

ROMANCE, INSULARITY AND REPRESENTATION

Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and Hong Kong Cinema

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Humans can live on an island only by forgetting what an island represents
(Gilles Deleuze, 2004: 9)

Abstract

Wong Kar-wai's film *In the Mood for Love* (2000) is set in Hong Kong in the early 1960s and explores the predicament and reactions of a female character (So Lai-chen) who experiences a personal crisis at a time of political turmoil. Like that other great film about passion and solipsism, Nagisa Oshima's *Ai no corrida* (1976), *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, the backdrop of 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. This article discusses these elements of the film in the context of contemporary Hong Kong society and cinema.

Keywords

Hong Kong, Hong Kong cinema, Wong kar-wai, Self-Representation

When considering Hong Kong, the meaning of the term 'island' becomes fuzzy, elusive, if not outright paradoxical. Though it comprises almost 200 outlying islands and its financial centre sits at the edges of one of them – Hong Kong Island, once called "Victoria" – the city of Hong Kong is economically a harbour, a point of passage, a gateway in and outside of China rather than an island. The archipelago itself exemplifies what geographers call continental islands, as distinct from oceanic islands, fractured pieces of land that were once part of the continent. It is the fruit of a shipwreck of sorts, a "geological mutiny that separated them from the tyranny of continental land" (Conley, 2005: 209).

This metaphorical description may well apply to Hong Kong's as seen through its 20th Century history *vis à vis* China. Like the archipelago, the bulk of Hong Kong's population is the result of a mass mutiny as waves of up to hundreds of thousands of people, most of them from the neighbouring Guangdong province, fled poverty and political uncertainty throughout the 20th Century to work or live there. The city not only functioned as a jumping point toward the overseas for countless emigrants and refugees but those who stayed saw the rise within it of a political, social, and cultural space that has become distinctly local, a space defined both by the immigrant's desire of starting from scratch and the islander's sense of being separate (separate from its colonial ruler, Britain, from within, and from China, at once motherland and foe, from without).¹



Figure 1 – Map of Hong Kong and vicinity

The arising of an insular culture in the midst of a city whose main function is the *passage* of goods, capital and people would seem to be an indication of the power of geography over economics. Truth to be told, the fact that Hong Kong is partly an archipelago is almost incidental to its status. True, as a geographical entity Hong Kong island was crucial to the special hydro-geological characteristics of the harbour that divides it from Kowloon (and thus the mainland) but the pronounced distinctiveness of today’s former colony is first and foremost political. It is also fueled by desire, the desire to be apart, alone, safe against all possible odds; a symptom, in some extreme cases, of isomania rather than a reflection of culture and geography.²

Whether political or cultural, imaginary or delusional, Hong Kong’s insularity is one important facet of a truly unique, and uniquely situated, habitat. Cinema is one of the most egregious expressions of this habitat and the critical debate surrounding Hong Kong cinema has exhibited distinctive - indeed “insular” - traits to match. For there has been a tendency among both local and non-local critics and historians to stress issues having to do with the city itself, its legendarily cramped spaces, its relationship to both China and the rest of the world, the unique socio-cultural situation of its people – in brief, issues of self-representation.³ This has seemed a

particularly appropriate approach in the case of many films produced as the 1997 handover from British to Chinese control was approaching, particularly those made by the directors of the so-called New Wave: Shu Shuen, Allen Fong, Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam, to name a few.⁴ To be sure, a constant preoccupation with the social, political, and psychological space of Hong Kong is a conspicuous component of many a Hong Kong film. Indeed, The display of inwardness, interest in the local urban space and fragile sense of identity much in evidence in many films by the likes of Hui, Kwan, Tam, and Wong, among others, may well one day be regarded as one Hong Kong's main contributions to world cinema culture. Even the countless action flicks and comedies that have made Hong Kong cinema a recognisable brand abroad, and which display no preoccupation with Hong Kong per se, were forced to use the city as a backdrop (if for no other reason that lack of access to China during the history of the local film industry meant that Hong Kong was the filmmakers' sole set). However, to write about Hong Kong cinema as if the city itself were the sole theoretical and critical horizon has the unfortunate corollary that Hong Kong cinema is only interesting insofar as it is about Hong Kong.⁵ This corollary is unfortunate not only because it does not reflect the fact that Hong Kong films have found an international audience but also, in that it implicitly asserts the marginality of the city's cinema, diminishes its accomplishments by implying that it is incapable of addressing general issues in a way that resonates with anyone unfamiliar with or uninterested in Hong Kong per se i.e. that its meaning and, ultimately, value is contingent on its reflecting a major aspect of the local culture (ignorance of or lack of direct exposure to which would, by the same token, preclude any meaningful response to it).

From time to time a film is released that by dint of its sheer technical or stylistic accomplishments transcends not only its own original context of production and reception but also its own apparent theme or subject, thus calling in the most unequivocal, unquestionable terms for a different kind of yardstick with which to measure its impact and value (a yardstick with which one could then reassess, given the appropriate theoretical and historical framework, Hong Kong cinema as a whole). Among these, Wong kar-wai's *In the mood for love* (2000) has made the rounds and has been written about perhaps more than any other. This is partially due to the film's extraordinary production values and its seductive treatment of longing, unfulfilled romance, and nostalgia. Aside from glowing reviews from most major film magazines, the film has elicited scholarly work that is keenly conscious of the specificity of the Hong Kong context and the director's cultural background (be it the literary and cinematic sources that inform the screenplay, the significance of Shanghai in the history – and Wong's own mythology – of Hong Kong, and the place of the film within an ideal trilogy about the Hong Kong of the 1960s started with *Days of Being Wild* [1990] and ended, after *In the Mood for Love*, with *2046* [2004]).⁶

What follows builds on these excellent studies but also departs from them by treading a path that while keeping us close to the specific historical context that provides the background to the film's intensely private story will also bring to light one of the film's most philosophical aspects, above and beyond Hong Kong and its destiny as well as the themes of longing and nostalgia (however seductive and accomplished Wong's treatment of them may be). I am interested in drawing the implications of a seemingly marginal yet poignant reference to politics made toward the end of the film. The time is 1966, at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in China. 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 landlady, Mrs Suen (Rebecca Pan), about her plans, Lai-chen is told that because of the situation in China Mrs Suen is planning to leave Hong Kong to join her daughter in the USA. Lai-chen, looking out the window toward the apartment Mo-wan used to live in, can hardly contain her tears.

It would seem intuitive to interpret her reaction as an expression of regret, frustration for a missed opportunity, or nostalgia for happier times. But the dynamics of Lai-chen's breakdown

are rather more complex. Subsumed within her tears is a grasp of how the private sphere is enmeshed with a social situation. Her sorrow is tinged, made deeper and more devastating, by understanding that the departing Mrs Suen, driven away from Hong Kong by political and economic instability in the mainland, 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 both nurtured and repressed their feeling of love. With Mrs Suen gone, and with the disappearance of a whole communal and societal network associated with her, symbolised by the intricate close quarters of her flat, Lai-chen now understands that the love story has truly come to an end and can only exist in the form of memory, hence her despair. The image of her looking out and quietly shedding tears may well chronicle the first time that she experiences the love affair with Mo-wan as a memory rather than a possibility.

While the romance between the two protagonists took shape during a period of political stability, then, its end coincides with a moment of political turmoil, a moment of heightened awareness of the dependence of people's whereabouts and emotional lives on political contingencies. This is of course more than a pure coincidence. For all its casual tone, the reference to 1966 as a time of political uncertainty is a shivering revelation of the social and political conditions that had enabled the protagonists' solipsistic absorption in their feelings as well as the fragility of Hong Kong's status as a geographical, political and psychological – that is, metaphorical – island.

The offices where the two would-be lovers work, Mrs Suen's flat, the restaurant, the noodle stall and the stairs leading to it, the street leading to the flat, the hotel room, the taxis, which move across town like capsules flying in mid-air: all these spaces give up their topographical and functional meaning to become but witnesses to the same, inner drama. This is further amplified by the sub-plots which Wong kar-wai, like Truffaut in *A Woman Next Door* (1981), uses as proliferations of the main love story: refracted images of what the relationship between the two protagonists might have been but isn't. The protagonists' spouses are one such image, the hypocritical yet comfortable arrangement between Lai-chen's boss and his wife is another; the joyful, uncomplicated zest for life and lust in the person of Ah Bing, Mo-wan's colleague, is a third such image. Then there is Mrs Suen's clan, which is yet another model of what the couple may end up being – older and focused on familial feelings, rather than erotic impulses. In the absence of any connective tissue between different spaces, without any evidence that Lai-chen and Mo-wan have gone from one place to another, the film's different locales are sets for different variants of the same theme: Mo-wan's and Lai-chen's preoccupation with their spouses' affair and, increasingly, their own.

Mrs Suen's flat is impossible to locate in any concrete reconstruction, however tentative, of the Hong Kong of the 1960s. Though spatially and topographically impossible to locate, however, the flat is clearly readable as a microcosm of a sector of the Shanghainese émigrés' community. This community lives in an almost fictitious realm defined by visual and auditory images of Shanghai – the *cheongsams* worn by the female characters, the songs, the food, the daily rituals and, of course, the language. These images of Shanghai float and cross paths freely in the ambient fluid of memory, poster and clothing design of the Shanghai of the 1920s and 1930s merge with Western-designed or Hong Kong-made props which, in turn, are transfigured by the sounds of songs ranging a whole spectrum of styles and periods (most prominently the song that gives the film its Chinese title, *Huayang Nianhua*, made popular by the Shanghainese singer Zhou Xuan in a 1947 Hong Kong Mandarin movie, *An All-Consuming Love* [1947]). The occasional, jolting reference to the latest examples of Japanese home technology – such as the rice cooker - reveals these images for what they are: relics of a vanished past uncomfortably cast against a new, unfamiliar spatial and temporal background. They bespeak a mythologisation of a time and a place in the mind of these homesick characters which doubles Wong's own mythologising of the Hong Kong of the early 1960s.

The special kind of seclusion enjoyed by the Shanghainese in Hong Kong continues, albeit less stringently, to the present day through the exclusivity of business and social networks. What the Shanghainese shared with the largely Cantonese population was the apparent lack of investment in local politics, with the British Colonial Government standing as a near-invisible, intangible guarantor of business-as-usual, the presence of which was experienced as the impression of absence. There was more than just a hierarchy between the governing and the governed; the Chinese and the colonial civil servants were separated by an immense social and psychological gulf. Being cordoned off from (rather than merely in an inferior position with respect to) those in charge in the handling of the territory produced a further layer of isolation in such a way that the people of Hong Kong appear to have been isolated from the city they live in. The almost total absence of politics in this film is an expression of this isolation from within.

The film, then, represents several degrees of insularity, both real and imagined. The shield from China that defined Hong Kong is doubled, tripled, quadrupled in the form of self-contained communities and psychological spaces that seem impermeable to outside influences – hence the freshness and poignancy of the reference to global politics which is at the center of my argument. I am not suggesting that *In the mood for love* is a political film or that the love story is an allegory of political struggle or a struggle for political self-definition. The film represents directly and transparently something at once very specific and very difficult to capture: the engulfment of private lives within regional, national and even global politics. The geological fate of continental islands, which Deleuze metaphorically describes as one of “escaping the continent that once engulfed them,” is neatly reversed when it comes to human affairs, as such escape proves to be a chimera.

In the particular context of Hong Kong the engulfment of the private within the political takes a special form. Political changes in Hong Kong have followed a certain pattern: a sudden crisis followed by a phase of apparent calm in turn followed by another crisis, and so forth. There have been many crises and they all have left permanent signs in the territory and its inhabitants’ perception of it: the Japanese invasion, between 1941 and 1945; the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949; the United Nations’ embargo on trade with China in 1950; and the Chinese ‘Great Leap Forward’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s, all of which unleashed massive waves of refugees seeking repair in Hong Kong; the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s; the Sino-British Declaration of 1984; the economic crises of the late 1990s; and, of course, the handover in 1997. During moments of stability, the faint awareness that a fragile isolation may end any moment and that political changes beyond one’s control may intrude and disrupt one’s life at any time lurked constantly at the fringes of one’s consciousness without yet informing one’s daily routine. Without suspending one’s belief in the utter instability of the social and economic order, everyday life in the colony would have been anything but possible. If anything, it is state of feigned ignorance of the political sphere that the solipsistic romance of the film allegorises.

But *In the Mood for Love* also addresses a general aspect of the relationship between individual destiny and politics, giving it a vivid, poetic formulation, and a philosophically significant one at that. The overwhelming power of social and political structures over the particular facets of individual lives is so obvious a fact as to be *prima facie* utterly uninteresting as an object of representation. Now, the film manages to give this obvious yet obviously important truth the noteworthy, poignant expression it deserves by referring to it off-handedly, through Mrs Suen’s remark about the 1966 disturbances in China. Held back till very late in the film, the appearance of the broader social and political context is a true shift in point of view, rather like a sudden awakening after a long period of lethargy. This flipping of perspective is given concrete, tangible and explicit form first in the form of references to the links between Hong Kong and Singapore and then the TV footage of French president Charles De Gaulle’s arrival in Cambodia, the images of which, not unlike the horrific footage of a self-immolating monk in Ingmar Bergman’s

Persona (1966), break through the lavish, sensual surface of the film with considerable force. It is a sudden reversal of perspective which sheds new light on everything seen up to that point by suggesting that politics had been there all the way through, hidden in plain sight, buried under the obvious truth about its crushing power, a truth which the film defamiliarises not only by holding it back till the very end but presenting it in the form of an absence. Though in a manner not quite as chilling and gruesome as in that other tale of solipsism and eroticism, Nagisa Oshima's *Ai no corrida* (1976), politics in this film are nowhere, because politics are everywhere.

How could it be otherwise? The whole world evoked by the film, and the nostalgia that is its generating force, would not exist without the social upheavals and sudden changes – local, regional, and global – of the previous decades. It is a world that more than any other is wholly the result of the evolving of political circumstances. How could one think that the creation of such a claustrophobic space was not meant to prepare one for broader concerns, that the film would sooner or later acknowledge the impossibility of that self-absorbed, solipsistic perspective, see it crumble before a revelation of the sheer magnitude of the forces at work in shaping the so-called private sphere? Only gossip had been presented to begin with as a symptom of a social field larger than the one seen onscreen.⁷ But in keeping with the logic of the reversal of perspective suggested above, all thematic elements of the film can be re-read from this point on as indirect sign of the pressing and oppressing power of social forces.

Toward the end, as it addresses the sheer size and complexity of the world as a physical and political space, and Hong Kong's place in it, the film changes gear several times at breathtaking speed and reverts to mysticism in the ending, set in the Cambodian ruins of Angkor Wat. In Angkor Wat, Chow Mo-wan wanders as if in search of answers to questions, one presumes, beyond human control: the possibility of love and happiness, the definition of the self, the meaning of life. It is the last, moving expression of the core question the film adumbrates so subtly – indeed, obliquely – yet eloquently: the infernally complex, Byzantine, and mercurial thread that ties individual destiny to social and political networks, seemingly isolated habitats to global processes. The presentation of this facet of human existence, at once so elusive and fundamental, transcends local concerns and preoccupations in such a way that that, for once in Hong Kong cinema, self-representation becomes representation.

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Endnotes:

1. On the rise of a new, distinctive brand of political subject – the “Hong Konger” – see Tsang (2004).
2. “Dreaming of islands – whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter – is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone – or it dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew.” (Deleuze, 2004: 10).
3. The trend has given signs of abating only very recently, as Hong Kong's desperate attempt to revitalise its film industry has prompted socio-economic analyses of the local film industry against the global context. See, for instance, Pang (forthcoming).

4. On Hong Kong as the subject of Hong Kong cinema, following the identity crisis due to the 1984 Sino-British Declaration, see Abbas (1997: 23-24). For a historical reconstruction of the 'New Wave', see Rodriguez (2001).
5. Though in different ways, both David Bordwell and Jeremy Tambling have voiced their reservations about an approach to certain Hong Kong films wholly centered on the local historical, political and cultural changes they allegedly allegorise. See Bordwell (2000: xi; 36-37; 47, and 270-281); and Tambling, (2003).
6. Teo (2005), Brunette (2005); and Luk (2005).
7. On the role of gossip in the film and the possible inspiration of Manuel Puig's novels, see Teo (2005: 129).

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