part of the 1800s and up to the early part of the 20th century, human and arts and crafts exhibitions of Asian people were held in Europe and America. Whole villages were transported to give the West an idea of an authentic indigenous Asian life. This concept of “colonial spectacle” or “ethnographic displays which showed people, not objects” was discussed by Stuart Hall in “Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices” (1995-98).

During the 1800s, after hundreds of years of a closed door policy, Japan opened its door once again. A huge Japanese Exhibition transporting a Japanese Village complete with performers, artisans and craftsmen was held in London in the early 1880s. This exhibition inspired Sir William Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan to create their biggest hit comic operetta *The Mikado*, a satire of Japanese village life seen through the English eyes of Gilbert and Sullivan. It makes fun of Japanese names and creates the image of the Japanese as a funny, strange lot. (The making of *The Mikado* became the subject of a film, *Topsy-Turvy.*) In 1904, the opera *Madama Butterfly* composed by Giacomo Puccini was premiered. This is the most famous work of Italian
composer Puccini. The opera revolves around the life of a very young Japanese “geisha” or courtesan named Cio-cio San. Cio-cio San falls in love with an American military man Lt. Pinkerton and they go through a bogus wedding. Pinkerton deflowers the nubile Cio-cio San. He returns to the US but swears by his love and promises to return to her. A few months after, she gives birth to their child. Cio-cio San patiently waits for Pinkerton and turns down many wealthy Japanese suitors. A few years after, Pinkerton returns to Japan with his American wife. Cio-cio San is so distraught that she commits suicide. The child is then taken by Pinkerton and his wife to America. This opera was the inspiration of the hit London and Broadway musical Miss Saigon created by Frenchmen Claude Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil. In Miss Saigon, the 16-year-old Vietnamese Kim, a novice prostitute, is deflowered by US serviceman Chris. They get married and he leaves for the US but promises to return to her. She gives birth to their child. Chris marries an American woman. He is disturbed by “Vietnam War” nightmares and thoughts of Kim. He and his wife get leads and go to Bangkok and find Kim. Kim hands over their child and commits suicide. Both Madama Butterfly and Miss Saigon reinforce the image of the Asian woman as fragile, subservient, submissive, a martyr and worse, a courtesan or a prostitute. Japanese courtesans or geishas are the prototype for the “Japayuki” and the GRO (guest relations officer) singing along with their clients or patrons, mixing and pouring their drinks, and feeding them literally and their ego as well. During the early part of the 20th century when Japan was not yet the economic power that it is now, Japanese courtesans were sought after and exported.

Another source of the West’s perceptions of the Orient was paintings. In the early 1800s, French painters Ingres and his famous student and apprentice Eugene Delacroix painted Middle Eastern women and Northern African women as naked, sensual odalisques in Turkish baths or exotic, opulent settings. They also featured scenes from Middle Eastern literature. In the late 1800s Post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin moved to the French colony Tahiti. Here, he created paintings and sculptures of Tahitian women in colorful floral sarongs or lounging around naked. His paintings and sculptures of these Tahitian women added to the French iconography of “exoticism.” I used the term “added to the iconography” as other French painters like Ingres and Delacroix in the early 1800s painted women from the various colonies of France in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Gauguin’s images of Tahitian island women created a prototype for the “exotic brown skinned, woman with long black hair.” These days, the term “island fever” refers to white men who come to the Philippines or to any tropical country seeking “Gauguin’s sensual but submissive, exotic island woman prototype.”

**Representation and Edward Said’s Orientalism**

The representations of Asian or Oriental women described above with the exception of “Noli Me Tangere” were all created by Europeans. The European in this case is would be called “an Orientalist.” This whole process of the West creating images of the Orient is at the heart of Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. For Said, “Anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist,
sociologist, historian or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspects, is an 
Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (2). Said defines Orientalism as

a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction
made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ Thus a very large
mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political
theorists, economists, and imperial administrators have accepted the basic
distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories,
epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its
people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on. (2)

If a Western painter, writer or theorist who creates images or representations of
the Orient or who theorizes about the Orient is considered an Orientalist, then the
Western filmmaker who creates films regarding and representing the Orient could also
be an Orientalist, while at the same time presenting a critical perspective on Orientalist
issues. The film Goodbye America is such an example. The film is about the US Subic
naval Base in Olongapo, Zambales set during the pullout of the US and turnover of the
base to the Philippine government in 1986. The film is produced by Michael D. Sellers
and ABS-CBN Star Cinema. The script was written by Frederick Bailey, Robert Couttie,
Ricardo Lee and Michael D. Sellers. Ricardo Lee is Filipino scriptwriter Ricky Lee. The
director, Thierry Notz is a Swiss American who supposedly studied film at University of
Southern California and who started his career working with Roger Corman productions.

Stereotyping in the Representation of Non-Whites

This reading will explore the racial stereotypes of Filipinos and Americans represented
and perpetuated in the film Goodbye America and it will look into the postcolonial
issues raised in the said film. There have been very few films made wherein the subject
is Philippine – American relationships both political and romantic. As there are very few
films representing Filipinos in American films, the issue of stereotyping becomes all the
more important. Robert Stam in his introduction to “Permutations of Difference” in
Film and Theory: An Anthology raises the issue of racial stereotyping and states that
“The hair-trigger sensitivity about racial stereotypes partially derives from what James
Baldwin called the ‘burden of representation’” (662). Stam says that the dangers of this
stereotyping is such that

Any negative behavior by the oppressed community is instantly generalized as
typical, as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative
essence. Representations thus become allegorical; within hegemonic discourse
every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but
putatively homogenous community. (662)

As for the dominant culture which Stam calls “the socially empowered groups,” these
groups which include white Americans represented in most Hollywood films “need not
be unduly concerned about ‘distortion stereotypes,’ since even occasionally negative images form part of a wide spectrum of representation” (662). However, the dangers exist for the minority or the oppressed community wherein Stam adds that “Each negative image of an under-represented group, in contrast, becomes sorely overcharged with allegorical meaning. The sensitivity around stereotypes and distortions largely arises, then from the powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation” (662-63).

One of the first and most important studies done in the area of race and stereotyping is “On Visual Media Racism” which was written by Eugene Franklin Wong in 1978. Robyn Wiegman in her essay “Race, Ethnicity and Film” from the *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* quotes Wong on stereotypes: “For Wong, the stereotype is a form of representation in film that produces non-white cultures and characters as static and one dimensional. Acting is therefore more gestural than performatively complex; more about the cliché than emotional range. For this reason a group’s stereotyped image tends to oscillate between two simple poles: good and bad, noble and savage, loyal and traitorous, kind-hearted and villainous. It is by virtue of condensation that an image becomes a stereotype; its racialization is achieved by an implicit or explicit moral assessment concerning the group’s inherent ‘essence’” (161).

*Goodbye America* centers on the life of three US marines named John (Corin Nemec), Hawk (John Haymes Newton) and Paul Bladon (Alexis Arquette) and three Filipina sisters namely Emma (Alma Concepcion), a prostitute; Lisa (Nanette Medved), a staff member from the office of Mayor Dick Gordon; and Maria (Angel Aquino), the youngest who is looking for a job. Apart from these main characters, there are peripheral characters such as Ed (James Brolin), an ex-marine turned bar owner living with Ann (Daria Ramirez) who is the mother of Lisa and Emma. How they all became sisters is rather vague in the film and not completely explained. The impression the film gives judging from the story and the credits is that Lisa and Emma have different fathers but their mother is Anna. Lisa’s father is from the US navy who abandoned her mother while she was a baby and this is clearly stated in the story. As for Maria, she says she came to Subic to look for work so she can help her mother who is not Anna. If Emma and Maria are also sisters, it is implied that they have the same father but different mothers. The relationships between these characters, the navy men and the three sisters are central to the film. Another main theme is the issue of American supremacy in the world and its losing its grip as a superpower combined with America’s political relationship with the Philippines. The male and female characters and their relationships with each other are actually metaphors for underlying themes of colonial issues and struggles between the US and the Philippines. The film is set in November 1986 during the last ten days before the final pullout of the US bases.
The Filipina as Prostitute

One stereotype which stood out in the film was the representation of the Filipina as a prostitute as personified in the character Emma. And this representation of the Filipina as a prostitute connects it with the materials mentioned earlier which represented the Asian or Oriental woman as a prostitute or a courtesan. Ella Shohat in her essay “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema” points out that “The critique of colonialism within cinema studies, meanwhile, has tended to downplay the significance of gender issues, thus eliding the fact that (post)colonial discourse has impinged differently on the representation of men and women” (669). The film is set in the largest US base outside of the United States of America which is Subic. This particular US naval base among other things caters to the rest and recreation of the American GIs. Therefore, it is not surprising that areas surrounding these bases – Subic naval Base and Clark Field Air Base would have bars and the prostitution industry outside the bases for US servicemen. During the 1960s the Philippines became a center of prostitution together with Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh) and Bangkok. This was courtesy of the presence of the US bases exacerbated by the US – Vietnam War. The Subic Naval Base area in Olongapo, Zambales and the Clark Field Air Base in Angeles, Pampanga were the centers of the prostitution industry and night life. In the early 1980’s Firehouse, Superstar and Blue Hawaii were popular girlie bars located in M.H. del Pilar, the red light district in Manila. These bars had giant screens on the dance floor where MTV film clips of the latest new wave music were projected as the male and female guests danced to the music while in house bikini clad prostitutes gyrated on the ledge. During this time, the Subic Base area in Olongapo, Zambales and the Clark Field Airbase area in Angeles, Pampanga were known not just for the prostitution catering to the US servicemen but also for the good Filipino rock bands featured in the bars. During the 1970s and the 1980s, the Philippines became known for its prostitution industry and its “sex tours” catering not just to US servicemen but also to regular male tourists from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United States. Also, the importation of Filipinas to Japan as club hostesses called “Japayukis” began in the 1970’s. Many manpower agencies masquerading as “talent companies” really functioned as “international, legalized pimps” sending women to various clubs all over Japan. Then during the late 1970’s and the 1980’s, the “mail order bride” became the trend. These days, we have the internet dating and matchmaking sites catering to foreigners wanting to marry Filipinas. Also there are porn sites featuring Filipinas together with other Asians for Westerners with a fetish for Asian women.

For a country like the Philippines which is struggling with poverty, this is not a surprise. Mary John Mananzan in her essay “Sexual Exploitation of Women in a Third World Setting” mentioned that prostitution which is an aspect of the bases is seldom discussed. She said that prostitution “is the social cost of the bases in terms of corrupted and dehumanized lives, especially the lives of Filipino women. A thesis of sociologist-educator Leopoldo Moselina shows how the bases in Olongapo have created a degraded world of pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts, and criminals. Olongapo, a town of nearly
200,000 people the home of the Subic Naval Base, is also the working ground of 16,000 prostitutes and the home of several thousand illegitimate children of American servicemen. During the Vietnam War, Olongapo had the reputation of being a wide open area for GI recreation. But even today, the demand for prostitutes has not diminished. Ten thousand girls are licensed; several thousands ply their trade illegally” (107-08). Due to the huge prostitution industry here in the Philippines, Filipinas seen with white men were often labeled or mistaken as prostitutes or club hostesses. The reality is that, the Filipina prostitute and white man stereotype is just one of the many kinds of interracial relationship in the country. After the former Manila Mayor Alfredo Lim padlocked many bars along M.H. del Pilar in the hopes of “cleaning up” the city, the red light district moved to P. Burgos in Makati. Many of the free lance prostitutes currently hang out in Havana bar in Greenbelt 3 and in the surrounding area and in the billiards bar Heckle and Jeckle in Polaris St. near Burgos St. Considering that the Filipinos are a minority in the realm of international film, it is inevitable that Emma as a character will add to the continuing discourse of “the Asian woman as a prostitute or courtesan.” As mentioned earlier, the Japanese geisha Cio-cio san of the opera “Madama Butterfly,” Vietnamese prostitute Kim of the musical Miss Saigon; the supposedly Filipina ex-prostitute and wife of an elderly Australian who strangely speaks Thai instead of Filipino in The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert; and the Japanese geishas in Memoirs of a Geisha all add to the continuing discourse and stereotyping of the “Asian woman as prostitute.” Incidentally, all these works cited including Goodbye America were all written, produced and directed by white western males.

In Orientalism, Edward Said described the French writer Gustave Flaubert’s account of his encounter with the Egyptian prostitute Kuchuk Hanem and how this has helped create the image of the submissive Oriental woman. Said also uses this passage as a metaphor for the relationship between the West and the Orient as the colonizer and the colonized. Said in this passage says that

The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered common place by an average nineteenth century European., but also because it could be – that is, submitted to being – made Oriental. There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was “typically Oriental.” My argument is that Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. (5-6)

Said is explaining the literal experience of Flaubert with Kuchuk Hanem but this relationship between them is also a metaphor for the East – West relationship of the
colonized and the colonizer, a relationship wherein one party is from a dominant culture and the other from a more subordinate culture. As Said explained, “He [Flaubert] spoke for and represented her” (6). In this sense, in Goodbye America, the white male filmmakers speak for and represent not just Emma but the Filipinos in the film. And the same is true for the other Asian characters mentioned earlier. Their Western creators, playwrights, writers, and painters “spoke for and represented” the Asian woman and all the other Asian characters represented in their works.

The image of Emma as a prostitute in Goodbye America is a much more classy, refined, sophisticated version of the real-life prostitutes in Subic, Angeles, and P. Burgos in Makati. She was labeled “hooker” by the males many times in the film. The words “hooker” and “Filipina” are used to mean one and the same thing giving the impression that all Filipinas are whores or hookers one way or the other. John, who epitomizes the tough, rough, nationalistic US marine sets the tone of the film when he says to his buddies Hawk and Paul in one of the first scenes of the film, “You boys are buying me a woman tonight. Which boy is paying the bar fine?” and they drive through the main red light district of Olongapo as a caboodle of prostitutes waiting for clients wave at them and try to get their attention. Clearly, these Filipina women are for sale plying their trade and catering to GIs as well as some American and European tourists. As mentioned earlier, prostitution in the Philippines became a major industry due to the presence of the US bases. American troops spend their rest and recreation time in the Philippines within the base area. The bases and the prostitution industry in the Philippines have been so intertwined as this situation has given way to many relationships between Filipinas and Americans and there have been many children born of these unions.

Prostitution, Exploitation and the Subaltern

Because the Philippines is a poor country, much exploitation has happened but it has been trivialized in a situation wherein survival on a day to day basis is of primary importance as many Filipinos live on a hand to mouth existence. Mary John Mananzan in her essay “Sexual Exploitation of Women in a Third World Setting” mentions that “in an underdeveloped, exploited country, women tend to bear the burden of double exploitation because of their sex” (104). And that “the most glaring form of sexual exploitation in an underdeveloped country is prostitution.” (106). It is the women who go out into the cities and work as maids or prostitutes. Both jobs offer situations for sexual harassment and sexual exploitation. For Mananzan there are several types of exploitation. She says that “even when done with the consent of the women, the fact that the consent is extracted, or even just conditioned, by a weakness or a position of disadvantage make the act an act of exploitation” (104). Mananzan compares the prostitute’s vulnerability with factory workers “who sell their labor value for economic survival” (105). She says that “the possibility of coercion in the exchange of values and the power of intimidation through superior strength make sexual exploitation doubly exploitative in situations that are compounded by economic, political and social
coercion and intimidation of the weak by the strong which is the situation in Third World countries” (105). These women, the prostitutes, the maids, the struggling factory workers, the poor and the marginalized from the formerly colonized Third World or less developed countries which Mananzan wrote about would be classified as “the subaltern.”

In the field of post-colonial studies, Gayatri Chakradavorty Spivak conceptualized “the subaltern.” The subject of the woman from the Third World as being doubly oppressed by the virtue of her being a woman and poor at that was the thesis of Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Hans Bertens in Literary Theory says that Spivak “has drawn our attention to that large majority of the colonized that has left no mark upon history because it could not, or was not allowed to, make itself heard. Millions and millions have come and gone under the colonial dispensation without leaving a trace: men, but even more so women. Since colonized women almost by definition went unheard within their own patriarchal culture, they were doubly unheard under a colonial regime” (211). Bertens adds that Spivak “employs the term (which derives from Gramsci) to describe the lower layers of colonial and postcolonial (or, as many would say, neo-colonial) society: the homeless, the unemployed, the subsistence farmers, the day laborers and so on” (212). Bertens explained that though Spivak spoke of the subaltern as the poor and the marginalized in general including males, Spivak focused

on the female subaltern, a very large...category among the colonized (and neo-colonized) that, she argues, has traditionally been doubly marginalized: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 1995b:28). (212)

In addition to this definition, Ashish Rajadhyaksha in “Realism, Modernism and Post-Colonial Theory” describes Spivak’s subaltern as “the tragic, eternally silenced subaltern figure whose own voice is always lost in a tumult of an invoked subject of oppression” (421). With regard to representation, Rajadhyaksha also notes that

Spivak distinguishes between two concepts of representation, in the sense in which the “people,” an absent collective consciousness often dispersed and dislocated as “subjects,” find a category of representatives (who sometimes betray them), versus re-presentation: the space for rhetoric, realism, “scene of writing”; radical practice should attend to this “double session of representations rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire.” (421)

With regard to Spivak’s objective and agenda, Hans Bertens writes that “This focus does not mean that she speaks for – or has the intention of speaking for – the female subaltern. Rather, she is motivated by the desire to save the female subaltern from misrepresentation” (213). It is this idea of the misrepresentation of the subaltern and
the stereotypes represented that is of interest to the writer in Orientalist films such as *Goodbye America* as there have been very few films tackling the interaction between the American, a former colonizer and the Filipinos, the formerly colonized or neo-colonized within the Philippine setting.

**The Virgin and Whore Stereotypes**

In the beach scene, John gets rough and sexually aggressive with Maria. She screams for help. When Hawk reprimands him and asks him to be careful as she’s just a “little girl,” John retorts “She’s not a little girl, she’s a hooker, they’re all hookers! You got that?” John is generalizing that all Filipinas women are hookers or prostitutes. When John was informed that Maria upon the prodding of Lisa had filed a sexual harassment complaint against John, he tells Paul: “There’s no way I’m getting canned for a bargirl with an attitude.” In reality, Maria is nor a bargirl and in fact a naïve, innocent, demure virgin, but for John he is pigeonholing her as a “hooker,” “bar girl” just because her sister Emma is a former bar girl. The film does not explain that this is a naval base town where bars and prostitution are the main business. Since, John is used to the idea that most of the women he meets are Filipina prostitutes and since Maria’s sister is the prostitute Emma, he assumes that all Filipinas are prostitutes or may not be career prostitutes but have the same behavior and would not complain about his rough and sexually forward ways. If there is the stereotype of the Filipina as a prostitute, there is also a reinforcement of the image of the Filipina as an innocent virgin. This film reinforces the good girl/bad girl dichotomy of Filipinas and women in general. Emma, the prostitute represents the bad girl. And both Lisa and Maria represent the good girl or virgin. The Filipina is either a virgin who you take seriously and eventually marry and who does not have sex with her boyfriend or admirer, or she is the extreme, the bad girl who is either a prostitute who has sex in exchange for money; or a woman who is promiscuous and who loosely has sex with several partners or lovers with no exchange of money involved. For the Filipinas represented in the film, there is no middle ground which is a woman who has sex with her admirer or partner simply because she wants to and simply because she is attracted to him and wants to experience sexual pleasure without coercion or without using sex as a means for social mobility.

According to Julia Woods in *Gendered Lives*, “Media have created two images of women: good women and bad ones. These polar opposites are often juxtaposed against each other to dramatize differences in the consequences that befall good and bad women” (281). In psychology, men who want to marry virgins with conservative values but at the same time want to have extramarital affairs with sexually exciting women are said to have the Madonna/Whore Complex. This male complex is also called the Pedestal/Gutter complex by Carol Botwin in *Men Who Can’t Be Faithful* (79-81). Wood says that men can be accepted as womanizers but female characters who are shown to have sexual lives are the exceptions to the rule as “good women” are more often represented as not sexually active (283).
If Maria is a naïve, young virgin, then Lisa is the older, wiser, focused, mature, career-oriented, conservative virgin. Lisa is more than conservative. She is a snob – in Filipino she would be called *suplada* or *isnabera* (snob) or *pakipot* (playing hard-to-get) or *mailap* (elusive). When Hawk tells Emma that he does not think Lisa is enthusiastic about him, Emma responds with “Well, you gotta make her hot!” Lisa is the old-fashioned Filipina type who needs to be chased, courted and wooed. The prostitutes who the GI’s are accustomed to, need clients in order to survive, to pay for their rent and to buy their meals. These prostitutes therefore exhibit more sexually aggressive behavior, chase and call the men as their “marketing strategy” to procure clients. The film says that there are two polar types of Filipina women: the prostitute; and either the prepubescent girl who is young and naïve or the “perennial virgin” seen in conservative, religious types of Filipinas. In the Hollywood films representing Asian women, they are portrayed either as evil, scheming vixens or as seductresses or as subservient lotus blossom types who you need to protect. Robyn Wiegman in “Race, Ethnicity and Film” quotes Eugene Franklin Wong’s “On Visual Media Racism” in explaining this binary stereotype: “For non-white females, the stereotype oscillates between nurturing, de-sexualized, loyal figure and a woman of exotic, loose and dangerous sexuality” (163). Nancy Kwan played both these stereotypes as the sweet, wholesome Chinese lotus blossom Linda Low in *Flower Drum Song* and as the sexy vixenish title character in *The World of Suzy Wong*. A recent personification of this binary of vixen and virgin in the portrayal of Asian women is seen in *Memoirs of a Geisha* where Sayuri (Zhiyi Zhang) plays the sweet virgin while Hatsumomo (Gong Li) represents the wicked vixen.

Maria plays the young, innocent virgin who is looking for a job in Olongapo. Lisa discourages her as the most available job for women in Olongapo is as a prostitute and she does not think that Maria fits into the scene in this city. Maria also asks Emma “Pero, Ate Emma, sa tingin mo ba makakakuha ako ng ‘Kanong boyfriend katulad mo?’ [Do you think I can get an American boyfriend just like you?]. Having an American or a European boyfriend epitomizes a better way of life and more money, so that many Filipinas aspire to marry an American or any foreigner who will take them out of this country. Also, many Filipinos’ idea of beauty is fair skin with Caucasian features and some women want to marry Caucasians specifically to have hybrid babies. In the film, Maria is sexually harassed by John in the beach. At first, she refused to sign the formal complaint when Lisa was prodding her to do so. But later in the film when Paul had doubts about marrying Emma, she got the courage to file a formal complaint against John. Julia Woods in *Gendered Lives* says that “Women are portrayed alternatively either as decorative objects, who must attract a man to be valuable, or as victims of men’s sexual impulses. Either way, women are defined by their bodies and how men treat them. Their independent identities and endeavors are irrelevant to how they are represented in media, and their abilities to resist exploitation by others are obscured” (290). In this film’s case, Maria is “the victim of the man’s sexual impulses” while Emma represents the “decorative object who must attract a man to be valuable.”

**The Spectator, the Spectacle and the “Gaze”**
In *Goodbye America*, the woman who is the middle ground of these two extreme types is the American girlfriend of Paul, Angela. Angela is clearly respectable, educated, intelligent and favored by his father Senator Bladon, but she is shown having sex with Paul when she visits him during the turnover ceremonies. She accompanies Senator Bladon as she works as his secretary and assistant. The scene is subtly lit as it shows Angela in virginal white panty and bra signifying purity lying on their bed before they make love. Angela’s pose is similar to the nude models in classical European paintings. This signifies that nice, good girls who you can take seriously, introduce to your mother and eventually marry can also enjoy sex – if they happen to be American or Western women. Right after this scene, Emma also has a body baring scene wherein her tanned body with just a white bra and panty signifying again purity is shown laying on a sofa. She is lying on her stomach with her back and buttocks area exposed and the camera pans her body from the head to the calf area. Emma is posed like a reclined “Odalisque” in the French paintings Ingres, Delacroix and like a Tahitian woman of Gaugin. These semi-nude scenes of Angela and Emma serve to cater to the “male gaze.” There are no hunky bodies of the US marines displayed in this film, they are quite clothed even in the beach scenes. But the film presents both Angela and Emma lying in bed in classical poses popularly used in European paintings and sculptures for centuries.

Julia Woods talks about these issues and says that “While men are seldom pictured nude or even partially unclothed, women habitually are” (291). John Storey explains this phenomena of the passive female image in An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture quotes Laura Mulvey and says that

> Popular cinema is structured around two moments: moments of narrative and moments of spectacle. The first is associated with the active male, the second with the passive female. The male spectator fixes his gaze on the hero (“the bearer of the look”) to satisfy ego formation, and through the hero to the heroine (“the erotic look”), to satisfy libido. The first look recalls the moment of recognition/mis-recognition in front of the mirror. The second look confirms women as sex objects. (141)

Storey explains that this focus on the female body “produces moments of pure erotic spectacle as the camera holds the female body (often fragmented) for the unmediated erotic look of the spectator” (142).

Once again, Patricia White quotes Laura Mulvey in “Feminism and Film.” Mulvey in her groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) took off from Freud’s scopophilia, which is the pleasure in looking (119). White paraphrases Mulvey and explains that “Dominant cinema deploys unconscious mechanisms in which the image of woman functions as signifier of sexual difference, confirming man as subject and maker of meaning” (119). Furthermore, White states that “Centered around the spectator’s and the camera’s look, cinema offers identificatory pleasure with one’s
on-screen likeness, or ego ideal (understood in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage), and libidinal gratification from the object of the gaze. The male spectator is doubly supported by these mechanisms of visual gratification as the gaze is relayed from the male surrogate within the diegesis to the male spectator in the audience. The woman, on the other hand, is defined in terms of spectacle, or what Mulvey described as to-be-looked-at-ness. As Mulvey observed, 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive /female’” (119).

The Filipino Pimp and the Illegibility of Ethnic Differentiation

If there is a prostitute, then there is usually a nightclub or a pimp behind her career. In Emma’s case, her pimp is Jimmy Cruz (Richard Joson). Emma owes Jimmy three thousand US dollars. Jimmy’s goal is to get Emma or her boyfriend Paul to pay him this amount of money. He hounds Emma in Ed’s bar, in the streets of Olongapo and later in the beach while she is frolicking with Paul. Here he pressures Emma to “cough up,” and says to Paul, “Ah, here he comes. Mr. Moneybags himself.” Paul refuses to give Jimmy the three thousand dollars and they get into a brawl. John comes to Paul’s rescue and shoots Jimmy. Paul and John carry his dead body in a boat and they dump it in the middle of the sea. Emma is a witness to the murder and to the disposal of the corpse. What is odd in Jimmy’s portrayal of a pimp is that he mimics African American mannerisms and speech patterns. He is cool, smooth, hip. He speaks English very well with an accent which sounds African-American in origin. Again, like Emma, he is portrayed as much more sophisticated than the regular pimps in Olongapo or anywhere else in the Philippines.

It is interesting to note that the African American male as a pimp, as a drug dealer and as a rapist are popular negative stereotypes in Hollywood cinema. As mentioned by Robyn Wiegman, Griffith’s Birth of a Nation was a landmark film in creating the African American male stereotype as a rapist lusting after white women. Wiegman in “Race, Ethnicity and Film” says that “Many of the stereotypes of non-white men that film critics have analyzed – the Mexican greaser, the Native savage, the African American beast – can be found in the silent film era, which coincides historically with widespread political conversation about immigration, racial equality, and the meaning of being ‘American’” (161). The silent film era also coincides with the early colonial years of the US in the Philippines. The Philippines was bought by the US from Spain in 1898. Film scholar Nick Deocampo mentioned the existence of a studio of Thomas Edison here in Manila during the silent film era which created silent movies intended for the US mainland. These silent films cast Filipino males to portray African Americans. The issue here in Jimmy’s mimicry of an African American male is one of “ethnic differentiation.” Wiegman in the same essay says that

Other immigrant groups in the United States have not fared as well in the popular imaginary as have those of European descent. Asians, for instance, have long sought the kind of differentiation within race categorization which would
recognize specific ethnicities, but instead the popular conception melds together the disparate histories, cultures and languages of those from East Asia (Korea, China and Japan), and Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines and the Indonesian archipelago.)… The illegibility of ethnic differentiations is the norm for those groups pre-existing the arrival of European colonialisits in the Americas. Film scholarship on Native Americans, like the movies themselves, have rarely paid attention to the specificities of tribal cultures.... Rarely are tribal languages part of the Hollywood text. (160)

During the early part of this century, Filipino men were brought to the US mainland, Alaska and Hawaii to work as farmhands in sugar plantations, apple pickers, pineapple pickers, workers in salmon canneries. They provided cheap labor which took the place of positions formerly filled in by African American male slaves. As Filipino males have darker skin compared to the other Asians, and because they replaced African American males in the jobs that were traditionally associated with them, the US including Hollywood cinema applied this “illegibility of ethnic differentiations.” What can be seen in Jimmy’s African American male mimicry as a pimp is the blurring of “ethnic differentiations” which can be traced through the relationship between the same roles that Filipino males and African American males portrayed in US society in the first quarter if the 20th century. The writer believes that the portrayal of Jimmy mimicking an African American pimp was intentional and deliberate suggested by the director and the producer to give the role some flavor. The natural tendency of a Filipino actor portraying a Filipino is to act and talk like a Filipino would because you know the terrain and would like to create a realistic portrayal of the role. This artifice, this mimicry is not organic for a theater trained Filipino actor like Richard “Ebong” Joson. To a Filipino it is not realistic but contrived. But to a white American director, producer and scriptwriter, the Filipino is probably perceived in the same light as an African American hence the “illegibility of ethnic differentiations.”

Interracial Relationship as Forbidden Romance

John also labeled Emma a “whore” when he warned John saying: “Do you trust Emma? She’s of the street. She’ll burn your ass. What about your father? You’ll give all that up for a whore?” Later in the film when Paul Bladon decides to marry Emma, his father Senator Bladon who is also in Subic to represent the US in the official turnover rites, presents him provocative pictures of Emma with her former GI boyfriends who all promised to marry her but who all left her as well. Senator Bladon has high hopes for Paul and tells him that he has a legacy to follow and a duty as he is a “Bladon”; and that he couldn’t possibly introduce Emma to the President in the White House saying “Mr. President here is my wife, a former prostitute.” Paul disobeyes his father. He ends his relationship with Angela and marries Emma instead. After the wedding rites as the newly wed couple marched out, Paul runs toward his father to protect him from John’s assassination attempt. Unfortunately, Paul dies from the shot meant for his father.
Emma is now Paul’s legal wife and she is pregnant with their child but she will not get to enjoy the married life with “a Bladon.”

As Julia Woods explained, she is a “bad girl” and she will have to experience the negative consequences of “being bad.” She is a former prostitute who will not fit into US society. This storyline wherein one of the lovers in an interracial romance dies is common to interracial relationships featured in film. The death or a tragedy breaks the chances of this interracial romance from prospering. Examples cited by Robyn Wiegman in “Race, Ethnicity and Film” are US films Broken Arrow (1950); The Savage (1953); Imitation of Life (1959); West Side Story (1961); A Man Called Horse 1970; and Jungle Fever (1991) (163). Robyn Wiegman adds,

Film studies scholars have interpreted the sexualization of race in Hollywood film as evidence of a much larger anxiety in American culture concerning interracial sexuality. After all, the democratic ideal of the ‘melting-pot’ brings into crisis the relationship between separatist cultures, languages, and sexual activity and the full force of integration which would reconfigure the family and romance along with national identity. Since their beginning, film narratives have been obsessively drawn to this crisis, rehearsing a variety of interracial configurations and concluding, almost always, that the cost of interracial sex is much too high. (163)

Other examples of this forbidden interracial romance which end in a death or tragedy which were mentioned earlier in the introduction are the opera by Puccini Madama Butterfly, and the West End musical Miss Saigon.

**Separatist Cultures vs. Integration in America**

In a heart-to-heart conversation with Paul, Ed, the ex-marine and the live-in partner of Lisa’s mother, discourages Paul from marrying Emma. In his monologue, he explains why this interracial romance will not work in an American setting. Ed says: “So, you buy a ring for US$ 400 and then you spend the rest of your life paying for it. Do you plan to stay here for the rest of your life?” Paul answers: “Of course not.” And the worldly-wise Ed says: “This place is just a theme park with the world’s greatest rides. The only difference between here and Disneyland is you don’t get to lay Minnie Mouse. Look, face it. She’s been working tricks and she got into a training brawl. Here, she’s the girl of your dreams and back there she’d be an embarrassment to you. Sure, maybe you really love her. But back there in the real world, her kind just don’t fit into your life.” Paul asks Ed: “Well, look at you and Anne?” Ed answers: “Do you want to live a life like this? Sure, but the point is you can’t take them home. Not these girls. It just won’t work. Either you live with her out here in her world or you forget it.”

In real life, there have been many GIs, and even multinational executives and Asian Development Bank executives, who have married Filipina prostitutes and maids
for their “subservience.” As a matter of fact, a Filipina journalist from Subic (whose name is withheld upon request) disclosed the information to the writer that she has worked with Michael D. Sellers, the producer of the film, and that he lived in Subic for quite some time and married a prostitute who he met in one of the bars there. They are now settled in California. Somehow these women were challenged by the idea of having a better life economically and were able to adjust and reinvent themselves. However, there is a “counter-prejudice” in the Philippines among the more educated classes of Filipinos and it is these who look down on foreigners and Americans who may not be very sophisticated or prominent or educated in their societies. Filipinos perceive these Americans as having such low taste in desiring Filipinas who have been or who are prostitutes. This is the “Filipino macho double standard mentality” and the hypocritical Catholic morality working here. Filipinos have a term “tayp ng foreigner” (type of a foreigner) to mean petite, dark skinned Filipinas with rough features who possess flirtatious, friendly, charming, accommodating personalities. Some men have a “Pygmalion Complex” and are thrilled to take the burden of teaching their “Galatea” who can be any lesser educated or any less mature, much younger woman the ways of the world. The Pygmalion and Galatea complex is based on the Greek myth of the sculptor Pygmalion who created a beautiful lifelike marble sculpture which he named Galatea. He fell in love with his perfect creation. The gods took pity on him and made his creation Galatea come alive as a human being to be his wife (Hamilton, 112-15). With regard to these types of relationships, there are also deeply imbedded power issues involved wherein the man is older, wealthier, more educated and white.

This “not fitting into US society” which Ed mentioned implies that Filipinos in general have their own cultural quirks which make them “Others” in the white culture dominated US society even if they are technically US citizens. Robyn Wiegman in “Race, Ethnicity and Film” defines ethnicity as “the means for differentiations based on culture, language, and national origins, race renders the reduction of human differences to innate, biological phenomena, phenomena that circulate culturally as the visible ledger for defining and justifying economic and political hierarchies between white and non-white groups” (161). And that “race and ethnicity as terms in film criticism are themselves products of a broader and highly political discourse about power and privilege in the United States” (161). Ed’s statement casts doubt on Filipinos in general and questions their acceptability in US society. As mentioned earlier during the discussion on “ethnic differentiation,” many early Filipino immigrants in the United States were not very educated and were sent as laborers in sugar farms and pineapple farms in Hawaii, salmon canneries in Alaska and to other plantations in the mainland. We replaced the African American black slaves in providing cheap labor in the United States in the early part of this century. For Ed, being culturally different, and racially having dark skin from a different culture, Filipinos somehow do not fit into the white dominated mainland.

The Philippines as a Theme Park with No Rules and Laws for Americans
Indeed Ed’s description of the Philippines “as a theme park with the world’s greatest rides” – with Subic in Olongapo, Zambales, and with Clark Field in Angeles, Pampanga – is a place where they can be wild, raunchy and undisciplined. The latest example of American GI madness in Olongapo is the rape of Nicole, a Filipina by six young, intoxicated GI’s who the Filipina met in a bar. The Filipina’s prudence and wisdom is in question considering she went to this bar unaccompanied. She went drinking with strangers. She rode with the strangers in their van. Whether it be with Filipino male strangers or with white Western male strangers, she got drunk, her judgment lapsed and she did not consider her personal safety. And, the GI’s were in a “we’re in a theme park with the world’s greatest rides mode” in the Philippines. And Olongapo was their “theme park full of great rides” complete with bars and prostitutes. The Philippines being “a theme park,” the Americans here whether GI’s or civilians let their hair down and they break the social rules, the sexual taboos which otherwise they cannot do in their country as they are expected to behave in acceptable Puritan ways and they are expected to comply with the stringent rules and laws in their society. Justice is swift in their society and crimes especially rape and sexual harassment get the corresponding punishment. Even minor crimes like drunk driving are punished and there are “alcohol breath tests” administered by cops for suspected drunk drivers in the wee hours of the morning. But being in the Philippines creates an illusion for these Americans that they can do anything and be anything and not get reprimanded for their misbehaviors and pecadillos or convicted for their criminal acts. While the US Bases were still present in the Philippines, an incident with a trigger happy serviceman inspired the film directed by Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara starring Nora Aunor entitled “Minsa’y Isang Gamu-gamo.” The tackled the “accidental” killing of a Filipino who tried to enter the Bases because they thought he was a wild boar. From this movie comes Nora Aunor’s famous lines, “My brother is not a pig!”

The bases are no longer in the Philippines, but the Philippine government has the “Visiting Forces Agreement” with the US which allows American troops to be sent in the case of threats of terrorism and threats to the security or to aid the Philippines in times of disasters. Some American troops are currently deployed in the southern part of the Philippines where there are terrorist threats and Muslim rebels and extremist groups.

An Analogy between Emma the Prostitute and the Philippines

Ann, Lisa’s mother and Ed’s live-in partner overhears this conversation between Ed and Paul. When Ed realized that Ann was there all along, he comforts her and says: “Hi there. You know I love you. I was just talking to the kid. What’s the matter?” Ann says: “Why are you all so weak? All of you.” Ed answers: “You don’t understand.” Ann says: “That’s the problem Ed. I do understand.” In the film, Emma is technically Ed’s step-daughter and yet, he discouraged Paul from marrying her. Filipinos in general would want to help out their family and siblings in whatever way they can be it through financial support or through connections. In this case, he would be accused of being “walang pakisama” (does not know how to get along) and “hindi ka-pamilya” (not acting like a family
member) and “walang malasakit” (no concern or compassion). These are traits which Filipinos rich and poor alike value. Ed’s undermining Ann and assuming that she does not understand is the way many Western men underestimate the lesser educated Filipinas' capacity to feel, to comprehend bigger issues. It actually reflects a lack of sensitivity and compassion in the Westerner. They can be frank and honest with no concern for your feelings. Also, they assume that the Filipina does not have a good command of the language and therefore is dense to the issues.

This lack of sensitivity is reflected in the US political style of bullying smaller, weaker and poorer countries. This also applies to America’s patronizing stance towards the Philippines and the perception of the Philippines as inferior or weak or desperate and at their mercy needing the US to survive politically and economically. The Philippine government should have demanded more rent for the US bases like other countries that host the bases but it could never seem to drive a hard bargain. The Philippines always ended up selling itself short. An analogy to the Philippine – US relationship is Emma and Paul’s romance. Emma also felt short-changed when she thought that Paul was also going to abandon her just like her other GI boyfriends who used her for free sex when she became an “official girlfriend” in exchange for the promise of marrying her. She confided in Maria that Lisa was right all along regarding Americans and says of them: “Pinapa-asa nila tayo sa wala. Tapos sa bandang huli, anong mayroon tayo? Wala. Tingnan mo ako” [They make us hope for nothing and in the end, what do we have? Nothing. Look at me.]. She was a fool to forego her payments as a prostitute in exchange for being turned into a girlfriend and for the dream of marrying an American and moving to the USA to have a better life. This issue of the bar fine was brought up by Hawk in a discussion with Paul when they were at a bar. Hawk said: “All I know is the only difference between Emma and these girls here is that you don’t have to pay the bar fine anymore.” Sometimes, the American GI’s use this tactic of making the prostitute an official girlfriend and promise to marry her so that he could take her out and have sex with her without the bar fine involved. Emma said that Lisa called this “an American promise” so don’t buy a wedding dress yet. The Philippines as a nation has hoped for much US aid to help the economy but has received nothing much but political meddling, prostitution of women and the buying of favors of Filipino politicians for a prolonged stay of the US Bases for a low rental fee as Filipinos are “little brown brothers and the US has helped us in many ways.”

**Hegemony and English in the Philippines**

Lisa, who works for Mayor Gordon’s office, is critical of the US presence and the Americans in general. First of all, her GI American father left for the United Sates and did not take along her mother Anne and Lisa the baby. She feels that Ed will repeat this, close his bar, pack up his bags and leave Anne and their two little sons behind. In the first scene between Lisa and Ed, Lisa speaks to Ed in Filipino and asks him why he still does not speak any Filipino even if he has lived here for ten years. The situation here in the Philippines makes it convenient for Americans and also for other foreigners to
survive as many Filipinos speak English in varying degrees of proficiency. We were a US colony and our education was an area that they controlled. Today, much of our education in schools and universities is still conducted in English – or in Taglish. Countries like China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, or Vietnam have their own calligraphic writing and their own distinct languages that it makes it necessary for foreigners intending to work or live there to learn both the spoken and written language. In France, Spain, Germany, Russia, Italy, Greece, or Portugal for instance, not that many people speak English either. Again, it is necessary for foreigners wanting to live in these countries to learn their language to integrate into their society. The Philippines was structured in such a way that it made it convenient for the colonizers both the administrators and the businessmen to do their necessary work here with the Filipinos. Our major signs are in English. The major newspapers are also in English. But colonial necessity put aside, Filipinos are an auditory people and excel in music and languages. Some Filipinos speak a couple of dialects along with English and sometimes they also speak Spanish. When taught or when exposed to other languages, they learn quickly. Italians and Greeks are surprised at how well the Filipina maids speak Italian and Greek respectively. The Japanese are amazed at how the Filipina entertainers called “japayukis” who have been to Japan several times speak fluent Japanese. More often than not, the average American and even the highly educated ones know only one language – English. 

Lisa in a conversation with Hawk said, “I don’t hate Americans, I hate us loving America too much. You’re everywhere, in what we eat, in what we drink, in what we wear, in what we watch, even in what we think. Most of the time, we don’t even speak our own language. We speak some bastard half English, half Tagalog. For as long as you’re everywhere around us, we’ll never figure out who we really are.”

In Philippine postcolonial society, the hybrid or “bastard half English, half Tagalog” is an example of the mechanics of hegemony. According to John Storey in “Marxism” (from Cultural Studies and Popular Culture), “The concept of hegemony is used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to a condition in process in which a dominant class (in alliance with other classes or class factions) does not merely rule a society but leads it through the exercise of moral and intellectual leadership” (124). In the Philippines this can be seen in the language and in the general lifestyle and culture of the Filipinos. Lisa already mentioned in the film that we have absorbed both consciously and unconsciously the former colonizer’s American culture as a people. Both the widespread use of English and Taglish in the Philippines speak of a colonial past with America. The prolific Filipino writer F. Sionil Jose in his book We Filipinos: Our Moral Malaise, our Heroic Heritage wrote about the effects of colonization on language, “English, my borrowed language, brings with it a whole culture for now whether I like it or not, I have joined the mainstream of English letters. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Steinbeck – they have become part of my tradition, a tradition I refuse to accept for what I cling to is what I know, what I am, the village I have left and its implacable poverty” (43).
According to Javier Galvan, former director of Instituto Cervantes, Tagalog and the other Filipino dialects have incorporated over four thousand Spanish words into the language both as nouns and as verbs. There are more Spanish words integrated in Cebuano and Ilonggo and Hiligaynon than in Tagalog. Chabacano, a Creole language combining Spanish and Tagalog is spoken in Cavite. Zamboanga also has its own version of the Chabacano. Chabacano is the Spanish colonial version of the current vogue “Taglish” which is a combination of English and Tagalog. Apparently, there are different versions of “Chabacano” in various parts of the world which have been colonized by Spain and there are “Chabacano” conferences to unite the speakers and to study the language. Just as Spanish was negotiated in the colonies where it was spoken, there are also various ways by which English was negotiated in English speaking colonies. In the essay “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” Stuart Hall was made “Jamaican” by saying that “The subversive force of this hybridizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where Creoles, patois, and Black decenter, destabilize and carnivalize the linguistic domination of “English” – the nation-language of master discourse – through strategic inflections, reaccentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes” (714). John Storey from the same essay “Marxism” also explains this process of “negotiation” and also uses the Caribbean colonial experience as an example. Storey says that

What emerged was a transformed English; with new stresses, and new rhythms; with some words dropped, and new words introduced (from African languages and elsewhere). The new language is the result of a “negotiation” between dominant and subordinate cultures; a language marked by both “resistance” and “incorporation”; that is, not language imposed from above, nor a language which spontaneously had arisen from below, but a language that is the result of a hegemonic struggle between two language cultures involving both “resistance” and “incorporation.” (125)

Storey adds that “Because hegemony is always the result of ‘negotiations’ between dominant and subordinate groups, it is a process marked by both ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation’; it is never simply power imposed from above” (126).

English in Philippine society is often used as a barometer for a person’s level in society, and degree of intelligence. It is used as a social locator. People who speak impeccable English are perceived to be more intelligent, perceived to have been educated in better schools, and to have come from a wealthier social class. As most of the people nowadays do not speak perfect English, the creation of Taglish democratizes English and allows the Taglish speaker – who may not necessarily speak perfect English – to be acceptable. These days, it even becomes “cute” and “in” with the younger crowd to speak Taglish.

These days, the country’s leading source of employment are call centers where the employees go through English grammar lessons, American culture classes, and
American accent training. The Philippine Star (Oct. 7, 2006, p. 1) in an article by Mayen Jaymalin stated that “Labor Undersecretary for social protection Romeo Lagman said there are over a hundred call centers nationwide, which currently employ some 175,000 young workers. Lagman said the Philippines is now the world’s leading manpower provider for call centers but the government is working for the hiring of more Filipinos in the sector.” In terms of sourcing out cheap labor for call centers worldwide, the Philippines would be ideal as the country already has an exposure to American English and the American way of life.

Mimicry of the American Way of Life

Filipinos have always copied the “American way of life” and have always fancied imported American products – food, chocolates, clothes, shoes, toiletries, toys. Long before these American fast food franchises and the malls, “PX” items meaning American made products such as toiletries, food items, cigarettes, candies and chocolates, clothes and accessories and appliances could be purchased in areas close to the US Bases. The Filipino colonial mentality and globalization and our trade relationships with the US has made it easy and almost obligatory for the multinational US franchises to enter the Philippines. Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Burger King, Kenny Rogers, Shakey’s, Pizza Hut, Dunkin Donuts, Mister Donuts, Taco Bell, Starbucks, Seattle Coffee, 7-11 are but a few famous franchises which are widely available in the Philippines today. Toby Miller in the essay “Hollywood and the World” describes globalization and the Ford Motor Company’s corporate motto as “‘To be a multinational group, it is necessary to be national everywhere.’ And General Motors translates its ‘hot dogs, baseball, apple pie, and Chevrolet’ jingle into ‘meat pies, football, kangaroos, and Holden cars’ in Australia” (377). This shows the use of specialized advertising to make the American product fit into a particular country niche market. This can clearly be seen in the television and print advertising of McDonald’s, Coke, 7-Up and Pepsi here in the Philippines. It is a good sign that there are Filipino competitors who also boast of quality products which compete with these American brands such as Jollibee, Greenwich Pizza, Chow King, Andok’s, Figaro Coffee, Tapa King, Chicken Bacolod, Max’s, Goldilock’s and Red Ribbon. Europe for example, has these American franchises too but not in the same breadth as the Philippines. Even the American Mall which is non-existent in Europe due to their patronizing small labels and boutiques; and little neighborhood delis and coffee shops has become a monolithic institution in Philippine society. Malling around and hanging out in malls as a group and as a family and “midnight madness” shop-till-you-drop sales promos have become part of the Filipino way of life. Considering that the Philippines has many economic problems and is considered Third World, it is surprising how the Filipinos have taken American consumerism to a higher level. And this is not a good sign. The Filipinos are a spending people and not a saving people. This “American way of life” promotes credit card use which is glamorized debt. It promotes status symbols and keeping up with the Joneses. It promotes conspicuous consumption and spending beyond one’s means. Filipinos continue with a “save money for the fiesta and go broke” attitude. Consumerism has become a family preoccupation and obsession in a
mall. Now, kiddie birthday parties almost always have to be in McDonald's or Jollibee. Studies have also shown that there are more obese Filipino children these days. Filipinos are still on the honeymoon stage with regard to the use of credit cards, fast food franchises and the mall culture. The United States of America is also the most favored place for travel purposes and for permanent relocation. Both rich and poor families have at least one relative residing in the United States. Douglas Kellner, "Hollywood Film and Society," says that "To some extent globalization equals Americanization, and Hollywood film is an effective arm of media culture to sell the 'American way of life'" (361).

Today in the US, there are many health studies which link heart disease, diabetes and obesity with fast food. These studies discourage consumers from eating food from fast food franchises which are high in calories and have much chemical preservatives, refined sugar, and cholesterol. Even former President Bill Clinton talked about his latest pet project in Ladies’ Home Journal (November 2005) which is fighting obesity and over eating in children as he himself was a fat child who grew up with an obese grandmother. Also, there are more newsletters and books on “downshifting” and “simple living” and “anti-consumer movements” which all attack the consumerist ways, conspicuous consumption, spending beyond one’s earning potential and the debt promoting use of credit cards. F. Sionil Jose says that

Indeed, it is much easier for a colonized people to inherit the vices – not the virtues – of their conqueror. From the Spaniards, we should have imbibed urbanidad [politeness, manners], their sense of delicadeza [finesse, delicateness, refinement], and moral amor propio [self-esteem]. No, we got from them the arrogance, the cruelty, the compulsion to authoritarianism – all the sins of the Inquisition that had warped the Spanish character. From the Iberians, too, we inherited the disdain for manual labor. From the Americans we should have inherited the work ethic, thrift, the democratic ethos. Since the shibboleths of freedom were dinned into us in grade school, such values should have characterized our institutions. No, from the Americans we got megalomania and the worst of the mercantile ethic which is a blight on our economic life today. (22-23)

F. Sionil Jose’s incisive observation of the Filipinos imitating the negative characteristics of their former colonizers is what Homi Bhabha calls “mimicry.” Hans Bertens in “Postcolonial Criticism and Theory” from Literary Theory quotes Bhabha’s definition of “mimicry” as “the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice or under duress, will repeat the colonizer’s ways and discourse” (208).

Even in Philippine pop culture, local singers emulate American talent. There are local Frank Sinatras, Elvis Presleys, Whitney Hustons, Mariah Careys, Madonnas and Britney Spearses. The Filipinos being naturally musical and auditory have a talent for mimicking these foreign pop stars and are able to perform a wide range of musical styles.
The country exports musicians and singers all over Asia. The main performers in international cruise liners sailing through America, the Caribbean and Latin America, the Mediterranean, Europe and in Scandinavian ferries are Filipino musicians. The naturally prolific musical talent of Filipino musicians is utilized in doing cover versions of American and international top 40 hits functioning like a human juke box or a human i-Pod. Not to mention that with versatility comes cheaper talent fees compared to their American and European counterparts. F. Sionil Jose’s advice to Filipinos is “We should cut ourselves off from the stifling cultural influence of the United States and work out a culture truly our own. I say this although I write in English – a colonial language – with an excessive colonial baggage” (69). F. Sionil Jose is an example of a Filipino postcolonial writer as he writes mainly in the English language.

The fact that Lisa is aware of the fact that Filipinos are so influenced by America makes her an example of the emerging nationalistic consciousness. She is consistent with her choice to stay in the Philippines as a volunteer to look after the bases after the pullout even if in the end Ed offered to take her with her mother Anne and her two half-brothers. Lisa represents the ideal, as she is aware of the effects of colonization and she chooses to stay and help rebuild Subic in whatever way she can. Lisa’s choice of turning down Ed’s offer to take her to America together with her mother and two half brothers is a tough act to follow. There is a diaspora of Filipinos from various sectors of society who have chosen to leave this country in the hope of greener economic pastures in whatever country which can offer them higher wages and better social security. But this cultural phenomenon seen in the Philippine situation which Lisa pointed out is what postcolonial studies hopes to explain. Robert Stam in Film Theory quotes Gauri Viswanathan in his definition of postcolonial studies as “the study of the cultural interaction between colonizing powers and the societies they colonized, and the traces that this interaction left on the literature, arts, and human sciences of both societies” (292).

**America as a Superpower and Neo-Colonizer**

If Lisa represents, the colonized person with an awareness of the effects of colonization in his or her culture, then John represents the mind of the colonizer and also the extreme right wing Republican American and the Alpha male. John seems out of date in the Philippine setting as an “American colonizer” but in a global setting he represents the bullish aggression to further America’s economic and political concerns as exemplified in Republican George W. Bush Jr. and his father before him George Bush Sr. who both invaded Iraq. The Bush family has long been involved in the oil business and maintains close connections with the Middle East especially with the Saudi Arabia royal family and the controversial and wealthy Bin Laden clan as stated in their biographies in the international movie database website www.us.imdb.com. The database also stated “Using his father’s connections, Bush Jr. became a millionaire twice over through Middle Eastern oil projects.” The relationship of the Bush family with the Middle East, and the friendship with the Bin Laden clan and the Bush business interests in oil was
also revealed by Michael Moore in his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The supporters of
the Bush administration are not the multi-cultural Californians from Los Angeles or San
Francisco or the New Yorkers and not the ethnic minorities, they appeal to white
dominated Midland America. America currently does not have “colonies” but it is a
“superpower” who wields power globally. Also, America has transformed “colonization”
in terms of business spawning the globe and is seen in the presence of multi-national
companies and American franchises. This is the new kind of “acceptable imperialism” or
neo-imperialism done through legal international business. Edward Said mentioned in
*Orientalism* that

ideas, culture, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without
their force or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. To
believe that the Orient was created – or, as I call it, “Orientalized” – and to
believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be
disingenuous. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of
power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony, and is quite
accurately indicated in the title of K.M. Panikar's classic *Asia and Western
Dominance*. (5)

In the film, John tells the female Special Agent Danzig, “Right here where you’re
staying, there used to be a mountain 1,300 feet high. America said, ‘You’re in my way.’
And removed it. An entire mountain. That is the kind of country we used to be.” Bush
Senior attacked Iraq during his term in 1989-93. Bush Junior attacked Iraq a few years
ago. America has not changed as it is pushing its weight around and waging war for their
personal interests. And yet with their ineptness at dealing with their national disasters
such as 9/11 or the New Orleans hurricane Katrina, you wonder how this “Great Nation”
as they like to call themselves failed in this area.

When John gets jailed as he is the main suspect for murdering Emma’s pimp
Jimmy, he yells at Police Officer Jess Santiago (Raymond Bagatsing), “You little brown
shit! This is America!” And Santiago responds with, “This is my country! This is my jail!
And you are my prisoner!” This scene represents the bullying American colonial master
mentality or the white race superiority still at work. And Santiago shows the Filipino
gaining self-respect and getting empowered to stand up for Filipino independence. He
symbolizes the nationalist sentiments of the groups wanting to oust the US bases at that
time. When Mary John Mananzan discussed prostitution and the US bases in her essay,
she mentioned that only a minority of the Filipinos were really clamoring for this
political independence and ousting of the bases US bases. The human rights and leftist
groups and nationalistic statesmen like Lorenzo Tañada, Jose W. Diokno and Jovito
Salonga were at the frontlines of this movement.

Special Agent Danzig’s response to John’s statement that America could once
remove mountains in Subic is, “People here want us to go. You have to respect that.”
Many Filipinos still believe that an American presence is beneficial to the country. When
the cop Jess Santiago told Special Agent Danzig that he was certain that John was guilty of murdering Jimmy Cruz the Pimp, he challenged her saying, “I’m willing to bet my month’s salary.” Special Agent Danzig condescendingly taunted him with “Yours or mine?” Filipino policemen do not earn big salaries and it is common knowledge that graft and corruption are rampant among their ranks. This emphasizes the disparity, the big gap in the standard of living between the US and the Philippines; the colossal difference between the buying power of the dollar and the peso.

John attempted to assassinate Paul’s father Senator Bladon. Before shooting, he accused the Senator with, “You’re selling us out. Taking what America paid for and giving it away.” Senator Bladon responds with, “I’ve done a lot of things but I’ve never sold out my country. You want to fight for America, then put down that gun.” Then he shoots but instead shoots Paul accidentally as he tries to protect his father. After the shooting, John says, “It’s all about power.” In the beginning of the film John tells Hawk, “America, raw power. Power. Look what we’re doing, just giving it away without a fight.” Hawk says, “Maybe they’ll (the Filipinos) put it to good use.” John responds “I got loyalty to America and the Navy.” Later in another scene in a bar, the American flag was removed and replaced with the Philippine flag with the American flag placed below the Philippine flag, John gets upset and says to Hawk, “Look at what they’re doing to our flag. I can’t believe they’re doing this. If my dad was here I can’t even tell you what he’d do. Look at them, they’re walking all over us as if they own us.” John sounds bizarre and is a caricature of the “redneck politically conservative extreme right-wing Republicans.”

But if one looks at America and its bullish global political and business stance, his reactions do not sound bizarre after all. Another caricature comes to mind, the cartoon character Ralph, the vigilante in the early 1970s cartoon series “Wait Till Your Father Gets Home.” Ralph carried a rifle, was always watchful, and wore a Vietnam veteran’s uniform as he feared that the “Commiss” would invade America. Now that communism is dead and the “Commiss” are no longer a threat with Cuba as the only communist country, America has found a new bogey man – and that is Iraq, the Moslem terrorists, and the Middle East. John symbolizes the extreme right wing Americans who do not come from the cosmopolitan, liberal and multi-racial towns like New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago or Miami but the Republicans who supported George Bush Senior and George Bush Junior. Inner America is xenophobic, white-dominated and politically conservative and most in this area support the Republicans and not the more liberal Democrats. John is right, it really is all about power and it entails aggression and violence to keep this power.

Colonialism is dead – in its original high-handed implementation. It has been reinvented to not just have power over individual nations that were chosen to be colonized in the colonial style of the 18th, 19th and the early part of the 20th century, but to use more acceptable means like international business, globalization and diplomacy. This relationship of power is also visible in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, and between the Orient and the West or the Occident, or
between America and the developing countries. Said calls this power of the West over the East as “the formidable structure of cultural domination and specifically for formerly colonized people” (25). Said also explains Orientalism in relation to diplomacy, colonization and authority over countries and says “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3).

Hawk in the film, on the other hand represents this “reinvented imperialism.” He is an officer and a gentleman – but still working within the U.S Navy protecting American political and business interests. When the African American Commander Hamilton promotes Hawk as his executive officer in the next post after Subic, it showed the involvement of the cultural or ethnic minorities in protecting this power. Incidentally, Special Agent Danzig is also portrayed by an African American actress. Commander Hamilton tells Hawk with regard to John’s refusal to let go of the bases: “Sometimes change is a hard thing to take off.” Unlike John, Hawk is more flexible in working within the parameters of American power and neo-colonialism.

The use of African Americans in positions of power in the person of Commander Hamilton and the female Special Agent Danzig shows political correctness in this day and age in the US. After all the Republican President George Bush Jr. placed African American Condoleezza Rice as his Defense Secretary. Rice started as a Democrat and later moved to the Republican Party. Before working with the Bush Administration, she was part of the Board of Directors of several multinational companies including the oil company Chevron. In America, you can succeed if you are ethnic, if you work within the system of keeping and protecting the American way of life and American interests. And more especially if you have conservative politics, the better for the white right wing majority who hold most key positions in government to think that you deserve to be in America and deserve a seat in the higher echelons of power with them. To be truly American and loyal to America would entail joining them in their acts of violence, domination and neo-colonization. It is interesting to note that many of those drafted into the Vietnam War were African Americans and Hispanic Americans. And those drafted into the Iraq war of George Bush Senior and George Bush Junior had among them many Filipino Americans aside from the African Americans and Hispanic Americans. White-dominated America sends its colored citizens to war to defend its turf and capitalist interests. But when it comes to protecting or helping their communities highly populated by African Americans like New Orleans in the Katrina hurricane disaster, the American government displays inefficiency and neglect.

The White Alpha Male and the Independent Woman Stereotype

John in the film does not just represent the colonial power of America and the aggression in males which has been represented in many films, television shows and
also in MTV. In the early part of the film with their plan to hit the bars and take out a prostitute, John, Hawk, and Paul drive to Olongapo speeding. The car almost kills a child. John shoots a gun in the air to scare off the Filipinos who are shown carrying pipes ready to fight with the three navy men. This early, John’s tendency to be aggressive and violent is displayed. In the film, John commits rash and aggressive acts like shooting a gun in the air to intimidate Filipinos, shooting beer cans on the beach for fun, sexually harassing Maria, slugging men in prison when he escapes, attempting to assassinate Paul’s father Senator Bladon but instead shoots Paul, keeping Lisa as hostage.

This aggression in media is often associated with males and not with females with the males featured as the aggressor and the females as the victims according to Julia Woods in *Gendered Lives*. Woods says that

Portrayals of women as sex objects and men as sexual aggressors often occur in music videos as shown on TV and many other stations. Typically females are shown dancing provocatively in scant and/or revealing clothing as they try to gain men’s attention (Texier, 1990). Frequently, men are seen coercing women into sexual activities and/or physically abusing them. Violence against women is also condoned in many recent films. R. Warshaw (1991) reported that cinematic presentation of rapes, are not presented as power motivated violations of women but rather as strictly sexual encounters. Similarly, others have found that male dominance and sexual exploitation of women are themes in virtually all R- and X-rated films, which almost anyone may now rent for home viewing (Cowan, Lee, Levy and Snyder 1988; Cowan and O’Brein 1990). These media images carry to extremes long-standing cultural views of masculinity as aggressive and femininity as passive. They also make violence seem sexy (D. Russell, 1993). (291)

Lisa was held hostage by John. When Hawk tells John, “Do what you gotta do. I’m untying her. She’s not part of this mission.” John replies: “She’s got everything to do with this.” Lisa never liked John and she expressed this dislike. She never approved of him dating Maria and she told him to keep away from her. Lisa knows her rights as a woman. She stood up against sexual harassment as she repeatedly prodded Maria to file the sexual harassment complaint against John. She has anti-American sentiments. She must be “tamed.” She is neither a sex object nor a victim. Therefore she is held hostage by John, the main male aggressor. For Julia Woods Lisa would be classified as the independent woman. And because she is not sexual or a sex object, she would also be described by Woods (“Gendered Lives”) as a “non-woman who is represented as hard, cold, aggressive – all of the things a good woman is not supposed to be” (282).

Hawk came into John’s hideout to rescue Lisa. But Lisa was able to free herself and she gets Hawk’s gun and shoots John on the leg. She could have shot John – and killed the villain, her kidnapper, the attacker of her sister, the arch right wing vigilante. This would have been the ideal feminist and nationalist ending. But no, the hero had to
be male – and American. As the writer explained earlier through citations from John Storey and Patricia White wherein both authors quoted Laura Mulvey, this is for the purpose of the male audience or “spectator” identifying with the active male as females are supposed to be passive whose sole purpose is to be a “spectacle” or to be looked at. As Storey explained, the active hero is the bearer of the look and satisfies male ego formation while the heroine or woman provides the erotic look and satisfies the male libido. Added to this Woods mentions that a recurring theme in media representations is the portrayal of men as “competent authorities who save women from their incompetence” (286) and “showing women who need to be rescued by men” (287). In this case it is made specific for the hero and the rescuer to be a “white male.” If this were to be analyzed from Said’s perspective, this can be explained as the Asian/Oriental/colonized is a feminine energy and therefore passive whether male or female while the Westerner/colonizer is a masculine energy and therefore active and aggressive.

During one of the first scenes between Hawk and John, John described the Japanese samurai “seppuku” or suicide through a knife which he by the way possesses. And should the samurai fail to kill himself, the best friend is expected to kill him to “save his honor.” In this case, the filmmakers used Japanese samurai codes of war and honor which the Japanese reinvented during World War II to bring honor to the soldiers fighting for Japan, to justify John’s “right wing, sexist vigilante behaviors.” Also, Hawk explained to Lisa John’s childhood upbringing as a soldier. When she asked why they hung out together, Hawk answers, “It’s mostly training. When it’s real I want him with me. You gotta understand a guy like John. From day one, he was raised to be a soldier. So if he has nothing to fight against, he’s like a fish out of water.” Many fathers with a military or police background tend to bring the “discipline” or “verbal, emotional and sometimes physical abuse” which they were used to in the military into their domestic lives. John also remembered his childhood and said, “My dad, that son of a bitch. He made me sing this everyday (pertaining to God Bless America- national anthem of the USA being played in the background). He’d make me salute the flag everyday with his drunk ass in the front lawn. He spent his whole life making an American out of me. Look where I am now.” In the end John blames his twisted, militarized upbringing for what has become of him. Here he is expressing what popular psychology calls “inner child issues.” The filmmakers still want John to appear sympathetic to the audience by making him seem like a victim of an implied child abuse as a child of an alcoholic. He is therefore a virtuous but misguided nationalistic American brought up to defend and uphold the American way of life. Hawk finds out after he shoots and kills John that he was not armed with a bomb as they thought. This makes John seem either like a “noble, brave vigilante” or “a total madman, a lunatic of a (neo)colonial master.”

The Filipino Politician and American Diplomacy

This brings me to the final part of this critique, the representation of Filipino politicians, bureaucrats and technocrats portrayed by Mayor Richard “Dick” Gordon who plays
himself in this cameo role. Also included is the interaction between the (neo)colonizer and the (neo)colonized as seen in the encounter between Mayor Gordon and the Americans and Senator Bladon. On the other hand, Senator Bladon represents the government of the USA.

In a cocktail, Senator Bladon states, “We can see a new relationship with this country.” And Mayor Gordon answers, “Partners.” Before the official turnover of the Bases, Senator Bladon chides Gordon with: “When you’ve been a houseguest for the better most part of the century, maybe it’s time to go home.” Gordon responds with: “It’s going to be a new era in our relationship. It’s going to be a new relationship based on mutual trust and of trade, no longer aid.” Senator Bladon adds: “We have to get used to the changes whether we like it of not.” Gordon ends with: “These changes will challenge us. It will require a great part of the history of the alliance to make it happen.” Senator Bladon alludes to America and the US Bases being overstaying houseguests who have abused, used and taken advantage of the hospitality of their host, the Philippines for so many years with no protest from the doormat of a host country. True to form, Gordon kowtows to the old colonial master. He is the quintessential “little brown brother” stereotype. As far as non-white stereotypes are concerned he is classified under the “castrated male.” Robyn Wiegman in “Race, Ethnicity and Film” described the binaries for non-white males as “either of a sexually aggressive masculinity that threatens white womanhood or of an effeminate and castrated male” (163). Filipino politicians are lions with their compatriots but kittens with American politicians.

The terms “partnership,” “mutual trust and of trade,” “it will require a great part of the history of the alliance to make it happen” allude to a continuing of the status quo of bowing and kowtowing to US demands for open markets and globalization and accommodating US business in the Philippines. The key words from the American side are “a new relationship with this country,” “we have to get used to the changes” means the reinvention of America’s colonial stance into a (neo)colonial stance which is more economic in nature. But for this economic preferential treatment towards America to happen, political and economic pressure on the Philippines is inevitable. There is no such thing as a free lunch and there are always strings attached. As far as America is concerned, whether a liberal Democrat or a right wing conservative Republican, American interests come first. As John kept on repeating: “America, raw power,” “It’s all about power.” Political power and economic power go hand in hand. America wields power through domination and through this domination, America can use force and pressure to attain its economic goals to preserve and further “the American was of life” of having cheap goods and services at the expense of cheap labor and materials from its former colonies and less developed countries. In the case of Gordon, he seems very willing to be manipulated by US power represented by Senator Bladon. Mayor Gordon is not in the least bit skeptical or wary or fed up with his overstaying houseguest. In fact, he is a cockeyed optimist peering behind rose colored glasses seeing cute stars and stripes. In this respect, he is just like most Filipinos. Gordon represents most Filipinos’ trust, respect, awe, fascination and idolatry of its former colonizer the USA in the midst
of exploitation and Machiavellian, Capitalist designs wherein Filipino politicians and businessmen are sometimes an accomplice and a partner in crime. Hans Bertens in the chapter “Postcolonial Criticism and Theory” states that,

For Said, Orientalism – this Western discourse about the Orient – has traditionally served hegemonic purposes. As we have seen, Antonio Gramsci thought of “hegemony” as domination by consent – the way the ruling class succeeds in oppressing other classes with their apparent approval. In Gramsci’s analysis it does so with culture: the ruling class makes its own values and interests central in what it presents as a common, neutral, culture. Accepting that ‘common’ culture, the other classes become complicit in their own oppression and the result is a kind of velvet domination. Orientalism, then, has traditionally served two purposes. It has legitimized Western expansionism and imperialism in the eyes of Western government and their electorates and it has insidiously worked to convince the ‘natives’ that Western culture represented universal civilization. (204)

Hans Bertens expounds on Said’s theory with, “So instead of the disinterested objectivity in the service of the higher goal of true knowledge that Western scholarship has traditionally claimed for itself, we find invariably false representations that have effectively paved the way for military domination, cultural displacement, and economic exploitation” (204). The purpose of many leading American academic institutions, the Ivy League universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Colombia etc. is to come up with research on business strategies, political science in the guise of “Asian Studies,” “Middle Eastern Studies,” “African Studies,” “Latin American Studies” and international diplomacy that would help American government and corporate agencies further the American goal of imperialism and globalization. To further this neo-colonialism, Said in Orientalism noted that Orientalism becomes a necessary tool for it is “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling in it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Said further describes specifically American Orientalism as a “kind of intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture” and he applies the term to “modern American social scientists” (19).

Conclusion

Mayor Gordon in his speech in the opening scene of the film is trying to convince the scowling, dour looking American men and women about the great future of Subic and the Philippines. His speech is: “We’ll pass this test of character, we will come out a new eagle in Asia ready to take on anybody in competition. And a new people will rise in victory. Come and join us. This is the new Philippines.” Twenty years have passed since the EDSA revolution in 1986 and the Philippines is as poor and as corrupt as ever. Foreign observers and leaders of other nations keep continue to ask “Why can’t the
Philippines get their [sic] act together?” Gordon’s speech is the stuff that every politician recites during his or her campaign. Social scientists who have studied the Philippine situation blame many factors: the colonial past from Spanish and American rule, the Marcos dictatorship which institutionalized corruption and cronyism and nepotism, the lack of national unity which can be traced from the divide and rule style of the Spanish colonizers. The tendency of most politicians is to outdo the last politician in graft and corruption and getting kickbacks. There is no unified national goal of creating “a great nation” the way America or Japan was created. This seems so alien to the Filipino psyche which is highly individualistic and family and clan oriented. Even the politicians think of their personal clans and families ergo the creation of the family dynasty wherein you have several members of a family holding various political positions simultaneously and generations of politicians. Politics becomes a family business. No leader has had the political will to break nepotism and the family dynasty of politicians both old and new in spite of the “anti-dynasty law.” No leader has had the political will to clean-up every nook and cranny of the country from the local government to the congress to the senate to the cabinet of graft and corruption. Most countries have some degree of graft and corruption but some countries are better at keeping it at a minimum and some countries are good at allowing these government funds to trickle and flow into the everyday lives of people in the form of social services and improved infrastructure for the general welfare of the public. In this country, pork barrels that come from the people’s taxes go unchecked and unaudited and are siphoned into the personal and family coffers of the local politicians. The colonizers have left, the bases have left, Marcos has been dead for many years and the Philippines has no excuse for consistently bungling up its act. The Philippines has been overtaken economically by its neighbors Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Many of their bureaucrats, scientists and educators came here during the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s and ironically studied in premiere academic institutions such as the University of the Philippines, International Rice Research Institute, and the Asian Institute of Management. And they are applying the principles of public administration, business, and rice production in their countries while the Philippines flounders in the black hole of economic and political limbo and political intrigue. In the film Goodbye America, the American guests drinking in Ed’s bar were discussing the future of the Philippines and they were unanimous in predicting a dismal future for the Philippines without the US presence and the US Bases in the Philippines. Likewise, Hawk raised the question “After the navy, what will be left?” Lisa replied, “Don’t underestimate us, Hawk.”

It is not the US presence that can solve the country’s ills and change the course of its history. Neither can a Pollyanna outlook solve it. When the subalterns emerge from their shell of invisibility and begin to feel a sense of ownership of this country and a sense of belonging to this country; when they start representing their group’s interests; only then can the majority of this nation composed mostly of the poor and marginalized move toward real change and claim victory over the old oppressive order led by a small political and business ruling class and the wealthy, oligarchic elite.
Works Cited


Christine Carlos is an M.A. Film candidate at the University of the Philippines Film Institute. She is interested in post-colonial and feminist issues. She is a Humanities graduate also at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Christine is an independent filmmaker with a special interest in animation. Her animation shorts are “Ubecat Goes into the Kaleidoscope” (cutout), “Dance Isadora!” (pen, ink, and crayon), and “I’ve Got Nine Lives” (claymation with live action), which was invited to the New York University Student Film Festival in 1999. She recently made a documentary on interracial relationships called “Island Fever” (2004). She is also a veteran stage actress who has worked with the finest theater, TV, and film directors in Manila. A professional jazz singer since her college days, she has performed in many hotels all over Asia and the Pacific. She is also an emcee for seminars and corporate and special events.
The Culture of Piracy in the Philippines

Tilman Baumgärtel
University of the Philippines Film Institute

Abstract

How does the Philippines, with its Westernized orientation and fairly easy linguistic access to Western (especially American) cultural products, cope with the profit-driven imperatives of recent digital technologies? Like many other countries that are marginalized by the West, a number of enterprising souls have introduced the irresistible delights of pirated products. Yet unlike these other countries, even those immediately neighboring the archipelago, video piracy in the Philippines flourishes in a decidedly old-school manner: no illegal downloads or broadcasts, strictly VCDs and now, DVDs. How and why this culture has emerged and flourished, and the reasons for its persistence, will be the concerns of this paper.
Not many people are scrupulous about smuggling when, without perjury, they can find any safe and easy opportunity of doing so. To pretend to have any scruple about buying smuggled goods...would in most countries be regarded as one of those pedantic pieces of hypocrisy....

– Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

Piracy is the best distribution system.

– Hong Kong film producer Manfred Wong, upon discovering his film, *Young and Dangerous IV*, on the black market, on his way to the premiere

When I started to teach at the Film Institute at the University of the Philippines in July 2005, I found a film collection of approximately 500 films on VHS tapes, around 100 VCDs¹ and a handful of DVDs. The videos were a sound collection of the international and local film canon, although the quality of many of the tapes was admittedly poor and there was a lack of Asian films. Yet, it was entirely possible to use the collection to teach classes on film history, film theory, experimental film, documentary etc.

Yet, only one year later, the situation has drastically changed. On the shelves of the film collection there is a quickly increasing number of brand-new DVDs, and many professors have started to use top-notch DVD versions of rare and off-beat movies from their own collection in class. Not only allow the brisk, new transfers on many of these DVDs for a more rewarding viewing experience for the students, but it is also noticeable that some professors have started to use more uncommon, contemporary, independent and cult films, and also more films from Asia.

Needless to say, most of these films stem from the markets for pirated DVDs, which have sprung up all over Manila. They are therefore obtained under circumstances that are deemed illegal in the Philippines and everywhere else in the region. The growing piracy business has made the Philippines one of the thirty-one countries worldwide, that supposedly have a larger market for illegal software than for commercial software (International Intellectual Property Alliance 2005). Similar numbers are not available for the film industry, yet it is safe to assume that media piracy has changed the way movies in the Philippines are distributed and consumed.

While the production hot spots of bootlegged DVDs and CDs seems to be in China, Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines were on the “priority watch list” of the International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA), another industry lobby group from the US, until very recently (International Intellectual Property Alliance 2005). While the Philippines have been dropped from this list in the beginning of 2006, news reports indicate that the movie pirates have a surprising influence. According to a recent newspaper report, film producers were forced to pay 200,000 pesos to movie pirates in

---

¹ Video CDs, a digital storage format that is extremely popular in some Asian countries, such as China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.
order to keep them from selling the entries to the Metro Manila Film Festival during the festival (San Diego 2006). According to the report, the Optical Media Board (OMB), the institution in charge of fighting piracy in the Philippines, was instrumental in brokering the deal between the producers and the pirates. The head of the OMB, former action-star Edu Manzano, told the newspaper: “I think we were just a bit more creative this time. We went back to the old dialogue. We really went deep inside [the pirates’ lair].”

That the head of the very institution that is supposed to go after pirates is publicly accused of cutting deals with these very pirates says as much about the situation in the Philippines as the fact, that Manzano never even felt obliged to deny this story. Despite the damning report he is still in office, the claims have never been investigated, and Manzano has never even felt to urge to comment. Under these circumstances, it is safe to assume that the piracy situation in the Philippines is not going to go away any time soon.

And it is not just because the organizations in charge of fighting piracy often seem to look the other way. The piracy market for DVDs, software and music is a boon to a number of very different groups of people. One group consists of the producers, traders and distributors of bootlegged media that have work and a relative reasonable income, which is not a given in a Third World country like the Philippines. One personal estimate has it that more than 100,000 people in the Philippines earn a living by being part of the supply chain for pirated media (Joel 2006).

Film buffs are happy to get their films from these illicit sources, because it gives them an unprecedented access to films. Many of the films that one can find in the pirate markets were never officially released via the legitimate distribution channels in the Philippines, which predominantly carry mainstream movie fare. For a very long time, being a film fan in the Philippines meant to either to limit oneself to the American and Filippino offerings in the cinemas and on video. Or it meant to pay a fortune for mail-ordered videos from abroad. Or it meant to have a well-organized circle of friends that would swap and copy the latest movies on VHS tapes. These days are over, for good.

Just as one example: Orson Welles’ classic *Citizen Kane* was never legally available in the Philippines, and people went to great length to see this movie. Now it is easy to find this film in pirate markets. While the majority of films, that are for sale on the pirate markets, are the same predictable Hollywood-blockbusters as in the regular stores, it is entirely possible to find “independent” films, classic movies all the way back to the silent area, cult films, and even occasionally experimental and documentary films (Cang et al. 2002). Examples of rare films that people discovered on the pirate market are a complete retrospective of the works of German art house director Rainer Werner Fassbinder on three DVDs, a number of Chinese silent movies from the late 1920s and early 1930s and one of the *Cremaster* films by American video artist Matthew Barney, that was never officially released on DVD.
When I came to the Philippines more than two years ago, these pirated movie market were one of the most fascinating phenomena I encountered. Coming from a country where this type of piracy is virtually unknown, I was very interested how the economy and the distribution system of this illegal market works. I started to run into obstacles. For obvious reasons, the people involved in this kind of business are not interested to reveal the details of their operations to the public. Even though pirated DVDs and CDs are sold all over Metro Manila as well as in the provinces, it was very difficult to obtain information. Most of the traders were unwilling to talk about their trade, and those who were prepared to talk knew surprisingly little about where these disks came from, where they were manufactured, where the original films came from etc.

Only eventually and only with the help of friends was I able to meet some people who knew more details, and were willing to share them. Most of what I will present in this talk is based on three interviews with people who have greater insights in the dealings with pirated material. I tried to counter-check all the details of what I was told, and what I will present in this paper are only details that at least two informers confirmed.

Due to the illegal nature of the trade, other writers and scholars run into similar problems when they try to answer the many questions that piracy raises. Most of the statistics that are quoted on a regular basis in the press come from a number of mostly American lobby groups such as the Business Software Alliance or the RIAA. Needless to say, these groups have self-serving interests, and try to paint the situation in the darkest colors possible. Therefore their numbers have to be taken with more than a grain of salt.

According to the Business Software Alliance (BSA), software piracy in the Asia-Pacific region costs manufacturers close to $8 billion in 2004. Worldwide, losses due to software piracy were estimated at more than $32 million in 2004. The BSA puts piracy rates in China at 90 percent and Russia at 87 percent. These are highly questionable numbers, to be sure. These institutions are financed by the media and software industry, and therefore have a vested interest in making the losses caused by piracy seem as big as possible. However from their publications it is often difficult to assess how they arrived at these numbers. So it is safe to assume that their numbers are not only estimates, but also highly exaggerated estimates. Yet, even if the actual numbers are lower than the numbers quoted, they are still quite impressive and suggest that the subject of piracy deserves closer examination both as an economic and cultural phenomenon. And it is to the culture of piracy in particular that I will turn in this paper.

**Piracy as “globalization from below”**

The study of piracy is timely not only because it has become so predominant in the Philippines and other countries. The type of piracy that we see developing in Southeast Asia is an obvious result of the technological and economic apparatus that has sprung
up as a result of international fiscal and political globalization. It could not have existed in this particular form even ten years ago.

The deregulation of many national markets in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union and their Eastern European satellite countries was one of the prerequisites that paved the way for the kind of globalized media piracy, where American movies are available on the streets of Manila, Delhi, Beijing and much more remote corners in Asia before they even premiered in the United States. In addition, the Post-1978 reforms of Deng Xiaoping, that allowed for private enterprise in the People’s Republic of China, and the economic opening of formerly socialist countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, played their role in furnishing pan-Asian piracy.

The free movement of capital and data is not only a hallmark of globalization, but also of global piracy. The process of economic “liberalization” around the world, privatisation and business deregulation have played their part in facilitating piracy. At the same time – and also in the name of a neo-liberal curbing of the power of the state – many countries have cut back on law enforcement and reduced border patrols, which obviously was another advantage to the international pirates.

This process worked in tandem with technological developments such as the proliferation of the Internet and comparatively cheap access to powerful computers, disk burners and scanners. While economic liberalization provided the means for distributing and paying for illicit goods, these new digital technology supported their production. Be it the Internet that is used to send movie as files around the globe, be it the inexpensive and fast disk burners that allow for the mass production of DVDs and VCDs, be it the scanners and the graphics software that allows for the design of the covers, be it the cheap printers that allow for their output on paper. The creative, do-it-yourself-aspects of digital media, which have been hailed by many media educators and computer evangelists, also allow for the mass production of illegal media.

Moisés Naím points out the importance of new communication and distribution technologies for the pirate business in his book *Illicit*:

With communication technologies that allow such tasks as warehouse management and shipment tracking to be done remotely, the trader and the goods need never be in the same place at the same time. This flexibility is a crucial advantage that illicit trade has over governments, and is a defining aspect of the problem. [...] New technologies have placed a major part too: more efficient ships..., new loading and unloading tools, better port management, improved logistics, advances in refrigeration, new packing materials, just-in-time inventory management, satellite navigation and tracking, and more. (Naim 2005, 19-21)
Other new technologies used by smugglers and pirates include the use of clandestine telecommunication systems and of encryption that are often very far ahead of what the respective governments have at their disposal.

In many respects, piracy therefore is the illicit underbelly of globalization. It is a globalization from below, where the participants are not multi-national corporations, but criminal gangs. Flexible, non-hierarchical, speedy, highly efficient and organized beyond national boundaries, these groups are in many respects quite representative of globalized businesses. They gleefully take advantage of the newly deregulated foreign exchange transactions, the financial offshore havens in obscure venues such as Tuvalu, Nauru or the Cook Islands, or the benefits of the Internet – from the anonymity and convenience of free web mail accounts to running online shops.

As far as the Philippines is concerned, there are a numbers of the law-enforcement organisations that might make the magnitude of piracy more evident. According to a recent newspaper article, the government’s anti-piracy campaign has hauled in one billion pesos (more than 20 million American dollars) worth of counterfeit products; half of them bootlegged videos and music, in the last nine months. These numbers are from a report by the Intellectual Property Office (IPO), which was published in October 2005 and assessed the results of various raids in the first nine months of the year 2005. IPO Director General Adrian Cristobal, Jr. said included in this year’s haul were 3,089,120 pieces of pirated optical media products and kits worth 537,367,550 pesos (over 10 million US-dollars). These items include Playstation games, MP3 CDs, VCD, and DVD movies, computer equipment, as well as other equipment used to manufacture pirated products. Needless to say, that these numbers represent only a small fraction of the pirated material that is sold in Manila and the rest of the Philippines.

Again, these numbers should not be taken at face value. If you divide the assumed worth of the confiscated goods with the number of confiscated goods, each item would be worth 174 pesos or around three dollars. Since most pirated DVDs are sold for 70 pesos or 1 dollar 30 cents, one wonders on which “value” these numbers are based – on the “street price” for these goods, or on the price that are charged for legitimate DVDs, software packages and CDs. Free Software activists have argued for a long time, that the prices for example of Microsoft programs are inflated and arbitrary. And in fact the company charges very different prices for the same programs in different countries.

The Economy of Piracy

In Marxist terms the price that Microsoft charges for its Office Suite for example, is the “exchange value,” defined here for the sake of brevity as the price that Microsoft can ask for its product and get away with it. The real value of these programs – the money that Microsoft invests to produce these programs – can be very different. The peculiar nature of digital information – may it take the form of a movie on DVD or a program on a CD –
therefore challenges traditional economic notions of value and price setting. Once a program is finished, the costs of reproducing and distributing Microsoft Word on a CD are comparatively low.

In this sense, digital information is very different from physical goods such as crude oil or rice, because with digital material – unlike with foodstuffs or other raw materials – there is no scarcity. A digital file can be reproduced and distributed for relatively low costs. Piracy is therefore an important case in point where the price of digital data, that software manufactures or DVD producers ask is challenged.

The particular “nature” of digital data has given rise to the Free Software and the Open Source movement that aims to make computer programs available for free – “free as in freedom, not as in free beer,” as supporters of Free Software, such as Richard Stallman, have stressed time and again (Gay 2002, Williams 2002). Concepts such as Free Software or Open Source are not about giving software away for free, but about finding new ways of compensating the producers of software in a fair way, while avoiding the approach that companies such as Microsoft take, which use their monopoly on the software market to set prices as they see fit.

The approach that the pirates take is obviously the exact opposite from companies such as Microsoft. Microsoft tries to maintain an exchange value for their products that is different from the prizes of its medium, the physical DVD or CD disk. The tendency in the cutthroat competition of the pirate market is to eventually bring the prize down to the lowest level, where one essentially pays for the disk, not for its content. While pirated DVDs were on sale for 100 pesos and more per film in 2002 (Cang et al 2002), in the meanwhile the prize has dropped to between 50 and 70 pesos.

One good example of the mechanisms of the pirate market is the “DVD sampler,” that many Chinese vendors have started to offer recently. These samplers contain not one single film, but rather sets of up to eight movies on one DVD. These samplers are often compiled around a specific theme, for example around an actor or an actress. They might contain only digital animation films, or war movies, or recent horror films etc. (The films on these compilations are usually of lower technical quality then those that require one whole disk. Without having looked at the technical details, upon ocular inspection the quality of the sampler film approximates the quality of VCDs [that are in the MPEG-2 format], while the DVDs with only one film on them are typically in MPEG-3.)

These sampler disks were originally offered for 150 pesos and more. But in a matter of months, their prizes dropped to 50 to 70 pesos – the same prize that is charged for DVDs with single films. At the same time, the DVDs with only one film on them now seem to be on their way out or the market. Interestingly, the illegal competition seems to have lead to dramatically falling prices of legal DVDs and VCDs in the Philippines in the recent years. While two years ago, new movies on DVD were sold
The entertainment industry so far has shied away from looking into new ways of getting compensated for their products in the age of their digital reproduction. They rise of file-sharing and peer-to-peer services, that has made music, movies and other files easily available over the internet has been greeted with law suits by the music and film industry. Instead of looking at services such as Napster, Kazaa, Limewire or Bittorrent as new opportunities to distribute the material they offer, the media industry has tried to criminalize the use of these technologies. Thousands of users of these services have been sued in the United States, Europe and a number of Asian countries.

That was the situation I was familiar with, when I came to the Philippines. The debate around piracy in Germany has centred mainly on the file sharing on the Internet, where digital data flows from computer to computer. In the Philippines however I encountered a quite different kind of piracy. Not only was the data that was being distributed once again bound to physical objects such as CDs, VCDs and DVDs. The distributors of these disks made a profit from distributing this material, which was not passed on to the creators of this material. While I obviously do not subscribe to this model, I nevertheless had to take into account that it existed and provided access to software, music and movies for a great number of people. I will discuss the defining characteristics of this type of piracy in greater detail later in this paper.

I wanted to find out more about piracy since there did not seem to be a great number of studies on this particular phenomenon. There still isn’t. Recently a number of books and academic essays have started to address the issue of media piracy. While most of the book publications are popular and often sensationalistic accounts from the United States (Lascia 2005, Naim 2005, Phillips 2005), some fascinating studies have addressed the different “national cultures of piracy” in various countries (Husted 2000, Condry 2004, Hu 2004, Larkin 2004, Pang 2006). In addition, the conferences Contested Commons/Trespassing Publics, that took place at the Sarai Centre for the Study of Developing Societies last year, addressed questions of Intellectual Property and Piracy from a distinctive South Asian perspective (Sarai Media Centre 2006).

My presentation will address the issue of media piracy in the Philippines from a number of different viewpoints. First of all, I will look at piracy as a means of distributing films, and – drawing on my research and interviews with people involved with piracy networks – on how the piracy market works. In the second part of my presentation I will formulate some preliminary ideas on the nature of media piracy in the Philippines. I will discuss the unprecedented rise of media piracy in the last couple of years as one of the most prominent issues of the digital millennium. The “Pirates of
the New World Image Order" (Zimmermann 2005) are not only piggybacking on the new globalized economy that has arisen due to the worldwide deregulation and liberalization of markets in the 1980s and 1990s. They are also profiteers of a number of technological developments in the computer sciences such as the international expansion of the Internet, which has challenged traditional notions of copyright and intellectual property on a very fundamental level. Surprisingly the pirates in the Philippines seem to make little use of the means of digital distribution that are available to them, but seem to rely on more “traditional” methods, that include messengers and personal delivery, and using long distance busses and fishing boats for the delivery of illegal DVDs.

“Asian Piracy”?

But before I look into the mechanics of this trade in greater detail, let me flesh out some of the differences in the piracy that I observed in the Philippines as opposed to the Internet piracy that I was familiar with.

Lawrence Lessig, an American lawyer and law professor who has made major contributions to the discussion of Intellectual Property in the US, has described what he labels “Asian piracy” in his book Free Culture:

All across the world, but especially in Asia and Eastern Europe, there are businesses that do nothing but take others people’s copyrighted content, copy it, and sell it—all without the permission of a copyright owner. The recording industry estimates that it loses about $4.6 billion every year to physical piracy (that works out to one in three CDs sold worldwide). The MPAA estimates that it loses $3 billion annually worldwide to piracy. This is piracy plain and simple. Nothing in the argument of this book, nor in the argument that most people make when talking about the subject of this book, should draw into doubt this simple point: This piracy is wrong. (Lessig, 63)

Lessig is an advocate of the freedom to use copyrighted material for artistic and educational purposes. In legal terms, this kind of use is called “fair use.” Lessig is trying to ensure that the concept of fair use will not be taken away in the digital age. At the same time, his Creative Commons rights management scheme was conceived to provide an alternative copyright system for all kinds of media. Creative Commons is an important antidote to the overbearing copyright claims that especially American media companies have put forward in the last couple of years. These claims have made the production of independent documentaries or found footage films increasingly difficult, since the use of copyrighted songs or movies has to be cleared and paid for, which can be too costly for independent filmmakers (for some examples how copyright was used to prevent documentaries films and CD-Roms from being made, see Lessig 95-107; Lascia 67-85). Lessig is trying to maintain some flexibility for filmmakers and other artists whose works rely on the use of other creators’ intellectual property.
Lessig and other lawyers usually draw the line, when media material is used and reproduced without “transformative authorship,” a legal term that denotes a use of other author’s material without substantial changes. This is just what the media pirates of the Philippines do. They simply make copies of movies, CDs, software and sell them for profit. Lessig sets this apart from what many users of file sharing services do. Because these users provide playing lists, additional information or they mix the music they share, they are adding content to the public domain. The “Asian piracy,” on the other hand adds no value and contributes nothing.

Lessig’s perception of “Asian piracy” is supported by a number of publications that deal with Asian concepts of intellectual property, or the lack of those. The best-known example of this type of publication might be William Alford’s To Steal a Book Is an Elegant Offense (Alford 1995). In this study of Chinese intellectual property law throughout its history, Alford argues that the very concept of intellectual property is alien to Chinese traditions and Confucian ethics. According to Alford, Chinese intellectuals and artists for centuries considered it as an honor, if their works were copied. Art and general education incessantly stressed “learning fro the master” by painstakingly reproducing his works rather than creating their own. Alford writes: “Such copying [of paintings and literature], in effect, bore witness to the quality of the work copied and to its creator’s degree of understanding and civility” (Alford 1995, 29).

It remains questionable to essentialize such historic facts into a “national character,” that is prone to piracy. Other scholars have argued that it is the general lack of a legal tradition in China that is the main reason for the high level of piracy in China. According to this line of thinking, China’s huge dimensions and its diverse population, which entails the problem of so-called regional protectionism (the protection of local infringers against claims of non-local right owners), further aggravate the implementation of a legal framework against piracy that does exist (Ganae 2005). This claim also raises questions about the law-enforcement capacities of a country that seems to have little problems in enforcing a rigid Internet censorship and is able to mercilessly crack down on political activists that it considers to be subversives. However, in any case these observations about China would not account for a general “Asian piracy,” and most certainly do not apply to the situation in the Philippines with its completely different legal history.

For the purposes of this paper however, the question of legality and morals is immaterial. What I want to do is not to judge or assess what the Philippine pirates are and do, but how they do it and how it forms a particular culture of piracy that is quite different from the culture of piracy in other countries. I take into consideration that piracy has greatly affected the availability of movies in the Philippines that were nearly impossible to get before and therefore might have a positive impact on the media literacy of the country. I also acknowledge that the piracy gives a lot of people work and income that otherwise would have none. But that is not the point of this paper. I am
more interested in the mechanics of the trade, and what they say about the Philippines as a social culture. So who does piracy work in the Philippines?

The “Chinese Connection” and the “Muslim Connection”

According to one of my sources (Joel 2006) the trade with illegal goods is organized along two main trajectories, that he called the “Muslim Connection” and the “Chinese Connection.” Let’s first look at the “Muslim Connections,” which operates mainly from the Southern Philippine island of Mindanao. Mindanao is characterized by its Muslim population and the close connections that the island has to the Malay parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. According to this source, the movies that come from this region into the rest of Philippines are predominantly from these two countries – an account that rings true considering the large number of DVDs that have subtitles in Bahasa Indonesia or Malay, that are available in the Philippines.

According to this source the movies that come into from this region are brought into the country by the most inconspicuous, humble means. Often it is via the boats of fishermen, that travel the Mindana Sea, the Sulu Sea and the Moro Gulf, the area between Mindoro and the Malaysian Island of Borneo. According to my informants most of the Malaysian pirate movies come from the city of Kota Kinabalu on Borneo (Joel 2006). This area is very difficult to watch for the police and the coast guard, because it has hundreds of little island and many of them are under the effective control of the Moro Liberation Army, a Muslim guerrilla organization.

When these fishermen smuggle illicit movies into the country, it is usually one single disk, that contains the wanted films. Often these disks are hidden in the belly of tuna fish or in barrels of shrimp in order to hide the disk from the customs or other law enforcement agencies. Once this one precious disk has arrived on the beaches of Mindanao, two copies are made, typically in the city of Davao. One stays in Mindanao as master disk for the copies, which are eventually distributed there. One copy goes to Cebu to assure the distribution in the Visayas, the smaller islands in the centre of the Philippine archipelago. The “original” goes to Manila. From these three “master disks” the ten thousands of copies that will eventually be sold all over the Philippines are made.

Joel says that the distributors of these disks use the public transport to deliver their goods, most commonly the long-distance busses that cross the Philippines. They make use of the “RoRo” scheme (“RoRo” stands for “roll on – roll off”), where long-distance busses leave Mindanao via ferries that take them to other islands, in this case typically the main island of Luzon, where the capital Manila is located. These trips take around 14 hours from Davao to Manila. That means that disks that have been delivered to Mindanao in the early morning, will be in Manila on the afternoon of the same day. The disks are usually hidden in coat pockets, backpacks and other pieces of luggage. In Manila, the duplication of these disks starts as soon as they arrive. Hot spots for reproduction are the districts of Quiapo, Pasig, Caloocan City and other parts of Metro
Manila. Especially in the neighbourhood of Quiapo, where the biggest pirate market in all of Manila is located, the duplication machines can only run between 8 am and 6 pm, because otherwise the noise they make might attract unwelcome visitors.

Therefore the first DVDs are typically available on the streets in the afternoon of the day after they arrived in Mindanao. Errand boys deliver the disks complete with covers to the merchants they have a business relationship with. These business relationships are not exclusive. The owners of the little stalls that sell the pirated disks are free to buy from all the suppliers. Yet among the distributors there exists an unspoken agreement that whoever has a film first has the exclusive right to distribute this film. According to Joel, they even maintain periodical contact to make sure that not two suppliers deliver the same movie. This system is based on a code of honour that is recognized by all the main players in the market.

The existence of such an unwritten “code of honor” was stressed time and again by this informant. According to Joel the whole piracy market relies exclusively on these informal, but binding agreements. For obvious reasons, there are no written agreements or even contracts between the distributors and merchants, between the suppliers and the sellers. The number of disks delivered to a seller is only documented in the notes that the delivery boys keep. It is an entirely informal economy.

This accord usually entails that the distributors will supply the sellers with new DVDs, when their merchandise is confiscated during a police raid. The police in the Philippines are required to furnish the traders with a list of the disks they confiscate, and the sellers take this list to their suppliers, who in turn provide them with new movies (Alexander 2006). Those who do not honour the rules of this trade have to face punishment, which can range from exclusion from the delivery system to more severe forms of retributions including physical violence. This is an important point, and I will return to this observation later (Richie 2006).

The “Chinese Connection” in the Philippines operates slightly differently (Richie 2006). Their goods usually come from Hong Kong, sometimes from Singapore. Often the couriers are unsuspicious looking, young women, coming into the country as tourists by plane. They typically hide the disks in their luggage, often in bags with other, legal DVDs and CDs. In another method, the disks are hidden in big boxes of clothes, which are imported into the Philippines. Once these disks reach Manila, they are manufactured like the ones coming from the “Muslim Connection.”

According to Joel, to buy a “master disk” in Hong Kong can cost the buyer up to one million HK dollars. Once the disk has been smuggled into the Philippines, the distributors will sell the copied disks for 20 or 25 peso, while the blank DVD usually costs 5 peso. The vendors in turn offer the disks for a prize from 50 pesos (for a standard movie) up to 70 pesos (for a new or not-yet released movie). Since the most successful films are distributed in quantities of hundreds of thousands, there are huge profit
margins – both for the whole sellers and the vendors of DVDs and CDs – despite the outwardly low prizes per disk.

In some cases, the suppliers do not just deliver the disks, but also blueprints for the cover design. In other cases, local graphic artists – using pictures they obtained from the Internet – design these covers. Sometimes this practice can lead to amusing results. On the covers of some disks one can find pictures, which are not from the movie in the box, or credits of completely different films (a pirated version of *On the Wings of Desire* by German director Wim Wenders lists Vin Diesel as one of the actors!). They might also include lists of special features (such as bonus materials or subtitles in Spanish, Cantonese or Arabic) that are not on the disk.

The plot summaries on the back of the box are typically taken from the Internet Movie Database, and are often reproduced in side-splitting versions full of typos or poor English. The practice of using pictures from the web can sometimes lead to hilarious results: Recently a version of Akira Kurosawa’s Dostoevski-adaption *The Idiot* (1951) was sold in Manila with a cover from Lars Von Triers’s independent digital movie *The Idiots* (1998). The English subtitles of pirated DVDs that come from China usually ranges from Chinese-flavoured to completely outlandish and sometimes even in direct contrast to the actual dialogue (Pang 2005).

The account of DVD covers can read like this: “The global film is included completely, broadcast the new feeling superstrongly.” On the box of another DVD sampler it says: “Unique Color Sensual Desire Cinema.” The copyright notice (!) on the same box reads: “The copyright owner of the video disc in this DVD only permits Your Excellency to run the family to show, owner keeps the copyright all one’s life relevantly in the right, not listing exhaustively, ‘the private family shows the use’ not including using, exhibiting in the place such as a club, station, bar, theatre etc, for instance without permission, forbid hiring out, export or distributing, copy issue, alter right, will bear civil and criminal responsibility.”

Apart from these language difficulties, the quality of the films that stem from the “Chinese Connection” are often of better quality, and it seems that most of the “quality” and art house and the increasing number of classic American, European and Japanese movies also come from China rather then from the “Muslim Connection.” A company from Shenzen by the name of “Bo Ying” produces very sophisticated DVDs, often taken from the American Criterion Collection, which specializes in top-notch editions of classic films in flawless transfers and with original bonus material. Yet a visit to the website of Bo Ying leads to an “Anti-Piracy Statement”! Emails to both TR-Boy and to the Criterion Collection regarding the copyright situation of these DVDs were not answered. Yet it is safe to assume that Bo Ying did not obtain the rights to these films, since the Criterion Collection points out on their website, that they only distribute their films in the United States.
Some customers of piracy markets in the Philippines have become very aware of issues of quality. In a number of forums on the Internet, buyers of pirated movies exchange tips on where to find rare films and how to distinguish quality DVDs from bad product. This type of advice also includes information where rare, sought-after films were sold. In one forum called TheQ. (Q stands for Quiapo, the neighbourhood in Manila with the biggest black market.) Since “TheQ” has recently disappeared from the Internet, I can only quote from my memory here, but there were a lot of posts along these lines: “Found Weekend by Jean-Luc Godard in Quiapo in the Muslim Barter Center at Stall No. 16. Ask for Benjie!”

Other forums provide more general advice on how to distinguish bad DVD copies of a movie from good ones. These expert customers go so far to identify well-made copies of films from the design of the cover and the occasional manufacturer name. One poster in the “Pinoy DVD” blog explained crucial differences in manufacturing quality, and pointed out the quality of the releases from a company that identifies itself with the label “Superbit” on the cover. (PinoyDVD forum in June 2002). Other participants of the forums provided detailed technical analysis of different DVD versions of the same film, and compared them in terms of picture and sound quality. These tests were obviously conducted with laboratory equipment and software used by professional video studios.

Access in a Globalized Information Economy

But where do these films come from? In many instances, movies that have not even premiered in the cinemas of the Philippines are already available there. Unlike a couple of years ago, these versions have not been video taped from the screen in a cinema. Since movie premieres of American films are increasingly internationally synchronized this practice has become obsolete anyway. Increasingly, these films are in near-DVD quality, which suggests that they were made available to the pirate market from sources inside the US film industry, where people have access to digital, high quality versions of these movies. That would mean that these films have been taken from the various Internet peer-to-peer offerings, where “Warez” groups compete in releasing new films on the net before their official premiere. These groups typically obtain their films from sources inside the film industry, for example disgruntled employees in post-production or dubbing studios or in DVD-pressing plants that get new movies before they come out in the theatres (see Lascis 2006, 47-66).

Surprisingly, this was vehemently denied by my informants (Alexander 2006, Ronnie 2006). They point to the censorship board of Mainland China as a source for Hollywood films, which are available on the pirate market before they are released in the movie theatres. There might some truth to this claim. Most American film companies submit digital copies of their latest releases way ahead of their official opening in the US to the Chinese authorities, because they want to distribute their productions on the huge Chinese market (that so far only allows in 20 foreign films per year.) If people in this
office were the leaks, they would have far-reaching access to the latest Hollywood productions in digital versions of good quality.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that all the new US films that are available via the “Chinese Connection” in the Philippines come from one source. I still assume that many of these films come from internet sources, either from peer-to-peer sites or direct exchanges with people in the US film industry that make films accessible to pirates for payments. Which leads us the most important question: If the players of the “Muslim Connection” or the “Chinese Connection” can get access to these new films, how come that the Filipino traders cannot? Why do they rely on sources outside the country for product, which are both costly and must be smuggled into the country? The Philippines might be a relatively poor country in South East Asia, but so are Malaysia and Indonesia, where many films on the black market in the Philippines come from.

The mechanisms of globalization have leveled the playing field in this particularly area to an extent, that all that is needed to participate in the exchange of illegal software, films and music is a state-of-the-art computer and a DSL internet connection. In the days before the emergence of the “Darknet,” the networks of peer-to-peer offerings and the many private servers and nets designated for the exchange of pirated films and music, you had to have access to executives in the film industry to get access to new, unreleased films. In the age of digital globalization, however, we see a well-developed and highly efficient network of intermediaries that provide material that was completely inaccessible to people outside the privileged group of film distributors, television executives, etc. To participate in this network all it takes is technical equipment that is available to middle class Filipinos and very limited technical knowledge to participate in the mobilization of images, that global digital networks have made possible.

Yet, the media pirates in the Philippine seem to prefer to get their material from outside the Philippines rather than obtaining it themselves. In addition to this, the methods that are used to smuggle the movies into the country and to the distribution centers seem positively antiquated. Why smuggle a disk in the belly of a tuna, when you could hide the movie on the laptop of a businessman or the iPod of a tourist. Why even send these digital goods physically, when one of the most practical features of digital data is that you can send them via the Internet. Even the five or more Gigabytes that are typically on a DVD could be sent over an ordinary DSL connection in less than a day. So, therefore, it is bewildering, why the pirate groups rely on the risky and complicated approach that I have described.

Again, my suggestions to use the Internet for the delivery of the movie material were greeted with incomprehension by my informants. They claimed that the net was either not safe enough or prone to interception by law enforcement authorities. Giving the fact, that the majority of the media pirates in the West get their movies via P2P offerings, that strong encryption is easily available for this type of transaction and that it is safe to assume that many of the Chinese and Malaysian pirates get their material from
just these sources, this argument is not convincing. Also, lack of technological know-
how or the necessary equipment cannot be the reason.

Rather it seems that there is a instinctive resistance on the part of the Filipino
pirates to make use of these tools, that the recent development of technology and
globalization have made available to them. Rather than using the net or other new
technologies, they prefer to use time-honored ways of delivery – such as fishing boats,
ferries and the long distance busses – that might seem overtly complicated and
convoluted to outsiders, yet draw on long traditions of moving contraband into and
throughout the Philippines. These delivery systems are as effective and fast as any other
system in the Philippines, such as the postal service or the various private courier
companies. Yet, it relies on technology and methods that appear anachronistic and
outmoded compared to the piracy in other countries.

Therefore, the “culture of piracy” of the Philippines does not rely on the latest
technological means of obtaining and distributing their material, but rather moves along
long-established trajectories of the illegal economy of the Philippines. Ironically the
pirates in the Philippines are beneficiaries of globalization, while not directly
participating in it. That sets them apart from the piracy of other Southeast Asian
countries, that make liberal use e.g. of peer-to-peer service, billing services such as
Paypal for financial transactions, and even online auctioning houses such as Ebay for
the sale of their products.

None of this is true for the media pirates of the Philippines. They have no use for
these new technologies, and rely on long-established ways of deal making, where
physical objects rather than non-tangible, digital goods are sold for cash, not for money
transfers to virtual Internet accounts. Piracy in the Philippines is a predominantly local,
not a globalized, trade; films might enter the country from various neighboring nations,
but they do not get disseminated from the Philippines.

A Code of Honor

In the interviews with the traders that I conducted another interesting point kept
coming up: the claim that the various players in the black market operated following a
common, unwritten “code of honor.” The basics of this code of honor are that deals and
agreements are honored, that payments are made as agreed upon and in time, and that
the various participants in the black market acknowledge their obligations towards each
other. That goes so far, that distributors replace disks that were confiscated during
police raids, and that traders exchange defective disks for their customers!

Joel especially kept pointing out that the whole pirate market could not work
without these commitments. He stressed that he felt that in many respects the way the
pirates conduct their business was more reliable and sincere than many legitimate
companies in the Philippines and especially than the government. When I quoted the
line “If you live outside the law, you must be honest” (from Bob Dylan’s song *Absolutely Sweet Marie*), he enthusiastically agreed. He pointed out that while he was never “wronged” by anybody in the pirate market, while the majority of the Philippine government institutions as well as the political administration were known to be corrupt and frequently ignore both the law and business contracts. Compared to the general disorder of the state, he described the piracy market as comparatively orderly and fair.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the present condition of the Philippine state. Yet it is safe to say, that the Philippines is a weak state and that the rule of law is not incessantly observed. Powerful people and especially politicians bend the law to their own advantage. Gloria Arroyo, the current president, has been accused to of manipulating the last election to her advantage, allegations that were never properly investigated and that have never been discounted. The government has also been held responsible for the increasing numbers of political killings of critical journalists and activists all over the Philippines, again a charge that the government so far was unable to prove untrue. Behind many of these killings seem to be local politicians, out to either silence opponents or even gaining material advantages. Nevertheless, the Philippine law enforcement agencies and the courts have shown little success in curbing these crimes and in convicting the guilty.

Considering these facts, for many participants in the pirate market, the market appears like a more honest and fair alternative to a society that is perceived as unjust, uncontrolled and generally in favor of the elite. Joel sums it up like this: “Most politician and big-time business men are really crooks, while we are honest. Our word counts” (Joel 2006).

That they break Philippine and international law is rationalized by the pirates as justified, since “we take from those, who have too much to begin with” (Joel). All of the interviewees agreed that it was morally acceptable to pirate US-American movies, since “Hollywood” or “the West” makes so much profit out of these films anyway. This does not account, of course, for the growing number of American, European and Asian independent films, which start to appear on the pirate market.

All of my informants also agreed, that they would not touch pirated versions of Philippine movies in order not to endanger the existence of the Philippine movie industry. Yet, in the last couple of month a growing number of DVD samplers with films of local super-stars such as Fernando Poe Jr. or Sharon Cuneta have appeared on the black market. The way my informants justify their participation in the black market therefore leaves many moral questions open.

**Outlook**

The mobilization of moving images that both international and Philippine piracy has set in motion seems unstoppable at the moment. The government lacks resources – some
might argue even the will – to effectively reduce piracy. While the Philippines was
recently dropped from the “priority watch list” of the International Intellectual Property
Alliance (IIPA) because of alleged crackdowns on pirate markets, these markets seem
more thriving than ever, when I visited them recently.

In other countries, the piracy traders eventually use their considerable
distribution muscle for other purposes. A particularly interesting example is Nigeria.
There the pirate market gave rise to a whole new genre of movies, which were
distributed along the same networks as the pirated Indian “Bollywood” films that were
so popular among the Hausa people of Nigeria. (Larkin 2004). These so-called
Nollywood films, cheap feature length video productions that are immensely popular in
Nigeria, wouldn’t have developed without the existence of pirate distribution net works.

For the time being, filmmakers and film studios in the Philippines usually
condemn piracy and will not deal directly with the pirates. Yet, another example
suggests that these distribution channels can be used for other purposes that selling
pirated Hollywood blockbusters. In August 2006, the Movie and Television Review and
Classification Board of the Philippines gave a documentary on the former president of
the Philippines, Joseph Estrada, an X, thereby effectively prohibiting its public
exhibition. According to newspaper reports, the film promptly surfaces on the pirate
markets in Manila.

So far, the press and the arts in the Philippines are relatively free from
government intrusions, and cases like the ban of the Estrada-documentary remain an
exception. So it is unlikely that we will see a development as in China, where precisely
the films, which have been banned by the Film Office, are often the most successful
films on the black market. In China, piracy is effectively a way around state censorship.
If the illegal distribution channels of the Philippines will be used for the dissemination
of material, which the authorities try to keep out of circulation, depends on the future
development of the country.

Works Cited

Alexander (pseud.), Interview on 2 August 2006, Diliman, Quezon City.

Alford, William P. To Steal a Book Is an Elegant Offence: Intellectual Property Law in

Cang, Jeanne. Ava Danlog, Carmela Fonbuena: “Pirates’ Haven.” Newsbreak, 27 May

Condry, Ian. “Cultures of Music Piracy. An Ethnographic Comparison of the US and


Joel (Pseud.), Interview on September 1, Diliman, Quezon City.


Ronnie (pseud.), Interview on 10. October 2006, Cubao, Quezon City.


**The Author**

Tilman Baumgärtel lives in Berlin and Manila. He is an art and media critic and curator. He contributes to German and international reviews, newspapers and magazines, and his writing has appeared in *Die Tageszeitung, Die Zeit, Die Woche, Intelligent Agent, Telepolis, Kunstforum International*, et al. He studied German Literature, History and Media Studies at the Heinrich-Heine-University in Düsseldorf and the State University of New York in Buffalo. His Ph.D. thesis was a monograph of the German avant-garde film director Harun Farocki. He has taught media aesthetics and media history at the University of Paderborn; Technische Universität, Berlin; the Mozarteum in Salzburg (Austria); and is currently teaching at the University of the Philippines. He has lectured internationally, and gave presentations at the Palais Tokyo in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and at the Goethe Institüt in Moscow, Barcelona, and Montevideo (Uruguay). He was a founding member of mikro e.V. <http://www.mikro.org>, an organization for media culture in Berlin, and co-founder of rohrpost, a German-language mailing list for digital culture. He has curated a number of exhibitions focusing on media art, including “Games,” a presentation of computer games
The East is (Mis)Red: Transcultural Misperceptions in Selected North American Scholarship on Hong Kong Cinema

Sean M. Tierney
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

For the last forty years, Hong Kong’s film industry has been one of its most visible and vibrant exports. Global audiences have thrilled to the films, actors, and cinematographies which made (and kept) Hong Kong one of the world’s preeminent film cities. Following Hong Kong’s success, pan-Asian cinema has risen to an unprecedented level of global presence and appreciation. Korean cinema currently enjoys an enviable position of being the current Asian cinema favorite not only in Asia but throughout the world. In addition to popular writings on Asian films, scholarly works have long examined Asian cinemas from an academic standpoint, applying various theoretical frameworks both inside and outside the discipline of film studies. Hong Kong cinema has been the subject of scholarly research in both English and Chinese; books, articles, abstracts and conference presentations about the subject are both numerous and widely available. Yet some of these scholarly writings seem to commit several significant hermeneutic errors based on intercultural misperception. An analysis of selected North American scholarship on Hong Kong films will shed considerable light on some of the influences, restraints, and other considerations at work in the scholarly understandings of Hong Kong’s cinematic output. The willingness of North American scholars to use theoretical frameworks which offer significantly skewed understandings will be examined in detail. In addition, the ramifications for both Hong Kong cinema as well as the academy will be discussed. The implications of these troublesome intersections for pan-Asian cinema, and by extension Asian scholars and viewers of Asian cinema, will also be discussed.
For the last forty years, Hong Kong’s film industry has been one of its most visible and vibrant exports. Global audiences have thrilled to the films, actors, and cinematography that made (and kept) Hong Kong one of the world’s preeminent film cities. Following Hong Kong’s success, pan-Asian cinema has risen to an unprecedented level of global presence and appreciation. Korean cinema currently enjoys an enviable position of being the current Asian cinema favorite not only in Asia but throughout the world. In addition to popular writings on Asian films, scholarly works have long examined Asian cinemas from an academic standpoint, applying various theoretical frameworks both inside and outside the discipline of film studies. Hong Kong cinema has been the subject of scholarly research in both English and Chinese; books, articles, abstracts and conference presentations about the subject are both numerous and widely available. Yet some of these scholarly writings seem to commit several significant hermeneutic errors based on intercultural misperception.

A critical discourse analysis of selected North American scholarship on Hong Kong films will shed considerable light on some of the influences, restraints, and other considerations at work in the scholarly understandings of Hong Kong’s cinematic output. The willingness of North American scholars to use theoretical frameworks which offer significantly skewed understandings will be examined in detail. In addition, the ramifications for both Hong Kong cinema as well as the academy will be discussed. The implications of these troublesome intersections for pan-Asian cinema, and by extension Asian scholars and viewers of Asian cinema, will also be discussed.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

A long-standing debate in communication centers around the role of language as it relates to social reality, whether language is reflective of social reality or constitutive of it. The present study takes the position that language “does not act as a mirror able to reflect an independent object world, but is better understood as a tool that we use to achieve our purposes... Language ‘makes’ rather than ‘finds’” (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 29).

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989) has its methodological beginnings in critical linguistics, which seeks to explain how and why particular discourses are produced. To Fairclough and other critical discourse analysts, discourse is not only a product or reflection of social processes, but contributes towards the production (and reproduction) of these processes. This area of study is alternatively known as Critical Language Studies (CLS), and it is most interested in the cognitive processes that allow for the making of meaning or the creation of understanding, with a special emphasis on the role of language in this process.

Critical analysis of discourse is a means by which researchers can examine discourse in the supra-linguistic sense, where discourse is “the sort of language used to construct some aspect of reality from a particular perspective” (Chouliaraki &
Fairclough, 1999, p. 63). In essence, CDA seeks to examine the language used to convey ideas and messages with an eye towards uncovering what other kinds of ideological messages and ideas the discourse contains. This aspect of CDA is indispensable for making plain “the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge” (McKerrow, 1999, p. 442). CDA compels us to look at “whether and how the problematic aspect of the discourse which is in focus has a particular function within the practice.... [to seek] explanation of what it is about a practice that leads to a problem, to evaluation of the practice in terms of its problematic results” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 65).

Discourse has also been theorized as what Gee (1999) calls cultural models. They are ways of thinking and perceiving, and these processes are quite culturally informed. However, subjects are “usually quite unaware [they] are using them and of their full implications, unless challenged by someone or by a new experience where [their] cultural models clearly don’t ‘fit’” (Gee, 1999, p. 60). When cultural difference manifests itself, problematic aspects of cultural models used in understanding become apparent.

The problematic nature of selected North American scholarship on Hong Kong cinema is the central focus of the present study. These kinds of investigations are necessary because the application of cultural models, or of the ideology that drives them, “involves the claim of particular cultural practices to represent reality. Yet, it is not reality that is represented (and constructed); it is rather our relation to it” (Grossberg, 1997, p. 159).

Transcultural (mis)Reading

The global distribution and appreciation of Hong Kong cinema makes it both possible and essentially unavoidable that films will cross cultural boundaries. The exact nature of culture, as well as the demarcations thereof remain both hotly contested and beyond consensus. However, it is still possible to state that films produced in Hong Kong by Hong Kong people, are viewed and interpreted by different people in different places. Naturally, the interpretations and appreciation will also differ, and not simply because they are neither in nor from Hong Kong.

One means by which people outside Hong Kong come to understand Hong Kong’s film industry is through the English-language writing and analyses of academics. These writings often seek to introduce or explain this “foreign” cinema to those who are new to it or do not “understand” it. The approaches used in these works are as varied as the motivations and the results, but a plausible perspective for some is that by “studying Orientals...‘we’ can get to know another people, their way of life and thought, and so on” (Said, 1994, p. 293). Indeed, some of this work falls within an Orientalist paradigm in that it seeks to establish an understanding of Hong Kong’s people, culture, and film industry through application of Western ideals and theories which are problematic in their application as well as their conclusions.
Quite often in these writings, potentially inappropriate cultural assumptions are brought to bear, assumptions that are both irrelevant and often indicative of underinvestigation on the part of the author. The present study seeks to build on the previous efforts to illuminate theoretical misapplication in scholarship on Hong Kong cinema such as Fang’s (2003) analysis of Stokes & Hoover’s (1999) *City on Fire*, an academic text on Hong Kong cinema openly grounded in Marxist theory. Fang reasons that the volume is guilty of “implicitly suggesting that Hong Kong cinema had not been adequately theorized until the introduction of a specifically western voice” (para 10).

The present study seeks to illustrate some of the ramifications that result from asking “how does one know the ‘things that exist,’ and to what extent are the ‘things that exist’ constituted by the knower?” (Said, 1994, p.300). Through illustrating examples of misapplication and their implications, the present study contributes to the ongoing debate over issues “regarding the relationship between the practice of cultural misreading and the increasing dissemination of Hong Kong film images in the West” (An, 2001, p. 96).

**Knowledge, Perspective, and Wordplay**

Critical discourse analysis starts with “some perception of a discourse-related problem...[such as] problems of representations and miscognition” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 60). Sandell’s (1994) explications of perceived homoeroticism and the role of masculinity in the films of John Woo have (1996) appeared in *Bright Lights Film Journal* and *Film Quarterly*, respectively. They still figure prominently in annotated bibliographies of scholarly writing on Hong Kong cinema and have been referenced in scholarly works. In addition, they appear as suggested or required reading in English-language classes on Hong Kong and/or Asian cinema. As such, they are among the more well-known and widely read scholarly articles on the films of John Woo, displaying a unique perspective of the director and the films.

The author asserts that Woo’s *The Killer* is “a film in which the eroticization of the gangster body reaches a whole new level and where male bonding is explicitly tied to a rejection of femininity and, by implication, of China” (1996). Her characterization of the protagonists’ interaction as homoerotic is based on the observation that they “do more than merely join forces; they fire their weapons in harmony, they gracefully leap away from flying bullets, they gaze lovingly into each others eyes, and they move in synchronized time and motions, employing a kind of mutuality not found elsewhere in the film. Thus, the relationship between the two men is characterized as being not merely homoerotic but also, in some senses, transcendent” (Sandell, 1994, para. 2). Yet this perspective is directly contrary to the perspective of not only the film’s indigenous audience, but even those who created the film.
Terence Chang, one of the producers of *The Killer*, addresses this problematic interpretation directly: “The relationship of the killer and cop is hard to translate for an American audience. People think they are gay” (Dannen, 1997, p.152). Sandell makes no mention of (and therefore might have been ignorant of) the Chinese concept of male friendship in her 1994 article. Neither does she acknowledge her own perspectival position. In 1996, however, she notes “While many critics emphasize the homoeroticism of Woo’s films, Chinese-American fans often resist these kinds of interpretations, arguing that the male-bonding found in Woo’s work is merely a cinematic representation of the kind of relationships of honor between men found in Chinese historical chivalric dramas” (p. 24). It is important to note that these dissenting viewpoints remind us that perception “is already informed by culture, and so even illegible images are (cultural) perceptions, not raw sensations” (Marks, 2000, p.145). Thus, while it is understandable how and why the author may have come to these conclusions, it is similarly easy to see that they are quite particular in cultural terms.

Not only does the author fail to provide citations for the aforementioned critics, much less identify them; this intercultural perceptual conflict is resolved, for the author, by asserting that “the influences he cites in interviews are primarily Western filmmakers... Woo’s success with non-Chinese-American audiences suggests that a reading ‘outside’ these references is still both possible and productive.... The fact that Woo’s popularity in the U.S. transcends ethnic identity indicates that his films can be usefully (if not completely) understood within the terms of Western discourse” (Sandell, 1996, pp. 24-25).

Sandell apparently feels that Woo’s popularity with Western audiences rationalizes her insistence on the veracity of a Western-based analysis of the films. Such an intellectual rationalization may well spring from “the universalization of Western values...[which] can occur only if people believe they know everything about whatever they are making judgments about. The myth of universal knowledge tells them that when they see something, they possess a template that will explain what it all means” (Root, 1996, p. 194). The staunch defense of her perspective also fits into the Orientalist paradigm; her ardent defense is fueled by “the sense of Western power over the Orient [that] is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” (Said, 1994, p. 46).

Sandell makes no disclaimer as to the applicability of her perspective, or specifies that such interpretations might be most valid for Western viewers. The author’s strident defense and rationalization of her perspective unfortunately contribute to the problem outlined by Teo (1991): “There is the authority of the Western expert on Asia which is exercised even over the way in which Asians view their own culture” (Teo, 1991, p.89). A much more plausible assertion for Sandell’s article might have been that the *Western audience’s reactions to Woo’s films* could be “usefully (if not completely) understood within the terms of Western discourse” (ibid.).
Perhaps in making this argument, Sandell believes that she “know things by definition that Orientals cannot know on their own” (Said, 1994, p. 300). From a critical perspective, her interpretation falls into the Orientalist habit of forcing upon the Other a definition not only of their own making, but one for which they have expressed a distaste or distrust: “The Oriental is given as fixed, stable, in need of investigation, in need even of knowledge about himself. No dialectic is either desired or allowed. There is a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist), in short, a writer and a subject matter otherwise inert” (Said, 1994, p. 308).

As further defense of her position, she states that John Woo has communicated to her that while he “may not have intended the homoerotic and masochistic themes, his response suggests that he was, nevertheless, not opposed to such an interpretation” (Sandell, 1996, p. 34). This attitude also presupposes that John Woo was being more honest than polite, an inversion of a rather well-entrenched Chinese social custom. It is not the intention of the present study to debate the veracity of Sandell’s scholarship. The “death of the author” means that such interpretations are both possible and plentiful. The present study instead is interested in the deployment of this and similar interpretations and their consequences. We are not concerned so much with the interpretation as with its implications. With its assertively defensive tone, Sandell’s discourse may constitute an example of the deployment of “the authority of the Western expert on Asia which is exercised even over the way in which Asians view their own culture” (Teo, 1991, p.89).

Sandell’s vociferous defense of her position unfortunately provides an example of “the refusal of many of the most cherished institutions of Western culture to come to terms with...the way they privilege and universalize particular approaches to reality” (Root, 1996, p. 75). Such an attitude also echoes the question ironically posed by Rosenbaum (2000):“[W]hy should we be interested in new films from all over the world unless it’s to ratify what we already know?” (p. 117).

Even in matters of simple linguistics, the value of Sandell’s scholarship is questionable. Her (1994) interpretation of the Chinese title of John Woo’s Hard Boiled, (Cantonese Lat Sau San Tam; Mandarin La Shou Shen Tan ) which translates literally as Spicy/Hand/God/Detective may be a case of linguistic underinvestigation or postmodern playfulness of signs. Either way, it smacks of poor scholarship and less-than-serious attention.

According to Sandell (1994), Chow Yun Fat “shoots – spicy handed (two hands) – a dozen people dead in five seconds” (p. 1). The Chinese phrase Lat Sau/La Shou, while literally composed of the characters for spicy hand, is more accurately, non-literally translated as meaning “driven without regard for consequences,” “cold-blooded,” or “ruthless,” translations which provide a critical insight into the motivations and character of Hard Boiled’s protagonist. Sandell’s playful word usage totally ignores this cultural artifact. It is highly unlikely that she knew, or researched, the phrase and its
meaning; in this same article she takes the character’s names from the subtitles, a mistake noted by an author whose work appeared in the same volume (Rubio, 1994).

Worse, this term has now become a catch phrase for the cinematic or video game depiction of the simultaneous use of two pistols. Her transliteration stands as stark evidence of underinvestigation and slipshod hermeneutics; in making this playful transliteration, understanding “of the Orient is obliterated by the designs and patterns foisted upon it” (Said, 1994, p. 173). Sandell’s scholarship illustrates the particular dangers of transcultural interpretation of culturally grounded behaviors and language. At best, her carefree interpretation of a Chinese phrase is an amusingly misinformed view, albeit one with unfortunate consequences. Sandell’s co-optation of language veers dangerously close to “falling into a ‘hermeneutic nihilism’ whereby all texts become nothing more than a meaningless play of signification” (Shohat & Stam, 2001, p. 180). At worst, her insistent assertions about the validity of perceived homoeroticism in the face of indigenous criticism and rejection is an example of Western intellectual arrogance that assumes that “Asians must still rely on the West for a more ‘internationalised’ view of their culture. They must learn about Asia from the West” (Teo, 1991, p. 92).

If Sandell’s transliteration is indeed simply a playful interpretation of signs, something common in the so-called “postmodern” world, then her scholarship differs little if at all from “a postmodern spectatorship that is evidenced in its ultimate form in campy cult film. Interest in the text is disengaged and fragmented, and little attention is paid to historical and social meanings” (An, 2001, p. 103).

Universalism and Context

David Bordwell is a well-known and highly respected film scholar. He has written many of the most frequently used texts in film studies in general and Asian film studies in particular. His work, while well-respected and widely acknowledged, has also been criticized for its Orientalism (Berry, 1990). His book *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* has proven to be one of the pre-eminent English language scholarly works on Hong Kong cinema. In the book’s preface, Bordwell addresses what he sees as the potentially thorny subject of transcultural understanding:

Some might say that the book risks imposing an outsider’s values on a cinema that exists in and through unique cultural circumstances. But despite many claims to the contrary in our multicultural milieu, there are more commonalities than differences in human cultures: universal physical, social and psychological predispositions and the facial expressions of many emotions will be quickly understood in a film, whatever its country of origin... Popular cinema, moreover, is deliberately designed to cross cultural boundaries.... (Bordwell, 2000, pp. xi-xii)
Bordwell appears comfortable with the conflation of common and universal; it follows logically that he might see no difference between “some” and “all,” between “many” and “every.”

In real-life terms, universalism rationalizes much more than it obligates; it is important to point out that Bordwell’s claims of universality are intended to support the viability of his scholarship rather than to promote a belief in common humanity. Indeed, one might be tempted to wonder about the author’s feelings about the ‘multicultural milieu;’ it is possible to suspect a rather dismissive tone. In both its tone and content, Bordwell’s rationalization upon which his work is grounded is a form of “power/knowledge used to justify the actions of persons or groups and which have specific consequences for relations of power” (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 25). His assertion of the ineluctable veracity of his perspective (and the language used to deliver it) might even be interpreted as emblematic of the “constant endeavour on the part of those who have power to try to impose an ideological common sense which holds for everyone” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 86).

Critical analysis of this discourse becomes necessary since these kind of rationalizations are neither unique nor infallible. Rather than any sweeping statement of the obvious, justifications based in universalist assumptions “should be seen as rationalizations which cannot be taken at face value but are themselves in need of explanation... together with the generation of common-sense discourse practices comes the generation of common-sense rationalizations of such practices, which serve to legitimize them” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 92). Bordwell certainly seems confident that his rationalization is logically impregnable, likely a result of the naturalization of the concept of universality in Western thought. It is also a likely result of his place within the hierarchical structure; it is no secret that some voices are more powerful than others.

It is also true that “Discourse types and orders of discourse vary across cultures. But in such gatekeeping encounters, white middle-class gatekeepers are likely to constrain the discourse types which can be drawn upon” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 47).

Contrary to Bordwell’s assertion, the interpretations of body language and facial expressions are not cross-cultural. It is common in Japanese (and to a lesser extent Chinese) culture to smile when embarrassed and/or feeling guilt. It is seen as an accepted gesture of contrition. “Smiling” (sometimes modified to the more pejorative “grinning”) on the other hand, is frequently seen as a flippant gesture in the West in similar situations, and is interpreted as the person in the wrong not approaching the situation with sufficient seriousness. While the underlying feeling/emotion may be identical, the manner in which people express it, and even more importantly, how one interprets those signals, is not universal. How people interpret intention is quite dependent on enculturation. While it is indefensible to claim that there are no transcultural similarities, neither is it defensible to overemphasize similarity simply because it is convenient to do so. The deployment of “universal” can function in
situations such as this to establish not only equality but equity; it grants access perhaps more than it bestows equality. Universalist analyses of Hong Kong cinema, while certainly possible and not without merit, by their very nature overlook or ignore significant and culturally specific phenomena that are neither immediately apparent nor universally understood.

In fact, there is no “universal” definition for the concept of universal. Any kind of transcultural observations or evaluations must contend with the simple yet significant differences between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of level of context, a concept originally explicated by Edward T. Hall (1976). Eastern cultures, such as that of Hong Kong, are high-context, relying much less on articulation and more on contextual understanding. Western culture, conversely, relies upon the statement of ideas for their comprehension. As Chen (1998) points out, people in low-context cultures “tend to use a direct verbal expression style that emphasizes the situational context, carries important information in explicit verbal messages... People in high-context cultures tend to use an indirect verbal expression style that de-emphasizes verbal messages, carries important information in contextual cues (e.g., place, time, situation, and relationship)” (para. 30).

Utilizing this model, once can posit an interesting correlation between “universal” and “low-context” in Western hermeneutics; in order to be universally understood, an idea must be self-articulating and/or self-evidently comprehensible. In a low-context setting, the idea must articulate itself, something not necessary for “universal” comprehension in high-context cultures. Therefore, anything that articulates universally in a low-context model must, by definition, articulate explicitly; if it does not do so, it is not apparent. If this is the case, then Western appeals to universalism may constitute an assertion or assumption of the superiority of low-context cultures. In effect, universalism legitimizes, supports and maintains the Western status quo; Western universalist assertions, much like globalization, would “shape the world in ways that bring it into conformity with Western ways” (Webster, 2002, p. 113).

Bordwell’s characterization of popular cinema as “designed to cross cultural boundaries” is also suspect, at least as it applies to Hong Kong. Historically, Hong Kong films are made for Hong Kong audiences in particular and the Chinese diaspora in general (Wong, 2002). It is only in the very recent past that Hong Kong’s film industry has begun taking the “global” audience into consideration, and even then only partially. Recent Hong Kong emulations of Hollywood’s style and method are more likely local attempts to compete with imported Hollywood films than any putative attempt at transcultural appeal.

More importantly, seeking to understand Hong Kong cinema as the product of a high-context culture instead of simply ingesting its universally articulated aspects is a much richer course to take. John Woo’s Hard Boiled (1992) again functions as a highly illustrative example. The film, known for the technical execution of its action sequences and high body count, has been hailed as a masterpiece of action filmmaking, and, in the
words of one Amazon.com reviewer, the penultimate example of shootouts without symbolism. While such a universally comprehensible perspective on the film is certainly possible, such characterizations elide significant, culturally specific dynamics of the film. Without understanding the social, cultural, political, and temporal contexts in which the film was produced, a great part of the director’s vision is rendered invisible at best and irrelevant at worst.

Without understanding the film’s metaphoric allusion to the uncertain future of the city, important details can seem minor. In the opening scene, which revolves around a transaction between gun smugglers and their customers, it is revealed that the guns that are being sold are of communist Chinese origin. As the film unfolds, these guns, and the people who bring them to the city for profit, wreak havoc on the streets and people of Hong Kong. Thus, the allegorical effect of the entry of communist China into Hong Kong is violence, havoc and death.

An understanding of the allusive subtexts of Hard Boiled also hinges on knowledge of Hong Kong filmmakers’ understandable reticence in terms of making overtly political statements in general and critical statements about communist China in particular, especially once the colony was guaranteed reunification with China. These negotiations were finalized in 1984, thirteen years prior to the actual handover.

Woo’s use of violence in Hard Boiled was intended to indirectly reflect the most pessimistic projections of what might have become post-1997 Hong Kong. It is critical to remember that this film was made not only before the 1997 handover but, perhaps more importantly, not long after what is referred to in Hong Kong as the June 4th Incident, known in the West as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Woo’s earlier (1990) film A Bullet in the Head expresses his opinion about the June 4th Incident, albeit obliquely (Logan, 1995). This kind of culturally based rhetorical deference is indicative of the larger attitude in which political statements are made subtly and metaphorically if at all; it is not something universally apparent.

The recurring theme of emigration, addressed repeatedly in the film by both heroes and villains, loses much of its resonance when decontextualized from the time and place in which the film is set; without knowing the overriding sociopolitical tension that makes emigration a necessary option, much of the inherent tension is lost. In addition, without understanding the importance that Chinese culture attaches to birthplace proximity, yet another layer of meaning is made invisible. Woo’s use of newborn babies as potential victims in the film’s final act was an allegory for the future of both Hong Kong and its residents; the idea of making the literal birthplace unsafe, while universally understandable, probably carried much more resonance with the film’s Hong Kong Chinese audience.

An obvious, if not universally understood dynamic of the film is the implied similarity or sameness of Tequila, the police officer played by Chow Yun Fat, and the
assassin Alan, played by Tony Leung Chiu Wai. Before it is revealed that Alan is actually an undercover policeman, Woo uses a sequence in a library to emphasize their similarity. From a universalist standpoint, this sequence may be foreshadowing the revelation that Alan is actually a police officer. However, invisible to universalist observation is the culturally intriguing parallel between police and criminals in Hong Kong and throughout China and the Chinese diaspora: both groups pay homage to the same deity, General Kwan, the god of righteousness, whose statue is addressed by Chow Yun Fat in a scene set at a police station. The significance of General Kwan to both policemen and Triads, and of the resulting inherent moral ambiguity and conflict, is not universally apparent. It is, however, highly pertinent to the motivations of the protagonists.

There are numerous other examples of the shortcomings of a universalist appraisal of *Hard Boiled*; other films provide virtually countless examples. It is not the authors’ intention to attempt to argue that universalist approaches have no merit. Instead, it is our intention to illustrate just how little a universalist appraisal can provide in terms of richness, background, and motivation compared to a culturally cognizant reading. *Hard Boiled* is a visually striking, technically breathtaking action film. It is also, however, quite a bit more than “shootouts without symbolism.” A universalist approach, in this instance, only reinforces such a short-sighted perspective.

Implications

The implications of the study are two-fold. There are significant consequences for scholarship (and scholars) of Hong Kong cinema. There are also important considerations for the audiences and students of Hong Kong cinema. It is not the intention of the present study to imply that either Bordwell or Sandell are consciously, willingly adopting these problematic perspectives. Indeed, it is much more likely that they would assert themselves to be oriented in exactly the opposite way. This kind of conundrum illustrates the benefit of critical discourse analysis. Through its use, we can see the way that people “are typically unaware of the ideological dimensions of the subject positions they occupy... It is quite possible for a social subject to occupy institutional subject positions which are ideologically incompatible, or to occupy a subject position incompatible with his or her overt political or social beliefs and affiliations, without being aware of any contradiction” (Fairclough, 1999, p. 42).

One of the most significant implications of this scholarship is the re-inscription of these potentially erroneous approaches through their ongoing utilization in academic classrooms and research. Sandell’s 1994 article, part of an issue of *Bright Lights Film Journal* focusing on Hong Kong cinema, has been used as course material in academic settings; the implication is that students, especially those either unfamiliar with the films or uncritical of the author’s views, would accept her theses as fact much more readily in an academic setting than if they encountered them in a non-academic setting. Thus, Sandell’s articles, having been used as course material and cited in scholarly publications, have contributed to and helped perpetuate culturally misinformed
conceptions of Hong Kong cinema. The most salient problematic aspect of Sandell’s interpretations is their tacit reinforcement of the feminine Asian male stereotype (Bernstein & Studlar, 1997, Marchetti, 1993). By equating Chinese male friendship with homosexuality and even describing Woo’s films as part of a crisis of masculinity, Sandell’s scholarship, when used as course material, contributes to the perpetuation of this stereotype. Bordwell’s encouragement of a universalist standpoint also helps perpetuate a misrepresented interpretation of Hong Kong cinema. Universal analysis, as opposed to a more culturally aware and specific approach not only denies the producers (both literal and figurative) the chance to have their works interpreted more closely to the original intent. It also contributes, unfortunately and unfairly, to the assumption that Hong Kong’s films lack substance, complexity, subtlety and depth. All these qualities become apparent not through universal analyses but through culturally cognizant readings.

A more important implication is that for scholars of Hong Kong cinema, especially those operating outside a Western perspective, these kinds of problematic scholarship place an unfair burden upon their shoulders. In addition to the task of trying to establish a more autonomous voice that speaks of the nature of Hong Kong and/or Asian film, these scholars also now face the task of confronting and/or correcting scholarship that does not, they feel, portray Hong Kong cinema in its truest light. When Chute (1998) compliments Teo’s (1997) growth as a critic, it is precisely because of Teo’s abandonment of the need to define himself in opposition to Western critics. But the present study has made obvious the reality that often Western critics and/or their perspectives are in need of critique, which can be too easily seen as opposition. The consequent burden is that such oppositional scholarship can and does unfairly lead to these scholars being branded reactionary, small-minded or wrong-headed. Hence, to set the guidelines for debate in such a way that stigmatizes “geographically” oppositional standpoints (geographic terms the original scholars themselves deploy) as inappropriate is to subsume the power to decide guidelines for “appropriate” discussions and subjects.

Transcultural interpretation of film is an inevitability in both daily life and academic settings. It is not the intent of the present study to impugn the activity itself. Instead, the focus has been to point out the particular dangers and implications that result from transcultural misreadings resolutely based on a single cultural perspective. These implications are especially important in light of the fact that they have significantly negative hermeneutic consequences for both students and scholars of Hong Kong and Asian cinema. Perhaps even more importantly, transcultural misreadings such as those examined in the present study have significant and serious negative consequences for those people who are the putative subject of these flawed conceptions.
Works Cited


Wong, K.H. (2002). Personal interview. Shaw Brothers Studio, Hong Kong.


The Author

Sean Tierney is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include Hong Kong cinema and its reception and interpretation by non-native audiences. His research interests also include critical whiteness studies. His most recent research, an analysis of themes of whiteness in American martial arts films, was published in the Journal of Communications this fall. He is currently filming a documentary on the changing nature of tattoos in Hong Kong.
Session 6
MEMORY, DESPAIR, TRANSCENDENCE

Transnational Tamil Cinema as a Foucauldian Heterotopia: Diasporic Narratives, Identities, and Malaysian Indians

Gopalan Ravindran
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, India
ACF Travel Grant Best Faculty Paper

Abstract

The transnationalization of diasporic cinemas has been a growing trend in the age of globalization. Increasingly, members of the Tamil diaspora see the transnational Tamil cinema as having a perceptible influence on the negotiations of their identities. In the Foucauldian sense, the transnational Tamil cinema is a “heterotopia.” Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” and Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura” inform this paper’s theoretical premise. The encounters between Malaysian Indians and the diasporic narratives of transnational Tamil cinema on the “heterotopic” and “auratic” planes have been explored in the present work. This paper also subjects the diasporic narrative of Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek) to a Foucauldian analysis.
“Heterotopia,” “Aura,” and Diasporic Cinemas

Michel Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces” and Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” though separated in their historical contexts of origin/authorship, share striking similarities. Both are short essays. Both seek to provide succinct theoretical frameworks for explaining the implications of long drawn historical processes on the basis of fragmentary examples. Both have been invoked very frequently to examine media spaces and their social networks. Both have been widely used by scholars to relate to spaces as diverse as gallery space, lifestyle event space, cyberspace and filmic space (Elliot and Purdy, St. John, Yue, Kazis, Hansen and Warschauer). The concepts contained in both essays remain as relevant and meaningful as they were at the time of their formulation.

In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault conceptualizes three kinds of spaces. They are “utopia,” “heterotopia” and “mirror.” Foucault’s notion of “utopia” posits placeless and unreal spaces. “They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (Foucault). In contrast, he likens the “heterotopia” as a counter-site with a real place. “Heterotopia” is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault). Foucault’s third category shares the characteristics of both “heterotopia” and “utopia.” He calls it “mirror.” “Mirror” is “utopian” as it is placeless and “heterotopian” in its state as the real and counteracting place. Says Foucault,

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy.

In what Foucault calls as his “heterotopology,” he outlines six principles of “heterotopia”:

i) ...there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias... ii) ...a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion... iii) The heterotopia is capable of

---

1 The concept of “aura” first emerges in Benjamin’s 1931 essay, even though his 1936 essay is widely respected as the source of the concept.
juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible... iv) Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time... v) Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable... and vi) The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space.... Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.

“Heterotopias” have other traits as well. A short essay like “Of Other Spaces” could not be comprehensive in uncovering the other possible dimensions of “heterotopias,” despite the rigor of the Foucauldian “heterotopology.” One important missing trait of the “heterotopia” in Foucault’s “heterotopology” is its “auratic” character. To correct the same, this paper advances the seventh principle of “heterotopia” as: Heterotopias hold the potential to be auratic if the characteristics of uniqueness, authenticity and relative distance from the sites they seek to contest are native to them. But all heterotopias can not be auratic. If films (and their subsets such as narratives) can be construed as heterotopias, all films and their subsets can not be taken for granted as auratic heterotopias. Aura is not pre-given, it is acquired. Auratic heterotopias are not as common as other heterotopias. This does not mean they are the exceptions. Heterotopias that inhere auratic losses are the exceptions. Aura is neither a positive nor a negative attribute of heterotopias. It is what makes heterotopias auratic and discernible. Aura is a shifting location in the heterotopic space. Aura is transient, momentary and fluid. It is here today and gone tomorrow depending on the propensity of heterotopias to hold on to it or allow it to fade away.

Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” has been attracting critical examination right from the times of Adorno (Turner 2) for advancing one of the critical concepts of modernity, the “aura.” Benjamin wrote about “aura” in the context of its supposed destruction by photography and films. This was when the formation of masses and the rise of mass culture were seen as helping the rise of fascism as well as the emergence of a politically sensitive cinema. Benjamin was positive about the loss of “aura” in the age of mechanical reproduction as it marked the end of “cult value” of art. According to Benjamin, “aura” is defined by the factors of authenticity, uniqueness and distance. “Aura” is unique because of the unique location of the original art in its historical contexts of time and space. What happens to such locations when the tools of mechanical reproduction unfurl a wave of copies? Said Benjamin, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.”
In Benjamin’s rationale, authenticity is borne of tradition. And tradition gets its sustenance from the cult value ascribed by rituals. The formation of masses and the emergence of mass culture have led to the displacement of the traditional markers of authenticity by the “exhibition value” of the arts. According Benjamin, “aura” suffers the most when the object of art loses its distance between itself and the masses who desire to hold everything very close. And thanks to photography and films, the desire of the modern man to see works of art on their terms, in their specified time and space contexts, has effectively denied “aura” to both objects of nature and art, so goes the Benjaminian logic.

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.” (Benjamin)

Not surprisingly, Benjamin said, “One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film.” Even as Benjamin exuded confidence in the potential of films to be politically progressive and aesthetically reflexive, he was not, according to Bolter et al., getting away from the nostalgic longing for the immediacy of the arts that existed before the age of mechanical reproduction.

Notwithstanding the critical acclaim gained by Walter Benjamin’s essay, there is a discernible uneasiness about Benjamin’s characterisation of cinema as the harbinger of the decline of “aura” among those who seek to view films as “auratic.” Bolter et al. (21-39) hold the view that Hollywood films exuded “aura” then (during 1930s, when Benjamin wrote the essay) and continues to exude “aura” on account of continuity editing (which entails a sense of immediacy as well as distance) and the “auratic” star systems. While others like Bertsch (11-12) seek to subject Benjamin’s essay to a new reading to discover “whether he (Benjamin) is doing anything else,” besides “celebrating the demise of aura.” Bertsch (12) discovers the “simulacral aura” “that functions like it (aura).” Thanks to the overwhelming influence of Benjamin’s thesis, cinema has been denied the testimony that it is as “auratic” as other arts. Ironically, what has been denied to cinema in the Benjaminian tradition is the acknowledgement of what cinema inheres,
a certain uniqueness, distance and authenticity, the same factors which have been cited as the defining parameters of Benjaminian “aura.” In view of this, there is a greater need than ever before in fusing the concepts of “heterotopia” and “aura” to correct what has been denied to the “heterotopia” of cinema for well over 70 years.

The loss of “aura” is but only one of the implications of the mechanical reproducibility of films as pictured by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin did envision the positive fallouts of the loss of “aura” and the collapse of traditional and cultist markers of arts. He sounds more than optimistic about the emergence of politically active films in the wake of the collapse of traditional and cultic markers of arts. The advent of democratic mass cultures and media that lend themselves to projects of political aesthetization and mobilisation was due to the destruction of “aura” and the sources of its sustenance. In this sense, the loss of “aura” was seen as inevitable for the emergence of films as media of mass culture, political aesthetics and mobilisation. The political cinema becomes a possibility in the Benjaminian logic only with the destruction of “aura” and its sources (tradition, history and rituals). There is a serious limitation in the Benjaminian conception of both “aura” and its destruction. This paper takes issue with the Benjaminian logic that “aura” is pre-given for objects of arts because of their historical processes of production and reception. The Benjaminian notion of “aura” becomes a possibility because of tradition, history and the cultist rites and rituals. “Aura” becomes an impossibility with the de-linking of traditional, historical and cultist relationships from the work of art in its state as a copy. This paper argues that “aura” is not pre-given. It is not something that is born and later destructed due to extraneous factors. It can not be permanent even if those extraneous factors allow it. It is acquired and exists as a transient trait. “Aura” inheres in films and their subsets not because of historical contexts of production, but because of the factors of uniqueness, authenticity and distance in their non-historical and contemporaneous contexts such as “identity performances” (Merchant 235-44), “networked individualism” (Wellman 10-25) and “self reflexive” projects (Giddens 35-108) of individuals in the age of modernity. “Aura” can not be destructed nor it can be created by extraneous factors of historical processes.

This paper sees the “heterotopia” of cinema as a site that is different from other real sites in their degrees of lack or possession of “aura.” Cinemas are “heterotopic” in their collective character and “auratic” in their individual contexts. Like “heterotopic” spaces, the “auratic” spaces are also neither purely real nor “utopian,” but have to be contesting, inverting and transforming themselves as counter sites. If not for any other reason, this unifying characteristic of the two spaces justifies eminently the need to view cinemas as “auratic heterotopias.”

There has been a growing interest among scholars to employ the concepts of Foucault and Benjamin in examining the contexts of media spaces. The usefulness of their application has been widely acknowledged in studies in areas as diverse as video gaming (McNamee), virtual reality (Bolter et al.), internet (Liff and Fred) and body studies (Tester), despite the reservations held by some scholars regarding their
One of the interesting planes of applications of “auratic heterotopia” is the diasporic cinema. Diasporic cinemas are as much “heterotopic” as “auratic.” Diasporic cinemas are transnational in terms of their character, market penetration and content. Diasporic cinemas are also about the “heterotopic” possibilities transnational cinemas have made possible. Diasporic cinemas are as much transnational as they are “heterotopic” and they are “heterotopic” because they are “auratic.”

Even though, it has become rather customary to locate the “place” in the diasporic space in terms of the original homeland and settled homeland binary, the diasporic space is as placeless as any other “heterotopia.” It is real, but can only exist as a counter site of reality and not as the real site. In Foucauldian terms, it is the “other space,” where the “utopian” longings of the diasporic self meshes with the identity crises of the self that finds itself at the crossroads of the “utopia” and the real; and between the “utopia” of the “original homeland” and the real space of the “settled homeland.” In short, diasporic cinemas are transnational in their character, content and reach. And diasporic cinemas are “heterotopic” in their spatial and temporal implications. As “heterotopias,” diasporic cinemas ought to be conceptualised at another important level as well. This paper’s theoretical premise is informed by the concepts of “heterotopia” and “aura” in understanding the planes of transnational Tamil cinema, diasporic narratives and what they seek to engender: the identities of diasporic Tamils.

“Crisis Heterotopia,” “Aura,” and Diasporic Narratives: A Foucauldian Analysis of Kannathil Muthamittal

In Foucault’s conception of “other spaces,” the location of the “crisis heterotopia” holds a significant place. According to Foucault, those who were undergoing the “crises” of ageing, adolescence, menstruation and pregnancy were located in “secluded and forbidden” places. Foucault said,

In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found.

But Foucault was only partly right regarding his conception of “crisis heterotopia.” As in the case of Benjaminian logic of “aura,” this paper takes issue with the notion of Foucault that “in our society, crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing.”

The age of modernity is the age of crises. In fact, the modern individuals are caught up with crises of unprecedented nature and magnitude. The modern versions of “crisis heterotopias” have less to do with crises on account of “menstrual pollution” or
“ageing.” They are borne more of the crises of identity politics in the age of globalization and transnationalization of flows of people and their cultural goods. Appadurai (33-47) likens the planes of such flows as “scapes.” This paper likens them as planes of diasporic identity crises or “diasporic crisis heterotopias” If “heterotopias” represent spaces that are real as well as “utopian” with the potential to contest, transform and invert other real spaces, then diasporic spaces have to be construed as “heterotopias.” They are at the crossroads of the “utopian” imagination concerning the distant/lost homelands and the real/settled places. They contest, transform and invert whatever other real spaces that come into the social networking of the diasporic members. If “diasporic heterotopias” merit consideration as the modern versions of Foucauldian “crisis heterotopia,” it becomes relatively unproblematic to posit the location of the diasporic cinema also as “heterotopic.”

In Benjamin’s conception of “aura,” the factors of distance, authenticity and perception have their locations in the historical process of production and relationships engendered by unique contexts of reception. As mentioned before, the widely held conception of Benjaminian “aura” denies cinema, the so-called medium of the “mechanical age,” the quality of “aura.” Cinema and photography were seen as the sources of destruction of “aura” enjoyed by painting and early versions of photography. According to Walter Benjamin, “aura” is what is lost when a work of art gets dislocated from its historical contexts of rituals and cults to its contexts of exhibition. What is lost as “aura” is the authenticity and uniqueness that arise from relationships of the reception contexts and the historical contexts of the production of arts.

There have been several attempts to dislocate the widely held readings of Benjamin’s essay and conceptualise “aura” more positively (Bolter et al. and Bertsch). This paper seeks to perform one such attempt in reconceptualizing Benjamin’s notion of “aura” to fall in line with the nature of “diasporic heterotopias” and their cinemas. The “aura” of an object can be only as misleading as its other dimensions of representations, notwithstanding its peculiar origins in historical place and time. “Aura” does not only belong to physical objects externally. “Aura” is something that gets embedded in the internal confines of persons, places, spaces, flows and their media. “Aura” is intrinsic to cinema, notwithstanding its nature of “mechanical reproducibility.” “Aura” lives on in every individual context of a film’s reception, notwithstanding its locales of time and place of production. Diasporic cinema is “auratic” as it is “heterotopic.” Even if the factors of distance, uniqueness and authenticity, as enunciated by Benjamin, ought to be held as the defining parameters of “aura,” the planes of diasporic cinemas and their sponsors are “auratic” as they are conditioned primarily by the factors of distance (between the different locales of their objects of desire in places as varied as original homeland, settled homeland, borderlands and transient homelands), uniqueness (as defined by their individual contexts of relationships with objects of desire) and authenticity (as defined by the individual conditions of proximity and alienation vis-à-vis objects of desire). With this yardstick, what becomes of diasporic cinemas is not only “heterotopic,” but “auratic” as well.
Diasporas are “heterotopic” in so far as their location at the crossroads of “utopian” imaginary spaces and the real spaces of the settled homeland is concerned. Diasporic narratives are no different. They are “heterotopic” in so far as their nature to be reflective of the diasporic contexts they seek to address. The locales of displacement, re-displacement and connectedness between the places of displacement and places of settlement are the defining parameters of “diasporic heterotopias.” The same serve as the defining contexts of diasporic narratives. “Diasporic heterotopias” and their cinemas are also to be seen as “mirrors.” The Foucauldian “mirror” is a “heterotopia.” It is a site where the virtual meets the real. The “mirror” makes present what is absent (in the placeless place of “mirror”) and, in turn, signifies what is present in front of it. The presence of the object before the “mirror” is regulated by what is reflected in the mirror and vice-versa. “Diasporic heterotopias” and their cinemas share with the “mirror” similar characteristics. They are “mirrors” in so far as their ability to make present what is absent in real contexts through collective nostalgia and imagination about their original places of displacement. In a sense, the diasporic space exists as a “mirror” because it is a placeless place, even though the binaries of settled homeland and original homeland denote identifiable physical locations, their anchoring function is normally suspended in the face of their ambivalent nature. Moreover, the diasporic space is a space that is “everywhere” and yet “nowhere.” Any space that seems “nowhere” is bound to have a placeless location, a “mirror” state. Diasporic cinemas are as much “mirror” like as their sponsors, the diasporas. They are transnational, global, diasporic and “everywhere.” Their location in the “everywhere” space is to be construed as a “nowhere” location.

Transnational Tamil cinema may be conceptualized as having a dominant centre of production in the original homeland (Tamil Nadu), but what makes it transnational are both inside and outside the homeland. What makes it transnational in the age of globalization is a continuum of contexts of audiences, markets, story worlds, technologies of production and distribution which knows no borders. This characteristic effectively erases the homeland production marker on transnational Tamil films once they become part of the ceaseless cycle of cultural flows in the “diasporic heterotopia.” They are as placeless as other goods in the loop of cultural globalization. They are as placeless as a Nike shoe or a Pokemon cartoon show or a Jackie Chan movie. Given the transnationalized production environment of shoes, cartoons and movies, it is well nigh impossible to pin point their real places of origin. They are what they are because of their production in “everywhere” contexts. The “everywhere” space of their production locales is no different from the “everywhere” space of the transnational Tamil cinema. They are no longer made only in the places of the original homeland about issues, events and people in the homeland. They are about Tamils “everywhere” and places “everywhere.”

A classic example of the placeless context of the transnational Tamil cinema is the rapidly shifting and alienating locations in the song and dance segments. It is not
uncommon to find places far and near and places culturally alien and similar in a short span of three minutes. This paper defines the song and dance segments in Tamil films as comfort zones. The objective of the song and dance segments is a non-narrative ploy. It aims at the annihilation of place as a durable signifier. What emerges as a consequence in such instances is the placeless “everywhere” place, a “mirror.” “Mirror” is a “heterotopia” with a difference, as it connects the virtual with the real. The “mirror” of the transnational Tamil cinema is connected to the real sites it reflects upon and makes present what is absent. The transnational Tamil cinema in that sense is a “heterotopic mirror.” Foucault did not conceptualize his “heterotopias” as placeless. According Foucault, ‘heterotopias’ are real sites unlike the placeless “utopia.” Transnational Tamil cinema is real in so far as its “heterotopic” character is concerned. It is a “mirror” as regards its “placeless” and “everywhere” contexts. The spatial and temporal locations of the diasporic narrative of Kannathil Muthamittal (2002) attests to the above in more ways than one. This paper seeks to subject the diasporic narrative of Kannathil Muthamittal to a Foucauldian analysis. The premise of the same is informed by the Benjaminian concept of “aura.”

Kannathil Muthamittal has been chosen as the subject of analysis in this paper for three reasons. The film embodies a diasporic narrative that connects well not only the poles of original homeland and settled homeland, but the identity crises relationships between the two poles signify for the members of the Tamil diaspora. Kannathil Muthamittal provides the context of ethnic conflict borne diasporic crisis. Thirdly, Kannathil Muthamittal does not belong to the typical “run of the mill” kind in Tamil cinema. Kannathil Muthamittal was directed by Manirathnam, one of the “middle-brow” directors in Tamil cinema, who has carved a niche for himself for seeking perfection and authenticity in what he does.

However, Kannathil Muthamittal was not to the liking of many diasporic Tamils, particularly Sri Lankan Tamils, as the film was seen as too ephemeral and distorted for the subject it chose to handle, the implications of the ethnic conflict in the life of a nine-year-old girl, Amutha.2 The ethnic conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese in the island nation of Sri Lanka is more than three decades old and has claimed thousands of lives so far. The struggle by the Tamils for an independent state, incorporating the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, has its violent origins in 1983. It is waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against the Sri Lankan government. The large-scale dispersal of the Tamils across the world during the last three decades has been mostly on account of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Tamils have been immigrating to countries as distant and varied as Norway, France, Switzerland and Australia as political refugees since 1983, in the wake of continued uncertainty over safety and livelihood for lives in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Before the current

---

2 The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) banned Kannathil Muthamittal for the reasons mentioned in this article. The controversial Tamil film, Boys (2003) was also banned, as it was seen as a potential source of bad influence on Tamil youth in Sri Lanka. See <http://www.mohankumars.com/html/cinebitsoct20oct30.html> for details.
wave of migration, Sri Lankan Tamils migrated to distant lands during the 19th and early 20th centuries to work as supervisors and workers in plantations in British colonies such as Malaysia.

*Kannathil Muthamittal* is as crisis driven as the lives of the Sri Lankan Tamils it seeks to have as the macro world of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. The film seeks to connect this macro world to the identity crisis of a young girl, Amutha. Amutha is shown as a school girl, happily coexisting with her siblings and loving foster parents, unaware of her real origins, in Tamil Nadu, an important diasporic geographical marker for Tamils as the original homeland. Amutha’s foster father, Thiruchelvan, is a “no-nonsense” professional engineer. He doubles up as a popular Tamil writer, with the pseudonym, Indira (the name he shares with his wife). Thiruchelvan is shown as a caring and sensitive family person. Amutha’s foster mother, Indira, is shown as a conventional Tamil housewife. Her world is the world of her husband, three children and ageing father.

*Kannathil Muthamittal* is the story of a diasporic subject who was born in a “somewhere” space, a refugee camp in Southern India. What makes such a diasporic subject traumatic is her entry into the “nowhere” space, when her foster parents seek to tell the truth of her biological identity early on. When the news of her abandonment by her biological mother was revealed by her foster father, the revelation comes as a bolt from the blue for the girl who thought all along that she belonged to a definite spatial location, the family of Thiruchelvan and Indira. As their “only” daughter, she also probably thought that she had the space to take on her two younger siblings boldly. After the news of her abandonment by her biological mother in the “somewhere” space of the refugee camp, Amutha feels the pangs of slipping into the “nowhere” space, a rootless space where her biological parents are found missing and her loving foster parents no longer serve as the fountainhead of her identity.

Long before the credits start rolling, the film opens with an intertitle that locates the geographical and cultural context of a Tamil marriage. The intertitle reads as “Mangulam, Ilankai (Sri Lanka), few years before.” As the marriage procession winds down the streets, happy onlookers, mostly Tamil women shower their happiness through their giggles, laughter and teases on the young couple, Dileepan and Shyama. The verbal transactions by the characters are in the distinct dialect of Sri Lankan Tamil, which is widely seen as more chaste and pure than other Tamil dialects in the diaspora. Dileepan and Shyama get married and are shown as having a passionate love for each other. They were shown cuddling up themselves on the bed, in the first night of their marriage. Later, they are shown bathing in a pond, amidst a very eerie setting of thick vegetation. The sudden arrival of gun toting soldiers and tanks shatter their happy moments, just as it stole the happiness from the lives of every other Sri Lankan Tamil. Dileepan and Shyama hide themselves behind a tree. Dileepan tries hard to contain the shrieks of Shyama, who is in deep shock. As the troops leave from their view, Dileepan
tells Shyama to leave the place at once. He mentally prepares her for his departure. Shyama cries and pleads with Dileepan not to go, but in vain.

Soon after this, we are shown the escalation of the war and the displacement of Shyama from her homeland. She is shown as a pregnant refugee, adrift in rough seas, on a dingy boat. The boat is overcrowded with more people than it can carry safely to the shores of the original homeland, Tamil Nadu. After the journey, Shyama is shown with other refugees in a government camp and questioned by an officer in a blunt manner. The officer is none other than the father of Amutha’s foster mother, Indira. Shyama develops labor and is carried away by a few fellow refugee women to the Red Cross Camp. She delivers Amutha, but bids adieu to her new born baby immediately. She reluctantly leaves to get herself displaced from the foreign land to reach her homeland. Amutha’s would-be foster parents were shown as having an affair. Amutha’s would-be foster father seeks to adopt the baby, but was forced to marry his lover earlier than they planned, thanks to one of the important conditions prescribed for those who seek to adopt, only those who are married can adopt.

The rest is the story of a very happy family until Amutha is given the news of her adoption. Amutha is unable to come to terms with the fact that she was adopted. She yearns to know the whereabouts of her biological mother. An identity crisis befalls the young girl. She disappears one day, but was traced quickly by her foster parents in a city railway station. Later, without informing her foster parents she boards a bus, along with her cousin, to the southern town of Rameswaram, where she was born and abandoned, only to be quickly traced by her foster parents again. Sympathising with her condition, her foster parents make a resolve to trace Shyama. They board a plane to Colombo, Sri Lanka, with Amutha. They are welcomed by Amutha’s foster father’s friend, Dr.Wicramasinghe, a Sinhalase. Amutha and her foster parents board a bus to Mangulam, but were only left clueless in their search for Shyama in the war torn region. Finally, they establish contact with Shyama’s brother and arrange for a meeting of Shyama and her daughter. When Shyama’s brother breaks the news about her daughter, Shyama declines to meet her daughter. She says that she has 300 children to take care in her camp. In this scene, she is shown as a non-traditional Tamil woman, in contrast to her portrayal during the happy times of her marriage, doing her job as a rebel soldier along with her brother.

But Shyama finally relents and arrives to see Amutha in a public park that has just been devastated by the crossfire between rebels and government soldiers. To begin with, Shyama is shown as a person not given to motherly emotions. Amutha tells Shyama her achievements as a student and starts asking a series of questions that have been the source of her identity crisis. They include, among others: i) “Why did you leave me?” ii)”Who is my father, can I see him?” and iii) “Did you cuddle me after I was born?” As Amutha prods Shyama’s motherly instincts with determination, Shyama breaks down. She hugs Amutha intensely even as she prepares to leave her once again. Amutha pleads with her not to leave. Says she: “Let’s go to Madras where there is no war,
we can watch TV. There is a beach too.” Shyama says, “I have work here.” Cries Amutha: “Please do not go. Take me with you.” Shyama tells Amutha, “When this land is freed from the war, come back here.” The child haltingly asks, “When... When mother...? When mother [sic]?” The four characters, Amutha, Shyama and Amutha’s foster parents, are shown in these last moments of the film under an umbrella as the rain arrives. Shyama and her brother leave the park. Amutha and her foster parents are shown in the last frame.

Like the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, which has been traumatized by the ongoing ethnic conflict, *Kannathil Muthamittal* is also emblematic of a “crisis heterotopia.” It harbors a narrative that seeks to connect the real site of Amutha’s crisis (her psychological displacement from the secure space of “her family” to a “nowhere” space, where her biological mother is found missing) with other real sites in the macro world of the ethnic conflict, albeit in the unreal virtuality of what it constructs as locales of the narrative events. The unreal virtuality of the “crisis heterotopia” is a prerequisite for the birth of the filmic “crisis heterotopia” itself, as it alone can engender tendencies that can contest and transform the real sites in the “crisis heterotopia.” The unreal virtuality is not shown explicitly as real. It can not be shown as real as it is virtual. It is shown more through the suggestive indicators that are made to lurk in the minds of the viewers, even as they are made to travel through the real sites of human tragedies the ethnic conflict has engendered.

The tragedy of displacement and separation from loved ones is the brute reality of the real sites of “crisis heterotopia” in *Kannathil Muthamittal*. But the comfort zones of songs in dubious settings, like the one on the beach, where the skeletal remains of an artificiality of the boat on a serene beach lie, betray the authenticity of the “crisis heterotopia” and makes it non-auratic, albeit temporarily. The artificiality of the boat in the song “Kannathil Muthamittal” struggles to catch up with the real site of the overloaded refugee boats in stormy seas, but in vain. It is also emblematic of the deadpan pessimism about the vehicles of displacement (the active dingy boats) that connect the land of the displaced (homeland) with the place of temporary comfort/safety zone, the refugee camp in a foreign land.

It is not without reason that Foucault called the boat/ship “heterotopia par excellence.” In the “crisis heterotopia” of *Kannathil Muthamittal*, the boat provides a comfort/safety zone for the displaced despite the harshness of the journey, as it is still in the zone of “nowhere” place. Here, the “nowhere” space signifies a comfort zone. In contrast, the “nowhere” space of Amutha, when she comes to know about her identity as an adopted child, is the heart of the “crisis heterotopia.” The refugee camp is a comfort zone too, but an intensely alienating one, as it is “somewhere.” The “somewhere” location of the displacement is more harsh and troubling than the “nowhere” location of the boat that ferries people to imagined safe locales. This is probably the reason why the transient location of the refugee camp is not appealing to Shyama despite the need to care for her new born baby. Shyama seeks the comfort/safety zone of
the boat once again for her eventual union with her ultimate comfort zone, her homeland. The place of being “no where” is true of the boat and its people. The place of being “no where” also entails the boat a “utopian” character in the Foucauldian sense. The “utopian” is what survives as the virtual on screen and in the back of the minds of the Foucauldian viewers when they seek to connect the “utopia” of constructed serenity on the beach, where boats have been offloading human tragedies, with the virtual comfort zones (songs and dances) the diasporic narratives seek to provide.

The functionalist appropriation of artificiality makes the virtual comfort zones rather easily, but the appropriation of authenticity struggles to move forward as the virtual seeks to deny the present any “actuality.” What gets transacted as the actual is the virtual. What gets appropriated again and again is the artificiality of staging. From the locales of thick vegetation (of Kerala?) to the Buddha statue in a public park (in the “no where” space of Tamil Nadu or Kerala?) to the carefully crafted ruins of a boat in the beach (a boat that never sailed as it was born as a cinematic ruin), what emerges in the failed transformation of the artificiality as virtuality is a Hyalosign that fails repeatedly. In the Deleuzean framework, the crystal image emerges as a time-image due to the almost complete unity of the virtual and actual images “to the point where they can no longer be distinguished” (Deleuze 335).

The virtuality is not restricted to the visually explicit layer of serenity vs crisis, as shown in the popular song on the beach (“Kannathil Muthamittal...”), but also in the song, when hordes of Tamils leave Mangulam, even as Amutha’s foster parents land there in search of Shyama, amidst thunderous pounding by bombs from hovering helicopters. The song begins, “Bid us adieu, our dear homeland.” It is another instance of an artificiality that gives rise to the virtuality in Kannathil Muthamittal. The need to define the artificial as virtual is concomitant with the need to define the virtual as unreal. They are both border zones and unreal. But they are nonetheless deemed as necessary narrative strategies by the transnational Tamil cinema. Without the virtual and unreal comfort zones, the real sites can not be contested and transformed for the emergence of ‘heterotopias’.

In the conventional understanding of the Deleuzean framework, there is no place for the binary, real and unreal. Images can be only virtual (of the past) and actual (of the present). “The present is the actual image, and its contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror” (Deleuze 79). According to Deleuze (335), the Mnemosign is emblematic of the recollection image and Onirosign gives rise to the dream image. The Deleuzean framework becomes inadequate in its conceptualization of the virtual as the past and actual as the present when the possibilities of Mnemosigns and Onirosigns in the actual (of the present) can not be excluded. Hence, it is appropriate to call the virtual as the unreal and the actual as the real, notwithstanding their temporal contexts. This is crucial for dealing with the temporal and spatial peculiarities of the comfort zones (song and dance segments) in Tamil/Indian cinema. For instance, if one seeks to apply the Deleuzean notion of time-image in analysing the comfort zones in
Tamil/Indian cinema, one would be disappointed with the discovery of atypical Hyalosigns, signs which have succeeded only partially in bringing about the unity of actual and virtual images. In *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Deleuze (69) said: “there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation: it is a place and its obverse which are totally reversible.” The comfort zones of songs and dances in Tamil/Indian cinema remain only as incomplete time-images as the actualizing of the virtual and virtualizing of the actual do not proceed along the Deleuzean expectations. The actual and virtual are not reversible in terms of their locations all the time. Only very rarely, the complete unity of the virtual and actual becomes discernible.

The artificiality that masquerades as the real is to be seen as virtual for one more reason. It is virtual because it lacks the authenticity and uniqueness to be real and because it lacks the Benjaminian “aura.” The characteristic of “aura” is the function of real objects and not copies. Copies can not be located in their contexts of historical time and production. Copies are as functional and physical as real objects, but they can not be located in concrete locations of place and time of authentic production. They can be *used*, but can not stand as real as they lack the “aura.” The virtual lacks the “aura.” The virtuality of the narrative strategies such as the above mentioned comfort zones lack the “aura.” There is no denying that they are functional and serve designated purposes in the transnational Tamil cinema industry, but they are “outside of all real places,” to borrow the usage from Foucault.

Another context to apply the Benjaminian notion of “aura” in this diasporic narrative is provided by the entire thrust of Amutha’s project as a diasporic subject. It is to seek a biological identity that can be validated only by the comfort zone of the “aura” of the biological mother. However loving and caring the foster parents are, the diasporic subject longs intensely to experience the “aura” of her mother. It is an elusive comfort zone, not easily accessible and enjoyable, unlike the comfort zones provided by the virtuality of the songs. It is a real site that requires logical entry and exit points, going by Foucault’s fifth principle of “heterotopology.” Says Foucault in his fifth principle of “heterotopia”: “In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.” Foucault’s examples of barracks and prison are to be replaced with the comfort zone of the “aura” of Amutha’s mother here. Amutha succeeds in entering her object of desire only after performing the rites borne of her identity crisis. However, she can not live in the comfort zone forever as anything that enters the “heterotopia” must exit, just as all good things in life must exit at some point of time. The narrative closure in *Kannathil Muthamittal* is made possible only when the comfort zone of the biological mother’s “aura” is experienced by Amutha after a long search, even as the “aura” of the foster parents is sought to be privileged by none other than the person who holds the real “aura,” Shyama. She urges Amutha to forget the real “aura” (as it is only transient) and go for the “aura” of the foster parents (as it is
purposeful). Here arises the contesting nature of Foucault’s “heterotopia.” What started out as the search for the “real aura” of the biological mother is made to discover and experience the same, but only for a fleeting moment. In this fleeting moment, what gets lost once again is the “real aura” and what sustains the journey of the diasporic subject is the “aura” of the foster parents, which would also be exited when Amutha finds yet another “aura,” in her life partner, at a later date.

What was seen earlier as the source of Amutha’s identity, the lack of the “aura” (the biological mother who went missing), is now transformed as the permanent lack. The momentary and transient encounter with the “aura” of the biological mother is only a comfort zone that can not last forever. Like the comfort zones engendered by the unreal, the artificialities of songs; the “aura” of biological mother also can last only for a couple of minutes. As in the diasporic narrative, where the entry and exit points of the comfort zones such as the songs have been predetermined by the extraneous factors of the transnationalization project, the “aura” of the real mother can not be allowed to last longer than necessary. It has to exit and give room for the real. In other words, the “utopian” dream, even when it gets realized in the “crisis heterotopia” of the diasporic subject, has to last only for a fleeting moment and can not last longer than necessary.

**Transnational Tamil Cinema and Malaysian Indians**

The world of the transnational Tamil cinema is the world of Tamil diaspora in more ways than one. One of the important markers of the transnationalization project of territorialized cinemas is language (Ravindran 250-54). What makes the Tamil diasporic cinema transnational is the distribution of the individual markets across the world, albeit with the semblance of unity of a single market, the diasporic market. Thanks to the role of the language marker of Tamil, the transnationalization project of Tamil cinema is able to make inroads in this market.

According to *Ethnologue*, Tamil is spoken by 74 million people around the world, including 61 million people in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Members of the Tamil diaspora have their primary locations in regions as varied as South Asia, South East Asia, North America, Western Europe, Australia and the Indian Ocean Region. There are traditional and new diasporic belts of their distribution. The traditional diasporic belts include countries like South Africa, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore, Reunion and Fiji. The new locations include countries like Australia, Sweden, Norway, UK, Switzerland, USA and France. Tamil is one of the two classical Indian languages (Sanskrit was the first to get the status). Tamil has a recorded history of major genres of literature and grammar spanning over 2000 years. Tamils are diglossic in their language use. The diglossic nature of their language use has its implications in the formations and negotiations of identities. The diglossic language use, coupled with the pride in the literature and classical status of the language, is very likely to be one of the sources of influence in the negotiations of identities by the diasporic Tamils.
Transnationalization and transnationalism are projects borne of the larger movement of globalization. Transnationalism denotes the ideology of the transnationalization project. Rather, it is the engine of the transnationalization juggernaut. Transnationalism as an ideology exists not as the precept of any “utopian” project, but as a lived experience on the “heterotopic” space of transnational individuals, individuals who belong to polar or multiple locations in the transnational social space. Transnationalism may also be likened as the politics of the “multicultural incorporation” of transnational migrant communities (Kivisto 5-28). Transnationalism survives on the transnational social space. And the transnational social space emerges from multiple locations, constructions and flows of transnational migrants over a long period of time. According to Thomas Faist (199), the transnational social spaces “consist of combinations of sustained social and symbolic ties, their contents, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that can be found in multiple states of multiple actors in multiple locations.” On the other hand, Ramji (646) argues in favor of a conception of transnational space that allows an examination of both larger cross-national processes and the micro level processes involving human relationships. Kivisto (25) says, “Transnational social spaces exist and it is likely that they will persist, (as) the product of globalizing forces. This includes immigrant transnational social spaces.... Transnational immigrant communities need to be conceptually distinguished from the larger social spaces in which they are embedded.” According Kivisto (5), “Transnational social spaces exist both ‘from above’ and, in the case of contemporary immigrants, ‘from below.’” He considers the conception of Thomas Faist as representing the former.

While there is a divergence of opinions regarding what constitutes the transnational social space, there is no disagreement on the view that transnationals are those who are on the move across multiple borders in their constructions of two homes and two homelands. Transnationalism, transnational social spaces and transnationalization are conditions of modernity. This paper defines the transnationalization of media as a process borne of modernity. In particular, it is a project that articulates the needs of transnational individuals and gives vent to their “networked individualism” (Wellman 10-25), “identity performances” (Merchant 235-44), and “self-reflexive” projects (Giddens 35-108).

Similarly, the transnationalization of Tamil cinema ought to be primarily seen as a process borne of the forces of modernity and the subjects of modernity, which are always geared towards the tasks of “networked individualism” (Wellman 10-25), “identity performances” (Merchant 235-244), and “self-reflexive” projects (Giddens 35-108). This is not to undermine the market and business driven processes of the transnationalization of Tamil cinema. Undoubtedly, they are the public face of any transnationalization project. But the ideology of transnationalism inheres more in the transnational social space (made possible by the needs of the subjects of modernity and the forces of modernity such as globalization and media technologies, etc.,) than in the market and business plans of the producers of transnational cultural goods. The location of the latter is not merely secondary to the former, but is more dependent on the former.
This is proved amply clear if one takes a bird’s eye view of the history of transnational Tamil cinema and its growth over the past fifty years. Before the advent of globalization and new media technologies, Tamil cinema’s transnational project did not extend beyond its traditional markets such as Malaysia and Singapore. Globalization and other forces of modernity have endowed the transnational Tamil cinema with new markets, new audiences and new narratives. The emergence of a truly varied and distinctive Tamil diasporic cinema has been made possible only after the emergence of a vast transnational social space in the era of late modernity.

The transnationalization of Tamil cinema has also profited from the operationalization of globalization and its implications within the national borders of India. Interestingly, the domestic diasporic market is an important driver of the growth of the transnational Tamil cinema as there is a growing momentum of domestic migration of Tamils to other states in India for reasons of livelihood. This is a less studied dimension of the transnationalization project of Tamil cinema. The cultural location of the transnational Tamil cinema is no longer rooted in the physical location of the Tamil film industry, Tamil Nadu. The cultural locations of the transnational Tamil cinema are where a sizable section of the Tamil diaspora lives. The locations could be Thiruvananthapuram (India), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), New York (USA), Melbourne (Australia), Colombo (Sri Lanka) or any place where there is scope for weaving a diasporic thread in the narratives of Tamil cinema.

Among the several pointers to the deep inroads made by the transnationalization project of Tamil cinema in countries like Malaysia, the scale and nature of publicity drives that accompany the release of Tamil films is a significant one for study. The influence of Tamil cinema in the psyche of the Malaysian Indian is strong and deep. It is not uncommon to find school children and college students discussing the trends in Tamil cinema. No hour passes on local Tamil FM stations and Astro Vanavil, the only 24-hour Tamil satellite channel, without a content sourced from Tamil cinema. Spaces of all kinds are intensely mediated by what emanates from the plane of the transnational Tamil cinema. Be it the socio-religious spaces of Thaipoosam, which attracts the largest single gathering of Malaysian Indians every year; or lifestyle/event spaces of parties or the functional space of a hair cutting saloon or the event space of kindergarten students, there is a sure location for Tamil cinema.

In this context, it is not surprising to note that Malaysian Tamil newspapers closely resemble their counterparts in Tamil Nadu in the volume of film advertisements they carry everyday. And it is not surprising to read about the upgradation of projection and sound systems whenever a Tamil blockbuster hits theaters in Malaysia, as it was

---

3 Thaipoosam is the single most important event in the religious and social calendar of Malaysian Hindus. It attracts millions of people from all over Malaysia and abroad. It falls during the Tamil month of Thai (January-February). The event celebrates the Tamil God, Lord Murugan. It attracts members of the ethnic Chinese community and foreign tourists.
done for the 2005 release of Chandramuki, a film from the stables of the Tamil super
star, Rajnikant (Ravindran 247).

“Crisis Heterotopia,” “Aura,” Diasporic Narratives, and Malaysian Indians’
Identities

Given the widespread dispersions of the markers of the transnational Tamil cinema in
the social lives of Malaysian Indians, it is also not surprising to come across accusations
against Tamil films that they are responsible for the rising levels of crime among certain
sections of the Malaysian Indian community. Ravindran (241) says that “the alleged
negative influences of homeland films are a cause for concern among Indians in
Malaysia and Singapore even though there is no empirical evidence to prove the
negative linkage between homeland films and violence.” In her study on Tamil cinema’s
location in the lives of south Indians in Singapore, Chinniah, emphatically says: “Tamil
movies cannot be indiscriminately blamed to be the negative force hindering the growth
of local South Indian teens.” According to Ravindran (242), “the perceived linkages
between the violence on screen and the violence on streets require a broader and in
depth examination of many more interconnected variables than film mediated ones.”
The view of Nadarajah that “the assignment of Tamil cinema and/or Tamil schools as
main causes of Tamil Malaysians community problems [sic] is not only limited and
careless but also dilutes the focus on more serious preventive measures addressing the
community’s socio-economic and political marginalization” lends support to the
conclusions reached by Chinniah and Ravindran (250-54).

The age of modernity is the age of crises and risks (Giddens 109-43). The age of
modernity is also the age of identity politics. The politics of identities cuts through the
vast swath of the transnational social space in its dimensions of postcoloniality,
neocoloniality and the globalism of media flows. The case of the politics of diasporic
identities is no different. It is also defined by the conditions of postcoloniality,
neocoloniality and the globalism of media flows. Diasporic identities are seen as
expressions of new found assertiveness in conditions of postcoloniality and
neocoloniality (Rajgopal 63-64). In exploring the new Asian identity in the films of
Gurinder Chada, a well-known UK film maker of Indian origin, Rajgopal (63-64) says,

I argue that the new diasporic identity represented is closer to what black
feminist theorist bell hooks describes as a “site of radical possibility, a space of
resistance.” It is in this sense that the collapsing or fragmentation of identity in
the postmodern framework is inadequate when discussing postcolonial Third
World cultural productions. For one major problem inherent in the very
characterization of the state of postcoloniality is that it fails to take into
consideration the issue of neocolonialism.

In contrast to the emergence of the “assertive diasporic identity” (Rajgopal 63-64)
witnessed in other diasporic locations, the diasporic identity of Malaysian Indians is as
ambivalent and fluid as any hybrid identity can be. Hybridity is to be seen as a defining marker of diasporic identity for more reasons than one. In its essence, diasporic identities are conventionally seen as sourced from the spatial and temporal locations of original homeland and settled homeland. At another level, Ang (9) sees the role of hybridity in how it “problematicizes the concept of ethnicity which underlines the dominant discourses of diaspora.”

In the contexts of Malaysian Indians, as Ravindran (252-53) pointed out, the inability to reconcile the innate differences between what is projected by the transnational Tamil cinema as the original homeland and what Malaysian Indians imagine and expect the original homeland to be is the source of their hybrid identities as well as their identity crises. Says Ravindran (252),

Malaysian Indians seek to negotiate their identities primarily in the contexts defined by Gidden’s “time-space distanciation.” They are equally divided in their longing for inputs from the cultural homeland and in their dismissal of what comes to them through homeland films. There is a clear division in time and space in their negotiations of identities borne of the two important locations, the settled homeland and the cultural homeland.

Moreover, what is at play in the identity politics of Malaysian Indians are not only the factors of ethnicity, language, religion and race, but also the perceived denial of opportunities for recognition from the bounded social space of the settled homeland and the imagined social space of the original homeland. What Nadarajah says attests to the perceived denial of opportunities from the settled homeland. And the strident criticisms of the Malaysian Tamil intellectuals in Malaysian Tamil newspapers, against the apathy of homeland social space towards Malaysian Tamils, is a testimony to the perceived denial of opportunities of recognition from the homeland.

In a sense, the crisis of Malaysian Indians’ identity is emblematic of a “crisis heterotopia.” What are the implications of the encounters between the two “crisis heterotopias,” the transnational Tamil cinema and Malaysian Indian diaspora? What are the contesting sites and other real sites in these two “heterotopias”? These questions provide the contexts of explorations in the following section.

The following section subjects to a Foucauldian-cum-Benjaminian analysis the encounters between “crisis heterotopias” of the transnational Tamil cinema and the Malaysian Indian diaspora. Three modified focus group sessions were conducted in the northern Malaysian city of Penang, where a sizeable Indian population lives, during March and April 2005. Thirty young participants were chosen for the focus group sessions from different socio-economic backgrounds. The focus group sessions consciously chose Malaysian Indian youth as participants as they are the subjects of the vexatious public debates in which the role of the transnational Tamil cinema is implicated. The format was a modified focus group. The discussions were made to flow
from the contexts defined by the four Tamil films shown in the first part of the focus group sessions. To represent the diasporic narratives, *Kannathil Muthamittal* and *Nala Damayanthi* (2003) were shown. To represent the non-diasporic narratives, *Kadhal* (2004) and *Vasool Raja* (2004) were shown.

In *Kannathil Muthamittal*, the “crisis heterotopia” exists at two levels: i) the macro-politics of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and its macro level implications and ii) the identity crisis of Amutha as the micro level implication of the macro politics. It was proved in the analysis of *Kannathil Muthamittal* that the “crisis heterotopia” of Amutha is also “auratic.” The analysis brought to fore the vulnerabilities of the Deleuzian logic regarding the actualising of the virtual and the virtualizing of the actual. The song and dance segments in the transnational Tamil cinema have been conceptualised as comfort zones in this analysis. Moreover, the Foucauldian analysis of *Kannathil Muthamittal* locate the comfort zones as sites of artificialities that masquerade as virtual.

In the following paragraphs, the encounters between the “crisis heterotopias” of transnational cinema and Malaysian Indian diaspora are subjected to a Foucauldian-cum-Benjaminian analysis. In this analysis, three contesting “heterotopic” sites are being explored. They are: i) language identity, ii) social/caste identity, and iii) cultural identity. The following responses of the focus group participants serve as the basis of analysis regarding language identity.

**Language Identity**

**R6** Language and culture are the basis our identities.

**R5** We may also judge the issue of language based identities differently though Tamil films. For instance, in the film *Autograph* (2004), one of the lead characters, who is shown as a Malayalee, is wearing a saree printed with letters from Tamil alphabet. This may be read differently by our youngsters. It may be seen as fun stuff. But we must realise that even though the two characters come from different cultural backgrounds, they are willing to accept the cultural identities of the other. This shows how we should be negotiating our identities.

**R6** People displaced and dispersed have to accept the transformation of their identities depended on language.

**R1** Tamil films show us our identity in terms of language and area.

**R5** Our identities are dependent on how we are named. Tamil films are responsible for the popularity of culturally alien names among Tamils. Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names. What is being done by Tamil films is having an impact in this regard in Malaysia also.
As pointed out earlier by Ravindran (2006), the language marker, particularly the one that is defined by the diglossic language practices of diasporic Tamils, holds immense significance for the Malaysian Indians in their entry into the “crisis heterotopia.” Their entry and exits from this “crisis heterotopia” are fraught with challenges from the locations of their names in the supposedly chaste confines of the diglossic binary. Their entry and exits from this “crisis heterotopia” are not guided, but exacerbated by the encounters between the two “crisis heterotopias.” The sense of exacerbation is borne not of any indifferent encounters between the two “heterotopias.” The sense of exacerbation is more due to the ambivalent and fluid nature of the Malaysian Indians’ identity. The Malaysian Indians’ identity encounters simultaneously a site of “aura” in transnational Tamil cinema (as regards the pointers concerning how they should be sourcing their language identity) and a site of helplessness in the lived spaces of their “crisis heterotopia” (as regards the perceived inevitability that “people displaced and dispersed have to accept the transformation of their identities depended on language”).

The site of helplessness in the lived spaces of their “crisis heterotopia” is too quickly alternated with the site of “aura” in Tamil cinema and vice-versa. It has been already proved in the analysis of Kannathil Muthamittal that “aura” is transient and fleeting. What Malaysian Indians experience as “aura” in terms of their language identity in Tamil cinema is also transient. It disappears in the face of the alternation function performed by its counter site in the lived spaces of Malaysian Indians’ “crisis heterotopia.” The “aura” of Tamil, in its diglossic context, shines well on the saree of the Malayalam (a Dravidian language spoken in the state of Kerala) speaking character and actress in the Tamil film, Autograph. It is also an instance to prove that the site of Tamil language identity can only be articulated better in the counter site of the body of the Malayalam speaking actress/character. But this “aura” can not last long. It can only metamorphose into a hybrid identity where ambivalence, fluidity and helplessness reign. In particular, the sense of helplessness expressed in the statement, “people displaced and dispersed have to accept the transformation of their identities depended on language,” is also emblematic of the peculiar diasporic location of Malaysian Indians which can not spring surprises like the “assertive and new Asian identity” Rajgopal (63-64) discovers in the films of Gurinder Chada.

Malaysian Indians’ identity is primarily defined by the ambivalent and fluid nature of hybridity. The ambivalence rears its head again in the language identity borne of naming a Tamil child. Here again, the encounters between the two “crisis heterotopias” only result in the ambivalence of negotiations. “Our identities are dependent on how we are named. Tamil films are responsible for the popularity of culturally alien names among Tamils. Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names. What is being done by Tamil films is having an impact in this regard in Malaysia also,” says one participant attesting to the above. Whereas Tamil films are seen as responsible for how Malaysian Indian identities are derived from their naming process (the emergence of “aura”), the same Tamil films are simultaneously seen as without “aura”
(“Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names”). Here, the “crisis heterotopia” alternates between their fluid “auratic” and non-“auratic” locations. The following responses of the focus group participants serve as the basis of analysis regarding social and caste identity.

**Social and Caste Identity**

**R⁵** In India, the social divide is shown to begin with birth, at least as shown in Tamil films. Caste and communal associations are also shown to be active in India. Many believe it is not so in Malaysia but they are also coming up here among Indians. This is a negative contribution of Tamil films.

**R¹⁰** India is a big country with a big population. What Tamil films show are unlikely [to happen] in Malaysia.

**R⁶** In Tamil films, social divisions are brought to the fore strongly. Viewers only identify with the social group to which they belong. In the beginning, we do not know anything about our culture. We learn our cultural clues only from our parents. But when we are exposed to the social divisions such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians on Tamil films, we are likely to be divided as well. When we move in our families, we only know our parents; but when we are exposed to the social reality, as shown by the films, our minds are poisoned about social relations.

**R⁵** Our ancestors who came from India to Malaysia were the oppressed people. We were united then. They had a sense of belonging as Indians. In Tamil films such as *Devar Magan* (1992) and *Tirupaachi* (2005), the characters are shown as belonging to places. When we identify with those places of origin as shown in Tamil films, we are once again likely to be divided in terms of our places of origin. One might say, we came from Madurai (a temple city in south Tamil Nadu). The other might say, we came from *Tirupaachi* (a small town in Tamil Nadu).

**R⁵** What films like *Tiruppachi* (2005) show are cultural identities which cannot be trusted.

**R⁹** In *Bombay* (1995), a Hindu is shown as marrying a Muslim. This may be acceptable there but not here. They show their culture.

**R¹⁰** Even though Tamil films show the divides among Hindus, Muslims and Christians. But they always make a turnabout and have happy endings. Why we do not relate to the moral of the story at the end?

**R⁵** The moral endings are only motivated by commercial considerations.
What Tamil films show in terms of social and communal divisions may be true of that place (India) but not our place (Malaysia).

But what is now being shown in Tamil films about Indian culture is a wrong one. For instance, in Kadhal (2004), “thali,” the symbol of marriage, is thrown away. Why the symbol of our culture should be shown in this manner?

That could not have been avoided as the film is about a true story.

Even if the story of Kadhal (2004) is supposedly true. They could have shown that incident differently. Tamil films are seen by others as well, particularly by people in countries like Japan. Why should we denigrate our cultural identities then? In the film, 7G Rainbow Colony (2004), the lead characters fall in love and have sexual relations. Is it right? Do you think it is right? Love can be shown differently, it can be shown to transcend sexual relations. Many of our youngsters’ ways of life are more like what Tamil films portray.

Tamil films do not erode our culture. They in fact promote our culture. For instance, we get to know about how to dress, particularly during wedding ceremonies, only from Tamil films.

In the above responses of the participants, what emerges is yet another evidence that the encounters between the two “crisis heterotopias” are fraught with the challenge of negotiating an ambivalent hybrid identity. Hybridity is conventionally thought of as a fusion of strange objects. Here again, the hybrid identity is emerging from the fusion of strange locales of India and Malaysia. The strange locales are also visualised as antithetical, even though there exists a relationship between the two homelands and the two “crisis heterotopias.” This becomes very evident in responses like:

India is a big country with a big population. What Tamil films show are unlikely in Malaysia.... In Bombay, a Hindu is shown as marrying a Muslim. This may be acceptable there but not here. They show their culture...and.... What Tamil films show in terms of social and communal divisions may be true of that place [India] but not our place [Malaysia].

On the other hand, there are responses which take issue with the Tamil cinema for the destruction of symbols of cultural “aura” such as Thali (the sacred thread tied around the neck of the bride at the time of marriage by the bridegroom). Kadhal is a film that provides such a context. In this film, the “aura” of the thali is seen as destructed when the girl, who marries her boyfriend against the wishes of her family, is forced to give up her thali, as it is thrown away. The destruction of thali is to prepare the girl for the marriage arranged by her family. What is transacted at the site of social identity in the “crisis heterotopia” of Tamil cinema becomes unacceptable to the site of social identity in the lived spaces of Malaysian Indians, where the “aura” of the site, thali,
persists. This becomes more than evident in the response: „...in Kadhal, thali, the symbol of marriage, is thrown away. Why should the symbol of our culture be shown in this manner?... Even if the story of Kadhal is supposedly true, they could have shown that incident differently.”

Another plane of contesting and transforming encounters is the one concerning the place of origin. Interestingly, there is ambivalence hereto as the places are primarily associated in terms of the casteist markers shown in Tamil films. For instance, in the following response we find that the location of the caste as a place marker is made to alternate with that of the place as a caste marker, thanks to the real cultural distance between the settled/lived spaces, the spaces of ancestors and the spaces contained in the “crisis heterotopias” of Tamil films.

Our ancestors who came from India to Malaysia were the oppressed people. We were united then. They had a sense of belonging as Indians. In Tamil films such as Devar Magan and Tirupaachi, the characters are shown as belonging to places. When we identify with those places of origin as shown in Tamil films, we are once again likely to be divided in terms of our places of origin. One might say, we came from Madurai (a temple city in south Tamil Nadu). The other might say, we came from Tirupaachi (a small town in Tamil Nadu).

Devar Magan is a well known Tamil film of the 1990s, made by Kamal Hassan, a leading Tamil film actor and a film intellectual known for infusing a innovative spirit in his cinema. The narrative of Devar Magan is primarily located in the contested social space of castes. The film reeks with casteist violence and was widely criticised for the same by many focus group participants. It shows no geographical markers directly, but allows the places of castes, as identified by the Malaysian Tamils, to emerge from the perceived geographical locations of the castes. The following responses by the participants provide the basis of analysis concerning hybrid identity.

**Hybrid Identity**

**R1** We imbibe only the negatives from films like Baasha (1995).

**R4** We should be seeing the films not as good or bad films but depending on our process of identifications.

**R9** Our Tamil community is different from others. Instead of showing the downside of the society, the story lines should be changed to enable us to look at the Tamil community differently, not just from the side of political and police corruption.
R² Our films must move away from fight scenes which are culturally alien and must go back in time to use only culturally relevant martial arts so that our identities can be better related.

R⁴ If we expect the film industry to change, we may not get the clues to solve our problems. They have to show the negatives so that we can learn from them. We should see the films by identifying with the films and their contexts.

R⁶ In *Ayutha Ezuthu* (2004), the selfishness of the individuals is brought alive and there is a lesson for us in our lives. We are also selfish and we only care about our future and not the society or community.

R³ We only like those films which concern our cultural identities. For instance, *Boys* (2003) failed because we could not accept the identities the film was trying to promote. Whatever be the level of our modernisation, we want to be culturally Indians in terms of our identities.

R⁵ I am wearing Punjabi dress. It is not reflective of my identity. The way characters dress in scenes only exposed their bodies not their culture. How such scenes contribute to the promotion of our culture?

R⁴ In *Vasool Raja* (2004), we may like the character, “Seena Thana,” who is vampy and hybrid but we identify only with Sneha, who is homely and culturally acceptable. So we want to accept only culturally ideal/acceptable identities.

ₐ How would you relate to the cultural identity of the Sri Lankan girl in Australia in the Tamil film *Nala Damayanthi* (2003)?

R⁴ It is an ideal identity, even though the character is shown as hybrid she lives by her original culture and language.

Ravindran (252) said that Malaysian Indians “are equally divided in their longing for inputs from the cultural homeland and in their dismissal of what comes to them through homeland films. There is a clear division in time and space in their negotiations of identities borne of the two important locations, the settled homeland and the cultural homeland.” In the responses quoted with regard to the sites of language and social identity, the same was proved correct once again. In the site of hybrid identity, what is allowed to emerge as “aura” is not hybridity alone, but what masquerades as the cultural identity that is seen not as hybrid, but unique. It is not the “aura” of the individual kind, it is the “collective aura” of “our Tamil community.” “Our Tamil community is different from others” and “whatever be the level of our modernisation, we want to be culturally Indians in terms of our identities” are the two responses which seek to get bring identity

---

⁴ “Seena Thana” is a vampy character in the comfort zone of a popular song in *Vasool Raja*.
politics of Malaysian Indians to new heights, even as the evidence of their ambivalent and fluid hybrid identities rear their heads in other sites. The hybrid identity in itself is not a “less ideal” identity, provided one lives by one’s culture and language, according to the logic of the ambivalent Malaysian Indian identity. Like the Sri Lankan girl, who is made to enter into a marriage of convenience with an Indian chef to hoodwink the immigration system, in Nala Damayanthi, hybrid identity “is an ideal identity, even though the character is shown as hybrid she lives by her original culture and language.” In this site, as in previous sites, the encounters between the two “crisis heterotopias” are only reinforcing the central point of this analysis that irrespective of the nature of the contesting “heterotopic” sites in the lived spaces and filmic spaces, negotiations of identities by Malaysian Indians are far from the kind Rajgopal (63-64) finds as the “new Asian identity,” an identity that is as radical as it is assertive. The Malaysian Indians’ identities are as hybrid as the diasporic identities elsewhere, but only more ambivalent, traumatised and fluid. They are assertive only in their ephemeral sporting of cultural identities.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the present work employed the concepts of Foucault and Benjamin more purposefully to deal with the “crisis heterotopias” of the transnational Tamil cinema and the Malaysian Indian diaspora. The Foucauldian analysis of Kannathil Muthamittal and the two “crisis heterotopias” amply prove that “heterotopias” hold the potential to exist in its seventh dimension. The concept of hybridity is a fractured notion, as fractured as the identity it seeks to relate. It is also emblematic of the ambivalence and fluidity that defines the state of hybridity. The Foucauldian and Benjaminian analyses of the “heterotopic” sites of the lives spaces and transnational Tamil cinema amply prove that the cultural praxis of negotiations by the Malaysian Tamil film audience is faced with challenges to escape from the location of hybridity, even as its alternatives are seen as non-“auratic.”

Texts Cited


Filmography


The Author

Gopalan Ravindran is Reader in the Department of Communication, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli 627012, India. His areas of interests are digital cultures, diasporic cinemas, and film theory and film cultures. He was a visiting fellow at the Department of International Communication, Nagoya University, Japan, during 1993-94. He was teaching film theory and film history in the Film and Broadcasting Section, School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia during 2002-05.
The Presence of the Returnee in Contemporary Philippine Cinema

Eduardo Lejano Jr.
University of the Philippines Film Institute

Abstract

Inevitably the local phenomenon of returnees has entered the collective consciousness of Philippine society through their presence in popular culture. Are their portrayals limited to the usual unsung heroes who come back to a dollar-strapped country? Does these returnees’ newfound economic power change people’s perceptions and attitudes about them? Do local films portray such characters in a positive light or are the harsh realities of abandoned families also reflected? This paper will survey a number of recent Filipino movies, representing the most popular genres in local cinema, that have featured balikbayans and Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as leading characters. This paper aims to look at the uneasy combination of wealth brought about by the influx of foreign currency vis-à-vis familial disorder caused by the absence of the very same person who sustains the social unit. It seeks as well to form a composite portrait of the characters’ areas of commonality and points of departure, and hopes to unearth certain myths about the overseas experience and reflect realities that emanate from a society’s values and dreams.
The emergence of the Filipino Diaspora in the last few decades has spawned a regular flux of returning Filipinos back to their home country. Over the years these returnees have slowly manifested their presence in the collective consciousness of the country’s psyche through its representation in the mass media.

With the Philippines’ long history of migrations, the reality of returning Filipinos has been an inevitable result of such a phenomenon. For every Filipino who becomes part of this mass exodus, whether as an immigrant to another country or as a contract worker abroad, returning to one’s homeland is an opportunity shared and cherished by most of them.

For the purposes of this study, the use of the term returnee pertains to those homecoming Filipinos popularly labelled as either \textit{balikbayan}s or OCWs. In “Trajectories of the Filipino Diaspora,” E. San Juan Jr. (1998) explains how the term \textit{balikbayan} was first used during the tourism campaign of the Marcos regime in the 1970s that combined two Filipino words – \textit{balik} (to return) and \textit{bayan} (town or nation).

Thus a word came to refer to visiting Filipinos (usually from North America) who become temporary or permanent visitors in their homeland. At the same time, San Juan adds, being a \textit{balikbayan} depends on one’s permanent residence abroad, meaning “that one lives somewhere else and that one’s appearance in the Philippines is temporary and intermittent, as if one were a tourist.”

The economic plunder that ensued after the Marcos Regime hastened the rise of the contract worker. The last few decades saw the mass exodus of Filipinos searching for employment overseas, seeking a better future.

Whether as domestic helpers, healthcare professionals, seamen, blue collar workers, teachers or engineers, the phenomenon of the OCW is but a reflection of the country’s increasing difficulty in providing well-paying jobs to many qualified & educated Filipinos.

More than 20 years have passed since the first wave of OCWs left for the Middle East, Japan, Hong Kong, and other countries. With the economic impact of their dollar remittances, these OCWs came to be labeled as economic heroes, evangelizers, labor martyrs, dollar earners and hope of the homeland.

In contextualizing the Balikbayan and OCW experiences to the country’s social and political realities, San Juan explains how the Philippines has become one of the main suppliers of cheap migrant labor for the world that has led to “the development of the Filipino’s revolutionary tradition that characterize their daily acts of resistance and economic survival.”
In tracing the origin of the *balikbayan* phenomenon during Martial Law years when the Marcos regime aggressively wooed overseas Filipinos to come home to the Philippines as tourists, San Juan elucidates how the seeds of nationalist fervor found its roots in the midst of its welcome-with-open-arms reception that was accorded these visitors which could only provoke a backlash:

That the state succeeded in domesticating *balikbayan*s into tourists can in part be seen in Filipino nationalist unease about them. Nationalist writers often distinguish those who return from working temporary jobs in the Middle East and Asia from those who visit from the US. Whereas overseas contract workers are seen to return from conditions of near abjection, *balikbayans* are often viewed to be steeped in their own sense of superiority, serving only to fill others with a sense of envy.

In the article “Bracing for *Balikbayans*” by Conrado de Quiros (1990) he offers a critical perspective on how *balikbayans* are generally perceived by their countrymen. He writes how

They bring us stories about how much life in America has proved what the *Reader's Digest* says it is. They also bring us homilies, delivered with the proselytizing zeal of Thomasites, which are forceful for their use of contrasts. It's too hot in the Philippines. It's nice to snuggle by the hearth in America. There's grime and smog in our streets. You can't drive without anti-pollutants in the States. Filipino drivers are maniacs. American drivers follow traffic rules.... You defer too much to authority here. You can talk man-to-man even with the president of the United States.

The perception that Balikbayans are admired and resisted in equal measures is anchored in de Quiros’ thesis that *balikbayans* are like the Thomasites, acting like neo-colonizers whose ambitions lie in “setting themselves apart from the rest of the ‘natives’ rather than affiliating with them.”

In the essay “Your Grief Is Our Gossip” by Vincente Rafael (2000), he focuses on events in mid-1990s Philippines with regard to the flows of immigrants and OCWs as he inquires into the “nationalist attempts at containing the dislocating effects of global capital through the collective mourning for its victims.” In its effort to understand nationalism in a context of a community of longing, this study draws from its historical perspective on the Filipino diaspora in situating the phenomenon of the returnee.

Comprising an army of flexible workers, Filipinos abroad simultaneously signify the failure of the Philippine nation-state to contain its excess population and the success of global capitalism in absorbing and accommodating this failure...Though they originate from the Philippines, they can, thanks to the
workings of global capital, now return to the nation in a form that is at once abstract and exterior to it.

Rafael situates the root of the ambiguous perceptions to these overseas Filipinos when they return to the native land when he writes how they are neither inside nor wholly outside the nation-state as they hover on the edges of its consciousness, “rendering its boundaries porous with their dollar-driven comings and goings.” He adds that in this sense “they take on the semblance of spectral presences whose labor takes place somewhere else but whose effects command, by their association with money, a place in the nation-state.”

With the country’s long history of migrations, the modern phenomenon of these overseas Filipinos may be understood in the context that the massive, state-encouraged movements of workers and immigrants have become part of the nation’s everyday life.

Returning to a home that is at once the same and yet different belies a shifting consciousness of a paradox: what used to be familiar now seems foreign. Not only is this true for the returnee’s point of view but more importantly, from the eyes of those around him or her.

For nowhere is this more evident than the fact that such individuals become perceived in perplexing binaries of familiarity and difference on one hand, and acceptance and resistance on the other. An overall countenance that reflects an ever-shifting image that, for the most part, spring forth mixed impressions and inevitable contradictions.

These returnees, whether as balikbayans or OCWs (overseas contract workers), certainly have made a dent in the people’s consciousness not only through personal interactions but also through the prominence of celebrity-returnees in Philippine popular culture and the growing body of texts on the socio-political and economic impact of these returning Filipinos in the mass media through the years.

It is but inevitable that such phenomenon enters the myth-making apparatus of a society through its emergence in popular culture. And film is an effective medium where such issues are realized, or for that matter fictionalized, as they are a reflection of a society’s construction of their multi-dimensional portrayals.

The varying facets of a character from three contemporary Filipino films show a range of characterizations that bring about certain myths of a nation beset with a colonial past and a third world reality. Three portraits of an archetype that somehow reflect a country’s varying notions of an oft-misunderstood character type.

This paper analyzes the portrayals of these returnees in three significant Filipino films in the last few years and examines how such representations reveal facets of the
returnee character: a caregiver who returns to her province to find that she’s a carrier of a dreaded disease; a successful chef who comes home to marry his worldly girlfriend but falls for the charms of a barrio lass; and a visiting nurse who scandalizes the whole town when he returns a totally different person.

This paper tackles how the films portray the character of the returnee, seeking points of departure and convergence as it forms a composite culled from their characterizations in each of the three films’ plot narratives. This study focuses on three fairly recent productions that range from 1998 to 2003, one from a major film company, the other two, independently-produced.

The films included in this study are: Homecoming from Teamwork Productions (2003), Miguel/Michelle from Forefront Films (1998), both of which are directed by Gil Portes and Kailangan Kita from Star Cinema (2002), directed by Rory Quintos.

**Converging Patterns of Portrayals**

The range of the returnee archetypes arising from the narratives of Homecoming, Kailangan Kita and Miguel/Michelle – from the fallen woman to the heroic archetype to that of the transgressive woman, allow room for convergence in its varying portrayals.

The fall from grace of the protagonist in Homecoming finds its equivalence in the trajectory of the returnee portrayals in the other two films. Aga Muhlach’s Carl goes through a similar fallen state when he is caught romancing the disfavored sister of his soon-to-be bride. The scandal that ensues after the discovery of his liaison with Claudine Baretto becomes a predictable complication to his wedding plans which at this point has already made Carl to reassess the soundness of the idea in the first place.

That the sophisticated chef from New York falls in love with the domesticated Lena and having been caught in the act in a moment of romantic impulse right in the household of the older sister that he is marrying certainly makes for an ironic plot twist that seals his fate in a similar fall from grace, like that of the fallen woman albeit in male fashion.

The titular character in Miguel/Michelle finds himself in a more extreme fall from grace as he scandalizes his hometown with his new sexual identity and the more he is reviled for his deviancy, the more he becomes determined to confront such prejudices.

The heroic attributes that get foregrounded in the character of Carl in Kailangan Kita is shared to some extent by the protagonists in the other two films. Both leads in Homecoming and Miguel/Michelle come home as exalted figures in their respective familial and social circles by virtue of their being dollar-earning breadwinners. That Alexandra de Rossi returns home to a broken family makes her homecoming a harbinger of hope in healing the family rift that has deteriorated in her absence. Her
mother is now a single mother, her father has since left the family abode and is now living-in with a woman almost as young as Abby, and she discovers her teenage brother to be hooked on drugs.

The timing of Abby’s return couldn’t have come at a more opportune time and the story premise could only pave the way for the family’s healing process through Abby’s heroic efforts of which her affliction was but a catalyst.

Miguel as Michelle wears her heroism on her sleeve as she is portrayed as a well-meaning goal-oriented protagonist in the film. Her mission upon coming home is almost messianic in that she uses her new found sexual persona as a means for asserting her individuality against the town’s prejudices. When she comes home as Michelle, she finds herself solving the problems of her friends’ personal crises with her own crisis becoming a counterpoint to theirs.

The transgressive nature of the protagonist in Miguel/Michelle is shared to a lesser extent with that of the other two films. As a romantic hero in a film whose twists and turns are largely seen from his point of view, Muhlach is portrayed to be feminized in a certain way that makes his aberration notable in the context of Bicolano machismo.

Typically garbed in pinks and floral prints and tasked to kitchen and marketing duties for the most part of the film, the character of Carl is more feminine than masculine as his sole focus throughout the narrative is his romantic pursuits. When Carl, the cosmopolitan chef that he is, falls for a “lowly” woman in the person of Lena makes for a character development imbued with transgressiveness as he violates the trust of his fiancée’s family.

De Rossi’s Abby on the other hand is portrayed as sort of mannish in that her return as the sole breadwinner in her broken home makes for a not-so-subtle transformation from the simple dutiful daughter that she was to that of a father figure who makes decisions for the broken household that she now supports.

Certain patterns emerge that cut across to the three portrayals in synthesizing their characterizations into a grand narrative. For one, the issue of displacement recurs in the three films. This becomes a motivating factor in each of the protagonists as each one pursues his or her own character objective in the course of the films’ narrative. That all three films share the elements of the classical Hollywood pattern make for a more consistent analysis of its plot development.

Like a stranger in new surroundings not unlike a fish out of water, the returnee initially stands out from the pack in trying to re-adapt to the homeland. Sometimes the effort of re-assimilation becomes an occasion for humor as in the case of Carl in Kailangan Kita.
Sometimes as the native tries to re-learn the ways of his or her original home, the process becomes more like a debriefing session as in the case of Michelle. Her constant quest to prove herself in her new-found sexual persona puts her in situations that call for new coping.

In their long absences from the country make such characters pine for home, emanating from the returnee’s remembrance of a place far different from what he or she had left behind.

**Displacements and Character Flaws**

The displacements that occur to all three manifest itself in physical and psychological nuances. This brings forth the second pattern that recurs in the three character portrayals – the character flaw.

Certain facets of each of the returnee surface as a result of their character displacements. The flaws become apparent in each one that render their filmic portrayal more complex in the context of the usual trajectory of the classic hero archetype, be it in literature or film.

Abby’s character in *Homecoming* depicts her as the sole breadwinner of her lower-class family dependent on her caregiver earnings. By remitting dollars to support their needs, privileges Abby into a position of power that makes her stake in decision-making within the household more pronounced.

The transformation from the comely lass that she was to the assertive, confident dollar-earner she has become constitutes a character flaw and is a key factor to the film’s plot. The dutiful daughter coming back as the family breadwinner marks a shift, presenting a microcosm of the effects of overseas employment on the Filipino family. Her affliction with SARS and eventual recovery turns the tables of her position of power to that of helplessness.

A similar flawed strain is reflected in *Miguel/Michelle* when its central character evolves into a determined and purposive individual in his “incarnation” as a woman. The old Miguel as the studious and obedient son gets buried six feet under to give way to the woman-of-the-world trappings of the new Michelle. Such empowering traits similarly lead to awkward situations for Michelle. This forms the crux of the film’s cause-and-effect pattern leading to her eventual validation.

The flaw in Carl’s character in *Kailangan Kita* surfaces as he asserts his idealism whenever he comes face-to-face with Bicol’s backwardness and provincialism. Such fervor puts him at odds with the comely Lena and their ensuing spats form part of the film’s romance plot. That he eventually falls for Lena and discovers her innate homespun wisdom puts as an ironic counterpoint to Carl’s unabashed pro-Western bias.
All these traits that characterize the three leads usher in the element of superiority to their evolved natures. While their respective flaws reveal their human side, it also brings about their newly-acquired air of superiority, rendering each of the portrayal more complex.

Returning to the homeland is not always that simple a matter. In a country like the Philippines, where a better life is equated with overseas employment and where getting a green card is the ultimate Filipino middle-class dream, the returnee is most often looked upon as a success story.

Whether the balikbayan experience is indeed a success story or not is beside the point because he or she, upon returning, becomes subjected to such perceptions by their fellow Filipinos.

In 20th century Philippines, the balikbayan assumes a mythic stature – wrought unto him or her by the community at large. Perhaps due to shared expectations of succeeding in a foreign land that are borne out of tales from others who boast of relatives who have made it abroad. Those who don’t are hardly mentioned at all.

Such myth-making can be the returnee’s own doing. Exposure to foreign ways, supposedly more advanced and progressive, make the balikbayan itch to show-off his or her new-found knowledge and abilities and perhaps worldly stature. Their superior demeanor then is best explained in the context of the native vs foreign paradigm.

This is Odysseus, coming back to his homeland after his exploits abroad – going back to a household that must be put in order: a loving wife, an organized home, the start of a family, the assured continuance of the human race.

With such preconditioning, those who do come back a success are seen differently. With stories to regale, with wonders from other lands to exalt, the returnee’s background sets him apart from his community whose world has been limited to the confines of the native land. This makes the returnee’s myth-making more engrossing and their superiority complexes all the more understandable.

**Binary Oppositions**

In focusing on the overall character development of the balikbayan or OCW, certain assumptions are derived at based on the “eyes” that the theory of semiotics apply in interpreting the deeper meaning of such characterizations.

Claude Levi-Strauss analyzed myths in terms of their elementary components and fits them into patterns of opposition that reveal, Berger asserts, the hidden meaning
of texts. Strauss’s methodology may be adapted to look for a set of binary oppositions that inform a text and can reveal its latent or hidden meaning.

The binary of the native vs. foreign is reflected in the characterizations of the three returnee protagonists. Upon their respective returns to their native soil, each of them get to confront once again the third world realities they had all but left behind, thrusting them into situations where their westernized selves are put into conflict. Their assimilation of foreign ways have made them into evolved individuals and their newly-acquired worldviews somehow run against the parochial nature of the native folks. This becomes a key factor to the story premises of the said films from which emanate the problems that confront each of the returnee characters.

How they are received upon their return dramatize the shifting polarities of peoples’ perceptions of their new status regardless of the archetypes they represent. That they are warmly received on one hand, and envied and sneered at on the other reveals another binary opposition of acceptance vs. resistance.

The film Homecoming presents its returnee heroine as the idealized family member who provides for the needs of her lower-middle class family and as such, privileges Abby in a position of power that makes people around her to welcome her with open arms.

Family, friends, neighbors and even strangers accord her with respect and awe at the beginning of the film by virtue of her being a caregiver to the world. A number of scenes show her being approached by different people, each of them articulating their material needs that she perhaps can provide. Midway into the film, as her SARS affliction becomes a burning issue in her provincial community, Abby is resisted and reviled by the townspeople, her privileged position devolving as she has now become the town pariah.

Carl’s arrival in the household of his bride-to-be in Kailangan Kita is accorded with warmth by most of his future in-laws. Johnny Delgado, who plays the family patriarch, who openly expresses his disdain upon Carl’s apparently Westernized ways and treats him with aloofness. Lena’s initial encounter with Carl proves disastrous as well as he mistakes her for a domestic helper that triggers her negative reaction to the man that she will eventually fall for. Their succeeding spats are punctuated with barbs as she gets ticked off by his incessant complaints about the backward life in Bicol.

Since meaning in texts is always elicited and not readily apparent, the use of textual analysis in this study has unearthed an emerging image of the returnee, as culled from the portrayals in the three film narratives, that reflect archetypes and binary oppositions that share commonality in the three films.
The overall image then reveals an ever-shifting image that, for the most part, spring forth mixed impressions and inevitable contradictions.

The study has unearthed the cinematic portrayals, whether the returnee is portrayed in a fallen and/or transgressive state, or as a heroic figure, that takes into consideration the functions of these images as contextualized in the film narratives.

Some come home like exalted heroes with gifts to bear and stories to tell. Some come home to revisit the land of their birth to renew ties with families and friends, rekindling a lost bond severed by time and distance, their long absences fragmenting temporal and spatial recollections of what was left behind and their return, more significantly impacting the lives of those they have left behind.

The prolonged stint abroad and the journey back to the native land lay bare certain transformations on the part of the returnee and their subsequent reintegration becomes an occasion for potential misunderstandings and misrepresentations arising from a society’s shared expectations and stereotypes.

How characters are depicted in the narratives is an evolving process of representation that somehow affect general perceptions of what such characters signify beyond the confines of a plot’s diegesis. The converging patterns in the range of returnee portrayals, from their character flaws, to their displaced natures and superior demeanors, reflect a commonality that is culled from a shared perception of such character types borne out of people’s general impressions and perhaps existing realities.

The binary oppositions of native vs. the foreign and acceptance vs. resistance belie innate contradictions and complexities situated not only in the point of view of the returnee but also that of society’s. It thus operates on the larger level of mythmaking of which film is an effective medium where such processes are realized, or for that matter, fictionalized.

The characters that are portrayed in the popular culture landscape of moving images then involve a complex web of myth-making, stereotyping and media representation and the phenomenon of the returnee is just one subject that has slowly found itself portrayed onscreen.

This study lends credence to its emerging impact in the socio-cultural context of the Philippines where the resulting image somehow evokes and reinforces a stereotypical view of the returnee. This is better understood as a phenomenon that is culled from reality and, at the same time, a myth reinforced through the naturalizing function of the moving image.

In deciphering meaning in terms of their elementary components that fits into patterns of binary oppositions, this reveals the connotative and symptomatic layers of
significance that surround the returnee persona. The conflicting dualities of the native vs. the foreign and that of acceptance vs. resistance reflect the ambiguity of its impact in economic, social and cultural means.

The cinematic portrayals of the balikbayan and the OCW, as evidenced from this study's textual interpretation of the films' plots, uncover the prototypical returnee's ongoing grand narrative that brings to fore a dynamic pattern of media representation that thrives in the interstices of socio-cultural formations.

Like a veritable Pandora's box, the returnees' image-making in movies are like unearthing a trove of representations and stereotypes borne out of a people's collective experience. Perhaps an odd mixture of perceptions to different people for whom the returning Filipino is like a lightning rod where conflicting and converging issues are personified.

These experiences run the gamut from the realistic to the mythic, coming from a people's shared post-colonial past and contextualized in the nuances of today's enlightened yet polarizing times.

Whether such images are indeed factual or not becomes insignificant because what becomes noteworthy is the multi-faceted nature of its characterizations that bring forth a richly-textured essence, sometimes contradictory and oftentimes complementary. Because the character of the returnee in its filmic portrayals of late are etched in subtle shades of gray than drawn in stark contrasts of black and white.

The cinematic representations that this study has analyzed, that of the returnee as a balikbayan and as OCW, uncover an ongoing process borne out of reality, stereotype, and myth.

Works Cited


Á

**The Author**

A current member of the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC), Eduardo Lejano, Jr. is a regular contributor to the Philippines’ leading newspaper, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, where he writes about foreign film festivals and independent filmmaking.
Cinema as a form of personal expression divorced from the constraints of commercial narrative filmmaking has relatively remained a novelty within the chronicles of Philippine film practice. This paper will attempt to describe & examine the works of Filipino experimental filmmakers specifically Roxlee, Luis Quirino and Donna Sales; and how their films delve into the peculiarities that reflect the Filipino soul – fluid and contradictory in nature as articulated in their films.
I see a row of coconut trees influenced by breeze,
People milling in calm cadence as if it were a Sunday afternoon,
And smell of all things consumed.

This specific text from a shot in Quirino and Sales’s film, “True Blue Coconut Grove (gawa sa Pilipinas)” [made in the Philippines] uses our view of past glimpses to recall the smell of lapsed periods in order to comprehend all that is lost. Art through cinema has a way of doing that – to use one sense as portal to other senses and then subsequently rousing all our faculties to estimate oneself.

Someone once said, “Art is the only possible escape from the bitterness of impotence.” It isn't that art magically makes us out rightly special, it only feels that way but there is work to be done. What ultimately transforms us is our treatment of the experience. What art does is act as our north so we can bear times of consciously recognizing places where we’re at, and yielding experiences of unexpected though welcomed self re-acquaintances.

When art succeeds, it becomes more than a reflection. It is dialogue. There is a continuum of curiosity with us through the work. We ask and the work answers as it answers when we query. All these profound motion braided into a force that condenses into, or at least resembling our souls. We are summoned to discover and endure.

“The longing to inhabit” according to Barthes (p. 40) is a condition in the experiencing of art that does not pertain to seeking out a specific physical location but rather to revisit a part of oneself. It suggests a kind of resoluteness wherein we are called towards courage to delve into parts of ourselves still unruffled and unoccupied. In creative work, if fruitful, conjures this desire, this determination.

We tell ourselves, upon affected by art, that we should rummage within in order to examine the extent of our consciousness, and conceive the privilege of being tourists in our own selves. We have armed ourselves, our spirits are waiting, and the discoveries are ours. That I suppose is art. It initially connects through a single sense then majestically electrifies us just as lightning would but rather than short-circuiting the effect is cognizance profound and practical.

Experimental films ambition itself much in the same way. It puts the medium of film in a position “to minister directly to spiritual needs in a way music often does and abstract painting attempts to do” (MacDonald, 1993, p.2).

The need to view the parameters of our experience is to realize its depth. Our inquisitiveness forces us to seek ways to express it. Experimental films manifest the inquiries, and provide the space to visually affirm the various levels of our reality in ways the narrative cannot and will not as its structure is securely bounded in its
dogma – linearity and logic. Simply, there are things too difficult and awkward for a narrative to visually consent and realize.

Avant-garde or experimental films disturb our quiet submission towards the conventions of mainstream cinema. It is “filmmaking without story, characters and plot – or in which these elements, considered so essential to cinematic form, are put into new and critical relationships (Rees, 2002, pave). Here, the flickering image is not meant to merely perpetuate ‘normal’ vision or be an extension of real time but to function as metaphors for the ineffable, a function too impractical for conventional films.

Filmmakers who have elected to use the medium and visually author under these conventions depict for us expressive films, or as someone else aptly described it, “living paintings” – an amalgamation of images that delineate intuitive recognitions of a truth. In these films, we feel by seeing unlike in conventional films, we know thru viewing. In experimental films, the understanding is not about the subject but about the experience of an encounter.

In Philippine Experimental film, the cinematic landscape is quite different from its progenitor in the West. The local experimental scene came forth and more significantly proceeded in less definitive and dramatic conditions. We can, however, state that its emergence may have arisen from similar philosophical examination spawned out from political circumstances as that in the West (in the Philippines during the 1960s to the early 80s, and in the West, specifically Europe in the 1920s). But the effect of the political periods of unrest stirred up mainstream cinema or narratives more than it did experimental films in the Philippines unlike that in the West. Nor did it come into existence and continued out of the economic feasibility the medium of film acquired as it did in the West (United States in the ’60s) for domestically, the medium of film to this day has remained exclusively costly and economically restrictive. Support from government and foreign institutions exist but can be, at times, ambivalent and vague. Their reach wanes in its immersion and breadth. Most often well intended, the assistance still sputters and not always as forthcoming. It is the related visual media, such as video and computer graphics that have become more accessible or obtainable. As a result, video has technically superseded film as the medium most employed to produce and create experimental works. Ironically, most experimental films in the Philippines are in principle, videos.

Film artists whose approach and close adherence to the convictions of pure filmic manipulations are found to be few and far-between. The status of experimental practice in the Philippines can tend to paradoxically lean toward a more calculated disposition. Part of the reason may lie in the fact that the practical and logistical structure of the country differs, to say the least, from the West, notably the U.S. that said, working with a medium that is cost related could have its practitioners, specifically experimental filmmakers, produce to some extent cautious and measured responses; and in experimental filmmaking one must be unmindful and incessantly push the boundaries
for complacency and hesitancy are its adversaries, and audacity and faith its allies. This confining occurrence can certainly incite adherents of experimental filmmaking to renounce the philosophy and/or the medium altogether. That may, likewise, account for the perception of a spluttering experimental film landscape. At the recent film competitions, a dwindling number of film entries are submitted, a trend that has existed for some time. In the Philippines, the intentions of experimental film practice may remain but technically, experimental film or more particularly, experiments in film have withdrawn considerably.

Audience and space are other significant factors that restructure the contours of the experimental film practice in the Philippines different from the West. A larger percentage in relation to the local viewing audience have entrenched cinematic habits biased toward the narrative as compared to the West. Their orientation in perceiving films are comfortably rooted in commercial and linear films. Further perpetuating the practice is the limited space or venues allotted for conceptual art such as experimental films. There exist few galleries and sites obligated to the expansion of the visual perception we have of cinema. The call for an extensive cinematic experience has, in effect, been constantly stymied. This situation can only reinforce the traditional understanding the local audience has of film.

Another facet wherein the Philippine experimental film site elaborated itself quite differently from its western counterpart is that it did not experience definitive periods within itself wherein numerous experimental film approaches were defined and practiced. It meant that the domestic experimental filmsetting behaved more as a scene and not a movement. Filipino filmmakers who were drawn into experimental film’s dogma of provocation had already a formed movement (founded and practiced) from the West to take in, in its entirety. As a result, visual styles that developed within the experimental form fluctuated between forays and perused visual acquisitions. Most local experimental filmmakers were left to devise their own visual concoctions. Absent then was a defined style with devoted disciples, and an established progression within a style over a particular period of time. Visual methods culminated into unique and personal meshes of approaches, understood and perpetuated; or unsure unions of cinematic explorations, abandoned and disregarded.

Notwithstanding the contrasts between the local and western experimental film practice, one should not be premature to conclude an incongruous existence and function for experimental filmmaking in the country for occurrences such as Roxlee, Quirino, and Sales and their bodies of works verify this as the inclusions of experimental-film categories in film competitions attest, and the existence of scholastic perusals affirms. The local experimental film scene cannot be expected to behave in ways it did in the West particularly in the U.S. but it will persevere because it is the nature of creative minds to constantly seek ways to impress and express imagination. After all, the essence of experimental film is ingenuity and discovery. Apart from the nuances that have been contemplated and considered what should remain steadfast, to every experimental
filmmaker in every experimental-film landscape, are the persistence to ask and the commitment to innovate the responses of the cinematic experience.

Experimental Filipino filmmakers, Roxlee, Quirino and Sales are part of the fearless lot who has committed themselves to such a vision. Their mischievous views are not those of petulant artists but by concerned citizens. Patriotism is a recurring and shared theme for these filmmakers. Patriotism as expressed through their films is parental and reflective. They offer unblemished portraits of us as Filipinos. Their concern and duty to nation is to point out the laxities, the flaws, and dents embedded in national character to underscore the urgency and significance for contemplation and change. It is a pledge of allegiance recited with irreverent honesty.

One gets the notion of a spanking when viewing their films. But like any child learning his lessons, we, the viewers accept the punishment because their intentions are heartfelt and inclusive. Their beliefs are assumed. Roxlee, Quirino and Sales are not impressed by the nobility of their thoughts only by the duty to be true. Roxlee has constantly stirred and confronted our cinematic assumptions. His films conceive a tradition expelled through an idiosyncratic manner. His convictions are incessantly protective of the Filipino’s inherent voice.

His string of films, particularly those created in the ’80s such as Words, Spit and Optik, Optik, The Great Smoke, and Trompong Puti manipulates live action and traditional animation with extreme filmic experimentations such as lapse-time photography, cinematic discontinuities (of flickers and pixallations), intense filtering, loops, and emulsion alterations among others. Through these intense cinematic processes, Roxlee enunciates a cinematic language that constantly paraphrases his patriotic fervor in a watchful but firm, and urgent tone. He deliberately conceives an intensely frictional visual space that is both messy and beautiful. Bringing to mind the “TRASH” style of the experimental film movement in the US during the ’50s-70s. Although it must be said that the filmmaker’s cinematic sensibilities can be traced more toward European influences than American (he has worked alongside the Goethe Institute in most of his films).

Though Roxlee never quite chooses to mimic studio films as implied in the Trash-style, he never expunges elements crucial to narrative films either. In a number of his films, there are evident inclusions of character, story, and location at one time or another. What he does is never irons out the obvious wrinkles in his films. His utterance isn’t mellifluous. Therefore, he makes certain that his viewer spots the creases. These kinks are the unconcealed marks of his honest examinations, and constitute the gritty texture of his films. Roxlee’s patriotism and care is urgent and feral. It shouts, he thrives, and we listen.

In the film Optik, Roxlee distinctly dispels the notion that film as medium, and its apparatus are “neutral technology” (Mac Donald, 1993, p.17). He dissects and vivisects
the structural composition of the medium to create a visual language that betrays the phenomenon of illusionism (the impression of movement through stills) (Rees, 2002, p. 5). Roxlee, particularly in this work, both depends and jettisons this principle. He makes his viewers aware of what they are seeing are flawed and manipulated motion. In the disruption of simulated movement, he conveys to his viewers his mistrust for the obvious, and demands them to arrive at a deeper truth. A Filipino obviously frustrated at the national tendency to simply gloss over matters that compels critical judgment.

The filmmaker utilizes the concept of looping to amplify the extent of time by repeating his shot or visual pattern and sequence until it ceases to be cryptic but stops short before it commences to become prosaic. With this concept, Roxlee enables his viewer to travel at rest much like when silence is magnified it reinstates itself as sound. By looking at the same image innumerable times, the viewer is made aware that the image has finessed itself into an altered form. In looping, we experience the resonance of the reiterated. This understanding discloses the filmmaker’s declaration to distrust those that are mindfully blatant, and reassures us what is true is almost always misleadingly modest. Apart from this, Roxlee’s personal approach of exposing and manipulating film as raw material is bared through his inclusion into view of sprocket holes and image jiggles. Again, pressing onto his viewer the complexities of a truth—flawed and purposeful.

Though there are evident influences in Roxlee’s technique and vision, he isn’t exclusive to one specific experimental approach. As a result, he isn’t pigeonholed into a specific visual style within the experimental form itself. Roxlee either maneuvers from one approach to another or incorporates various principles all at once into a film—a spontaneity maybe born out of a Filipino’s inherent or intuitive sense of flexibility as well as his personal inclinations.

Roxlee’s films do not, in any way, feel unsure. They might have been serendipitously considered but have been ponderously sustained. Watching his films, one is made conscious of his sincerity. His techniques do not exhibit themselves as novelties or mimicry for those that have been pronounced might have been influenced by Western principles but thoughtfully uttered for the vernacular—these are imaginative and brave responses thoughtfully exercised.

Filmmakers Luis Quirino and Donna Sales’s found-footage films, True Blue American Coconut Grove (gawa sa Pilipinas) (1989) and The Girl From Bikini Island (1990) jostle, likewise, the familiar nationalist questions of definition and practice as analogized through tales about insidious cultural infiltration by way of film collage. It was only a question of time before Filipino filmmakers would come together with collage film-form to describe their own nature. Their suitability, one can only smile in the realization of their convergence. For what cinematic form possesses the mannerisms that mirrors more the complexities and incongruities that lie in us as a people than collage films are able to unmask?
Colonized several times over, the Philippines like any run out colony is in perpetual grapple with confidence, never truly in terms with her own composition. The weight of past cultures (particularly of its colonizers, Spain and America) and their indoctrination have so profoundly assumed themselves into the Filipino’s senses though not always comfortably. I suppose it is like being startled when confronted with the unexpected shape of one’s shadow, and accepting the deeper implications of its form and presence – that as strange as it all is, this is who we are, or rather it is what we have become.

As a people we can be defensively patriotic but with questionable nationalist fundamentals. We inscribe laws to speak without regard of passion yet they can be ruled out in misconstrued fervor. For another, we can be quite self-conscious of our own persuasions. We can deftly shift in our beliefs owing them to the demands of the times in truth, however, simply too lazy to face up to the inconveniences arising from convictions; and thus, effectively exposing our own collective as well as our individual certainty as a people. In the subject of contradictions none bears more than that of Filipinos. In ‘Found-footage’ film or collage-essay films, the cinematic venue is specifically assembled in pursuit of the truth obscurely embedded within the paradoxes found in the nature of things. With this experimental film style, the differing facets of the Filipino can be explored and expressed in one swoop.

*True Blue American Coconut Grove* is a *Trash* narrative, that is, a crude narrative peppered with post-war archival footages whose images, in the surface beams with colonial deference. Here, are images of a country and people who look comfortably familiar but that have become disconcertingly lapsed, and a soundtrack of a narrative whose drawl is of blatant sarcasm in naughty cohabitation questioning the real worth of our cultural make-up.

*The Girl from Bikini Island* carries the same acerbic inflection with a gibe more penetrating. Its images, specifically of found-footage, don’t run in gamut as wide as *True Blue* but its trashy and amusing plot is more piercing, even angrier. The stance and conviction of its filmmakers crystallized.

In both films, the filmmakers’ dominant use of found footage integrated with Trash narratives and crude cutout animations, lined with retro-popular music effectively exposes the embarrassing family secrets of the Filipino race. The subliminal is no longer. Such is the ability of collage-film form. It innately creates irony and reveals truths once shoved to our backwaters, now propelled to the consciousness. When viewing, one can almost find oneself in awkward admission to one’s findings. We can only notice the peculiar conduct of certain affirmations to the question, “Is this us?”

*Collage Film-Form* is an experimental film style that recontextualizes found imagery (p1, hi-beam). It plucks out images away from their inaugural contexts and anchors them in new visual shores to bare surprising meanings. These ‘rehabilitated’ images disclose their hidden consequences by being convulsed away from their initial
circumstances. Separating them from the values that have aimlessly disapproved of the undercurrents situated in the truth, they are offered a re-birth by creative re-application. Through it, we become mindful of the underbelly. We sense the history of recovered images, and insist in its assertion on the present. What we get is a cinematic debate – tiers of meaning and context lodged within an image.

Through such a technique aligning previously filmed footages with soundtracks coming from dissimilar perspectives or nature resulted to an explosive cinematic convergence. It is as if the viewer was catapulted to a place where past and present subverted each other in devotion, each nudging the other for dominance in the viewer’s consciousness, the consequence – a spectacle.

In utilizing this cinematic technique, Quirino and Sales have managed to visualize a filial reprimand on the conventions of the Filipino way of thinking. Watching their films embellished with cultural archival footage, specifically post-war is like reacquainting oneself with family albums. Offering us the experience of unearthing pictures that are somehow out of step yet depicting us even more in ways unexpected. The secrets confessed are mercilessly critical although valid. It is with droll plots that Quirino and Sales manipulate to uncover our (Filipino) psyche and make us seat and endure it. Their findings – that we are creative, ambivalent, perverse, dogged, fearful, and intransigent. At any case, the family secrets are excavated. You’ve heard the tales; you now know the stories.

Through their films, the filmmakers contest that tradition is not to be dismissively defined as practices inherited but convictions reflected. Between and beyond the farcical situations these found images are nestled rest their true gazes. We see one thing and realize deeper. We become most aware that we hear several narrative voices (p.1, Baldwin, hi-beam). Layers of axes converging – what these images were meant for, what they are now, and what they have become because of who we are. Voices ranting, everything distinguished. Such is collage; it is music from noise, pattern from mayhem. As one said, “When it works, all collage is a shock” (p.2, Baldwin, customer).

In *True Blue* and *The Girl*, the stories are deliciously and intently too ludicrous that as viewers, we know better than to hinge ourselves to these premises. Instead, we become acutely aware that the unceasing, at times, intensifying absurdity is merely a playful act to disclose examinations on questions that can be otherwise agonizingly personal. In humor, the filmmakers attest, all can be confronted. The reverberation of laughter cloaks the derelictions, and transforms the disagreeable.

Jocularity is requisite as is air to the Filipinos. Coming from a place dented much from self-inflicted torments, though ironically proud, Filipinos devotedly seek ways to appease this need to level their national scars. It is of no surprise, therefore, that Filipinos habitually exercises his wit to bring himself squarely with all things difficult
and provoking. Behind the facetious visual style of these films seats a piercing portrait of the peculiarities of a race and the notion of its identity.

Never fully at ease, always struggling to accept, natural to adapt yet stubborn to learn; a paradox, an irony, a people with an impulse for wit and a center with heart. This is the Filipino, an elusive creature with his eye towards the universe, and his feet anchored on home shores. We, dream about places and what it would be like, and end our quest about glimpses of home.

**Works Cited**


———. Media Meltdown <dcox.customer.netspace.net.au/Baldwin.html>.


Povey, Thad. Notes from the Filmmaker <http://www.hi-beam.net/mkr/tp/tp-bio.html>.


The Author

Anne Marie de Guzman, Director of the University of the Philippines Film Institute, is a disciple of the image. For her, it isn’t mere love, it is a pursuit. This fundamental want has determined her path, from artist to teacher. “I am what I see” is how she describes herself.
“Small-fry”: Suburban Despair and Redemptive Space in Recent Asian-Australian Cinema

Helen Grace
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper will focus on the scenario of Rowan Wood’s recent *Little Fish* (2005), in which, I suggest, the possibility of a future is only imaginable via Johnny (Justin Nguyen) – the principle Vietnamese character in the film and the love interest of former junkie, Tracy (Cate Blanchett) – suggesting that the role repositions the Asian in Australian cinema beyond sacrificial victim, while the doomed Australian characters face the despair of the dispossessed. The paper is concerned with developments in national cinemas in transnational and global contexts and especially with the refiguring of Orientalism. My reading will focus on image and time within the film, suggesting parallels with Khoa Doa’s *Finished People* and reflecting on the film’s setting in Sydney’s “Little Saigon,” an area noted for gang warfare, drug dealing, police corruption and intercultural conflict, presenting challenges to notions of citizenship and community. This paper builds on earlier work on Asian-Australian cinema.
Thinking today is, as always, thinking difference. In this time of globalization this means visual thinking transcends as much the romantic concept of nationalism as the geometric orders of a homogenous transnationalism.

– Nestor Garcia Canclini (1992)

Perhaps it is perversity on my part which pushes me, now that I am located in Hong Kong, to propose a paper, not on “action cinema” but rather on a couple of films which belong to a category we might call “inaction cinema” and it is the very question, “whither the Orient?” which suggests this direction, since it presupposes a type of questioning of categories, locations and identities in which the films I will discuss are also engaged.¹ I want to focus on two recent films made in Australia – one, a low-budget local production belonging to the category we might call “Asian Australian” (no hyphen) and the other, a larger budget, big-star vehicle, which, it is fair to say, was brought forth by the former (though it cannot be categorized in the same way, in spite of overlapping themes). The two films are Khoa Do’s *Finished People* (2003) and Rowan Woods’ *Little Fish* (2005) and both films open out, in different ways, the complexities of what we might call the global industrialization of culture, describing some of the local processes at work in manifesting aspects of modernity’s contradictions, especially in its regional variants, in the stalling and indeed reversal of processes of modernization.

The cinema of inaction, for my purposes, is located in a space of economic fragility, to the extent that we might say that action is the result of economic dynamism and that there is always a shifting centre of action, according to wherever the wages are lowest (alerting us to the centrality of human labour – or more particularly, its exploitation – and the impact of this for human *being* in the dynamics of market capitalism, notwithstanding the assumption that it is the market which is central). It would be simple to say that my contrast between action and inaction cinema coincides with Deleuze’s figures of the movement-image and the time-image² – except that I am invoking what might be characterized as a vertical North-South (Asia/Australia) faultline which is a somewhat different axis from his predominantly horizontal New World-Old World (Hollywood/Europe) trajectory. To the extent however that Deleuze’s time-image describes scenarios in which characters are unable to act and react directly, leading to a breakdown of the sensory-motor system, then it is certainly the case that this is what occurs in the films I am discussing.

I am also interested in the familial within these films – but not only as space of trauma, with which psychoanalysis represents it, requiring always the (symbolic) death

¹ This is a preliminary sketch of themes suggested by these films and this is the very first rehearsal of this material, so I am taking a more descriptive and polemical approach in this first testing of the water, rather than a fully elaborated theoretical approach which uses films simply as examples of a particular conceptual framework.

of the Father in order for the paternal Rule of Law to continue. In the scenarios of the two films I discuss, there is the question of what happens after the death of the father, another kind of unasked question. In an essay commenting on the humanities in the West and the propensity from within the humanities to issue death warrants to aspects of culture (“death to the author, death to history, death to utopia, death to originality, death to the human [and consequently, the humanities]”), Mikhail Epshtein has provocatively suggested (from the point of view of someone behind rather than in front of the now torn Iron Curtain), that it might be a greater challenge to find ways of understanding and living with one’s progenitor, rather than wanting to kill him – in the interests of “continuity, generation, and nascent phenomena.”

This may not be the place to engage in the debate about humanism, which this approach raises, but there is certainly the question of what becomes a kind of double maternal function in the absence of the father in the films I am interested in here, as well as the desire to see value in the generative potential of the familial in terms which are not solely conservative.

Additionally, I am especially interested in what happens in and around this thing we call the knowledge economy – by which I mean that transformation of creative labor in the particularity of its mental and physical being into that abstraction now called “creative industry,” which in many cases seems to represent above all a managerialist discourse which is not very much interested in the operations of creativity or even its actual products, but only in the potential to exploit possible intellectual property relations arising from activities which are creative. (The lack of interest in the actual products is indicated in the tendency one often hears in media industry and policy discussions to describe the actual work as “content production,” a generic label, effacing any material specificity, a description indicating above all the economistic determination of activities, which is certainly characteristic of culture’s global industrialization).

What is relevant however in this brief over-schematization of the problem is that individual films and their techniques of production are central to the knowledge economy and through them we can closely study dynamic processes and developments in their dramatic embodiments which may be invisible in general descriptions of such processes. Moreover perhaps we can polemically suggest that if there is something called the knowledge economy then it has a large counterpart in what I’ll call the “ignorance economy” – by which I mean a zone of displacement, where those ignored, excluded from or made redundant within the circuits of rapid capital accumulation (and its benefits) languish in marginal economic activity, excluded from the networks of valuable information which make self-transformation possible, existing in a kind of

---

borderland, which is partially a stockpile of human waste, open to exploitation at every stage.

In her description of what she calls a new geography of centers and margins, established by the ascendance of information economies and the growth of global cities, Saskia Sassen notes the unevenness of these processes, marked by shifts in centers and the accompanying decline of former manufacturing centers, for example, with increased investment in downtown real estate developments and telecommunication infrastructure, while low income areas are specifically starved of resources. Sassen refers to zones which she calls “analytic borderlands,” spaces which are constituted in terms of discontinuities and because they are conceived as having a terrain, they cannot thus be reduced to dividing lines. Such a borderland is the setting of both *Finished People* and *Little Fish*, a borderland location of migration as well. Cinema however denationalizes urban space and its transnational actors, key players in the knowledge economy, move freely from one location to another and from one voice to another, taking on the personae of the small-fry street dealers, who can’t so easily move.

The knowledge trade’s street dealers, distributors and major players keep pretty much to themselves, since in order to maintain knowledge’s high street-value, it has to be kept off the streets. In a sense, ignorance is one of its main waste-products, and generally speaking a lot more ignorance is produced than knowledge in the knowledge economy. Amongst those unable to obtain regular supplies of knowledge (i.e. valuable information), an affective self-awareness exists, characterized by negative and destructive emotions (anger, self-abuse, loss of hope, etc.) and also by a sense of complete ephemerality, having no distinct subject boundaries separate from the world. In this sense we can say there is a collapse of the motor-sensory system, in the Deleuzian sense. In one case, a group of low-level street dealers refer to themselves as “the dust of life” which might be easily blown away. Similarly, at the beginning of *Finished People*, the words of a 19-year-old street kid provide an intertitle, which frames the whole film and also acts as a partial intertext linking both *Finished People* and *Little Fish*): “When I was on the streets...and hanged around there every day, some people thought I was part of the brick wall.... They think we’re low-lifes, capable of nothing.... They think we’re finished people.”

Most of the characters in the two films I want to talk about here are “finished people,” belonging in the “ignorance economy” in one way or another — the “small fry” who slip through the net of social safety and inclusiveness, but who thereby underline the contradictions contained within the complacency and self-congratulation of cultures who regard themselves as “comfortable and relaxed”.

---


6 John Howard’s description of the kind of Australia he wanted to see, if elected Prime Minister in 1996.
aftermath of a twenty year period of Anglo-Australian anxiety about Asian immigration which begins in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the influx of Indo-Chinese immigration, intensifying with Geoffrey Blainey’s Warrnambool speech in 1983 and subsiding with the displacement of anxiety from Asians and Asian Australians to “people of Middle-Eastern appearance,” a shift which might be seen as a re-orientation of Orientalism.

Equally, the landscape of suburban decline which both films evoke parallels a particular discourse of decline in the rhetoric of a national cinema in Australia – which both films are seen to arrest, firstly in the low budget freshness and directness of Finished People and secondly in the casting of high profile global/Australian actors in the case of Little Fish (Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving, and Sam Neill). In fact what happens is that the energy of Finished People is appropriated by mainstream Australian cinema in order to try to re-dynamize Australian stories. Khoa Do is credited with being an advisor on Little Fish – and the distribution of his own film is helped by the support of another global figure – Jane Campion – so that a circuit can be said to exist between the films, with the use of non-actors, playing street-kid characters like themselves, based on a workshopped script; the style of this method is then transferred and adapted in a precisely written script, performed by big-name actors, who can be said to simulate the methods of “non-acting” – though the performance style is nonetheless highly technical. At the same time, the “real-life” stories of the “non-actors” provide what needs to be recognized as acting experience, mediated by knowledge of film and television performance codes practiced within popular culture and everyday life itself. To this extent, the “non-actors” had already done their character research on the streets, having effectively internalized “back stories,” which the global actors had to work to acquire, using video interviews with locals to try to find Australian voices they had long lost.8

Olivia Khoo has argued that the Asian figure in Australian cinema is frequently a sacrificial victim, denied full subjectivity so that the Anglo characters can more fully realize themselves. She refers to four films, to support her argument: Linda Hunt in Peter Weir’s The Year of Living Dangerously (1982) Joan Chen in Stephen Wallace’s Turtle Beach (1992), Youki Kudoh and Kenji Isomura in Craig Lahiff’s Heaven’s Burning (1997) and Gotaro Tsunashima in Sue Brooks’ Japanese Story (2003). She argues that the logic of sacrifice in which difference is contained through the sacrifice of the threatening other so that order and identity can be restored is the foundation of

What followed his election was the carefully manipulated unleashing of populist anti-immigration sentiment, firstly focused on Asians and indigenous Australians and more recently on Muslims and the emergence of a disturbing racist discourse (in, for example the figure of Pauline Hanson, who has since faded from view). For a Lacanian analysis of the underlying psychodynamics of this process, see Hage, Ghassan: White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society (Pluto Press, 2000).

7 Macintyre, Stuart and Clark, Anna The History Wars (Melbourne University Press, 2003).
8 This is noticeable in Blanchett’s elongated pronunciation of the word “again” – a marker of a particular class and geographic location which is no longer in wide usage.
much contemporary theory – from feminist philosophy, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and film theory. She asks whether it is possible that a non-sacrificial economy based on the recognition of difference rather than identity could become the basis of social cohesion and what this might mean for both cinema and identity.\textsuperscript{9}

To partially answer this question it might be argued that a structure in which difference was allowed expression rather than being subjected to repression would merely amount to the substitution of identity by difference, or in other words, simply a reversal (or more of the same). The task is rather to understand repression as itself a form of expression, and a powerful one, and to acknowledge Canclini’s observation that thinking today unavoidably involves thinking difference. We might say that the search for identity (which seems to be a particularly anxious discourse in Australia) is doomed to failure, since it necessarily requires exclusions and the embrace of similarity rather than difference. Khoo herself suggests hopeful directions in the counter-representations of Asian Australian filmmakers and the contributions which this work makes to the idea of modern Asian Australian cinema – though I would argue that in dropping the hyphen between these two localizing markers, which is a recent development in discussions of Asian Australian Studies\textsuperscript{10} and in thus abandoning the sense that one term is subordinate to the other, we ought to be able to allow that such work can be considered part of both Asian and Australian cinema, however broadly or narrowly such terms are defined, and not as marginal practices in both categories.

To this extent Jacqueline Lo’s discussion of the distinction between Multicultural Studies (focused on ethnicity, biculturalism, migrancy and modes of arriving into Australian-ness) and Asian Australian Studies (emphasizing the mobility of “diasporic communities with cultural allegiances and political connections across a number of sites within and beyond the nation”) presents a more hopeful scenario than “Critical Multiculturalism’s” focus on a critique of the singular nation (both before and after One Nation) because of its proposal of multiple spatialities and histories.\textsuperscript{11} Audrey Yue’s invocation of the trope, “going south” as a specific aspect of migratory movement distinguishing Asian diasporas in Australia from those elsewhere adds a further layer to a more active and mobile assumption of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{12}

Mobility however is not the experience of the characters in \textit{Finished People} and \textit{Little Fish}. Rather it is an inability to move, which characterizes their realities and both


\textsuperscript{10} See the Special Issue of \textit{Journal of Intercultural Studies}, Vol. 27, Nos. 1-2, Feb.-May 2006.


films are marked by a slowness of pace, a sense of spatial containment and a claustrophobic interiority. Relatively few wide shots open out the characters’ lives beyond the traumas of memory, of broken families, of addiction and of lack of economic options. *Finished People*, based on a script written by the participants in a community youth group, blurs the fiction/documentary line, aiming for the immediacy and intimacy of a “home movie” aesthetic, the immersive sense of engagement for the audience, vicariously living on the streets, while *Little Fish* exceeds the low-budget aesthetic of the former by simulating it with the kind of budget and technical options which are able to more fully aestheticize the abject scenario.

*Finished People* which is marked by a sense of greater authenticity, arises from a community – Cabramatta, Sydney’s “Little Saigon,” considered the heroin capital of Australia, location of street gangs, of political murder: in other words a cinematic space, but the action scenarios which such a space generates in other cinemas are eschewed here for a more suburban inaction (where smooth mobilization of the camera is required beyond the use of handheld cinematography, dolly shots are improvised using a shopping trolley). Three unconnected stories are interwoven without any sense of incoherence – because there are narrative links between characters, which give a structural unity even in the absence of a singular story. Each is displaced from family, but in each case, a connection still exists and is reactivated as a point of tension in the film. Although the stories are centered on three young men, Des (Rodney Anderson), Van (Joe Le) and Tommy (Jason McGoldrick) and the women in the film are peripheral and essentially serve to support them, I think this produces an alternative structure which overwhelms their stories, displacing them somewhat with the generative capacity of the women’s lives, so that the feminine and especially the maternal produces a new order of survival, which the lives of the men are incapable of producing because their trajectories are inevitably self-destructive – though each is given a potentially redemptive decision to make.

For Des, a future exists with his pregnant girlfriend, Sara (Mylinh Dinh); this will not be a bright suburban future, since they are both street kids, but the alternative is joining a gang and being killed on the streets. In cinematic terms, this is clearly the more heroic option, but in the narrative of *this* film, there is a realism which – perhaps arising out of the actual experience of street gangs and influenced by the migrant desire for success – proposes the lesser evil of the street, though Des is admittedly reluctant to make this decision. Tommy (Jason McGoldrick) has a conflicted (which is to say, normal) relation with his Filipino mother (Miriam Marquez), to whom he goes to borrow money and a supportive friendship with Sophie (Sarah Vongmany), which he tries to make

---

13 Fairfield City Council, where Cabramatta is located, promotes the suburb as “a taste of Asia,” or “Asia without the ticket and without the visa” (neglecting to mention that it is those who come to Australia from Asia who need the visas, rather than those who go from Australia to Asia).

14 A lesson here for the Australian Film Commission and other bodies in their propensity to bring Hollywood scriptwriters to teach Australians how to tell stories cinematically.
sexual. (She refuses – because she understands the nature of the relationship as a surrogate-maternal one). After fruitless efforts to find work, the decision he has to make is whether to become a junkie again – or whether to meet Sophie and negotiate. For Van, troubled by a relation with a father, a Vietnamese soldier, who brought up all his children to be soldiers (rendering them useless in peacetime), redemption comes through friendship with Carla (Daniela Italiano) who is herself condemned (with HIV), a condition which she fiercely resists by extreme optimism. When this fails, and Van discovers the nature of her illness, he too must make a decision – to reconnect with his mother, a suburban sweatshop worker.

In all cases, there are no fathers (except, as it happens, the reluctant Des, who in any case is still an expectant rather than real father) so that the maintenance of any order is left to the women, who are all more or less maternal and who therefore need to perform the double function of both the maternal and paternal. A social order thus exists which is considered to be aberrant, certainly in terms of the nuclear family model, even though in the context, and in spite of its imperfection, it represents the only possibility of survival in this scenario.

*Little Fish* is centered on one family, the aptly named Heart family, headed by Janelle (Noni Hazlehurst). There are interesting echoes with her earlier roles as a junkie in *Monkey Grip* (Ken Cameron, 1982) and a single mother in *Fran* (Glenda Hambly, 1985). Janelle is filled with *ressentiment*, a visceral rage, arising from her sense of social failure and lost hopes, which can only be recovered through her children. Her daughter Tracy (Cate Blanchett) is a recovered junkie, trying to get back on her feet, but unable (because of earlier credit card fraud) to borrow money to take over the small business she currently manages – though she has promised the money to the business’s Vietnamese owner. Her brother Ray (Martin Henderson) literally can’t get back on his feet, since he has lost a leg in a car accident some years earlier and is now dealing drugs. Tracy and Ray are infantilized by the economic necessity to remain at home, though in their thirties and Janelle cannot push them out because of her own emotional dependence on them. She has earlier rejected her former long-term de facto partner Lionel (Hugo Weaving), a former Rugby League star and now a junkie (with whom Tracy retains a relationship, which needs to be thought of as an uncle rather than fatherly one, though there is ambiguity in it).

The source of Janelle’s rejection of Lionel lies in his having introduced Tracy to drugs, so there is a kind of defiance in Tracy’s friendship with Lionel, which gives her some semblance of independence. These people are white trash, and whilst there is nothing like the psychotic malevolence of the family in Rowan Woods’ earlier film, *The Boys* (1998), he is venturing into similar territory of social dysfunction in depictions of an underclass that disturb the order of bourgeois comfort. (This has been something of a theme in recent Australian cinema, reflecting more widespread anxieties, observable in *Lantana* [Ray Lawrence, 2001] *The Bank* [Robert Connolly, 2001], *Three Dollars* [Robert Connolly, 2005].)
Again, it is the peripheral story in this scenario to which I am drawn. Tracy’s ex-lover is Jonny (Dustin Nguyen), also an ex-junkie and the driver of the car in the accident in which Ray lost his leg. Jonny has been living in Canada for several years, sent there by his family to escape drugs. He has now returned and has ostensibly been working as a stock-broker, so on the surface his story is another success story (though it turns out not to be a true one). Surrounding the Heart family and the bleakness of their futures is a new economy, in which the markets and small businesses are all owned or run by Asian migrants. The Anglo family has been abandoned by men and left to women to eke out a precarious subsistence of deprivation and emotional conflict and the only model of familial functionality is to be found in the Asian family, presented in its extended communality.

In *Little Fish*, one of the few times that a sense of a broader, less claustrophobic domestic interior is presented is the family reunion when Jonny re-enters. The space of the reunion is a huge new light-filled open-plan house, a domestic space which allows for wide shots and for imagining futures. It provides a pointed spatial contrast with the tight close-ups of constrained space and constrained lives in the very ordinary suburban house, which the Hearts rent (and do not own). In another scene underlining their marginality, they visit a pre-auction “open-house” of the waterfront mansion owned by The Jockey (Sam Neill) the drug king pin who is retiring. In the two large houses, alternative options of economic success are presented – the hard-working migrant success story or the story of drugs and corruption (though the potential for opening out this story to a more extended treatment of this theme, which has been part of the image of Cabramatta for at least two decades is not taken up by either of the two films I’m discussing, perhaps in the interests of a “more positive” story, in the context of increasingly dystopian accounts of suburban migrant ghettos).

The magic of capital marks the lives of the characters in numerous ways; the difficulty for Tracy of getting a small loan, in the context of large-scale white collar crime underlines the selective nature of risk assessment. Economic decline and marginality is a staple of cinema, the basis of many genres (noir, most notably). Its mood has long provided a form of expression, embodied in cinema both on the performative register of what actors do physically in projecting characters and in what cinematographers do in composing images and scenes. The economic decline of the scenario here parallels in some ways the economic decline of national cinema in Australia, which has largely become the location for multi-national co-productions (*Mission Impossible, Matrix*) and post-production (*Hero*). A US/Australia Free Trade Agreement – made possible as a pay-off for Australia’s support of the US in the Iraq

---

15 This is a not uncommon solution used by Vietnamese families in Australia to deal with delinquency – though Vietnam is another common destination for wayward children, sent to live with families still there, in a kind of small-scale individualized version of re-education.
war – which has ostensibly opened up US agricultural markets to Australia, has also further opened up audio-visual markets for US product in Australia.

While there is finally relatively little evidence that Little Fish opens out a new future for Asian characters in Australian cinema, even though the Jonny character is granted an iconic presence, it signals an alternative reality which is relatively little seen or acknowledged. My interest in this and in earlier work\(^\text{16}\) is still on the margins of the story, where potential exists for imagining transformed realities, excluded from the limitations of national cinema, narrowly defined (and practiced) – and there is still a great deal more work to be done on these two films in more fully developing the themes which I have only touched upon here.

The Author

Helen Grace teaches new media and visual culture theory in the Department of Cultural & Religious Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is the author of the CD-ROM Before Utopia: A Non-Official Pre-history of the Present (Pluto Press, UWS, 2000). She co-authored Home/World: Space, Community and Marginality in Sydney’s West (Pluto Press, 1997), she co-edited Planet Diana: Cultural Studies and Global Mourning (Research Centre in Intercommunal Studies, 1997), and she edited Aesthesis and the Economy of the Senses (UWS, 1996). She is also a photographer, award-winning filmmaker and new media producer. Her recent works include: Train of Thought (2006); The Immortals (2005) Lounge (2004); Dog (2004); Ost Offic (2004). She established the Theoretical Studies Department (later Art History) at the University of Western Sydney, where she worked for 14 years. Prior to moving to Hong Kong, she was Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. She has written widely on cinema, photography, cultural studies, contemporary art, and aesthetics.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

[Circa the Digital Edition]

Joel David completed his Ph.D. and M.A. (as Fulbright scholar) in Cinema Studies at New York University. He was the first graduate of the film program of the University of the Philippines – finishing in 1986, after a journalism degree in 1979, both times with honors – where he subsequently became founding Director of the UP Film Institute. He was former Head of the Writers Division at the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines and resident film critic of National Midweek. His books on Philippine cinema include The National Pastime, Fields of Vision (first winner of the National Book Award for Film Criticism), and Wages of Cinema (UP Centennial Book Awardee). He is currently tenured Professor at Inha University in Incheon, Korea, and maintains his personal archival blog, Amauteurish! at <https://amauteurish.com>. In 2016 he became the first Filipino to be given a life-achievement prize for film criticism and scholarship, with the Gawad Lingap Sining (Culture-Nurturer Award) from the Filipino Arts & Cinema International Film Festival in San Francisco, California. His latest books include Manila by Night: A Queer Film Classic, part of Arsenal Press’s acclaimed series; and Millennial Traversals, formerly an exclusive feature on his Amauteurish website, later a two-volume publication of the University of Santo Tomas’s UNITAS journal (the country’s longest-running academic periodical), and now a single-volume book edition from Amauteurish Publishing. Forthcoming are Sine, a volume devoted to 100-plus outstanding Filipino films, as well as the digital editions of his out-of-print books.