

**In Search of a Comparative Poetics:
Cultural Translatability in Transnational Chinese Cinemas**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with the question of how a more comprehensive comparative poetics of cinema might be formulated — one that depends not on essentialised notions of culture accentuated by binary divisions but one that would need to take into consideration the multiple agencies and subjectivities that impact the cultural production, and reading, of a film.

The formulation of a constructive comparative poetics is necessary when building a case for the film's cultural translatability, especially in the face of the proliferation of cinema that is being increasingly identified as 'transnational.' The case is made by analysing examples of transnational Chinese cinemas as exemplified by the films of three directors, Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar-wai and Ang Lee, between 1991 and 2002. In each of these examples, I explore how the films negotiate the various cultural and national boundaries they invariably cross as they enter into the global circulation of film and media products.

Whilst I analyse the films in the contexts of the political and social histories of the various Chinese territories from which they appear to originate, I do not claim that they are merely products of those histories. The films are also products of economic and business networks, individual aesthetic choices on the part of the filmmakers, and a complex matrix of tastes and preferences exercised by their audiences, which may not necessarily be nationally or culturally demarcated. These elements constitute the boundaries of the notion of film cultures, the exploration of which I argue is a more productive approach than the more limited notion of ethnological cultures in the cultural analysis of cinema.

LIST OF PUBLISHED PAPERS

Parts of this thesis have been, or are about to be, published in the following incarnations:

Chan, Felicia. (2003) *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Cultural migrancy and translatability. In *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes* (Ed. Berry, Chris), British Film Institute, London, 56–64.

— — — (2003) In Search of a Global Cinema: The Case of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Commentary*, National University of Singapore Society, Singapore.

— — — (2003) Reading ambiguity and ambivalence: The asymmetric structure of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/reading-ambiguity.htm>>.

— — — (2005) *A Primer in Film Cultures and Narratives*. Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, Nottingham.

— — — (2006) *Wuxia* cross-dressing and transgender identity: The roles of Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia from *Swordsman II* to *Ashes of Time*, *EnterText* 6.1: *Wuxia Fictions: Chinese Martial Arts in Film, Literature and Beyond*, 111–33.

— — — (forthcoming 2007) Cultural translatability in transnational Chinese cinemas: The Case of Zhang Yimou. In *Off-screen Spaces: Regionalism and Globalised Cultures* (Eds. McLoone, Martin and Porter, Robert), University of Exeter Press.

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CONTENTS

Abstract	i
List of publications	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Notes	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Culture in Film / Film Culture	37
Chapter Two: Zhang Yimou	90
Chapter Three: Wong Kar-wai	147
Chapter Four: Ang Lee	202
Conclusion	248
Bibliography	262

NOTES

For convenience and consistency, where there is an occasional mention of a phrase or word in Chinese, the Mandarin *hanyu pinyin* spelling will be used. In quoted material, the original spelling used will be retained, whether in the Wade-Giles system or others, with Mandarin *pinyin* in parentheses for clarification, and consistency, if necessary.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese language cinema has made large strides into mainstream markets since Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* first introduced the Chinese 'Fifth Generation' cinema to US and European audiences with its screening at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985. According to Tam and Dissanayake, 'many who saw it realized that day that the new Chinese cinema had arrived [...] and the film went on to win numerous awards at international festivals' (1998: 13). Today, in 2007, Chinese language 'blockbusters' — such as *The Promise* (Chen Kaige, 2005) and *The Banquet* (Feng Xiaogang, 2006) — are no longer relegated to Chinatown theatres, the 'cult' section of the local video store, or the arthouse circuit in US and European metropolitan centres. Julian Stringer warns against mistaking '*distribution* histories of world cinema' for '*production* histories' (2001: 134), and thus against the 'nostalgic invocation of those moments when non-Western industries were "discovered"' (2001: 134). This thesis seeks not to perpetuate such a perception of film history but to explore the issues for cultural ownership and identity that are raised by the penetration of Chinese cinema/s from the 1990s to the early 2000s into US and European markets, and ultimately circulating back into Asia as exemplars of successful cultural translations. This introductory chapter will take the first step towards that aim by defining the terms in the title of the thesis, *In Search of a Comparative Poetics: Cultural Translatability in Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, before elaborating on the methodology to be employed in the rest of the thesis as well as its structure. I shall begin by working backwards through the title, engaging first with the notion of 'transnational cinemas,' back through 'cultural translatability,' before finally addressing the notion of a 'comparative poetics' in cinema.

Transnational Chinese cinema/s

The term ‘transnational Chinese cinemas’ and ‘transnational Film Studies’ was introduced by Sheldon Lu in his anthology of essays, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (1997), which sought to define Chinese ‘national’ cinemas in ‘its properly *transnational* context’ (1997a: 3). Lu argues that:

Transnationalism in the Chinese case can be observed at the following levels: first, the split of China into several geopolitical entities since the nineteenth century — the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong — and consequently the triangulation of competing national/local ‘Chinese cinemas,’ especially after 1949; second, the globalization of the production, marketing, and consumption of Chinese film in the age of transnational capitalism in the 1990s; third, the representation and questioning of ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’ in filmic discourse itself, namely. the cross-examination of the national, cultural, political, ethnic, and gender identity of individuals and communities in the Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora; and fourth, a reviewing and revisiting of the history of Chinese ‘national cinemas,’ as if to read the ‘prehistory’ of transnational filmic discourse backwards. Such an operation has the aim of uncovering the ‘political unconscious’ of filmic discourse — the transnational roots and condition of cinema, which any project of national cinema is bound to suppress and surmount, for the sake of defending the country against real or perceived dangers of imperialism or in order to uphold national unity by silencing the voices of ethnic and national minorities. (1997a: 3)

This argument is echoed in Vitali and Willemen’s anthology of essays, *Theorising National Cinema* (2006). In their introductory essay, they argue that:

[...] cinema can be thought of as pertaining to a national configuration because films, far from offering cinematic accounts of ‘the nation’ as seen by the coalition that sustains the forces of capital within any given nation, are *clusters* of historically specific cultural forms the semantic modulations of which are orchestrated and contended over by each of the forces at play in a given geographical territory. (Vitali and Willemen 2006: 7, my emphasis)

Whilst some of these forces may indeed be ‘national,’ others may also be regional, local, and ‘cultural’ in ways that transcend national boundaries. Nevertheless, it would seem evident at the first instance that in order to properly address the ‘transnational,’ we must first address the ‘national’ as a political framework that holds together, in however unstable a manner, these various forces. The relation between the national and the transnational is rarely simple, especially if we take into account the dynamic nature of their semantic definitions, the historical evolution of geopolitical boundaries and the flow of transnational capital across these boundaries.

It is useful here to make a distinction between the concept of the ‘transnational’ from the ‘international’; the two may appear interchangeable, but their definitions in the *Collins English Dictionary* highlight several fundamental conceptual differences. In the *Collins*, ‘international’ is defined as: ‘1. of concerning, or involving two or more nations or nationalities. 2. established by, controlling, or by legislating for several nations [...]. 3. available for use by all nations [...].’ In contrast, ‘transnational’ is defined in the same dictionary as ‘extending beyond the boundaries, interests, etc. of a single nation.’ The key issue underpinning the two lies in the concept of ‘national boundaries.’ Where do these boundaries lie? To what extent are they permeable and/or malleable? The existence of national boundaries as geopolitical realities is difficult to deny; one need simply reflect on the difficulty of the administration of national borders in the form of passports, permits, visas, and, in extreme cases, fences and military border patrols, to realise that there are real and effective consequences for insisting otherwise. The main concern of my project is to ascertain where these political boundaries are seen to conform (or not) to cultural and social boundaries at play in the creation of cinema as a cultural formation. The important question to be asked is not simply where these boundaries are, nor even what and how they might

have come to be, but how the drawing of these boundaries, whether real or imagined, shapes the production of films as cultural products, as *texts* on which the traces of the films' paths of circulation (intended or otherwise) may be inscribed beyond national and political boundaries.

If the term 'international' concerns or involves 'two or more nations or nationalities,' the notion of an 'international cinema' implies collaborations and co-productions between individuals of different nations or nationalities. If the term 'transnational,' however, denotes an extension beyond the boundaries of a *single nation*, the notion of a 'transnational cinema' thus implies, not collaboration, but hegemony.¹ The notion of a transnational Chinese cinema/s rests on two concepts — 'Chinese' and 'nation,' concepts which have histories from which we can extrapolate arguments for whether we can consider transnational Chinese cinema as that which extends beyond the boundaries of the Chinese nation. What might constitute such a 'Chinese nation'? Yingjin Zhang's *Chinese National Cinema* (2004) locates collectively the cinemas of the People's Republic, Taiwan and Hong Kong — and I am compelled to emphasise — *as well as* the 'transnational imaginary' (Zhang 2004: 259–96) under its titular umbrella, covering a period from 1896 to 2002 and beyond. Although the name 'China' as a geopolitical entity is 'traditionally derived from the Ts'in [*Qin*] dynasty which reigned from 221 to 206 B.C.' (Room 1997: 86), it is more commonly accepted today that the notion of a Chinese agency is a contested one. Lu writes that 'China as a modern nation-state [...] is subject to deconstruction, hybridization, multiplication, fragmentation,

1. It is possible to define the *de facto* transnational cinema as Hollywood's, given its international market penetration and cultural reach; and indeed, arguments have been made about its role in the dissemination of American culture around the world (see Semati and Sotirin, 1999; Moretti 2001; Bruner 2007; Ezra and Rowden 2006).

division, and erasure' (1997a: 12); Chris Berry likewise argues that 'the making of "China" as national agency is an ongoing, dynamic, and contested project' (1998b: 131). Indeed, Homi Bhabha writes of the 'cultural construction of nationness as a form of social and textual affiliation' (1994: 140), and that 'the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of "nation" as a narrative strategy' (1994: 140). According to Lu, any attempt to classify a 'Chinese cinema' in contemporary terms must at the very least address the three cinemas of the Chinese mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong, though he is careful to keep them distinct; he asserts that, '[t]hese three cinematic traditions have developed in separate directions and yet all attempt to signify a shared object: "China"' (1997a: 12). In this sense, Lu is acknowledging the multiple political subjectivities that constitute the conception of a contemporary Chinese identity. Similarly, Berry argues that the conception of a "China" as singular, essential, and naturalized [...] is a discursively produced and socially and historically contingent collective entity' (1998b: 131). As such, the notion of a 'Chinese cinema' holds together the tensions between, on the one hand, the ongoing, dynamic cluster of territories that make up the geopolitical entity that is 'China,' and on the other hand, the global pull of the forces of industrialisation and capitalism, of which cinema as a form of cultural production is a part.

The fragility of national and cultural identities is sometimes addressed via the concept of 'diaspora,' whose etymology, from the Greek *diaspeirein*, signifies a dispersal or a scattering of peoples across national boundaries. However, embedded in the notion of diasporic dispersal is the conception of a point, historically and spatially, of *origin*. The notion of such a point of origin, although lost in dispersal, implies, theoretically, a potentiality for recuperation in the future. The diasporic conception of culture is one that arises in tandem

with the nation state and its insistence on boundaries. The tension between the fixity of national boundaries and the dynamic nature of cultural subjectivities underlies the discussion on theories of diaspora. Arif Dirlik argues that a ‘fundamental contradiction built into diaspora discourse is that, while it seeks to negate the nation, or more strictly, the nation-state, it is itself incomprehensible without reference to the latter’ (2004: 491). More specific to the question of Chinese identities, Ien Ang writes of the ambivalences of being a ‘migrant intellectual’ (2001: 4), especially of her experiences as one who is ethnically Chinese, born in Indonesia, but grew up and studied in the Netherlands, before moving to Australia, and her ‘(troubled) relationship to Chineseness’ (2001: 24). As one who looks ‘Chinese,’ but speaks none of the language, she uses her own autobiographical experiences and encounters with ‘East’ and ‘West’ — not ‘Western’ enough for the ‘West,’ and not ‘Chinese’ enough for the ‘East’ — in order to make sense of the ‘diaspora problematic’ (2001: 31). In spite of her recognition that her Chinese identity is continually being reconstructed by each community she enters, the intellectual enquiry nonetheless stems from an attempt to rationalise her own emotional responses to her ‘Chineseness,’ ranging from embarrassment and defensiveness to empathy. Her book, *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001), is littered with personal anecdotes.

For many Chinese diasporic communities, therefore, the notion of ‘Chineseness’ may lie with ethnicity, as popularly defined by ‘blood,’ genetic make-up, by looks or appearance, and/or language (though the grammatically and phonetically distinct Chinese languages only give emphasis to the problem),² all pointing to the mythical point of origin in ‘China.’ However,

2. A recent BBC news article reports that only about half the population in China can speak Mandarin (Anon. 2007e).

Chineseness as a national or political identity becomes a complex issue for those who identify, as Ang does, with being ethnically Chinese, but who bear no allegiance to, or have any cultural memory of, modern or even a historical China. This is usually the case with second or third generation migrants, as well as those identified by Wang Gungwu as ‘re-migrants,’ or ‘Huayi [foreign nationals of Chinese descent] in one foreign country [who have] migrated or re-migrated to another foreign country’ (1992: 9), such as a second or third generation Chinese Singaporean who migrates to Australia or America.

At the same time, there is a need, as Rey Chow puts it, ‘to unlearn that submission to one’s ethnicity such as “Chineseness” as the ultimate signified’ (1993: 25). In her essay, ‘On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem’ (1998), Chow deliberately refers to the term ‘Chinese’ as an ‘ethnic *supplement*’ (1998: 3, my emphasis) rather than a qualifier, arguing that the ‘*collective* habit of supplementing every major world trend with the notion of “Chinese” is the result of an overdetermined series of historical factors, the most crucial of which is the lingering, pervasive hegemony of Western culture’ (1998: 3, my emphasis). Her choice of the word ‘habit’ is significant for its connotations of learned behaviour. In other words, the use of the ethnic qualifier — as in Chinese cinema, Chinese culture, Chinese food — denotes not a natural association, but a naturalised one. This naturalisation occurs at its most pervasive on the question of Chinese language/s. The privilege of Mandarin, which Chow calls ‘the white man’s Chinese, the Chinese that receives its international authentication as “standard Chinese”,’ over the other ‘dialects’ is ‘a systematic codification and management of ethnicity that is typical of modernity’ (1998: 11). Yet, the adoption of Mandarin as the *de facto* Chinese language is not simply ‘a white man’s problem,’ as it were; the Singapore government, for instance, has had a long-standing ‘Speak Mandarin’ policy, enforcing through social means (through education, primarily, and public use,

such as on television) the use of Mandarin in schools and the public arena for all those who are identified as ethnically ‘Chinese’ on their National Registration Identity Cards, even if the languages spoken at home may be Cantonese, Hokkien, or any other language. Rey Chow notes that when Chineseness, denoted by ethnicity and competency in Mandarin, is perceived ‘as an index to existential value [...], [t]hose who are ethnically Chinese but who, for historical reasons, have become linguistically distant or dispossessed are, without exception, deemed inauthentic and lacking’ (1998: 12). In the case of Singapore, the pressure of cultural authenticity is imposed, not by ‘white man’s’ standards, as Chow has argued, but by a predominantly ethnic Chinese government, acting precisely with the view to — and the phrase is worth quoting again — ‘a systematic codification and management of ethnicity that is typical of modernity’ (1998: 11). However, the term ‘ethnic’ is noted by John Hutchinson to have been entered into the *Oxford English Dictionary* only in 1953 (Hutchinson 1996). Tom Nairn notes that ‘ethnicity’ was adopted into the public discourse in the US only after the breakdown of the informal black/white racial classifications that had delimited and structured the North American identity from the time of the Civil War:

This terminological shift reflected both the new neo-imperial hegemony (which made racism deeply embarrassing) and the mass arrival of Hispanic-American immigrants (who made it impossible in the old guise). Such big changes created a need for a more effective all-American nationalism: a dilemma of irresolution, tending toward centrifugal dispersion. (Nairn 2003: 123)

Notions of ‘ethnicity’ are therefore as discursively constructed and historically contingent as notions of ‘nationality.’

In this context, the mechanisms of diaspora and identity may be seen to function beyond the perception of the displacement and loss of the homeland. Dirlik argues that nation-states also ‘stand to benefit economically and

politically from the dispersion of their populations worldwide. [...] It was with the modern reorganization of the world into nation-states that diaspora emerged as a problem of existence and identity' (2004: 492):

So long as territorial states were identified with their rulers, without claims to coincidence between state, territory, population and culture, there was no implicit contradiction between the territorial state and its diasporic populations. It was when the state became the nation-state, and its culturally constructed constituents the 'natives,' with claims to the homeland, that the homelessness and the statelessness, taken to be one and the same thing, of the diasporics rendered them into aliens — and diasporics. (Dirlik 2004: 492)

In other words, the concepts of diaspora, cultural displacement, and translation, are the products of societal modernisation, an important development of which in China was the increased media dissemination and economic advancements that followed from Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1979. Discourses of diaspora, cultural displacement and translation draw from and feed the trend of international globalisation, the discourse from which it is increasingly impossible to escape. It is a discourse that has given rise to the notion of a 'global Chineseness' (Ang 2001: 75), which is in turn 'a kind of cultural essentialism [...] that draws an imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world' (Chow 1998: 6). Whilst it may seem ironic that the corollary of cultural dispersal should be a perceived cultural unity, in reality, it may be seen as a central conflict of modernity. Delanty argues that:

[...] modernity, in the broadest sense of the term, can be seen as a tension between autonomy and fragmentation [...]. On the one side, modernity as a cultural project refers to the autonomy of the Subject, the self-assertion of the self, or individual, and the progressive expansion of the discourses of creativity, reflexivity, and discursivity to all spheres of life. On the other side, modernity entails the experience of fragmentation, the sense that modernity as a social project destroys its own cultural foundations. (Delanty 1999: 2)

Therefore, it may be argued that as products of cultural modernity, films also contribute to the discourse of what 'China' is, that is, it is 'movies that help

make China' (Berry 1998b: 131). Furthermore, it may also be argued that transnational Chinese films — I include in this category 'Chinese' films that have found a wide viewership in 'Western' markets as well as non-'Western' audiences weaned on 'Western' films — have a significant role to play in the shaping of audience perceptions. The sheer visibility of these films in both arthouse and mainstream markets, through commercial distribution channels, film festivals, television broadcasts and DVD sales, over other 'independent,' 'small' or 'local' films that are never seen outside of China, or even in certain regions in China, makes their cultural reach wide-ranging and influential.

Thus, 'transnational Chinese cinemas,' as understood by Sheldon Lu, and adopted by other writings on the subject, refers to the condition of Chinese cinema being widely available across geographical and cultural borders, the prefix 'trans' denoting the act of crossing, which raises the question of agency: who, or what, crosses? Not the Chinese nation, as such, but 'Chinese cinema.' However, transnational agency necessarily requires that multiple agencies be taken into account, that is, beyond the monolithic notion of the state and the political boundaries it administers. Chinese (or any) cinema as an industry and as a cultural form exceeds (and not necessarily in line with) the institutions and regulations of the nation state. If that is so, what then is *Chinese* about Chinese cinema, or by the same logic, what *is* Chinese cinema? At the level of production, multiple agencies include international collaborations and co-productions, but circulation routes via mainstream multiplexes or the arthouse circuit must also be considered with regard to distribution and exhibition. All of these will have quite a direct impact upon presentation, as demonstrated in a film's narrative and stylistic strategies, as well as on the ways in which these strategies may be 'read' at the level of reception. In other words, multiple agencies are a crucial factor in the translatability of a film's address.

Cultural translatability

Transnationality implies border crossing — migrating — which necessitates translation. In the course of a migration, two or more cultures are brought up against each other requiring a process of translation of one culture to another. Ien Ang writes that '[m]igrants always inevitably undergo a process of cross-cultural translation when they move from one place to another, from one regime of language and culture to another' (2001: 4). In attempting to address the multiple agencies involved in the cultural analyses of cinema, I wish to address the notion of translation on different levels of the text: on the level of the dialogue and on the level of the film's narrative and stylistic strategies, as they bear on issues of translation across cultures, be they ethnic, social, political or film cultures. In particular, I am concerned with how the cultural translatability of a film may be written onto the body of the text, such as in its strategies of narration or modes of address, and their potential for engaging with the spectators' own previous viewing experiences and expectations; what Janet Harbord calls 'taste cultures' (2002: 14). As such, I make certain theoretical assumptions about the filmic text in accordance with Roland Barthes' classification of texts into texts of 'pleasure' (*plaisir*) and texts of 'bliss' (*jouissance*):

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes 1975b: 14)

All films, in my view, have the *potential* to act as Barthesian texts of *jouissance*, even if they are not always read as such. It is the level at which the reader engages the text that enables its function. In this regard, the most

‘euphoric’ and ‘comfortable’ Hollywood film may potentially engender the most discomfiting reading if the reader is willing to read beyond its aspects of *plaisir*. In that sense, all films, in my view, are ultimately ‘writerly’ (*scriptible*),³ and that it is the reader/spectator ‘who understands each word in its duplicity and who [...] hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him’ (Barthes 1977: 148). A text, Barthes goes on to say, ‘is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader’ (1977: 148). Yet this reader is not a personalised individual, nor even an idealised one, but ‘simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted’ (Barthes 1977: 148).⁴ Walter Benjamin expresses a similar view:

In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an ‘ideal’ receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener. (Benjamin 2000: 15)

Perhaps Gerald Prince’s notion of the ‘narratee’ may serve to articulate the role of the reader more clearly in this context. According to Prince, the ‘narratee’ is not the equivalent of the reader, whether ‘real, virtual, or ideal’ (1996: 192),

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3. The notion of the writerly text is introduced by Barthes in *S/Z*: ‘The writerly text is [...] ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages’ (1975a: 5).
 4. *Quelqu’un* in French may be translated as ‘someone’ as well as ‘anyone’ in English, thus conflating both notions of identity (‘someone’) and anonymity (‘anyone’) into a single concept.

but one who can ‘exercise a series of functions in a narrative’ (1996: 200). These functions include, constituting ‘a relay between the narrator and the reader,’ helping to ‘establish the narrative framework,’ serving ‘to characterise the narrator,’ emphasising ‘certain themes,’ contributing ‘to the development of the plot,’ becoming ‘the spokesman for the moral of the work’ (Prince 1996: 200). The narratee, for Prince, is as important in a text as the narrator; he argues: ‘Just as we study the narrator to evaluate the economy, the intentions, and the success of a narrative, so too we should examine the narratee in order to understand further and/or differently its mechanisms and significance’ (1996: 201). This concept of the viewing subject as narratee in film narratives is important because it acknowledges the subjectivity of looking without reducing it to mere relativism, where we simply agree to disagree and conclude that every individual looks and sees differently.

My discussion of the films of Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar-wai and Ang Lee will take off from this understanding of film texts and their readers/spectators and explore the ways in which the texts may function as texts of *jouissance* and *plaisir* under different conditions of distribution and reception. I apply not so much a theory of reception as a theory of *textuality*, in which what is to be read is the condition of the translatability (as an aspect of the writerly) embedded in the film texts, elements of which often also lie in the cracks and crevices that arise from the processes of translation and enunciation themselves. For example, one aspect of translation in cinema is the translation of the dialogue through the subtitles. However, these are only one aspect of translation in cinema, though the idea of subtitles, as Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour argue, ‘animates discussions of translation, otherness, presentation, national identities, and the tasks of cultural interpretation’ (2004: 25). In addition, they also note that, ‘[t]he presence of subtitles on a film screen might suggest that the only thing requiring translation is the words, as if images were somehow universally

intelligible. Visual economies, however, can be conditioned by regional or national particularity or even by the singularity of an artist's vision' (Egoyan and Balfour 2004: 26–27). It is these visual (and auditory) economies that I wish to address by locating the ways in which narrative strategies and modes of address operate within particular film cultures.

The notion of 'culture' may first be defined, as the *Collins* does, as

1. The total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action; 2. The total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group; 3. A particular civilization at a particular period; 4. The artistic and social pursuits, expression and tastes valued by a society or class, as in the arts manners, dress, etc.; 5. The enlightenment or refinement resulting from these pursuits; 6. The cultivation of plants or rearing of animals; 7. The experimental growth of bacteria for study.

There are two key concepts in these definitions. The first is fixed, the idea of a particular society or group; the other is the idea of growth, hitherto restricted to the study of plants and animals or bacteria (for example, in horti-*culture*). For my purposes, the latter is not necessarily irrelevant, as it serves to highlight the ways in which the two notions of society and growth may intersect, and interact, in the filmic sphere. In this sense, 'culture,' as Homi Bhabha puts it, 'is both transnational and translational':

It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement [... and] translational because such spatial histories of displacement — now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of 'global' media technologies — make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue. (Bhabha 1994: 172)

The signification of culture in film can occur on the narrative and formal levels, and how we approach culture in film can be determined by the film culture in which we participate, intentionally or not. The tension between the two — culture in film and film culture — underlies my argument, primarily in terms of

whether we can we address the presence or operation of ‘Chinese culture’ in film (with all its inconsistencies) without also addressing the film cultures through which the film is produced and received.

The notion of ‘film cultures’ as explored by Janet Harbord is located in ‘our putative tastes [...] derived from our position within what Bourdieu images spatially as a field, a matrix of relations structured by class, ethnic and national differences’ (2002: 2):

Yet, filmic taste is not simply an arbitrary projection of individual preferences onto a range of film texts. Films themselves, as they are circulated through different paths and networks, different institutional and discursive domains, are produced and presented as a range of aesthetic objects competing for status. (Harbord 2002: 2)

Harbord explores a range of sites and networks in her book. These sites and networks include differing sites of exhibition from the shopping centre multiplex to the arthouse cinema and gallery screenings (Harbord 2002: 39–58), as well as festival events which act not just as arbiters of cultural value, but also exert a considerable impact on local and national political economies (Harbord 2002: 59–75). Harbord also explores how tastes may be formed by marketing (2002: 76–92), as well as what she calls ‘postmodern praxes,’ by referring to the ways in which films in the era of late capitalism have had to engage with the increasing fragmentation, not just of the Grand Narrative in theoretical terms, but also with the fragmentation of markets and production entities, such as film studios (2002: 93–116). Harbord however is careful to stress that her approach is not simply a sociology of film production and reception. In her chapter on ‘Aesthetic encounters,’ she addresses the part that aesthetic practice plays in the formulation of cinematic taste cultures (2002: 118–37). She offers in her analysis ‘a different way of reading mimesis and presence’ from that mostly employed in film scholarship (2002: 123), and

draws on ‘Derrida’s reading of aesthetic taste as a culture of narcissism’ (2002: 125):

In Derrida’s essay [aesthetic taste] is the work of the hysterical narcissist, fearing the merging of categorization, the collapse of borders, repudiating everything that is not the same. Aesthetic engagement becomes a form of defence, either in attempting to transform difference into sameness, or expelling it from the self. Mimesis is the trope of self-identity, a process that validates the identical. (Harbord 2002: 126)

The repetition, or reiteration, involved in mimesis is dependent on the authority of the language in which it is articulated; at the same time, the ‘authority of language does not reside in its essential qualities or structural properties, but in its re-enactment; thus, the moment of the reproduction of linguistic authority is also the moment of its own potential misfiring’ (Harbord 2002: 127). In the case of film cultures, ‘the authority with which film narrates and animates a story is dependent on historic precedence, its past success in defining film as a cultural form, and its ability to continue to do so’ (Harbord 2002: 127). This authority is also contained in the rituals accompanying the watching of a film, although these are increasingly diversified with the advent of home videos, cable television and digitization. Traditionally, these rituals include the ‘seating arrangements [...], the theatrical curtain, the darkness of the auditorium, the appropriate responses of silence and laughter’ (Harbord 2002: 127). Along with the display of regulatory certification and studio logos, these enact the ‘performative gesture of authority’ (Harbord 2002: 128). In other words, the crux of Harbord’s argument is that the authority of mimesis in cinema, a cultural preference, emerges in part from the condition of its reception, whose linguistic authority is codified beyond simply the images on the screen. ‘Filmic representation,’ she argues, ‘is the replay of a language rather than a replay of the “real”’ (Harbord 2002: 128). Having laid out her argument so thoroughly Harbord’s admission of defeat at the conclusion of her chapter on aesthetic encounters is surprising, but one which I will attempt to recuperate. She writes:

Certainly, I would argue, aesthetic engagement with film can provide one of the potentially transformative features of culture, shifting perspective, denaturalizing time, confronting the viewer with differences. Yet it is not possible to state the conditions or contexts of this happening, nor to specify the textual form in advance. We can read the social value of certain aesthetic configurations in the form of genre, itself a shifting constellation; yet this does not allow a reading of the engagement between film and viewer that takes place. If the paths of filmic circulation and the contexts of viewing provide socially demarcated texts, the relationship between text and subject remains more obtuse, the fluidity within the model of structures, the possibility within the paradigm of constraint. (Harbord 2002: 135)

Whilst it may not be possible ‘to specify the textual form in advance,’ it is certainly possible to at least attempt to articulate the shifts that are taking place and their contexts, however tentative they might be. One of the ways I propose to attempt this articulation is through the issue of cultural translatability, the reading of which the ‘relationship between the text and subject’ may be potentially recuperated.

In exploring the issue of cultural translatability, it needs to be asked in the first instance what it is that is being translated. If ‘culture’ is indistinctly defined as a body of knowledge, a set of attitudes or a series of practices, the question of translating one or all of these elements appears to necessitate the identification of source and target texts. Traditionally, the act of translation is perceived as a transparent, invisible act, in which the identity of the translator tends to be effaced in favour of the work. This is affirmed in practical terms by international copyright law, where the translator retains rights over his translation, but not over the ‘original work’ of the ‘author.’ Translation is thus ordinarily seen as a second-order act, where although the translated text exists parallel to the source text, it occupies (by implication) an inferior status, as copy, imitation or derivation. The source text is essentially unchanged by the translation, and the translation is made to bear all the responsibility for reproducing the ‘authenticity’ of the source. However, as Peeter Torop argues,

culture itself ‘operates largely through translational activity, since only by the inclusion of new texts into culture can culture undergo innovation as well as perceive its specificity’ (2002: 593). In this sense, it is not one culture that is being translated into another, but that culture itself is the result of translations, or as Roland Barthes describes it, the text is ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture’ (1977: 146). Wai-lim Yip, bilingual poet, translator and comparative scholar, argues that ‘[t]ranslation is a “pass-port” between two cultures in which they face each other and through which they pass from one state to the other. It involves the confrontation, negotiation, and modification of cultural codes and systems. It requires a “double consciousness” that includes the state of mind of the author [...]’ (1993: 2). In this sense, translation is not a second-order act, coming after the original, but an act of creation in itself, and by extension, problematises the whole notion of an ‘original’ text. To paraphrase Barthes, there is no ‘theological’ origin to return to (1977: 146), in the ‘multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*’ (Barthes 1977: 147). With this notion (of culture as text, and of culture as writing), it becomes possible, then, when speaking of transnational cinema, to refute the notion of ‘diaspora’ and its predications of origin — there is no dispersal if there is not that which is to be dispersed. I am positing the notion of the transcultural⁵ and the transnational, not in terms of hybridities or *mulatto* identities, but in terms of independently actualised states of being.⁶

5. In this context, the term ‘transcultural’ refers to interactions between cultural subjectivities that may not necessarily be in line with national subjectivities.

6. These states are a lived reality, as Willis, Enloe and Minoura find in their study of pupils at an international school in Japan. They conclude that for the generation for whom the transnational and transcultural effects of globalisation are taken for granted, these individuals are ‘seen as adaptable, sensitive, skilled in listening, self-reliant, self-confident, with a strong sense of self-image, tolerant of others but with an awareness of their own multicultural identity’

Jacques Derrida addresses philosophically an example of such a state of being by means of his own subjectivity in his monograph, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (1996). As an Algerian Jew, once deprived of, then regaining French citizenship (Derrida 1998: 15–16), Derrida considers himself a ‘monolingual other’, and his relation with the French language is described thus: ‘I have only one language and it is not mine; my “own” language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other’ (Derrida 1998: 25). For Derrida, the ‘origin’ is ‘prosthetic’ insofar as it serves merely to reflect on the otherness of the ‘other,’ the sentiment of whose experience the term ‘alienation’ does not quite express:

This abiding alienation [*aliénation à demeure*] appears like ‘lack,’ to be constitutive. But it is neither a lack nor an alienation; it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it, it alienates no *ipseity* [selfhood], no property, and no self that has ever been able to represent its watchful eye. Although this injunction issues summons, lastingly [*mette en demeure à demeure*], nothing else ‘is there’ ever to watch over its past or future. This structure of alienation without alienation, this inalienable alienation, is not only the origin of our responsibility, it also structures the peculiarity [*le propre*] and property of language. It institutes the *phenomenon* of hearing-oneself-speak in order to mean-to-say [*pour vouloir dire*]. (Derrida 1998: 25)

Such an articulation of subjectivity as ultimately unstable poses questions for translatability, which Derrida acknowledges. On the one hand, he argues, ‘[n]othing is untranslatable, however little time is given to the expenditure or expansion of a competent discourse that measures itself against the power of the original’ (Derrida 1998: 56). On the other hand, he adds, ‘the “untranslatable” remains [...] the poetic economy of the idiom’ (Derrida 1998: 56). For ‘everything’ to be translatable, this economy must be ‘renounced’ (Derrida 1998: 56). Expressed differently, whether something is translatable or

not depends upon the choices determined by priorities of *value* that the translator must make.

My use of the term *cultural translatability* thus points to, rather than resolves, this conundrum, giving credence to, as Walter Benjamin put it, ‘the law governing the translation’ (2000: 16). Benjamin explains translatability as such: ‘Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability’ (2000: 16). What this ‘significance’ of the original might be is problematised if the original is itself understood to be polyvalent:

There it is a matter of showing that in cognition there could be no objectivity, not even a claim to it, if it dealt with images of reality; here it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife — which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living — the original undergoes a change. (Benjamin 2000: 17)

The cultural translatability of cinematic texts arises out of a complex matrix of textual and contextual functions. In the course of this thesis, I shall attempt to articulate the complexity of that matrix through the address of *film cultures*, as defined by Janet Harbord, and which I reiterate as the cultures of the medium, of its aesthetics, its modes of presentation and address that have developed over its histories, and the cultures of reading that have developed out of those histories. To that degree, I am concerned mainly with an ‘intersemiotic translation or transmutation that means interpretation of the signs of a sign system with the signs of another sign system’ (Torop 2002: 595–96). Beyond acknowledging the importance of a Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony in the text, issues of cultural translatability in cinema involves, not just semiosis, but also, ‘intersemiosis’ (Torop 2002: 602), that is, reading not just within one system of meaning-making but across systems, and thus, regions and nations.

It is in this spirit that I invoke Rajeev Patke's conceptualisation of diaspora, writing and translation:

[...] all imaginative writing partakes of the diasporic, even when the writer is not diasporic; [...] and] all diasporic experience partakes of the writerly, even when the diasporic is not a writer. Speaking figuratively, all writers translate, and so do all diasporics. My conflation of diaspora and writing in the metaphor of translation is based on a profoundly simple commonality: all writing is committed to the task of preserving, transmitting and recuperating meanings that are continually threatened by dispersal. In that sense writing is a form of witness against change and evanescence. Likewise, diasporic experience forces individuals and groups to recuperate value through a translation of geographical displacement into a sense of relocated being. (Patke 2005: 111–12)

Even though he is originally writing of South-east Asian poetry in English, the processes are not altogether incompatible if film-making is regarded as a form of 'writing'; indeed, film-making has been described as 'writing with light' (see Storaro 2002). The task of a comparative film studies is to arrive at the formulation of a framework in which diverse systems of meaning-making from different historical trajectories may be productively and accurately compared. The exploration of the notion of cultural translatability in transnational cinemas is a step towards this goal.

Comparative poetics

The term 'poetics' is understood to refer to the study of literary discourse, and to poetry; its roots lie in Aristotle's *Poetics* to which David Bordwell's historical poetics pays direct homage (1989a: 371). '[T]he poetics of translation' may be understood as 'the inventory of genres, themes and literary devices that comprise any literary system' (Gentzler 1998: 167). Furthermore:

In translation studies, the term also refers to the role a literary system plays within the larger social system and/or how it interacts with other (foreign) literary or semiotic sign systems. As a comparative field, the poetics of translation is concerned with the relationship between the

poetics of a source text in its own literary system and that of the target text in a different system. (Gentzler 1998: 167)

A poetics, therefore, refers to the structure that organises a system of meaning-making such as literature (and by extension, narrative film-making). Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov refer to the term ‘poetics’ as such:

Poetics [...] proposes to elaborate categories that allow us to grasp simultaneously the unity and the variety of literary works. The individual work will illustrate these categories; its status will be that of example, not of ultimate end. For example, poetics will be called upon to elaborate a theory of description that will bring to light not only what all descriptions have in common but also what permits them to remain different; but it will not be asked to account for particular descriptions in a given text. Poetics will then be capable of defining a conjunction of categories of which we know of no instance *at the moment*. In this sense, the object of poetics is constituted more by potential works than by existing ones. (Ducrot and Todorov 1981: 79)

According to Ducrot and Todorov, because poetics is a theoretical framework, it is necessarily ahistorical, or transhistorical; it seeks to be applicable to all modes of literature (and thus may be also applied to other forms of ‘writing’), across time and place. However, a distinction needs to be made between the ahistoricity of theoretical concepts, and the historicity of their application. Edward Said’s term for that which enables theory to transcend its place and time is ‘critical consciousness’:

I am arguing [...] that we distinguish theory from critical consciousness by saying that the latter is a sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating or situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the place and the time out of which it emerges as part of that time, working in and for it, responding to it; then, consequently, that first place can be measured against subsequent places where the theory turns up for use. The critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. And above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict. (Said 1991: 241–42)

A poetics of cinema must thus aim to provide a framework for reading cinematic texts and for understanding the readings of those texts as part of a

larger matrix of forces governing its cultural production. Such a poetics seeks not to interpret signs in film but to address the conditions for which those signs may be read in one way or another. In this respect, my vision of a comparative poetics differs somewhat from David Bordwell's historical poetics, although it owes a debt to Bordwell's programme of painstaking textual scrutiny.

The addition of 'historical' as a qualifier to 'poetics' allows Bordwell, in his view, to avoid 'the province of sterile taxonomies and dogmatic prescriptions' (1989a: 371) which he believes has dogged the poetics of literature. Bordwell's historical poetics is 'characterized by the phenomena it studies — films' constructional principles and effects — and the questions it asks about those phenomena — their constitution, functions, consequences, and historical manifestations' (1989a: 371). By his own admission, '[p]oetics does not put at the forefront of its activities phenomena such as the economic patterns of film distribution, the growth of the teenage audience, or the ideology of private property' (1989a: 371). Bordwell's theory, or practice (for he eschews the term 'theory'), is to construct a common method of reading films, which he calls 'poetics,' out of a vast range of individual examples. In contrast, Ducrot and Todorov's understanding of poetics is precisely that it cannot be reduced to individual examples and must stand as a study of structural frameworks rather than individual texts:

[Poetics] proposes the elaboration of instruments permitting the analyses of these works [of literature]. Its object is not the set of existing literary works, but literary discourse itself as *the generative principle of an infinite number of texts*. Poetics is thus a theoretical discipline nourished and fertilized by empirical research but not constituted by it. (Ducrot and Todorov 1981: 79, my emphasis)

It is with Ducrot and Todorov's understanding of poetics that I approach my object of study.

In attempting to address the poetical aspects of filmic discourse, I aim not to suppress questions of socio-economic phenomena, but to engage them within the formulation of its comparative framework, as it is my contention that the discourse cannot in fact be separated from its socio-economic milieu. By definition, a cross-cultural comparison predicates differences in cultural practice and world view; the issue at hand is not so much how these differences are defined, but the terms by which the cultures and practices are compared. It is by defining the terms of comparison that the latter are defined. The first task of a comparative poetics of cross-cultural cinema, therefore, is to address what the terms of comparison might be. There is, paradoxically, no immediate consensus on what is to be compared. However, given the complexities of definition I have introduced, it is uncertain if such a consensus is attainable, or even desirable, if it is not to become another rigid example of institutional gate-keeping. Nevertheless, precisely because of the historical complexity of terms such as 'transnational,' 'translation,' 'culture,' 'diaspora,' 'ethnicity,' and so on, as I have argued above, a comparative poetics should, in the first instance, take into account questions of multiple agencies and historical trajectories when conducting the analyses of cinematic strategies of narrative and style.

In order to clarify some of the issues at stake in a comparative studies of cinema, this thesis will take off from Paul Willemen's 'For a comparative film studies' (2005). In the essay, Willemen argues for the necessity of circumventing the 'blind spots' in the film theory in the UK, as it was formulated in journals such as *Screen* in the 1970s and 1980s through the study of, primarily, US films, and from the mid-1980s, institutionalised as an academic discipline in UK and US universities, especially when that theory encounters films produced under economic and social circumstances different

from those at work in the US at any given time.⁷ In Willemen's view, a truly comparative film studies would have to address film through a culture's encounter with capitalism. Indeed, cultural formations are influenced by and relate to capitalism in different ways, because capitalism, a process, intervenes in these formations by acting on historical material that is marked as culturally 'different.' Historical accounts of the development of Hollywood provide descriptions of the distinctive factors that gave rise to the unique development of the industry, ranging from early twentieth-century immigrant culture in America to the economics and politics that drove industry players from New York to California. Non-American 'national' cinemas are, by contrast, seen almost exclusively as ambassadors of their own 'culture' first, and as capitalist-industrial products second. Yet, that these films are indeed capitalist-industrial products is not in doubt, for how else would their culture/s be able to circulate across, be sold to the rest of the world, and be, quite literally, *translated* (from the Latin, *translātus*, meaning carried over, or brought across), were it not because of the greater circulation of commodities that characterises industrialisation and capitalism? Benzi Zhang, in writing about the rise of the Fifth Generation films in the international market has described these films as 'self-translatable and self-marketable user-friendly products,' as 'Chinese film can no longer be made by itself, for itself, and of itself; in other words, film is often produced in the context of international film trends and in response to the demands of the world market' (2000b: 167).

7. John Mowitt writes of the 'schism that developed within the editorial board of Screen' in 1975, as a result of the conflict that ensued over a decision to publish a translation of Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*. Those who objected to Metz's application of psychoanalytical theory to film argued that 'such theory threatened to undermine the educational commitment of the journal' (Mowitt 2005: 4).

However, this self-translatability and self-marketability is not a magical formula the filmmakers have suddenly struck upon. A filmmaker almost always depends on an already-schooled audience; and this schooling is not confined to linguistic fluency and cultural knowledge alone.⁸ As I will discuss in the following chapters, for Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar-wai, and Ang Lee, the effort at translatability is exercised in different ways: balancing at different moments the demands (and desires) of artistic and cultural ‘authenticity,’ the changing expectations of local and international audiences, the material limits of industrial production, and the inscribing of those expectations (socially and culturally specific) onto the film text at the level of production and within its (equally specific) industrial limits. Benzi Zhang describes the Fifth Generation Chinese films as caught between ‘two modes of ideological signification — the West and the Chinese’ (2000b: 167), resulting in a kind of ‘deterritorialized’ ethnicity ‘translated into the medium of globally-sensible visibility’ (2000b: 170); whether this form of ethnicity is ultimately ‘deterritorialized’ depends on the question of whether ethnicity is to be defined by territory alone. Rather, what is interesting in these transnational cinemas are the ways in which they call into question the validity of territorial boundaries as a theoretical, and historiographical parameters in the first place.

Willemsen’s solution for a more productive comparative approach is to consider a film at the intersection between globalising capitalism and national histories. At the intersection is where national specificities lie. So, he argues:

if we also refuse to credit the nationalist mystifications invoking ‘blood and soil’ to explain why it is possible — even necessary — to differentiate between one state’s industrial production of cultural

8. Hong Kong filmmaker Peter Chan notes in an interview that linguistic barriers are not sufficient to explain the translatability of films across cultural boundaries, as in spite of the fact that ‘not everyone reads and speaks English in Asia,’ ‘Hollywood films control 80% of the market share’ there (Pao 2002).

commodities and that of another, it becomes possible to reflect on the ways in which the encounter between 'national' histories and the capitalist-industrial production of culture intersect, generating specific ways of 'discoursing.' (Willemsen 2005: 168)

These specific ways of 'discoursing' include specific ways of employing narrative forms (that is, specific modes of address), and thus specific ways of making films. Although there is no such thing as a purely 'French' or 'Chinese' film, cultural and national markers are nevertheless regularly invoked as markers of identity. Though these claims are sometimes made emotionally, to ignore them would be to negate the role they play in the way identity itself is perceived or constituted through a film's mode of address. However emotional or banal it might seem, the national and cultural pride in Peter Pau's acceptance speech at the Academy Awards for Best Cinematography for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* must be accounted for: 'It's great for me, the people of Hong Kong and for Chinese people all over the world' (my emphasis). While 'blood and soil' as plausible explanations for a film's cultural construction may be reductive, that they are invoked is nonetheless revealing about the various ways in which cultural products address individuals as inhabiting a particular cultural, social and political formation. As Pau's statement indicates, rather than remaining static, a film's address inevitably offers a dynamic, and often contradictory, identity that is dependent on a multiplicity of contexts. Pau's 'Chineseness,' like Ien Ang's, morphs depending on where he is, and who he is speaking to. These unstable national/cultural identities can be further broken down where the context dictates: Zhang Yimou may be said to be from the northern province of Shaanxi; Ang Lee may be said to be Taiwanese-American; and Wong Kar-wai to be a Hong Konger of Shanghaiese origin. However, a more productive way of conceptualising this instability of national identity markers is by recourse to the notion of subjectivity. Vitali and Willemsen prefer the plural —

subjectivities — in order to encapsulate the plurality of issues and histories they address:

Which historical models are then most apt to grasp the dynamics that shape a cultural practice such as cinema in diverse historical constellations? Which forms has cultural industrialisation taken in these areas? Which forms does modernisation take, understood in terms of the emergence of a public sphere? And, following from these issues: how do diverse societies differentiate between identity, a function of public administration, and subjectivity? Finally: how are *subjectivities* — the cluster of positions put into place by discursive processes and institutional pressures — effected through historically specific cinematic narrative models? (Vitali and Willemsen 2006: 7, my emphasis)

The notion of individual subjectivity, which incorporates the private sphere along with the more publicly determined notion of ‘identity,’ would have to account for cultural and historical influences, including the encounter with industrialisation. This subjectivity is ultimately unstable and contingent not only on past events, but ongoing ones. Willemsen asserts, ‘[w]hat is unstable is then not the compromise between local material and foreign form, but between local material and the transformative power and impact of industrialization itself, which is never simply “foreign”’ (2002: 103). This is true of the transnationality of Zhang, Wong and Lee’s films on even the most mundane of levels. Aside from their cultural subjectivities, they are each located within specific positions in the industry: Lee is a filmmaker based in New York, initially outside the purview of Hollywood, but rapidly gaining mainstream credibility with a string of successes; Zhang was once apparently located outside of, but now within, the Chinese establishment; and Wong is located both within and outside of the Hong Kong mainstream film industry at the same time. All three are simultaneously located inside and outside the festival and multiplex circuits as well. This aspect of a film’s (as opposed to its director’s) subjectivity is rarely discussed: in other words, whom does it address? Whilst marketing divisions of distribution companies are undoubtedly armed with data on consumer preferences and box-office receipts, theoretical

studies of the imagined spectator, Gerald Prince's 'narratee,' or what Stephen Heath calls 'the subject-reflection' are less prevalent:

The subject-reflection is a narrative effect (or series of effects): in the movement of the chain of differences — the flow of multiple intensities of image and sound — the narrative defines terms for the movement of the chain, specifies relations and reflects a subject as the direction of those relations, produces the coherence of the view and the viewer. (Heath 1981: 116)

The attempt to conceptualise and historicise the 'narratee' or the 'subject-reflection' in a film is important for the formulation of a comparative poetics insofar as it impacts most directly on questions of translatability: How does the narratee relay information and meaning to the spectator, and in the process constructing it as a national or transnational subject? This question is important not merely in the abstract realm of theory. So far, the bulk of English-language scholarship on the subject has been to frame this question in terms of the encounter of films other than American or European with the dominant 'Western' discourse. Yet, the question of what exactly constitutes 'Western discourse' is rarely specified. It is as if in order to plot the dynamic processes on one end of the cultural spectrum ('Chinese culture'), it becomes necessary to force the other end ('Western culture') into a point of stability, which the latter is not at all obliged to sustain. A new language is needed to unpack this tautology, a language or a framework, a poetics, capable of raising and possibly answering questions such as what kinds of translations take place between what are ostensibly dominant discursive encounters, such as that between Britain and America? How is *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) 'translated' by audiences in America, in London, or indeed, in Scotland? What happens in the encounter between two 'marginal' film discourses, such as that between Nigeria and Mexico, for example? The term 'postcolonial' can no longer accurately encapsulate such encounters. Patke cites Anne McClintock, who 'worried that the term [postcolonial] "reduces the cultures of peoples

beyond colonialism to prepositional time”, that it ‘signals a reluctance to surrender the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and ahistorical abstraction’, and that “Political differences *between* cultures are thereby subordinated to the temporal distance *from* European colonialism” (Patke 2006: 371). More generally, a new way of conceptualising these relations outside of the centre/margin dialectic has to be developed in order that our experiences of cultures do not become reduced to what Rey Chow describes as being akin to ‘switching channels’: ‘As we keep switching channels and browsing through different “local” cultures, we produce an infinite number of “natives,” all with predictably automaton-like features that do not so much de-universalize Western hegemony as they confirm its protean capacity for infinite displacement’ (1993: 46).

If translation activity is to be useful in the comparative paradigm, its ideological role cannot be neglected. Timothy Brennan explores the ‘ideological politics underlying translation’ (2001: 44), in which he notes the general imbalance in knowledge between the dominant and marginal discursive communities: ‘The imbalance in historical learning means that the citizens of Indonesia or the Caribbean nations know much more about Europe than Europeans generally know about Indonesia or the Caribbean’ (2001: 52). This is not to say that no translation takes place. However, these interactions tend to be confined to two scenarios (in the English-speaking world): the first is that of non-European intellectuals writing of their own culture in a European language; and the second, European intellectuals engaging in anthropological studies of non-European cultures, most likely with a fluent knowledge of the local vernacular, but publishing their findings mainly in a European language. Brennan casts a sceptical eye on the politics of these activities, discussing the transformative effect Cold War politics has had on the role of translation in the creation of ‘area studies’ programmes designed originally with the intention of

understanding the ‘enemy’ better. He goes as far as to say that translation may not simply foster communication but may in fact be mobilised to impede it: ‘acts of translation do not always seek ways to communicate more accurately, but instead to mistranslate meaning subversively in order to ensure an incommunicability that can then, retrospectively, be posited as a linguistic or cultural law of separation’ (Brennan 2001: 53). Thus, he is cautious about the sense of liberation that is usually expressed in postcolonial arguments of the empire finally striking, or writing, back:

The danger in such postcolonial theory is that, while it refuses to claim any epistemological authenticity for race or ethnicity, it allies itself with a Western political culture even as Western audiences grant the critic authority for being from a foreign place. One is not so sure that these methods successfully deconstruct the ‘myth of origins’ or show origins to be nostalgic so much as they efface the original; and once effaced, there is no outer tribunal to compare China against the West’s ‘translation’ of it. (Brennan 2001: 54)

A comparative film studies must at least try to locate that ‘outer tribunal’ within the debate to avoid the pitfalls of the old dialectic. Nevertheless, this third-party position will be difficult to locate clearly as the realities of mass market capitalism dominated by Anglo-European economies dictate that the world is no longer, if it has ever been, separated into distinct cultural territories — the narrative of ‘globalisation.’

Thus, the notion of an ‘authentic’ translation becomes impossible to conceive of, especially when this mass translation may now return to the originating culture as a reflection of what it is supposed to be — a sort of ‘double migration.’ Whether that ‘originating’ culture, if there is such a thing, recognises what it sees is another question. As Brennan notes, there is the need to consider the ‘networks of conditioning and expectation within which translation operates’ (2001: 58), and he is keen to stress in particular the international role of English in this development:

‘English’ refers to much more than a vernacular language: we are speaking about a North American cultural industry that has built upon an earlier British educational industry in a setting of empire whose current victorious dissemination is inseparable from an America that ‘won’ the Cold War. (Brennan 2001: 58)

A comparative poetics of cinema must thus look to contextual contingencies if it is not to be reduced to a listing of differences between films. At the same time, it must cast an equally critical eye, informed, as Said would have it, by a ‘critical consciousness’ over what constitutes these contextual contingencies and how they may have come to emerge from a particular historical discourse as well.

Concluding remarks

Many of the concerns raised in this introduction will be addressed via the textual analyses of the films, in terms of the narrative structure, characterisation as well as visual and aural presentations. Access to film as cultural text is not dependent on dialogue alone and the question facing comparative cinema is: how do we read what we do not (cannot?) understand? A point of entry into the question is through the film’s mode of address. Although this can be difficult to define in abstract, I shall attempt to do so by addressing issues of cultural capital and literacy on the part of the reader/spectator. The structure of the thesis is as follows: Chapter One deals with the issues surrounding the reading of culture in film, and Chapters Two to Four are devoted to the films of Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar-wai and Ang Lee respectively, the analyses of which illustrate how the concerns I raise form a fundamental dimension of these films, constituting them as instances of Chinese transnational cinemas within an international context. A brief note must be made here about the historical period in which the films are to be confined. Each director’s contribution to the history and discourse of cinema

will be considered within roughly the decade of 1991 to 2002, beginning with the introduction of the Fifth Generation films into US and European film markets and ending with the beginning of a new kind of commercialism in Chinese-language cinemas, the conditions of which are still evolving at the time of this writing.⁹ This new commercialism has, to my mind, encouraged the explosion of epic, pan-Asian blockbusters like Chen Kaige's *The Promise* and Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*. As these new pan-Asian collaborations¹⁰ appear to reflect a new cycle of cinematic evolution in the 'Chinese' context, taking advantage of, for instance, the new popularity of the 'Korean Wave' in Asia,¹¹ it is too premature for me to reflect on their implications at the present time, though the cycle's current momentum may be seen in the light of the histories I shall be discussing.¹²

I have relied primarily on English language sources, and whilst this is partly to do with my limited knowledge of the Chinese language, its systems of

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9. See, for instance, Ying Zhu's article on 'Commercialization and Chinese Cinema's Post-wave' (2002); and Yomi Braester's 'Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement' (2005).
 10. Filmmaker Peter Chan speaks in 2002 of the 'pan-Asian film [...] as a business proposition': '[...] Asia can really be seen as a single domestic market [...] — the total population is around 300 million, which is even bigger than the US domestic market.' This might be achieved, it is suggested, with Hong Kong functioning as a centre working 'to connect local industries to the rest of Asia': 'We're much more used to working with people from different countries, and Hong Kong people are very open-minded. So Hong Kong will play an important part in the deal-making aspect of pan-Asian cinema [...]' (Pao 2002).
 11. Yingjin Zhang describes briefly the state of Chinese cinema post-*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as 'a new age of transnational Chinese cinema,' in which 'it has become fashionable to mix stars from all three Chinas as well as from foreign countries, in part to generate audience interest but also to facilitate transnational packaging' (2004: 260).
 12. On 6 August 2007, the Weinstein Co. confirmed a US\$285 million fund 'to fully finance the development, production, acquisition, marketing and distribution of a large slate of Asian-themed films over the next six years' (Hayes 2007).

knowledge classification, as well as the difficulty of obtaining Chinese language material from where I am based, this ostensible ‘lack’ simultaneously highlights the very question this thesis seeks to address, namely, the question of translatability of cultural forms, whether as films or cultural theories on cinema. Many of the ideas that shape this thesis are refracted through the prism of my own subjectivity as a ‘transcultural’ individual, an example of the ‘monolingual other’ that Derrida addresses, as a Chinese Singaporean who grew up with an English education. At the heart of this transcultural position, and thus of this thesis, is not to aim for an ‘authentic’ Chinese point of view, but rather to aim for a point of view that would allow a better, non-essentialist understanding of what it may mean to be ‘Chinese’ today, in the age of globalisation. I explore this question by means of an examination of the global circulation of films, in the ‘Chineseness’ of which is already inscribed a sense of movement well beyond the political boundaries of the Chinese nation/s. The thesis is thus concerned less with how audiences in China may have perceived the films, but more with how a perception of China is projected from the films to audiences in ‘Western’ and ‘Westernised’ cultural centres. Many of these are urban metropolises, from Singapore to New York, which tend to be exposed to the proliferation of the same global media, in the form of television reviews programmes, internet websites, newspapers and magazines. Readers of these media, many bound together by English, may not have any fluency in Chinese nor have access to Chinese language sources to form an opinion of the cultural systems presented in the films, yet their cultural impact is no less significant than that of Chinese ‘native informants.’ Bhabha refers to the ‘cultural globality’ which is ‘figured in the *in-between* spaces of double-frames: its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentred “subject” signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionality of the “present”’ (1994: 216). This is a space of

‘discontinuous historical realities,’ which is dramatised by ‘the problem of signifying the interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the “in-between”, in the temporal break-up that weaves the “global” text,’ a ‘disintegrative moment, even movement, of enunciation’ (Bhabha 1994: 217):

This space of the translation of cultural difference *at the interstices* is infused with that Benjaminian temporality of the present which makes graphic a moment of transition, not merely the continuum of history; it is a strange stillness that defines the present in which the very *writing* of historical transformation becomes uncannily visible. The migrant culture of the ‘in-between,’ the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslatability; and in so doing, it moves the question of culture’s appropriation beyond the assimilationist’s dream, or the racist’s nightmare, of a ‘full transmissal of subject-matter,’ and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture’s difference. (1994: 224)

In attempting to give voice to the interstitial inherent in cultural readings, my analyses will be accompanied invariably by anecdotal observations, both mine and others’, in the form of personal experiences, newspaper columns and reviews, and even the occasional ‘blog,’ or ‘web log.’ Like Ien Ang, Laila Farah finds it necessary to enter the ‘discussion of diasporic subjectivity, through [her] lived experience,’ mainly as a strategy to avoid the reductive nature of normative representation (2005: 316–17); similarly Hamid Naficy offers up his own autobiography and childhood memories of going to the movies as a case to explore film spectatorship in Iran (see Naficy 1996: 3–26). In the case of film studies, especially with regard to cinemas from outside the US and Europe, these personal insights can appear to stand in for more ‘objective’ scholarship. Yet, these informal voices are necessary to reflect on ‘how cinema functions in the world’ in a way that continues to elude a classic ‘scholarly’ or ‘academic’ theoretical template (Macdonald 2002: 204), a template that was developed precisely on the personal exposure of scholars to a diet of, primarily, if not exclusively, European and American films. The

difference lies in the different degrees to which these equally personal, that is to say, equally (but differently) historically specific experiences of ‘watching films’ (and which films) have been institutionalised. In some ways, these attempts to come to terms with what is (un)familiar to the subject illustrates Stanley Corngold’s reflection on George Steiner’s work in *After Babel* (1975), in which ‘translatability’ is addressed as ‘the enabling feature of cultural communication’ (2005: 140). For Steiner, Corngold notes, ‘the “far remote” character of translation lies less in its literal distance from human affairs than in the inscrutable ubiquity of its embeddness: *it cannot be directly identified because it always already indwells each attempt to understand it*’ (2005: 140, my emphasis). Of course, whilst they work in tandem with, these voices do not substitute for, more sustained empirical research. While such research remains outside the scope of this thesis, and will be reserved for future work, the utility of these personal insights and voices lies in the directions they may open up for future exploration.

This thesis is not about historical movements in Chinese cinemas *per se*, nor about ‘Chinese cinemas’ as such. Rather, in locating the work of three filmmakers in the contexts of their social and historical environments, my objective is to identify the cultural boundaries they seek to navigate. In order to do so, this thesis straddles across the three terms of a complex relationship — of self, culture and history — a relationship which constitutes the stuff of cinema, its capacity to address audiences, and ultimately to communicate across national borders. The first step in this line of inquiry is the formulation of a poetics of cinema capable of translating critically the liminality of that experience.

CHAPTER ONE

CULTURE IN FILM / FILM CULTURE

That cinema is a cross-cultural phenomenon is not restricted to the late twentieth-century and the age of globalisation. During the silent era, intertitles were translated into the language of the target audiences; when sound technology became available, dialogue was either dubbed or subtitled, as Egoyan and Balfour note, though specifically of US and European film history:

The subtitle was actually introduced as early as 1907, that is to say, still in the era of intertitles, but it did not really come into its own until the age of the talkies and their international distribution. The era of the modern subtitle was ushered in with the screening of *The Jazz Singer* in Paris in 1929, two years after its American release. Subtitles were quickly recognized by discriminating viewers as the most accurate way of preserving the director's and screenwriter's dramatic intentions. Technical or material constraints made subtitles, in the early days, labour-intensive and not all that cost effective, though still only a fraction of the expense of dubbing. Over the course of its development, the process of subtitling has evolved from mechanical etching on the frame to chemical, laser, or optical burning. The technical advances have been uneven but relatively swift. In our time we have reached, at long last, a moment in which subtitles can now be programmed in the privacy of a filmmaker's home computer. Moreover, films can now be easily distributed with subtitles in multiple languages or even with multiple versions of subtitles in one language. (Egoyan and Balfour 2004: 22, 25)

Cultural translation in film is, however, not limited to linguistic translation. Since its inception, filmmakers have also attempted to employ the medium in a way that not only best translates its intention, but also (consciously or not) reflects the particular cultural tradition from which it came. In its early years, '[t]he American cinema, with its emphasis on individuated characters, came to depend on "close shots" of faces [...] and a continuity system of eyeline matches and shot/reverse-shots,' and 'European cinemas, by contrast, advanced a different mode of representation characterised by "deep staging",' which gave rise to an 'alternative model of continuity editing [...] characterised

by relatively consistent 90° and 180° changes in camera position' (Abel 1999: 96). Conditions of exhibition (screening venues, available technologies, and so on) also determined how films were received by audiences, whether in the form of music halls, fairgrounds, picture palaces or multiplexes (Abel 1999: 96). Audiences in turn translate these films into what Abel calls a certain 'use value' for themselves (Abel 1999: 97), a use value which may include emotional gratification experienced as a form of pleasure.

My point here is that although culture is at work in film, the question of what is translated, and how, necessarily leads to the question of what the translation apparatus might consist of. There is, for example, the filmmaker's translation of ideas into story, script, visuals, dialogue and so on; or the audiences' translation of the filmmaker's translation into their own perceptions of the form and content of the film; there is also the marketing departments' translation of the form and content of the film into what they think audiences might want and expect, which would determine the form and content of the publicity materials, and over a longer period of time, of other films. Furthermore, there are the socio-political dimensions of translation activity. As Paul Willemen notes:

[i]n terms of the cinema, a wave of translations is better envisaged as the international distribution and exhibition of (mostly American) films, dubbed or subtitled. Like translations, this circulation of films in altered forms of expression adapted to 'local' conditions is often supported and subsidized by national governments seeking to derive prestige and profits from the export of the products of their cultural industries (or their industrialized cultures). In that respect, film distribution and exhibition confirm Pascale Casanova's view that nation states transform a selected range of cultural materials into nationally branded product-lines which are then competitively marketed abroad. (Willemen 2005: 168)

If the meaning of 'translation' is understood in this sense, the least one can say is that the levels at which translations take place are multifarious and layered.

There are two main approaches to reading culture in film. One approach is to read *through* the medium, that is, as if the medium were a transparent transmitter of cultural information. Janet Staiger notes that '[s]ome scholars assume communication is neutral — the transmittal of messages that may or may not hold ideological content' (2002: 60). The other is to read *via* the medium, that is, with the acknowledgement that the way the medium structures and presents cultural information is itself informed by a particular ideological perspective (2002: 60-64). The two positions are not always mutually exclusive, though it would depend on the assumptions a critic makes about the task of his critical apparatus. I would like to look at three main areas of film study here that pertain to my search for a comparative poetics of cinema able to account for cultural translations. These are, firstly, the neo-formalist approach led by David Bordwell's 'historical poetics'; secondly, the identity-based approach; and thirdly, the neo-marxist approach led by the editors of the British journal, *Framework*, in the 1970s and 80s, and by Paul Willemen in particular. Within the last, I also include proponents of the theory of Third Cinema. The triangulation of these three approaches does not insist that they are necessarily mutually exclusive, that is to say, that one method of reading is excluded by or from the other. Rather, I would like to suggest, the triangulation points to a relationship that is perhaps more fraternal than either party would care to admit. I am aware that are other approaches to consider — such as reception theories and spectator studies — but these are beyond the scope of my argument, which remains, in Janet Staiger's terms, 'text-activated' (2002: 48) to a large degree, even as it aims for concerns which are also context-based.

Historical Poetics

David Bordwell's historical poetics developed in the 1980s as a response to the overdetermination of what he refers to as the 'Grand Theory' of the 1960s and 1970s. He is suspicious of its universalising tendency:

In the academic setting of the 1970s, and with the crucial influence of French Structuralism and Poststructuralism, film theory became Theory. Here was a comprehensive account of representation in which film took its place as one signifying system among many. Unlike classical film theory, Grand Theory constituted a large-scale account of how signifying systems constructed subjectivity within society. (Bordwell 1997: 140)

Bordwell argues that this development invited a revisionist version of film history, in which film scholars looked back on the canon through theory. He outlines his historical poetics painstakingly in a number of essays, such as 'Historical Poetics of Cinema' (1989), and a number of books, such as *Making Meaning* (1989), and puts his method into active practice in several volumes, including *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), *Film Art* (co-written with Kristin Thompson, 1990), and the *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (co-written with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, 1985).

Timothy White sums up the methods of historical poetics as looking primarily at 'thematics,' 'constructional form,' and 'stylistics':

At its most basic, historical poetics asks the following questions of a film, an aspect of film, a film genre, a national cinema, et al.: What is it? And how did it get that way? And, importantly, it is descriptive, not prescriptive.

More specifically, historical poetics looks at the ways in which aspects of theme, form and style have been used in different ways at different times for different reasons. It assumes that different options have been available (or forbidden) in various cinemas at various times in history. Some options are considered standard, or norms (for example, continuity editing in the classical Hollywood cinema). Some options are available and are used, but are not standard [...]. Some options are known, but are not available because they are avoided or forbidden by common consent

[...]. Finally, other options are not available because they are not known or are not feasible [...].

What is interesting about film, or about any art form, according to poetics, is the ways in which these options, or parameters, are used. Are they 'stretched' by some artists? Do some artists use the parameters in more interesting or unique ways than others? What are the parameters of a particular cinema at a particular time? How and why do these parameters change? (White 1996)

In this sense, historical poetics aims to return to the formalism of classical film theory, except with a more historical dimension. For this reason, the approach has also been referred to as 'neo-formalism' (see Ray 2001: 29–63). In Bordwell's own words,

A historical poetics can fruitfully start with the assumption that no a priori device or set of meanings can serve as the basis of an invariable critical method. (For this reason, Kristin Thompson has called the 'neo-formalist' poetics an 'approach' that can utilize different 'methods.')

To make all films mean the same things by applying the same critical procedures is to ignore the rich variety of film history. In a given film, any item may bear an abstract meaning; or it may bear none. It is all a matter of conceptual scheme, intrinsic context, and historical norms. (Bordwell 1989b: 267)

Classical film theory is primarily concerned with the ontology and epistemology of the medium — what is film and how do we understand it? Dudley Andrew in his introduction to the major film theories writes of the classical period as lasting from about 1915 to 1935, a short but intense period of time within which thinking about film was to become highly refined and consolidated. It was also a period of high intellectual fermentation and experiment with film form, and several film theorists were themselves practitioners. Some of the major theorists in the formalist tradition are Hugo Munsterberg, Rudolf Arnheim and Sergei Eisenstein. Munsterberg, writing in 1916, equates human psychological processes directly with film form. Andrew describes Munsterberg's contribution as follows:

Besides the basic quality of motion, he [Munsterberg] notes that close-ups and camera angles exist not simply because of the lenses and cameras

which make them technically feasible, but because of the mind's very way of working, which he labels 'attention.' Not only does the mind live in a moving world, it organizes the world by means of this property of attention. In the same way the motion picture is not a mere record of motion, but an organized record of the way the mind creates a meaningful reality. Attention operates on the world of sensation and motion, just as angle, composition, and focal length are properties a step above the sheer recording of intermittent photographs. (Andrew 1976: 19)

For Rudolph Arnheim, film works its scopophilic magic because of its capacity for 'partial illusion,' a capacity drawn from the conventions of theatre where the audience suspends its disbelief and becomes complicit in forming the 'fourth wall' of the dramatic scene:

Thus, film, like the theatre, provides a partial illusion. Up to a certain degree it gives the impression of real life. This component is all the stronger since in contrast to the theatre the film can actually portray the real — that is, not simulate — life in real surroundings. On the other hand, it partakes strongly of the nature of a picture in a way that the stage never can. By the absence of colours, of three-dimensional depth, by being sharply limited by the margins on the screen, and so forth, film is most satisfactorily denuded of its realism. It is always at one and the same time a flat picture postcard and the scene of a living action. (Arnheim 1983: 31)

For Arnheim, it is in this illusory imperfection that the strength of cinema lies, and which allowed it to become art.

It is possible to read the emergence of these views and culturally and historically determined, for example, of Eisenstein's theory of montage — that 'art is always conflict' (Eisenstein 1949: 46) — as having emerged out of a particular moment in Soviet history. Eisenstein himself writes:

At present, Soviet cinematography is historically correct in entering the campaign for the story. Along this path are still many difficulties, many risks of falsely understanding the principles of story-telling. Of these the most terrible is the neglect of those possibilities given us now and again to liberate from the old traditions of the story:

The possibility of principally and newly re-examining the foundations and problems of the film-story.

And to go ahead in cinematographically progressive movement, not 'back to the story,' but 'to the story ahead of us.' There is not yet clear artistic orientation on these ways, although separate positive influences are already becoming visible. (Eisenstein 1949: 121)

However, these theories themselves do not really account for cultural differences, preferring instead to present film form as an independent and neutral transmitter of cultural information.

Historical poetics offers a formalist approach that aims also to incorporate a historical dimension: '[h]istorical poetics takes on a particular urgency within a critical milieu that appeals to conventions as a way of setting off the target film,' which is dependent on 'an awareness of historically existent options' on the part of the critic (Bordwell 1989b: 268). However, its use of history is highly specific and qualified. As White puts it, historical poetics 'is not concerned with the ways in which film may or may not perpetuate capitalist, communist, sexist, religious, or any other sort of ideology, or the ways in which film affects society,' except for 'the ways in which these may affect films themselves' (White 1996). Principally, Bordwell's historical poetics eschews the meaning and interpretation when looking at film, except insofar as it relates to the history of the technology of the medium and the industry at a particular point in time. Bordwell does not suggest that ideological forces are not at work, yet actively refuses to acknowledge them. Robert Ray puts it more bluntly in his criticism of the *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the *magnum opus* on which Bordwell's reputation (along with his co-writers, Staiger's and Thompson's) is made:

'Ideology' in CHC [*Classical Hollywood Cinema*] has been reduced to mean only commitment to narrative filmmaking. The larger ideological stakes of such filmmaking — its effects, its epistemic causes — are left unexplored because the book's methodology commits BST [Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson] to risking only those hypotheses confirmable by empirical evidence. CHC's predictability, then, derives from its refusal to bet. BST do not gamble with their *stakes* in film studies. (Ray 2001: 62)

Instead, the history of the medium is viewed in terms of norms and conventions, and a film is assessed by how far it adheres or deviates from those normative standards: the poetician, for Bordwell, is ‘a historian of forms, genres, and styles,’ who ‘aims to analyze the conceptual and empirical factors — norms, traditions, habits — that govern a practice and its products’ (1989b: 269). This definition of poetics contradicts, as I have mentioned, Ducrot and Todorov’s formalist/structuralist definition of the term as pertaining to an overarching framework of reading than to an aggregation of minutiae. Insofar as Bordwell acknowledges that film is an industrial product, he argues that ‘standardized compositional options should be specifiable’ (1989b: 269), that is, specifiable to the technology and application of technology that make them possible.

One of the aims of this method, though perhaps not explicitly expressed, is to return the study of film to positivist ground, in the face of the vast proliferation of theories in the discipline, and to repudiate theory’s ‘interpretive’ dimension, as Bordwell puts it. He is critical of the meaning-making in many interpretative and theoretical studies, arguing that ‘some effects are not reducible to meaning in the sense that interpretive critics employ’ (1989b: 271). As part of a larger project called *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), Bordwell contributes an article called ‘Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision,’ in which he explains that his method is the ‘middle way,’ ‘signposted by the notions of contingent universals, conventions as norm-governed patterns of behavior, and artistic goals conceived as effects’ (1996: 93). In other words, his approach is an effort to ‘historicise,’ and thus objectify, film study by locating it in ‘history.’ However, the notion of ‘history’ employed by Bordwell leans strongly towards a kind of materialist determinism: it includes, for instance, what sorts of technologies were available at the time, what kinds of business partnerships

were set up (if any), what sorts of laws there might have been which may have regulated content, and so on, rarely taking into account the cultural, political and social milieus surrounding a film, except in their impact upon technique. Bordwell's approach leans towards what Stephen Heath calls a '[t]echnological determinism [that] substitutes for the social, the economic, the ideological, proposes the random autonomy of invention and development, coupled often with the vision of a fulfilment of an abstract human essence' (1981: 226).

In the preface to the third edition of *Film Art*, Bordwell and Thompson write that 'we have sought an approach that would lead the reader in logical steps through various aspects of film aesthetics [...]. The approach we have chosen emphasizes the film as an artifact — made in particular ways, having a certain wholeness and unity, existing in history' (1990: xiii–xiv). Despite the aims to consider the 'whole film' (1990: xiii), the approach defines that whole as little more than the sum of its parts. Bordwell and Thompson systematically break down what they identify as 'film form' into two main categories of 'film narrative' and 'film style,' each category is then systematically broken down into a strict Aristotelian order of sub-categories. Film narrative, in Bordwell's terms, is discussed in terms of its principles of construction (plot versus story; cause and effect; temporal structure; spatial structure; and so on), flow of story information, and narrative conventions (which are classified broadly into 'genres' and the 'Classical Hollywood Cinema'). Non-narrative films are likewise listed under various 'types': categorical, rhetorical, abstract formal, and associational formal. Film style is analysed according to four main aspects: mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. Each aspect is described according to the unique role that it contributes to the overall unity of the film. Significantly, the Bordwell's approach makes little attempt to distinguish their notion of 'film art' and the CHC, and the ramifications of the simple association of film's technical history with the history of American cinema

upon the production and reception of films in other cultures remain largely unexplored in their writings. The CHC remains, in all of Bordwell's books, the centre from which all other cinemas radiate:

If we cannot imagine a widely accessible filmmaking practice that does not utilize this set of norms [of the CHC], it may be because it has proved itself well suited to telling moderately complicated stories in ways that are comprehensible to audiences around the world. (Bordwell 1997: 155)

This approach takes no account of the impact of the vast circulation of mainstream Hollywood films in international markets made possible by sheer economic and political power, which invariably contributes to shaping the tastes and preferences of audiences around the world. Colin MacCabe, for instance, objects to the naïve 'naturalness' of Hollywood's realism, arguing that 'film does not reveal the real in a moment of transparency, but rather that film is constituted by a set of discourses which (in the positions allowed to subject and object) produce a certain reality' (1986: 182). Thus, Elizabeth Cowie objects to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's 'functionalist' account of the classical Hollywood cinema, the textbook of which has now formed the staple of many undergraduate programmes, arguing that their point of view has resulted in a 'hegemonic account of classical narrative in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*' (1998: 178), which elides many examples that do not fit into their account. Cowie notes in particular that Bordwell does not account for the profitability of 'story-films,' for which the classical Hollywood cinema is known. Its profitability is not inherent in the films themselves, but 'the result of specific exhibition practices in relation to the creation of a market (a middle-class audience) and a product for that market' (Cowie 1998: 180–81). Reducing the agency of a film's address to the persistence of norms and standards is unhelpful, according to Cowie, because the terms are 'so elastic that there can never be a post-classical that is not absorbable by the classical

system' (1998: 188). In Cowie's sharp words: '[t]he church is so broad that heresy is impossible' (1998: 178).

The broadness of Bordwell's methodology is both the strength and the weakness of his argument. Poetics, Bordwell writes, 'has a propensity to the problem/solution model, to institutional frames of reference, and to rational-agent explanatory assumptions' (1989b: 269), aiming to build a bridge between production-oriented criticism and reception-oriented criticism, in that '[i]t will not let the former dictate the latter, but it will study the parallels and common grounds no less than the divergences' (1989b: 270). It is proclaimed to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive, but the contention, for his critics, is whether the refusal to engage interpretation is in fact a form of self-fashioned naïveté. Unlike Cowie, Henry Jenkins welcomes Bordwell's historical poetics for its infinite capacity for expansion:

Adherence to those norms allows for the production of works which win easy approval both from the production system and from audience members. Yet disobedience of the norms is not necessarily a 'negative' act, since formal transgressions often result in welcome artistic innovation or novelty. Any given work will be situated more or less comfortably in the dominant aesthetic tradition, though it may also borrow formal devices from outside that system as a basis for expanding the aesthetic vocabulary. (Jenkins 1995: 102)

By rejecting 'the notion that a universal standard, however constituted, can be applied to evaluating all artworks,' and insisting 'on more local assessments based upon a fuller historical understanding,' Bordwell's historical poetics, according to Jenkins, 'constitutes a political act, helping to question the naturalness of the aesthetic norm separating high and low culture (and with them, the social distinctions they express and repress)' (1995: 111). Yet his account of poetics influenced by an Aristotelian style of classification may also be seen in its own way to be universalising, even as it declares its intentions not to be so. By defining film mainly through its four aspects of style, a

‘universality’ of film form is achieved through the assertion that every film, American, French, or Japanese, will have to employ one or more of these aspects. Almost any page in *Film Art*, for instance, will yield an all-inclusive statement of this kind: ‘Some directors (Howard Hawks, John Ford, Kenji Mizoguchi, Jacques Tati) seldom use the subjective shot, but others (Alfred Hitchcock, Alain Resnais) use it constantly’ (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 203). Such a comment alludes to a commonality in behaviour that neither illuminates their work for the reader, nor the use of the subjective shot. Janet Staiger offers the reason that while Bordwell ‘explicitly constructs a competent viewer as his spectator,’ he ‘excludes affect, not because it is not pertinent, but because *he is delimiting his field of research*’ (2002: 58, my emphasis). She also notes specifically that, ‘[h]e also eliminates historical and cultural differences in viewers’ (2002: 58). While Staiger is not herself arguing for a cultural reading, her article argues for the necessity of context in studying the issues of reception in film and television, and her criticism of Bordwell’s approach lies in the premises it holds of the spectator, as well as the relationship between interpreting and reading. Staiger writes, in spite of her collaboration on *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, ‘I disagree with Bordwell’s belief that viewing or perceiving can be separated, except in a most theoretical way, from interpreting or reading. I believe that interpretational propositions inform perception and viewing’ (2002: 57). She argues that in fact Bordwell’s approach does not preclude what she calls ‘a context-activated approach to the history of viewing,’ including ‘the notion that schemata develop from cultural, social, and historical experiences’ (2002: 58). It is in effect Bordwell’s apparent refusal to address the possibilities that she mulls over, an example of which I have also emphasised above: ‘Bordwell is discussing these issues theoretically — i.e. as conceptual categories. I am suggesting that the research from which he draws does not prevent a linkage or even interpenetration of

cognition with emotion. However, because he so *chooses*, Bordwell does not try to supply a theory of pleasure (or other emotions or sensations)’ (Staiger 2002: 58–59, my emphasis). In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek criticises Bordwell’s ‘trans-cultural universal’ (2001: 17) for its inability to address cultural particularities, as well as its failure to account for the historicity of universalism itself. He writes that ‘the very relationship between trans-cultural universals and culture-specific features is not an ahistorical constant, but historically overdetermined: the very notion of a trans-cultural universal means different things in different cultures’ (Žižek 2001: 17).¹³

Robert Ray is more trenchant in his criticism to the extent of questioning Bordwell’s (and Thompson’s) motives. He argues that theirs is a ‘disciplinary specialization that marks itself in *repetition* [...] to the extent that he [Bordwell] succeeds in establishing a single, persistently used method, he becomes reliable, *predictable* (positivism’s goal): a brand name to depend on’ (Ray 2001: 42). In other words, Bordwell’s method of reading film, according to Ray, is self-validated by the sheer volume of production — seven books in twelve years — seeking to consolidate ‘the same project: to install formalism as the dominant paradigm in film studies’ (Ray 2001: 45). Ray goes as far as to call it, ‘the Bordwell *regime* of knowledge’ (2001: 45, my emphasis), one that he says ‘is curiously blind to its own unquestioning participation in our culture’s hegemonic arrangements between truth and power’ (2001: 45). Ray addresses the authority of Bordwell’s style as one which invokes the classicism

13. Bordwell’s responses to Žižek may be found in the last chapter of *Figures Traced in Light* (Bordwell 2005a), which Des O’Rawe describes as ‘shadowboxing [...] that] verges on the ridiculous’ (O’Rawe 2006), and an essay on his personal web log (Bordwell 2005), which continues to question Žižek’s motives.

and Enlightenment principles on which modern Western regimes of knowledge were founded:

[...] Bordwell's work, like that of almost everyone designated by our culture as providing 'knowledge,' participates thoroughly in the apparatus that Nietzsche describes as Western civilization's last great religion: rational science. As a writer, Bordwell is classically clear. He eschews 'excessive' metaphors and obviously bravura figures (the signs of his own desire) [...]. Bordwell's preference for active verbs and clearly defined transitions reaffirms the rational tradition's faith in cause-and-effect sequences of distinct, locatable events. Even the format of his books, maintained through several volumes, is scientific: double-columned, oversized, they literally stand out from the rest of a shelf of ordinary humanities books, manifesting the signs of textbook authority amidst the clutter of mere 'interpretations.' (2001: 41)

Staiger, his co-writer on *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, is more circumspect, and comments on his style of argument thus: 'what is normative becomes nearly prescriptive, *at least in his phrasings of ideas*, if not by the terms of his theory' (2002: 59, my emphasis).

Ironically, Bordwell may have an answer to the uses of repetition, though not specifically directed at Ray's objections. Bordwell's historical poetics and its emphasis on the persistence of norms and convention are precisely authorised by the function of repetition. The function of a film style or technique, he argues, is a response to task (Bordwell 1997: 151), and 'tasks and functions are,' he adds, 'supplied by tradition' (Bordwell 1997: 151); how and where this 'tradition' arose is rarely interrogated:

Replication, revision, synthesis, rejection: these possibilities allow us to plot the dynamic of stability and change across the history of style. For example, since every film demands a multitude of technical choices, we should expect that most choices will replicate or synthesize traditional schemas. Revising or rejecting an inherited schema always demands fresh decisions, and unforeseen problems can swiftly proliferate. Since the virtues of a new schema can be discovered only through trial and error, the strategic filmmaker will innovate in controlled doses, setting the novel element in a familiar context that can accustom the viewer to the device's functions. For such reasons, in any film very few schemas are likely to be revised or rejected. (No wonder Godard seems very adventurous; he revises or repudiates different schemas in almost every scene.) (1997: 155)

Based on its own premises, Bordwell's argument is unassailable; it is, ostensibly, an inductive argument employing deductive conclusions: 'If we cannot imagine a widely accessible filmmaking practice that does not utilize this set of norms, it may be because it has proved itself well suited to telling moderately complicated stories in ways that are comprehensible to audiences around the world' (Bordwell 1997: 155). It is a self-sustaining argument because of, not in spite of, its claim of the 'middle-level' ground:

A technique does not rise and fall, reach fruition or decay. There are only prevalent or secondary norms, preferred and unlikely options, rival alternatives, provisional syntheses, overlapping tendencies, factors promoting both stability and change. We find innovation and replication, consolidations and revisions. Loose schemas may be tightened up; long-lived ones may be streamlined, roughened, or combined. All these stylistic phenomena are driven by human aims and ingenuity. Within institutional imperatives, agents understand their purposes and problems in certain ways, settling on ends and seeking alternative means of achieving them. There are no laws of stylistic history, no grand narratives unfolding according to a single principle; but that does not prevent us from proposing explanations for long-term, middle-level trends of continuity and change. (Bordwell 1997: 261)

Furthermore, it is self-sustaining to the degree that its self-reflexivity is directed at consolidating its own perspective. Bordwell writes:

[...] I have sought to lay out certain middle-level concepts which interpreters employ and show how they embody the institutional choices which critics make. I offer not a hermeneutics — a scheme for producing valid or valuable interpretations — but a poetics of interpretation. An indication of this [...] is the extent to which criticizing this book's conclusions will entail using its own concepts. [...] Like every poetics of writing, mine hands over to the reader the tools with which my own discourse can be taken to pieces. (Bordwell 1989b: 273)

Robert Ray describes this as 'Bordwell's obsession with legitimization': 'You may disagree with our conclusions, he repeatedly argues, but for your disagreement to count, you must come up with proof. No one has been able to do so because on his own ground, Bordwell seems irrefutable. Indeed, this kind of response is fore-doomed, because Bordwell has anticipated it' (2001: 35–36). John Mowitt also takes issue with what he sees as Bordwell's

determination to dominate the film studies agenda. He cites Bordwell's keynote speech at the Centenary of the Cinema conference in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1995, which, in light of 'a shrinking job market in academia at large,' focused on how 'it was crucial that only truly qualified applicants be considered for the few available positions [in film studies]' (Mowitt 2005: 40). Mowitt's sums up the speech as such:

[...] to determine whether an applicant was truly qualified, he [Bordwell] made it sound as though one had only to perform the following litmus test: Does the applicant use cinema from within, that is, on its own terms, or not? Can he do a neoformalist interpretation of a given film, or not? Negative responses were taken to indicate that the applicant was incompetent and therefore unqualified. Moreover, this perspective was mobilized in order to establish that academic units (programs, departments, et cetera) that did not involve themselves in the concerted inculcation of these skills [...] should not be trusted to produce qualified applicants for cinema studies jobs. (Mowitt 2005: 40)

Because of Bordwell's status, and prolificacy, the impact of such views on the shaping of the discipline within institutional frameworks cannot be underestimated.

However, like the distinction in the study of poetry between practical criticism as a tool for reading and the New Criticism as a philosophy of reading, the distinction between historical poetics as a tool for reading and a philosophy of reading films must be drawn. When applied with an awareness of its limitations, the use of Bordwell's poetics in film analysis may yield fruitful results, as its insistence on detail has the advantage of sharpening the critical apparatus. As a philosophy of reading, however, its professed neutrality sidesteps questions of cultural subjectivity, even as it does not evade the practice of cultural comparison, as Hollywood is constantly assumed to be the unmarked centre from which all other alternatives radiate. If Bordwell's historical poetics aims to negate cultural subjectivity, identity politics approaches do the opposite by foregrounding questions of identity and

subjectivity. The next section attempts to address the premises behind these questions, as well as the potential strengths and limitations they may have for a comparative cultural project.

Identity politics

‘Identity politics’ is not a school of thought, an approach, or a theory in film studies. I have employed the term to group collectively the approaches in the fields of film and cultural studies that are concerned with the politics of identity, such as ethnic and/or religious nationalisms, and gender and sexuality. There is no central theoretical framework for the study of identity politics in cinema, though in sociologist Syed Farid Alatas’ typology of ‘meta-analyses’ in the human and social sciences (2006: 41), theories of ‘Orientalism, Eurocentrism, postcolonialism and rhetoric’ collectively employ ‘the critique of ideas internal to social scientific discourse such as the notion of progress, the superiority of Western civilization and its inherent paternalism’ (2006: 42). Readings of identity politics in cinema are often drawn from some of these fields of study, such as postcolonial and feminist studies. For my purposes, I shall focus in this section primarily on postcolonial arguments pertaining to the construction of identity in order to address the notion of cultural translation within the domain of transnational cinemas.

Postcolonial studies aims to address the legacy of (primarily European) colonialism on indigeneous cultures, with regard to their social organisation, cultural activities (such as literature and the other arts), and historical self-fashioning. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) is said to have been ‘instrumental in bringing to focus the discursive dimensions of colonialism’ (Alatas 2006: 42; see also Patke 2006). For Said, the term ‘Orientalism’ referred to ‘a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the

Orient's special place in European Western experience' (1979: 1), and by this he meant largely the 'Near' and 'Middle East,' the ex-European colonies of the Indian subcontinent and 'the Bible lands' of Arabia (1979: 4). He does, however, acknowledge that increasing American participation in international politics (such as in Vietnam in the 1970s) also expanded that "'Oriental" awareness' into the 'Far East' of Japan, Korea, and Indochina (Said 1979: 2). Basically, Said argues that Orientalism is not merely a fanciful imagining of the Orient in European writing, but in their very acts of exoticising and nativising produce a historical and political structure of domination in which the Orient is never 'a free subject of thought or action' (1979: 3). Said argues that Orientalism is above all a *discourse*, and thus has a wider reach beyond geographically defined locales and historical colonies.

In this vein, it becomes possible for Wang Ning to argue for China's cultural subjugation to 'the West', even though China itself was never formally colonised by a European power, save for the territory of Hong Kong. For example, in offering up Confucianism as an antidote to the problems of globalisation, which Wang identifies as being caused by 'Western' capital, he writes: 'to many people, to be modernized simply means to be Westernized, or more exactly, colonized. Since Chinese culture should undergo its demarginalization from the periphery to the centre, its first step should be to "decolonize" itself in the "homogenizing" context of globalization' (2004: 11). Wang's vision is largely practical. He suggests that the global/local binary be re-configured in order to 'achieve equitable dialogue between the Chinese and international scholarship' (2004: 13). He believes that 'stubbornly resisting this trend [of globalisation] will only lead to further conflict between China and the West' (Wang 2004: 13). To foster this growing entente, Wang is keen to stress compromise: 'We know clearly that preserving some characteristics of national identity is necessary, but any attempt to over-emphasize localization at the

expense of excluding foreign influence will easily give rise to an inadequate nationalist sentiment and result in an unfavourable condition for China's stable external surroundings' (2004: 15). These are the reasons for his recommendations:

In world culture, the Chinese culture is still in an inadequate position of marginality whose value has by no means been fully recognized by the world [...]. Therefore, it may help Chinese culture to move from the periphery to the centre and deconstruct the myth of the monolithic centre if we begin to 'demarginalize' and 'deterritorialize' Chinese culture starting with translation and its studies. If this can be done in an adequate manner, it would put Chinese culture in a favourable position of engaging in equitable dialogues with Western culture as well as with international scholarship. (Wang 2004: 27)

However, in this line of argument, the players are simply moved onto different positions on the same board without really addressing the rules of the game. The approach is paradoxical but pragmatic and even politically expedient: that the notion of 'the myth of the monolithic centre' must be deconstructed in order to bring Chinese culture to the centre of 'world culture.' In other words, the current centre is to be deposed in order that it may be re-occupied in the future.

In his efforts to re-think and re-formulate the structure itself, Alatas is careful to point out that other Asian scholars had already written about the issue of Orientalism, independent of Said: he cites Abdel-Malek ('Orientalism in Crisis,' 1963), Tibawi ('English Speaking Orientalists,' 1963) and Ahmad Ashraf ('The Social Scientists and the Challenges of Development,' 1976) in particular (Alatas 2006: 42), though Said has referred to Abdel-Malek on occasion (1979: 96–97, 334, 335, 346). Alatas also notes that even in contemporary work, in spite of Said's and others' exhortations, 'the Occident/Orient dualism takes the form of spatial dualisms such as North/South, core/periphery, and developed/developing' (2006: 44). Inevitably, Said's own work

becomes implicated in the argument he makes, something which he briefly acknowledges:

No one can escape dealing with, if not the East/West division, then the North/South one, the have/have-not one, the imperialist/anti-imperialist one, the white/colored one. We cannot get around them all by pretending they do not exist; on the contrary, contemporary Orientalism teaches us a great deal about the intellectual dishonesty of dissembling on that score, the result of which is to intensify the divisions and make them both vicious and permanent. (Said 1979: 327)

One solution Said offers is to accept and engage with the ‘worldliness’ of the text (1991: 34), one that is mediated by the detachment and the objectivity of discerning ‘intellectuals,’ who ‘traffic in ideas’ (1991: 80), but who are nonetheless conscious of the contingency of their own historical circumstances (1991: 35).

In its prevalence, Orientalism is perceived to prey upon the self-perceptions of the ‘Oriental other’ as well. Alatas refers to this as an example the ‘captive mind’ (2006: 47), in which ‘the captive mind is a victim of Orientalism and Eurocentrism and is characterized by a way of thinking that is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner’ (2006: 47).¹⁴ One practical example of this might be the manner in which Chinese film critics from the mainland, heavily influenced by the politics of nationalism and communism in the 1980s, began to see the early Chinese approach of filmed drama as ‘primitive.’ Xie Fei in 1984 regrets the stagnation of Chinese cinema; he says that ‘mediocre ideas about film, and a lack of knowledge on the part of our filmmakers of philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, and ideology have created tremendous obstacles’ (1990: 79), blaming his own lack of film education on

14. Solanas and Getino, the proponents of Third Cinema to be discussed below, are far more trenchant, calling the ‘neocolonised person [who] accepts his situation [...] a Gungha Din, a traitor at the service of the colonialist, an Uncle Tom, a class and racial renegade, or a fool, the easy-going servant and bumpkin’ (1969).

the 'closed-door policy and the passive teaching methods' (1990: 83) of the Mao era. Likewise, in Semsel, Xia and Hou's anthology of essays in Chinese film theory, a number of declarations are made about the 'backwardness' of Chinese film culture as well as calls for a need for it to 'catch up' with, as Zhang and Li put it, 'the development of world cinema and the modernization of film language' (1990: 10). At the same time, Alatas insists though that the 'concept of the captive mind is not political or ideological but a phenomenological concept' (2006: 50). In other words, and to use Alatas' own example, 'an Asian scholar may adopt French poststructuralism in a creative way by successfully domesticating it and not necessarily be a captive mind, while another may be a Gandhian but may intellectually be dependent upon metropolitan academe' (2006: 50). The paradox in Alatas' analysis lies in his continued reliance on typologies, which imply, even as it does not always insist on, the assumption that the boundaries marking 'East' and 'West' are clearly drawn. Even as he calls for an 'alternative discourse' based on 'indigenization,' 'decolonization' or 'nationalization' of localized area studies, which are but a selection from a 'variety' of options (Alatas 2006: 83–105), his argument nevertheless continues to depend on essentialised conceptualisations of identity, which may also be employed by the so-defined 'Orientals' themselves in a conscious act of 'self-orientalisation,' 'self-orientalism,' or what Benzi Zhang calls 'cultural self-translation' (2000a: 132). This is the process by means of which 'non-Western' cultural practitioners are seen to offer up specific ethnic or cultural tropes in their work to be consumed by the global ('Westernised'?) market. Benzi Zhang notes, 'the deeper you go into your native local culture, the more salable commodities you can produce for the world market' (2000a: 132). Rey Chow has called this process 'auto-ethnography,' often manifested as a 'conscious invention of an ethnic primitivism' (1995: 147). In other words, the 'native' exploits the coloniser's

tendency to orientalise him by giving him precisely what he expects, such as exaggerated, codified or, on occasion, entirely invented cultural tropes for his consumption. Theoretically, this appears to shift the power of initiative and agency back to the 'native,' but in practice is also perceived as no more than sycophancy in the face of 'Western' capital.

Alatas' search for an alternative Asian discourse when discussing the politics of culture points to an effort to formulate a non-'nativist' and non-state-based approach, one that may be 'autonomous' (2006: 112) by being 'neither anti-Western nor pro-state' (2006: 114). Yet, how this may be possible without changing the very language itself is open to question. The dilemma of being of and also apart from the discourse one is critiquing is central to many difficulties cultural theorists face, and nearly twenty years after Said's *Orientalism*, E. San Juan, Jr. offers arguments for why the postcolonial project as he sees it merely ratifies and perpetuates existing colonial structures. 'Postcoloniality,' for San Juan, is a 'historical moment in this worldwide crisis of late imperial culture,' and cultural practice 'registers this historical moment as difference, hybridity, fragmentation' (1999: 15–16). He is, however, sceptical of its 'prima facie radicalism' and contends that 'in general postcolonial discourse mystifies the political/ideological effects of Western postmodernist hegemony and prevents change. [...] Such idealist frameworks of cognition void the history of people's resistance to imperialism, liquidate popular memory, and renounce responsibility for any ethical consequence of thought' (1999: 22). San Juan further accuses the postcolonial theory 'entrenched in the Establishment institutions of the West' of denouncing 'historical specificity and with it projects of national-popular liberation and socialist transformation' (1999: 22). He argues that it does so '[b]y ignoring or discounting the actual efforts of "Third World" communities to survive the havoc of global imperialism, postcolonial critics and their subtle strategems

only serve the interests of the global status quo [...]. One suspects complicity with transnational and “transculturological” interests’ (1999: 22). His book is thus littered with numerous examples of the ‘actual efforts’ of local activists, from Rigoberta Menchu, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Guatemala (San Juan 1999: 33–42), to C. L. R. James, the West Indian Marxist activist (1999: 38–43, 227–50), in transforming the injustices within their societies by radical means. These efforts, according to San Juan, represent an ‘alternative cultural milieu,’ in which the impotence of postcolonial discourses of hybridity and polyvalence is overcome:

So instead of the in-between, we have transition and the interregnum as privileged sites of self-recognition via the community; instead of ambivalence, we have resolve, commitment, determination to face specific problems and crisis. Instead of the local, we have a striving for coalitions and counterhegemonic blocs to prefigure a universal public space. Instead of the syncretic and the hybrid, we have creative demarcations and the crafting of the architectonic of the new, the emergent, the *Novus*. Instead of the polyvocal, we have the beginning of articulation from the silenced grassroots, the loci of invention and resourceful innovation. Here the trope of difference is displaced by the trope of possibilities, the binary impasse of reified hegemonic culture deconstructed by the imagination of materialist critique and extrapolation. Utterance is neither private nor solipsistic but an utterance of the mass line, not heteroglossic but triangulated; not contingent but charted by cognitive mapping and provisional orientations. (San Juan 1999: 51)

There is a sanguine boldness in his statements, motivated by pride and admiration for these individuals who risk their lives for a greater cause, ‘oppressed people of color [who] endeavor to shape a future freed from the nightmare of colonial history’ (San Juan 1999: 51). ‘Such endeavors,’ he insists, ‘are central, not marginal, to any attempt to renew humane learning everywhere’ (1999: 51). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address San Juan’s assessment of the practical work of radical activism, his argument against the ‘premium assigned to hybridity, pastiche, parodic performance, and so on, as constitutive of the postcolonial *Weltanschauung* [world view]’ (San Juan 1999: 29), is revealing of the frustrations faced by individuals desiring to

make theory mean something in the ‘real world’ as they continue to be expressed as dialectical struggles and binary opposites, as one ‘instead of’ the other.

According to San Juan, the postcolonial reflections of Said, and of Bhaba and Spivak, whom San Juan also criticises, are inadequate because they select from a limited set of paradigms to contrast. Aijaz Ahmad’s trenchant criticism of Said’s *Orientalism* is an example of these limited paradigms,¹⁵ arguing that Said is as guilty of essentialising ‘the West’ as the Orientalists he is critical of. Ahmad describes the force of European colonialism not as ‘some transhistorical process of ontological obsession and falsity [...] but, quite specifically, the power of colonial capitalism’ (1992: 184), of which ‘the East’ also tried to exploit (1992: 195). Thus, discourse and counter-discourse over time ‘have produced such a wilderness of mirrors that we need the most incisive of operations, the most delicate of dialectics, to disaggregate these densities’ (Ahmad 1992: 184). Navigating the ‘wilderness of mirrors’ is going to entail the recognition of one’s own reflection within it, something, he argues, Said fails to do. Ahmad locates Said’s attack on the history of Western civilisation within the very historical tradition of Western discourse itself, and his sarcasm is discernible:

[...] Said’s denunciations of the *whole* of Western civilization is as extreme and uncompromising as Foucault’s denunciations of the Western episteme or Derrida’s denunciations of the transhistorical Logos; nothing, nothing at all, exists outside epistemic Power, logocentric Thought, Orientalist Discourse — no classes, no gender, not even history; no site of resistance, no accumulated projects of human liberation, since all is Repetition with Difference, all is corruption — specifically Western corruption — and Orientalism always remains the same, only more so with the linear accumulations of time. The Manichean edge of these

15. Kuan-Hsing Chen notes the furore Ahmad’s comments generated, primarily in defence of ‘the masters, especially Edward Said,’ and criticises, not too discreetly, the parochialism of institutional gatekeeping in academe (Chen 1996: 39).

visions — Derridean, Foucauldian — is quite worthy of Nietzsche himself. (Ahmad 1992: 195)

In light of these arguments, the term ‘postcolonial’ is itself problematised.

Patke notes that

[...] writers have consistently resisted the association of their work with ‘postcolonial,’ with the argument that such terms tend to homogenize difference, simplify complexity, misdirect reading and perpetuate a new form of conceptual colonization that pushes writers into a cultural ghetto at the behest of academics struggling to place themselves closer to the centre by promoting the margins of post-imperial cultures. (Patke 2006: 370)

Patke sums up the term ‘postcoloniality,’ as a ‘period concept,’ a ‘name for a predicament,’ and a ‘state of mind’ (2006: 370). However, he also asserts that the understanding of postcoloniality as a period concept is now ‘a very small part of the story’ (Patke 2006: 370) of the decline of European colonialism. The term is now understood, in a broader sense, to also include ‘cultural productions and practices for an imprint of, and a reaction to, the residual force of colonialism on societies whose contemporary history is shaped by asymmetrical patterns of modernization, industrialization and globalization’ (Patke 2006: 370).

Issues of translation face similar allegations of hegemony, whether intentional or inadvertent. Lydia Liu argues that the need for translation across cultures is itself a function of the universalising force inherent in modernity. Her arguments have serious implications for the study of cultural translation in cinema as a cultural form that emerged from that modernity. This is her warning:

Universalism thrives on difference. It does not reject difference but translates and absorbs it into its own orbit of antithesis and dialectic. For that reason, any articulation of cultural difference or alternative modernity must be treated with caution, because such articulations are themselves embedded in the process of global circulations that determine which elements count as difference and why they matter. The fact that

one can speak about a varied range of modernities suggests an extraordinary faith in the translatability of modernity and its universal ethos. (Liu 1999a: 1)

Universalism, for Liu, is a condition of modernity, ironically as a result of its desire to recognise difference. With regard to the translation of cultures, Liu cites two ‘parallel historical developments’:

First, translation has been indispensable to the processes of global circulation of colonial language theories, universal history, scientific discourse, material culture, and international law for the past few hundred years. Second, colonial encounters between European and ‘other’ languages have helped define the unique intellectual contour of Western philosophical thinking about language, difference, culture, and alterity. (Liu 1999a: 3)

Liu’s approach is to address cultural translation and translatability through the question of ‘meaning-value,’ that is the question that is ‘centrally concerned with the production and circulation of meaning as value across the realms of language, law, history, religion, media, and pedagogy and, in particular, with significant moments of translation of *meaning-value* from language to language and culture to culture’ (1999a: 2), it is ‘the question of how meaning circulates *meaningfully* among the world’s diverse languages and societies, and how cultural difference has become a problematic and is translated in such a context’ (1999a: 4). The crux of Liu’s argument is that the nature of equivalence within cultural translation is in fact a *hypothetical* one (Liu 1999b: 37). ‘Translation,’ she argues, ‘need not guarantee the equivalence of meaning between languages,’ but rather, ‘represents a *reciprocal* wager, a desire for meaning as value and a desire to speak across, even under least favorable conditions’ (Liu 1999b: 34). As such, translation thus ‘hypothesizes an exchange of *equivalent* signs and makes up that *equivalence* where there is none perceived as such’ (Liu 1999b: 34).

This contradicts the assumption that near-equivalent parallels may theoretically be found between languages. Susan Bassnett identifies, in a work from 1991, one of the central issues in translation studies as the question of equivalence, as that of ‘determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence’ (1991: 25). She identifies two types of untranslatability; they are linguistic and cultural: ‘Linguistic untranslatability [...] is due to differences in the SL [source language] and the TL [target language], whereas cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text’ (Bassnett 1991: 32). The lack of equivalence does not mean, however, that no attempt at translation is made. Bassnett refers to Eugene Nida’s concept of ‘dynamic equivalence’ as a possible solution. The concept of dynamic equivalence is based on ‘the principle of *equivalent effect*, i.e. that the relationship between receiver and message should aim at being the same as that between original receivers and the SL message’ (Bassnett 1991: 26). In other words, something as close as possible to a common ground is addressed. This principle of equivalent effect is dependent on us accepting the existence of the ‘invariant core’ of meaning in a text, ‘represented by stable, basic and constant semantic elements in the text, whose existence can be proved by experimental semantic condensation’ (Bassnett 1991: 26–27). This invariant core is thus defined as ‘that which exists in common between all existing translations of a single work’ (Bassnett 1991: 27), rather like a transcendental signified. It is this invariant core that is continuously invoked when critics argue that, for example, Ang Lee’s Chinese sensibility bears many similarities to the social concerns of Jane Austen’s England.

In a 1999 volume of essays edited by Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Bassnett and Trivedi’s introduction to *Post-Colonial Translation* (1999) makes the power relation in translation more apparent. They write that ‘translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is

part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer' (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 2). It is 'not an innocent, transparent activity [... and] rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems' (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 2). Highlighting the metaphor of the colony 'as a copy or translation of the great European Original' (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 4), they argue for postcolonial theory's appropriation of translation theory as a means of conceptualising the postcolonial condition (1999: 5), but only insofar as it eschews 'a politics of polarity' (1999: 5). The arguments for and against a postcolonial paradigm in translation studies can be made in the same mould as the arguments for and against postcolonial theory above, that every act designed to assert the independence of a non-European identity becomes invariably bound to the European domination it seeks to subvert.

Criticism on national, ethnic or cultural cinemas are inevitably also caught up in the discourse-counter-discourse web of argumentation. As there is not the space here to highlight every single example of its use, examples pertaining to the films I discuss will be raised in the following chapters. At this juncture, my intention is simply to point out that applying the politics of identity to film studies criticism only serves to perpetuate its limitations. The next section considers the utility of a comparative poetics in the delineation of a different paradigm and the limits it might also face when considering the question of how national, ethnic, or cultural subjectivities work in the cultural production of cinema.

Towards a comparative model

A comparative cultural poetics must consider these concerns, if it is to be of use both to local cultures (however one chooses to define them) as well as to the study of cinema. As Haun Saussy, writing of China, puts it, '[t]he relation

between us (whoever we are) and China becomes [...] a way of learning about the relations of necessity and contingency, nature and culture, genus and example, sign and meaning' (1993: 7). Yet, this relativism is also continually pointed out as inadequate to the task of subverting the political structure:

Comparison is as much hegemony as it is Balkanization — indeed it may hegemonize more effectively the more it tries to Balkanize [...]. Universalism inhabits philosophies of cultural difference as a necessary constitutive moment, as the means by which they consolidate their authority to say how the different is different. (Saussy 1993: 11)

So, it appears that with the increasing acknowledgement of the subjectivity of discourse, the business of conducting a comparative poetics, of conducting any kind of cultural criticism at all, becomes more and more burdened by questions of how it cannot be adequately conducted. A comparative film studies is no exception.

Peter Lehman writes of the dilemmas facing Western scholars of Japanese film in an essay from 1987, at a time when Japanese cinema was perceived as the most radical alternative to Hollywood and European cinema, also at a time when, he notes, 'Western film scholars are accusing each other of being Western film scholars. Or to put it more accurately, Western film scholars are accusing each other of being Western in their approach to Japanese film' (Lehman 1987: 5). In his assessment of various readings of Japanese cinema, including work by Bordwell and Thompson, Noel Burch, Paul Willemen and Stephen Heath, he concludes that '[a]ll important work currently being done in the West on Japanese cinema [...] seems to be caught up in the Western ideological space of its practitioners. We have to be very careful about accusing [*sic*] each other's work of being Western' (Lehman 1987: 12). The reason, he goes on to explain, is because the argument would degenerate into 'name-calling and labeling' (Lehman 1987: 12), and suggests instead that 'Western film scholars might do well to foreground their Western

perspective rather than deny it' (1987: 12), leaving 'the Japanese to have a Japanese perspective on Japanese films' (1987: 13). In other words, to engage the foreign cinema as a tourist would engage foreign customs; potentially participating in the foreign cultural activity but without necessarily understanding any of the motivations behind it. While Lehman argues against the imperialist practice of imposing of (Western) cultural meanings on non-Western films, such as Ozu's use of space or Oshima's use of sex and violence, his call for Western scholars to relinquish that right and simply acknowledge their cultural blind-spots is equally unsatisfactory. Or as Homi Bhabha put it:

To enter into the interdisciplinarity of cultural texts means that we cannot contextualize the emergent cultural form by locating it in terms of some pre-given discursive causality or origin. We must always keep a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological or dialectical. The 'difference' of cultural knowledge that 'adds to' but does not 'add up' is the enemy of the *implicit* generalization of knowledge or the implicit homogenization of experience, which Claude Lefort defines as the major strategies of containment and closure in modern bourgeois ideology. (Bhabha 1994: 163)

Thus, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto contends that Lehman's argument remains 'Eurocentric' and does not consider, for example, what ostensibly 'Western' modes of cultural practice, like modernism, 'possibly means for the non-West' (1991: 244). Whilst not ostensibly hostile, the labelling that Lehman engages in is a classic example of Orientalist practice, in which the 'East' continues to be perceived as inscrutable from his 'Eurocentric' perspective, even though in effect he argues that by recognising this inability to understand is actually a way of understanding 'how far we are still from a reading of Japanese films which neither reduces and trivializes the role of culture in understanding the films, nor obscures through Orientalizing the role of the culture until everything is turned into stereotyped "essences" of Japanese character and religion' (Lehman 1987: 14). The choice becomes an either-or option only if Japanese and European cultures can, *a priori*, be essentialised, and exist in

mutual exclusion. If cinema is assumed to be an already transcultural, transnational experience, neither of these options is sustainable.

Thus Yoshimoto describes the ‘difficulty of being radical’ within the discourse of ‘national cinema scholarship,’ especially since ‘we are no longer sure about the coherence of the nation-state and [...] the idea of history has also become far from self-evident’ (1991: 242). The study of ‘non-Western’ cinema, he argues, adds to the problem:

What is required by the hermeneutics of the Other sought out in non-Western cinema scholarship is neither a simple identification with the Other nor an easy assimilation of the Other into the self. Instead, it is the construction of a new position of knowledge through a careful negotiation between the self and the Other. (Yoshimoto 1991: 243)

The problem, Yoshimoto concludes, is not with trying to understand the ‘Other,’ as much of cultural criticism based on identity politics has done, ‘but the formulation of [the] particular question itself’: ‘By construing the Other as the sole bearer of difference, this seemingly sincere question does nothing but conceal the fundamentally problematic nature of identity of the self’ (1991: 257). The Other, he further argues, ‘cannot be misrepresented, since it is always already a misrepresentation. Imperialism starts to show its effect not when it domesticates the Other but the moment it posits the difference of the Other against the identity of the self’ (1991: 257). Yoshimoto ends his essay by calling for a return to ‘that spirit of true radicalism that once made film studies such an exciting space for critical thinking’ (1991: 257), a spirit he traces back to the inception of film studies ‘as a contestation against the academicism in the 1960s and remained in the forefront of the changing humanities and a redrawing of disciplinary boundaries’ (1991: 256). He argues that over time the discipline has consolidated itself within academic institutions, and ‘the division of labor in national cinema studies, [now] uncannily mirrors the geopolitical configuration and division of the contemporary postcolonial world order’

(1991: 256), that is, into pockets of ‘area studies.’¹⁶ However, whilst Yoshimoto offers some careful analyses throughout his essay of how film studies has failed to theorise Japanese cinema outside the self/other paradigm, including work by Bordwell and Thompson, Noel Burch, and E. Ann Kaplan, he offers no solution, in that particular essay, as to how this radicalism might be achieved.

One move towards radicalism in film studies is Third Cinema, ‘a project’ which, as Meaghan Morris puts it, ‘emerged, or re-emerged, in the 1980s with an aim of rearticulating the radical internationalist traditions of Latin American, Soviet and European cinemas to contemporary concerns with neocolonialism, multiculturalism and national-historical experience’ (1994: 1). In the preface to his collection edited with Paul Willemen, *Questions of Third Cinema* (1989), Jim Pines outlines the intentions of the anthology: ‘we wanted to shift the debate to critical issues and flesh out the somewhat uneasy relationship between (oppositional) critical practice/theory on the one hand, and oppositional film and video practices on the other’ (1989: vii). The editors of the anthology intended the essays to offer ‘a systematic approach to “reading” Third World films and, by doing so, helped to realign the hitherto peripheral status of Third World “Otherness”, so as to make it — both critically and politically — the centre. The stress was now on “difference” rather than “otherness”’ (Pines 1989: viii). Their primary concern was with ‘framing

16. Valentina Vitali explores the effects of such institutionalisation on film studies in British universities in her essay, ‘Why study cinema? Serial visions of the culture industry and the future of film studies’ (2005). She notes that, ‘in the 170 universities of Britain, there are 1341 ‘film studies’ modules (in addition to 1111 modules in media studies, whereas there are only 976 modules in literature)’ (2005: 284), and argues that the result of extensive bureaucratisation has produced courses designed for the ‘formatting of a global labour force’ (2005: 287), which are in effect politically impotent at best, and totally uncritical of its own context in history at worst (2005: 287–88).

a range of questions around the various forms of oppositional cultural production' (Pines 1989: viii).

The term 'Third Cinema' was coined by Argentinian filmmaker Fernando Solanas and Spanish-born Octavio Getino, between 1968 and 1969. In their manifesto, 'Towards a Third Cinema,' they call for a 'cinema of liberation' and revolution against bourgeois complacency (Solanas and Getino 1969). In its opposition to 'First Cinema' (that is, Hollywood), this 'Third Cinema' was to distinguish itself from merely the 'counter-cinema,' or the 'Second Cinema' of the European arthouse alternative. The Second Cinema was for Solanas and Getino not a 'real alternative,' as it remained within the rarefied domain of intellectuality divorced from public and political engagement, or what they refer to as the 'cutting off of the intellectual and artistic sectors from the processes of national liberation' (1969). Paul Willemen sums up the tenets of Third Cinema as: firstly, the 'opposition to a sloganised cinema of emotional manipulation. Any cinema that seeks to smother thought, including a cinema that relies on advertising techniques, is roundly condemned'; and secondly, 'the manifestos refuse to prescribe an aesthetics' (1989: 6). One of the key distinctions Willemen notes between Third Cinema and 'the European notion of counter-cinema' is 'this awareness of the historical variability of the necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted':

Whatever the explanation — and the weight of the modernist tradition in the arts may be a crucial factor here — and regardless of the political intentions involved, the notion of counter-cinema tends to conjure up a prescriptive aesthetics: to do the opposite of what dominant cinema does. Hence the descriptive definition of dominant cinema will dictate the prescriptive definition of counter-cinema. The proponents of Third Cinema were just as hostile to dominant cinemas but refused to let the industrially and ideologically dominant cinemas dictate the terms in which they were to be opposed. (Willemen 1989: 7)

In other words, the aesthetics and politics of Third Cinema attempt to circumvent the structural trap of discourse and counter-discourse that plagues

much of identity politics as described above. Third Cinema stages its politics, not as a ‘politics of deconstruction,’ which ‘insists on the need to oppose particular institutionally dominant regimes of making particular kinds of sense, excluding or marginalising others’ (Willemen 1989: 7), and ‘on the need to say something different; an aesthetics of deconstruction dissolves into endlessly repeated difference-games’ (Willemen 1989: 8), but ‘on an approach to the relations between signification and the social’ (Willemen 1989: 9). In refusing to play the discourse-counter-discourse game of the First and Second Cinemas, Third Cinema positions itself as a ‘cinema of revolution,’ ‘one of destruction and construction; destruction of the image that neocolonialism has created of itself and of us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in any of its expressions’ (Solanas and Getino 1969). The power of Third Cinema lies in its acclamation of cinema’s revolutionary potential: ‘The possibility of discovering and inventing film forms and structures that serve a more profound vision of our reality resides in the ability to place oneself on the outside limits of the familiar, to make one’s way amid constant dangers’ (Solanas and Getino 1969: my emphasis). ‘Our time,’ they write, ‘is one of hypothesis rather than of thesis, a time of works in progress — unfinished, unordered, violent works made with the camera in one hand and a rock in another’ (Solanas and Getino 1969). For them, the cinema, controversially, is also a ‘rifle,’ a weapon of ‘guerilla activity’ and war (Solanas and Getino 1969).

Timothy White is suspicious of Third Cinema’s professed politics and reads it as a further symptom of ‘Western’ liberalism:

What, for that matter, is ‘serious social art’? Does it mean art with political content? Or does it mean art with a specific political content, content usually valued not necessarily by the populations of Third World nations, but instead by Western liberal intellectuals? Must film conform to the political notions of essentially Western radical critics to be of value to its viewers? (White 1996)

Whether this is the case is the subject for another debate (see for example Wayne 2001), but White's questions expose the degree to which it is difficult to theorise Third Cinema aesthetics — indeed, one would be hard-pressed to list a canon of Third Cinema films. This is because the aesthetics of Third Cinema was defined by the politics of becoming, rather than what is already there to be analysed (ostensibly by the same liberal-minded intellectuals belonging to that bourgeois-capitalist institution known as the modern university). More than three decades later, Anthony Guneratne edits and introduces a collection of essays designed to 'rethink' Third Cinema theory. Guneratne notes that Third Cinema has not only been denied 'grandeur' in contemporary discourse on cinema, but that it has not even merited 'a dishonorable mention,' by critics such as David Bordwell, along with other scholars of non-European cinema working in US and European institutions (2003: 4):

At a time when the Eurocentric model of film history and film studies has given way to a spate of publications and university courses on non-Western national cinemas and the award-winning auteurs of the various film movements of the moment (Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien in the case of the New Cinema in Taiwan; Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige in the case of the Fifth Generation Chinese filmmaking; Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf in the case of the New Iranian Cinema, and so on), Third Cinema and the theory that undergirds it are very much in the danger of achieving the 'condescension of posterity' [...]. (Guneratne 2003: 4)

Guneratne hints at an unspoken conspiracy of exclusion, defusing Third Cinema's radical politics by relegating its study to the margins of the university curriculum; as Yoshimoto put it, there appears to be no real radicalism in institutional film studies (any longer?). However, this is not to say that no attempts are made in the spirit of Marx, whom Solanas and Getino cite, 'it is not sufficient to interpret the world; it is now a question of transforming it' (1969).

In that tenor, the work of Paul Willemen exists adjunct to the main texts and theories in institutional film studies, largely because, in contrast to more prolific scholars like David Bordwell, there is no consistent subject of study or framework in his approach, although the work on Third Cinema opened up for him an agenda that he continues to pursue today. One could perhaps look upon his work as a re-mobilisation of Third Cinema as a critical theory, rather than as a mode of film-making, questions of which he is now addressing as part of a comparative film studies framework. Meaghan Morris refers to Willemen as a ‘pragmatic utopian’ (1994: 9):

[...] Willemen has argued for over twenty years [from the 1970s to the 1990s] that cultural politics is a *relational* ‘profession.’ For professional critics, this means taking into account ‘in the actual formulation of our work’ the ways in which a practice carried over or *translated* from one area of culture to another will change its value and its direction in the process of ‘lateral connection’; a practice *becomes* oppositional only when it is mobilised in relation to something else, and made intelligible as an alternative to others available at any particular ‘focus.’ (Morris 1994: 9)

Willemen is primarily an essayist, rather than a theorist; or, put differently, the theory in Willemen’s work lies primarily in the practice of theorising, especially in the theorising of borders, not least those that surround theory itself. As Morris puts it, ‘[t]he border is a dense and busy place in Willemen’s writing; he uses it to organise various linguistic, institutional, social, cultural and national orders of reality, and again to map the comings and goings between them’ (1994: 9). Willemen’s own reflection on the contribution of *Framework*, the journal which he edited in the 1980s, to British cultural and film studies, reveals the central theme of his work, that is, in Morris’ words, a ‘theory of cinematic experience’ (1994: 15). It is also, she argues, a ‘theory of historical particularity’ (1994: 16, original emphases). Willemen explains the birth of *Framework*:

In broad terms, the constellation that presided over the emergence of *Framework* was ‘the national’ British sector within the context of

cultural-philosophical Marxism's dynamics in Western Europe since the end of World War 2. The specific role and production of the intelligentsia in Britain as the cement of the social fabric was described in *The Breakup of Britain* by Tom Nairn, who outlined elsewhere both the function of and the reasons for the massive dominance of an English Ideology (Eng. Lit. and its Crit.) within that particular social group. Francis Mulhern's *The Moment of Scrutiny* provides an invaluable account of the contradictions and struggles within the literary ideology at the core of the English Ideology: its oppositional aspects and the solid victory of Leavisism as the ruling set of discourses in academia since the fifties. (Willemen 1998: 1–2)

In other words, a particular mode of criticism (not just modes of film-making) emerged from particular social, political, industrial, economic and institutional conditions. This historical particularity differs from Bordwell's, in the sense that it is history that is always necessarily accountable to its makers. There is a degree of polemicism in Willemen's writing that almost wilfully refuses to hide behind the depersonalised formalist readings of film texts or the studied distance of theoretical speculation. In refusing to speak the polite language of the academy as it were, Willemen positions himself, quite self-consciously, outside its validating apparatus; though this form of tactical intervention, as with other social revolutions, has its limitations too, requiring the critic at times to attack the foundations of knowledge-production in which he, in this era of 'University Ltd,'¹⁷ has also to participate. The life of *Framework* was fairly short, folding in 1992, before being relaunched in 1999 by Wayne University Press, whose aims are far more conciliatory: 'new *Framework* has no single ideology, rather, the journal covers a panoply of ideas and seeks to publish work from original thinkers in the forefront of new cultural and political perspectives' (Stutesman and Sielaff 1999). This is not to say that the new

17. This phrase is not mine but E. P. Thompson's. The concerns that Alex Callinocos expresses in *Universities in a Neo-liberal World* (2006), attacking the increasing dependence of British universities on private capital and business practices, are predated in E. P. Thompson's account of *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (1970).

Framework does not provide a platform for innovative work in film studies, merely that the contrast in political positions, and the articulation of that position, serve to emphasise Willemen's preference, even insistence, on a radical politics, even as he looks back upon a platform which is already lost:

Framework's engagement with issues of cultural difference, perhaps its most telling and lasting legacy, was both tentative and aggressive. Aggressive in the affirmation [*sic*] of a conviction that any variety of 'centric' (ethnocentric, Eurocentric) or 'essentialist' critical frames of reference were to be rejected. Tentative in its formulation of what a non-essentialist notion of the 'nationally specific' might be. [...] If I were to claim one single main achievement for *Framework*, it would be this: the journal was among the quickest to recognise the need, and to argue, for the elaboration of a transnational critical-theoretical discourse which would leave no 'existing' frame of reference undisturbed. (Willemen 1998: 10–11)

In other words, there is no centre-ground; in Willemen's view, one could not simply agree to disagree, in the best 'liberal pluralist' sense (1998: 10); the proverbial bull has to be taken by the horns and the critic risks being scored in the process.

Willemen's more recent essay from 2005, 'For a comparative film studies,' outlines more explicitly what has mostly been implied in the essay on Third Cinema (1989). He argues that the 'real challenge' facing cross-cultural film studies today is 'to find ways of overcoming the limits of any cultural relativism, any fetishization of geo-political boundaries, and to elaborate a cultural theory worthy of the name' (2005: 98). 'At present, cultural theory, wherever practised,' he notes, and as I have argued above, 'must be regarded as still mired in its prehistoric phase, precisely for being incapable of coming to terms with its own historicity' (2005: 98). He offers as a starting point Hohendahl's assertion that in order to investigate the workings of culture in modern society, '[s]uch a concept would have to begin by avoiding all culture-critical prejudices and debate anew the problematic correlation between the conditions of production (organised capitalism), social formation, and political

struggle (state intervention)’ (Willemen 2005: 99). Willemen offers less a theory of cinema than a theory of cultural production through the study of cinema; cinema for him is a particular mode of cultural practice in which the relations between art and society, between the production and the consumption of culture, may be studied. Cinema, he argues, ‘is particularly well suited to provide a way into the question of how socio-economic dynamics and pressures are translated into discursive constellations’; it also ‘dramatizes the very processes of modernization understood as the differential encounters with capitalism underpinning what, in Marxist theory, is called combined and uneven development’ (Willemen 2005: 99). There are two central questions he asks:

The first one is the further elaboration of a theory of subjectivity-in-history (with associated questions of individuation, modes of address, regimes of looking and so on). The second one is the as-yet still unasked question of how the transformation of physical energy into labour power, which is the founding dynamic of capitalism, happens to present itself in cinematic discourse. The problem underpinning a comparative practice of film studies would then be: how do cinemas emerging from within different socio-historical formations negotiate the encounter between capitalist modernization and whatever mode of social-economic regulation and (re)production preceded that encounter? (Willemen 2005: 99)

This is a look at culture in film not from a representational angle — for example, how culture is semiotically presented, or how culture is constructed as the result of state or imperialist pressures — but from the perspective of how this cultural representation comes into being as a result of the encounter of a social formation (his own term [2005: 101]) with capitalism. One of the questions I raise in my introduction was how to formulate a comparative poetics of cinema that could account for a film’s socio-economic milieu. Willemen’s use of C. S. Peirce’s theory of the sign may prove a way into the issue. In Willemen’s view, the representational aspect of the image is informed by the indexical, iconic, and symbolic aspects of the sign as articulated by

Peirce. However, Willemen argues that these aspects manifest dimensions that extend beyond the text and its immediate context; various other intra- and inter-textual dimensions need to be taken into account. These include aspects of the film industry, such as the technology available in a given place and time, or the modes of production that characterise it, as well as distribution and exhibition patterns, but also, and most importantly, the broader socio-economic fabric of which any film industry is necessarily a part. Willemen is, for instance, primarily concerned with questions of the organisation of social relations and labour, including ‘dead labour.’¹⁸ In other words, the task of comparative cinema is not merely to compare and contrast the stylistic and narrative employment of cultural tropes, but also to account for the socio-historical relations that have given rise to the cultural tropes, *as well as* their comparativity, including the nature of their translatability:

It now falls to the new discipline of comparative film studies to begin to explore, more systematically, how social-historical dynamics impact upon and can be read from films. Such a reading has to proceed with forensic care, paying attention to the ways in which, in different geo-cultural regions, films orchestrate their modes of address, the relations between the indexical, iconic and symbolic dimensions of substances and forms of content and expression, paying due attention to the co-presence of a dual fantasy structure vehiculated by that network of signifying relations. The programme of work is vast and must be done, and discussed, transnationally if it is to make any significant headway. (Willemen 2005: 110–11)

For this reason, Willemen is supportive of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society, of whose activities include a quarterly journal dedicated to advancing and supporting cultural work done within Asia and between Asian countries. The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project was described by Stratton and Ang as ‘so left-field in the cultural studies project, that its place in the official history of the field remains uncertain’ (1996: 366). The scope is both local and

18. ‘For Marx, the labour power of past generations is also stored in the form of dead labour in machines of various kinds’ (Willemen 2004: 9)

regional;¹⁹ the society's activities offers Asian academics opportunities to publish work on Asian cultural products that may find difficulty in being published elsewhere, especially by North American and European academic publishers and university presses, whilst at the same time questioning the delineations of the term 'Asian.' These questions include: what is an 'Asian' cultural studies? What is Asia and how can we understand it? As such, the society offers a space for dialogue between cultural scholars working ostensibly in the field of 'Asian Studies,' including those who have been traditionally writing for local and international readerships. The aim is to expand cross-cultural scholarship beyond the 'East-West' paradigm. However, the sheer plurality of Asian languages means that all the work written in vernacular languages needs to be translated into English (and published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis), and English becomes the medium via which knowledge of a part of Asia becomes accessible to other parts of Asia. Its reach is thus also automatically *intra*-regional, and *inter*-national, extending beyond the geographical confines of the territory known as 'Asia'; put differently, in trying to talk to one's neighbours, one is also trying to talk to the world.

These inter-cultural efforts are not without practical limitations. At one of their conferences which I attended in Seoul, South Korea, in October 2006,²⁰ the practical limitations were apparent: all the papers at the conference were

19. This can be contrasted, for example, with the *Transnational China Project* sponsored by the James Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University (<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~tnchina/>), which seeks to foster relations between 'the greater China region' and the United States via academic and cultural means, maintaining as its loci of interest on the development of a 'transnational' China, defined by the exponential economic growth of the People's Republic, and its implications for the United States.

20. *Trans: Asia Screen Culture Conference* organised by the Trans: Asia Screen Culture Institute, with the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society, and the Seoul Art Cinema, sponsored by the Korean National University of Arts, Seoul, South Korea, 9-11 October 2006.

first translated into written Korean for the largely Korean audience, meaning contributors had to submit the full papers to the organisers several months before the actual event; all papers delivered in the Korean language were translated into written English for non-Korean-speaking participants, but verbally translated through the use of translation kits into Mandarin for the sizeable Mandarin-speaking, non-English-speaking participants; Mandarin language papers were likewise verbally translated into English, potentially excluding non-Mandarin speaking, non-English speaking, non-Korean reading audiences, of which it is perhaps safe to say there were none present at the time. The desire for an 'inter-Asia' dialogue is commendable, but in a world still having to do without the Babel Fish,²¹ the inability of translation to engage more than two languages at a time makes it always necessary to employ a third-party, either in the form of an army of interpreters as in the case of the United Nations, or in the case of a journal focussed on Asian subjects for Asian readers, the role that is currently given to Standard English. The Inter-Asia project is ambitious enough and unusual enough for Stratton and Ang to remark on the project's predecessor, the *Trajectories* conference held in Taiwan in 1992 (1996: 386), as being 'subversive' (1996: 366). They note that at this meeting, the first major one of its kind, 'speakers came from Taiwan, Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong as well as Canada, Australia and the United States,' and 'the absence of representatives from Britain and British cultural studies was hardly noticed, let alone a major topic of discussion' (1996: 386). The dual admiration and bewilderment, if not discomfiture, of the writers are

21. A fictional device in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) facilitating the simultaneous translation of any language spoken in the universe into a language the wearer can understand, thus allowing alien species to communicate without the time lapse necessary when using an interpreter, or indeed without the need for an interpreter at all.

apparent, primarily at the change they sensed was taking place, but could not yet articulate:

This reflects the current intensifying formation of an Asia-Pacific network of interconnections, where Britain — and more generally, Europe — are hardly relevant. Here, then, a very different configuration of the ‘international’ is taking shape, where the fine distinctions between neo-colonialist, post-imperialist, postcolonial and diasporic are put to severe test. New oppositions, new hierarchies are created here: and one of the most subversive aspects of the ‘Trajectories’ conference may be the very relativization of all discursive self/other positionings within the Anglophone cultural studies community. (Stratton and Ang 1996:386)

The conflation of ‘different’ with ‘subversive’ is particularly salient here; the ‘subversion’ lies in the act of circumventing, rather than contesting, the hegemony of Eurocentric discourse, and as a result, sidesteps the more traditional dialectical confrontations of East and West, margin and centre, inside and outside.²² Lee Weng Choy explains, in his column for the Asia Art Archive’s newsletter, *DIAAALOGUE*, the rationale for the Inter-Asia project:

More recently, Chen Kuan-Hsing and Chua Beng-Huat, the Co-Editors of the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal, explained at a seminar why, for the name of their publication, they deliberately chose the words ‘inter’ and ‘Asia,’ instead of ‘intra’ and ‘Asian.’ So what is this difference between ‘Asia’ and ‘Asian’? Obviously, the former is a noun while the latter is an adjective, but more than that, ‘Asian’ as an adjective often characterises something as Asian in its *essence* — for instance, ‘filial piety is an Asian value,’ ‘feminism is not part of Asian culture,’ and so on. Whereas the term ‘Asia,’ at least in Kuan-Hsing’s and Beng-Huat’s usage, signifies a deliberately complex, contested and constructed site. In their purview, ‘Asia’ is not definitively bounded by geography; that is why they do not say ‘*intra*-Asia.’ Their journal is not so much interested in what happens within the borders of this region called Asia. Their concern is for what happens across many different ‘Asias’ — just as the word ‘*international*’ presumes many different nations. Furthermore, their use of ‘Asia’ does not denote any cultural essences, either common throughout the region or located in one or another ‘Asian’ society. Rather, it signals emerging discourses that stake as well as contest claims about what the idea of ‘Asia’ might mean. (Lee 2004)

22. See Chen (1996) and Ang and Stratton (1996) for a further dramatisation of their divergent views and politics, especially with regard to the future of cultural studies as a politically efficacious discipline.

This idea of 'Asia' is bound not by geography but continually re-defined through discourse and articulation. It is an 'Asia' that incorporates aspects of 'Western' culture and discourse within its purview, not as an entity other to itself, but one that is part of the transformative process of cultural formation:

From a Taiwanese perspective, the United States, Canada, Britain and Australia are all part of the globally dominant English-speaking West. [...] However, neither 'Japan' nor 'China' exist today outside of the globalizing force of capitalist modernity with which the 'West' has so identified itself. (1996: 386–87)

An example of how this force is manifested may be found in 'the provision of high-tech simultaneous Chinese/English and English/Chinese translation for *all* participants' at the conference in Taiwan (Stratton and Ang 1996: 386).

Mediation in the translation of cross-cultural products like transnational cinema is difficult to theorise because it is difficult to extricate one translingual process from another. In multilingual societies, where linguistic distinctions may mirror class cultures, the problem is exacerbated. I shall offer the brief example of Singapore, simply as one that I am more familiar with. In spite of having four official languages, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, proficiency in one or more of the four is often very variable amongst different sectors of the population. Whilst public documents are available in four languages (though usually the default is in English and Mandarin, with material in Malay and Tamil being available on request), cultural products do not face the same imperatives. Mainstream English language films, like Hollywood blockbusters, are often subtitled in Chinese in acknowledgement of the 77 per cent ethnic Chinese majority that make up the population, but not in Malay or Tamil. The latter are expected to understand English, or if they are restricted from watching these films, the numbers are not significant enough to affect box office revenue. In the case of non-English language films, especially those screened in arthouse cinemas, such as French or Iranian films, subtitles

are often in English and nothing else, alienating not just the minority non-English speaking Malay or Tamil population, but a potentially large segment of the Chinese population whose literacy in English may be insufficient to keep up with the subtitles. Clearly a more detailed sociological study will be necessary to tease out all the implications of translation in this context, but my raising it here is designed to highlight all the potential areas in which translation, whilst increasing accessibility to a cultural product on the one hand, may simultaneously restrict access to meaning on the other.²³

Willemen characterises the difficulty accounting for all the contextual layers at work within a cultural text as an alchemical one: ‘at present, cultural theory finds itself in a position akin to that of chemistry at the time of the alchemists: one can detect mysterious processes at work transforming one thing into another, but the hows and whys remain beyond our intellectual reach until we have found a means of deciphering the dynamic sequencing of cultural genomes’ (2004: 8). He has invoked the terminology of scientific study on other occasions as well:

A breakthrough in cultural theory analogous to the achievement in physics of a Mendeliev table of elements or, in biology, of DNA profiling (metaphorically speaking, the construction of the DNA sequencing of cultural formations) is, unfortunately, unlikely as long as the financial resources required for such a project are withheld. Those resources will continue to be withheld for as long as religious modes of thinking about social and personal relations benefit the current power-elites. (Willemen 2005: 98)

23. Interestingly, Bassnett and Trivedi note that ‘[s]tudents of translation almost all start out with the assumption that something will be lost in translation, that the text will be diminished and rendered inferior. They rarely consider that there might also be a process of gain’ (1999: 4). In other words, while the source and target texts may bear enough similarities as to be compared, they are never considered the same. If languages and textual systems are the same, there would be no need for translation.

There is clearly an expressed desire for an Enlightenment-style breakthrough in cultural theory beyond the murkiness of premodern 'religious modes of thinking' that he believes prevents cultural criticism from going further than it possibly could. Beyond that, there is also the late modern desire for a 'Theory of Everything,' one that is freed from the agency of church or state, yet seemed to find its authority in the naturally occurring state of 'nature':

The precondition for such a collaboration [in comparative film studies] is that the participants should be prepared to consider their own intellectual formations and thought-habits as symptomatic constellations shaped by the very same dynamics that animate historicity itself. To date, such a programme of work has been thought of, in my view correctly, in terms of the possibility of a historical materialist theory of culture. But in the same way that no theory has as yet been elaborated capable of reconciling Einsteinian physics and quantum theory, so there is no single theory available to us that is capable of articulating cultural dynamics with the socio-economic field. Reflection theory has been discredited for nearly a century, and its opposite, assuming a non-correspondence between the economic and the cultural, has, of course, merely muddled the waters. The long march to the theorization of cultural dynamics has barely begun, mainly because to date we have been able to identify only some of the directions in which we should *not* go. (Willemsen 2005: 99)

In charting the different approaches to culture in film studies, from historical poetics to identity politics to neo-Marxist historical materialism, their similarities become more apparent in spite of their more obvious differences. These similarities lie mainly in their concerns with the tensions between universalism and pluralism, and those between discourse and practice: Bordwell rejects the universalism of 'Grand Theory,' but instates his own universalist discourse in neo-formalist practice; postcolonial theorists reject the universalism of colonialism, but instate the universalist discourse of diversity and pluralism; Willemsen rejects the universalisms of both historical poetics and identity politics in anticipation of a new discourse that may encompass both universality (the argument for a cultural DNA) and diversity (where the DNA recombines into different forms) while exposing their limitations at the

same time (where the DNA potentially mutates or fails to combine). Žižek describes the problem in structural terms:

Where, then, is universality ‘as such’? That is to say, if all individual cases of the species are just so many failed attempts to actualise the universal notion, where do we locate this notion ‘as such’? *In the exception*. However, from a structural standpoint, [...] it is not sufficient to explain the exceptions from the simple external interaction between rules and idiosyncratic, externally/contingently determined cases. What one should ask is *why does the domain of rules itself need exceptions*, i.e. why is the exception *structurally necessary*, why would the domain of rules collapse without its founding exceptions? (Žižek 2001: 27)

These assertions and contradictions are, interestingly, part of the processes of modernity and modernisation themselves. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the necessity of coming to terms with the transformations within modernity as put forward by Gerard Delanty.

Intimations of a modern dilemma

The tension between universal and individual subjectivities is central to the project of modernity. Modernity, as Delanty explains, is ‘articulated around a central conflict — be it democracy versus capitalism, liberty versus discipline, the individual versus society, differentiation versus integration or cultural ideal versus social reality,’ at the same time, it imposes ‘a logic of unity on the world — largely by means of the nation-state which set limits on politics — but it was also articulated through a logic of differentiation which provided the foundations for the project of autonomy and its radical discourses’ (Delanty 1999: 18). Delanty also argues that, modernity ‘above all, refers to the encounter between the cultural model of society — the way in which society reflects and cognitively interprets itself — and the institutional order of social, economic and political structures. As a political project, modernity gains its impulse from the tension between the cultural and the institutional’ (Delanty 1999: 11). If the tension between unity and difference is

inherent to the project of modernity itself, then it is not something that can be easily transcended using the discourse that is available *as* a product of modernity as well, especially while the ‘modern social actor is an interpreter who is both shaped by the prevailing cultural model and at the same time is enabled by virtue of his or her interpreting capacity to act in an autonomous manner’ (Delanty 1999: 11). This perpetuates, for Delanty, the ‘expression of the great faith of the Enlightenment in the liberating power of knowledge. In so far as the social actor is an autonomous actor, capable of creatively interpreting cultural values and norms, the social world is never closed or determined, but is always open to transformation. Modernity is ultimately, then, a project of social constructivism’ (1999: 11). In other words, the well-meaning desire to find answers for one’s social condition, to theorise one’s cultural practices, is already part and parcel of the condition of modernity. This desire for self-understanding, this ‘narrative of self-realization as opposed to the manifestation of a divine plan’ (Delanty 1999: 20), through ‘the self-legislating power of human reason’ enabled the recognition of ‘the authenticity and therefore the legitimacy of the birth of the Subject in its struggle for self-assertion’ (Delanty 1999: 20):

The notion of the consent of the governed became fundamental to the self-understanding of the modern project. From the scientific revolution to the Protestant Reformation to the American and French Revolutions to the October Revolution, modernity unfolded as a project that sought to reconstruct the world in its own image. What varied was exactly how the Subject was to be understood. (Delanty 1999: 21)

In this sense, the discourse of modernity gives legitimacy to the discourse of personhood, culture and identity. At the same time, the idea of an individuated subjectivity is defined and measured by and against the agency of the superstructure that is society, now divorced from the exclusivity of church and state: ‘Modern society differs from traditional society in that it is a differentiated unity and therefore the question of integration is central to it’

(Delanty 1999: 27). The substitution of church and king with the modern nation state results in a different quest for unity — that of the ‘nation,’ which ‘becomes the ultimate point of identification, overriding class and political loyalties’ — seeking at the same time to assimilate difference through ‘institution-building’ (Delanty 1999: 29). This is the ‘homogenizing logic of the state’ (Delanty 1999: 29), driving the process of cultural rationalization (Delanty 1999: 32), through the institutions of art (Delanty 1999: 33), knowledge and education (Delanty 1999: 34), and the public sphere, which is always already distinguished from the private, domestic sphere (Delanty 1999: 36). The process of modernisation, Delanty further argues, is accelerated by ‘the printed, not the spoken, word’ (1999: 37):

The emergence of a reading public was one of the most decisive moments in the formation of modern forms of communication, for printed discourse made possible the separation of discourse from the Subject or social actor. Discourse, institutionalized in the public sphere of civil society, became a medium of communication which was irreducible to any particular social actor. (Delanty 1999: 37)

What I am trying to argue for with this appeal to the question of modernity is my own rationalization of the plurality of discourses in film and cultural theories about the nature of culture, that enact in various ways the desire of the modern subject, for whom ‘there is only one trajectory, the master trend of change from the premodern — the origin — to the modern, the *telos* or the goal of history’ (Delanty 1999: 39). For Bordwell, it is the transition of film aesthetics from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘classical,’ from the desire for ‘meaning’ to the free-floating action of form separate from meaning; for postcolonial theory, it is the transition from imperialist discourse to a non-imperialist one, the argument being how the latter might be defined or achieved; and for Willemen, it is the transition from an institutionalised mode of discourse to a non-institutionalised one, however the latter might be defined or achieved. The

telos of theory, and of cultural discourse, is that goal of history, that is, to come up with a 'better' way of talking about ourselves.

The urgency of that goal, to transform discourse about cinema and culture, is the urgency of narrative closure. Delanty argues that '[m]odernity entailed an evolutionary myth of progress which was conceived as the unfolding of a narrative, the narrative of the manifestation of Reason, the realization of subjectivity, the building of institutions, the mastery of nature and the process of civilization' (Delanty 1999: 39). The present 'crisis' of modernity, of endless cultural differentiation, of self-critique, of globalisation, and so on, is the crisis of the narrative starting to lose its shape or form. Delanty recounts how the lofty ideals of the Enlightenment are now being threatened by the form modernity has taken in the late twentieth century (1999: 42):

The modern Subject was formed in a society of producers, but we are now living in a society of consumers in which creativity is no longer tied to the production of commodities. The question of autonomy is much more complex today, for, in general, the threat to human autonomy does not come from either the state or the church but from a variety of other forces, such as the market, urban violence, environmental destruction, changes in the uses of information and cultural production, and identity politics such as those pertaining to gender and race. (Delanty 1999: 46)

This is the result, he says, of 'a de-massified society in the sense that the threat to the autonomy of the individual comes not from the "mass" which annihilates the autonomous individual but from the very self-expressions of individuality itself' (Delanty 1999: 46). If cultural discourse as I have tried to explore is caught in the bind of a dog chasing its own tail, it is because it is also caught in the bind that modernity has enacted:

What has become questionable today is the very coherence of the idea of the autonomy of the Self, in its personal and collective manifestations. The notion of universalizable personhood, which I have argued underlay the modern project, has collapsed by the end of the twentieth century in an intellectual climate that celebrates difference, the Self as context-

bound, and multiple identity projects. We are less inclined to believe in the idea of an abstract and universal person today: the discourse of the Self has unleashed multiple selves whose autonomy is not something that can be articulated in the traditional terms associated with modernity. (Delanty 1999: 47)

Thus, '[a]t the end of the twentieth century [...] we are witnessing the decline of the social, not its rise. [...] Processes of globalization have undermined the project of modernity as one of institution-building by an autonomous agency. What has collapsed is a belief in both the autonomy of agency and the legitimacy of the social and political order' (Delanty 1999: 49). Rather than posit the argument that 'the nation-state is losing its ability to legislate' as a result of its historical fictionality, Delanty asserts that it is 'not so much the decline of the nation or state' that is the issue, 'but their increasing uncoupling' (1999: 49). The result, he says, is that 'nation and state go their own separate ways, releasing in one direction a politics of identity and, in another, an unfettered instrumentalism' (1999: 49). This is the position from which Willemsen seems to take his cue; for him the politics of identity argued through the cultural readings of cinema become irrelevant in the face of the instrumentalism of global capital.

After three decades of postmodern freeplay and poststructuralist deconstruction, Delanty notes a more recent and 'gradual shift from *differentiation* to *de-differentiation* and the related shift from *integration* to *fragmentation*. By de-differentiation is meant the blurring of the boundaries between institutional structures, such as culture and economy, the private and the public, rights and identity, work and leisure' (Delanty 1999: 50). This process is accompanied by a new 'desire for *enchantment*,' which is 'not the revenge of premodern tradition or the return of irrational historical forces, but the product of late modernity' (Delanty 1999: 56):

[...] the idea of re-enchantment captures the contemporary salience of identity projects which seem to challenge, or at least re-configure, the great ideologies of modernity. These ideologies — liberalism, conservatism, socialism — were primarily codified by intellectual elites and defined the relationship between state and society; they specified a subject and were designed for the purpose of the mobilization of the population. [...] Today, it has become commonplace to remark that these classic ideologies have come to an end, or at least no longer command mass allegiance [...]. What has replaced them is a new politics of identity [...]. But what is distinctive about this new politics of identity is not so much the disappearance of ideology but its refraction or recombination by new social actors as well as the older ones, who are launching what are essentially identity projects. (Delanty 1999: 56–57)

What I shall attempt in the following chapters is to identify this ‘new politics of identity’ as it applies to the selected films, one that is not simply a case of a knowledgeable insider’s attempt to market a self-orientalised culture for an ignorant outsider’s consumption, nor a case of the tourist sampling cultural curios. The task is to explore, in microcosm, non-European cultural encounters with aspects of late modernity, and from their specificities, extrapolate a mode of cultural comparison that may serve them beyond their current limits. It is a way of having to ‘rethink the normative and cognitive categories of occidental modernity’ (Delanty 1999: 98), without simply countering them from a localised, ethnicised or essentialised standpoint; or in Delanty’s words, to speak of ‘the Subject emerging in a way that somehow dissolves the conflict between autonomy and fragmentation’ (1999: 102).

Whether it is a case of re-enchantment in the face of late modernity, the question of cultural identity continues to project an emotional dimension in which much of cultural theory, grounded in Enlightenment rationalism, rarely engages. Cultural assertion, in the form of the various -isms in identity politics, is never solely a function of political instrumentalism, although that is one aspect of it. It is one thing to say we are all subjects of post-Enlightenment modernity and that our cultural subjectivities continue to reflect that, and

another to feel an affiliation, whether by social conditioning or otherwise, for those subjectivities to the extent that one feels the need to defend it. As Kuan-Hsing Chen puts it, even as it attempts to distinguish a local identity from a national one, ‘identity (however multiple, partial, momentary, strategic) is the foundation for political alliance and the most powerful political force moving in the third-world context’ (1996: 41). Simply being able to see the structures that construct one’s identity does not negate the way one relates to one’s identity; the challenge is to stop the dog chasing its own tail without a descent into cynicism that ultimately disempowers critical and cultural practice. The solution for Haun Saussy, who writes of comparative literature, may be to elaborate on ‘the poetics *of* comparative poetics’ (1993: 16):

We are thus forced to acknowledge, on several planes at once, the properly poetic character of comparative poetics. It has to make up its own language as it goes along. Not only does it lead, by means of adventurous translations, to collocations that are original in any of the languages to which it refers, but in taking stock of the effects of its own translation it is obliged to set new standards of literalness and metaphoricity, truth and fiction. Comparative poetics doomed to originality. (Saussy 1993: 16)

Exploring what *that* poetics may potentially consist of in the realm of a comparative cinema is the project on which I am about to embark in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

ZHANG YIMOU

The Fifth Generation filmmakers emerged in China in the mid-1980s, roughly coinciding with the rise of Deng Xiaoping as leader of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978, ushering in a climate ‘characterized by economic reform, modernization and liberation’ (Zhang 2004: 226). The Beijing Film Academy, closed since the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), was re-opened for registration in 1978, enrolling its now-famous ‘Fifth Generation’ of students, who graduated in 1982. The impact of these filmmakers was to introduce (what was perceived as) a radically new film language both in the histories of Chinese and international film-making. Two monographs on the ‘New Chinese Cinema’ cite the Fifth Generation films as the starting point of their analyses (see Tam and Dissanayake 1998; and Cornelius 2002). Tam and Dissanayake argue that much of cinema in China since its introduction in 1896 was of foreign origin and that this created a sense of ‘alienness’ (1998: 1) amongst Chinese audiences who felt no cultural ownership of the product: ‘for most of this century the attitude was widespread that the art of cinema was not a native form of entertainment and communication’ (1998: 2). They add, though rather unhelpfully, ‘[h]owever, with the passage of time, this notion began to fade away,’ and the ‘emergence of the Fifth generation of film-makers [...] changed the situation significantly’ (1998: 2). Sheila Cornelius describes the radicalism of the New Chinese Cinema as part of a questioning of identity following Deng’s economic reforms:

Following centuries of relatively well-founded mistrust of foreign imperialist incursions, ‘Westernness’ became all the more threatening to a sense of national identity. The films of the Fifth generation film-makers thus look to the past for the roots of cultural crisis, discover why change is resisted, but cannot formulate a way forward. (Cornelius 2002: 37).

In contrast, Yingjin Zhang argues for the Fifth Generation's place within the historiography of Chinese cinema. Its radicalism for him is but a continuation of the path Chinese cinema has already set out on, its reason for being as much a result of its historical circumstance as its predecessors.

It is not my intention in this chapter to re-narrate the histories of the Fifth Generation nor of Zhang Yimou's career as a c/overt dissident; neither is it my intention to reveal one 'truth' at the expense of another. Rather, I would like to explore the tensions in the constructions and perceptions of Zhang's films, in terms of how they contribute to questions of cultural translatability and comparison that I have already delineated in the preceding chapters.

I

Paul Clark writes of Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), shot by Zhang Yimou, as the film that first brought Chinese cinema to international attention:

Apart from the setting, all elements of the film were new, or at least unexpected. Instead of the usually heavy mainstream reliance on dialogue, *Yellow Earth* used image to a remarkable effect. Clear, ordered narrative was replaced by slow, indirect revelation of the characters and their predicament. The ending of the film was self-consciously ambiguous. (Clark 2002: 72)

Significantly, Clark's description could well apply to the cinematography of the European post-war art cinema; and to that degree, the similarities are unsurprising as the Fifth Generation directors were fed a steady diet of European films during their years at the Beijing Film Academy. Fourth Generation filmmaker Xie Fei writes, '[i]n our classes, we show our students art films. We do everything to allow our students to view films of different schools and artists. But we seldom touch upon entertainment films like the musicals, westerns, melodramas, and science fiction which are so popular' (1990: 80). So rather than try and read Chinese and European cinemas as

different from each other, I would like to consider the advent of cinema in China as part of the advent of (European) modernity on its cultural landscape. However, rather than posit the encounter dialectically, in terms of how the technological apparatus and its accompanying narrative forms were alien to and thus potentially transformed China into a European cultural colony, I would like to relate its arrival to a number of other historical processes at the turn of the twentieth century. Any historical periodisation must inevitably be accompanied with contingencies. Without resorting to a narrative recounting of modern Chinese history — there are other more comprehensive accounts than I can ever hope to accomplish here — mine will draw on key moments from the late nineteenth century, following the concession of Hong Kong to Britain after the war, to the late twentieth century, following communist China's rapid embrace of capitalism. In my view, the early films of Zhang Yimou enact in particular that encounter in the latter. While the varied responses to his films suggest a kind of ambivalence towards what the nature of China 'in transition' might be, the allegations that have been levelled at Zhang, to be discussed below, of orientalisising Chinese culture for the pleasure the 'Western' gaze, in tandem with his international popularity, raise questions of cultural translation that have not been fully explored.²⁴

Although film arrived in China as a European import in 1896 (Hu 2000; Zhang 2004: 13-14), its arrival there coincides closely with the inception of modern cinema in Europe. Contrary to Tam and Dissanayake's analyses, Jubin

24. Sheldon Lu credits Zhang with single-handedly jumpstarting the international demand for Chinese cinema in the 1990s: 'By funding his production through transnational capital, and by distributing his films in the international film market, Zhang has created what might be called 'transnational Chinese cinema.' He has brought about a permanent change in the pattern of Chinese national cinema. After Zhang Yimou, the mechanisms of funding, production, marketing, distribution, and consumption of Chinese cinema were forever changed' (1997b: 109).

Hu argues that although it was a technological import from Europe, film was perceived by the Chinese in the early years ‘simply [...] as a tool to record another art form, similar to the traditional Chinese shadow play which displayed stories from traditional Chinese operas,’ in which ‘opera was the essence while “film” was only the means of recording it’ (2000). Laikwan Pang notes that ‘cinema was just not that popular with the Chinese masses in the first two decades of its appearance’ (2006: 67), while Paul Clark notes that ‘the strong influence of operatic conventions’ extended well into the 1970s in mainland China (1983: 310). The fact that the Chinese seemed to approach film as something already ‘Chinese’ meant that filmmakers did not perceive the need to claim the medium for themselves:²⁵ ‘when the European filmmakers in the 1920s were busy exploring the potentialities of film as a new medium, their Chinese counterparts did not show much enthusiasm for developing a “language” which specifically belonged to film’ (Hu 2000). According to Hu, the mimetic quality of film was acknowledged by early Chinese audiences but their response was comparatively lukewarm. While they were ‘extremely astonished by the “truthfulness” of film [...] the Chinese tried to find the identity of film and the traditional Chinese art forms through their “essential common aspect” by ignoring the mechanism and techniques of film’ (2000). He also recounts that the earliest recorded film review in China expressed neither surprise nor curiosity about the new technical medium, expanding instead upon the author’s ‘thoughts about the relationship between film and human life, and even the relationship between film and dream’ (2000). Pang’s account of the early experiences of Chinese audiences corroborate this. However, along with the technology that brought the cinema to China, and the foreign ownership of distribution and exhibition channels, a flood of foreign

25. As they did instead, for instance, in South Asia (see Rajadhyaksha 1999).

films was brought into China (Zhang 2004: 14–17). In addition, because imported films depicted scenes in America and Europe, unlike American or European audiences, Chinese audiences did not recognise themselves or their milieux in the films, and related to the ‘space of foreignness’ differently (Pang 2006: 77). Pang gives the example of an early film spectator’s experience with the cinema, who had chosen

to rely on the traditional Buddhist/folk concept of *wanshi jumie* [all phenomena vanished, Pang’s translation] to interpret a novel, and somehow alienating, experience imported from the West, so that he can retreat safely to a familiar system of thinking, and therefore into a protected subject position, which the film had perhaps disturbed. [...] while the writer tries to separate the filmic reality from his own with the threshold of darkness, he ultimately uses the concept of *wanshi jumie* to link reality and representation, exclaiming that these changing images are in fact reflections of a deeper reality. (Pang 2006: 77)

This ‘deeper reality’ refers to the Buddhistic notion of impermanence. Pang reads this effort to incorporate one cultural reality into another as an example of the active participation of the spectator in generating meaning from an unfamiliar form:

[...] this painstaking attempt to link the two realities actually highlights the boundary between them, as they cannot be connected without recourse to the traditional Chinese notion of ultimate cosmic order. As was the case in many other countries, modernity descended on China along with a new visual discourse, but the viewer should not be seen as a passive and involuntary receptacle for such images. In this case, the writer both highlights and rejects the connection between the film and his reality, and reaches the implicit conclusion that, after all, there is no need to take the overwhelming effects of the image too seriously. (Pang 2006: 78)

The lesson from this encounter can be extended to the cross-cultural analysis of Chinese cinema, though the layers of audience engagement are not always possible to separate (Kaplan 2006/1989); in the space of the immeasurable is perhaps where the questions of the comparative and the translatable lie.

To consider the history of modern China as one that is separate from European modernity is to consider only half of the story; or as Takeuchi Yoshimi put it, ‘Oriental modernity is the result of European coercion, or is something derived from that result’ (2005: 53). Although Takeuchi, a Japanese sinologist, notes that civil society had existed in the Orient prior to the arrival of the Europeans, he asserts that ‘the direct moment that produced this self-consciousness [in Chinese culture] was the invasion of Europe’ (2005: 54). If the European imperial conquest, which Takeuchi sees as ‘a manifestation of [...] European self-preservation’ (2005: 55) was a result of its modernisation, Europe’s trade with China and the subsequent wrestle of territory culminating in the Opium wars (1839-42), after which the territory of Hong Kong was ceded to the British, cements the, albeit uneasy, ties between the two territories. Thus, European modernity and its imperial desires may also be taken to be a part of contemporary Chinese history. Takeuchi, writing in 1948 and predating Edward Said, goes as far as to say that ‘[i]n order for Europe to be Europe, it was forced to invade the Orient. This was Europe’s inevitable destiny, which accompanied its self-liberation. Its self was confirmed by encountering the heterogeneous’ (2005: 55). A similar point is made by Gerard Delanty who argues that ‘the idea of Europe found its most enduring expression in the confrontation with the Orient in the age of imperialism,’ and that ‘the idea of Europe became tied to processes of bipolar identity formation’ (1995: 84, 85).

During the upheaval in the years between the collapse of the Qing empire and the formation of communist China (1911-1949), Europe saw its greatest crises in modern times — the advent of two world wars. These wars had not just an impact on European economies and societies but also on its film industries. Initially not part of the European conflict, the United States was drawn into the Pacific war when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. This

brought Japan properly into the ‘world war,’ even though its invasion of China may be dated several years earlier to 1931 (Zhang 2004: 58). Other key links in history include the formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, at the beginning of the Cold War headed by the United States and the Soviet Union that was to last for another forty years, and the turbulence of the 1960s, of which the difference in dimensions between the US-European and Chinese experiences is addressed by Wang Hui and Christopher Connery in their essay on the subject (see Wang and Connery 2006).

The more intricate connections between the two histories is the subject of a different study but I believe it is worthwhile to note that they are more interconnected than usually acknowledged in the writings on Chinese cinema. For example, although Sheila Cornelius acknowledges the importance of providing the necessary historical context in which to understand the New Chinese Cinema, she discusses the history of contemporary China as a purely Chinese phenomenon, mainly through the biography of Mao Zedong, the events of which ‘the West’ is only a passive spectator, whether through the hand-wringing in the media over human rights transgressions, or through exerting ‘international pressure’ where necessary, by means of the United Nations (Cornelius 2002: 96, 99). This is not to say that Chinese critics do not resort to similar means of historical compartmentalisation. E. Ann Kaplan questions such reverse stereotyping:

[...] Chinese scholars sometimes say (in response to an American reading of a Chinese film): ‘This is not the *Chinese* way of thinking.’ Or ‘Chinese do not think that way.’ What does this mean? Does it mean that theories develop in very specific national/historical/intellectual contexts that are not readily transferable? Ought we to think of theory in terms of national/cultural issues? (Kaplan 2006: 157)

In a similar vein, by the 1980s, Chinese film critics began to see the early approach of filmed drama as primitive. Xie Fei in 1984 regrets the stagnation

of Chinese cinema; he says that ‘mediocre ideas about film, and a lack of knowledge on the part of our filmmakers of philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, and ideology have created tremendous obstacles’ that were brought about by the ‘Gang of Four’ (1990: 79). He further laments his own lack of film education during the Mao era as a hindrance:

The closed-door policy and the passive teaching methods of the time restricted our knowledge. Many subjects required of foreign high school and college students such as humanities, sociology, national and folk customs, world culture, the history of philosophy, and esthetics were not offered to us. In what was offered, the point of view was biased, the content narrow, and no rich and solid comprehensive foundation of knowledge was laid. To be frank, I dared not make a film dealing with historical topics of the old nationalist period, not to mention ancient China, because my knowledge of history, culture, society, and customs was so limited. In other words, I lacked an artistic sensitivity toward it. (Xie 1990: 83)

In the 1980s, film theories from Europe, especially those of Bazin and Kracauer were received with great enthusiasm in China. In the effort to ‘oppose the artificiality in film wrought by leftist thinking,’ Luo Yijin writes that ‘Bazin’s realism [...] played an important role in affecting the development of Chinese film theory in the 1980s. New methodologies such as semiotics and psychoanalysis began to be introduced, enlarging the vision of Chinese film theory and enriching its patterns as well’ (1990: xvii). These new ideas provided the means by which the study of cinema in China could heed the call of Bai Jingsheng, in 1979, for Chinese film to ‘throw away the walking stick of drama’ (1990: 9). Bai argues that while staged drama required conflict to forward the narrative, film required no such impetus:

It can certainly present conflicts indirectly, reveal emotion, and depict landscapes without any characters on the screen. In drama, the environment (setting) and the objects (properties) cannot exist independently, without the appearance of characters. But in film, natural landscapes and objects can appear in a series of scenes without characters. Though these natural landscapes and objects are also used to express emotions indirectly, they obviously do not directly represent conflicts. (Bai 1990: 6)

In other words, film was less like drama, but more like ‘painting, prose, poetry, and music’ (Bai 1990: 7). Yang Ni similarly calls for throwing off the yoke of drama, that ‘we,’ that is, Chinese filmmakers, ‘would not make any contribution to the development of film art if we stubbornly held fast to the concept of drama or to the principles of dramatic structure’ (1990: 74). She also argues that — and this is particularly significant — ‘I believe that to raise the quality of our filmmaking, the present task is not a matter of strengthening the dramaturgy of the narrative, but to increase, *through effective training*, our basic ability to use the cinematic imitation of reality’ (Yang 1990: 74–75, my emphasis). As with the early Chinese filmmakers, Yang acknowledges film’s capacity for verisimilitude, however, the task she sets forward is not of the ways in which verisimilitude can be enhanced or captured, but how it can be used effectively. This approach to cinema raises two issues: the first is the issue of what constitutes ‘reality,’ who perceives it and how?; and the second is the issue of the best ways and strategies which may present ‘reality’ to the highest degree of verisimilitude. Both issues have implications that are dependant on the socially, politically and culturally specific position of the spectator.

The attempt at the wholesale importation of ‘Western film theory’ has its own historical contingencies, as Berry observes:

Although we may perceive Western film theory in terms of a number of competing and often incompatible schools of thought distributed historically and in relation to social fragments, it arrived in China as one job lot in the 1980s, much as ‘modern art’ and many other things previously excluded did. (Berry 1998a)

Hu Ke narrates how these theories entered China in the 1980s by way of translation via journals such as *Digest of Film Translations*, as well as through visits from renowned American and European film scholars such as David Bordwell, Vivian Sobchack and Janet Staiger, among others (Hu 1998). The

first of these visits took place in the summer of 1984 with three American scholars, Nick Browne, Robert Rosen and Beverly Houston, attending:

About thirty directors, screenwriters, theorists, translators and magazine editors took part, attending over thirty hours of lectures, as well as watching films and videotapes and participating in discussions. This was the first time that the Chinese film world had dealt with contemporary film theory systematically, and although they were unfamiliar with most of the theories and concepts they manifested a thirst for knowledge that impressed the American scholars. (Hu 1998)

The patronage of the last statement notwithstanding, Hu Ke notes in the rest of his article that in spite of these intensive sessions, contemporary film theory, with its emphasis on affect and applied poststructuralist theory, failed to appeal to Chinese film intellectuals in the same way that classical film theory, with its emphasis on form and effect, until the *avant-garde* experiments of the Fifth Generation films, integrating the auteurist practices of the European art cinema, itself influenced by poststructuralist theories, began to emerge (Hu 1998). The difference in the particularities in cultures is thus also the difference in the particularities of histories — it is not a case of ‘Western’ theory not finding resonance in ‘Chinese’ film cultures, but a case of these theories finding different resonances at different times within these different cultures.

Far from arguing that modernity is the new universal under which cultural difference may be understood, the experience of modernity itself elicits a cultural response and transformation. However, if film is a product of the modern era, assessing its implications for cultural modernity is a loaded enterprise. On one level, the content of the film may be said to respond to certain effects of modern society — politics, social and cultural traditions. On another level, the apparatus as a modern device implicates itself in the process. The seductive quality of the richness of Zhang’s colour cinematography and the intimacy of the camera’s gaze upon the oppressed heroine, exploits the allegorical and cryptic nature of Chinese visuality, and, as will be discussed

below, is seen to be a part of a double-pronged strategy to engage the ('Western') audience whilst casting a critical eye on Chinese politics. Having made a name through the influential international film festival circuit — which Julian Stringer defines as 'the existence of a socially produced space unto itself, a unique cultural arena that acts as a contact zone for the working-through of unevenly differentiated power relationships' (2001: 138) — Zhang has been perceived as having to struggle under the additional pressures of state censure (see Cheng 1996; and Halligan 1997). However, Zhang's films that appear in markedly different style, such as abandoning the visual 'seduction' for a more neo-realist aesthetic, have elicited different responses. I am specifically concerned with how film aesthetics invites a politics of reading, that is to say, I shall elaborate on the implications of the different responses his films have elicited with the analysis of *Red Sorghum*, *Ju dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, as examples of Zhang's early filmmaking, and *Not One Less* and *The Story of Qiu Ju*, as examples of his neo-realist phase.

II

The narrative and style of Zhang's early films — *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) — can be characterised by what I shall call 'brutality.' On the surface, each film tells the story of a young woman's forced submission to patriarchal domination, each set within an isolated setting from which the woman has no escape. I would like to explore, in this section, the tension between, on the one hand, the nature of desire, which is central to the construction of the modern individual, and, on the other, the nostalgia for a pre-modern rurality, which is set up by the seductiveness of the visual style — that is, the aestheticisation and ritual fetishisation of rural settings — even as the films construct that rurality as harsh, isolated and ultimately detrimental to the expression of individual desire.

Red Sorghum opens with a voice-over belonging to the protagonist's grandson, who recounts his grandmother's arranged marriage as a young woman to an old leper who owns a sorghum wine factory. The wedding party cross a field of sorghum, during which the sedan chair bearers transporting the young bride begin to sing raucous songs while swinging the chair, in 'the Nietzschean celebration of the Dionysian spirit' (Neo 2003). When the party is attacked by bandits, one of the chair bearers successfully fights them off and exchanges several looks with the bride. He appears later in the film, after the woman is already established at the winery, and they both enter into a sexual relationship (the first rendezvous takes place in the field of sorghum). The leper later dies and the widow takes over the factory along with her lover, whom the grandson explicitly refers to, in the voiceover, as 'Grandpa.' In a night of drunken revelry, the lover urinates into a vat of wine, ironically producing its best vintage ever. The film then shifts in tone to mark the arrival of the Japanese army who destroy the fields and the factory. The workers revolt, but their efforts are crushed, resulting in two workers being skinned alive in front of the others. Jiu'er (or 'Nine' in some translations), the female protagonist, responds with hysteria before she, too, is killed. The sole survivors of the attack are 'Grandpa' and the speaker's father, Jiu'er's child with her lover, who is a young boy at the time. Accompanied by the strains of a folk song, the film closes with images of the mud-caked bodies of the dead amidst the swaying sorghum.

David Neo reads the film as an allegory denouncing China's 'obsolete feudal and patriarchal system,' represented by the impotent old leper (2003; see also Lu 1997b: 108). Jiu'er, the female protagonist, is thus representative of the modern individual, who defiantly condemns her own father for selling her to the leper for a mule, enters the her wedding night armed with a pair of scissors to guard her honour, and defies societal inhibitions by being an active

and willing partner in an adulterous relationship. Neo writes: '[t]he film blatantly criticises the ineffectual and repressive feudal and patriarchal system of China, boldly awakening and beckoning us to the real and genuine realities of our feelings and primal instincts' (2003). He interprets the film as a 'search for roots' and that the end of the film — with only two sole survivors, the rest lie as corpses amidst the sorghum plants — 'tells us that the characters' survival and the survival of the Chinese people depend on their ability to shake off the shackles of repression of Chinese culture and return to grass roots' (Neo 2003). Similarly Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* reads Jiu'er's sexual assertiveness — disturbingly, albeit stereotypically — as a sign of individual independence:

Nine [Jiu'er] [...] does not resist. She looks at the bandit eye-to-eye. In what is to be the best moment in all of 'Red Sorghum,' it is realized that, for Nine, rape by a masked bandit is preferable to marriage to a rich, aging leper. Nine has a mind of her own. (Canby 1988)

The film is variously read as an allegory (Neo 2003), a fable or a parable (Canby 1988; Ebert 1989), and with the second part of the film, when the Japanese invade, as 'realism' (Neo 2003; Canby 1988; Ebert 1989).

The narrative of *Ju dou* is markedly similar. It tells the story of the eponymous female protagonist married off to an old man, who had previously beaten two former wives to death for not producing a son; the film reinforces this brutality by making it known that the old man is in fact impotent. The old man's nephew, later to be Ju dou's lover, lives in the same house and works in the silk-dyeing factory the old man owns. At night, Ju dou is tortured by her husband and his nephew, Tianqing, is forced to listen to her cries. The nephew, however, falls in love with Ju dou and begins to spy on her while she is bathing, something which she discovers and exploits by exposing to his gaze, not just her body, but specifically the bruises that have been inflicted on it.

They have an affair and Ju dou eventually conceives a child who bears her husband's name. The old man later suffers from paralysis due to a stroke and is reduced to crawling or moving about in a bucket on wheels. He learns of the affair and tries to kill the child but is stopped by Ju dou and Tianqing. The lovers then truss the old man up in a barrel, leaving him helpless and dangling, day and night. The couple continue in relative happiness until Ju dou discovers she is pregnant a second time. This time, however, because of the old man's incapacitation, the truth of their adultery can no longer be concealed from society and in desperation she proceeds to abort the foetus with poison, leaving her permanently infertile thereafter.

The child, a son, meanwhile grows up sullen and does not speak. One day, however, he suddenly calls the old man 'Father' and the latter begins to accept him as his son, only to fall into a vat of dye a short while later and drown. Following a dramatic funeral, the film cuts to a decade later, when the child, now an equally sullen teenager, discovers his parents, who have been forced by social decorum to continue living separately, post-coitus, in a cellar. He drags Tianqing, his biological father and his mother's lover, into a dye vat and drowns him, and the film ends with Ju dou's hysteria as she burns down the entire factory and watches as the flames consume the bales of silk around her.

Raise the Red Lantern is set in the same period, in 1920s and 30s China, and centres on a young female protagonist, Songlian. She is introduced as having attended university for a year but is made to drop out following the death of her father in order to marry a rich patriarch. Songlian is defiant but resigned to her lot, enunciated by her walking to the master's house instead of waiting for the sedan chair to arrive. She enters the household as the fourth 'wife' or concubine of the master, whose face is never seen throughout the

film. Before long, Songlian catches on to the politicking amongst the wives, learning quickly that power is gained through the master's favour. The title of the film refers to a ritual within the household of erecting red lanterns outside and within the quarters of the favoured wife. In an attempt to monopolize the master's time, Songlian feigns pregnancy, in the hope of actually becoming pregnant. This proves to be a mistake when her lie is discovered by her maid, who has aspirations one day to become one of the master's wives. Songlian is punished by having her lanterns covered indefinitely with black cloth, condemning her potentially to a lifetime of solitude. She becomes increasingly disillusioned and in a drunken state one day inadvertently blurts out her knowledge of the Third concubine's affair with the family doctor. According to family custom, the Third concubine is dragged out and hanged to death in a room on the roof of the house. Songlian witnesses this grim event, the tipping point for her descent into madness. The film closes with the introduction of a new 'wife' into the master's household and Songlian pacing about the courtyard in her delirium, dressed in her university uniform, as she first appeared in the film.

I have grouped the narrative descriptions of the three films together to highlight their remarkable similarities. They all star Gong Li as a young woman subject to patriarchal domination — her characters are all married to not just old, but decrepit, impotent, and unindividuated men — whose attempts to subvert their domination only results in her annihilation, either in body or in spirit. Each of the women, including Jiu'er who dies fighting the Japanese, enter the film as young and defiant, and leave the film dead, disillusioned, or mad, but before that, they are also often subject to physical, mental, and emotional torture; their momentary liberation in the form of illicit sexual affairs, or the false pregnancy in the case of Songlian, is also in the end the catalyst for their destruction. Jeannette Delamoire explores the representation of

women in Zhang's films as part of a tradition in Chinese melodrama in which 'the spectacle of the powerless is often acted out on the body of a woman,' and the ritualised nature of their subjugation as an exemplar of Michel Foucault's 'theatre of punishments' (Delamoire 1998). A large part of the power of these films lie in the casting of Gong Li — whose private affair with Zhang also generated substantial media interest (Cornelius 2002: 80) — who carries the film 'through her sheer force of presence and her remarkable face, with its mobility and subtlety' (Tam and Dissanayake 1998: 33).

Much has been made about how the representation of gender and domestic power relations acts as an allegory for the political state of modern China: Delamoire believes that *Raise the Red Lantern* provides 'an important but disguised critique of repressive power relations in a totalitarian state' (Delamoire 1998); Lu describes the films, and 'the collective mission of his generation of filmmakers,' as the launch of 'a total attack on the very basis of Chinese tradition, which is perceived as inhuman and repressive to its people,' but that this 'liberation of the self [...] is still the unfulfilled task, the incomplete project of Chinese modernity' (Lu 1997b: 110). What shifts, in these analyses, is what constitutes 'Chinese tradition,' the state, and the self. If one of the professed aims of the communist revolution was to free China from the shackles of its feudal past, Zhang's 'attack' on that aspect of Chinese tradition would seem to hardly merit the authorities' ban on *Ju dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* from being screened in China. If Zhang's intent was to disguise the political message and equate the communist leaders with the ageing patriarchs in his films, thereby offering a sly critique on the ineffectuality of their governance, the state bans would suggest that the authorities had successfully seen past his subterfuge. Zhang has never directly admitted to any political messages behind the films; what is read into the films by critics is the motivation for censorship, or lack thereof, which then in turn

gives the films an allegorical flavour. Jerome Silbergeld refers to *Red Sorghum* as a ‘melodramatic masquerade,’ in that it ‘restores popular melodrama in a variety of styles and structures. It infuses films of moral drama with cloaked identities, so that we know all too well who in the film is good and who is evil but are left uncertain about who or what in modern Chinese society is being referenced allegorically by their moral struggle’ (1999: 238). Of *Raise the Red Lantern* Silbergeld writes: ‘exactly what [the authorities] thought they were banning remains as much a melodramatic masquerade as the film itself; neither they nor Zhang dares to remove the mask’ (1999: 293). So to the degree that the lanterns in *Raise the Red Lantern* can be seen as allegorical sheds no light on the matter, for as Silbergeld also notes, the ‘allegory stimulates “reading” but allows no particular reading, distributing authorship among the audience’ (1999: 111). Regardless of the ‘truth’ of whether the figure of Gong Li represents the youth of China seeking to liberate itself from the geriatrics of tradition, the question remains to be asked what *visual power* lies in the abuse of nubile young women at the hands of brutish men? The trope itself is not a new one — examples such as Desdemona in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* can be found in the English literary tradition — what makes it shocking in the context of Chinese film culture up to that point in time is perhaps its departure from earlier representations of Chinese women and Chinese culture.

Wang Yuejin notes that *Red Sorghum* was ‘[for] some Chinese [...] a traumatic experience’:

Strikingly rough, forthright, rugged, bold and unrestrained both stylistically and morally to Chinese tastes, the film is a shocking affront to many cherished and received formulae of Chinese cultural praxis; to the deep-rooted Confucian ethical and moral codes of sobriety and decorum; to the ingrained artistic codes favouring strategies of concealment and restraint; and to the aesthetic taste which prioritises

emotional delicacy and refinement. Never before has the medium of Chinese cinema been so unquestioningly given over to the countenancing containment of an unbridled and abandoned manner of life and visual wantonness and crudity. (Wang 1991: 80)

The use of such visceral — or to use Rey Chow's term, 'pornographic' (1995: 146, 147) — imagery in Zhang's films is described by her as a means of constructing Chinese modernity via a return to the primitive. Chow argues that the formal innovations of European modernism, when read historically, are simply 'the other side of a continual *primitivization* of non-Western lands and peoples' (1995: 20). This is enacted not just by the Europeans but also by the 'third world':

In the 'third world,' there is a similar movement to primitivize: the primitive materials that are seized upon here are the socially oppressed classes — women, in particular — who then become the predominant components of a new literature. It would not be farfetched to say that modern Chinese literature turns 'modern' precisely by seizing upon the primitive that is the subaltern, the woman, and the child. (Chow 1995: 21)

Chow refers to the Chinese films of the 1960s, in which this primitivism becomes the 'major place for the negotiation of cultural identity' (1995: 22). This primitivism is achieved mainly through the 'prominent nature images and nature figures in these otherwise diverse films [which] include landscape, rural life, and oppressed women' (1995: 35). She adds:

This history of visibility would then enable us to see why it is that the 'China picture' of the 1960s represents, in more than one way, the climax of Chinese modernity: it is a spectacle that epitomizes the ingredients structural to the emergence of primitive passions in the modern era by showing them all at once — the complete and successful overthrow of the past; the urgency of a new beginning constructed on a new notion of humanity; the illusion that this new beginning is primary, unique, henceforth invincible; the mobilization of all energy toward the transparency that is embodied in a male fatherly figure. (Chow 1995: 37)

It is this vision of China, she suggests, that the Fifth Generation were in fact attempting to contest, a vision in which the 'coherence and persuasiveness' of

its paternalism needed to be ‘dismantled’ (Chow 1995: 37). The Fifth Generation did this, ironically, by employing the very images of ‘landscape, rural life, and oppressed women’ (Chow 1995: 35), only, the viscosity employed in Zhang’s rendering of those images covered those images with other layers of meaning:

Regardless of their personal intentions, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou, and their contemporaries become their culture’s anthropologists and ethnographers, capturing the remnants of a history that has undergone major disasters while at the same time imparting information about ‘China’ to the rest of the world. In their hands, filmmaking itself becomes a space that is bifurcated between the art museum and the ethnological museum, a space that inevitably fetishizes and commodifies ‘China’ even while it performs the solemn task of establishing records of China’s cultural violence. (Chow 1995: 38)

Zhang’s was the generation that emerged from the turbulence of the 1960s, and any nostalgia for their rural past is tempered by the Cultural Revolution’s valorising of rurality and peasant life:

For Chen [Kaige] and his contemporaries, who are moved by the sight of monuments of nature such as the Yellow River, filmmaking is a way to *ponder* what had gone wrong with the Cultural Revolution, which was once the pinnacle of hope for Chinese youths of their generation. Nature, especially in the relatively underdeveloped western part of China, suggests that there are ways of reconceptualizing the Chinese culture that are alternative to the manipulative and deceptive ‘China picture’ of the 1960s. (Chow 1995: 39)

Chow sees the films as responding to that failed project of cultural modernisation that was the Cultural Revolution, arguing that the films of the 1980s are ‘first, a means of culture writing, of the ethnography that documents the disasters left behind by the Cultural Revolution’; however, ‘the filmic representation of the past as image has the peculiar effect of being simultaneously past and future, because the past, as that which is completed, is now cast in a different time, the time that unfolds with the process of watching’ (Chow 1995: 42):

The seemingly impossible amalgamation of two different kinds of time —retrospection and forwardness, nostalgia and idealism — thus finds its most appropriate locus in film images, which act both as a review and a preview, epitomizing the past as much as it imagines the future. If filmic visuality has by the 1980s and 1990s become the most gigantic and spectacular form of ‘autoethnography’ by Chinese intellectuals, it is an ethnography not only of chronological, historical time, but also of dream time, of the time of renewed myths. (Chow 1995: 42)

If the Fifth Generation filmmakers are indeed responding to the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, Dai Jinhua offers an explanation for why the event is conspicuously absent in their films:

Until the 1980s, the Fifth Generation avoided the topic entirely; however, their films inevitably came to reflect the fact that they (not the Fourth Generation) are the Cultural Revolution’s spiritual offspring, heirs to the historical and cultural ruptures it caused. They are the ones who bear an unspeakable historical unconscious. Their generation, following a historic act of Patricide, faces the castrating power of the double weight of ancient Eastern civilization and assaults from the West. This generation struggled in despair at the margins of the Imaginary but failed to enter the Symbolic Order. The art of the Fifth Generation is the art of the Sons. The history of the Cultural Revolution determined that their struggle would painfully negotiate an abiding Father-Son symbolic and a Fatherless reality. (Dai 2002: 14)

Like Yingjin Zhang, Dai considers the artistic innovation of the Fifth Generation spent by around 1987 — a year in which China may be summed up by ‘the reestablishment of concentric circles of power; the multi-centeredness of social life; the tremendous shock of the onslaught of Western/Other culture; and the enormous power of commodity ideology to deconstruct and castrate history’ (Dai 2002: 33). Ironically, it is around the same time that the films were beginning to win awards at festivals around the world, even though Dai remarks that ‘*Red Sorghum* signals the fall of the Fifth Generation, though it is indeed a glorious fall’ (Dai 2002: 29). Dai’s analysis of the film focuses on the presentation of the masculine figure, rather than the feminine, as she reads the film as tapping powerfully into the national psyche seeking ‘the interrogation

of the transcendental Father, and the reestablishment of a new order' (2002: 33); China, she says, was 'a nation in need of a hero' (2002: 33), and it seemed to have found it in the character of the unnamed 'Grandpa' in *Red Sorghum*. She discusses in great detail, how the masculine power of 'Grandpa' is asserted time and again throughout the film (2002: 34–44), right to the rousing end in which 'Grandpa stands alone, like the statue of a national hero, his whole body covered with mud, gilded bronze by the setting sun' (2002: 44). Similarly, in the words of Sheldon Lu:

Narrating a legendary, action-packed tale of a heroic past, the film reaches deep into the roots of China and attempts to rehabilitate and establish a new subjectivity of the Chinese nation. The story is a cinematic reenactment of libidinal and psychic liberation. [...] As a crowning piece of Chinese national cinema, the film narrates the story of the rebirth and recovery of the Chinese nation. (Lu 1997b: 108)

Yingjin Zhang likewise sees *Red Sorghum* as 'a milestone of Chinese cinema that marks an end to avant-gardism and a beginning of commercialism' (2004: 238). Its commercialism lies in it 'unabashedly fabricating history as myth and pleased a wide spectrum of audiences with its sophisticated cinematic techniques and lavish ethnographic elements' (Zhang 2004: 238). He also notes that '*Red Sorghum* announced the end of the fifth generation as an avant-garde movement' (Zhang 2004: 238). Thus Yingjin Zhang sees the Fifth Generation output as no more than furthering the aims of their predecessors, favouring 'a non-dramatic structure and depoliticized narration, but they went farther with scant dialogue and music as well as abundant ambiguities in characterization and narration' (Zhang 2004: 236). As a result, prior to *Red Sorghum*, their films found little audience even in China, and what is not said but implied in Yingjin Zhang's argument, is that Zhang Yimou's 'tactics of visuality,' to borrow Rey Chow's term, had to find a new audience in markets outside of China. Nevertheless, Yingjin Zhang concedes that 'the *discursive*

impact of the fifth generation's strategy of historical representation is unmistakable. In their efforts to rewrite revolutionary history, they effectively demythified what had been central to socialist representation' (2004: 236). Chen Xiaoming shares his view that Fifth Generation filmmaking 'effected an imaginary act of rebellion rather than an aesthetic revolution' (1997: 126), which was more a result of history — '[t]his was the moment when the dominant ideology on which earlier films were dependent, ran aground' (Chen 1997: 126) — than artistic design. From an historical angle, it is worthwhile to note that, '[b]y the end of the 1980s, the critical thrust of New Chinese Cinema had largely been spent' (Zhang 2004: 240); though it seemed that the rest of the world was only beginning to discover them.

Given this context, the three films I am discussing here become significant for the history they do not articulate, rural nostalgia notwithstanding. Each of the three films is set within 1930s China. *Red Sorghum* is set in the province of Shandong, the administration of which catalysed the May Fourth movement of 1919, sometimes considered to be the cataclysmic moment in history to which the modernisation of China may be traced (see Takeuchi 2005: 160). After China's last feudal dynasty, the Qing, collapsed in 1911, China entered World War I on the side of the Allies on condition that German controlled provinces such as Shandong would be returned to Chinese control. However, after the war, the Treaty of Versailles in 1914 awarded the province to Japan (see Elleman 2002). Angered at this betrayal by their newly formed republican government, mass demonstrations, many participants among whom were students, took place on the day of May 4th, 1919, in Tiananmen Square (see Schwarcz 1990). The arrival of the Japanese into the Shandong village in *Red Sorghum* thus may be seen to allude to this event, though it is set within the context of the Japanese invasion of

China in 1937. There is a kind of double displacement (or ‘double vision’ that I discuss below) taking place here:

By castrating the castrator/foreign invader, the film consoles a nation that is leaden with anxiety and in danger of losing its memory. *Red Sorghum* announces to the people the continuation of history. So it not only traverses the latest rupture of history/culture; it also effortlessly passes over the wasteland of Cultural Revolution, and the cultural rupture of the May Fourth era as well. *Red Sorghum* thus pushes back into a ‘prehistorical’ era the coming of age of the Fifth Generation and that of the whole nation. This prehistorical era, ambiguous in time, exists in a wilderness outside Ur-society itself. (Dai 2002: 34)

The interspersing of ‘real’ history with mythical history complicates the truth/falsehood, authentic/inauthentic dialectic. The only historical logic is that which takes place within the narrative universe, the ‘Ur-society’ that stands for and yet exists outside of society.

Ju dou and *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang’s films after the ‘glorious fall’ that is *Red Sorghum*) were both banned by the Chinese government at the time of their release, and are believed to have consolidated his status as the Chinese filmmaker to watch at international film festivals.²⁶ Significantly, in these films, ‘real’ history no longer intervenes. *Ju dou* is set in an indeterminate time (though located somewhere in the 1930s, that is, pre-1949, when civil war ends in China and the communist party takes over) and an indeterminate place (a rural village in China). *Raise the Red Lantern* is set in roughly the same period, in an indeterminate town, the entire film being set within the compound of a traditional courtyard mansion, a *siheyuan*, usually the prerogative of the

26. *Ju dou* made history by being the first Chinese film to be nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards in the following year. It was also nominated for the prestigious *Palme d’Or* at the Cannes Film Festival. Likewise, *Raise the Red Lantern* was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar (as an entry from Hong Kong), it later won the BAFTA award for ‘Best Film not in the English Language,’ as well as the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival, and a handful of other critics’ awards.

gentry. Not unlike the English heritage films, the setting of *Raise the Red Lantern* evokes a similar nostalgia for a more genteel time, the external demeanour of which belies a hidden brutality. The worlds of *Ju dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are self-enclosed worlds in which external forces — be it in the form of sexual desire or a college education — are excised or suppressed. Symbolically, the films have been read as post-Tiananmen films: ‘The difference between these films and *Red Sorghum* becomes obvious. They do not return to the “nurturing, regenerating origins” of the Chinese people; on the contrary, they expose and criticize the stifling and degenerating origins of Chinese institutions and habits’ (Lu 1997b: 113). Within these self-enclosed worlds, extracted from geography and history, time is also at a standstill; or rather, time progresses at a pace and a logic known only to that world. The unseen patriarchs represent no particular patriarchs, but every patriarch, as the women represent no particular women, but every woman suffering under patriarchal rule. Without an external reminder, such as the violent intervention of the Japanese soldiers in *Red Sorghum*, temporality in *Ju dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* is, as Sheldon Lu argues, ‘spatialized’:

An eternal space triumphs over time. Time does not move, or it moves in circular and cyclical patterns. Although the film is set in the past, time appears to be an eternal present, without differentiation and progression between the past, the present, the future. Spatial representation creates the overarching, overpowering spectacle. Be it the dye mill or the Chen mansion, the allegorization of a timeless space, an ancient ‘museum,’ as it were, annihilates the possibility of change, of real temporal or historical progression. (Lu 1997b: 110)

Likewise, Rey Chow notes that, ‘[i]n almost anonymous and generic forms [...] images of the land, the village, the country people, and their seemingly unending sufferings conjure up not only a modern and politicized nation at a specific time and place but also a *timeless collective life* that goes beyond the confines of communist history’ (1995: 39).

The sense of this self-enclosed bubble is reinforced by the extensive use of colour and mise-en-scène. Alongside the figure of Gong Li, the *texture* of the image is rendered highly sensual and sexually charged: 'Zhang's films might be described as dramas of desire and sensation. The intense visual energy, the pulsing surfaces of erotic desire, the joyous celebrations of life, the luminous images, and the portrayal of cultural worlds dense and rich in texture hold a special appeal to local as well as international audiences' (Tam and Dissanayake 1998: 33). With the use of discarded Technicolor equipment purchased from Hollywood (Ebert 1989), Zhang has managed to create images with the richness of colour associated with the Golden Age musicals but employed to a very different subject. Part of the fascination comes from the vibrancy of the images and at the same time its utter bleakness. The richness of colour that conveyed exuberance in *The Wizard of Oz* (Vincente Minnelli, 1939) or passion in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), conveys an altogether more complex picture in Zhang's films. The saturation of colour, red in particular, gives the films a sensual feel and an atmosphere of raw sexuality, modifying and extending the traditional association of the colour red with luck and prosperity in Chinese culture, but also the red of revolution in contemporary Chinese history. In *Red Sorghum*

The drinking of the red wine derives its meaning from a network of red motifs: the red wine, red marriage dress and décor, the blood, the sun, etc. They combine to evoke a world of visualized passion, topology of fertility, a cinematically articulated life force, an iconographic presence of creativity and destruction, and death and rebirth. (Wang 1991: 87)

In *Ju dou*, similar effects are achieved with the red dye in the dye factory; there are numerous sequences of the silk cloths being dyed a blood crimson. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the warmth of the lanterns' red contrasts initially with the tepid grey of the mansion's walls and their cold blue sheen at dusk. Later in the

film, the hue cast by the light of the lanterns inside the bridal bed chamber is so overpowering it projects a sense of sickly oppression, rather than wanton passion.

Colour in the films, Jenny Kwok Wah Lau argues, is drawn from the use of colour in Chinese painting, and is thus used not for verisimilitude but for

[...] creating the ‘spirit resonance’ and ‘rhythmic vitality’ of the painting, which is the quintessential criterion for judgement, including brushwork, stroke, and ink. This Chinese preference is related to the Taoist conception of nature. Given that *qi* is the vitality of the spirit, the essence of anything both human and nonhuman, the highest goal of art is to express it. The achievement of a painting is the presentation of the spirit rather than the representation of the physical form. (Lau 1994: 132)

Lau disputes the conventional wisdom that Chinese paintings are mainly experienced in black and white and she cites the paintings of the Song and Ming dynasties as using colours such as ‘white, yellow, and especially green remain[ed] active.’ However, she does concede that, ‘by this time, mainstream art’s attention has shifted to the complementary use of color in relation to ink’ (1994: 132), and that the ‘attraction’ of *Ju dou*, the main subject of her analysis, ‘lies precisely in its untraditional cinematic adaptation of traditional painting which creates meanings that are new to traditional Chinese cinema’ (1994: 133). In *Ju dou*, the red dye, symbolic initially of the couple’s illicit passion, become also the means by which they are destroyed, their red-ness finally consumed at the end of the film by the red flames of the fire.

The use of confined spaces also contributes to the sense of oppression. In *Raise the Red Lantern* in particular, the rigidity of spatial organisation, where the red lanterns line the walls of the square courtyard with ordered symmetry, ‘express the age-old obsession with strict order’ (Lu 1997b: 110). The formality of the spatial arrangement within a traditional courtyard house as depicted in the film is also a microcosm for social relations in Chinese society:

these houses ‘often embodied spatial principles of “self-similarity” implicit in the *li* [propriety], linking household member to family to society and therefore, room to house to city,’ they also ‘embodied the harmonious balance (*yin* and *yang*) necessary for appropriate comportment, [...] through the use of volumetric spatial components, structural and decorative symmetry, and a balanced hierarchy of spaces and functions’ (Rowe and Kuan 2002: 28). At the same time — and this is perhaps more significant — these spaces did not simply reflect the social order passively, they also *facilitated* social conduct: ‘spatial sequences usually unfolded in a gradual and visually semioccluded fashion, thus helping to safeguard against the impropriety of unwanted contact and contention, as well as promoting protocol, etiquette, and courtesy’ (Rowe and Kuan 2002: 30). The balance set up by the architecture is disrupted in the film, not by the arrival of Songlian — indeed, she tries to play by its rules, fails, and in the final scene, is seen pacing a tiny square within a smaller courtyard, imprisoned by her madness — but by the Third Mistress’ use of the rooftop. The Third Mistress not only breaks protocol narratively by having an affair with the family doctor, but also does so on a formal level by venturing onto the roof — it is a space she claims for her individuality, venturing onto it to sing her operatic songs; but it is also, eventually, the space of her annihilation, as she is dragged up there to be hanged (in the novella, the Third Mistress is drowned in a well). In the Confucian cosmology that defines such an architectural structure, the roof is designed to protect all within the compound; venturing above it is tantamount to leaving its protection, and thus being open to attack, though in this case, from within. The reversal of above (roof) and below (well) is significant. Unlike in the novella, in which the Third Mistress is thrown into a dark well, along with all the other adulteresses before her, condemned forever into a hidden and forgotten existence, in the film, even though it is supposedly encased in secrecy, the murder of the Third Mistress is,

filmically, exposed for *us* to see — implicating the spectator, whether or not he is conscious of it, in the murder. The dilemma, as always, with Zhang's films, is to have to contend with being seduced and horrified at the same time. As Rey Chow puts it, '[h]is films do not change the mundane nature of the stories but enlarge the possibilities of our enjoyment of precisely those unspeakable, at times pornographic fantasies that are, shall we say, a culture's "shame"' (1995: 146–47). At the same time, as 'it provides him with a palpable means of expressing womanly contents,' it also 'provides him with an alibi: he is merely showing such (pornographic) contents in order to give a "realistic" picture of China. The didactic excuse [...] is already there, in the silence and ambiguity of the filmic image' (Chow 1995: 147).

Chow explains Zhang's 'pornography' as one that is borne from a willingness 'to immerse himself in the "dirty" representational conventions that are ridden with the errors of history and redirects "sexuality" and "nature" into the materiality of his filmmaking':

The sexual energy (re)discovered and revealed by Zhang's camera — through the 'primitive' that is the oppressed woman — is now used pragmatically for a new kind of filmmaking, for filmmaking as ethnography, autoethnography, and cultural translation. In his films, the patriarchal system is demoted from being the ultimate signified to being a signifier, the abundant sensuous presence of which on the screen signals its new status as a mere movable stage prop. The primitive is now the prostitution — the prostitution of history, of the scars and wounds of history. This primitive is also the 'goddess' whose commodified image exudes charm. The co-temporality of the visual image is hence also redefined: instead of a coexistence of retrospection and idealism [...], the past and the future amalgamate in the form of fetish-cum-parody. The 'divine' and 'primitive,' circulating among lookers in the international film market, is now infinitely reproducible. [...] Zhang's 'women' draw attention to themselves precisely as spectacular, dramatic bodies. (Chow 1995: 48)

In a sense the images assert the power of their visuality on the spectator. Alan Stone, writing for the *Boston Review*, even suggests that Zhang's 'wonderful films' — '*Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Qiu Ju*, *To Live*, and

Shanghai Triad — ‘are best understood neither as political parables nor as attempts to recreate authentic China, but as Zhang’s prolonged artistic meditation on Gong Li as desire, as beauty, and as subversive inspiration’ (2003). Like Ju dou displaying her battered body to Tianqing’s gaze, the film compels one to look — at a time when few images of China were available in the popular media (Cornelius 2002: 25–29) — but the scopophilic gaze is tempered by nostalgia — the use of the folk tune, the costumes, the historical setting, and the diffused lighting. Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of nostalgia as the antithesis to pornography (1991: 111) provides an interesting position from which to address the internal tensions of Zhang’s visual style:

[...] the function of the nostalgic object is precisely to *conceal* the antinomy between eye and gaze — i.e., the traumatic impact of the gaze *qua* object — by means of its power of fascination. In nostalgia, the gaze of the other is in a way domesticated, ‘gentrified’; instead of the gaze erupting like a traumatic disharmonious blot, we have the illusion of ‘seeing ourselves seeing,’ of seeing the gaze itself. In a way, we could say that the function of fascination is precisely to blind us to the fact that the other is already gazing at us. (Žižek 1991: 114)

The fascination of looking, Žižek argues, is dispelled the minute we realise we have been made to look, that all along we were being addressed, and our desire to look was ‘from the very start “part of the game”’ (1991: 114). Thus, the film, in order to sustain our fascination for it, must continue to conceal the fact that the spectacle is staged ‘only to capture [our] desire’: ‘If the power of fascination is to produce its effect, this fact must remain concealed. As soon as the subject becomes aware that the other gazes at him [...], the fascination is dispelled’ (Žižek 1991: 114). The ‘pornographic’ via the nostalgic in Zhang’s films is what seduces us; reviewers often mention the tragedy in the narrative, but one that is nearly always tempered by a wonder for the cinematography (see, for example, Neo 2003; and Ebert 1989). This is where the films depart from traditional feminist readings of the female body being put on display for the benefit of the male gaze:

What is displayed is not so much woman or even feudal China per se as the act of displaying, of making visible. What Zhang ‘fetishizes’ is primarily cinematography itself. If we speak of a narcissism here, it is a repeated playing with ‘the self’ that is the visuality intrinsic to film. This play is *the* sexuality of Zhang’s works. (Chow 1995: 149)

The gaze is directed simultaneously at the battered body of Gong Li *and also* at the titivated body of the film itself, creating not a sense of stereoscopic vision in which two images coalesce in the mind into a single whole, but of perpetual double vision that the mind constantly needs to be aware of, if it is to resist seduction; it occurs, Chow argues, in the realm of *signification* (1995: 44)

It is thus unsurprising that the semiotic signification of cultural artefacts displayed in the films is similarly problematised. *Red Sorghum* did well at the box-office in China (Lu 1997b: 108). Its songs were popular, and gave rise to ‘a wave of so-called “Northern Shaanxi folk songs”’ (Clark 2002: 81), where the ‘songs and sequences from it became prominent elements of new folk performances’ (Tam and Dissanayake 1998: 23). Significantly though, the songs, like other cultural ‘details’ in Zhang’s films were invented:

I asked Mo Yan [the author of the novel from which the film was adapted] how the sedan bearers jolted the chair, and he said he didn’t know either. So I made it up myself. And the song — I wrote all the lines of the song they sang while jolting her chair. After seeing it, many people said that it preserved folk customs very well. What folk customs? *I made it all up*. (Zhang 2001b: 14, my emphasis).

In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the hanging of red lanterns outside a concubine’s chamber denoting her favour with the patriarch was also wholly invented. As Dai Qing complains, these rituals did not exist in Chinese history, society or literature (1993: 333–37). In the novella, *Wives and Concubines* (1990) by Su Tong, from which *Raise the Red Lantern* is adapted, there are no lanterns at

all.²⁷ Zhang admits in an interview that ‘the lanterns were my idea, to give a concrete form to their oppression’ (2001b: 40).

Chow influentially argues against such a mode of ‘auto-ethnography’ in which ‘the use of things, characters, and narratives [are] not for themselves but for their collective, hallucinatory signification of ethnicity’ (1995: 144). The ‘ethnic details,’ she writes, ‘are not there simply to “mean” themselves; rather, they are there for a second order articulation. They are there to signify “I am an ethnic detail; I am feudal China”’ (1995: 145). Of course this China is also a China caught in the timeless trap of signification, constructed, Chow asserts, ‘by modernity — the modernity of anthropology, ethnography, and feminism. It is also a “China” exaggerated and caricatured, in which the past is *melodramatized* in the form of excessive and absurd rituals and customs’ (1995: 145). In other words, it is not that it is ‘wrong’ to engage in an anthropological, ethnographic, or feminist reading of the films, but that in doing so *closes* the circuit of signification has already been set up. The presence of the battered woman, for example, *invites* the feminist reading, and thus the political reading, rather than the fact that there is a feminist text to be read prior to the reading itself. In this sense, Zhang taps into already-familiar images and symbolism, in which the suffering of women ennobles a culture, by *allowing* it the capacity for outrage (Chow 1995: 146): ‘the tropes of prohibition, repression, and liberation that run consistently throughout readings of Zhang’s films in effect load them with power — the power of interpretative ideology, of *discursive meaning-ful-ness*’ (Chow 1995: 159).

27. As a matter of anecdotal interest, the English translation of the novella is published as *Raise the Red Lantern* (Su 1993).

The cultural translatability of the films is dependent not on the skilful interpretation of these tropes in the narrative, the mise-en-scène and the cinematography, but in negotiating the slippages that occur in the very attempt to interpret them. The game of seduction is played, not simply with the exoticisation of culture, but with the coyness of the incremental revelation. In other words, the attraction is not simply the attraction of oriental beauty or exoticism, but the game of filmic striptease:

Accordingly, the seduction of Zhang's films — the appeal of his visual ethnography — is that they keep crossing boundaries and shifting into new spheres of circulation. The wish to 'liberate' Chinese women, which seems to be the 'content,' shifts into the liberation of 'China,' which shifts into the liberation of the 'image' of China on film, which shifts into the liberation of 'China' on film in the international culture market, and so on. (Chow 1995: 149)

This is not to say that the attraction of the exotic does not exist — a glance at mainstream reviews will affirm that it does (see, for example, Ebert 1992) — but that the object of attraction is not just a passive artefact on display, but an active purveyor of its own construction of meaning, both shallow and profound at the same time, that is, 'meaning [...] is displaced onto the level of surface exchange' (Chow 1995: 150).

These slippages, usually read as disguised political commentary, are often said to be the cause of state censorship, though, as I have discussed, it is impossible to ascertain whether there are any real political targets in the film. Nevertheless, a series of high profile bans on his films have added to the desire to read the films as politically significant. Following *Ju dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern, To Live* (1994), which chronicles the life of a single family in China through the 1940s to the 1970s, and won another BAFTA, as well as the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes, resulted in Zhang being 'banned from receiving foreign

assistance for five years' (Rose 2002). The reasons for these motions are never explicitly revealed, though various explanations have been put forward: that the Chinese government objects to the portrayal of Chinese society as feudal and backward; that the Chinese government sees itself as symbolised by the ageing feudal masters in the films, who eventually come to a bad end; that the airing of Chinese culture's 'dirty linen' is simply bad publicity for a nation keen to take its place among other modern nations (Chow 1995: 152–53; Cornelius 2002: 29). The cloak-and-dagger cast of communist politics perpetuates the proliferation of meaning in the films, which Zhang rarely confirms or denies. Or, as Chen Xiaoming puts it more bluntly: 'Politics becomes a highly stylized, stereotyped, complicated, and ambiguous symbol,' and significantly, 'a hallmark of Chinese cinematic narratology' (1997: 123). 'Such a manipulation of political codes,' Chen adds, 'can be labelled "postpolitics" in Chinese film, where everything is political and nothing is political at one and the same time' (1997: 124).

In many ways, the films, often described as 'painterly' by critics (see Stone 1993), also tap into a particular mode of representation derived from Chinese painting, in which political meanings may be read into apparently innocuous images. One example is Qian Xuan's *Pear Blossoms* (1280), where the painting of a simple branch of pear blossoms was said to 'express the artist's sorrow over the fall of the Song dynasty to the Mongol invaders' (Anon. 2002). This mode of representation is similar to symbolic representation in European art history, except that in the Chinese tradition there is sometimes no consensus as to what the meanings might be. These paintings are sometimes rather like signifiers in search of a lost signified. For example, a

painting of a sheep and goat in 1395 by Chao Meng-fu [Zhao Mengfu] included an inscription that revealed nothing of the painter's intention. Only years later, after intense scrutiny by many scholars, did one arrive at the conclusion that the painting may have been a political one — 'the painting also refers to a popular saying about "grieving over the lost sheep" — meaning that Chao Meng-fu, like the sheep he paints, has lost his way in selling his services to the Mongols' (Sullivan 1974: 34) — marking an occasion on which 'the painter was unable to speak' (Sullivan 1974: 34). What the Fifth Generation, and Zhang Yimou in particular, has done is to marry two styles of signification: 'Chinese traditional landscape painting styles [...] are translated into cinematography, and the codes of certain types of European art cinema' (Berry 1998b: 146). Thus Chow contends that, ironically, more credit should be given to the Chinese authorities:

In the language of visibility, what the Chinese authorities' disapproval signals is a disciplinary surveillance from above, but it is not exactly a surveillance over the 'content' of backwardness in Zhang's films as is often assumed (many mainland films of the past few decades also use such content to point their morals). Rather, the surveillance is over the act of exhibiting and displaying. The reactionary response of the Chinese authorities in fact contains much more intelligence than most of their critics are willing to grant them, for in their disapproval lies the correct intuition that Zhang's films are not simply about backwardness, it is about a different kind of signification. (Chow 1995: 153)

In other words, the surveillance is not over direct political content — or in the words of the French linguist, Émile Benveniste, *l'énoncé* — but over how it is being uttered — *l'énonciation* (see Mowitt 2005: 17). In that respect, it may not thus be unexpected that a radical change of style soon returned the filmmaker into the good books of the authorities. It is with the neo-realist style of *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Not One Less* that the next section will address.

III

Given that visuality was so dominant in Zhang's early films, the more subdued visual style of *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), made after *Raise the Red Lantern*, puzzled critics, at least critics in the US and European world. Made in the neo-realist style with Gong Li as the only professional actress, many of the street scenes were shot with hidden cameras, a style reminiscent of the Italian neo-realist filmmaker, Roberto Rossellini. The film tells the story of a peasant woman, Qiu Ju (played by Gong Li), who spares no effort to get the justice she thinks she deserves — the Chinese title, *Qiu ju da guan si*, transliterates as 'Qiu ju goes to court.' When the headman of her village kicks her husband in the groin, the heavily pregnant Qiu Ju embarks on a Panglossian journey as she travels from village to town to city seeking justice from an ever higher level of authority, and at every stage, she is fobbed off. The film takes the spectator along with Qiu Ju for a frustrating but comedic ride through the ranks of Chinese bureaucracy, 'a vertical cross section of modern China' (Ebert 1993: 52) in which '[t]he variety of settings, in her progress from village to town to city and the encounters with masculine authority figures allowed Gong to demonstrate a range of understated emotions and the director to comment on some of the bizarre features of China's transition to modernity' (Cornelius 2002: 81). The frequent barbs in the film — such as, 'if we can't fix your plumbing we'll be stuck with the single-child policy for good' — exposes the inefficacies of officialdom with humour rather than the grim melodrama of the earlier films. As Qiu Ju ventures on, it becomes clear that all she wants is an apology and an *acknowledgement* via financial reparations that a wrong had been done to her family — the headman once scornfully throws some money at her feet, which catalyses her resolve for justice. At the end of the film, she

returns to the village, gives birth to her child and makes up with the headman in a feast attended by all. However, the bureaucratic machinery finally catches up with them and the police arrive to take the headman away amidst the festivities, and the last shot is of Qiu Ju's face, looking out at them as they leave the village, with an expression of utter bewilderment.

Initially, as with Zhang's earlier films, it is difficult to place the period of the film until Qiu Ju reaches the city and we realise that it is set in contemporary China. Dressed up as a heavily pregnant peasant, the glamorous Gong Li is hardly recognisable in this film; this anonymity allowed her and the crew to capture the quotidian scenes with concealed cameras, providing the audience (both European and Asian) with a glimpse of 'real' China in the present, as opposed to the 'mythical' China of earlier films: 'One of the pleasures of the film is to see China, which appears on screen unrehearsed and natural. Only three of the movie's actors are professionals, and the others essentially play themselves' (Ebert 1993: 52). However, as is often noted, comedy translates less readily across cultures than tragedy. Jerome Silbergeld writes of the film's 'intentionally "artless" style' (1999: 120), where '[a]fter the drama of works like *Red Sorghum*, *Ju dou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* seems to have left American audiences and critics disappointed, not because they couldn't absorb its lessons in Chinese law but perhaps because they missed the ironic tone, lodged in small, comic moments, that animates the film' (1999: 122). Like the disparate responses to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* which, as I discuss in the next chapter, show that some Asian audiences found it slow and tedious and some American reviewers found it fast-paced and energetic, *The Story of Qiu Ju* was seen as plodding and uneventful by American viewers. Alan Stone refers to it as a 'shaggy dog story with an unhappy ending,' and expresses genuine

bewilderment that Chinese audiences found it so funny that they were ‘rolling in the aisles’ (1993). Silbergeld suggests that a knowledge of context may have been necessary to appreciate the film:

Contextually, the film is shot through with a humor that an urban(e) Chinese audience wouldn’t miss. The very idea of Gong Li, *Red Sorghum*’s glamorous leading lady, playing a dowdy, puffed-up, pregnant peasant, her toes pointed out, her knees turned in, and leaning as far back as she can to avoid toppling forward is ironic at least, or a comic sight for an already well-primed audience; try to imagine which glamorous American comedian of manners could pull this off and the once-glamorous Gong Li seems here at her best. (Silbergeld 1999: 124)

For most of its small American audience, this particular portrayal of officialdom may have meant nothing special. For a more critical American audience, it seemed a bit peculiar: why was this bold, rebellious director passing so light on Chinese officialdom? But for the Chinese audience, *Qiu Ju* was preposterous and therefore taken as a joke, the parody of an ‘exhausted’ genre of films — of a whole generation of films in which the government’s notion of ‘justice’ always won in the end. (Silbergeld 1999: 125)

However, Stone’s attempts to describe his ‘astigmatic experience’ as a matter of cultural translation may inadvertently have revealed the cause of his feelings of dissonance — the expectation that narrative must be about ‘self.’ Although he does well to note that Zhang Yimou ‘has shown almost no interest in exploring the depths of individual psychology in any of his films,’ Stone uses the observation, and its apparent lack of narrative realism, to explain the ‘failure’ of *The Story of Qiu Ju* for American audiences:

Zhang Yimou had no interest in painting a realistic picture of the Chinese communist legal system. Given the delays that are typical of the courts, the fact that Qiu Ju could move through three levels of mediation and then litigate in one trimester of pregnancy is certainly not plausible. Just as Qiu Ju is not a real person is not a real person so the officials she meets are equally unreal. There are just too many other implausible details to be explained away. The conclusion is inescapable that the Chinese are correct and that all this is part of the director’s design! (Stone 1993)

In an interview with Michel Ciment, Zhang emphasises the social accuracy of the film. I have reproduced Ciment’s question as well for what it reveals of the

interviewer's cultural assumptions about Zhang's intentions — that *The Story of Qiu Ju* must be about 'self,' in this case, the director's sense of 'self':

Are you Qiu Ju insofar as you were not allowed into the film school because you were past the age limit and for a long time fought until you had to appeal to the Minister of Culture in order to obtain justice, considering your studies were postponed because of the Cultural Revolution?

It is not important to know if I am Qiu Ju or if her story reminds me of my own because this story is very ordinary and happens often in China. One does not know who to address, what to do, or where to go. At the beginning, most problems are not important, but they become so because of the bureaucratic system and the difficulties one has to live through. [...] what Qiu Ju wanted is a word she uses in the film *shuafa*, a Chinese word which does not refer to an excuse, but to an answer, an explanation or clarification. With *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, I had the same experience. The films were never distributed and no one ever gave a *shuafa* about the banning. (Zhang 2001b: 17)

There is an effort on Zhang's part here to resist the direct association of the character with his personal life, that Qiu Ju must *represent* something or someone, and what he continues to stress is the inability to read the bureaucracy's actions. At the same time, one suggestion for the official approval is precisely its apparent ambiguity. Where Qiu Ju's relentless pursuit appeared to expose the ineffectuality of Chinese officialdom, it simultaneously presented the 'communist bureaucrats as unfailingly prompt, honest, and polite at every level' (Stone 1993). While for some, like Jonathan Spence, this may have 'stood out like a sore thumb,' and that 'the censors were duped by the absurd depiction of their fellow bureaucrats' (quoted in Stone 1993), this ruse apparently succeeded when the bans on *Ju dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were retracted, and the films released along with the release of *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Silbergeld 1999: 129). In spite of Zhang's insistence that 'I wanted to tell a simple, normal story about simple, normal people in a straightforward manner' (Zhang 2001b: 15), nothing about the film's reception appears straightforward

at all. Even Silbergeld ventures a political argument and suggests that *The Story of Qiu Ju* was timed to coincide with the ‘show trials’ of the Tiananmen Square student uprising of 1989, and that the humour in the film ‘is not a frivolity but a necessity, a strategic distraction’ (1999: 125).

Not One Less (1999), released in the same year as his nostalgic *The Road Home* (1999), tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl, Wei Minzhi, who is employed as a substitute teacher in a rural school when the village school teacher has to take a leave of absence to care for an ailing mother. His instruction to her not to lose a single pupil from the class or she will not be paid, underscores the pressures that rural schools are under to retain their pupils pushed by poverty towards paid work in the city. When one of the boys, Zhang Huike, disappears to the city in search of work to help his bedridden mother, Wei Minzhi launches a search for him in a city she has never visited. Before she arrives there, however, she has to raise some money for the ticket, which she tries to earn with the help of the other pupils. Failing to do so, she ends up walking across the mountains, finally entering the city through a very dark tunnel: ‘This tunnel obviously symbolizes the great chasm between country and city — at one end lies the poor and backward countryside, and at the other the bright and prosperous modern city with its high-rise buildings and busy crowds’ (Zhang 2001a). In the city, she soon learns that the search for a single individual proves impossible and when someone suggests to her that she enlist the help of the local television station, she stands outside its gates until the manager has no choice but to interview her. The end of the film is rather pat, with Wei Minzhi launching a tearful plea on national television to Zhang Huike to return to school, her cause eliciting the sympathy of middle-class urban dwellers, who pool their resources and donate some money and supplies to the school, all while the television cameras are rolling.

The film is shot in a similar style to *The Story of Qiu Ju*, in that it employs the neo-realist aesthetic of using non-professional actors and shooting everyday scenes on location with a hidden camera. Indeed, the actors all play themselves, including the school's teacher and the village mayor, and Wei Minzhi is played by Wei Minzhi, as Zhang Huike is played by Zhang Huike. Its tone is rather didactic, as Alan Stone puts it: 'The film left me with the feeling I had just watched a long infomercial for a Chinese government "Save the Children" drive, and I expected to be told where to send my donation. I later learned that in China and Europe the hat was actually passed around and funds collected for rural schools in China' (2001). As a result, the film 'sparked a new kind of political criticism from the West: Zhang had been co-opted and was making propaganda for the Chinese government' (Stone 2001). In the light of Stone's lavish praise for Zhang's earlier films (1993; Stone 2003), it is interesting to note that, in this instance, Stone suggests that '[w]hatever he was doing, Zhang Yimou the artist was absent from this film, nor was there any sign of his powerful mind or moral concern' (Stone 2001). It is as if a large part of the insistence on Zhang's political views, at least in Anglo-American film criticism, emerges from the indelible memory of the images from his early formalist films; films, he later says, 'were more attached to form, colors and image, ignoring a little too much the actors and the characters' description. They favored estheticism' (Zhang 2001b: 62). Indeed, Stuart Klawans writes:

Raise the Red Lantern ('91) seemed enough like *Ju Dou* to fix in American minds a certain notion of Zhang Yimou, even if they couldn't remember his name. He was a maker of splendid-looking period melodramas, which offered enough sex appeal and exoticism to pull in an audience but were sufficiently feminist in tone — and covertly critical of the present-day Chinese state — to attain middlebrow respectability. (Klawans 1995: n. pag.)

Xiaoling Zhang, however, offers a reading of the ‘latent text’ (Zhang 2001a: 131) in the film as an implicit criticism of the Communist Party’s management of rural China and a means by which Zhang Yimou eludes the censors’ notice. She argues that the film in fact expresses ‘the director’s critical view of China’s recent social, economic and educational reform’ (Zhang 2001a: 139), and that its aim is ‘to show that more than two decades of reform have not fundamentally improved the economic and political situation in the village: it is marked by a sharp divide between the poor and the prosperous, the powerful and the powerless’ (Zhang 2001a: 138). The neo-realist style is simply a means to that end, in that it suggests

that the film is not so much fictional as a documentary of actual life in an existing village. Instead of using professional actors, every character simply seems to play himself or herself. The village head is actually a village head in real life, Master Gao is played by a real teacher, the kids are really rural schoolchildren, and the thirteen-year-old schoolgirl Wei Minzhi is played by thirteen-year-old schoolgirl called Wei Minzhi. The setting is real too: the story is set in Zhenningbao Village, Hebei Province, and this is exactly the place where the film was made. (Zhang 2001a: 138)

However, this ‘reality’ is just as artificial, just as constructed, as the images of pre-modern China he had sought to portray in the earlier films: ‘the school was chosen from a few dozen schools in that area, the eighteen pupils were selected from among thousands of pupils, and the girl playing Wei Minzhi was picked from twenty thousand girls, in an auditioning process which lasted more than half a month’ (Zhang 2001a: 138). Xiaoling Zhang’s reading of the ending also points out the irony which reviewers like Stone seem to have missed:

[...] while the TV host is speaking to the head of the village, asking him what he will do with all these donations from kind-hearted city people, Wei is pushed towards the camera as the symbolic rural receiver of urban charity. The TV crew portrays the city folk as the benevolent do-gooders and the villagers as passive recipients. When the TV host asks Huike what it was in the city that left the deepest impression on him, the answer is not what she expected. What impressed him most, the boy replies, is that he had to beg for food. (Zhang 2001a: 139)

Such a tactics of visuality appear to be the flip side of the coin of the formalist films. With a different stylistic toolbox — neo-realism, rather than stylised formalism — Zhang appears to be creating a similar sort of double vision I mention earlier.

According to Rey Chow, Chinese critic Zhang Yiwu has ‘argued that this stylistic change [...] may be traceable to the changing trends in the mainland Chinese film industry, which has been compelled by the pressures of globalisation to produce a more inward-looking approach, centred on China’s internal problems and aimed at a predominantly Chinese audience’ (2003: 144–45). Chow herself argues that ‘the story of alternating rebuke and embrace that has followed Zhang’s career [...] may itself be taken as an example of the power struggle over seeing and visuality in post-colonial, post-modernity’ (2003: 145). Her essay attempts to account for the reverse in Chinese reception, where the ‘warm reception of Zhang’s more realist films is perhaps as problematic as the hostile reactions to his early ones’ (2003: 145). She argues that the depiction of this ‘real’ China for Chinese audiences, as opposed to the cross-cultural imaginary of China designed for foreign audiences, is itself a ‘similarly fetishizing and exploitative tendency of the media,’ that is ‘underwritten not by the discourse of orientalism (read: depraved Western imperialist practice) but instead by the oft-repeated and clichéd discourse of national self-strengthening and concern for future generations (“Save the children!”)’ (Chow 2003: 149). The power of images is equally at work; as is the romance, albeit with a different flavour.

The ‘controversy’ surrounding the withdrawal *Not One Less* and *The Road Home* from competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 1999, in which Zhang reportedly accused the festival of ‘political or cultural prejudice’ (Rist 2002), seems to manifest the ambiguity of Zhang’s textual politics paratextually. *Variety* magazine reports that ‘it was not [Zhang’s] decision at all’ (McCarthy 1999); it claims that both films were rejected from the competition on artistic grounds, and suggests that the withdrawal was pre-emptive and a face-saving exercise. Zhang provides a different explanation in an interview: ‘I asked them [the authorities] to send the film to Cannes, but nobody knows why it didn’t go. When I asked why not, they responded with silence. Not one word’ (quoted in Lee 2000). Da Lan’s article attempts to sum up the various responses to the withdrawal in the Chinese media but the competing accounts shed no light on the matter (Lan 1999: 47–50). The slippage between representation and reality characteristic of his earlier films appear to be manifested in this incident. Is the film about politics? Is it not? Is it about politics but pretending not to be? Is it pretending to be about politics so that it can gain some notoriety? The review accompanying Lee’s interview falls into a predictable line of inquiry:

And since this is Zhang filming in China, you begin to wonder what that underlying message is: a kiss-up to government officials [...]? A sly critique of Beijing’s autocratic style [...]? A pronouncement that media is king [...]? Perhaps this is reading too much into the film. Better to just fix on any of the cute scruffy kids, wondering which might become the next Chow Yun-fat. (Lee 2000: my emphasis)

In other words, Lee has given up trying to uncover the ‘truth’; her advice to ‘just fix on any of the cute scruffy kids’ succumbs to the notion that all media is ultimately *simulacra*, and underscores the aridity of such popular media

analysis as political discourse. Rey Chow has longed called for a different way of reading the films, beyond the simple binaries of authentic/inauthentic, fiction/reality, echoing Zhang's plea for 'the West' to look beyond the binaries of pro-government, anti-government positions (Rist 2002). The Fifth Generation films have for such a long time been treated mainly as social and political critiques, and critics have looked at the social and political situation in China to support those views (Clark 1989: 121–36) that perhaps that trend has gathered its momentum, whatever choice of subject the filmmakers may choose to film. Even Zhang's martial arts effort, *Hero* (2002), was mentioned for validating tyranny and absolute rule, again presumably of the communist party (Kahn 2003). Zhang himself has described his own visual tactics in pragmatic, almost mundane, terms, in that he was just trying to be different for the sake of being different:

All of us [in the Fifth Generation] were basically fed up with the unchanging, inflexible way of Chinese film-making, so we were ready to fight it at all costs in our first film [*One and Eight*, 1984]. I would set down the camera and take a look, and [say to myself], Oh god the composition is still the same as the old stuff! No! Turn the lens round — just turn it around, raise it, just for the sake of raising it. Actually if you ask me whether there was any concept in this kind of incomplete composition, the answer is no; but the point was simply and deliberately to be different. (quoted in Silbergeld 1999: 235)

Indeed, Yingjin Zhang is critical of the auteurist-historiographical approach of Tam and Dissanayake's 'hit parade' of the Fifth Generation directors (Zhang 2004: 7). He argues that the problem with the auteurist approach situating the films in the realm of high art versus popular culture, generates an outcome that is 'generally more biographical than historical' (Zhang 2004: 7). His method of looking at their films historically is to address the wider industrial and political context in which they work:

As Dai Jinhua speculates, in order to secure their legitimacy in historical representation, the fifth generation had to accomplish the dual acts of *rebellion* from and *resubmission* to power [...]. From the beginning, their rebellion was enacted predominantly in an avant-garde language. [...] Ostensibly, with the fifth generation's unprecedented achievements in the visual realms, Chinese cinema finally broke away from the fifty-year dominance of 'films by literature people' and entered an age contested — albeit not exactly overwhelmed — by 'films by film people.' (Zhang 2004: 237)

In other words, if I may decode the sense behind the words here, the Fifth Generation is admitted to being different, but nothing special.

IV

The questions of cultural translation must thus take us beyond essentialist, ethnological categories of culture. Attempting to argue for or against Zhang's position as an authentic or inauthentic cultural spokesman is futile simply because that position is dynamic rather than fixed. Whether the persistent changes in style, and in self-positioning, can be attributed to a certain pragmatism on Zhang's part with regard to the market (Stone 2001) does not negate the issues of translatability and comparativity; if anything, a consideration of market forces is useful in the ways in which it takes us beyond the relatively abstract conception of cultural relevance, especially because the films also have a material, market, reach that influences and is influenced by further conceptions of 'culture,' whether of cinema, or of 'China' as a whole. These influences may also include the potential for co-productions and collaborations impinging upon the funding of future projects.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I would like to consider the culture of commodities in addressing the wider notion of transnational Chinese film culture/s. Benzi Zhang argues that the 'Fifth Generation films have opened up a new representational space for staging cultural difference and for "writing

back” to a hegemonic centre, which by establishing a canonized, totalizing image of “Chineseness” sets all other cultural manifestations in a negative relationship to it’ (2000b: 175). This hegemonic centre refers not just to the dominance of European cultural discourse, but the socialist Chinese one. According to Benzi Zhang, ‘[i]n the films made by the Fifth Generation directors we can find the “silenced” cultural differences that have been buried deep in the past and disremembered as “absence” by the canonized and institutionalized discourse’ (2000b: 175). There are, thus, at least two possibilities of reading — one, that Zhang Yimou is reacting to America and Europe, and two, that Zhang Yimou is reacting to China — leading to a third, which I have tried to argue for above, that through visual ambivalence the director has managed to address both at the same time. Consequently, Benzi Zhang argues that the Fifth Generation films are in fact self-translating products, in which the films are schooling their audience whilst they are being experience. However, aesthetically speaking, *how* are they self-translating? This is perhaps where Bordwell’s method of poetics may prove useful.

Bordwell argues that Chinese cinema can be viewed as ‘transcultural spaces,’ though he also qualifies, as he does, that he is not going to take the cultural view (2005b: 143). Instead he opts to study the ‘affinities’ between the films rather than their differences (Bordwell 2005b: 143): ‘Chinese films, to put it bluntly, are Chinese. They are, though, also films, and films are a powerful transcultural medium, drawing not only on local knowledge but also on a range of human skills that are shared across many cultures’ (2005b: 144). He then adds that, ‘By mastering several transcultural possibilities of cinema, Chinese films have gained the power to cross-national boundaries and be grasped by audiences around the world’ (Bordwell 2005b: 144). In other words, film precedes ‘Chineseness’ as a cultural formation; the ‘Chinese’ just happened to tap into its transcultural possibilities by, in particular, mastering

the techniques of the classical continuity system that is closely associated with Hollywood (Bordwell 2005b: 144). The continuity system, as Bordwell argues here and elsewhere, persists because of its ‘universality’:

[...] although the classical continuity framework is definitely a convention, it is a convention that is more quickly learned than alternatives ones we might postulate. And it is more quickly learned at least partly because it mobilizes several contingent universals of human experience. This framework exploits [...] our ability to identify other members of our species to ‘read their minds’ in terms of posture, glance, and expression; to situate them in a world of enduring middle-sized objects; to assume as a default value that action unfolds in sequence over time. (Bordwell 2005b: 144)

This understanding of universality is based on the prevalence of *usage*. The continuity system endures in part because so large a percentage of the world’s audience is exposed to Hollywood films so early on in their experience of cinema. Bordwell does concede that ‘[h]ad history been different, some other formats [...] might have endured longer’ (2005b: 145), but since classical continuity now dominates — and in his view, it dominates because its representations of time and space ‘are constructed out of human predispositions’ (2005b: 145) — they are thus ‘a transcultural bridgehead’ (2005b: 145): ‘Most Chinese films, like films from India or Argentina, are at this level comprehensible to audiences around the world [...] *after brief exposure and minimal tutoring*’ (Bordwell 2005b: 145, my emphasis). A brief recollection of Alan Stone’s struggle with *The Story of Qiu Ju* above (Stone 1993) serves as a reminder that of the limits of such exposure and tutoring.

The inherent tensions within Bordwell’s argument point to a desire for film to remain ‘universal’ and democratic, accessible to all, and at the same time, retaining many of its local characteristics as exemplars of indigenous ‘craft’ — ‘a common stylistic striving, that led Chinese filmmakers independently to explore the possibilities of the [planimetric] image’ (Bordwell 2005b: 160). The planimetric image is popularly referred to as the ‘flat’ image,

in that while it is still a three-dimensional image, it does not contain any diagonals or depth of field cues which are more commonly used to generate a sense of depth within an image (Bordwell 2005b: 150). Bordwell analyses several examples of the use of such an image as a ‘compositional device’ in various Chinese films, reflecting ‘a limited number of basic systems of shooting and staging a scene [which] are rediscovered and revised at various points in film history’ (Bordwell 2005b: 160), without drawing any parallels to the history of Chinese ink paintings in which the lines of perspective so valued in Renaissance art were eschewed in favour of a multiple perspectival system:

Classical Chinese painting bore no burden of realistic representation, and chose to achieve generality through abstraction rather than through the use of archetypal forms. One effective means of accomplishing this was to reduce the concreteness of the pictorial image, and classical Chinese painting adopted multiple perspectives and/or a perspective elevated well above the apparent horizon in order to avoid the visual concreteness which accompanies the use of a visual horizon and vanishing point. (Hao 1994: 47)

In other words, the notion of the ‘universal,’ like the notion of ‘culture,’ is entirely contingent on historical experience. Bordwell seems to suggest in his closing remarks that it is sufficient just to be able to ‘see’ (2005b: 161), a view which may be contested by Philip Rosen’s probing of the role of the apparatus in the epistemology of film:

To what extent [...] is spectatorial position already determined by the machinery of cinema? Are there ideological and psychic determinants and/or implications in that machinery? [...] If the cinematic machinery in itself is treated as a *necessary* manifestation of certain kinds of subjective positioning, or as *necessarily* imbued with a certain ideology of vision and visual representation, then to that extent it becomes more difficult to conceive of oppositional practices in film. (Rosen 1986: 281)

Seeing, as Norman Bryson puts it, ‘is not simply light but intelligent form’:

For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world. Vision is socialized and thereafter deviation from this social construction of visual reality can

be measured and named, variously, as hallucination, misrecognition, or 'visual disturbance.' (Bryson 1988: 91)

'Between the subject and the world,' he continues, 'is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visibility, that cultural construct, and make visibility different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience. Between retina and world is inserted a screen of signs, a *screen* consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena' (Bryson 1988: 91–92). In other words, the prevalence of the continuity system, to use it as an example, is a *social* act collectively consented to, whether in the form of box-office demand, artistic choices or technological limitations.

The apparent universality of a certain kind of cinematic experience is brought about by a number of interweaving factors that work together to create a film culture. Sheldon Lu, for example, discusses *Not One Less* as a response to the rapidly changing film culture in China in the 1990s, and Zhang Yimou's author-function as a barometer of that ever-changing set of circumstances. Lu sums up the climate of the 1990s (after the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989) as 'an age without heroes and gods' (2005a: 121). Alongside the rampant commercialism that was rapidly taking over from China's socialist economy, cinema audience numbers were falling, due in part to the rising popularity of television (growing affluence enabled more households to own sets), and widespread piracy, especially on video CD, an inexpensive format widely available throughout Asia (Lu 2005a: 121). In addition, state subsidies for film production were continuing to fall, and films had to compete for audience share in the mass market (Lu 2005a: 121). For these reasons, Lu surmises that the simple messages in *Not One Less* resonated with the Chinese audience because it seemed to valorise the simple values of education, hard work and sheer tenacity in the face of defeat, which then appeared to tap into a 'deep collective unconscious' that harked back to old fables, legends and films

(2005a: 127). *Not One Less* raised the director into a different kind of ‘hero,’ especially when followed by the commercial success of *Hero*, his next film, noted to have ‘rejuvenated China’s domestic film market and Zhang became a model for other commercially oriented filmmakers to follow’ (Lu 2005a: 132).

In contrast, *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Not One Less*, in particular, elicited different responses from European critics: the director of the Cannes Film Festival of 1999, Gilles Jacob, to whom Zhang’s letter of protest was addressed (Rist 2002), is said to have perceived the films as ‘vehicles of government propaganda’ (Lu 2005a: 126); Paul Pickowicz goes as far as to call Zhang as a ‘quasi-dissident film-maker’ and a ‘highly privileged insider’ (quoted in Silbergeld 1999: 129). The accolades of the late 1990s to early 2000s, which marked Zhang has ‘the regime’s favorite director’ (Lu 2005a: 132), also marked him as having capitulated to the Chinese establishment: in 1998, Zhang directed a performance of Puccini’s *Turandot* at Beijing’s Forbidden City — the lavishness of which prompted Sean Metzger to assert that ‘Zhang Yimou has mobilized an aesthetic of excess to create an intercultural Fantasy Island’ (Metzger 2003: 214); as well as a ten-minute film as a central part of Beijing’s bid for the Olympic Games in 2008. He was also the general director for the Chinese segment previewing the Beijing Games during the closing ceremony of the Games in Athens in 2004. It was an eight-minute display featuring traditional Chinese dance and martial arts, not unlike conservative cultural demonstrations put up for foreign tourists. In May 2000, Zhang directed the National Ballet of China in a performance of *Raise the Red Lantern* that toured the world: the ballet’s display of orientalism is possibly even more pronounced than in the film. Ismene Brown of the *Daily Telegraph* provides this description:

Red predominates, in the lanterns (the red light of sex), in exquisitely luxurious panels and pagodas, and in some remarkable images of blood.

[...] The key scenes are produced with a startlingly theatrical eye: the husband rapes his new wife in a monstrously effective shadow-play, an imaginative human mah jong game adds a symbolic dimension to the story, and in the horribly elegant execution scene soldiers lash a white canvas with red paddles and snowflakes pour down to cover the corpses. Violence is portrayed with neck-prickling beauty, to which Qigang Chen's intriguing Chinese orchestral score adds strange allure. (Brown 2003)

Some scenes, like that of the rape, are not present in the film, and the ballet makes other alterations to the names, plot and characterisations, casting over Su Tong's narrative other layers of cultural meaning. The ballet may be seen as the after-life of the film; it would not have been likely to exist (in its present form) had the film not been so popularly received. In this manner, it revives interest in the film and takes it beyond its particular historical context of China at a particular point in time. This does not negate readings of the film as historical artefact, but generates a parallel history of the cultural artefact with its own historicity. An different example of this process would be Andy Warhol's painting of Marilyn Monroe or the Campbell soup can: in each instance, the painting becomes that — a representation of what Monroe or the soup can represents at the point in culture that the painting enacts. In the same way, the ballet of *Raise the Red Lantern* is not a balletic rendition of Su Tong's novella, but of Zhang's film, which is not in particular a depiction of Chinese history as it is a representation.

The films are thus not just texts, but also *inter-texts*, dramatising Julia Kristeva's notion of the text as an open system of intersecting texts: 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (1980: 66). They interact not just with other film texts — previous Chinese film, the European art cinema — but also with other cultural texts — painting, theatre, even theory (for example, feminism and psychoanalysis). Film-authors, if directors can indeed be considered as such,

are also, not simply ‘artists’ or ‘craftsmen,’ to use Bordwell’s term, but also Foucauldian author-functions, that is, as functions of *discourse* (see Foucault 1977: 124–27). In this sense, the varied receptions to the films point not to the possession of truth in one camp and falsehood in another, but dramatise the ways in which the historicities of the text may be both horizontally (in semiotic terms, the syntagm) and vertically (the paradigm) conceived of: horizontally, in the unfolding of a historical linear time, which we accept by consensus through the use of a common calendar; and vertically, as a historicised presence in a particular moment in relation to other historicised moments (such as other art forms, texts, or the same artefact in a different time). The ambivalences of Zhang’s author-functions may be located at where the two axes meet: on the one hand, he is a product of a specific historical moment, whether of the Cultural Revolution or the Tianmen Square incident, or of his own birth; on the other hand, he is also constantly responding to the demands of the market, of changing tastes and moods, whether of audiences or his own artistic temperament, and to the continually shifting roles his film-texts play in each historical moment. For example, the release of *Raise the Red Lantern* in China would resonate differently after the official approval of *The Story of Qiu Ju* than it would have at the point of its banning.

However, the advent of late modernity’s onslaught on history, and geography, via ‘postmodernism’ in terms of cultural criticism, and ‘globalisation’ in terms of transnational capital, complicates the syntagmatic notion of historical time. For instance, the question of whether the Fifth Generation formed a break with the Chinese film tradition or one that was merely the logical extension of that tradition is open to debate. Silbergeld suggests that the divide between Fourth and Fifth Generations may not be as distinct as perceived, as many of the Fifth Generation were in fact trained by members of the Fourth Generation, and close personal and familial ties

continued to be maintained. The relationship of the Fourth to the Fifth Generation, as Silbergeld puts it, is one of ‘cultural parentage’ (1999: 236). Similarly, the notion that the Fifth Generation films were a counter-cultural measure against the Chinese state is also to polarise a relationship that was more mutual than usually acknowledged. Lu argues that the “‘Orientalist” path is not a choice for many Chinese filmmakers, but a step they have to take in order to deal with the reality of their home country in the 1990s’ (1997b: 130). This reality was not so much political as economic. In fact, and ironically, the avant-gardism associated with the early Fifth Generation films was only possible when the industry was state-subsidised (Lu 1997b: 130). Following reforms to the economy, along with the arbitrary censorship that was still being exercised by the state as a measure of control, the only solution left to these filmmakers was to seek foreign funding, thus preempting foreign viewership (Lu 1997b: 131; Clark 2002:82). Whether or not Zhang’s decision to address the ‘Western’ gaze was made consciously, he certainly seemed to have tuned in to a particular *zeitgeist* at the time. *Zeitgeists*, however, are not wholly severed from the demands of the market, and it would appear that the kinds of Chinese film for which Zhang and the Fifth Generation were known in the US and Europe — that is, films prior to the emergence of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the new international commercialisation of Chinese cinemas — are now perceived to be relegated to the archives of history:

By the time Zhang returned [in 1999 from the five-year ban following *To Live*], the arthouse baton had moved west. International audiences were now getting *worthier, riskier and more exotic cinema* from modest Iranian directors such as Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Zhang’s comeback film, *Not One Less*, appeared to acknowledge this. It featured struggling children in poor rural settings: it was Kiarostami in China. (Rose 2002, my emphasis)

This statement, however, notes only the gap in the international exhibition of Zhang’s films following the ban on *To Live*; in China, Zhang’s *Keep Cool*

(1997), a black comedy about life in Beijing, was released to reasonable box-office success (Lu 2005a: 129). More significantly, it is suggested that, '[f]or the first time in living memory, Chinese directors have options beyond the festival/arthouse route. They can make modern films for their own citizens and they can make mass entertainment for global audiences' (Rose 2002). *Whose* living memory is being spoken of?

One of the routes by which these films circulate the world is through the international film festival circuit. Far from simply providing a neutral space for these films to be experienced, the act of participation at a festival is determined by a complex political economy of factors, including the selection process of the festival committee, the funding available to it, the suitability of venues, the visibility of the festival's awards, and so on. On this space, national, cultural, and political agendas may be routinely played out. Julian Stringer notes that, '[f]ilm festivals have not offered an escape from the national projection room, so much as one of its major showcases: they have not provided a neutral background for the pure gaze of aesthetic contemplation so much as a location for the implantation of nationalist agendas' (2001: 136). Ruby Rich describes the scenario under which the Fifth Generation films first entered the US market in the 1980s. Their arrival coincided with a time when the 'foreign film' also 'became a business [in the US] as the entire world of film exhibition was irrevocably altered by forces both within and outside its control':

Distribution companies mutated and multiplied, home video forced changes in the habits of both audiences and exhibitors, multiplexes became a reality, and the debut of cable television stations created further competition for viewer dollars just as the development of music video accelerated the alteration of their attention spans. (Rich 2004: 157)

Rich notes that in the mid-1980s there was a concerted effort by the US film industry to 'bait' audiences into 'switching' to foreign cinema, and cites a particular memorable example of how US audiences were 'duped' into sitting

through *Raise the Red Lantern*. The deception involved screening trailers of the film without dialogue or subtitles:

[Co-founder and co-president of Sony Pictures Classics, Michael] Barker still chuckles over a story he attributes to New Yorker Films founder Dan Talbot, who went to a movie theatre to see Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*, a Mandarin language film from China that Sony Pictures Classics released with the same, no-dialogue trailer strategy. The audience settled contentedly in their seats until the opening credit sequence ended and the talking — and subtitles — began. Then [...] a sudden burst of groaning was audible. The audience was face-to-face with the ruse and realized it had been duped. But people stayed. And the film became another hit [the same strategy having succeeded earlier with Pedro Almadóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*]. (Rich 2004)

However, the translatability of Zhang's films in a non-US context, such as in Singapore, which comprises a large ethnic Chinese majority but whose consumption of US cultural products is comparable to other US and European metropolitan centres, requires that a different conception of cultural literacy be taken into account.

Clarissa Oon, a reviewer and columnist for Singapore's English-language daily, *The Straits Times*, writes whimsically of her life as 'a Zhang Yimou film.' She recounts her experience, which anecdotally mirrors my contemporaries' somewhat, as having re-discovered a part of her Chinese identity through his early films, after 'a diet of Hollywood blockbusters and Merchant Ivory films' (Oon 2000: 9). 'One day,' she writes, 'an ad in the papers for a Chinese movie nominated for a Best Foreign Film Oscar caught my eye' (Oon 2000: 9). In other words, Oon's experience up to this point is no different from a spectator in a US or European metropolitan centre reading up on the latest arts events. However, she adds that 'Judou, a tragedy of youth and passion set in a rigid feudal society, had its impact on our burning young minds. Our understanding of it transcended the on-screen subtitles' (Oon 2000: 9). The need to read subtitles here is an allusion to the problems of Chinese-

language acquisition faced by many pupils of English-speaking backgrounds in Singapore (see Gopinathan *et al.* 1999). The discovery of Zhang Yimou for Oon in this context is the re-discovery of a China and a Chineseness hitherto unknown to her generation of middle-class, English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans. This generation was born well into the period where China was no longer seen as the ‘home’ to return to for Chinese Singaporeans, many of whom were brought up on European, usually Anglophone, literary classics. The experience of Zhang Yimou’s films, for them, was to bring to attention the cultural specificities of their education and socialisation: ‘new wave Chinese director Zhang Yimou led us to start paying as much attention to our Chinese compositions [essays] as the Sylvia Plath-pastiche poetry we wrote in our journals’ (Oon 2000: 9). *Raise the Red Lantern* caused Oon to ‘[rail] silently against the subjection of my soul sisters in China’ (2000 :9); this response may be readily compared with Dai Qing’s disdain, Dai Jinhua’s political reading, or Rey Chow’s scepticism of Zhang’s films. My own memory in Singapore of some of the casual responses to the film at the time, albeit anecdotal ones, is that a certain sense of superiority was reinforced — that ‘we’ (the Chinese in Singapore) are not like ‘them’ (in China). In Oon’s China imaginary Zhang’s mythical China becomes at once close and foreign — close because it seems to call to her Chinese origins, and foreign because it is an imaginary, unseen, and ultimately unknowable, China; it is also doubly foreign because the writer’s own cultural familiarity with a range of US and European cultural products, such as Hollywood, Merchant-Ivory and Sylvia Plath. Oon’s experience is echoed in Trinh T. Minh-ha assertion that, ‘I am who It [Language] is, whom I am seen to be, yet I can only feel myself there where I am not, *vis-à-vis* an elsewhere I do not dwell in’ (1994: 11). The question of cultural translatability and comparison becomes more complicated when the question of what is to be compared or translated is not so easily categorised; or rather, when the

‘elsewhere’ triangulated by the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ resolutely resists categorisation.

CHAPTER THREE

WONG KAR-WAI

Films from Hong Kong have from the beginning enjoyed a relatively wide market distribution beyond its shores, mainly into territories with sizeable overseas Chinese populations and through the video market. The need for overseas market penetration has always been a concern for the industry, due to its small domestic market, where '[l]ocal box office generally occupies only one-fifth or one-third of total revenue' (Lo 2005: 47). Thus, one could argue that Hong Kong cinema has always had to address the transnational. As Meaghan Morris notes:

By 'Hong Kong,' I mean a location in which filmmakers from many places — notably Japan, the Philippines, Australia, the US, Taiwan and the Chinese mainland — have interacted with the local industry to produce a new transnational genre. In multiple forms and languages, from the Hollywood blockbuster playing in a multiplex wherever there's a shopping mall, to outdoor screenings of tapes in remote communities with only one video-player, action cinema circulates scenarios of 'contact' between rival ways of life to diverse audiences worldwide. In doing so it borrows deeply from Hong Kong cinema, which has long addressed local concerns in cosmopolitan cultural forms. (Morris 2004: 184)

The kineticism for which Hong Kong cinema is known is in part driven by the dynamism of capitalism inasmuch as it is also driven by historical anxieties:

Playfully combining generic clichés with easy-to-read emotions and quite unthinkable circumstances that are meant to provoke spontaneous responses, uncontrollable laughter, and bewilderment, the films communicate with their audiences in a language of detached, borderless enjoyment even as they make references to local events and conditions. (Yau 2001a: 2)

Their relative accessibility, according to Esther Yau, depends upon a film language 'drawn abundantly from Hollywood's and Japan's examples, from old Cantonese movies, and from popular fiction,' and locates Hong Kong

cinema at the crossroads between genres and other film cultures, exuding ‘a modern, worldly sensibility that is at once part proletarian and part bourgeois, both sentimental and rational, and fantasy oriented’ (2001a: 2). Yau further argues that Hong Kong cinema is imbued with a paradoxical quality of being both local and global, of speaking the discourse of margin and centre at the same time:

This quality has proven to be the key to their accessibility for many viewers who are neither knowledgeable about nor interested in the tensions and the paradoxes of Hong Kong as a densely populated city of about 7 million residents; at the same time, the films’ light doses of ‘Chineseness’ can be a panacea for those seeking alternatives to Hollywood fare and for homesick overseas Asian audiences. Circulating in the far-reaching networks already established by immigrant businesses and economic diasporas, Hong Kong movies can appear provincial yet also Hollywood-like [...]. (Yau 2001a: 2)

In this chapter, I aim to address not just the expression of this transitoriness in the films of Wong Kar-wai, but also how this expression, in the form of the ‘arthouse style,’ contributes to a populist film culture whose kineticism is already seen as reflective of that elusive and transitory nature. In other words, I wish to address the films not simply as reflective of Hong Kong subjectivity, as many have already discussed, but also as a *projection* of that subjectivity onto the world and within Hong Kong itself.

I

The main island of Hong Kong was conceded to the British in 1896 following the Chinese defeat at the Opium wars. In 1897, the Chinese government leased additional land to British Hong Kong known as the New Territories (see Hanes and Sanello 2002). The expiration of the lease in 1997 prompted the British government in 1984 to negotiate the return of the territory to Chinese jurisdiction, in the form of the Sino-British Joint Declaration; Hong Kong inhabitants — who could hardly be called ‘citizens’ — were not

consulted. Unlike the question of a 'Chinese' subjectivity contested in the Fifth Generation films of the 1980s and 90s, 'Chinese-ness' is only one part of Hong Kong's subjectivity, mainly as a result of its political history:

In the past few decades, the Hong Kong colonial government consciously adopted a double alienation policy in order to avoid political conflicts [...]. Hong Kong people were discouraged from identifying themselves as national subjects of either China or the British Empire. Hong Kong was positioned by the British as a mid-way port, whose role was for the relaying of Sino-British political and economic interests. Without an official imperative imposed from above, formal education and the media did not provide or enforce a historical narrative for the members of the territory to contextualize themselves [...]. (Ma 2000: 175)

In other words, a Hong Kong subjectivity is historically constructed within an interstitial space. Eric Kit-wai Ma describes his personal experience, having been born and growing up 'in the formative years of postwar Hong Kong,' he is conscious of 'living in the "here-and-now", without a strong historical narrative with which to make sense of [his] existence' (Ma 2000: 175). Lacking a strong British identity, individuals like Ma did not necessarily identify with mainland China:

When I was a student, I only had a vague idea of Chinese history; I did not know much about the whos, whats and whys in contemporary China. Neither did I know much about the British Empire. China to me seemed foreign yet domestic, familiar yet exotic. In the 1970s, when I had a chance to visit my homeland in Guangdong for the first time, I experienced a strong sense of difference. The cultural imagination of China as a primitive place was so strong that it constructed my mainland relatives as outsiders, rather than members of my family. (Ma 2000: 175)

The return of Hong Kong to China, however, has forced Hong Kong residents to question their own identity. Ma writes of his post-1997 attempt to self-identify as a Chinese subject: 'Contrasting with my "de-sinicized" past, what I have experienced since the sovereignty transfer is a sudden re-embedding of my subjectivity within the imagination of a new home country' (2000: 175). It is a de-nationalised subjectivity that is usually said to be rooted mainly in the culture of capital and consumerism: 'In the past, Hong Kong did not have a

strong government, a nation or a high culture to harbour its collective pride. Thus, people took pride in the belief that Hong Kongers were efficient, smart and able to make lots of money in bad times' (Ma 2000: 174). The pivotal years from 1984 to 1989, however, just prior to the Tiananmen Square incident, saw a new desire in Hong Kong to formulate a self-defined cultural identity, which had hitherto been taken for granted:

Sharing a collective wish to seek a democratic future for themselves that they never had before, more than one-fourth of Hong Kong's residents participated in massive local rallies, donated generously to the cause, and watched the news closely, while many visited Tiananmen Square, started soul searching, and began to take Chinese history very seriously. (Yau 2001a: 15)

When the student democracy movement was crushed in 1989, the sense of urgency 'to seize any remaining opportunities to accomplish everything before the year 1997' was intensified:

[...] these few years saw an increased demand for overseas passports and assets, a real-estate boom, reinvigorated interest in Hong Kong's history, a sudden respect for local writers and artists, the birth of a tabloid newspaper, and strategically, a rush on the part of the late-colonial government to establish direct representation and political parties. (Yau 2001a: 15).

In the spirit of Hong Kong, '[e]verything developed quickly and all at once' (Yau 2001a: 15). Hong Kong as Yau puts it 'became a glittering boom town with a deadline' (2001a: 16). However, 1997 came and went without much newsworthy incident beyond the first televised celebrations:

On the day China reclaimed Hong Kong, the international media expected doomsday news stories but ended up having none. The sovereignty transfer was smooth; stock and property prices soared; dissidents were still protesting on the streets and no one was arrested. The hand-over ceremony seemed to be an anti-climax and international interest in Hong Kong quickly died down. (Ma 2000: 173)

Nevertheless, in the wake of the Chinese government's guarantee to the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong to retain its way of life (read,

business) for a further fifty years — the promise of ‘one country, two systems’ (Lo 2005: 106) — Hong Kong appears once again subject to a new extended ‘doomsday’ deadline, the new harbinger of the end of its ‘unique’ identity. However, Hong Kong’s subjectivity cannot be expected to remain as in stasis until 2046 comes around. As with 1997, the expectation of this externally imposed *fin de siècle* is already integral to the ongoing (mutual) transformation of Hong Kong (and Chinese) society (see Lo 2005: 1–21).

In a sense, the subjectivity of Hong Kong is one born of cultural adoption: not quite ‘Chinese,’ but not quite ‘British’ either, and not even really a hybrid of the two. While the territory enjoyed, relative to the totalitarian regime of communist China, some of the civil liberties of western liberal democracy under British rule — for instance, ‘[u]nder British colonial rule, newspaper columns were free to appropriate the local to promote national consciousness’ (Lo 2005: 45) — it remained resolutely a ‘colony,’ that had to be ‘given back’ in 1997, an event negotiated between the British and Chinese governments without consultation with the Hong Kong residents. Like much of the widely-dispersed Chinese diaspora, the people of Hong Kong are likely to see themselves, and be seen from the outside, as ethnically Chinese, as Lo writes:

To many foreign visitors, Hong Kong already appears to be a very ‘Chinese’ city. It was used to exhibit Chineseness when the ‘real’ China could not be accessed. In fact, the returned Hong Kong may serve as an exemplar of Chineseness not because the colonial city disassociated from Chinese culture in order to produce a Hong Kong identity, but because it has been producing and reshaping Chineseness since the early colonial era. (Lo 2005: 3)

However, Lo adds that the appropriation of Chineseness in Hong Kong also shifts depending on the context: ‘Sometimes Hong Kong provides a safe haven for sinicist ideology; [...] At other times Hong Kong appropriates Chineseness as a means to realize its own identity formation. [...] Sometimes the sinicist

ideology enables the Chinese culture to realize its full potential. And very often Hong Kong ruthlessly exploits Chineseness for commercial purposes' (Lo 2005: 3). That 'Chineseness' is a contested identity is not in question. What will be addressed in this chapter is how the questions of cultural identity and subjectivity informs the discourse of, and about, the selected films.

More than hybrid, Esther Yau describes Hong Kong cinema in particular as 'culturally androgynous,' in that it 'cites diverse idioms, repackages codes, and combines genres that are thought to be culturally, aesthetically, or cinematically incompatible. [...] These modes help break down the notion of bounded cultures, so that the cultural entities that once appeared to be historically and geographically intact are often taken apart and reassembled' (Yau 2001a: 7):

Relatively free from obligations of national self-representation and having for many years now adopted an apparently apolitical stance with regard to the antagonisms between mainland China and Taiwan, Hong Kong movies do not lock themselves within the old impasses on issues of national culture. (Yau 2001a: 2)

At the same time, the development of the Hong Kong film industry cannot be separated from the history of the mainland. Much of the creative energy of its early years was the result of emigrants fleeing the various tumults occurring on the mainland over the course of the twentieth century. Yingjin Zhang divides the history of Hong Kong cinema prior to the 1980s into three main phases: the first phase spans 1945 to 1955, the second 1956 to 1965, and the third 1966 to 1978 (2004: 150–51). The first phase involves the migration of large numbers of artists and producers from Shanghai, 'many of whom expected their sojourn to be temporary' (Zhang 2004: 150). This group left Shanghai after the end of the Second World War, when the civil war breaking out in China 'took a spiritual toll' on them (Teo 1997: 14). These emigrants 'initiated a trend of Mandarin cinema in postwar Hong Kong that rivaled its Shanghai counterparts

in both critical realism and genre innovations while exhibiting a strong nostalgic ambience' (Zhang 2004: 150). This development evolved alongside the Cantonese film industry already present in Hong Kong at the time, Cantonese generally taken to be the *lingua franca* in the territory (Teo 1997: 14). However, rather than blending into a pan-Chinese hybrid, 'the Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas remained parallel film cultures' (Teo 1997: 14), with the Shanghainese made-in-Hong Kong films depicting the city as 'an abstract, cardboard city, using Hong Kong locations dressed up as the streets and quarters of Shanghai [...]. The styles, themes and content of Hong Kong's Mandarin films evoked the classics of Shanghai cinema of the 30s' (Teo 1997: 14–15). Yingjin Zhang describes the two parallel cinemas as such:

The *divergence* of Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas in Hong Kong was conspicuous in the early 1950s since their respective production staff rarely mixed, they served two separate audiences in Hong Kong and overseas, and their characteristics could be contrasted in opposite terms [...]: for Cantonese cinema, cheap, simple, unpretentious, folk roots, southern, energetic, whereas for Mandarin cinema, expensive, arty, pretentious, urban roots, northern and stiff. (Zhang 2004: 162–63)

One of the reasons for this divergence lies in the political histories of the two territories:

In 1936, the KMT government in Nanjing passed an edict banning Cantonese movies [in Guangzhou]. [...] Due to the outbreak of war with Japan in 1937, the government, with more pressing matters on its hands, conveniently closed its eyes to the edict. Cantonese movie producers in Guangzhou, the ones most affected by the edict (Guangzhou had developed into a major centre of Cantonese movie production in the mid-30s) simply moved down to the British-controlled colony, and Hong Kong emerged as the base for Cantonese movies with a sizeable overseas market in Southeast Asia and America. In this way, Hong Kong's film industry counted on the use of Cantonese dialect as a selling point. (Teo 1997: 6)

The British colonial government, Lo notes, 'did not enforce a radical colonial language policy in Hong Kong,' as it seemed that a 'wholesale Anglicization would have met with fierce local resistance' (Lo 2005: 25). As such, the

politics of language and identity were expressed in Hong Kong largely through the various Chinese languages:

The cultural tolerance and minimal engagement of the colonial government in print culture seem to have allowed the local Chinese to gradually develop a linguistic form of cultural and ethnic representation. But this local consciousness still must rely on the prevailing Chinese writing system based on standard Chinese (*bai hua*, which is a written form of Chinese based on the vernacular Mandarin), since Cantonese — the everyday dialect of Hong Kong people — is primarily a spoken language [...]. (Lo 2005: 26)

Chua Beng-Huat, in describing the cultural flows within East Asia, offers this description of the dynamics, and tensions, within the politics of language use even amongst Chinese-speaking audiences:

Technically, Chinese languages can be phonologically strange to each other, although a relatively common written language facilitates communications among all literate Chinese. [...] Although it is often assumed that the written script provides the common language for all literate Chinese, the meaning of a written word is nevertheless not always assured. This is because a written word may be used only phonologically as a transliteration of spoken sound, with the meaning of the word completely discarded; then, it would be completely meaningless if read literally. [...] The multiple Chinese languages situation sometimes creates an interesting disjuncture when a Chinese audience is watching a film or a television programme that is dubbed in one Chinese language while carrying scripted Chinese subtitles in another, when one simultaneously listens to and reads the dialogue. (Chua 2004: 214)

As I will discuss in the analyses of the films, this linguistic disjuncture becomes the site on which the ‘trans-subjectivity’ (to use Lo’s term) of Wong’s films are located, especially when Lo also notes that the myth of Hong Kong as ‘essentially a monoethnic, monolingual Cantonese-speaking community’ is belied by the use of ‘Hakka [*kejia*], Hoklo [*fulao*], Chiu Chau [*chaozhou*], Fukien [*fujian*], Sze Yap [*siyi*], and Shanghainese together with Mandarin/ Putonghua [...] in many Hong Kong families’ (2005: 26). However, like in many other rapidly modernising societies, this linguistic diversity is also diminishing in Hong Kong, because of the predominance of schooling in

Cantonese, as well as the ‘growing pressure toward conformity [...] and the emergence of a sense of Hong Kong identity’ (Lo 2005: 26).

This rivalry between the Mandarin and Cantonese language cinemas is accentuated during the second phase of the ‘competing studios’ era (Zhang 2004: 151), the narrative history of which may be found in both Yingjin Zhang’s and Stephen Teo’s accounts (Zhang 2004; Teo 1997). The two main studios, Cathay and Shaw Brothers, both companies also operated in Singapore, were in ‘cut-throat competition,’ and ‘kept luring each other’s top artists and outpacing each other’s production plans’ (Zhang 2004: 163). They competed in both the Cantonese and Mandarin-language markets and in similar genres. During this era, a form of linguistic hybridity would emerge, which Yingjin Zhang argues reflects ‘the *convergence* in Hong Kong cinema,’ that is ‘the mixing of Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking casts in the same films’:

Interpreted at a symbolic level, this points to a self-confidence which Hong Kong filmmakers had obtained by the early 1960s: that by confronting rather than evading the hybridity of their cultural identity they could expect nothing but ‘happy’ endings. (Zhang 2004: 166)

He is referring to the ‘south-north’ films — the south, representing Hong Kong, and the north, Beijing or the mainland — which ‘present “mixed” couples but emphasize “happiness” (*xi*), “affection” (*qin*) and “family unity” (*yijia*)’ within a single film (Zhang 2004: 166). This ‘hybridity’ is enacted differently in Wong’s films, as I shall discuss.

Towards the mid-1960s, however, the Shaw Brothers would dominate, especially in Mandarin-language productions, ‘because a Mandarin title could be sold at a higher price than a Cantonese one’ (Zhang 2004: 166). The decline of Cantonese language cinema was in part due to its inability to meet audience expectations (note the ‘cheap’ descriptor above), an audience which was already able to consume Mandarin and foreign films (Zhang 2004: 174). The

rise of Mandarin cinema during this period was also supported by the importation of films from Taiwan, mainly martial arts fantasies, romances, and melodramas (Zhang 2004: 177). During this period, the South-east Asian market also grew in importance because the mainland government had banned Cantonese language films (Teo 2005: 193), accelerating the Hong Kong film industry's desire to expand its market share in other territories, especially to overseas Chinese communities around the world. The government had also banned *wuxia* [swordplay] pictures on the mainland on grounds that they 'promoted superstition' (Teo 2005: 193). Of course, this border division is not to be well-policed and Hong Kong cinema remains one of the major popular culture commodities in mainland China.

The revival of Cantonese Hong Kong cinema in the third phase after 1966 marks the entry of Golden Harvest, the new studio who founded superstars Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan and consolidated Hong Kong's reputation for the madcap kinetic cinema it is today most well known for. Mandarin-language cinema, in the style of the old costume fantasy dramas, would experience a severe decline in this era (Zhang 2004: 185) to be revived only in the late twentieth century with the advent of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which I shall discuss in the next chapter. Following the three phases outlined by Zhang, there is, in the 1980s, the Hong Kong 'new wave' cinema. Stephen Teo records two phases of this movement. The first consisted of filmmakers whose work now characterises mainstream Hong Kong cinema, but which originally challenged the didacticism of the films of the 1950s and 60s — the hyper-kinetic action films of John Woo, the over-the-top visual extravaganzas of Tsui Hark, and the madcap comedies of Michael Hui are but a few examples. However, by the mid-1980s, 'the new wave was so much a part of the Hong Kong film industry that there was never really any talk of it forming a separate, artistic identity' (Teo 1997: 160). The 'second wave'

occurred in the period following the 1984 Sino-British agreement for the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 (Teo 1997: 160). There was a 'mood of skepticism' brought to the films that were increasingly being about Hong Kong itself (Teo 1997: 160). Where the first wave was 'searching for a local identity by exploring contemporary life in the colony and representing Hong Kong as a multicultural reality' (Li 2002: 111), the second wave (of which many of the first wave were also a part) ushered in what has been identified as a 'postmodern' phase in Hong Kong cinema (Li 2002: 118; Teo 1997: 243). It should be noted that this refers to postmodernism in its broadest sense, a postmodernism of eclecticism and experimentation, and a postmodernism of profound seriousness as well as anarchic playfulness. What distinguishes the Hong Kong 'new wave' from other new wave movements is its relative lack of distinction between the mainstream and 'art' cinemas. David Bordwell puzzles over its ambivalence throughout his book, *Planet Hong Kong* (2000): 'How did such a frankly commercial filmmaking tradition manage to generate the conditions we might recognize as artistry?' (Bordwell 2000: 5). The answer is perhaps, as I shall explore, that there are no distinct boundaries between what constitutes art and commerce; even the most mainstream Hong Kong film risks a degree of formal experimentation that mainstream Hollywood would not attempt. Conversely, an 'arthouse' director like Wong Kar-wai may also be nominated alongside his mainstream counterparts at the annual Golden Horse awards (Hong Kong's equivalent of the Oscars). In fact the arthouse/mainstream distinction appears to be made only when the films travel to festivals like Cannes, where Wong has been a regular favourite. The aesthetic of the 'postmodern' Hong Kong film, therefore, is impossible to unify, except perhaps in the context of a particular film culture.

II

Ackbar Abbas, in his analysis of Hong Kong and ‘the politics of disappearance,’ devotes an entire chapter to Wong Kar-wai, whose films Abbas cites as symptomatic of a ‘*déjà disparu*,’ a condition in which the cultural identity of Hong Kong, by virtue of its geo-political history, as I have described above, is continually doubly erased. Visually, this double erasure is achieved by avant-garde camera work and lab processes, through ‘a form of visuality that problematizes the visible’ (Abbas 1997: 36). This use of visuality, accompanied by the strategic use of sound and music in Wong’s film narratives tend to accentuate themes of nostalgia and loss, and may be read as reflective of the prevailing mood in modern Hong Kong.

One of the main ways in which the visible is problematised is by establishing a non-linear narrative construction. However, Wong’s method of editing can be distinguished from the mere re-ordering of narrative sequencing as in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000). Instead, Wong relies on a non-linear spatio-temporal construction in which temporal linearity itself becomes impossible. The most evident example of this occurs in the fleeting appearance of Faye, a character in the second story of *Chungking Express* (1994), within the first story of the film. *Chungking Express* is essentially made up of two stories. The first story is of Cop 223, also known as He Qiwu²⁸ (played by Takeshi Kaneshiro) and his encounter with a blonde-wigged drug dealer (played by Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia), of whom he says when he first crosses her path: ‘At our closest point of intimacy, we were

28. ‘He Zhiwu’ in pinyin Mandarin, but rendered as ‘He Qiwu’ in the English subtitles. I have opted to use ‘He Qiwu’ since it is likely to be the more familiar to English readers. Other critics sometimes use the other spelling.

just 0.01 cm from each other. Fifty-seven hours later, I fell in love with this woman.’ The second story is of the relationship between Cop 663²⁹ (played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Faye (played by Faye Wong), a helper at a takeaway food stall called the Midnight Express. At the juncture between the two stories, He Qiwu is briefly introduced to Faye, of whom he says: ‘At our closest point of intimacy, we were just 0.01 cm from each other. I knew nothing about her. Six hours later, she fell in love with another man.’ Temporally, this suggests that the second story follows from the first. However, Faye makes a brief appearance in the first story, emerging from a shop with a large Garfield doll, which in the second story we learn she has bought for 663’s apartment. Thus, at the start of the second story, He’s narration projects into the future a narrative whose incidents have already occurred in the past. This is a temporal paradox that is made possibly not only on the level of editing and sequencing in the film, but also accentuated by the fact that the Chinese language does not rely on tenses to mark time. As a result, ‘fell in love’ could well also be ‘fall in love,’ producing not so much an ambiguity of meaning as the co-existence of double possibilities. It is an experience that Abbas refers to as ‘a principle of nonimmediacy and delay,’ where the ‘humour in the film is that of the double take, the delayed response’ (1997: 55). In other words, either we cannot believe what we see, or we must believe that time, as we know it, is unreliable as a measure of our faith in visual reality.

29. There is some contention over whether the character’s identity is actually 633 or 663. He is referred to as 633 by the proprietor of the Midnight Express stall, who is later corrected by his employees. Critics often use the two interchangeably. For a fuller account of the slippage, see Tong (2003). I have opted to use 663 for consistency, but it hardly matters whichever number is the correct one. The fact that he has a (problematic) number in place of a name is itself a take on the anonymity of modern urban life.

Indeed, time is often fetishized by Wong's characters, and much is made of deadlines and expiry dates in the films. In *Chungking Express*, He Qiwu's obsession with buying cans of pineapples expiring on the 1st of May refers to a personal deadline he has set for his girlfriend, May, whom we are told loves pineapple, to return his calls. When she does not, he eats all thirty cans of pineapple in a night, musing over his luck that May was not into garlic. He goes in search of another girl named May, to whom the proprietor of the Midnight Express has been trying to introduce him, only to find she has left with another man. The specificity of the mention of time (six hours, fifty-seven hours) renders time itself meaningless, though, ironically, it is brought to constant visual attention by the numerous close ups of ticking clocks. In *Days of Being Wild* (1990), there is another valiant but ultimately futile attempt to fix time.³⁰ The protagonist, Yuddy (played by the late Leslie Cheung), compensates for his fickleness in relationships by compulsively limiting promises to an impossibly short time frame. For instance, he woos Su Li-zhen (played by Maggie Cheung) with promises that whatever happens they will be friends for the present minute. Of course, while they watch the clock and wait for the minute to pass, nothing happens. When the minute is over, Yuddy is released from his commitment, and yet, for Su, the relationship becomes staked on a series of single minutes building up into a whole that Yuddy then refuses to acknowledge as valid.

It is the attempt and the futility of trying to fix time, to hold on either to the past, the present or even the future, that contributes to the sense of nostalgia

30. It is worthwhile to note that the Chinese title of *Days of Being Wild* is *A fei zheng zhuan* in Mandarin, *A fei jing chuen* in Cantonese, which was the translated title of Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean, when it was screened in Hong Kong. Such an occurrence points to an intertextuality in the Chinese context that does not operate with an English one.

and loss in Wong's films. *Ashes of Time* (1994) is Wong's re-working of a well-known martial arts story by Jin Yong called *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*.³¹ Written for serial publication, the well-known story has been continually adapted for film and television, and its characters and plots are familiar to Hong Kong and other East Asian audiences. However, what Wong does with the action-filled martial arts drama genre is to turn it into a treatise on time, emphasising not the action in the film but the interminable waiting in between; and yet, as Abbas notes, *Ashes of Time* 'does not obviously parody or ironize the conventions of the genre. Rather, the implications of the genre are followed through to their catastrophic conclusions, giving us in the end the complex continuum of a blind space and a dead time' (Abbas 1997: 58–59).

As in his other films, in *Ashes of Time*, love is often unrequited and each character is in love with the next one, and that one with the next one, the displacements and disappointments playing out like a game of tag, which eventually ends in a stalemate. It is a 'skewing of affectivity' (Abbas 1997: 60), especially embodied in the figures of Murong Yang and Murong Yin, twin brother and sister both played by the same actress, Lin Ching-hsia (also known as Brigitte Lin). The film plays on the martial arts film convention of women playing men,³² but also draws on the audience's knowledge of Lin's other roles

31. Jin Yong is the pseudonym of Louis Cha Leung Yung. Cha 'adopted the moniker to pen works of heroic fiction without damaging his credibility in his day job as a serious writer. [...] Louis Cha the journalist went on to found *Ming Pao Daily*, one of Hong Kong's best-read and most influential newspapers, while Jin Yong the writer of martial arts fantasies is perhaps the most popular Chinese writer ever, with some one billion books in print' (Yang 2003: 74). The title of his work here is alternatively known as *The Condor-Shooting Heroes* or *The Vulture-Shooting Heroes*.

32. A tradition derived from the early Cantonese opera films, which valorised characters such as the 'woman warrior,' most notable of whom is the legendary Hua Mulan (Li 2003), whose tale was most recently adapted by Disney as an animated feature in 1998. The cross-dressing woman warrior was popularised in films by swordfighting epics such as King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966), starring Cheng Pei Pei, and more recently by Tsui Hark's reinvention of the

as androgynous figures in other martial arts films; for instance, cross-dressing in *New Dragon Inn* (Raymond Lee, 1992), and playing the career-defining hermaphrodite, 'Asia the Invincible,' in *Swordsman II* (Ching Siu-tung, 1991), and its sequel, *The East is Red* (also known as *Swordsman III*, Ching Siu-tung, 1992).³³ In *Ashes of Time*, there is initial ambiguity about whether the Murong twins are two characters or one with a split personality. Cinematically, the conundrum of the dual identity played by a single actress is brought to a head when Murong Yang (the male twin) hires Ouyang Feng to kill Huang Yaoshi for jilting his sister, Murong Yin. However, before Ouyang Feng can do the job, Murong Yin turns up and offers to double his fee if he could kill her brother, Murong Yang, instead. Like a double handed shootout in a John Woo film, the characters are caught in a stalemate, where '[n]othing can happen, and action moves elsewhere. In *Ashes of Time*, the affective reveals a problematic space controlled by a system of double binds where no real action can take place' (Abbas 1997: 61). This is *Waiting for Godot* without the jokes, where the audience is invited not to laugh at the characters but to join them in the endless wait for fulfilment. At the same time, on the figure of Lin's character/s collapses the fictional and the real worlds. The stalemate is not only caused by the twin brother and sister wanting to kill each other but on the audience knowing that there is only one of Lin Ching-hsia. It is a different variation on

genre with Lin Ching-hsia in a transgender role (see Tetsuya 2005).

33. What the film also trades on is that this role and that of the blonde-wigged drug dealer in *Chungking Express*, filmed concurrently with *Ashes of Time*, were Lin's last before retiring, after a long career of over a hundred films, at the age of forty. Although Lin has never admitted to 'retirement' (Tetsuya 2005: 54), it was simply widely assumed when she stopped making films after getting married, as was the common practice amongst actresses in the Hong Kong and Taiwanese industries. Lin's popularity and status in Chinese films — as Julia Roberts, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Marlene Dietrich and Elizabeth Taylor rolled into one (Tetsuya 2005: viii) — meant that press coverage of her 'decision' was considerable.

the visual double-take in *Chungking Express*, and one that is achieved through the relational possibilities of editing.

Thus, if time is unreliable, memory appears to be even more so, although the melancholic characters seem to have nothing but their memories to hang on to. However, on the level of the film, memory becomes reduced to the materiality of everyday items. Stephen Teo writes of *In the Mood for Love* (2000):

Wong's skill in recreating Hong Kong of the '60s seems so assured and so transfixed to those of us born in the post-war baby boom years who grew up in the '60s that it is more than enough to recall nothing but the '60s (with the rise on our consciousness at the time of Western culture and *accoutrements*, plus the efforts to blend East and West, as evoked by the references to Nat King Cole's Spanish tunes, Japan, electric cookers, the handbag, Tony Leung's Vaseline'd hair, eating steaks garnished by mustard, and eating noodles and congee in takeaway flasks).

So successful is Wong's recreation of the past that we tend to forget that he has only shown us the bare outlines of Hong Kong in the year 1962 (the year when the narrative begins). Wong has created an illusion so perfect that it seems hardly possible that the director has got away with really just the mere hints of a locality to evoke time and place [...] (Teo 2001)

According to Rey Chow, 'these ethnographic details arguably constitute a kind of already-read text, one that evokes, in the midst of the contemporary filmic rendering, the sense of a community that has been but no longer is' (2002: 646). For Chow, Wong's Hong Kong is one 'remembered in oneiric images [...] [where] the everyday points rather to something clichéd, namely, the fundamentally unfulfilled — and unfulfillable — nature of human desire, to which history itself becomes subject and subordinate' (2002: 648). Memory is, in other words, a function of Abbas' *déjà disparu*. Interestingly, the closing intertitles to *In the Mood for Love* write of memory as blurred vision: 'He remembers those vanished years. As though looking through a dusty window pane, the past is something he could see but not touch. And everything he sees

is blurred and indistinct.’ This describes to a degree the audience’s experience of looking in Wong’s films; we look but we do not really know what we are seeing.

On the one hand, this attention to detail in the *mise-en-scène* is, on a formal level, an attempt by the films to arrest time, which can be read as a reflection on modernity in general, but is at the same time rendered more concrete when read as a reflection on Hong Kong’s version of modernity. In a city that is constantly renewing itself, memory cannot in fact be dependent on buildings and physical landmarks as markers of a city’s identity. For instance, Wong reveals in the commentary on the DVD version of the film that the hotel used in *In the Mood for Love* was in fact British Army accommodation during the time when Hong Kong was a crown colony, and was now slated for demolition. The uncertain fate of the building added to the urgency of shooting as much as possible while it still stood. This is Wong’s testimony to history, that while it may be inevitable for the building to be demolished, it will at least continue to exist on film, albeit in a different context.

On the other hand, Wong’s nostalgic treatment of the past generates in Rey Chow a scepticism for the sentimentality she sees as a consequence of this mode of historical production. Abbas argues that this is the inevitable product of ‘Margaret Thatcher’s visit to China [in 1982], which began a process of negotiation that culminated in the Joint Declaration of 1984 returning Hong Kong to China in 1997’ (1997: 23). In that agreement, the People’s Republic of China pledged to maintain ‘one country, two systems,’ guaranteeing no restriction on Hong Kong’s capitalist autonomy for fifty years, but Abbas argues that it had the effect of making ‘Hong Kong people look at the place with new eyes’ (1997: 23), for a declaration to preserve an identity for a finite amount of time meant that one had to know what that identity was in the first

place: 'It is as if the possibility of such a social and cultural space disappearing, in the form we know it today, has let to our seeing it in all its complexity and contradiction for the first time, an instance, as [Walter] Benjamin would have said, of love at last sight' (Abbas 1997: 23). Thus Hong Kong cinema during this period began to address this issue, of that of 'Hong Kong itself as a subject' (Abbas 1997: 23). In that sense, it is the unique history of Hong Kong that has contributed to its double erasure: 'the danger now [post-1997] is that Hong Kong will disappear as a subject, *not by being ignored but by being represented in the good old ways*' (Abbas 1997: 25). Hong Kong as a site of cultural contention enacts the '*déjà disparu*,' the 'already disappeared,' or 'the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been' (Abbas 1997: 25).

History, memory and time are but images of infinite regression, finding physical expression in Wong's conceptualisation of *2046* (2004). In (and on) *2046*, space and time are intertwined. In the film, '2046' is a time and a place, a place where people go to recover lost memories, a number of a hotel room, a deadline for the guarantee of Hong Kong's freedom — 2046 being the fiftieth year from 1997 — and at the same time, the title of Chow Mo-wan's novel and Wong's film. However, it must be noted that *2046* is set not in 2046 but in the 1960s, where 2046 is but a time and place in a character's imagination. Thus when Nathan Lee adds that, '*2046* is also, always, *2046*: a cine-Narcissus enraptured by its own depths, unnerved by what it sees, struggling to pull away from its own image' (2005: 32), he signals the infinite regressions of Wong's films brought to the extreme where '[t]ime and space collapse in memory — *memory* collapses in memory' (2005: 32). This conflation takes place on the memory of previous films as well, as Tony Rayns explains:

The conceit here is that the hole in the wall [from *In the Mood for Love*] becomes '2046,' a time/space where nothing changes, a site where nothing is lost and so everything can be found, a repository for everything that has been repressed, blocked, denied or deferred. [...] By naming it *2046*, though, Wong suggests that the film is itself a giant 'hole' into which everyone — including, of course, himself — can whisper their secrets. That's why *2046* is loaded with references to and evocations of Wong's previous films, and why it feels like some kind of summation of his career to date. (Rayns 2005: 22)

At the same time, the problematisation of the visual in Wong's films is taken beyond the level of narrative sequencing to the level of the manipulation of the surface image itself. The films are known for their 'step-printing' or 'smudge motion' technique,³⁴ which Janice Tong describes as follows:

[a] scene is shot at double-speed, forty-eight frames per second, and played back at twenty-four frames per second through the projector. At the lab, frames one to twelve are allowed to run consecutively, then frame twelve gets repeated for the next twelve frames to achieve a 'pause' in the motion; frames thirteen to twenty-four are discarded, and frames twenty-five to thirty-six get to run consecutively, and so forth. By letting the same frame run through the projector this process distinguishes itself from the device of the 'jump-cut' — another editing process used to show temporal discontinuity. Something gets lost in this process — we lose sight of our surroundings. Space becomes ambiguous, things and objects around the foreground and background merge with each other. (Tong 2003: 50)

Tong writes that Wong's use of the technique is an attempt to master time: 'with this technique he can "concentrate on [things which] don't move while everything around them moves fast"'. For him, this process is a way of "trapping time", to do to time what you can't do to it in real life'. Stephen Rowley writes that its effects are 'somewhat like viewing freeze frames and fast motion in rapid alternation' (quoted in Payne 2001). In effect, step-printing creates a sense of speed but also blurred vision, not unlike that of the landscape

34. In a note in her essay on *Chungking Express*, Janice Tong writes that both 'smudge motion' and 'step printing' refer to the same visual device, "step-printing" describes the actual lab process, whereas "smudge motion" describes what you can see' (2003: 54).

whizzing past when one is in a fast car. For Tsung-yi Huang, step-printing evokes a sense of the *flâneur*, doomed to walk the streets in ‘the elusive global space, the hidden source that over-determines the spatial practice of walking in Hong Kong’ (2001: 142). The over-determination of space is achieved precisely by emphasising ‘the forces of a dual compression: global compression, space collapsing to serve the purpose of global capital accumulation, and local compression, space collapsing to accommodate urban densities of population and housing, aggravated by global compression’ (Huang 2001: 129).

In *Ashes of Time*, it is not space that is over-determined by step-printing but speed and movement. Set within a desert vista, whatever elegance is displayed by Sammo Hung’s martial arts choreography is completely blurred. Abbas has this to say of the opening fight scene:

It is no longer a choreography of human bodies in motion that we see. In fact, we do not know what it is we are seeing. Things have now been speeded up to such an extent that what we find is only a composition of light and color in which all action has dissolved — a kind of abstract expressionism or action painting. It is not possible, therefore, to discern who is doing what to whom. The heroic space of Bruce Lee is now a *blind space* (one of the four heroes in fact is going blind); moreover, it is a blind space that comes from an excess of light and movement, that is to say, an excess of Tsui Hark-style special effects. *Ashes of Time* gives us a kind of double dystopia, where heroism loses its *raison d’être* and special effects lose their air of optimism and exhilaration. Wong’s film marks a point of *degeneration* of the genre, the moment when the genre self-destructs. (Abbas 1997: 32)

A direct comparison can be made with Ang Lee’s reworking of the sword-fighting genre with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. There, the genre is renewed by having its heroism and visual elegance given back to it, albeit in a different form.³⁵ Where Ang Lee employs familiar signs in new ways, Wong

35. Stephen Teo writes of the resilience of the *wuxia* genre, ‘bouncing back after each periodic crisis or stage of stagnation, and has quite effortlessly etched itself into the larger fabric of Chinese film culture to become a cornerstone of

disacknowledges them to the point of having them smudged out from the screen. Cinematic visuality, following from Abbas' reflection that Wong's film is 'a kind of abstract expressionism or action painting' has in a sense found a modernist voice:

[...] the visual is both ineluctable and elusive at the same time. Disappearance is certainly the result of speed, understood both as the speed of historical changes and as the technological speed of information and communication. But it is also the (negative) experience of an invisible order of things, always teetering just on the brink of consciousness. (Abbas 1997: 48)

It is a modernist visuality to the extent that, unlike Zhang Yimou's use of visual surfaces to hint at something beneath (real or imagined), the images in Wong's films do not point to something other than their own surface existence, although there is still an attempt, as Robert Payne puts it, in which the 'self-reflexive elements on the screen: hand-held cameras; intrusive out-of-focus objects in the foreground; intensely grainy frame enlargements; achronological editing; cutting between color and black & white' are in fact serving to stress the 'materiality of the image' (Payne 2001). The materiality of the image in this case is unlike the materiality of the *mise-en-scène* in Zhang's films, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, but one that relies upon the spectator to look precisely beyond the mere image itself.

III

If, by failing to conceal its own devices, the editing and cinematography support the narrativity of Wong's films as *film* (rather than film as a vehicle for story information), the use of sound and music are integral to their construction, not as supporting devices but often counterpointing the visuals or overlaying them with a new level of meaning. In this section, I would like to

that culture' (Teo 2005: 191).

consider the necessity of translating the auditory quality of his films, without which the problematisation of the visuals only addresses half the issue.

In nearly all of his films, with the exception of *In the Mood for Love*, the visuals are accompanied by voiceover narration. For Payne, the narrators serve an important expository role:

Due to his visually disruptive approach, Wong's films would be virtually impossible to follow if it weren't for the disembodied voices drifting from their soundtracks, voices that help us interpret what transpires on the screen. But the voice-overs do more than merely hold the stories together: they comment on the action, vocalize what's happening inside the characters' heads, and affirm the presence of what the camera can't capture — providing a parallel narrative of the intangible. (Payne 2001)

In other words, the voiceover narration overlays the visuals with another layer of narrative. However, it often gives us further insight into the character by counterpointing what they say with what they do. The mute, and comic, He Qiwu (also played by Takeshi Kaneshiro) in *Fallen Angels* (1995) is given a contemplative, mature voice, rounding off his character and making sense of his manic actions in a way that the action alone cannot. In the same way that the loud rendition of the Mamas and Papas' 1960s hit, 'California Dreamin', mitigates the questionable morality of Faye's intrusion into Cop 663's apartment in *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels*' He Qiwu's voiceover tempers what would be otherwise be unacceptable in the 'real' world — breaking into shops at night and selling their wares to passers-by, sometimes forcibly. However, the voiceovers are not all expository. Often they are as oblique as the visuals, as obscure as the narrative. For instance, what is one to make of the Japanese passenger on the train to 2046? At the point where the narration switches from Japanese to Cantonese, is it still the same character speaking? Or is it Chow speaking as writer of the story? Nevertheless, the voiceovers all have a sonorous quality, imparting to them a lyrical flavour that is strongly reminiscent of narrators (many of them unreliable) in modernist fiction. Often

we do not really have to comprehend every detail of what is being said, the tone and rhythm of the speech, usually meditating on the mysteries of time, space, love and loss, creates not just an intimacy with the spectator, but one in which we must trust that the journey will be worthwhile. For this reason, those who find these speeches pretentious are immediately distanced from the films, however enticing the visuals may be.³⁶ What I am trying to articulate is perhaps better expressed in Roland Barthes' concept of the 'grain of the voice,' in which the qualities of language and music overlap:

The 'grain' of the voice is not — or it is not merely — its timbre; the *signifiante* it opens cannot be better defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message). The song must speak, must *write* — for what is produced at the genosong is finally writing. [...] The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. (Barthes 1977: 185, 188)

Michel Chion argues that it is important to distinguish the voice from the speech act, from 'the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it' (1999: 1). The voiceover narrator in Wong's films act as what Chion refers to as the '*acousmêtre*' (1999: 17–29). The *acousmêtre* is not merely a disembodied voice, or an off-screen commentator; like Norman Bates' mother in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), he is both 'in the screen and not, wandering the surface of the screen without entering it, the *acousmêtre* brings disequilibrium and tension. He invites the spectator to *go see*, and he can be an *invitation to the loss of the self, to desire and fascination*' (Chion 1999: 24).

36. Not empirically exacting, but nearly every single person I have encountered who dislikes Wong's films have cited the 'pretentiousness' of the voiceovers as a major reason for their dislike. In this sense, the voice does indeed seem to set up a 'hierarchy of perception,' in which the 'ear attempts to analyze the sound in order to extract meaning from it [...] and always tries to localize and if possible identify the voice' (Chion 1999: 5), to the degree that it modifies the perception of the image as well (Chion 1999: 4).

The power of the acousmêtre lies in ‘the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power [...] ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence’ (Chion 1999: 24). It is a power, Chion argues, to which the spectator surrenders, as he does to the primordial ‘Acousmêtre’ — ‘God,’ or ‘the Mother’ (1999: 27).

Likewise, if rhythm has a gestalt quality (see Kreitler and Kreitler 1972), its lyrical effect on the spectator may be independent of the spectator’s ability to understand the language fully. As Chion argues, ‘intelligibility is not the only thing at stake’ (1999: 6). However, where the dialogue is concerned, Wong often employs a polyglot of Asian languages, whose mutual incomprehensibility creates different relationships between the characters, between the film and the Asian/Chinese audience, and between the film and the non-Asian/Chinese/‘Western’ audience.³⁷ Unlike Ang Lee’s conciliatory nod towards pan-Asianness, where actors of various Chinese origins come together and speak their dialogue in Mandarin in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Wong’s attempt at a pan-Asian identity highlights their many linguistic differences. So in a film, characters may switch from one language to another, or speak in one language while another replies in a completely different language. He Qiwu in *Chungking Express* opens the film with a voiceover in Mandarin, but when he speaks to the stallholder at the Midnight Express and the telephone operator, he uses the Hong Kong vernacular of Cantonese. At a point in the film where he tries to rekindle an old relationship, he speaks Japanese. In *In the Mood for Love*, Mrs Chan’s landlady, Mrs Suen (played by Rebecca Pan), speaks in Shanghainese, while Mrs Chan (played by Maggie

37. For argument’s sake, and from a straw poll of my students at Nottingham and Ulster, I am assuming that many US and European spectators would have greater difficulty distinguishing between Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Japanese.

Cheung) replies in Cantonese. Wong has used Pan in a similar role in *Days of Being Wild* as a signifier for the Shanghainese migrant community in Hong Kong during the period. In *Fallen Angels*, He Qiwu's father speaks in Hokkien, one of the main languages of Taiwan; a smattering of Urdu can also be heard amongst the Indian migrant worker community in *Chungking Express*. The multilingualism depicted in the films portrays Hong Kong at the crossroads of Asia, a truly 'global' city in which many cultures interact and intersect. In that respect, not many spectators would come to Wong's films understanding 'everything'; in most cases, there would always be at least one element beyond the comprehension of the viewer. It is in the fissures of identity construction that dramatises Lo's description of Hong Kong: 'Hong Kong's Chineseness is a site of performative contradictions. It is like a crack in the edifice of Chineseness. Its existence is simply a living and contingent contradiction, in the sense that the city's culture both exaggerates and negates Chineseness in the vicissitudes of its sociopolitical milieux' (2005: 4).

An extended, exaggerated and stylised use of one character speaking in one language, while another replies in a different language, is seen in the relationship between Chow Mo-wan (played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Bai Ling (played by Zhang Ziyi) in *2046*. Throughout their relationship, the fact that Chow speaks exclusively in Cantonese and Bai Ling exclusively in Mandarin already denotes the mutual lack of communication and compatibility between them, even though they respond to each other in the film as if they understood what the other was saying. The structure and sounds of Cantonese and Mandarin are sufficiently different for them to be mutually incomprehensible, unless one were versed to some extent in both languages. A more common scenario in Hong Kong would be to find a more hybrid form of Cantonese, which is 'sprinkled with snatches of Mandarin, English, and barbarous sounding words and phrases — a hybrid language coming out of a

hybrid space' (Abbas 1997: 28). While it is possible for Chow to have some fluency in Mandarin and for Bai Ling to have some fluency in Cantonese, their exclusive use of one language over the other in the film without any attempt to bridge the divide points to a formal decision made by the filmmaker to maintain their mutual exclusion. In doing so, he also alludes to the politics of language that have governed the history of Hong Kong and Hong Kong cinema, where until the mid-1970s, there was a divide between the higher budget Mandarin-language films and the lower-budget Cantonese-language films, as I have described above. Thus, when one reads of Wong Kar-wai's films as reflecting on the nature of Hong Kong history and society, it is worthwhile to note that they also reflect on that history as it was experienced through the history of the medium, especially in terms of their linguistic 'divergence' and 'convergence,' as Yingjin Zhang puts it.

The reference to cultural history is also made through the choice of music in the films, many of which are made up of favourites from the 1960s, songs with which Wong would have grown up. However, rather than date the film or locate its setting in the 1960s, the songs in fact re-enact the nostalgia the 1960s had had for an earlier time. As Abbas writes of the soundtrack for *Days of Being Wild*:

The soundtrack consists of old ballroom favourites like 'Always in My Heart,' 'Perfida,' and a well-known Chinese song. These songs in fact predate the sixties, and even when they were played then, they were already *out of date*. If the visual details locate a time, the soundtrack dissolves it back into prior moments. The result then is a history of the sixties that, like the experience of disappearance itself, is also there and not there at the same time. The film does not give us Hong Kong in the sixties viewed from the nineties, but another more labile structure: the nineties are to the sixties as the sixties are to an earlier moment, and so on and on. (Abbas 1997: 53–54)

In other words, the music erases, or at least problematises, the fixity of the *mise-en-scène* in a material reality. In the same way, music in *Happy Together*

(1997) acts to problematise space and spatial location. Set to the tune of a fiery Argentine tango, as a metaphor for the tumultuous relationship between the two gay protagonists, the music ironically evokes more a sense of Hong Kong in the 1960s (Latin music being popular at the time) than it does the city of Buenos Aires. The scenes of the dingy streets and cheerless flat could have well been in the Hong Kong of *Days of Being Wild*,³⁸ in spite of the opening scene where we see the passports being stamped.

Music, Yeh Yueh-yu writes, performs a ‘discursive function’ in Wong’s films (Yeh 1999: 121). Yeh analyses the role of the Mamas and Papas’ song ‘California Dreamin’ as not only standing in for ‘Faye’s dreams and thoughts’ (to go to California), but in the scenes where she infiltrates Cop 663’s apartment, the song also ‘works as the dominant, and with the ensemble of aggressive camera movement and montage, creates a fluidity and ballet-like rhythm in these housecleaning sequences. [...] Thanks to the music, the sense of transgression and intrusion in the “other’s” space is replaced with ease, spontaneity, improvisation and control’ (Yeh 1999: 124). As I have mentioned above, like the voiceover narration, the song ‘functions as an intermediary between the filmic world and the spectator’ (Yeh 1999: 124). It is the ‘audiovisual contract’ between spectator and film, Yeh argues, that generally ‘allows the possibility — one which is rarely realized in narrative films — for music to “undo” the images, that is, to enjoy autonomy by soliciting responses not available solely or primarily through visual channels. Because the film soundtrack is not additions [*sic*], but added-value and a hybrid audio-vision, music can later, dilute, or intensify the spectator’s perceptions’ (Yeh 1999:

38. Ironically, not many of these ‘dingy streets’ are left to be filmed in Hong Kong. *In the Mood for Love*, said to evoke 1960s Hong Kong so well, was filmed mainly in Bangkok, Thailand.

125). However, this auditory autonomy is not wholly divorced from the images; rather, as is most evident in the second segment of *Chungking Express*, it is the interspersing of the diegetic and non-diegetic use of the music, that demonstrates the interconnectedness between the characters, between the characters and the spectator, and finally between the film and the spectator.

According to Yeh, Wong's acuity in the use of music is what defines his films as properly 'transcultural and transnational' (1999: 128). For example, in *Fallen Angels*, Yeh identifies an old Taiwanese song, 'Missing You,' that Wong uses as a means by which the relationship between father and son (the He Qiwu character) is stabilised: '[t]he fact that the song is a Hokkien pop tune also indexically signifies the father's identity as a Hokkien immigrant in Hong Kong' (Yeh 1999: 131). However, she notes that 'for the Taiwanese audience, this song may seem out of place in this narrative context because it is a love song originally written in a Japanese style in the 1950s [...] [and] the version used in the film is a rock'n'roll remix of the song released in 1994' (Yeh 1999: 131). Thus, the full implication of the choice of song and music is just as dependent on a culturally literate audience. Some references, such as the use of Nat King Cole and the Cranberries, will be recognisable to many US and European viewers, as indeed they would be to many Asian ones. Other songs have more specific local and historical referents; even now, Cantonese, Mandarin and Hokkien pop music see its main audiences in the Chinese-speaking communities of the region. For instance, in *In the Mood for Love*, the song over the radio, 'Fa Yeung de Nin Wa' (in Mandarin, 'Hua Yang de Nian Hua,' translated as 'Full Bloom' in the English subtitles) from which the film takes its Chinese title, is sung by Zhou Xuan, a singer from Shanghai who lived from 1918 to 1957. The film, set in 1962, already post-dates her death, but the song would nonetheless have been a radio favourite in Hong Kong during the period, having made its debut in another film, *Chang Xiang Si* in

1946. Interestingly, the opening phrases of the song are those from the universally familiar, 'Happy Birthday.' Thus, even before their insertion into the films, these songs are already themselves transcultural, transnational products. As Martin Stokes, writing about the notion of music and place, notes, 'music is socially meaningful [...] largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them' (1994: 5); only in the case of Wong's films, the identities, places and boundaries are constantly shifting along with their musical accompaniment.

For example, 'Bengawan Solo' sung in English by Rebecca Pan,³⁹ who plays Mrs Suen, a folk song from 1940 originally written in the Indonesian language, refers to the name of an Indonesian river, its nostalgic tune and lyrics also recalling the enduring nature of the ancient river and the culture that sprang up around it. In the film, it refers not specifically to the location of Indonesia but the cultural space and time in which the song had been popularised in Hong Kong by popular singers of the day.⁴⁰ Similarly, the Cuban 'Quizás, Quizás, Quizás,' written in 1947, is rendered in the film by Nat King Cole, a singer who was popular in East and Southeast Asia during the

39. Rebecca Pan Di-hua was a famous singer in Hong Kong, especially during the late 1950s and 60s. She recorded 'Bengawan Solo' when she was eighteen years old.

40. Even now, the song is learnt in schools in the region as a folk song, without pupils necessarily having to learn about its cultural origins. I recall learning it in its original language in primary school in Singapore in the early 1980s, as part of the multi-racial ideology of the state, without really understanding a word of it, alongside 'Danny Boy' and 'Sur le Pont d'Avignon/On the Bridge of Avignon' as if we were simply tapping into a vast universal cultural reservoir. Until I began researching this, I was not even aware that 'Bengawan Solo' was not an old Malay folk tune from Singapore, so embedded is it now in the country's cultural history. It is thus resonant that in *In the Mood for Love* the song signals Chow's relocation to Singapore, enacting the ties between the two territories at the time of Singapore's own fledgling quests for identity following independence from Britain in 1959, the merger with Malaysia in 1963, and subsequent separation in 1965.

1960s, enacting for East and Southeast Asians a nostalgia for the era rather than the place (Indonesia or Cuba) from which the song originated. The English version of the song, 'Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps,' was also well known and covered by other singers such as Doris Day. Thus, the use of music in the films also enacts its integrality to the 'modernising state,' for which the advent of radio was one of the earliest mass media (Stokes 1994: 11).

Recycling and reinvention, as functions of the age of mechanical reproduction (see Benjamin 1968), are also in that way standard modes of operation for popular music; what Wong has done is to extend its use to film. In an interview, Rick Altman notes:

In a sense, we never hear a popular song for the first time; we are always hearing it *again*, each time with implicit reference to previous hearings. It is this recycling that makes popular song such a potentially effective vehicle, even if the relatively short shelf life of recent popular songs makes them accessible to no more than a limited generation of listeners. (Altman 2003: 69)

Wong takes this process to its limits not just by recycling old tunes but also by re-using them over and over within the same film, each repetition contributing to a cumulative effect in the film. It is the music and songs that thread together the different moments and locations in the films, rather than linearity of plot or logic of action. Wong's strategic use of repetition in his films recalls Deleuze's view of repetition as an inescapable condition of modernity: 'Modern life is such that, confronted with the most mechanical, the most stereotypical repetitions, inside and outside ourselves, we endlessly extract from them little differences, variations and modifications. [...] The task of life is to make all these repetitions coexist in a space in which difference is distributed' (1994: xix).

So although nothing is articulated between the characters, each time we hear 'California Dreamin'' in *Chungking Express*, we experience an

incremental progress in the relationship between Faye and Cop 663. At the same time, the repetitiousness of the song itself appears to suggest a certain stasis in their relationship, like a needle stuck in a groove. Faye and 663's relationship in many ways mirrors Wong's step-printing technique, where things are both moving and staying still at the same time. This paralysis is what his characters strive to break out of: Faye attempts to do so by going to the real California halfway across the world only to find that it is nothing special; 663, in losing Faye to California, chooses to change jobs, buying over the Midnight Express, inhabiting the space which Faye once occupied, and to which she finally returns. *Chungking Express* ends on a relatively positive note with a promise of a union between the two that the film denies us, though it ought to be noted that this is possibly the only relationship in all of Wong's films that hints at a happy ending.

Repetition is explored in various permutations in *In the Mood for Love*. In the fateful encounter between Mr Chow (played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Mrs Chan,⁴¹ the pair are doomed before even coming together to repeatedly walk the same paths — through the house, the dark corridors, the dank street, down to the noodle stall, and to the constant refrain of Umebayashi Shigeru's waltz, 'Yumeji's Theme,' taken from Suzuki Seijun's 1991 film, *Yumeiji*. As with Faye and 663, the music establishes a relationship between Chow and Mrs Chan *for the spectator* before the characters become aware of it themselves — the waltz is performed for *our* benefit, not theirs. It is thus significant that the visuality in this film is described in musical terms: Kent Jones refers to Wong's 'visual music' in *In the Mood for Love*, where 'the camera is pinned down, obliged to repeat the same POVs again and again on repeated activities and

41. In many critiques she is referred to as Su Li-zhen but I shall refrain from calling the character by that name for reasons that I shall explain further on.

behaviours, *like musical refrains*' (2001: 24, my emphasis). It is a film, he says, that 'feels less like a narrative than a beautifully drawn-out musical improvisation' (Jones 2001: 24). Improvisation is central to Wong's technique, as will be discussed later, but improvisation is also the cause for the protagonists' meeting and subsequent parting. *In the Mood for Love* tells the story of a man and a woman who get together initially in an attempt to work out how their respective spouses may have begun their adulterous relationship, and the protagonists rehearse possible scenarios by re-enacting the imagined encounter of their spouses by role-playing, improvising on snatches of dialogue and moments of intimacy that may have been exchanged. Unlike the other films, *In the Mood for Love* is unmediated by voiceover narration, and there are rarely any establishing shots, so we are never given any explanation for their behaviour until after the scene is over. Thus in the scene when we think Mrs Chan is finally confronting her husband with his infidelity, we are not provided with cues that it is not the real thing. Only when the camera reveals Chow's face, and he states eventually that 'This is only a rehearsal,' do we realise that they had been play-acting. Over time, and many performances, however, the emotions for one another become real, though the overlapping of one repetition with another never allows us to pinpoint the instance where illusion becomes reality. The 'reality' of the relationship between the protagonists, questions of whether it is physically consummated, whether they are really in love, and so on, can only be confirmed off-camera in the deleted scenes available on the DVD version. Deleuze's description of repetition as a 'secret vibration' (1994: 1) is resonant here:

Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks. (Deleuze 1994: 17)

The point where the masks that the characters wear give way to new masks marks a turning point in the film — the point of the parting, or rather the rehearsal of the parting between Chow and Mrs Chan, when they no longer rehearse the roles of their spouses but their future selves. How will each react when the moment to go comes? Perhaps the lady will weep and the man will comfort her. During the rehearsal, Chow comforts Mrs Chan, who weeps when it seems too real, and that is the only glimpse of ‘reality’ that the audience is allowed. We are never permitted to see the actual parting, the beginning of which is signalled, auditorily, by the Zhou Xuan song on the radio and, visually, by the cross-section of the wall that divides the two. After that point in the film, the characters never occupy the same space on the screen again. When the masks shift, the repetitions cease and the scene shifts, as does the music, to the location of Singapore. Deleuze may as well be writing about *In the Mood for Love* when he says:

The mask is the true subject of repetition. Because repetition differs in kind from representation, the repeated cannot be represented: rather, it must always be signified, masked by what signifies it, itself masking what it signifies. (Deleuze 1994:18)

[...] repetition does not so much serve to identify events, persons and passions as to *authenticate* the roles and select the masks. (Deleuze 1994: 19)

As for Faye and 663 in *Chungking Express*, a shift of location is necessary to break the cycle of repetition. Chow attempts to do so by moving to Singapore but Mrs Chan (and consequently Nat King Cole’s ‘Quizás’) follows him there, though she does not reveal herself. By leaving his secret in a third location in Cambodia, with its different but related history and politics, in the ancient city of Angkor Wat (and to new, original music by Michael Galasso), Chow seals his memory away in what is effectively an ancient monument to time and slow decay.

What repetition sets up is the expectation of fulfilment, for infinite repetition is stasis. However, the fulfilment achieved by narrative closure is precisely what Wong denies his audience, and yet stasis is forestalled by utilising a different kind of repetition. The repetition of names across films allows one film to echo into the next, providing a semblance of continuity, although often the characters do not share any similarity beyond the name. For instance, *Fallen Angels* is often cited as a 'sequel' to *Chungking Express*, partly because of the similarity in theme and treatment. However, it is not a sequel in a conventional sense where there is a consistency of story and characters. The link between *Fallen Angels* and *Chungking Express* is tenuous as they share only one character, He Qiwu. Where, in *Chungking Express*, he is a lovesick cop, in *Fallen Angels*, he is a rather eccentric character who spends his nights opening up stores that do not belong to him and selling their wares. Where the former eats all thirty cans of pineapple to mark the end of a relationship, the latter finds, after eating a can of pineapple as a child, that he has lost his voice. Similarly, *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046* are said to follow each other. The unnamed character that makes a cameo appearance at the end of *Days of Being Wild*, played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai, is sometimes cited as the character of Chow Mo-wan in *In the Mood for Love*, who is then reprised in *2046*. Because their production overlapped by as much as two years, and they were even shot simultaneously at points (see Rayns 2005; Taubin 2005), the links between *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* are strong. In *2046*, we see an older Chow but also one that appears to be a twin from the dark side. The love of his life that he has lost, we learn, is a woman called Su Li-zhen. Su Li-zhen is also the name of Maggie Cheung's character in *Days of Being Wild*, and now almost universally accepted as the name of her character in *In the Mood for Love*, even though in the film proper she introduces herself only as Mrs Chan. The application of the name 'Su Li-zhen'

to the character of Mrs Chan appears to have been made in hindsight, following Chow's flashback in *2046*. It is as if we look to possible repetitions in one of Wong's films, which will then affirm that it is indeed a sequel of the previous one. It should be noted that Maggie Cheung never appears as a full character in *2046*. She makes fleeting appearances as an android in the futuristic setting of *2046* and as her character from *In the Mood for Love* only in the occasional flashback. In a final twist, we learn at the end of *2046* that the name of the mysterious woman played by Gong Li, once Zhang Yimou's muse, is also called Su Li-zhen. Even the minor characters are replicated, such as Carina Lau's Lulu/Mimi in *Days of Being Wild* and *2046*. This intertextual self-referencing is like a game that is played with the audience to see how many dots within and between films can be connected.⁴² However, the point of the game is not the resulting picture at the end but the web itself.

A way of describing the interpellation of factors in Wong's films is the *tête-bêche*, literally meaning 'head-to-feet.' It is a term 'which describes stamps that are printed top to bottom facing each other,' and one that Wong himself has used to describe his films:

42. In the present era of intensified transnationality in Chinese cinemas, this 'game' appears to be taking place between filmmakers as well: 'some viewers have already wondered aloud if the choice of actresses bespeaks some film-to-film dialogue with Zhang Yimou. Zhang, the reasoning goes, "borrowed" Tony Leung, Maggie Cheung and the cinematographer Chris Doyle to make *Hero* (2002), and Wong appears to have returned the compliment by working here with all three actresses famous in China as Zhang Yimou "discoveries": Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi and Dong Jie' (Rayns 2005: 25). It is possible to add Ang Lee to the web of connections via his casting of Zhang Ziyi in *Crouching Tiger* and Tony Leung Chiu-wai in *Lust, Caution* (2007), and Zhang Yimou's use of Tan Dun's music in *Hero*. However, whether these choices are forms of personal cultural dialogue is less pertinent to my argument than that they indicate the global circulation of actors and films as transnational products, though perhaps their repetitive use also points to a shrinking rather than expanding web of connections.

To me *tête-bêche* is more than a term for stamps or intersection of stories. It can be the intersection of light and colour, silence and tears. *Tête-bêche* can also be the intersection of time: a novel published in 1972, a movie released in 2000, both intersecting to become a story of the '60s. (quoted in Teo 2001)

Likewise, Audrey Yue points out that the *tête-bêche* in *In the Mood for Love* occurs at 'the intersection of *Duidao*,' the novella from which the film's intertitles are adapted and the film, in which it 'intersects with the novella through the cinema, the space of Hong Kong and China, and popular media from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South-east Asia.' Secondly, the *tête-bêche* 'resonates with the temporality of Hong Kong before and after 1997, where the British colony is returned to its socialist motherland, China' (Yue 2003: 129). Although, technically, its 'motherland' was not socialist at the time of its colonisation, Yue's point highlights the multi-dimensionality of Wong's text.

The repetitive structure in Wong's films may be distinguished from the use of repetition in classical narrative cinema as Stephen Heath identifies it:

The economy of repetition in classic narrative cinema is an economy of maintenance, towards a definite unity of the spectator as subject; systems of repetition are tightly established but on the line of a narrative action that holds the repetitions as a term of its coherence and advances with them, across them, its sense of difference, of change, of the new. The practice of the 'structuralist/materialist film' is another economy; the spectator is confronted with a repetition that is 'in itself,' not subsumed by a narrative and its coherence, that is literal, not caught up in the rhythms that habitually serve to figure out the narrative film. The spectator is produced by the film as subject in process, in the process of demonstration of the film, with the repetition an intensification of that process the production of a certain freedom or randomness of energy, of no one memory. (Heath 1981: 169)

Repetition for Wong becomes a function of the method, as this form of intersection emerges from the highly individualised way in which Wong approaches his films; Stephen Short provides a brief glimpse of 'Wong's wild and crazy technique' in his article for *Time* magazine, 'A Night on the Set'

(2000a). Notorious for working without a script, Wong reveals in the interview on the DVD for *In the Mood for Love* that in order to allow Tony Leung to prepare for his character, he often gives him, not a piece of dialogue as would be expected, but a song or even a fragment of a piece of music as a point of reference. Similarly, when his cinematographer, Christopher Doyle, asked what *Chungking Express* might be about, he was given ‘California Dreamin’ to listen to. Doyle has a uniquely illuminating revelation regarding the music *In the Mood for Love* which he reveals in an interview: ‘the music which we based the movement of the camera on, which we based the unspoken emotional responses of the actors on, is not actually the music that ended up in the film’ (Doyle 2001). Its purpose, he says, was ‘to be emotive and suggest the rhythm of something. Like the rhythm of the camera movement, or the rhythm of somebody walking. Or the rhythm of a glance, or any other gesture’ (Doyle 2001). The intuitive nature of Wong’s method culminates in the madness that is the production of *2046* (see Rayns 2005: 25), though the production processes of *Ashes of Time* and *In the Mood for Love* could probably rival it. Nathan Lee sums up the production process of *2046*:

After five years in production, dozens of interruptions, numerous cast changes, multiple cinematographers, the reconstruction of a half-million-dollar set, the completion of three major side projects, an eleventh-hour world premiere at Cannes, two radically different edits, a thousand import DVDs, endless rumours, infinite expectations — the phenomenon known as *2046* has finally arrived. What does it all add up to? (Lee 2005: 31)

Because the scenes are scripted as they are shot, and put together only in the editing room, a lot of footage is lost to the cutting room floor. After seeing the finished film for the first time at the Cannes Film Festival, Maggie Cheung admitted to being surprised at how much that was shot had been left out of *In the Mood for Love* (Corliss 2000).⁴³ Wong’s films are often debuted at Cannes,

43. Keeping his cast and crew in the dark until the last minute marks Wong’s

which he has said is simply a way of giving himself a deadline to finish the film. It is said that hours before its debut, *2046* was still being edited (see Rayns 2005). As a result, the version screened at Cannes is not the same version that was made available for general release. This is similar to the production process of *Happy Together*. Joe McElhaney's online article reveals that, apart from the theatrical version that is ninety-seven minutes long, there is also a second version, 'roughly three hours long and never publicly screened' (McElhaney 2000). Indeed, where it is common for most films to have deleted scenes, Wong again takes this to an extreme in which 'what is frequently masked [in the offscreen space] is not simply reality or another space but another film' (McElhaney 2000). This is a cinema 'in which nothing ever seems quite finished, a certain intoxicated cinephile discourse has come into being, often drawing attention to these magical fragments which are not there' (McElhaney 2000). In this deferral of ultimate gratification, a process not unfamiliar to the characters in the films, one cannot even seek what is commonly known as a 'director's cut,' that is, the version the director would have preferred to make had there been more money, more time, or more approval from test audiences and producers. In Wong's case, there seems to be no 'ultimate' version even for the director himself. For example, the international DVD edition of *Chungking Express* was released by Quentin Tarantino for Miramax's Rolling Thunder division; Miramax owns the rights to its international distribution. The result is that the international DVD version

singular working method. Often the actor comes onto the set thinking he will be playing one role, only to find, in the final cut, that it is completely different to what he had expected. Brigitte Lin reveals in her interview with Akiko Tetsuya that her role in *Chungking Express* had started out as that of an actress, 'an insane star of some sort,' by the end of the shoot, it had become that of a drug dealer and a killer (Tetsuya 2005: 4). She says, 'For me, it was like only Wong Kar-wai himself knew where the story was heading, or whether my acting was in line with the story or not. It seemed like everything was in his mind, and I had no way of reading his mind' (quoted in Tetsuya 2005: 5).

is slightly different from the Hong Kong version. A website calling itself 'Web Alliance for the Respectful Treatment of Asian Cinema,' campaigning for Disney (who owns Miramax) not to make alterations to international releases of Asian films, lists the changes made to the film. However, the site also notes that the new edit was made by Wong himself, and that 'he considers it as much his own cut as the Hong Kong edit' (Anon. 2003). Between all the differing screen and DVD edits, it seems almost futile to attempt to pin down a 'definitive' version. Each film is simply a work in progress until the next opportunity to make changes comes along. So McElhaney asks:

[...] what about those 'missing' images from *Happy Together* which may one day appear and be given life? Will they offer us anything better than what we have already seen? Or will they be unwelcome guests in a film which we already know, one which has its own beauty and fascination and, for all of its fragmentations, does not really need anything else? (McElhaney 2000)

My own suspicion is that the answer lies in the latter. The seductiveness of *In the Mood for Love* is not the speculation over whether Chow and Mrs Chan consummate their relationship, but that Wong had shot the scene and chose to leave it out, forever tantalising us with a possibility that was realised but taken away.

Where Ang Lee emphasises for his audience the gap between his cultural position and that of the film, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, and Zhang Yimou attempts to close that gap by asserting the presence of the image, Wong Kar-wai, by virtue of inhabiting Hong Kong's already fractured cultural space as an immigrant himself,⁴⁴ expresses an interest in the potentiality of that gap itself; that between cultures, between languages, and even between the

44. Wong was born in Shanghai, but left for Hong Kong at the age of five, and it is said that he did not learn to speak Cantonese until he was thirteen years old (Anon. 2007b).

possibilities of existence. One of the enduring features of Wong's method is that he has his actors shoot the same scene for up to as many as forty takes, to the point where they are no longer acting but have come to inhabit the character. That in *In the Mood for Love* he had the same actors stand in off-camera for the respective spouses while the other was being filmed further blurs the divide between the lovers, between transgressors and transgressed, between performance and reality. It is only in the reality of the cutting and sound rooms that the 'final' film, and the characters as we know them, come into existence. Editing and sound, far from being supporting devices to the images in Wong's films, modify, qualify and bring them into being.

IV

Wong Kar-wai's emphasis on the problematics of a visual subjectivity has made his oeuvre popular in the international arthouse circuit. The way that the films eschew narrative coherence and teleology sets them well against the mainstream commercial cinema dominated by Hollywood. However, to locate the transnational subjectivity of Wong's films, it is necessary to explore its cultural translatability not so much *vis-à-vis* Hollywood narrative cinema (the deviations in form bear many similarities to other arthouse cinemas), but equally in relation to Hong Kong commercial cinema as well.

David Bordwell puzzles over the apparent ability of Hong Kong cinema to be classified both as mass entertainment and be artistically vibrant at the same time. Whilst he addresses the historical development of the Hong Kong film industry with customary thoroughness, his point of reference continues to be Hollywood's industry and aesthetic criteria. He describes the relative dynamism of Hong Kong cinema as "pure cinema," popular fare that, like

American Western and gangster movies of the 1930s, seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the kinetics of movies' (Bordwell 2000: x). Compared to the mainstream Hollywood film, it is not difficult to see how Hong Kong cinema can appear 'intuitive.' The tight narrative structure and stylistic restrictions that govern the contemporary Hollywood aesthetic do not apply to the mainstream Hong Kong film, which in Bordwell's own words can be 'playfully outrageous without being paralyzingly knowing' (2000: 93). Often the average Hong Kong film goes into production with only the bare plot outline — Wong's improvisatory technique merely takes it to extremes; most Hong Kong directors would improvise to a certain degree. In general, the emphasis is on the execution of the action, rather than the plausibility of the plot. In most cases, the plot is then woven around the action, which results in a spontaneity that Hollywood, with its tight budgets, insurance contracts and production schedules, finds more difficult to achieve. Lo notes that part of the appeal of Hong Kong cinema for north American audiences and film critics is 'because it evokes Hollywood's long-lost energy and the sheer visual pleasure of the silent film. [...] The outrageous delights offered by popular Hong Kong films remind Americans of early Hollywood, *before the great divide between entertainment and art had opened*' (2005: 52, my emphasis).

Bordwell's conundrum is based on the speed at which the Hong Kong film industry is able to churn out film after film (at least up until the 1980s), and he wonders how these films can thus be 'artistically interesting' at the same time (2000: 129):

With Bergman or Tarkovsky each film can be a long-pondered personal statement — indeed, this is a founding convention of 'festival cinema' — but a Hong Kong director driven to make two or three films a year scarcely has time to figure out the day's thirty camera setups. He or she must fall back on standardized routines, guided by an intuitive sense of craft. How can we tell craftsmanship from hack work? And how can craft ever produce something worth calling art? (Bordwell 2000: 129)

Without attempting to engage its political history, Bordwell clearly admires this ‘national’ cinema and yet cannot seem to fathom its purpose for being. The fact is, quite a lot of Hong Kong cinema is of questionable quality, and yet, for Bordwell, its very difference alone from the Hollywood dominant appears to convey its artistic value, especially by aligning it with Bergman, Tarkovsky and other ‘festival cinema.’ While Wong Kar-wai and other auteurs may be seen in the light of Bergman *et al.*, it is surely less useful to classify all of Hong Kong cinema as auteurist alternatives. Mainstream Hong Kong cinema is a popular cinema catered for a mass audience, just like Hollywood’s; for every ‘classic’ hit there are dozens of forgettable films that never make it past video (now video CD, and DVD) oblivion. However, because its exposure to the US and European market are limited to either cult video stores and Chinatown bootlegs or arthouse theatres and international film festivals, Hong Kong cinema appears to be the equivalent of such arcane fare known only in the festival circuit and seen by a limited audience.⁴⁵ Two assumptions are made here: firstly, that Hong Kong cinema is ‘artistically interesting’ because of its status as ‘other’ to Hollywood; and secondly, that in being ‘other’ to Hollywood Hong Kong cinema is necessarily ‘artistically interesting’ because Hollywood churns out mass entertainment, not art. Bordwell gets around his own challenge by concluding that Hong Kong directors are not artist-connoisseurs like Bergman and Tarkovsky, but ‘craftsmen,’ and a large part of *Planet Hong Kong* is geared towards supporting the view that Hong Kong filmmakers are intensely dedicated to their ‘craft.’

45. The 2007 edition of the International Film Festival at Rotterdam ran a retrospective of Johnnie To’s films, which may be usually considered to be aimed at populist mass market audiences in Hong Kong and East Asia. To’s *Exiled* (2006) opened in Singapore in 2006 in all the multiplexes alongside the Hollywood blockbusters of the day, including *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006).

This is an example of the ‘split discourses’ Gina Marchetti warns us against, of making too clear a divide between the arthouse and commercial cinemas, especially when speaking of Hong Kong. Although Marchetti’s article discusses Evans Chan’s films in particular, her views are applicable to Wong’s as well: ‘Rather than operating as a dialectic between the art film and the commercial love story, between English and Chinese, the films can be taken as palimpsests where the elements overlay one another, obscuring meaning for some, illuminating a different kind of meaning for others’ (2001: 255). Unless popularised at the various European film festivals, the dialectical relationship between high art and low art exists in less clearly demarcated boundaries in Hong Kong cinema than it does in the US and Europe and its cultures of exhibition. ‘High’ art, often also a byword for ‘highly subsidised’ art, as a marker of cultural value in Europe holds less sway in a free market like Hong Kong’s, where the box office determines a large measure of a film’s worth:

With few exceptions, the ‘Hong Kong cinema has to be popular in order to be at all.’ The point is that ‘there are different ways of being part of the mainstream.’ Abandoning the obsolete commercial-alternative opposition, our entrance points, among others, are the geohistorical situations that dominate the Hong Kong political arena and the general public’s concern. (Yau 2001b: 542)

The lack of tension between dialectical opposites is perhaps what also enables popular Hong Kong stars to switch roles and personae with greater ease than their Hollywood counterparts. Stars in Hollywood, as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson note, ‘were to a considerable degree the basis for the personae they played’ (1985: 179). It was what made them marketable as studio commodities. While Server notes that the ‘glamour and allure and the uniqueness of their [Hong Kong stars’] personalities could only be compared to Hollywood in its Golden Age’ (Server 1999: 18), Bordwell likewise notes that ‘there is no inevitable match-up between traditional roles and star images

[...] many mid-range stars can play heroes, villains or clowns' (Bordwell 2000: 157). This is true even for the biggest stars. The quality that makes them stars has more to do with the nature of their performance rather than the roles that they play. So for instance, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, the star of *In the Mood for Love*, has had an eclectic mix of roles over his career, in everything from the action comedy *Tokyo Raiders* (Jingle Ma, 2000) to the zany, Chinese New Year frivolity, *Always Be the Winners* (Jacky Pang, 1994) to the Vietnamese arthouse film, *Cyclo* (Tran Ahn Hung, 1995). The visibility and recognisability of stars in Hong Kong stardom is less discriminate than that in Hollywood possibly due to the sheer number of films being made (to date Leung has made over sixty films), especially during the height of the industry in the 1980s, and to the greater fluidity between the popular music, film and television industries, where many film stars are also pop and TV stars in their own right.

That Wong's films are known throughout Hong Kong and Asia, despite their relatively poor box office receipts, is due in part to his use of the biggest stars in the Hong Kong entertainment industries, which Zhang Yimou is now said to be trading on (see Rayns 2005) — the late Leslie Cheung, Maggie Cheung, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Andy Lau, Carina Lau, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, and Faye Wong are the main few. In a sense, Wong's 'experimental' cinema, rather than being anti-popular, comes into being *precisely* by being closely engaged with the mainstream and the popular.⁴⁶ Apart from the themes they

46. As an example of how closely inter-linked Hong Kong popular culture industries are, and how self-devouring the circuit of consumption, Wong's *Ashes of Time* is preceded by Jeff Lau's *Eagle-Shooting Heroes* (1993). A madcap B-movie parody, including a musical declaration of love performed to the tune of Rossini's 'William Tell Overture,' Lau's film uses the same cast from *Ashes*, namely Leslie Cheung (as Huang Yaoshi), Tony Leung Chiu-wai (as Ouyang Feng), Tony Leung Kar-fai, Brigitte Lin, Maggie Cheung, Jacky Cheung, and Carina Lau, and is produced by Wong Kar-wai and his Jet Tone company. To complete the circuit, Jeff Lau is also one of the producers of *Ashes of Time*, and embarked on *Eagle-Shooting Heroes* when Wong showed no sign

address, the films are also seen as serious representatives of Hong Kong's subjectivity partly because of the highly visible use of actors who have become synonymous with Hong Kong cinema itself. So when Rey Chow (2002) writes of the 'sentimental return' of the everyday in Wong's films, the everyday, it must be said, also encompasses the quotidian presence of his stars in Hong Kong's voracious media (see Lo 2005: 26–30).

Hong Kong's cultural subjectivity, however, as has been noted in Yau (2001a) and Lo (2005), is also always a transnational subjectivity. As a former crown colony for close to a century, now politically part of the People's Republic of China functioning as a Special Administrative Region, while still managing to remain a repository of transnational 'global' capital, the local subjectivity of Hong Kong identity is always located in a 'third space,' beyond Britain and beyond China; neither fully one nor the other, and not just a hybrid, either:

[...] the meaning of the Hong Kong local is always already overdetermined by the framework of the transnational that structures our perception of its reality [...] the Hong Kong local is always accompanied by a tinge of modernity in the sense that the capitalist narrative and the claim of Westernization are not easily repudiated. (Lo 2001: 263)

There is, he adds, 'a correlation or codependence between the transnational and the local, which [...] is not merely an objective correlative to the global force. It is the transnational itself, in its changing and pliable existence, that serves as a kind of stand-in for the local' (Lo 2001: 263). Hong Kong's subjectivity is made up of a kind of pastiche of cultures, rather than a melting pot, and the gaps that lie between the patchwork is where, I believe, the translatability of Wong's films lie; in the gap where the very subjectivity they problematise through the visually disruptive use of the editing and the contrapuntal use of

of completing his film by the Chinese New Year of 1993 (Tetsuya 2005: 86).

the sound and music, instead enact what Lo calls a ‘transsubjectivity’ (2001: 265) — a state of subjectivity that is always already aware of itself as not just fragmented, and intercultural, but also one that is always on the verge of slipping out of reach.

At the same time, the transnational, transcultural Hong Kong, as ‘not-China,’ as one whose identity is always in a state of flux is itself a cultural cliché (Lo 2005: 9; Law 2006: 384); and one which is employed precisely in order to substantiate a state of subjectivity already in flux. Yau Ka-Fai writes of the depiction of Hong Kong in Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1987):

A cliché is that which is so real to the extent that even mentioning it is superficial, let alone proving it; ‘what has never been’ is that which is totally invented, unprecedented. If histories and customs can be the mark of the past, they must be clichés so that almost everyone takes them for granted and uses them to justify a past. Within the recollection-images, clichés are regarded as the marks of the past to be referred to in order to justify present recollections of the past. (Yau 2001b: 550)

Clichés, in other words, are not simply false signifiers to be dismissed as exaggerations or delusions. In this case, the cliché is employed in the process of self-definition to the extent that it constructs its own reality:

[...] the description of Hong Kong as a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures is of course clichéd; Hong Kong locals have heard it for years and repeated it to themselves over and over like a mantra. But a cliché, paradoxically, can say something ‘original,’ if it has reached the point at which its concept reflects back only on itself. (Lo 2005: 9)

However, the terrain on which this battle of ‘transsubjectivity’ is fought lies, ironically, on the already-fragmented, -contested, -deconstructed notion of ‘Chineseness,’ as I have discussed earlier. It exists according to Lo like a shadow-image behind the transcultural one:

The Chineseness of Hong Kong emerges as a correlative to some traumatic reminder or to some excess that cannot easily be integrated into the Chinese symbolic space. Its very negativity signals the presence and actuality of a positive, definitive meaning of Chineseness. Precisely because Hong Kong culture does not present distinct national

characteristics [...], it can refer to an abstract wholeness that is implied by a singular element that is structurally displaced and out of joint. (Lo 2005: 8)

In other words, saying what something is not already predicates the possibility of what it might be. Historically, because of the political turmoil in mainland China, ‘the colonial city has become a stand-in for the Chinese identity lost to the motherland’ (Lo 2005: 11); and Hong Kong cinema benefited from this position since ‘Hong Kong movies could be given the privileges and favors by the Taiwan government to be categorized as the “national cinema” (*guopian*), which helped the industry to dominate the Taiwanese market until the 1990s, since Taiwan had a strict quota on foreign films’ (Lo 2005: 11). Part of this contest for a legitimate Chineseness has, as I have mentioned, a large part to do with the politics of language in the colony, and especially to do with the subtitling and dubbing of Hong Kong films into standard Chinese.

According to Lo, the ‘colonial government officially recognized the legitimate status of the Chinese language only in the 1970s’ (2005: 26). However, because of its diverse Chinese populations, ‘[a]ll Hong Kong films, even those released locally, have been subtitled in both Chinese and English since the mid-1960s’:

It was said that this was because English subtitles were mandatory under British colonial law and the standard Chinese subtitles are necessary to those Chinese who do not speak Cantonese. However, there has never been any colonial rule to enforce English subtitling. Actually it was the more cosmopolitan, outward-looking Mandarin cinema under the Shaw Brothers Studio that began the bilingual subtitling practice since the Shaw productions mainly relied on the overseas markets to make their money. (Lo 2005: 47–48)

‘Such bilingual subtitling,’ as is also true for Hong Kong films released in South-east Asia, ‘soon became the norm of Hong Kong cinema, and now the overseas-market-oriented industry usually does not even bother to release an unsubtitled copy for Hong Kong local viewers’ (Lo 2005: 48). This means that

for Hong Kong viewers and their South-east Asian counterparts, subtitling is a part of the film, not something in addition to it. There is thus little or no resistance to subtitling for which the American mainstream market is notorious. The presence of at least two sets of subtitles in every film means that viewers are constantly reminded, even if they have learned to ignore the presence of the words onscreen, ‘of the others’ existence’ (Lo 2005: 48, 49). However, the question of ‘otherness’ in the context of Hong Kong cinema takes on a different tenor, as ‘subtitling is bridging not different cultures but different Chinese communities sharing a national language’ (Lo 2005: 49).

In addition, because of the nature of the Chinese written language as a bridge for mutually unintelligible spoken languages, the Chinese subtitles work in a different way than, say, subtitling a French film in English for an English-speaking audience:

Because the concept of Chineseness is significantly grounded in the written language that serves as a symbolic system for the integrity of the national culture, Chinese subtitling in Chinese films and TV programs paradoxically creates a doubleness within the original text — not by juxtaposing two mutually incomprehensible national languages, as other subtitled films do, but by reinforcing the split between the spoken and written languages, thereby destroying the possibility of any easy identification. (Lo 2005: 51)

Nevertheless, the politics of language do not remain in stasis in any society and Lau, Hui and Chan explore the implications of the move toward linguistic standardisation in Hong Kong since the British handover in 1997. The post-1997 education policy of “‘two languages and three tongues” (the former being English and Chinese and the latter English, Putonghua [Mandarin] and Cantonese)’ resulted in ‘protests from teachers and parents,’ protests which were overlooked as ‘over 300 schools (a fivefold increase from the previous 70 or so schools) adopted Chinese as the medium of instruction [over English]’ (Lau *et al.* 2001: 252). In spite of the apparent preference for English, Lau *et*

al. note that ‘even in the University of Hong Kong, which is supposed to use English as the medium of instruction, half of classes in some courses were conducted in Cantonese [... and that] the belated educational reform may be read as a formal recognition of the actual pattern of language-use in Hong Kong’ (2001: 253). However, the increasing assertion of ‘Standard Modern Chinese [Mandarin]’ over Cantonese, to the extent of penalising students ‘using Cantonese in the written form’ (Lau *et al.* 2001: 253) indicates that linguistic and cultural politics continue to be at work in Hong Kong society, a linguistic and cultural politics that Wong mobilises in his films as a means of enacting the tensions within the address of a Hong Kong subjectivity.

Other interesting questions arise if we are also to consider what happens when the films cross boundaries to a Mandarin-dominated mainland China, or to, say Singapore, where since the 1970s, in order not to undermine the state’s ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign,’ all non-Mandarin Chinese languages in the public media, (that is, film and television) are required by the state authorities to be dubbed into Mandarin, even though, paradoxically, all other ‘foreign’ films, French, Iranian, Japanese, may be screened in their original language.⁴⁷ The cultural politics shifts to a different domain. If all the Cantonese in Chow Mo-wan’s dialogue is dubbed into Mandarin, the friction between him and Bai Ling is played out as a lovers’ spat, and the presence of Chinese subtitles becomes for Chinese Singaporean viewers mostly redundant, if they are Mandarin-speaking, or a means of translation for non-Mandarin-Chinese-speaking Singaporeans, of whom the numbers are rapidly diminishing. Instead, the text on the screen, or the ‘stains on the screen’ as Lo puts it, becomes as for

47. There have been some exceptions in recent years, such as the use of some ‘dialect’ Hokkien and Cantonese in some Singapore films, such as Eric Khoo’s *12 Storeys* (1997), but these are individual decisions that do not (yet) amount to a coherent policy or practice.

Hong Kong viewers of Cantonese films, largely ‘visible but also invisible’ (2005: 49).

The presence of the English subtitles in Hong Kong films also creates a different set of cultural interactions for non-Hong Kong viewers. The idiosyncratic expressions and syntactical anomalies in Hong Kong English subtitling have long been the subject of mirth in cult fandom (Lo 2005: 51):

[...] Hong Kong cinema is still tainted by its self-imposed English subtitles, which are by nature ‘excessive’ and which impede integration into the global economy. Hong Kong cinema is said to be too idiosyncratic and extravagant (its subtitles are only one of its wild elements) for mainstream Western viewers. English subtitles in Hong Kong film often appear excessive and intrusive to the Western viewer. [...] Hong Kong cinema is famous for its slipshod English subtitling. The subtitlers of Hong Kong films, who are typically not well educated, are paid poorly and must translate an entire film in two or three days. (Lo 2005: 53)

Lo further addresses the cultural politics inherent in such a practice, arguing that while ‘English’ subtitling allowed Hong Kong films to be marketed abroad, ‘the poor English subtitles make Hong Kong films more “Chinese” by underscoring the linguistic difference’ for US and European audiences, producing ‘an “outside” perspective from which to look at the so-called inherent ethnic subject position’ (Lo 2005: 51). Meaghan Morris recalls with some embarrassment her initial experiences with Hong Kong cinema in the 1970s:

I’m embarrassed because I remember what it was like to see a ‘Hong Kong film,’ *any* Hong Kong film, in that blankly Orientalist way — unable to distinguish one film from another let alone kung fu from swordplay (or, indeed, from karate and then from *chambara*), wholly ignorant of Chinese genres, and believing in response to the famously bad English dubbing that the films were uniformly so terrible they were funny — a camp reception of Hong Kong films that survives in some Western fan subcultures today. (Morris 2004: 182).

That poor subtitling is a barrier to comprehension may seem evident, yet the degree of incomprehension may differ with different audiences. Lo cites a

footnote in Julian Stringer's article on masculinity in two of John Woo's films. It cites the writer's 'disorientation' with the arcane subtitling of John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), in which the impenetrable babble of phrases such as 'Learning. That's what you've to learn!' and 'Don't trust those cunny!' left him 'lost and linguistically floundering, adrift on "an alien sea of undecipherable phonic substance"' (Stringer 1997: 37; and quoted in Lo 2005: 54). The experience of the subtitled Hong Kong film 'in the West,' Lo explains, 'produces a residual irrationality that fascinates its hardcore fans,' especially when 'the distortion is written into the very essence of Hong Kong films and is one of the major appeals for Western fans' (2005: 56). This distinguishes subtitled Hong Kong films markedly from Henri Béhar's assertion that

Subtitling is a form of cultural ventriloquism, and the focus must remain on the puppet, not the puppeteer. Our task as subtitlers is to create subliminal subtitles so in sync with the mood and rhythm of the movie that the audience isn't even aware that it is reading. We want *not* to be noticed. If a subtitle is inadequate, clumsy, or distracting, it makes everyone look bad, but first and foremost the actors and the filmmakers. It can impact the film's potential career. (Béhar 2004: 85).

I would like at this point to offer some personal observations, which admittedly have not yet been subjected to rigorous sociological study; yet I believe that the scenario that I am about to address is common enough in multicultural societies, though not often enough addressed in cross-cultural interpretations of cinema. For an English-speaking Chinese Singaporean viewer watching a Cantonese film (Cantonese soundtracks are now widely available on the VCD and DVD versions of Hong Kong films) with poor English subtitles, the linguistic disjunctures are perhaps slightly different, in that I can see where the English is wanting, but coming from a background in which the local patois ('Singlish,' or Singapore Colloquial English)⁴⁸ is already

48. For more about the syntax and structure of Singapore Colloquial English, see

a bastardised form of English, of which expressions such as ‘Why you so like that one?’⁴⁹ and ‘No come no come, one come all come’⁵⁰ are the daily norm, one is conditioned to read beyond the explicit meaning of the words and to decipher meaning from the mode of address and from the contexts from which the distortions might arise. Hong Kong English subtitles, funny though they may be, are not really that ‘foreign’ to me.⁵¹ At the same time, as I do not understand much Cantonese, I do fall back on occasion on the Chinese subtitles if the English ones fail, except Hong Kong Chinese writing employs the traditional Chinese script, whereas Singapore has long since adopted the simplified characters of the Chinese mainland. To compound the problem, the Chinese subtitles are sometimes in idiomatic Cantonese rather than ‘standard’ Chinese (Lo 2005: 73).⁵² The experience, for me, is not unlike trying to translate three different languages at the same time, all mediated by what is going on on the screen; and yet, the experience is not altogether about foreignness either. In Derrida’s words: ‘When I said that the only language I speak is *not mine*, I did not say it was foreign to me. There is a difference. It is not entirely the same thing [...]’ (1998: 5). The difference lies with the ‘*double interdict*’ experienced by the monolingual other, in which both the assumed ‘mother tongue,’ and the learned language of the subject is ‘*interdicted*,’ leaving the subject at a loss for words and yet not speechless:

Gupta (1998).

49. In Standard English: ‘Why are you behaving in such a manner?’
50. Usually used to express frustration when waiting for a bus, compounded when after a particularly long wait during which no bus arrives, three then arrive at the same time.
51. Such a dimension of ‘foreignness’ may operate differently in other contexts of ‘foreign Englishes’, such as Caribbean or Filipino English .
52. Lo also points out that to assume that ‘the Chinese language employs a single written form’ is a ‘myth’ (2005: 61).

In what language does one write memoirs when there has been no authorized mother tongue? How does one utter a worthwhile 'I recall' when it is necessary to invent both one's language and one's 'I,' to invent them *at the same time*, beyond this surging wave of amnesia that the *double interdict* has unleashed? (Derrida 1998: 31)

This double interdict occurs when the assumed mother tongue is displaced, or 'interdicted,' by the learned language (in Derrida's case, French, in mine, English), and the learned language is then displaced by the prosthetic point, or culture, of origin (Derrida 1998: 30–31).

Lo writes that 'subtitles undermine the primacy and immediacy of the voice and alienate the aural from the visual,' especially since '[m]ost Hong Kong movies are shot postsynch in order to save time and money. The soundtrack is added to the film only after the entire film shot. Therefore the visual is never intimately tied to the aural' (Lo 2005: 49, 50). As Lo is from Hong Kong and is fluent in Cantonese, his experience of the film needs no mediation via the subtitles; he admits to just ignoring them (2005: 50). What I experience in my mind, as a non-Cantonese-speaking, limited-Chinese-reading, English-speaking, ethnic Chinese Singaporean, however, is a re-suturing of the component parts — the visuals, the spoken dialogue and the written subtitles — separated initially by the gaps in my fluency. The translation that I put together in my mind is *a priori* conscious of and conditioned by the awareness that I am not able to translate fully, and thus am not able to know, everything that is being translated. That Wong's films enact the impossibility of spectatorial omniscience more than resonates with this expectation. This, I think, is a slightly different position from Lo's, who is concerned with how others translate Hong Kong via the films, and from Stringer's, excerpted above, who expresses a desire to know what he feels he has limited access to. Neither

of our positions is inauthentic inasmuch as each of us is conditioned by the limits of our own subjectivities and cultures of reception.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANG LEE

In this chapter on Ang Lee, I would like to address his films more directly as transnational, transcultural products, rather than as particularly symptomatic of a 'Taiwanese national culture,' as postwar Taiwanese cinema developed along a different trajectory from Hong Kong and later from mainland Chinese cinema. Unlike Hong Kong's relatively apolitical position, Taiwan's political divergence from mainland China meant that its state-run studios were consciously producing nationalist, and 'nativist,' films (see Chen 2006: 143), which would find a limited audience outside its shores. In the 1980s production units had to be shut down and studios restructured (Zhang 2004: 243). This set the scene for the emergence of a 'New Taiwan Cinema,' whose *auteurs*, such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, and Malaysian-born Tsai Ming Liang, are well-known at international film festivals, yet whose films, whether by virtue of their 'native soil consciousness' (Zhang 2004: 248) or industrial factors limiting their distribution,⁵³ questions of their transnationality and cultural translatability will need to be addressed in a different project. The industry's severe decline in the late 1980s is credited with driving its biggest stars like Sylvia Chang and Lin Ching-hsia to Hong Kong (Zhang 2004: 249).

Ang Lee, though born in Taiwan, moved to the US in the mid-1970s, attended film school in New York and has continued to live and work there.

53. For example, no English-subtitled DVD version of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's critically-acclaimed *City of Sadness* (1989), credited with introducing the New Taiwan Cinema movement to international audiences (Chen 2006: 143), is available to date.

Although his first major films, affectionately known as his ‘Father Knows Best’ trilogy — comprising *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) — centre around Taiwanese protagonists, their themes have addressed explicitly questions of the transcultural and the transnational (see Dariotis and Fung 1997). However, unlike the films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai discussed earlier, which dramatised a form of Chinese/mainland/Hong Kong subjectivity for international consumption, the transnationality of Lee’s early trilogy took the form of an immigrant nostalgia (see Ma 1996) — that is, the subject is already displaced from his homeland:

Lee advances overseas student/immigrant discourse by conceiving his films globally, with an eye to commodifying both the nationalist and the non-nationalist ingredients in the immigrant, Asian American, and American characters. (Ma 1996: 191)

My analyses begins with the director’s own symbolic cultural displacement, with his adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), to the American Civil war film, *Ride with the Devil* (1999), and to his symbolic return to an imaginary Chinese cultural foundation with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). In this chapter, rather than address the ‘Taiwanese-ness’ and/or ‘Chinese-ness’ of his films, I would like to discuss how this displacement and return are manifest in the encounter with the so-called ‘Western’ other in the form of the cross-cultural reception of his films.

I

While Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai work mainly in China and Hong Kong respectively,⁵⁴ Ang Lee is a filmmaker of Taiwanese origin who is based

54. Zhang Yimou has once mentioned that he would only work in China, and regarded even Taiwan ‘as an entirely different society where authenticity would be impossible for him’ (Malcolm 1994: E8); and Wong Kar-wai has recently

in New York (rather than Hollywood). Lee is known for his close collaboration with independent film production company, Good Machine, which until 2002 was owned by James Schamus, Ted Hope, and David Linde. Good Machine has since been acquired by Universal Pictures (ostensibly following the phenomenal success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) (Ross 2002). Good Machine was closely involved in the production of Lee's early Taiwanese trilogy even though the films were also financed by a Taiwanese studio; in addition, Lee's long-time collaborators, James Schamus and Hui-ling Wang, also worked with the director on the scripts (Ma 1996: 191). In other words, although ostensibly about Taiwanese nationals and/or immigrants, and being 'financed chiefly by Central Motion Picture in Taiwan and representing Taiwan in various international film festivals,' Lee's films, Ma notes, 'are self-consciously produced and consumed in the world market, with multinational crew, storyline, and marketing strategies' (1996: 191). Ma further notes that Lee also 'presents his films in a "tourist-friendly" way in terms of the appeal to bourgeois taste and the subsuming of class' (1996: 193). In other words, his Taiwanese films provide for the 'foreign' viewer an aspect of Taiwanese modernity in digestible chunks — for instance, the plight of the Taiwanese immigrant on foreign ('Western') shores, or the plight of Taiwanese families coping with change and modernity within Taiwan itself — made palpable by a dose of comic irony: 'The initial, potential tragedy on immigrant predicament

released his first English-language film, *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, an American road movie with Norah Jones and Jude Law, the implications of which are perhaps still too early to tell. Xan Brooks writes that the film 'is full of such false notes, such lost-in-translation moments that might conceivably have worked in a Hong Kong setting but fall flat on the road to California' (Brooks 2007), suggesting perhaps that the style associated with the director translates less readily to a different culture of production and a subject matter divorced from the historical context that had made sense of it for his spectators. However, this will require further analysis in the future.

and nostalgia is transformed into a comedy as an exotic/ethnic tour is extended to the audience in a global market' (Ma 1996: 193). Therefore, it could be said that Lee's shift to English-language films after the first trilogy is not such a cultural leap after all. This display as a form of cultural tourism, however, is not a false encounter, but an expression of how cultures in the modern era are inevitably subject to a tourist's gaze. In Lee's films, this cultural tourism allows for a recuperation of a kind of memory that does not always have a root in material reality.

II

In 1995, following the release of *Sense and Sensibility*, much was made of the director's Taiwanese origins, which along with his position as a New York filmmaker (as opposed to Los Angeles and Hollywood) located him outside cultural norms: we do not expect what appears to be a conventional period drama to be made by a non-Anglo-American director, much less one from East Asia and who admits to never having read Jane Austen before he made the film (Doran 1995: 15). As Dariotis and Fung note, 'No article or interview about *Sense and Sensibility* passes without some comment about Ang Lee's difference of identity from the understood identity of the film' (Dariotis and Fung 1997: 214). It is in fact this position as an outsider to the subject of the film, as a cultural tourist, that allows us to explore the questions of authorship and agency in film cultures more thoroughly. In some of the scholarship surrounding the film, *Sense and Sensibility* is often described as 'Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility*' rather than Ang Lee's (see Diana 1998; and Samuelian 1998). It appears much more 'natural' to associate Austen with Emma Thompson, who is known to be an Oscar-winning, Cambridge-educated thespian, even though *Sense and Sensibility* is her first

screenplay and she indicates in her *Diaries* numerous instances of Lee's artistic control over the project:

In the event I play it several different ways so that during the editing Ang has plenty of choices. He won't know what the right note is until he sees it in context. This is the real bugger with film – sometimes you cannot tell where to pitch an emotion and the only safe course is to offer up as many alternatives as possible. (Thompson 1995: 267)

Most films are adaptations of a script or a screenplay; however, with literary adaptations, especially of well-known literary works, the adaptor is often engaged in a complex negotiation with various relationships of power and authority. With *Sense and Sensibility*, the relationship between Jane Austen, Emma Thompson and Ang Lee is a tripartite one, with each exerting their own authority and agency. With *Sense and Sensibility*, issues of cultural ownership become more contentious with the presence of a 'foreign' director who is tasked with the presentation of a particularly 'English' subject. Thompson recalls:

Ang very keen on the yin and yang of *Sense and Sensibility*. His sensibility can be very unsentimental, like Austen's. They're remarkably connected. She'd be astonished. (Thompson 1995: 222)

The implications of this similarity and difference are evident not only with the presentation of English heritage culture in the film, but also with its negotiation with a particular kind of film culture. In particular, *Sense and Sensibility* attempts to avoid appearing too pretty or too staged. Emma Thompson recalls in her *Diaries*:

Later: Everyone hauling their way through the day. Kissing Hugh was very lovely. Glad I invented it. Can't rely on Austen for a snog, that's for sure. We shoot the scene on a hump-backed bridge. Two swans float into shot as if on cue. Everyone coos. 'Get rid of them,' says Ang. 'Too romantic.' (Thompson 1995: 228)

Thompson is referring to the kiss between Edward (played by Hugh Grant) and Elinor (played by Thompson) that was eventually cut from the film. This is an

example of the confluence of the three authors and agents in the film: Thompson the screenwriter writes in a scene that did not exist in Austen's novel, and the director asserts his final authority by removing it from the final cut. This anecdote is consistent with Lee's overall formal strategy to play down the romanticism in favour of the social and economic hardship that face the Dashwood sisters following the death of their father. Where Austen's concerns with the financial security of her female characters were always implied, rarely uttered, Thompson's dialogue reflects a directness more characteristic of modern discourse:

Elinor: You talk of feeling idle and useless — imagine how that is compounded when one has no choice and no hope whatsoever of any occupation.

Edward: Our circumstances are therefore precisely the same.

Elinor: Except that you will inherit your fortune. We cannot even earn ours.

Cinematically, the Dashwoods' relative fall from social grace is reflected in the *mise-en-scène*: the costumes are often plain and unadorned, and even worn on repeated occasions, and their cottage in the country is relatively bare. In its cinematography, the film offers a wide variety of shots. Rather than favouring tableaux arrangements accentuating the ornateness of the period detail, *Sense and Sensibility* favours mobile framing: there are many instances where the camera is found moving through the rooms of the house. In addition, the camera also tends to keep its distance (usually in a medium to long shot) from its characters, especially where emotion is particularly heightened. For example, in the scene where Elinor is upset at the news that Edward is not coming to visit them, the camera literally backs out of the door as if to give her some privacy. This is an example of a through frame, which is used extensively throughout the film. Another example is the use of the long shot which is sometimes held for an extended duration of time (long take) without

breaking it down with close-ups and denying us a direct emotional engagement with the characters, such as in the scene where the doctor announces the gravity of Marianne's illness to Elinor and her friends; the camera maintains its distance from the characters and does not allow us to see their faces. This construction of emotional distance mirrors Emma Thompson's efforts to avoid excessive melodrama: 'In nearly all the weepy scenes I've tried to get one good joke. Less indulgent' (Thompson 1995: 266). The verbal jokes are numerous and are usually delivered by the polite and proper Elinor as a counterpoint to Marianne and their mother's emotional excesses. The following exchange takes place when Marianne first meets Willoughby:

Elinor: You must change Marianne — you will catch a cold.

Marianne: What care I for colds when there is such a man?

Elinor: You will care very much when your nose swells up.

The intolerance for 'indulgence' in the screenplay mirrors Austen's own preference for wit and irony, which is also replicated *visually* in the film through the use of the camera's gaze, and by ironically offering up almost *too much* period detail of the less pleasant aspects of Regency life, such as having to tiptoe around the horse manure and a carriage gridlock on the way to a fancy ball. In this respect, both screenplay and cinematography attempt to adapt Austen's ironic tone of voice into the film's mode of address.

The movement of the camera also emphasises height as well as depth. There are several scenes shot from the top or bottom of stairways. In a scene where Edward chances upon Elinor weeping, the camera follows the couple across the room, allowing them to pass through before tilting upwards abruptly to show us a clearly displeased Fanny glowering down at them. The camera in *Sense and Sensibility* thus places the spectator in the same room as the characters, albeit one who watches them from a polite distance. There is a

strong emphasis on looking in this film, and there are many instances where the camera watches people watching other people. Thompson recalls:

[...] Ang said that he wanted the camera to watch the room, sense the change in it that a man, that sex, had brought. For Ang, the house is as important a character as the women. (Thompson 1995: 237)

Perhaps the concept of the ‘vacuum space’ in Chinese art and architecture may provide not only an alternative mode of looking, but an alternative way of thinking about looking in Lee’s films. Li Xiaodong explores the ‘aesthetic of the absent’ in Chinese art and architecture, where ‘reality is to be found in a vacuum space’ (2002: 87). He argues that ‘for the Chinese, the intangible content of things, though not materially manifested, is regarded as something real; accordingly, emptiness can be real space’ (Li 2002: 88)

One of the most important characters of Chinese architecture is the dualism of *void and solid* in the planning of space. Almost exclusively, every individual building unit, from smallest room to city, is planned to be adjacent to an equally sized open space. This is to achieve maximum balance between what is ‘within’ and what is ‘without.’ [...] The size and scale of the individual building has never been as important as the overall building complex. The horizontal unfolding of space was preferred over the vertical conglomeration of space. In this sense, Chinese architecture is to be experienced from within rather than viewed from without. A fixed perspective of visual effect on form is less emphasised than the dynamic process of the experience of space. (Li 2002: 99)

Although Li’s arguments in his essay are applied to spatial representation in painting, as well as architectural and urban space, they have implications for film, in that what is not seen, experienced or articulated, may co-exist with the present and the material. The use of *mise-en-scène* in *Sense and Sensibility* explores this concept of ‘negative space,’ which complements ‘positive’ or ‘occupied’ space in a way that suggests not absence but an equal presence. Ang Lee explains this as the influence of the concept of the *dao* (more commonly known in the Wade-Giles form as ‘Tao’), a doctrine which has a strong

influence on Chinese culture and aesthetics. In an interview on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Lee says:

The Tao, 'the way,' is manifested in the sword, the Green Destiny, the Chinese translation of which means the most remote sort of greenness. It's the ultimate yin where the yang comes from — the non-existence where all existence comes from. We're all attracted to that negative space when we pursue something we don't know, something that will overpower us. (Fuller 2000)

Mise-en-scène and cinematography in Lee's films can be analysed within this aesthetic framework, where 'negative space' is articulated not just in the narrative (in the form of an empty room, for example) but within the narrative space of the film as well. The space in a film, Stephen Heath argues, is 'the space of reality,' which is 'a matter of representation, and representation is in turn a matter of discourse, of the organization of the images, the definition of the "views," their construction' (1981: 384).

While the film's mise-en-scène takes pains to remain historically accurate, the framing of the scenes elaborate on and modify the spatial dynamics, reflecting on the social dynamics between the characters, as well as the cultural dynamics between the director and his material. There are numerous uses of 'through frames' in which characters are viewed through the frames of doors, as well as numerous instances where the camera is placed outside of the action and the spectator is situated in a corner of the room, and made to watch the characters from a distance, much like a fly on the wall. Occasionally, as in the scene where Fanny frowns her disapproval from a first floor landing, the camera allows the spectator access into the adjoining space, systematically revealing new information contained in the off-screen space, each segment unfolding to reveal a new character, item or scene contributing to the overall picture. This use of mise-en-scène is distinct from the use of location to set up the scene, in that the way the mise-en-scène is presented has

a part to play in the construction of the narrative, and extends and fulfils the theoretical role of *mise-en-scène*,⁵⁵ allowing the space to act as a means of engaging the spectator's participation.

Ironically, this deliberate distancing allows Lee to become even more closely aligned with Jane Austen. In Emma Thompson's whimsical acceptance speech at the Golden Globe Awards for Best Motion Picture Screenplay in 1996, the actress and screen-writer playfully spoke in the voice of Jane Austen, and offered this dedication to the director: '[to] Mr Ang Lee, of foreign extraction, who, most unexpectedly, appeared to understand me better than I understand myself.' Thompson's address encapsulates the simultaneous similarity and difference of Lee's association with Austen. Being of Taiwanese origin, he appears to be opposite to Austen, and yet his 'Chineseness' appears to align him more closely with her than her contemporary English counterparts:

Yet surely a modern upper-middle-class Chinese person has more familiarity with Austen's varieties of family ties and marriage responsibilities than a modern Briton. Romance is only one of the reasons for marriage in Taiwan, where family alliances and social class still play a role, while in modern Britain, as in America, young lovers hardly seem to recall their own earlier years, let alone their family traditions, if any. There are obvious parallels between this story of a mother who wants to see her girls happily settled and the two earlier Ang Lee films, which were about parents with much the same concerns. (Ebert 1995: 55)

55. Bordwell and Thompson argue that *mise-en-scène* includes 'those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the theater: setting, lighting, costume and the behavior of the figures' (1990: 127), that is, the *mise-en-scène* determines what you see within the frame of the shot. It refers to the composition of the shot, encompassing the set and props, costume and make-up, lighting, and acting and movement. For Robin Wood, *mise-en-scène* includes the 'movement of the film from shot to shot, the relation of one shot to all the other shots,' as well as the 'tone and atmosphere of the film, visual metaphor, the establishment of relationships between characters, the relation of all parts to the whole: all this is *mise-en-scène*' (quoted in Gibbs 2002: 57).

The sense of polite distance is reinforced by the position of the camera as always being in the same space but yet is slightly on the outside looking in. In many ways, this mirrors Lee's own positioning against the subject of Austen and English culture — although he has been invited (by Lindsay Doran, the producer) into that world, he is nonetheless conscious of intruding upon it. At the same time, the outsider does not adopt an ethnographer's position, as a mere recorder of events, but one who displays an understanding, albeit from a different cultural perspective, of the concerns of the text. Ironically, it is by being the polite Chinese man, standing on the outside, that renders him most 'faithful' to Austen's style, in the same way Austen herself always stood outside of her characters even as she was of the society she was writing about. What is this quality of 'Chineseness' that bears a similarity to eighteenth century English mores? It would seem that the similarity lies in the emphasis on manners. The politeness and decorum that Austen's characters are compelled to observe appear to resonate with perceptions of Chinese conceptions of public behaviour. In addition, perceptions of the English reserve, in particular that displayed by the stammering Edward Ferrars, is closely associated with a 'Chinese' reticence where meaning and intention are always implied but never explicitly articulated:

There are other touches which, although supposedly historically appropriate for British society, suggest Ang Lee's Taiwanese background. When the men and women of *Sense and Sensibility* meet there is a moment of recognition and after a noticeable pause everyone bows. If the English of that class and station bowed I doubt they did it in this skipped beat manner which draws attention to the ritualized aspect of their deferential gesture. The director seems to have choreographed the actors so that their ritualized movements supply Austen's missing voice. (Stone 1996)

The question of foreignness with respect to *Sense and Sensibility* is therefore a complex one. Although one could say America is foreign to Britain and *vice versa*, the degree to which they are different is usually perceived to be

less than between Britain and China or Taiwan. If Lee had made a Chinese adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, his cultural difference would have been evident enough; but by making an *English* adaptation of the novel, with an English location, cast and crew, his cultural difference is subordinated to the paradox that by being different, he is really similar.⁵⁶ Significantly, the critical success of *Sense and Sensibility* allowed Lee to attempt other English language projects, and acquire a reputation as one of the more eclectic of directors, having made films set in 1970s America (*The Ice Storm*, 1997) and the Civil War (*Ride with the Devil*, 1999), and in genres as widely differing as a martial arts epic (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000) and a comic book adaptation (*Hulk*, 2003).

III

A similar effect is attempted with Lee's *Ride with the Devil* (1999), but with different results. Where *Sense and Sensibility* emphasises the outsider's similarity to the dominant culture, *Ride with the Devil* emphasises commonality with other outsiders to the dominant culture. The film, set in the American Civil War (1861–1865), finds a new angle on what is essentially a foregone conclusion — the Union victory over the Confederate South. Characteristically of Lee's films, *Ride with the Devil* refuses to align itself explicitly with the Northern victory nor the Southern cause. Instead, the film addresses the implications the outcome of the war has had on the modern American identity by examining the ways in which the war impacts the lives of several individuals in a small Missouri community. As with *Sense and*

56. Ironically, an English lecturer and colleague teaching in Singapore once commented that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was simply *Sense and Sensibility* (the film) in Chinese clothes. Leon Hunt has similarly referred to the film as 'Jane Austen [...] let loose in *Jianghu*' (2003: 184), and Kwai-cheung Lo says the film is '*Sense and Sensibility* with martial arts' (2005: 187).

Sensibility, Lee's Taiwanese origins have been brought to bear on readings of *Ride with the Devil*: Ebert notes that Lee 'is able to see the Civil War from the outside' (1999 :40); Stephen Holden has likened him to 'a kind of cinematic anthropologist examining social microcosms in his adopted country' (1999). The director himself has expressed a consciousness of his own cultural position as outsider to the subject:

The story starts with the Southern boys' point of view, the perspective of those who will lose to the Yankees. But then it gradually shifts to focus on the points of view of the two outsiders (the German immigrant and the black slave) as well as of the young woman. Through them, we come to experience the changes that freedom will bring. It is their emancipation that the film comes to be about, and their coming of age. So, as a Taiwanese, I can identify with the Southerners as the Yankees change their way of life forever [...] but I can also identify, more strongly, with these outsiders who grasp at freedom and fight for it. (Lee 1999)

Lee's identification with *characters* who are outsiders here, rather than *being* an outsider himself as with *Sense and Sensibility*, implicates his identity more directly in the narrative, for America is presented in the film as a nation born out of outsiders, as well as a place where outsiders can ultimately belong. Unlike his foreignness to England, cultural identification in *Ride with the Devil* resonates with Lee's own position as a person of Taiwanese origin currently living and working in the US.

Where the cultural subtext of *Sense and Sensibility* traded on knowledge of Austen's text, lack of knowledge of the text may serve simply to render the film as 'just another costume drama.' Similarly, the cultural subtext of *Ride with the Devil* trades, not necessarily on historical knowledge of the Civil War, but its cinematic re-creations. Lee's elliptical style of narrative comes up directly against the model of the classical Hollywood Westerns and war films. Where a classical Hollywood narrative,⁵⁷ especially in respect of the 'Golden

57. See Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) for

Age' genre films, tends to centre the action around a single, male, protagonist with a clearly defined goal, *Ride with the Devil* has three indeterminate protagonists navigating their way rather tentatively through the future. Where the classical narrative tends to unfold linearly, with a clear sense of closure, *Ride with the Devil* takes a disproportionately large part of the film at the beginning to establish the characters' personalities before any fighting takes place. In other words, the film fills in the narrative gaps that most mainstream commercial films tend to overlook in favour of plot development, and like in his other films, Lee opts to let the narrative unfold through small interactions between the characters. These intimate encounters are interrupted only occasionally with a wild action sequence. There are also other anomalies where, rather than celebrate the Yankee victory, the film scrutinises the price of that victory for communities, families, and individuals, taking not just the point of view of, but sympathising with, a naturalised German immigrant, an unwed mother, and a former black slave. Peter Matthews, in his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, notes that

[...] the movie adopts the perspective of the American South — identifying not with its racism, certainly, but with the core of aggrieved humanity lying behind that culture [...] because they embody a vital connection to tradition which the secular and forward-looking Yankees have lost. (Matthews 1999: 34–35)

Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the American South highlighted in the film is its emphases on social decorum and manners (both recurrent concerns in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Crouching Tiger*) in spite of the brutality that supports its lifestyle. The issue of slavery is only indirectly alluded to through the character of Holt (played by Jeffrey Wright), the freed slave, easily the most complex

a breakdown of the 'classical' style.

character in the film, who is central to the film's avoidance of conventional polemics.

The closing scene of the film is worth analysing in some detail for the homage it pays to the triumphant endings of classical Westerns, albeit with a twist that brings the film back to the present, creating a subtext for the cultural dynamics seen to be present in America today. The end of the film sees Holt, the former slave, ready to exercise his new independence and Jake, the second-generation German immigrant, his new responsibilities. Jake (played by Tobey Maguire) is going to California with Sue Lee (played by Jewel) and her baby, and Holt is returning to Kansas in search of his mother. In the closing minutes, the film sets up a number of visual tableaux which links the three characters to the formation of a new American nation. Holt, in a last gentlemanly gesture of the South, tips his hat to Sue Lee, who is sleeping in the wagon with her baby next to her. The camera lingers on this picture of maternal warmth and peace — a variation on the Madonna-child tableau — for a moment, offering a picture of hope perhaps for Holt's quest to find his own mother. The setting of this film at the border of Kansas and Missouri is not accidental. As Lee reveals in his foreword to the book of the screenplay:

So, our story is about the very heart of America [geographically and symbolically], even as this heart was — and still so often is — torn apart by racial and other conflicts. Even as America seems to conquer the world with the promise of freedom, it has still not fully conquered itself, or achieved its own freedom. This ongoing struggle and hope is expressed through the film. (Lee 1999: x)

So Holt, in deciding to return to Kansas, returns to the 'heart' of America, close to where the story began and where he had once been a slave, in order to seek the source of his identity — his mother. It is Jake, the second-generation European immigrant, who is moving on away from that centre, from where he used to think his identity came, but where he never truly belonged. The final

tableau uses tropes familiar to the genre of the film Western in order to locate the characters thematically at the brink of a new frontier that the Western has always represented. After his farewell to Jake, Holt mounts his horse, raises his hat in a gesture of triumph and slaps the horse's flank with it, *cowboy-style*, before riding off into the distant horizon. There is even a faint glimpse of a sunset in the background. As Holt rides away, the camera pulls back to a wide shot and reveals Jake standing in the foreground next to his canvas-covered wagon, watching him. The covered wagon, a visual symbol of early European settlement in America, remains fixed in the foreground of the frame until the screen fades completely to black. Thus, the twin frontier values of pioneering and domesticity are merged, not cleaved, and its impact resonates only insofar as it relies on the audience's familiarity with the mythology of the frontier perpetuated by Hollywood and other popular narratives of the 'Wild West.'

In other words, rather than re-invent the Western, the film uses codes familiar to the genre to re-invent the notion of American identity embedded in the Western. As James Schamus, Lee's long-time collaborator and screenwriter, recounts:

The so-called (white) literary establishment had, for a long time, understood America as having two literatures: American literature and Southern literature. (Somehow, we never had a 'Northern' literature.) In his novel, Woodrell stages the battle between the American and the Southern both literally and figuratively and, like Twain (the Northern literary professional) and Clemens (the Southern raconteur), he knowingly resolves the North/South conflict by, in the end, resolutely facing *West*. We took Twain's and Woodrell's cue in the movie, making the last image of the film the archetypal first image of the Western: a lone horseman riding under the big sky of the prairie frontier. (Of course, in this version of the myth, the horseman is an armed black man heading south [...])

The movie is, thus, a kind of ur-Western, a rereading of the myth of the West in light of the violent racial and regional and sexual lines that informed it. (Schamus 1999: xiii)

Interestingly, from a formal point of view, Jake, Holt and Sue Lee become characters in a Western only in the final scene, not narratively — indeed, as I have argued, the film takes pains to deviate from conventional narrative treatments of the subject — but *cinematically*, in which ‘outsider’ and ‘American’ virtually become one and the same.

It is difficult not to see the film as a reflection on American cultural identity, given the nature of the subject matter, in the same way it is not too much of a stretch to see a Jane Austen film adaptation as a reflection on Englishness. *Ride with the Devil*, as Ben Thompson of *The Daily Telegraph* puts it, is a ‘story about “America before it became America”’ (2000: B10), especially since its ideals of individual freedom are still attributed to the achievements of the Civil War. Films made about the period tend to be stories of human struggle and heroism; indeed, John Wayne made a career out of playing calvarymen and cowboys. In many of these narratives, the cause, and more importantly the *values* within the cause, of the Yankee North are rarely disputed. What *Ride with the Devil* manages to do is to reflect upon the implications of that victory, while simultaneously inhabiting the space that the victory has created: on the one hand, Lee has identified with the alterity of the Southern position; on the other hand, it is precisely the conquering Yankee, ‘free-thinkin’ ideology that has created a physical, cultural and social space for a Taiwanese director to make his home there, as well as provided him with the artistic freedom and licence to make films that question that very Yankee identity itself. One of the minor characters, a Southern gentleman, makes this little speech just before his family is killed in a raid:

Before they [the Yankees] built their church even, they built that schoolhouse [...] They rounded every pup up into that schoolhouse because they fancied that everyone should think and talk the same free-thinkin’ way they do with no regard to station, custom, propriety. And that is why they will win. [...] Because they believe everyone should live

and think like them. And we shall lose because we don't care one way or another how they live. We just worry about ourselves.

In 2001, following the international success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Lee was voted 'America's Best' film director by CNN and the justification for its selection is uncannily relevant to my argument:

What else links our choices? How different they all are. To the extent that the U.S. is a land of the utmost diversity, a transmission point through which the energies and intuitions — the people — of every other nation pass, it enjoys what economists call competitive advantage in the global balance of talent. So the best American director can hail from Taiwan, the best American artist can be an African American [Martin Puryear] who takes inspiration from village crafts in Sierra Leone, and the best American fashion designer [Tom Ford] can be a kid from Texas whose showrooms are in Paris and London. In the end, *they stand as examples of Yankee ingenuity, if only because the U.S. was smart enough to gather them all in.* (Lacayo 2001, my emphasis)

Following this argument, what makes America America then, is its claim over the universally inclusive, over all of difference as its own. In making a film not about the Civil War but about outsiders in the Civil War, Lee has ironically offered a treatise for what the Civil War may invoke for America's diverse cultures today — namely, nationhood, identity and a sense of belonging. Lee's own explanation is this:

I grew up in Taiwan, where older people always complained that kids are becoming Americanized [...] It seems so much of the world is becoming Americanized. When I read Daniel Woodrell's book *Woe to Live On*, which we based 'Ride with the Devil' on, I realized that the American Civil War was, in a way, where it all started. It was where the Yankees won not only the territory but, in a sense, a victory for a whole way of life and thinking.

The Yankee invasion and victory not only had a surface meaning (Yankees prevail, militarily and economically) but also in an internal meaning. It changed everyone. Everyone is equal, everyone has the right to fulfill himself: this is the Yankee principle. Now we must study ourselves, our personalities, in order to know how best to be fulfilled. This is all very modern, and so is the new social order based on that. We learn to respect other people's freedom, too, even as we lose a certain connection to tradition.

This is what the Civil War means to me [...] The Civil War was not only a physical war — blood and guts — but also a personal war, one which led to the new world that we are living in today: the world of democracy and capitalism. (Lee 1999: ix)

However, despite some critical acclaim, the reception to *Ride with the Devil* at the box office and by mainstream press reviewers was lukewarm, suggesting that its arguments about the formation of the American identity may have failed to resonate with them. With an estimated budget of US\$18 million, the film grossed just over US\$630,700 in the US, and £100,700 in the UK (Anon. 2007c), by all measures a very poor showing. In contrast, *Sense and Sensibility* had an estimated budget of US\$16.5 million, and grossed nearly US\$43 million in the US, and over £13 million in the UK (Anon. 2007d). Ebert writes, in his review of the film:

[...] before this movie I had not seen a Civil War story about characters whose feelings are local and personal, whose motives were unclear even to themselves, who were essentially young men with guns forced to fight by the time and place they lived in. [...]

The movie is slow and deliberate — too slow. It begins with the enigma of heroes *whose cause we do not share*, and then has them spend much time hunched inside a hideout they have built into a hillside [...].

Watching the film, I could see that Ang Lee and his frequent collaborator, screenwriter James Schamus, were in search of something serious. ‘Ride With the Devil’ does not have conventional rewards or payoffs, it does not simplify a complex situation, doesn’t punch up the action or the romance simply to entertain. But it is, sad to say, not a very entertaining movie; it’s a long slog unless you’re fascinated by the undercurrents. It’s a film that would inspire useful discussion in a history class, but for ordinary moviegoers, it’s slow and forbidding. (Ebert 1999: 40, my emphasis)

Despite a similarity in approach to ‘foreign’ material, the contrast in the reception of *Ride with the Devil* and *Sense and Sensibility* is marked. Rather than judge its poor performance as an inherent failing of the film, it is worth considering the cultural stakes it appears to have put on the line. The ‘conventional rewards’ and ‘payoffs’ that Ebert alludes to are formal, but also

cultural, ones: the gun fights, the showdown between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ and the resulting catharsis for the viewer reinforce and affirm a value system that inevitably implicates him. *Ride with the Devil* denies that catharsis, even as it ends on a positive note. Indeed, at the end of the film, Jake lets the ‘villain’ of the piece go, despite holding him at gun-point. Rather than question the validity of American frontier values themselves, I wish to reflect upon its popular representation and the vernacular through which we have come to be introduced to those values. To a degree, a Civil War film is not *expected* to be laden with ‘undercurrents’ as it might for a Jane Austen film, whose audience is primed for irony and subtlety. Further in the politics of cultural translation, the subtleties of *Sense and Sensibility* only serve to affirm Austen’s status, aligning the film with the dominant discourse, whereas the subtleties of *Ride with the Devil* are much more subversive in the present context. Thus, issues of cultural translatability are inevitably mediated through film culture; in this case, through the culture of the Western and the Civil War film. Ben Thompson writes:

The new challenge posed by shooting tricky action sequences outdoors proved to be a walk in the park compared with the difficulties of reconciling the truth of a story about ‘America before it became America,’ with the expectations of a US movie-going audience weaned on bushwhackers played by Clint Eastwood. (Thompson 2000: B10)

In other words, to a certain degree, a successful cultural mediation in film requires the complicity of a willing audience, whose tastes and preferences are shaped by previous films and film cultures.

IV

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) offers a different instance of audience complicity in the reading of a ‘cultural’ film. Whilst Lee employs the usual formal strategies of his earlier films, this film provoked an even wider set

of responses. As with the other films, the structure of *Crouching Tiger* is asymmetrical and confounds expectations of the genre, both in Asian and US-European markets. Bordwell and Thompson write that: 'Looking is purposeful; what we look *at* is guided by our assumptions and expectations about what to look *for*' (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 141). However, what do we look at when we are not sure what to look for?

In writing about a film, it is customary to begin by providing a quick précis of the plot in order to give the reader a brief sense of what the film may be 'about.' However, an attempt to do so for *Crouching Tiger* can actually prove self-defeating because of what I identify as its 'asymmetric' structure. As different characters and motivations come to the fore at different points in the film, it is difficult to articulate clearly what or who the film might be 'about.' The film in fact begins with an end: it introduces Li Mubai (played by Chow Yun-fat) and his desire to retire from the life of a *wuxia* exponent (or knight errant) even though he has not yet succeeded in avenging his master's death. This departs from the plot structure of most martial arts films, which are often centred on revenge, and usually conclude with the hero's successful, and cathartic, elimination of the villain (see Bordwell 2000: 183). In *Crouching Tiger*, however, the clear polarity of good and evil is undermined as conflict results more from misapprehension and misalignment than true evil. Although Jade Fox is introduced as Li's enemy, the film's narrative is not focused on her pursuit or capture. Significantly, the crimes of which she is accused have taken place outside the film; even her killing of the police officer is presented as accidental. At the same time, her villainy is not motivated by wealth, power or world dominion; in the film, she professes that her only desire was to master the *Wudan* [*Wudang*] form of martial arts. Interestingly, her murder of Li Mubai's master stems from the vengeance of a woman scorned: 'he'd sleep with me but he would never teach me.'

Similarly, it is difficult to identify who the 'hero' might be. Li leaves the film in the first few minutes, only to return after the initial action sequence is concluded with the theft of the Green Destiny sword. During that sequence, it is Shu Lien (played by Michelle Yeoh) and her fighting prowess that take centre stage rather than Li's. This can be partly explained by the fact that Chow Yun-fat, although a prolific actor in Hong Kong, had never held a sword on film before this; his name was made as a gunfighter in John Woo's gangster films. Michelle Yeoh, on the other hand, is a practising martial artist and the showcasing of her athleticism is evident in the film. Nevertheless, the casting choice has some bearing on the structure of the narrative, as the hero is generally expected to advance the action and the plot. Even when Li Mubai returns to the film, he does so not because he has learnt of the theft of his sword, but because he is finally ready to settle down with Shu Lien, a sentiment he never gets to express fully before he is interrupted. In addition, one third into the film, the character of Jen⁵⁸ (played by Zhang Ziyi) takes over as the main focus, and the plot deviates from Jade Fox and the Green Destiny sword to a lengthy flashback of Jen's encounter with Lo (played by Chang Chen). However, it is not entirely accurate to say that the film is 'about' Jen's desire to escape the confines of her aristocratic lifestyle and a loveless marriage either. Certainly, the desire for personal freedom is the central motivation for her actions, but the narrative development of the film as a whole is not centred on that pursuit alone.

58. The names are sometimes spelled in the English subtitles in the Wade-Giles system; in *pinyin*, Yu Shu Lien is Yu Xiulian. The spelling matters little except for the transliteration of Jen and Lo's names. Jen is Yu Jiaolong in Mandarin Chinese, Jiaolong transliterating as 'tender dragon', and Lo is Luo Xiaohu, Xiaohu transliterating as 'little tiger' (Teo 2005: 202).

Throughout the film, the characters' actions and motivations are constantly deflected from the central line of action, both narratively and thematically. In fact, the narrative slides asymmetrically from one pair of characters to another, one story to another, one theme to another, and back again. As a result, it is equally difficult to identify the main romantic focus of the film. According to Stephen Teo, [t]he structure of the film is founded on the central romance of the two young characters, while the two secondary characters, played by Chow Yun-fat and Michelle Yeoh, provide the dramatic stimulus for martial arts action' (Teo 2000). However, the dynamics of the relationships in the film do not quite support such a neat geometry. I would argue that the central 'romance' is in fact that between Li and Jen. From the time Li takes an interest in Jen, it is their relationship that actually stimulates the action in the film, dramatically as well as thematically. When these two first meet, they spar and Li unexpectedly offers to train her. In their two major encounters, their 'fight' is rendered as an ethereal aerial chase and is accompanied by the romantic strains of Tan Dun's score performed by cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. This may be contrasted with Jen's two major fights with Shu Lien, where the sonorous beat of drums in the background serves to emphasise the rhythmic, physical and more masculine aspects of combat. The encounters between Jen and Li are more sensual and romantic, especially in the encounter at the bamboo grove. The soft-focus close-ups of Jen's face framed by the green of the bamboo leaves emphasise the delicacy of her features as the bamboo sways languorously to the music. In the final encounter between the two, erotic overtones are most apparent when Jen, dressed in a diaphanous gown drenched by the rain, bares her chest briefly to him and asks: 'Is it me or the sword you want?'

However, Li's attraction to Jen does not necessarily compete with his relationship to Shu Lien; the complex interweaving of both relationships is

apparent in this short dialogue that takes place between the two in the scene where she chances upon him practising with his sword in a courtyard:

Li: You did your job well. But, this girl ... I saw her last night.

Shu Lien: I knew she would intrigue you.

Li: She needs direction ... and training.

Shu Lien: She's an aristocrat's daughter. She's not one of us. In any case, it will be all over soon. You'll kill Fox, and she'll marry.

Li: That's not for her. She should come to Wudan [*Wudang*] and become a disciple.

Shu Lien: But Wudan does not accept women.

Li: For her, they might make an exception. If not, I'm afraid she'll become a poisoned dragon.

Shu Lien: It's not our affair. Even if Wudan accepts her, her husband might object.

Li: I thought by giving away the sword I could escape the Giang Hu [*jianghu*] world. But the cycle of bloodshed continues.

Shu Lien: I wish there were something more I could do to help you.

Li: Just be patient with me, Shu Lien.

The verbal pattern in this little exchange resembles the thrust and parry of an elegant fencing exercise. The director has said that, 'the drama is itself choreographed as a kind of martial art, while the fighting [...] is also a way for the characters to express their unique situation and feelings' (Lee 2000). Shu Lien's practical statements are thrust at Li who expertly evades them. Her matter-of-fact assertion that 'She's an aristocrat's daughter she'll marry' is met with an objection ('that's not for her'), but why should he care what happens to Jen now that his sword is recovered? When Shu Lien again asserts the bald fact that 'Wudan does not accept women,' Li's reason for suggesting that the sect might make an exception is cryptic at best, dubious at worst. He says that if they do not, Jen might become a 'poisoned dragon,' an idiom for

the waywardness that may result if talent like Jen's is unharnessed and undisciplined. The elusive nature of that 'poison' is what the film seeks to explore. Shu Lien's direct statement ('that's not our affair') is met with another enigmatic, almost philosophical, reply: 'I thought by giving away the sword I could escape the Giang Hu world. But the cycle of bloodshed continues.' Up to this point, there has been no real evidence of bloodshed in the film except Jade Fox's killing of the police officer, so it is unclear what 'cycle' Li is referring to, except perhaps one that is determined by conventions of the genre itself. The contrast between Shu Lien's level-headedness and Li's evasiveness emphasises the depth of his interest in Jen, although the nature of that interest is not entirely clear. The bond between he and Shu Lien appears to be a bond of another sort, of promise, loyalty, and understanding, although equally unspoken. At the end of the conversation, Shu Lien accepts his reasons, and even offers to help (although with what, we are never quite sure), and his last words to her ('Just be patient with me') seem to close the discussion with a promise, though of what, we are equally uncertain. As Li deflects Shu Lien's questions, the film deflects each attempt to find a corresponding answer to the questions it poses.

So, even though Shu Lien declares near the end of the film that 'everything has an antithesis,' dialectical pairing and resolution appear to be thwarted in the film in story, theme, and structure. Attempts to force the film into pre-conceived paradigms inevitably result in frustration. David Edelstein, reviewer for *Slate.com*, grumbles that the long flashback 'warps' the movie, that 'Chow and Yeoh disappear for a long stretch [...], Jade Fox, the central villain, is gone for nearly an hour,' and that 'Lee and Schamus can't make up their minds if Jen is the story's protagonist or antagonist — which wouldn't matter at all if the shifting structure of the movie didn't mirror their ambivalence.' Finally, he admits that he would need to 'redesign it in [his]

head' before he could truly enjoy the film (Edelstein 2000). Edelstein's inability to accept the asymmetric structure of the film as it suggests pre-conceived expectations about narrative structure and film conventions that *Crouching Tiger* resists. The asymmetric, or 'warped' structure of the film is directly related to the effect of ambivalence and ambiguity it produces. It is less a flaw than an exercise which calls into question expectations previously shaped by generic conventions and film history. In fact, much of *Crouching Tiger* is also devoted to exploring the sense of the lost romance and nobility of the *wuxia* tradition itself. Although generally known to be a staple of Hong Kong pop cinema, the martial arts genre is by no means a unified one. Lee has often said in many interviews that he was returning to the *wuxia* (or sword-fighting) films of his boyhood (see Corliss 1999; and Tong 2000: L5). These *wuxia* films are generically different from *kung fu* (*gongfu*, or fist-fighting) films, more closely associated with modern Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. Swordplay narratives, according to Stephen Teo, were traditionally set 'in medieval dynasties and other mythical fantasies which, in turn, became stylistic conventions of the genre,' such as 'the effortless facility of swordfighting heroes and heroines to leap, somersault and generally levitate in defiance of gravity' (1997: 98), which *Crouching Tiger* displays to full effect. The *kung fu* genre on the other hand 'emphasised the body and training rather than fantasy or the supernatural' (Teo 1997: 98), as in the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. *Wuxia* films gave way to *kung fu* films by the early 1970s (Teo 1997: 102), and until *Crouching Tiger*, enjoyed a different status as lengthy television serials. The casting of Cheng Pei Pei, 'queen' of the *wuxia* films in the 1960s in the role of Jade Fox, alludes to the end of this cycle: in *Crouching Tiger*, Cheng symbolically gives way to a younger generation of actors in the same way Jade Fox had to give way to her young protégé, Jen; and her transformation from *wuxia* heroine to villain offers 'a delicious

intertextual and intergenerational gloss that accentuates the subversive nature of Jade Fox as a character in the re-emergence of the *wu xia pian* in the new millennium' (Chan 2004: 12).

However, the discomfort is not Edelstein's alone. Larry Teo reports that critics in the mainland 'assailed [the film] as a shallow story about anti-heroes — a debasement to the traditional martial arts genre' (Teo 2001: A1). Stephen Teo (2000) also notes the lack of heroism noted in the film, but it is perhaps less a flaw in Lee's vision than a meta-textual acknowledgement that genres, like values, change over time. Although Li Mubai and Yu Shu Lien are renowned warriors, theirs is a faded glory. The film begins with Li contemplating retirement despite an unfulfilled quest, and Shu Lien reveals a faint regret for a lost youth ('[...] the freedom you talk about, I too desire it. But I have never tasted it'). As the character of Jen takes over, it becomes clear that the two older warriors are part of the past, existing more in legend and swordplay romances than in the present; though Jen's romanticism is also punctured by Shu Lien:

Jen: I've read all about people like you. Roaming wild, beating up anyone who gets in your way!

Shu Lien: Writers wouldn't sell many books if they told how it really is.

Jen: But you're just like the characters in the stories.

Shu Lien: Sure. No place to bathe for days, sleeping in flea-infested beds. ... They tell you all about that in those books?

Nevertheless, read against this context, the ambiguity of Jen's position becomes clearer. She vacillates between antagonist and protagonist because neither role is stable anymore. Jen's confusion is thus symptomatic, perhaps even symbolic, of the loss of an old order and a lack of a new one. As she cries to Jade Fox early in the film: '[...] once I realized I could surpass you, I

became so frightened! Everything fell apart. I had no one to guide me, no one to learn from.’ Thus her yearning for freedom is counterbalanced in the film by her lack of understanding of the restrictions that paradoxically come with that freedom.

The exploration of the meaning of *jianghu* is closely linked to the theme of lost heroism in the film. In the beginning, Jen is full of awe for the *jianghu* lifestyle, and longs for the freedom she expects it offers. However, Shu Lien is quick to remind her that the *jianghu* life is not one of freedom, but bound by a strict code of honour:

Jen: It must be exciting to be a fighter, to be totally free!

Shu Lien: Fighters have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity ... Without rules, we wouldn't survive for long.

The concept of *jianghu* finds only a partial equivalent in the Western notion of knightly chivalry. Literally translated as ‘rivers and lakes,’ *jianghu* refers to an abstract community within the Chinese literary tradition that is depicted as running parallel to the society of ‘ordinary folk.’ It is a community governed by moral principle and decorum rather than legislation and it exists paradoxically outside as well as within society for although its upright members are not above state laws, they are accorded the moral authority to reject the implementation of those laws should they serve corrupt ends; less than upright members also found a space in which they could exist outside the law:

Centralized government had little reach into the world of *jiang hu*; even if it did, its residents, many of whom are society's exiles and renegades, would refuse to submit to common law. What prevents the residents of *jiang hu* from descending into mere anarchy is an unwritten code of ethics — a chivalry of the outlaw brotherhood. [...] the essence of *jiang hu* [is] fighting fair, respecting your opponent, and celebrating the shared bond that comes of living in the fraternity of the rivers and the lakes. It is a recipe for a kind of honor among renegades; guideposts for living life the ‘martial way.’ (Yang 2003: 48–49)

The narrative of *Crouching Tiger* is sustained by the tension between the various characters and their varying abilities to adhere to *jianghu* principles. For example, the inability of Li and Shu Lien to act upon their love stems from their *jianghu* code of honour, as they are bound by a respect for Li's sworn brother and Shu Lien's late betrothed; that he was killed in battle does not free them from this obligation and in fact binds them further into honouring his memory. Li's responsibility to avenge the death of his master is another barrier between them. A viewer unfamiliar with the cultural resonances of this decision may ask why Li is unable to court Shu Lien and avenge his master at the same time. The answer is that that would mean privileging his personal desires over his social and filial responsibilities. Indeed, Li's initial attempt to retire from his *jianghu* obligations and give up on the search for Jade Fox only resulted in a situation that forced him to stay on and accomplish his mission. The intrusion of Jade Fox and her disciple Jen into Li's life provides a different perspective on the notion of *jianghu*. Jade Fox sees the *jianghu* world as a world of freedom in which she can roam freely. At the end of the film, she tries to persuade Jen to remain with her: 'But why go home now? We've gone this far, we won't stop now. [...] At last we'll be our own masters. We'll be happy.' For Jade Fox, the life of a wandering pugilist represents an entirely different world from the life within the governor's household. She sees the *jianghu* world as an escape from society, though her excessive concern with the martial combat ('Kill or be killed. Exciting, isn't it?') over the moral aptitude necessary to operate within that world forces her to remain in hiding behind the walls of the governor's mansion.

Her protégé, Jen, is the most complex character in the film. The narrative momentum of the film is sustained mainly by her failure to comprehend *jianghu* etiquette and values. When chided for stealing the Green Destiny sword, she says it was just 'for fun,' and at the end it is Jen's waywardness that

also leads Jade Fox to attempt to poison her, for Jen has committed the ultimate offence in *jianghu* terms: she has betrayed her own master. Li's desire to train her is in part an attempt to impart the moral discipline required to wield her talent responsibly. Much of the narrative and emotional trajectory of the film follows from her lack of appreciation, respect, and ultimately, understanding of the weight of its responsibility. One of the best examples is the scene at the tavern. On the surface, it closely resembles the numerous tavern fights that have taken place over martial arts film history. However, it later becomes clear that, although Jen's superior prowess initially appears to deflate the warriors' egos, it is Jen herself who is truly exposed — as being ill mannered, for not observing proper *jianghu* etiquette. It is not the physical injuries she inflicts that enrage her opponents, but the social. One of the minor characters later complains: 'We politely asked for a friendly match, but she showed no respect, and attacked us.' Another then adds: 'I've travelled everywhere, but never met anyone so uncivilized.' Thus martial arts fights, even among antagonists, is a sparring match which must respect a particular code of conduct. It is not a 'free-for-all' brawl although visually it can appear that way. The comic irony, a hallmark of Ang Lee's style, is once again present here, its delicacy subverts without inverting and so if one watches the tavern scene without the dialogue, its visual display reinforces all the tropes recognisable from tavern fights in countless martial arts films. Joan Acocella, reviewing for *The New Yorker*, concurs: 'One skirmish in particular, in which Jen, disguised as a boy, takes on a whole restaurant full of hoodlums, seemed designed to satisfy Hong Kong expectations' (Acocella 2001: 100). True, audiences familiar with Hong Kong films would find the scene visually familiar — the use of the entire tavern as a battle space, the fanciful characters, the ensuing mayhem as the furniture and other readily available props are used as weapons and obstacles. Lee's homage to tavern fights is evident, but the

undermining of Jen's character by two stock characters suggests that a degree of self-reflexivity absent in more typical examples of the genre.

A similar effect takes place in the long flashback in the middle of the film. It depicts an episode in Jen's life where she comes close to living the life of romance and freedom she had read about in pulp *wuxia* novels. Indeed, the mise-en-scène and cinematography evoke all the romance and exoticism of the desert, complete with a nefarious, dashing, bandit, known as 'Dark Cloud.' However, the irony comes towards the end of the flashback sequence when Lo admits that, 'All that Dark Cloud stuff is just to scare people and make my life easier,' and the bandit is just another lost boy yearning for security: 'Out here, you always fight for survival. You have to be part of a gang to stand a chance. Slowly, your gang becomes your family.' Visually, the self-reflexivity is less apparent again, since images of the desert's beauty linger in our minds long after the words are spoken.⁵⁹ Thus Lee's irony works more like a gentle reminder than a rude shock, mostly because it takes place through the verbal counterpoint to the visual, and while the verbal may cast a different light on the visual, it does not serve entirely to displace it.

The ambiguity in *Crouching Tiger*, as I have discussed, arises from its refusal of stable meaning. Its ambivalence arises from its refusal to *refuse* meaning, for instance by being deliberately obscure, but from the use of

59. Kenneth Chan also notes that the presentation of the bandit as one of China's ethnic minorities is Lee's effort to unpack 'Han hegemony in his formulation of a Chinese national imaginary'; he asserts that '[o]ne cannot but think that Lee's Taiwanese background contributed to the film's deployment of this metaphor, for how can any reimagining of China, as filtered through the boyhood fantasies and experiences of a young Lee in Taiwan, preclude the question of national identities and cultural loyalties in the troubled relations between Taiwan and mainland China?' (2004: 10)

existing conventions to construct ambiguity. By invoking established generic conventions to reinforce and yet simultaneously confound meaning, the film sets up an ambivalence in reading as we attempt to make sense of it through common polarities and cultural frameworks such as hero-villain, martial arts-romance, masculine-feminine, visual-verbal, and so on. Rick Altman argues that, ‘we must see genres as stable if they are to do the work we require of them’ (Altman 1999: 50), although in practice it is the act of criticism that polices genre stability:

We critics are the ones who see to it that generic vocabulary remains available for use. While producers are actively destroying genres by creating new cycles, some of which will eventually be genrified, critics are regularly trying to fold the cyclical differences into the genre, thus authorizing continued use of a familiar, broad-based, sanctioned and therefore powerful term. (Altman 1999: 71)

However, the difficulty of reading Lee’s films lies in the paradoxical manner whereby film genres are treated unconventionally, while maintaining the semblance of conventionality. The ambivalence lies not so much within the film itself, but with our attempts to classify it. Is it a martial arts film? Yes, but not quite. Is it a romance? Yes, but not quite. Indeed, Lindsay Steenberg notes that ‘*Crouching Tiger* puts tension between surface and substance in its combinations of *wuxia*, the Western, and art-house melodrama’ (2006: 159), and writes of the dangers of ‘overvaluing [...] surface readings and objects due to their visual and spectacular natures’ (2006: 166). Richard Corliss calls the film a ‘new, exotic strain’ borne out of a blending of various elements of film conventions, expectations, and practices, ‘*a blending, not a collision*, of Eastern physical grace and Western intensity of performance, of Hong Kong kung-fu directness and British attention to behavioral nuance’ (2001, my emphasis). Lee himself admits: ‘I cannot go all the way and make a purely genre film, I’ve got to throw everything I know into the movie — like a

combination platter. *The key is to keep the balance*' (Lee *et al.* 2000, my emphasis).

In spite of its generic deviations, *Crouching Tiger* is both also seen as Lee's return to his 'roots' — it is his first Chinese-language film in half a decade, after three English-language films — as well as heralding a new era for Chinese cinema in a global market. Sony Pictures Classics executive Michael Barker declared that the film had ushered in a 'new globalism in motion pictures' (quoted in Natale 2001) and a majority of the US press appears to echo this view. Lauren Hunter of *CNN.com* (2001) outlines in her article the international flavour of the 2001 Academy Awards and lists a whole string of 'foreign' contenders for the golden statue: for example, Judi Dench (Britain), Juliette Binoche (France), Russell Crowe (New Zealand and Australia), and Javier Bardem (Spain). However, the entry of such 'foreign' talent into Hollywood's biggest industry award ceremony is not unique to 2001. Many Anglo-Europeans have made Oscar headlines over the years, including Laurence Olivier (Britain), Sophia Loren (Italy), and Peter Weir (Australia), though not specifically for their *foreignness*. Ang Lee and *Crouching Tiger* are the first East Asian entrants to attract such media attention since Akira Kurosawa was nominated for *Ran* in 1986. *Crouching Tiger* was nominated for an unprecedented ten awards and won four, including Best Cinematography and Best Foreign Language Film, encouraging the perception that East Asian cinema had finally 'arrived.' In other words, the Chinese language film is seen to have completed the global circuit for the Oscars, in that *Crouching Tiger* now makes the Oscars even more 'global' than they had already been. Ironically, the film's success at this *American* sponsored event is what would open doors for it to the rest of the world, including East Asia itself.

When attempting to account for the film's phenomenal success, most credit its action sequences. Paul Dergarabedian, president of a box-office tracking service, Exhibitor Relations, says, 'The reason *Crouching Tiger* may transcend its foreign-language status is that it's an action film. There's a lot of visual information. That translates well in foreign markets' (quoted in Biers 2001: 167). Similarly, Paul Tatara (2000), also for *CNN.com*, gushes, 'The first fight, which springs to sudden, exquisite life [...] surely will elicit rounds of applause from audiences the world over — action, after all, has become cinema's universal language.' Yet many mainstream Hong Kong films, such as those by Jackie Chan, John Woo or Tsui Hark for example, boast a far higher and more spectacular action quotient, as well as a considerably higher body count. In fact, one Hong Kong viewer even complained that, 'there's simply not enough action [...] *Crouching Tiger* is so slow, it's a bit like listening to grandma telling stories' (quoted in Rose 2001).

Perhaps the cultural phenomenon may be better explained as an economic one. Record earnings at the US box office are what actually catapulted the film into an international acclaim. The film earned about US\$128 million at the US box office — in comparison, the threshold for 'foreign hit status' is a mere US\$1 million — and this in turn fueled its international success (about US\$208 million). However, the appeal of the film to mainstream US audiences was not a historical accident, but the result of a particularly shrewd marketing campaign, rendered even more exceptional given that American audiences are notorious for shunning subtitled films (see Koehler 2002). If Tom Bernard, co-president of Sony Pictures Classics, could suggest that 'Ang Lee has hit the button for every demographic' (quoted in Biers 2001: 167), it is only because his marketing team had cleverly tailored its publicity campaign at specific segments of the mass market (see Lippman 2001; and Pappas 2001). Basically, the producers divided the US audience into

five target groups — ‘the arthouse crowd, the young, the females, action lovers, and the popcorn mainstream’ (Pappas 2001: S2) — and tailored the publicity of the film to each group by anticipating their respective needs. For example, one group was composed of the fans of *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1997). *Crouching Tiger* was sold on the strength that action choreographer Yuen Wo-ping was also responsible for the action in *The Matrix*. Ironically, the quasi-martial arts display in *The Matrix* is itself a modified cultural import from the Hong Kong martial arts and action genres.⁶⁰ Such blurring of boundaries between primary and secondary texts is not new. Kurosawa’s adaptations of the Western for his samurai films were later remade into Westerns by Hollywood, such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) from *Seven Samurai* (1954). What is different and interesting about *Crouching Tiger* is that it was not only marketed as a *Matrix*-type film, but also as an art film, a woman’s film, as well as a combination of all these, which complicates its positioning. According to David Saunders, ‘[j]ust 700 of 37,000 U.S. screens are available for foreign films’ (2001: F41), but *Crouching Tiger* opened not only in arthouse venues but in mainstream multiplexes as well. This too was planned. In seeking to subvert the arbitrary association of foreign-language films with the arthouse, the producers deliberately withheld the film from competition at the Cannes Film Festival, in an effort to break from what they call ‘the art-house ghetto’ (Lippman 2001: M1). The fact that the move did not fail made distributors sit up and take notice. Daniel Battsek, managing director for Buena Vista International (Disney’s distribution arm), says that the film ‘acts as a vanguard for all foreign language films’ (quoted in Thorpe 2001).

60. Yuen Wo-ping is the action and martial arts choreographer for numerous Hong Kong martial arts films including *Once Upon a Time in China* (Tsui Hark, 1991), and director for films such as *Wing Chun* (1994) and *Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow* (1978).

Thus it would seem that the migratory success of this ostensibly Chinese text is made possible only when the *conditions* allowing for its (apparently) successful translation and favourable reception are adequately attended to.

However, the cultural migrancy of *Crouching Tiger* lies not only in the capture of US and European markets but also in the re-capture of Asian ones. The lukewarm reception of the film in China and other parts of East Asia has been well publicized (see Rennie 2001; and Chan 2004). And once again numerous theories abounded, the most common of which is that Lee has simply pandered to US and European tastes. Chinese filmmaker, Xie Fei bluntly suggests that, 'Lee is clever. He knows what they like' (quoted in Tan 2001: L10). Li Xun, director of the Graduate Programme of China Film Arts Research Centre, likewise surmises that, 'What is appealing to American audiences is the exoticism: the totally fresh aesthetic of Chinese martial arts and the imaginary artistic conception. But that turned out to be mundane to Chinese viewers' (quoted in Dai 2001: 1). So while Ebert (1999: 35) called the film, 'the most exhilarating martial arts movie I have seen,' a Beijing newspaper describes it 'as unrealistic and exaggerated as a video game' (quoted in Chu 2001: A1, 1). The opening fight sequence, which has the actors flying across rooftops, is widely reported to have produced spontaneous applause at its Cannes Film Festival screening; in Shanghai, however, 'audiences hissed its fantasy flight scenes' (Rennie 2001: 30). In addition, while Hong Kong viewers appear to expect a greater dose of action, mainland Chinese viewers appear to expect a degree of realism. Zhong Gang, a bank employee, is quoted as saying, 'The action scenes weren't as good as the old *kung fu* movies. [...] People flew around way too much. If you put me on wires, I could fly around too. [...] There was no real martial-arts skill' (Chu 2001). Xie Fei expresses a similar view, 'Some in China say that the movie's *gongfu*

is not very exciting because it's quite artificial. They can feel the wires and cables used' (quoted in Tan 2001: L10).

While Hollywood may be looking to reformulate its distribution strategies, China continues to be plagued by more mundane problems of excessive bureaucracy and video piracy. Attempting to distribute a film in the mainland is an arduous process. Films are not allowed to be independently distributed in China without official approval. A private distribution company must form a joint venture with a state-run firm in order to have any access to the China market. In the case of *Crouching Tiger*, the rights to its distribution were shared by a private production firm, Asian Union Film and Entertainment, and China Film Co-Production, a state-run company. Of the US\$1 million it cost to distribute the film in China, Asian Union invested 80 per cent and China Film 20 per cent. Problems arose when China Film, on realising that the film was about to be a hit, tried to oust Asian Union from the partnership. In the tussle, the film was withheld from exhibition for 'three crucial months' (Chu 2001: A1, 1). By the time permission was given to release the film, there was 'no time to remarket the movie' (Chu 2001: A1, 1). Furthermore, during that time, the streets became 'flooded with pirated DVD and video compact disc copies of the movie, selling for about [US]\$2.50 each, or less' (Chu 2001: A1, 1). Ironically, it was precisely in the bid to combat piracy that the film was 'scheduled for almost simultaneous openings across the region' (Cheng 2000: 85).

In addition, the film's Oscar triumph saw a revived interest in the film in many parts of East Asia, which basked in a collective cultural pride. This is evident in cinematographer Peter Pau's Oscar acceptance speech, I have mentioned earlier: 'It's a great honour to me, to the people of Hong Kong and to Chinese people all over the world.' Donna Tung, a spectator, called Lee a

‘credit to all Chinese people’ (quoted in Anon. 2001b). In Hong Kong, the film did not even make the top five box office earners of that year, and yet ‘as Oscar night neared, video discs of the movie were selling for nearly double the price of other local movies at around HK\$95 (US\$12)’ (Anon. 2001b). In Taiwan, Lee was honoured with a personal visit from the Taiwanese President, Chen Shui-bian, who congratulated him on being the first Taiwanese national to win an Academy Award (Anon. 2001c). The Taiwanese premier Chang Chung-hsiung also offered public congratulations: ‘We recognize the hard work and contribution that Lee Ang has made to our movie industry and his achievements on the international stage also honour us’ (quoted in Teo 2001). Interestingly, the film’s Taiwanese financier had backed out in the early stages of pre-production, and the film’s only links to Taiwan are the director’s own ethnic origin as well as those of his Taiwanese actors, Chang Chen and Cheng Pei Pei. Nevertheless, Scarlet Cheng, writing for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, calls it a ‘cultural homecoming’ for Ang Lee, while a Taiwanese office worker is reported to have exclaimed, ‘I am so proud of Ang Lee. [...] He never forgot his roots in Taiwan, and he also traced his roots back to China’ (Cheng 2000: 85). Never mind that Lee himself has said that the China he envisioned was a fantasy China of his boyhood dreams (Lee 2000: 7).

My own personal observation from living in Chinese-dominated Singapore is that the attitudes towards the film’s success in the US and Europe seem to reveal a characteristic, though paradoxical, mix of cultural chauvinism and deference towards US and European culture, what Kenneth Chan calls ‘a kind of cultural nationalism’ (Chan 2004: 3). Despite a great resistance to being dictated to by ‘the West,’ a foreign success is at the same time almost always seen as something to be emulated, praised, and welcomed. This cultural schizophrenia, at least with regard to *Crouching Tiger*, stems in part from a history of being inundated by high production value Hollywood films, which

set a commercial standard, and a sense of cultural self-effacement. Chinese film scholars like Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, for example, seem concerned with ‘why the development of our film *lags behind* the rest of the world’ (1990: 10, my emphasis). Even in Singapore, filmmakers, artists, and theatre practitioners often aim to make a name for themselves in international festivals before they are confident that the local public will accept them. So, while Chinese audiences may initially express reservations about *Crouching Tiger*, a ‘Western’ success may not only convince them to the contrary, but also assure them that it was a winning product to begin with.

Another consideration is the decision to allow the actors to deliver the dialogue in Mandarin, rather than dub it over with Mandarin speakers in post-production. When I watched the film in Singapore, several audience members burst out laughing when Michelle Yeoh uttered her first words with a distinctly Malaysian-English accent. The English- and Cantonese-speaking actress could not speak or read Mandarin and had to memorise the dialogue phonetically. Chow Yun-fat, a Cantonese speaker, also had difficulties with the language and both actors have commented that ‘speaking Mandarin was like speaking Shakespeare’ (Short 2000b). In fact, the four main characters speak with four different accents, and the verbal incongruity made it difficult for some audiences to appreciate the other merits of the film. In some ways, this aural diversity can be seen as representative of the diversity of the Chinese diaspora (Corliss 1999) — Lee is from Taiwan but works in the US; action choreographer Yuen Wo-ping is from Hong Kong; Chow Yun-fat is also from Hong Kong, but has since moved to Hollywood; Michelle Yeoh is from Malaysia, but is based in Hong Kong; Zhang Ziyi is from Beijing; and Chang Chen hails from Taiwan — and the filmmakers themselves were keen to emphasise its composite identity. According to James Schamus:

The film was shot in almost every corner of China, including the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Plateau, north of Tibet, near the Kurdistan border. We were based for a time in Urumchi where all the street signs are in Chinese and Arabic, all [the] way down south to the Bamboo Forest at Anji. [Then] North to Cheng De where the famous summer palace is [...]. The studio work was done in Beijing, we recorded the music in Shanghai, and we did the post-production looping in Hong Kong. *So it is really bringing together every conceivable image you could have of China.* (Lee and Schamus 2000: my emphasis)

Paradoxically then, the film's 'Chinese-ness' is represented by a whole myriad of Chinese-nesses, and it is this cultural schizophrenia that enables Chinese audiences to scoff at the film, while basking in its international success.

This 'double migration,' from 'East' to 'West' and back to 'East' again, has an impact on local industries and films. The Hong Kong film industry has already been looking to emulate *Crouching Tiger's* success. Joe Cheung of the Hong Kong Film Director's Guild says at the time, 'This movie is a benchmark and it shows that we must all be professional, that we must put together the best to create something of such high standards' (Anon. 2001a). Hong Kong cinema, which used to outsell Hollywood blockbusters in domestic markets, saw a reverse trend in the 1990s, caused in part by changing audience demographics, rampant piracy, and the political uncertainty leading up to the British handover of the colony to Chinese rule in 1997. Thomas Chung, an influential Hong Kong producer, is described by *Asiaweek* as being on a 'mission — to revitalize Hong Kong's ailing film industry' (quoted in Hansen and Seno 2001). Most of his efforts are directed at changing the signature slapdash style of production in Hong Kong films in favour of stronger scripts and high value productions designed to appeal to foreign audiences as well as local audiences weaned on foreign imports. This includes writing most of the dialogue in English, as with *Gen-Y Cops* (Benny Chan, 2000) and *The Touch* (Peter Pau, 2002), produced by and starring Michelle Yeoh; the kinetic energy

of a regular Hong Kong film resulting from the spontaneity of churning out a film in forty days or less, and the rapid-fire witticisms tossed out in Cantonese, apparently look set to be sacrificed in favour of Hollywood-style big budget action flair. Since then, though, popular Hong Kong cinema shows signs of bouncing back with the success of the mostly Cantonese *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002–03), prompting Bordwell to note on his blog that ‘Hong Kong filmmakers had finally made a Hollywood film’ (2006). The formal balance between arthouse and commercial, between ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ is the key to the translatability of Lee’s films. How this balance is achieved varies from film to film depending on the film cultures with which each negotiates.

V

In spite of the record-breaking success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Lee’s transnational transculturalism is sometimes viewed with ambivalence. For example, Kenneth Chan, then at the National University of Singapore writes that ‘the film is emblematic of a hybrid form that embodies the cultural reconfigurations and tensions resulting from its place in a global capitalist economy’ and that what it reflects cultural anxiety about representation and identity, particularly about what it means to be Chinese in the context of the ‘Asian “invasion” of Hollywood’ (2004: 5), an argument that is slightly anachronistic as *Crouching Tiger* is the film that is perceived to have instigated this trend. In contrast, Lu distinguishes *Crouching Tiger* from other ‘exilic cinema,’ ‘diasporic cinema’ and ‘postcolonial ethnic cinema,’ in that it displays ‘none of the pathos of displacement, alienation, homelessness, and quest’ (2005b: 222–23). The anxiety Chan writes of appears to be the projected onto the film: he cites Lee’s ‘pragmatism’ — referring to an interview in which the filmmaker explains the necessity of negotiating with Hollywood’s financing structure — as ‘problematic,’ in spite of the noteworthiness of ‘Lee’s

willingness to admit that cultural syncretism and hybridization are an inevitable part of a globalized film industry' (2004: 6). In a second example, Chan quote Lee in an interview:

With *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. Some people appreciate it; others don't because it twists the genre. It's not 'Chinese.' But to be more Chinese you have to be westernized, in a sense. You've got to use that tool to dig in there and get at it. (quoted in Chan 2004: 6)

Chan writes that '[o]ne gets the feeling that Lee needs to justify his "western" methodologies and techniques by formulating them as a means to a cultural end—that is, the reification of the centrality of Chinese culture' (2004: 6). He asks whether Lee is ultimately 'guilty of such self-Orientalism' in a similar vein as has been accused of Zhang Yimou (2004: 6)? On closer analysis, Lee's statement that perhaps one needs to employ 'Western' analytical tools to uncover Chinese texts is not altogether dissimilar from Rey Chow's own efforts to employ 'Western' critical theories in order to deconstruct the 'idealism' embedded in the construction of a cultural otherness allocated to Chinese texts (see Chow 1998). Lo extrapolates from Lee's remarks above that 'the appearance cannot be easily dismissed as mere illusion because it possesses a power of its own and conceals a different reality' (2005: 183). Lo argues that Lee's Chinese identity is 'completely mediated [in *Crouching Tiger*] by martial arts and period films mostly produced by *exiled* Chinese directors like King Hu and Li Hanxiang in Hong Kong' (2005: 183, my emphasis).

A way of reconciling the ambivalence of Lee's cultural position is to view the cultural politics of his films not as particularly 'Chinese' working against 'the West,' but on a level that transcends the binary:

[...] a highly fictional Chinese film like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* should not alienate Chinese audiences from culturally identifying with the Chinese images portrayed in the film. The dematerialization of the very image on which transnational Chinese identity is based does not weaken its power, but rather further endows it with a stronger spectral spirit that dominates the subject who thinks he can maintain a distance from it. (Lo 2005: 183)

The image ‘conjured’ is one of ‘an ambiguous pan-Chinese subject position’ which is at once attractive and illusory, or rather, attractive *because* it is illusory: ‘[s]uch a position can liberate the Chinese viewer precisely from the subjection to the sovereignty of any local or national regime, offering an illusive sense of emancipation from national politics and a racially interpellated secured [*sic*] place’ (Lo 2005: 184). My interpretation of Lee’s words above — that ‘to be more Chinese you have to be westernized’ — is that they point not to an anxiety about what it means to be Chinese in a Western context, nor to how Lee employs specific strategies to sell a neutered form of Chinese culture for foreign consumption (see Wu and Chan 2007), but that the words illustrate the lack of an *appropriate language* in which we might address a cultural formation attempting to articulate its presence as neither specifically ‘Eastern,’ nor ‘Western,’ nor even a hybrid (a concept that cannot hold if the two polar opposites are themselves in flux). In fact, Lo notes that ‘it is the inconsistency or incompatibility between the two cultural allegiances that makes Ang Lee’s films well acclaimed in both societies’ (2005: 184).

Lee has identified personally with this struggle for expression on a number of occasions, especially as it reflects upon his own migrant subjectivity: ‘honestly, I can’t tell any more which part of me is American and which is Oriental. I’ve lived here [in America] a long time, and my upbringing in Taiwan had a lot of American influences’ (quoted in Moverman 1997). It is a conundrum that Kenneth Chan himself notes, except that his desire for a

clearer distinction is more evident; Chan writes that '[o]ne could easily deconstruct the binary logic of the social responsibility versus personal freedom opposition' — he is referring in particular to Lee's Chinese-language films in which the characters all struggle against the traditional, patriarchal constraints of Chinese society, and yearn for an individualised freedom seen to be more valorised in US and European societies — 'but doing so does not nullify the very real impact this logic has on Chinese society and communities and on individuals' lives' (2004: 9). Lee's solution according to Chan is to shuttle 'between its poles as a way of negotiating an illusive middle ground' (2004: 9). Lee's collaborator, James Schamus, speaks in the same dialogic voice in this statement about *Crouching Tiger*:

I always thought we were going to make a movie that was understandable to westerners, but still very Chinese, and I still think essentially its a Chinese film. But in a way I also recognise that why the film has been so massively successful in Asia is not because it retained its Asian identity, but because of all these wonderful new things that came about in discourse with the west. [...] I think that one of the things I find people responding to here in the west is precisely the fact that you get to see a two-hour Taoist action movie. The Chinese-ness of it, even if it's not always entirely comprehensible because of the subtitles, I think that's what's so profoundly new about it. So in a way we ended up making an eastern movie for western audiences and in some ways a more western movie for eastern audiences. (Lee *et al.* 2000)

Whether such an attempt is inhabiting 'an illusive middle ground' or an effort to formulate a 'third' space is not entirely a matter of semantics. It is a 'space of exchange' which opens up precisely 'under the immense expansion of global communications and trade markets, [where] the circulation of cinematic images is carried out in the balance of exchange' (Lo 2005: 188). This space, however, 'is always the fleeting and elusive appearance, not the hard and inert reality, that spellbinds the other in the course of exchange' (Lo 2005: 188). In other words, the transculturalism — the 'easy accessibility and transmissibility,' or translatability — of the 'cross-cultural exchange' enacted in Lee's films is made possible by the 'dematerialization of the commodity

form' that cinema exemplifies as a product of cultural modernisation and global capitalism; one is a function of the other (Lo 2005: 188). In addition, the 'balance of this exchange could be maintained because appearance is not the opposite of the underlying reality' (Lo 2005: 188). Ang Lee's statement that 'to be Chinese you have to be westernized' makes sense, as Lo puts it, 'only when appearance and reality are no longer opposed' (2005: 188).

The terrain upon which the struggle is enacted, as I have tried to argue above, is on the formal construction of the films themselves, on the awareness that an affective *mise-en-scène* can only partially articulate meaning. Oren Moverman notes in an interview with Lee that the director's style has been the subject of criticism:

[...] he was attacked for lacking an auteur's vision; critics could not pigeonhole him as an aesthete, and he became known as an 'actor's director,' a term usually used as a consolation prize for a popular filmmaker who has failed to impress the eye with an inimitable visual style. (Moverman 1997)

Lee's auteurism, if any, lies not in the *mise-en-scène* itself, but in the way it is *presented*, that is to say, in its mode of address. In many of Lee's films, the spectator is continually positioned outside of the scene and made to move along the rim of the fictional space rather than one that is invited into its world. In mainstream cinema, the *mise-en-scène* is one of the main modes of access into the fictional world: it sets the scene, establishes the mood, and tells us who the characters are, where they are and what they do. In 'alternative' films, the casting of an unfamiliar or unusual *mise-en-scène* can by the same token disrupt our sense of cognitive stability. In Lee's films, the *mise-en-scène* neither gives us full access into the fictional world, nor categorically shuts us out of it; it creates a visually familiar world and yet questions that familiarity through the placement and mobility of the camera's gaze. They are worlds we think we recognise, stories we think we know, but at the same time, the

marginality of the spectator's position suggests a need to learn to read — and perhaps more importantly, to *talk about* how we might read — differently.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with the question of how a more comprehensive comparative poetics of cinema might be formulated — a comparative poetics that depended not on essentialised notions of culture accentuated by binary divisions but one that would need to take into consideration the multiple agencies and subjectivities that impact the cultural production, and reading, of a film. The formulation of a constructive comparative poetics is necessary when building a case for the film's cultural translatability, especially in the face of the proliferation of cinema that is being increasingly identified as 'transnational.' The case is made by analysing examples of transnational Chinese cinemas as exemplified by the films of three directors, Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar-wai and Ang Lee. In each of these examples, I explore how the filmic texts negotiate the various cultural and national boundaries they invariably cross as they enter into the global circulation of film and media products. Whilst I analyse the films in the contexts of the political and social histories of the various Chinese territories from which they appear to originate, I do not claim that they are merely products of those histories. The films are also products of economic and business networks, individual aesthetic choices on the part of the filmmakers, and a complex matrix of tastes and preferences exercised by their audiences, which may not necessarily be nationally or culturally demarcated.

The core of my argument is that whilst this transnationality appears to be a recent and new development, this form of 'border-crossing' has always been present on the level of lived experience, although the terms for describing that experience are themselves limited by discursive boundaries: terms such as 'culture,' 'identity,' 'postcoloniality,' 'diaspora,' and so on. These terms are

dependent on a conceptual point of origin, which I argue is slippery, if not illusory. The solution open to critics at present is to consider these terms as sites of contestation and fragmentation, as ways of signifying what they only partially describe and, in some cases, better act as ‘supplements’ rather than descriptors (see Chow 1998: 3). One of the reasons why the point of origin remains illusory is the fact of discourse as a mode of self-articulation in the era of modernity, the era in which the nation-state, and its cultural corollaries, are instituted. As Chow puts it:

[This is] the irreversibility of modernity. In the absence of that original witness of the native’s destruction, and in the untranslatability of the native’s discourse into imperialist discourse, natives, like commodities, become knowable only through routes that diverge from their original ‘homes.’ (Chow 1993: 42)

Cinema as a mode of cultural production mirrors the fractured nature of the modern ‘national’ subject, the industry acting as ‘a metonym for the industrialisation of culture and a metaphor for modernity itself’ (Vitali and Willemen 2006: 2). John Mowitt argues that cinema ‘as a distinctly international institution is fundamentally involved in producing this instability [of ‘the national’]’ (2005: 29). So to say that cinema has always been a transnational cultural product, ‘circulating more or less freely across borders and utilizing international personnel’ (Ezra and Rowden 2006: 2), seems self-evident. Yet, as I have explored in my analyses, interpellating this apparently inherent transnationality with the newly perceived transnationality of contemporary (Chinese) cinemas opens up the investigative territory of cultural (and national) subjectivities in ways that film studies is tentatively venturing to explore.

The search for a comparative poetics is part of that exploration and one that is intended to continue beyond the scope of this thesis. However, given that to speak of cultures in monolithic or essentialised terms is no longer

acceptable, or useful, the question of *comparativity* naturally arises. A comparative studies of cinema may be conducted in different ways, two of which are in terms of a comparative area studies and interdisciplinary studies. A comparative area studies, in the traditional sense, relies to a large extent on the distinctiveness of geographical regions; in areas where cultures ‘cross,’ they tend to be seen as overlapping, or ‘hybridised.’ For example, the Association for Asian Studies, based in the US, is organised according to various ‘area councils,’ such as the China and Inner Asia Council, the Northeast Asia Council, the Southeast Asia Council, and the South Asia Council. All new members are asked, but not obligated, to select a council to which they wish to be affiliated. I would imagine that, if asked, the many scholars I know and respect working in fields involving various ‘Asian’ cinemas would be hard pressed to make a choice.⁶¹ I cite the Association for Asian Studies as one example because the decision to institute area councils is explicitly stated as designed ‘to serve the better broadening of disciplinary and geographical interests of its membership.’ Its membership, although open to anyone interested in Asian Studies, primarily consists of scholars working in different parts of the US (Anon. n.d.). This is not intended as criticism of the Association, as much insightful work has emerged from its activities, including the contributions to the *Journal of Asian Studies*. As Pheng Cheah notes in his account of the discipline, it is not that the scholars

who were involved in defining the enterprise of area studies in the U.S.A. for institutional-programmatic reasons, as well as for the purpose of attracting foundation support in the two decades following the end of World War II, were [...] completely insensitive to the epistemological and

61. In their 2007 Annual Meeting report, about 20 per cent of the Association’s membership had ‘no preference stated’ when registering by area of specialisation. This may be compared with the 34 per cent that selected ‘China and Inner Asia,’ and the 28 per cent that selected ‘Northeast Asia’ (Anon. 2007a: 10).

methodological difficulties inherent in the constitution of their field, even if they ended up papering over those very difficulties. (Cheah 2001: 38)

However, particularly as transnational capital respects few boundaries, comparative studies of this nature in the field of film studies — that is, of area studies specialisms — is limited in the ways it can articulate these ‘border crossings.’ As Iain Chambers puts it: ‘In the accelerating processes of globalisation we are also increasingly confronted with an extensive cultural and historical diversity that proves impermeable to the explanations we habitually employ’ (1994: 3).

Chambers elaborates on the need to stress the concept of *migrancy*, rather than migration, when addressing the polyvalent discourses inherent in multivalent subjectivities, and the need for a ‘mode of thinking that is neither fixed nor stable, but is one that is open to the prospect of a continual return to events, to their re-elaboration and revision’ (1994: 3). This is the second mode of conducting comparative studies in cinema, what I have for the present termed ‘interdisciplinary’ to distinguish it from area studies methodologies, and may be characterised in part by the work done within the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society mentioned earlier in the introduction. Roger Dale sums up both functions of comparison as such:

On the one hand, it [the comparative method] may be seen as the quintessence of modern social science, with its ability to frame the world, and to confidently define its parts and make them comparable [...] through both variables and cases. It assumes and reinforces boundaries of all kinds, which are crucial to the possibility of comparison. [...] On the other hand, it may make possible new boundaries and imaginings, and it may offer opportunities for proceeding in ways that are compatible with and that could extend the suggestions for ‘research’ [...]. (Dale 2006: 184)

My concern in this conclusion is with the latter, with ways of theorising the cultural condition of an individual or society as *a priori* transcultural and transnational, rather than positing the transcultural and transnational as

exceptions or extensions of the merely 'cultural.' One way of thinking about such a move is to consider the state of cultural migrancy, as Chambers defines it, rather than cultural migration.

The state of migrancy, in the interdisciplinary mode of comparison, arrives at a different destination from the event of migration, if it arrives at any destination at all:

So this [discussion about migrancy] is not necessarily even an account of travel. For to travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary. It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming. Migrancy, on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. (Chambers 1994: 3)

This state of migrancy is described by Jacques Derrida as the state in which there are 'only arrivals [*arrivées*],' where the 'monolingual other' is 'in a way *aphasic* [...], he is thrown into absolute translation, a translation without a pole of reference, without an originary language, and without a source language [*langue de départ*]. For him, there are only target languages [*langue d'arrivée*]' (1998: 61). Because it is a *process* rather than a product, the concept of migrancy eliminates the need to talk about a point of origin, or a point of arrival, either in the past or the future, focussing instead on theorising the 'now-ness' of an existing situation. The address, and acknowledgement, that *all* cultures are in a state of migrancy, not simply those deemed 'diasporic' or 'postcolonial,' will entail conceiving of histories, and identities, as continuously produced, and re-produced by discourse:

The belief in the transparency of truth and the power of origins to define the finality of our passage is dispersed by this perpetual movement of transmutation and transformation. History is harvested and collected, to be assembled, made to speak, re-membered, re-read and rewritten, and language comes alive in transit, in interpretation. (Chambers 1994: 3)

Because this language needs constant interpretation, and because ‘thought wanders’ — that is, ‘it migrates’ — there is a constant need for translation (Chambers 1994: 4); except that the mode of cultural translation within a comparative studies framework will not have specific linguistic rules governing how it ought to be conducted, as the rules, and conditions, that regulate cultural production are subject to constant change as well. ‘Dwelling,’ Chambers adds, will need to be conceived of ‘as a mobile habitat, as a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation of an opening whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitute our sense of identity, place and belonging’ (1994: 4).

However, it must be noted that this notion of migrancy remains largely in the purview of ‘metropolitan cultures,’ sites which much of international cinema is reflective of, projected on and experienced in:

In the migrant landscapes of contemporary metropolitan cultures, de-territorialized and de-colonised, re-situating, re-citing and re-presenting common signs in the circuits between speech, image and oblivion, a constant struggling into sense and history is pieced together. It is a history that is continually being decomposed and recomposed into the interlacing between what we have inherited and where we are. (Chambers 1994: 15)

Because the constant flux of these migrant landscapes elude easy classification, they also enact the inadequacy of the discourse of cultural difference, examples of which I have provided for how a Singaporean spectator might engage with Zhang, Wong, or Lee’s films. The Singaporean identification, mis- and dis-identification, at various instances, with the project of ‘Chinese-ness’ read in the films, do not simply trade in differences; they are at various times simultaneous declarations of difference *and* allegiance to concurrently ‘foreign’ cultures.

It may be useful to return the study of comparisons to its etymological roots. The verb ‘to compare’ is derived from the Latin verb *comparāre*, meaning ‘to couple together,’ or ‘to match.’ In other words, to address similarities, not just differences. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the invocation of our similarities as modern, human, subjects, should then embrace a kind of undifferentiated universality, of the sort that declares us all ‘the same’ underneath the surface. An undifferentiated ‘sameness’ is as illusory as unmitigated differentiation, and not particularly useful in the context of divergent histories and subjectivities. One of the imperatives of a comparative poetics would entail an acceptance, even a certain humility, in the acknowledgement that, by virtue of our own limited subjectivities, there is no single explanation to how all of cultural production works, in the same way that the discovery of DNA has not been able to illuminate the more philosophical questions of human existence. Edward Said asserts that this is how theory should work, not one that endeavours to explain everything, but one that can acknowledge its own limitations even as it ventures to explain *something*:

Theory [...] can never be complete, just as one’s interest in everyday life is never exhausted by simulacra, models, or theoretical abstracts of it. Of course one derives pleasure from actually making evidence fit or work in a theoretical scheme, and of course it is ridiculously foolish to argue [*sic*] that ‘the facts’ or ‘the great texts’ do not require any theoretical framework or methodology to be appreciated properly. No reading is neutral or innocent, and by the same token every text and every reader is to some extent the product of a theoretical standpoint, however implicit or unconscious such a standpoint might be. (Said 1991: 241)

A comparative poetics of cinema must therefore, in that sense, account for its own historicity, its own ‘now-ness.’ Whilst it strives for an overarching framework of reading, it ought to be flexible enough to adapt to changing historical and social conditions, and remain conscious of ‘the ever-changing but ever-present complicity between our critical articulation and the political

environment at which that articulation is directed' (Chow 1993: 44). One of these conditions is the reassessment of what a comparison of cultural texts itself entails.

In writing of comparative literature, Stanley Corngold describes the comparative act as such: 'the act that I call "comparison," means, in fact, being, for one moment, without a language; it means being, not lost *in* translation but lost *for* translation: being at a place of thought where the target language is absent' (2005: 141). The comparative act, he argues, requires the critic 'to stand firm in the delay of translation,' as '[t]his holding two pieces together in the mind is a warrant against the violence of premature analogy, against improper association' (Corngold 2005: 142). To 'midwife the conjunction' (Corngold 2005: 142) would require the critic to hold two things in his mind at the same time, for which there may be no commonalities, or no differences, except those which the critic deems necessary to be compared. In other words, the *critical context* of the student, scholar, writer — *discourser* — is the other participant in this process of comparison.

From my perspective and critical context as a transcultural individual working in transcultural contexts, therefore, I argue for a productive comparative poetics that allows for an exploration of dualities beyond their potential for division. I have argued at the start of this thesis that a different mode of reading may be needed to better articulate the complexities of modern cultural subjectivities. It is a mode of reading that should consider translations beyond the fluency of a 'native informant,' and attempt to address what sorts of translations may occur for a spectator inhabiting a 'third space,' as Bhabha calls it:

I think that it was a very important perspective for me, of the possibilities of being, somehow, in between, of occupying an interstitial space that was not fully governed by the recognizable traditions from which you

came. For the interaction or overdetermination often produces another third space. It does not necessarily produce some higher, more inclusive, or representative reality. Instead, it opens up a space that is sceptical of cultural totalization, of notions of identity which depend for their authority on being 'originary,' or concepts of culture which depend for their value on being pure, or of tradition, which depends for its effectivity, on being continuous. A space where, to put it very simply, I saw great political and poetic and conceptual value in forms of cultural identification, which subverted authority, not by claiming their total difference from it, but were able to actually use authorized images, and turn them against themselves to reveal a different history. (Bhabha 1993: 30)

Presuming that *all* spectators from *every* tradition occupy this space, the numerical hierarchy of 'first,' 'second' and 'third' should eventually become unnecessary and potentially eliminate mutual accusations of double standards, as well as quarrels of who has the prior claim to history.⁶² The term 'postcolonial,' perhaps even 'transnational,' may go the same route. As Patke argues:

The first British colony to break free from its colonial status was the USA. The formation of nation managed to avoid or evade the appellation of 'postcolonial' in a manner that has implications for other former colonies. There must come a time when 'postcolonial' ceases to be a term always open-ended about the receding future it recognizes as the plight of those it describes. For that future to stop receding there would have to come a time when a society could look on its colonial and postcolonial pasts as the assumed ground on which to live and continue changing without being overshadowed or constrained by that history. (Patke 2006: 371–72)

This is not at all intended as an abrogation of concerns that remain pressing, of histories that remain undocumented, and of experiences that remain unvoiced, but rather a re-positioning of those concerns in a different framework, for, as Rey Chow argues, maintaining one's victimhood is rarely a solution as well:

62. For instance, Yau argues that there is a 'the double standard that modernism maintains when it comes to "authenticity": when Europe's artists reference the non-West, this gesture adds value to their work and their originality; but when non-Western artists reference Europe and the United States, their work is deemed derivative and inauthentic' (2001a: 8).

To insist on the native as an indifferent defiled image is [...] to return to the native a capacity for distrusting and resisting the symbolic orders that ‘fool’ her while not letting go of the ‘illusion’ which has structured her survival. To imagine the coexistence of defilement and indifference *in* the native-object is not to neutralize the massive destructions committed under such orders as imperialism and capitalism. Rather, it is to invent a dimension beyond the deadlock between native and colonizer in which the native can only be the colonizer’s defiled image and the anti-imperialist critic can only be psychotic. (Chow 1993: 53)

At the same time, it is worthwhile to ponder Takeuchi Yoshimi’s statement that ‘our very supposition of a third vantage point represents a European form of thought. It is a product created from within Europe’s advance’ (2005: 58). Takeuchi argues, from the vantage point of postwar Japan, that the very act of arguing for resistance is already a European discursive venture: ‘The European invasion of the Orient produced resistance there, a resistance that was of course reflected in Europe itself. [...] Resistance was calculated, and it was clear that through resistance the Orient was destined to increasingly Europeanize’ (2005: 55–56). This resistance takes place, ‘within the *framework of modernity*’ (Takeuchi 2005: 56), a modernity that Takeuchi conceptualises as part of the European advance into the Orient:

At each crisis in which Europe becomes conscious of its internal contradictions, those things that rise to the surface of its consciousness are always recollections of the Orient that exists latently within it. Europe’s nostalgia for the Orient is one of its contradictions, and it is forced to think this Orient the more explicit these contradictions become. [...] In the final analysis, the Orient is for Europe the rear: it cannot be seen with the eyes. (Takeuchi 2005: 56)

Haun Saussy articulates the paradox in a different way. He notes, albeit of poetry, that ‘since the “other world” of metaphysics should become an object of thought for us only after we have agreed to entertain a “Western” worldview, this characterization of the distinctiveness of Chinese poetry is unavailable to those Chinese of whom the theory speaks’ (1993: 34–35). Nevertheless, Takeuchi argues that ‘the Orient appears to have produced non-

European things that are mediated by, while at the same time exceeding, the European' (2005: 56). By this means, Takeuchi offers us an escape from the tautological state of modern cultural history. If, as he argues, 'this form of European thought is valid only within the instant of that advance,' and that 'this thought is conceived of as truth by virtue of the fact that the instant is conceived of as permanent' (Takeuchi 2005: 58), our way out of the double bind is to reconceptualise that instant of European discursive advance as impermanent and constantly changing. Gerard Delanty stresses similar ideas in different terms. He argues that it is important to address 'Europe' — and I would add, 'the Orient,' 'China' or any other region — as a 'discursive strategy' (1995: 157), in which it is 'crucial to separate the ethno-cultural idea of Europe from citizenship' (1995: 159). A similar precaution could be applied to the idea of the 'nation,' or indeed to essentialised notions of 'ethnic cultures' as well. Whilst 'nations' continue to operate politically and socially, it is impossible to discount the impact the *idea* of the nation has on the cultural production of texts. Yet, cultural production, as I have argued, is never wholly subject to such an idea without also providing the space within the structure of the text for the *critique* of that idea. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, it is the *intertextuality* of the *text*, not reducible to 'sources,' 'quotations,' or 'influences,' that dismantles the 'work,' whose authority is dependent on social consensus, and thus 'caught up in a process of filiation' (1977: 160). At the present moment, my approach is to work out how culture production works on micro-levels, on the levels of individual studies and texts. The aim is to allow an eventual theoretical understanding, a *poetics* — as 'the generative principle of an infinite number of texts' (Ducrot and Todorov 1981: 79) — of cinema as cultural production to emerge from the discussion, rather than to declare a poetics found from the sum of these parts.

Mowitt has ventured the suggestion of a linguistic shift, a ‘spoonerism,’ as he calls it, one that writes not of ‘foreign language films’ but of ‘foreign film languages’:

[The aim is to] stretch the concept of language — especially as applied to the cinema — while at the same time retaining from it, through the grammatical instance of reflexivity, the sort of systemic or structural limits that one might appeal to when disagreeing with someone [...] about the sense of the statements being made by a particular film. (Mowitt 2005: 36)

Mowitt thus re-poses the questions Christian Metz asks in his discussion of the *langage-langue* divide; that is, whether cinema is a language or a language system (see Metz 1974: 31–91). Mowitt argues for a need to theorise enunciation more clearly, that is to say, ‘who or what is speaking in the film’ (2005: 45), in order to perceive how ‘cinema studies and the multicultural initiative [are] bound up with one another’ (2005: 14). He argues, in the spirit of Bhabha, that:

If national cinemas, precisely to the extent that they view for cultural authority on the international scene, are subject to the interminable process of cultural differentiation, then they are dependent upon a Third Space that mediates and divides the encounter between senders and receivers of filmic messages and about which they are to varying degrees unconscious. (Mowitt 2005: 29)

Mowitt goes as far as to argue not for a bilingualism of spoken languages, but a bilingualism in *film languages*. ‘Bilingualism,’ he adds, ‘embodies a mode of foreignness that is far from simply relative. Only from the standpoint of an imperceptible “monolingualism,” in other words, from within a film culture where a certain enunciative tendency or stance has become normalized, is “bilingualism” intelligible as foreign’ (Mowitt 2005: 45). Consequently, if we drop the concept of ‘monolingualism’ in cultural production, that is to say that there is only one way of conceptualising culture or cultural texts, and that this way of conceptualising is dependent on the monolithic and essentialised, then

‘bilingualism,’ or alternative modes of reading will cease to be ‘foreign.’ The concept of foreignness is after all contingent on the concept of ‘home.’ This ‘home’ may also refer to a disciplinary ‘home,’ the metaphorical ‘home’ of the intellectual within the higher education institution. Meaghan Morris writes of the disciplining of boundaries in scholarly discourse:

Disciplinary borders are institutional as well as conceptual *barriers*, and they render extremely difficult the emergence of a genuinely transnational scholarship as distinct from the internationally distributed products of the Anglo-American publishing industry. It is very difficult not to re-inscribe national boundaries in scholarly discourse on culture, not only as we formulate objects of study but in our enunciative practice. [...] Too often, we simply do not *know* enough to discuss cinema historically *in* a transnational register, even on a regional scale — as distinct from talking with cultural compatriots ‘about’ transnational cinema. (Morris 2004: 183)

Yet, as I have argued in my analyses, the migrant nature of culture, of transnationality, and of cinema, often emphasises rather than diminishes the fact that we can *never* ‘know enough,’ as Morris puts it. Perhaps another way of perceiving the situation is to construct the state of ‘not knowing enough’ as a position of strength rather than weakness.

The formulation of a productive comparative poetics in a transnational context then, I would argue, entails not just being partially blind, partially deaf, and perhaps even partially inarticulate, but also being *comfortable* with being so. This recommendation clearly flies in the face of the construction of ‘expertise’ that one is expected to demonstrate in scholarly work. Yet there is substantial scholarly production, and I have raised several instances in this thesis, on precisely the impossibility of ‘knowing,’ which may be distinguished from the *position* of un-knowing, that is, the position of ignorance. To cite the words of Stanley Corngold:

[...] each translation has a way of producing its own theory of what it is about; this is unavoidable, since acts of translation may be seen as radically singular, involving, as is commonly agreed on, a certain surd

irrationality as the ‘thing’ that is always left out, the thing that is untranslatable in the representation of one particular piece of one particular language in another. And where the defining characteristic of each particular act of translation is always ineffable, one cannot say whether or not to what extent this translation resembles any other. (Corngold 2005: 139)

Likewise, Dale argues that ‘one of the key foundations of translation is the sociology of absences. Knowledges and practices made absent never register on the terrains of commensurability of, or even critical histories of, hegemonic knowledges and practices’ (2006: 188). An acknowledgement of these silences would avoid what Michel Foucault calls ‘a false unity.’ In so doing,

[...] perhaps one might discover a discursive unity if one sought it not in the coherence of concepts, but in their simultaneous or successive emergence, in the distance that separates them and even in their incompatibility. One would no longer seek an architecture of concepts sufficiently general and abstract to embrace all others and to introduce them into the same deductive structure; one would try to analyse the interplay of their appearances and dispersion. (Foucault 1972: 35)

Foucault’s assertion has informed the backdrop in my writing of this thesis, especially in my efforts to analyse the ‘interplay of [...] appearances and dispersion’ within the texts that have supported my argument over the course of these pages. The last thing that remains to be said is that (to paraphrase Benjamin) perhaps the task of the comparative critic is not only to compare cultures, texts, and films, but to add to his role, the explorer of the very nature of *comparativity* itself, in order that the paradigm from within which we understand how ‘culture’ works may be re-thought. That the paradigm needs to be re-thought is not a new idea; but that it *must* be re-thought is crucial for a more comprehensive theory in comparative film studies to emerge, one which may more accurately address the issues of cultural translatability in transnational cinemas in such a way that not merely uncovers the gaps in prevailing structures of knowledge, but also in exploring how those structures themselves might be, eventually, transformed.

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