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Terror at 30,000 Feet: Post-9/11 Film and Its Audience

In the years that have passed since September 11, 2001, a considerable number of films dealing explicitly with air travel have been produced. Each has provided a unifying space for its viewers while simultaneously evoking the feelings of a world forced to deal with irrevocable change. Furthermore, just as each individual dealt differently with 9/11—some grieved, others grew fearful, even more became patriotic—so have different films invoked these varied emotions. Therefore, when comparing three films—Flightplan (2005), Red Eye (2005), and the forthcoming Snakes on a Plane (2006)—it becomes evident that a spectrum of different genres are embodied in these narratives: a thriller, a thriller-romantic comedy hybrid, and a comedy, respectively. The viewer recognition promoted through genre conventions makes possible a unified audience, one that begins to deal with the event of 9/11 collectively. Furthermore, this collective experience seems to disclose what Wheeler Winston Dixon calls “a desire to replicate the idea of the ‘just war,’ in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare, are simultaneously inevitable and justified.” The illusion of “the just war,” promoted by easily discernible heroes and villains, further unites film audiences looking for a simple solution to the traumas caused by 9/11.

Dixon argues that “we are assured by the very act of entering a movie theater, the public domain of visual fiction, that what we are about to see is a construct.” Dixon uses the term “construct” to signal a fictive space, an illusion that, though resembling reality, stands separate from it. Nothing is totally tangible in the dream world of the theater. Similarly, many experienced 9/11 as they would a constructed event. In fact, Dixon notes that “many people have said watching [9/11] was like watching a movie.” As such, images from 9/11 have become codified and easily recognized. Thus, though based in reality, 9/11-related images now evoke a myriad of interrelated emotions. The on-screen images that evoke the memory of 9/11, while they do not seem real at all, are in fact empowered by the subtle shades of reality to which they refer.

Airplanes, explosions, terrorists: these images, reminiscent of 9/11, consume Flightplan. The film tells the story of Kyle Platt (Jodie Foster), an aerospace engineer whose daughter goes missing on a flight from Germany to New York City. The film contains many scenes in which Foster's character, running frantically through the plane, becomes the spectacle that her fellow passengers cannot help but watch. Though Platt believes she has lost her child, the other passengers do not believe her nightmare is real. Thus, the passengers on the plane resemble the post-9/11 audience watching the film, for whom the images of the falling towers and the smoldering Pentagon still remain and whose comprehension of Platt’s horror is affected by that memory. While the events of 9/11 were horrible to contemplate, the sheer volume of images that were generated around the attacks meant that one could not help but see and experience them. Similarly, both the passengers on screen and the audiences in the theater, unable or unwilling to avert their eyes, cannot help but watch Flightplan’s events in disbelief. The audience of Flightplan knows, however, that unlike the images stemming from 9/11, these events are fictional. Jodie Foster is acting and, in all probability, there will be a happy ending (which, of course, there is). Since the 9/11 images can never offer a happy ending, Flightplan reassures its audience with a resolution impossible outside the fictive space of the screen; that is, the film provides the kind of “just war” that Dixon described. In so doing, Flightplan provides both the collective space and the resolution that allows its viewers to deal with the realities of 9/11.

Flightplan attempts to ground its narrative in as much reality as is allowed by Hollywood; Red Eye, on the other hand, is less confined by reality because it is coded as both a romantic comedy and a thriller, adhering more closely to these genre conventions than to any notion of realism. Red Eye is speckled with romantic comedy conventions: chance meetings; cutey, flirtatious banter; the possibility of
emotional and physical intimacy. As a thriller, however, the film is filled with violence and suspense. *Red Eye*'s romantic comedy's motifs are colored by the violence inherent in thrillers; for example, the film is consumed with mixing allusions to rape into interactions that would normally be coded as tender by romantic comedy's conventions. This mixing creates unease where none would usually exist. Thus, contrived happiness masks real terror in a film that is a metaphor for the societal fears created in the wake of 9/11.

The film tells the tale of a hotel manager, Lisa (Rachel McAdams), who, after she is taken hostage on a plane, must fend off an assassin, Ripper (Cillian Murphy), in order to save herself, her father, and the head of the US Department of Homeland Security. In an essay entitled “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter after 9/11,” Gisèle Kuiipers discusses the way humor has been used following 9/11, noting that “the jokes can be divided into two broad categories: humor based on a clash of incongruous domains, and jokes containing more aggressive and/or degrading references.” *Red Eye* becomes consumed by “aggressive and degrading” images towards its climax, and its audience is united through the spectacle before it. For example, the final scene portrays Ripper's attempt to kill Lisa, who has returned safely to her home. The fact that the climax does not occur on a plane but at home signals the fear that terrorism will not stay in one form (airplane terror) but will instead more generally invade the now penetrable country. During the sequence, Lisa, returning home to rescue her father, is followed by Ripper, who chases her about the house in a typical “male killer/female in distress” sequence. Lisa fights back, leaving Ripper with a variety of injuries, one of which is conveyed by the amusing shot of a high heel sticking out of his leg. Overall, much of Lisa and Ripper's physical interaction during sequences like this brings to mind slapstick comedy; the inept killer is confronted by an unexpectedly powerful victim and comedy ensues. While they may not have been intended to be comical by the filmmakers, these amusing images serve to connect an audience much as *Flightplan*'s overt analysis of post-9/11 filmic catharsis. In the coming weeks and months, two more movies will enter the theater, each with a new representation of terror in the sky: *Snakes on a Plane* and *United 93*. *Snakes*, as it has been renamed by its online following, is a horror-comedy whose title sums up its plot; *United 93*, however, attempts to recreate the events of 9/11 through the story of the United Airlines flight, which crashed in a Pennsylvania field after several passengers attempted to regain command of the plane from terrorists. Both films stand as examples of the continuing fascination of terror in the air that has been exploited by films in the post-9/11 years. Furthermore, the high volume of Internet discussion of these films signals the public's willingness to unite because of them. Thus, films that use the airplane as metaphor for 9/11, no matter what their genre or style, offer viewers the space to come together and begin to work through the events of that day through the illusion of a world in which clearly recognized heroes easily defeat their adversaries. In this post-9/11 world, however, there does still exist the possibility for a more substantial US cinema which would avoid such simple binaries, instead thrusting its audience into a space which recognizes the complex politics at work in this modern world.

“The on-screen images that evoke the memory of 9/11, while they do not seem real at all, are in fact empowered by the subtle shades of reality to which they refer.” *Red Eye* (2005)

A special thanks to Professor L.S. Kim for her guidance with this project.

Lee Anna Mariglia

2. Dixon 117.
3. Dixon 117.
Denmark has seen its national cinema evolve from a struggling and uncoordinated enterprise into a dynamic model for creative filmmaking. This "New Danish Cinema," built on generous state subsidies, transnational co-financing, and innovative collaborations between film and television, produces content bound for film festivals and world audiences. However, this new cinematic model did not appear overnight; rather it was a calculated response to the barrage of Hollywood films that stream into world theaters at a daunting rate. The struggle to build this national cinema has empowered a new generation of Danish filmmakers. Capitalizing on inexpensive digital means of production, these filmmakers' output suggests an alternative method of filmmaking to other emerging cinemas worldwide.

This filmmaking climate owes part of its success to Dogma 95, a film movement started by a small group of Danish filmmakers in the mid-90s. Dissatisfied with the capital-intensive mode of production commonly demonstrated by Hollywood, they set out to purify cinema using cinematic limitation. This "purification" resulted in the Dogma 95 manifesto, which was delivered in the spring of 1995 by Lars von Trier on behalf of the Dogma film collective. The manifesto proposed a series of formal constraints that included the exclusive use of location shooting, handheld cameras, diegetic sound, and the requirement that the film's director go uncredited. Positioning itself in a historical lineage, the manifesto's introduction states: "Dogma 95 has the expressed goal of countering 'certain tendencies' in the cinema today." Film theorist Jean-Pierre Guenon has identified the origins inherent in their claim, citing François Truffaut ("A Certain Tendency in French Cinema," 1976) and André Bazin ("What is Cinema?" 1967) as influences. He concludes that Dogma 95 resurrects Bazin's and Truffaut's original argument: conventional movie techniques filter our access to reality so that, as spectators, we spend our time responding to them rather than discovering a world full of ambiguity and manifold diversity.

However, von Trier and the Dogma collective would encounter obstacles trying to move these philosophical notions into actual filmmaking practice. While the Danish Minister of Culture had initially committed a direct grant of fifteen million kroner ($2.45 million) to the Danish Film Institute (DFI) towards the production of Dogma films, those in the Institute believed this grant compromised their role evaluating who received funding. As a result, these funds were added to the standard
DFI budget, with no special preference given to Dogma films. The project would lay dormant for two years before it received life from an unlikely source—television.

Bjørn Erichsen, director of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, arranged a plan to distribute Dogma films to television in a number of Nordic countries via their public service channels, just three months after they were to be screened in Danish theaters. The sale of these broadcasting rights rejuvenated the Dogma 95 movement, and the first Dogma film (The Celebration, 1997) would be released the following year by manifesto co-author Thomas Vinterberg, winning the Jury Award that year’s Cannes Film Festival. With the subsequent release of numerous Dogma films over the following years, the movement proved itself a success story for the politicians and institutions involved.

This collaboration between film and television was a departure from the manner in which most Danish films had been produced. Previous films were dependent on national film subsidies (cemarked by the Danish Film Act of 1972), had been required to be in Danish, with a Danish cast, and (for the most part) shot in Denmark. Only under this criteria would the state would provide fifty percent of the funds needed for a project, but only after the filmmakers had secured the rest. This policy was updated with the Film Act of 1989, which gave Danish filmmakers more freedom to shoot in other countries and languages, in addition to increasing state funding to sixty percent of a film’s budget. This increase in state funding was quickly recognized by other Scandinavian countries, and motivated the creation of the Nordic Film and TV Fund in 1990 by the Nordic Council. Their efforts, with “participation from the various national film institutes, helped to create the parameters for transnational collaboration.”


In addition to these funds and initiatives, the 90s saw the creation of the New Fiction Film Denmark, a union of TV2 (a Danish public TV station) and the DFI, which earmarked three million kroner per project to films sixty minutes in length or less. Further initiatives designed to “support and develop the best of the new, and to carve out a breathing space for people who have already established themselves in film, and who have the ambition to experiment with completely new forms of expression,” included collaboration between two Danish TV stations and the DFI called the Talent Development Program. The program, which was budgeted at 100 million kroner, was aimed at projects under 75 minutes.

This collaboration between TV and film, along with the multinationl support that Dogma films began to receive, was representative of the shift the film industries in Nordic countries had started to make a few years earlier, moving from international co-production to co-financing. This kind of arrangement had not been the case previously, as many Scandinavian and European countries had been actively participating in co-productions as a means to secure the larger budgets believed needed to compete with the relentless flood of Hollywood films during the 70s and 80s.

These co-productions often had casts and crew from different countries, using languages often dictated by the largest national source of funding. As a result, the films lacked any distinct national identity. In an analysis of her 2001 interview with Danish director Henning Carlsen, Mette Hjort identified “the way in which co-productions are expected somehow to make their significant cultural collaboration manifest in the actual film, whereas co-financed films are freed from any such epiphatic requirements.” Carlsen’s *Wolf at the Door* (1986), a Danish-French co-production (shot in English), and based on the life of French impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (Donald Sutherland), is a great example of the ways co-productions put a strain on filmmakers:

> There were so many power struggles during the making of the film...between me [Carlsen] and the cinematographer, between Donald and myself, and all along I had to battle with the Danish Film Institute in order even to be allowed to make the film.

After its completion, and despite a ten minute standing ovation at the Venice Film Festival, it received poor reviews and did horribly at the Danish box office. *Wolf at the Door* personified the way that these early productions engage in what Hjort describes as, “[the] politics of recognition...[whose] aim was...to ensure that a national culture found continued expression in film, and that the value of that culture registered to the greatest extent possible within and beyond the relevant national borders.”

Co-financing has become an integral part of the New Danish cinema, and a great example of this is *The Five Obstructions* (2003), co-directed by Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier in 2003. This semi-documentary film explores the cinematic process as Leth
is challenged to remake his famous 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* five times, each with a different set of formal constraints created by von Trier. Von Trier did not apply Dogma 95's specific formal restraints to this film, but created unique and particular challenges that complicated the distance and logic of Leth's usual filmmaking practices. These structural limitations resulted in a process of adaptation and improvisation, creating a spontaneous dynamic for the documentary. With *The Five Obstructions*, von Trier was able to challenge his mentor to "confront the ethics of his style, the ethical limits of a distancing stance."

Leth, on the other hand, demonstrated the advantage of working in a free and improvised manner, overcoming the obstructions set by von Trier. The film was co-financed with Danish and Belgian funds, and shot in Denmark, Cuba, India, Belgium, Haiti, and the US. In that sense, the film embodies Hjort's observation that "Danish filmmakers and policymakers have began to gravitate toward a series of initiatives that have effectively combined to denationalize, to hybridize, but also to globalization the relevant minor cinema."

This trend has led to some remarkable success for Danish cinema on the international circuit, the earliest being the two successive Best Foreign Language Film Awards at the Academy Awards for *Babette's Feast* in 1987 and *Pelle the Conqueror* in 1988. The Dogma 95 movement would build on this momentum with over thirty films and a number of festival awards following the 1995 manifesto. In the wake of Dogma 95, many of the films and filmmakers who have come to define the New Danish Cinema are achieving success outside of Denmark. The works of Per Fly, Susanne Bier, and Christian Boe reflect a generation of Danish filmmakers whose films have been finding distribution all over the world. Additionally, Dogma authors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg continue to make films alongside Danish directors from past generations like Jørgen Leth. All have embraced the opportunities created by this creative and collaborative filmmaking environment, and their example demonstrates that Danish film industry does not reflect the size of its national borders.

"Beau Saunders"

Colonizing Through Camp:  
Just How Queer is Bollywood?

If popular Hindi cinema were to be summed up in one word, that word would be extravagance: lavish song-and-dance numbers, larger-than-life characters, and black-and-white melodramas are the stuff Bollywood dreams are made of. To fans of classic Hollywood musicals, however, another word may come to mind: camp, the mythic descriptor that famously resists definition, but almost always implies a queer subtext. In the past decade, a number of high-profile theorists have used this paradigm in expeditions to plant the rainbow flag in Bollywood. However, such labeling overlooks a number of key structural, historical, and social differences in the production and reception of the Bollywood musical versus that of Hollywood. Queer theorists should resist imposing this Western aesthetic model onto Indian films, both because it threatens to erode the films' regional specificities and because there's a quite functional Indian model of queerness, the hijra, which has been all but ignored by Western theorists.

For all of Hollywood's efforts to make the transition from scene to song as seamless as possible, the foundation of the song-and-dance sequence in the classical musical is narrative segmentation that mirrors the lovers' separation. This forges a gendered narrative universe, "divided into male and female in order ultimately to bring two sexes together again in matrimony." Other social dichotomies such as race (West Side Story [1961], class (My Fair Lady [1964]), age (Gigi [1958]), and talent (Singin' in the Rain [1952]) are condensed into this gender binary through their musical segmentation, so that the institutions of romance and marriage emerge as the ultimate unifying force and resolution to any individual's problem. Despite this overwhelmingly heterosexual purpose, the Hollywood musical has historically sported a rampant queer following, and the ritual of "camping" these genre films is a staple in both academic circles and midnight fan screenings. Steven Cohan, author of a book-length study of MGM musicals, defines camp as "exaggerated style," an excessive theatricality that serves to interrupt and derail the narrative, rather than become integrated with it. Actively ingrained within the text by "an all-gay enclave who worked closely with the set dressers on décor and props," the camp aesthetic destabilizes these conservative moralities and marriage-driven narratives, enabling informed spectators to transform a genre celebrating heterosexuality into one that is distinctly queer. Bollywood's moral universe is also staunchly conservative. However, the Bollywood musical serves a much wider range of social concerns than gender and sexuality. In many Bollywood musicals, these marriage and courtship conflicts are resolved early, and succeeding song-and-dance sequences address conflicts unrelated to gender, such as religious violence (Bombay's [1995] title track, a plea for tolerance amidst the Ayodhya riots), nation-building (Mangal Pandey: The Rising [2005]), vengeance, and class struggle (any number of superstar Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" action epics). This intense fusion of genres and narratives, particularly when accompanied by sudden shifts in physical space (e.g. lighting changes, emerging backup dancers, transportation to another location), marks the song-and-dance sequence as a fantasy space almost entirely disconnected from the narrative. The variety in these sequences encompass the wide range of Indian national citizens and experiences, becoming a vehicle for characters and audiences alike to express "feeling[s] that cannot be articulated otherwise," due to legal restrictions and social mores.

This is not to say that the Bollywood musical has no institutional motive. In a nation with dozens of dialects and cultural clashes, the extreme popularity of song-and-dance sequences and the film music industry have long been recognized as one of the nation's few unifying forces. The variance and accessibility within these musical sequences marks them as sites for negotiation of national character and morals, a position motivated by the commercial sensibility of "putting in
elements for everybody” that leads to the appropriation and reinterpretation of outside influences and contemporary conflicts to forge a continuing modern Indian identity. Hundreds of musicals participate in this process annually to promote a heterogenous national identity populated with a myriad of racial and religious characters. The downside of this intense national focus is that Bollywood rarely attends to gender issues at all, and while some song-and-dance sequences and recent comedies allow for gender transgression, diverse queer identities still lack permanent inscription in the celluloid nation.

For example, an interlude in the song sequence “Didi Tera Devar Divana” from the mid-90s blockbuster Huon Aapke Hain Koun...! (1994) features a female-cross dresser entertaining newly-wed Pooja and a crowd of other women by dressing as her husband Rajesh. This short dance is loaded with sexual subversion, as the woman’s excessively vulgar behavior shines a comic spotlight on gender roles and marital relations. Soon, the real Rajesh emerges, swinging in on a chandelier and wielding a whip to take center stage. He quickly chases the cross-dresser away, and because song-and-dance spaces exist outside of the narrative, she “never appears again” and is “never referenced in the remainder of the film,” her potential for gender re-negotiation usurped by a heterosexual super man.

In spite of these apparent limiting notions of sex and gender, Indian queer communities maintain affection for Bollywood musical. Indian critic R. Raj Rao attributes this to a latent homoerotic subtext, which he exemplifies by “camping” the lyrics of “Yeh Dosti,” from the action/musical epic Sholay (1975). In a duet describing the friendship (dosti) between free-spirited criminals Jai and Veera, the verses affirm their bond as overcoming all obstacles, sharing victories and losses, joys and sorrows. Rao suggests that the intense devotion and excessive melodrama expressed in the song brings dosti from the homosocial to the homoerotic realm, because the two are more romantically inclined towards each other than their heterosexual partners.

Another critic, Priya Jha, complicates this camp reading by reading the song through Indian nationalism. She reads dosti in the song not as a winking nudge but a psychic fatalism, wherein outside forces are entirely responsible bringing the men together; the men are “‘chosen’ (passive) rather than ‘choosing’ (active)” to be together. Historically, this passivity has little to do with gender transgression, but rather encroachment upon Indian nationalism by British colonialism and continued Western influence (signified through the motorcycle the two ride throughout the song). As a pre-colonial, Indian national institution, the use of dosti in Sholay is intended as a site of conscious national resistance, not gender transgression. Here, camp threatens Bollywood’s national specificity, a problem that doesn’t occur with the Hollywood musical because the national specificities and
characteristics that motivate its gender commentary are shared by both creator and spectator.

The problems of reading Bollywood through camp are less abstract when applied to aesthetics, as in queer theorist Thomas Waugh’s reading of Main Khiladi Tu Anari (1994). When relaying his frustration that the sudden appearance of a song sequence “deflect[s]” the preceding scene’s homoeroticism by disrupting a queer kiss he expected as a “reasonable spectator,” he ignores Bollywood’s nationally-motivated aesthetic and structural conventions because they conflict with his queer “reason.” His citation of an essential structural logic is key, for it illuminates how theories of aesthetics are culturally constructed and entirely subjective. While Hollywood aesthetics call for musical sequences to be adjoined with the action of the preceding scene, in Bollywood, the song sequence takes the form of a disconnected fantasy space. Waugh’s critique exemplifies camp’s status as a Western theory, originating from Western ideals of gender, sexuality, and aesthetics. Forcing Bollywood films into Western theories is tantamount to expecting a samosa to taste like an apple pie.

An alternate, local method of locating queerness in Bollywood, rather than one that derives from a Western critical concept like camp, is to focus on the figure of the hijra. Hijra is a term that historically encompassed all avenues of gendered difference, but most frequently refers to transgendersed individuals. Waugh criticizes the hijra as both an “easy target” for critics and a flamboyant “stock character,” his distaste ironically matching the historical precedent of British colonists, who considered them indecent. When he later analyzes the term, he does so in a hasty, reductive manner, arguing from a single film (Tamanna [1997], recognized as an atypical hijra character) that the hijra is simply a schizophrenic “angry and tender castrated mother” character that “encapsulates popular culture’s problematization of sexuality, family, and gender.” Such a brief analysis overlooks the significance of these characters to the national cinematic narrative.

In Bombay, for example, an anonymous hijra takes in a little boy who was separated from his twin brother and parents during a religious riot. This protection stands in for several reservations: those of heteronormativity, religious harmony (one of the brothers is Muslim, the other Hindu), but most importantly, the future of the Indian nation. This is no recent development either, as in Amar Akbar Anthony (1977), a chorus of hijras and orphaned children bump the romantic number “Tayyab Ali,” in which protagonist Akbar woos his love interest and attempts to convince her father the two should wed. Again, the hijras are seen to function both as surrogate parent and protector of the future nation. Certainly the hijra remains a marginalized character, but to dismiss it as Western theorists do ignores its potential as a socially accepted, local site of queerness.

For Bollywood films without a hijra, or for the increasing amount of transnational Bollywood productions (including the global export and consumption of Bollywood product, matched only by Hollywood), a hybrid approach is necessary. Diasporic cinema theorist Gayatri Gopinath uses this paradigm to read Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!’s “Diddi Tera Devar Divana” sequence. Like the camp theorists, she seizes upon and praises the cross-dresser’s disruption of heterosexual screen ritual, but unlike these theorists, acknowledges the sequence works not because of excessive “illogic unintelligibility,” but precisely because of its function within Bollywood film codes. She recognizes that the song-and-dance sequence is one of the few locations where otherwise-forbidden desires such as queerness can be expressed. Fusing this knowledge of Bollywood aesthetics with the camp spirit, she finds the sequence’s separation offers, however briefly, an important “slippage between homosocial and homosexuality” where Indian spectators can find queer pleasures on their own terms, rather than through a Western translation that provides queer satisfaction at a cost of Indian identity.

Ultimately, film meaning is created entirely by the spectator, with varying levels of interest, knowledge, and emotion each factoring into the individual experience. As noted queer film critic Robin Wood reminds us, there is no “criticism [that] could finally and definitively describe and interpret” any film. Just as no film exists in a bubble outside of criticism, there is no criticism so “accurate” that other readings are precluded. For all the camp readings and sentiments available regarding Bollywood musicals, a classic filmgoer unaware of such concepts will enjoy the films on their own terms. Similarly, a queer Indian viewer will seize upon the gender disruption provided by Hum Aapke Hain Koun...! or hijra irregardless of Waugh’s Western film “logic”. The intent of this essay is not to instate a binary of “right” or “wrong” ways to read a Bollywood film. Rather, I hope to have illustrated that certain critical paradigms, however liberating they may seem to their primary (Western academic) readership, can fail to account for the unique national characteristics of these texts.

**Availability**

With the exception of Tamanna, all of the Bollywood films mentioned in this essay are available on region-free DVD, through distributor Eros Entertainment (http://www.erosentertainment.com/). All but Main Khiladi Tu Anari have English subtitles.

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*Edward Robins*
1 The noted exception is the category known alternately as “mass camp,” “straight camp,” “cheese,” or “schlock,” terms whose non-academic use is rooted in a spectator’s condescension rather than queerness.


4 Cohan 46.

5 Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002).


10 Jha 47.


12 Waugh 283.


15 Waugh 288.

16 Gopinath 118.

Lost In Trans-lation

Upon its US release, The Iron Ladies (2001) was already a gigantic hit in Thailand, earning itself the title of the country's second highest-grossing film in history. Based on the true events of a 1996 national Thai volleyball victory, the victorious team depicted in the film is comprised mostly of gay men and kathoey, the Thai term for a male-born person who enacts a feminine persona, be it through cross-dressing or female hormones and surgeries. The success of The Iron Ladies in the 1990s, which marked the first wave of New Thai Cinema, occurred at a time when the country's bourgeois investment in cultural product helped to produce a national identity. Along with the legibility of a national Thai identity, within its cinema came the image of a tolerant and gender-diverse East. The films Beautiful Boxer (2003) and The Adventure of Iron Pussy (2004) are successors to The Iron Ladies legacy, and the New Thai Cinema movement, in that their popularities thrive on the West's readiness to consume romanticized queerly gendered Thai protagonists. All three films together offer insight into the complexities that arise in translating one system of gender and sexuality to another cross-culturally, while also exposing an embedded Western romantic notion that the East is the sacred beholder of a more enlightened approach to the constructions of gender.

The evolution and current usage of the Thai words “phet” and “kathoey” are important to understand in relation to a Western deployment of gender categories. Phet, a categorical term, encompasses what Westerners understand as biological sex differences (male, female), differences in gender presentation (degrees of masculinity and femininity), and sexual desire (heterosexual and homosexual). The deployment of the phet system sets up a gender continuum that reads individuals as masculine or feminine bodies first, before understanding what that individual might find desirable. Within this paradigm, gender is read first, while sexuality is considered as a secondary component, which is contrary to the West where the use of categories like “gay” and “lesbian” privileges sexuality and desire before the nuances of gender presentation.

The term kathoey has undergone a number of linguistic shifts, originally referring to “all forms of gender/sex variance,” but now primarily referring to biological males who assume female identities, either through cross-dressing or male-to-female transsexual surgeries.1 Given the nuanced history and deployment of the term kathoey, it cannot simply be replaced with an English term like “third gender” or “transgender” without considering the temporal, geographic, and cultural specificities that all of these terms connotate.2 Thai kathoey, due to a differentiated phet system should not be assumed to simply represent an Eastern version of a Western transgender person.

In his article “Global Gaze/Global Gays,” Dennis Altman criticizes a general Western fascination with transgender images from many Asian countries, suggesting that this fascination may lead many Westerners to assume that these kinds of identities enjoy greater social acceptance in the East.3 Altman warns that while there are differences and similarities among transgender classification cross-culturally, “[w]hat [Asian cultures] appear to have in common is a conceptualization of the sex/gender order which has no simple equivalent in the dominant language or social arrangement of western societies.” While Altman himself too quickly assumes broad similarities between Asian countries and their systems of gender categorization, he does uncover the real difficulty in directly translating a system of gender into a language and culture where that system may not ideologically exist. The complex interchange of ideas around gender and sexuality that surface as a result of transnational contact.
and movement further complicates translation between cultures.

The Western reception of Beautiful Boxer (2003), directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham, exposes the complexities that arise around the issues of gender transgressions cross-culturally. The film, based on true events, follows closely in the footsteps of its predecessor The Iron Ladies as a sentimental national sports success story with a kathoey protagonist. The protagonist Nong Toom (Asaane Suwam) is modeled after the real life Prinya Charoenphol, who became a national muay thai (Thai kick boxing) champion for the purpose of funding an expensive sex reassignment surgery. The boxer’s story is narrated through flashbacks by an Anglo reporter who comes to interview her at a club where she presumably works as a stage performer. The interviewer, after impatiently enduring a flamboyant drag performance in the club, ventures into the bustling backstage dressing room only to be intimidated by a feminine, deep-voiced performer who alerts him, “Nong Go Home!” The backstage is brimming with action and excitement, bejeweled performers swish past the disoriented interviewer as crowds of autograph-seeking girls block his exit back onto the street. The night-time scene outside mirrors the excitement of the club. Commercial vendors line the streets, smoke rises from food carts, and a woman with a t-shirt that reads “Self Made Woman” encourages the viewer into her club. This hectic scene is shown through the eyes of the interviewer, whose outsider confusion we feel viscerally through the blurry, quick editing. The specifics of the scene are rendered nearly incomprehensible until the interviewer comes under attack by a group of menacing street thugs; then the action is finally slowed when a feminine, stocking-clad leg intercepts a punch to the reporter’s stomach. Sound slows then falls away, and what ensues is the first of many, graceful slow-motion fight scenes where the feminine figure, whose identity is still concealed, both defends and offends the reporter’s masculine pride. Serendipitously, the fighter we come to understand is the person whose story the reporter is seeking. Toom’s story is told in flashback, by way of the British interviewer who represents a narrative suture for a possible Western viewership unfamiliar with this particular champion’s story. The exchange between Toom and Jack, the reporter, stands in for a Western interest not only in the victorious story of a national championship boxer, but more importantly because of the extraordinary story of the nationally celebrated “transsexual,” Prinya Charoenphol.

The term “transgender” in the movie’s English subtitles functions as a translation of the Thai word kathoey. In a 2004 online BBC review of both Beautiful Boxer and The Adventure of Iron Pussy, the headline reads “Transvestites Rescue Thai Movies.” The author of the article goes on to announce that the “Bangkok Post estimates that of the around fifty Thai films released this year, five or six feature prominent transvestite characters.” The deployment of the now defunct Western term “transvestite” is telling; used here to refer to persons who do more than cross-dress but more radically transgress culturally normative gender representations, the term marks the way categories not only evolve over time but get replaced, taken on different meanings, and fail to translate cross-culturally. A few American reviews of Beautiful Boxer also take issue with the fact that Nong Toom’s sexuality is not discussed explicitly in the film, but then is quickly explained away by the same reporters with the fact that the real-life Nam Toom is “reportedly a very private person.” Instead of considering this oversight a result of the way the Thai phet gender/sex system works differently from a Western one, the reviewers who voiced this criticism only articulate the failure that direct translation often lends itself to.

Another Western tendency that surfaces in other movie reviews is to see Thai films in general displaying a tolerance for queer and cross-dressing individuals. A New York Times review of The Iron Ladies articulates a common and romantic Western attitude toward Thai culture:
The Iron Ladies does tell us something about Thai society. The homophobia on display isn't as virulent and tinged with menace as it is in the United States. The straight athletes who reject the Iron ladies are only mildly derisive of their gay counterparts. And extreme effeminacy is regarded more with tolerant amusement than with revulsion.  

The perceived tolerance in Beautiful Boxer is illustrated in Toom's relationship to her family, with her boxing colleagues, and to Thailand in general. The minor family conflicts that exist are eventually resolved when her dubious father signs the medical permission forms for her "sex change." The tolerance of the boxing world is illustrated when a progressively made-up and increasingly famous Toom continues to win fight after fight, inching her way closer to her operation goals. The fantasy of a national tolerance is seen in the final credits which informs the audience that "Nong Toom is now a model and actress based in Bangkok. She no longer has to hide in toilets to put on her make-up," suggesting that her fame has also earned her a general public acceptance. Beautiful Boxer is an attempt at a self-conscious story by Toom, but is understood self-reflexively through the Western interviewer.

The Adventure of Iron Pussy, while quite dissimilar to the sports themed Beautiful Boxer and The Iron Ladies, also presents a kathoey protagonist who is still something of a national hero. It is true that Iron Pussy does contain a few similarities to these two sports films, but it is better read as a parody of the sentimentalism of the kathoey sport's genre's characters than an embrace of them. The film's plentiful references to international pop culture, like the superhero/secret agent character, signal an adept manipulation and playfulness with audience expectations. Co-directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai, who also stars as Iron Pussy, the film tells the story of a male 7-11 clerk who works on behalf of the Thai government as a hyperfeminine crime-fighter. Unlike Beautiful Boxer, the narrative of Iron Pussy does not address the trauma of a culture at odds with the heroine's non-normative gender expression, but goes so far as to exaggerate a general acceptance, which is read as obliviousness, to a comic degree.

Secret Agent Iron Pussy (Michael Shaowanasai) is given the immensely important responsibility of protecting her country from one Mr. Henry, whose suspicious international travel results in larger and larger sums in his bank account. Her important position as savior of her country is paired with the extreme glamour and beauty of her femininity. A scene in which the most attractive maids are chosen to serve the royal Pompadour, the comically tall (read: un feminine) Iron Pussy towers over the other petite maids but is still singled out as one of the more feminine and beautiful of the group, another maid is even dismissed because of the apparent manipulation of her appearance through plastic surgery procedures. The irony here is that Iron Pussy is subsequently praised for her glowing "inner beauty," ignoring any indication that she is understating any of her masculine features. The exaggerated delicacy of her large femininity is also performed in one of the many song interludes when we find Iron Pussy, dressed in a tightly-fitted maid's uniform, in the center of a huge lawn, using tiny scissor-sized clippers to cut it.

At no time during the movie is Iron Pussy's female identity revealed as fraudulent. Actually, the only doubt cast to her character's legitimacy is when she is initially being prepped for her mission as protector of Thai nationhood. Her reputation as a retired "go-go boy" even then is only potentially harmful to the nation because of its unsavory connection to commercial sex for which Thailand, as a "homosexual paradise," is popularly known. Not only is Iron Pussy never subject to the embarrassing revelation of a fraudulent gender identity, which has become a Western expectation as a result of the numerous "tragic drag queen" movies we've been subjected to, but the film's comic obliviousness to the protagonist's kathoey status serves to poke fun at a Orientalist fantasy of hyper-tolerance. If the film contains a moral it is not only that kathoey are tolerated, but are vital to the well being and protection of the
nation. While both Beautiful Boxer and Iron Pussy defy their respective genre expectations in relation to the West, by avoiding tragedy, Iron Pussy goes even further to manipulate and poke fun at more general ideological expectations that hold Thailand as naturally and institutionally more tolerant of their non-normatively gendered subjects. There are complications in comparing transgender movies and characters cross-culturally, mostly in that gender systems cannot be constituted exactly, and that geographically and culturally specific terms like “third gender” and kathoeuy do not translate in exactly the same ways. Western fantasies of an East more tolerant of non-normative gender expressions have often been used by anthropologists and popular Western transgender writers to legitimate recent transgender movements in the West. But using the example of a supposedly more tolerant East as proof that trans-phobia in the West is unnatural, is an oversimplification that ignores context and history, as well as effacing the West’s impact on the globe. Just as linguistic categories shift over time, so do attitudes; to assume a general attitude toward something like gender expression is to overlook the nuanced conditions under which these identities are permitted to exist. The Western fantasy of a hyper-tolerant East neglects historical context and the imbalanced power relations between West and East, and continues to romanticize and patronize the East as the sight of a more “natural” state of being.

-Chris Vargas


4. Altman 422.
The Queer Spaces of Tsai Ming-Liang's *The River*

Tsai Ming-Liang’s *The River* (1997) is a fascinating, yet challenging, film. It is filled with subtle, and often opaque, characters that exist in pockets of alienation and emotional poverty amidst the metropolitan frenzy of Taipei. Their actions seem strained and pointless, guided by leftover moments of instinct rather than self-serving interest. While these characters are intriguing in their absurdity, it is the spaces they inhabit, the seemingly innocuous and commonplace hotels, apartments, and saunas, which are of interest to me. These spaces seem odd and claustrophobic; they often limit and torment the individuals they are supposed to comfort. Indeed, something strange and productive is at work in Tsai Ming-Liang’s spaces, and they warrant a closer look. In this article, I offer my reading of *The River*, and in doing so, I suggest that Tsai Ming-Liang constructs cinematographic and diegetic spaces that disrupt common conceptions of identity, sexuality, and gender. In essence, these spaces become destabilizing fields, successfully unraveling, if only briefly, what Annamarie Jagose would call the “fictions of identity” that help us make sense of our world. In this sense, the spaces of *The River* are queer. In this specific case, I use the term “queer” not as a category of identification, but as a discursive tool, a hermeneutic framework, and an interrogatory term for analyzing new types of cinematic space.

In *The River* Lee Kang-sheng plays a young man, Xiao-Kang, who ends up on the set of a film after he runs into an old friend working there as a production assistant. While there, Xiao-Kang reluctantly agrees to stand in for a corpse and float in a dirty river. After this Xiao-Kang is afflicted with a debilitating neck pain. The remainder of the film follows Xiao-Kang, his father (a stoic and lonely man who cruises male saunas), and his mother (an elevator operator who participates in an affair with another man) as they embark on various attempts to cure the neck injury. In the course of this sparse plot there are three key scenes that revolve, explicitly or otherwise, around sex. In these scenes we encounter Tsai Ming-Liang’s peculiar cinematic space and the queer work that takes place within them.

The first of these scenes takes place after Xiao-Kang has been in the river and is cleaning up in a hotel. The scene depicts a sexual encounter between Xiao-Kang and his female friend; it is about a minute long and is comprised of a single shot. Like many of the shots in Tsai’s films, this one is relatively static, moving only slightly in a slow motion jiggle that indicates a hand-held camera. While brief, it is carefully constructed into three distinct segments, each having a clearly productive queerness. That is, each segment contributes in some way to an overall disruption of recognizable gender.

Before describing the first segment, it is important to note that this sex scene is not situated within a context of traditional cinematic desire. Prior to this scene, there are no indications that these two characters will have sex. There is no tantalizingly slow or passionately hurried undressing, there are no voyeuristic glances, there are no propositions, and there are no shots that focus on bodies in a manner that implies they are to be desired. Removed from this traditional context of the heavily gendered signification of objects and desire, sex becomes almost unimportant.

In the first segment of this shot the frame is completely black except for dimly lit and unidentified body parts. Over a few seconds these parts slowly assert themselves as arms. Emerging from the stark black of the frame, the body parts are removed from the context of the sexual encounter, which remains submerged. The body parts linger in the right half of the frame, leaving a blank area that is filled in the second segment. As the second segment begins, an image of the two beings appears in a mirror that slowly becomes visible in the left side of the frame. It is only in this mirror, a representative device, that the audience can glean the side of a female breast. In this moment, the mirror, which is a
mirror in both the simple sense and the Metzian sense of a constitutive device for identification, allows the viewer to ascribe the possibility of gender to these sexual beings. Yet, this does not undermine the queerness of the space, for with the use of the mirror, Tsai has signaled that gender is in a process of construction that follows the development of the shot. Gender is constructed through the reflection of body images and the reflection of the audience's own preconceptions of gender signification in a double mirroring of the image and the screen. Once this signification begins, the third segment of the shot commences. In this last segment, having been identified in the mirror, the bodies in the foreground slowly become more pronounced as the light increases. Finally, the identity of the figures, that of Xiao-Kang and his female friend, are revealed.

Only after the ongoing process of gender construction is revealed can the audience see the result of that construction as it plays out in sexual discourse. In this sense, Tsai is clearly representing a "fiction of identity." More so, he is engaging with Jagose's final words about queer: "its principal achievement is to draw attention to the assumptions that - intentionally or otherwise - inhere in the mobilisation of any identity category, including itself." In the same way, Tsai is interested not only in the construction and destabilization of gender and sexuality, but the implications of their representation through film. He is as interested in destabilizing the modes of signification that dominate the film form as he is in deploying that form to destabilize the codes of signification that dominate society. This destabilization becomes clearer in the second queer space that we encounter.

This space, the apartment of Xiao-Kang's mother's lover, is represented in a scene that is particularly concerned with layers of representation, both diegetically and cinematographically. Again, this scene is filmed as one continuous take lasting three and a half minutes. As the scene begins, the camera pans left, following the mother as she enters a sparse apartment carrying a bag of food. The camera stops, framing the mother and her lover in a full body shot. The mother attempts to feed the man and he slaps her hand away. She gives up and rises from the couch as the camera pulls back and tracks left to follow her. As she walks toward the foreground, a rack of VCRs comes into full view. On the rack a small monitor plays a scene from a porno video that is being illegally dubbed through the VCRs. The mother watches the scene of a man and a woman having sex, leans her head around the rack to stare longingly at her lover, and walks back to the couch as the camera follows. She forces herself on the man; he turns over and ignores her completely.

The heavily gendered nature of the characters in this scene is almost comedic in comparison to the earlier sex scene. The man lies on the couch in shorts with no shirt on, the mother arrives in a skirt and pink pumps and attempts to feed the man as a slave would feed a king in a harem. The man responds with violence and the mother retreats, pining for that which she cannot have. The monitor, which displays the sex act, only adds insult to injury, providing the mother with a glimpse of the hyper-gendered sex she is unable to attain. Whereas the earlier sex scene between Xiao-Kang and his friend represented sex without gender, this sequence represents gender with a frustrating lack of sex. Not only is the sex removed from this scene, it is displaced to the realm of pornography on a small black and white monitor. The mother longs to have sex like the people in the porno video, but ironically, almost sadistically, this is denied to her. The porno mocks her by displaying the passion and virility that is so clearly absent in her lover.

In keeping with this hermeneutic framework that attempts to destabilize the relationships between gender, identity, and sexuality, the final depiction of queer space completes an interesting discursive trilogy. The first scene engaged with sex and identity while destabilizing gender; the second scene presented gender and identity, but removed sex; this third scene is readily inscribed with gender and sex, but radially upsets notions of identity. This scene takes place in a male sauna that serves as a cruising ground for the solicitation of homosexual sex acts. Yet, the quality of the acts that occur in this space is by no means the reason it becomes a queer space. Again, it is the representation of this space and the figures placed within it that ultimately make it a site for queer work.

In this scene we encounter...
another dimly lit black frame that recalls the first sex scene. This single extended take depicts a moment of misidentification as Xiao-Kang and his father mistakenly end up in the same dark cubicle at the sauna. In the dark, the two men engage in homosexual acts. Gender is a given here; both men are aware of the nature of the sauna and the physical make-up of their partner. Sex, too, is a given. Here, it is identification of father by son, and vice versa, that fails due to the lack of light. They engage in these acts unaware of their relation.

This scene is, perhaps, Tsai’s most successful experiment. For although the men engage in homosexual acts, the labeling of these acts as incest is problematized through the lack of identity. Even when the light is turned on at the end of the scene, and Xiao-Kang’s father realizes what has happened, slapping the boy across the face, there is no incest. The affirmation of identity occurs after the sex; the slap is but a meaningless gesture, too little and too late. Gender, sexuality, and identity have so successfully been destabilized throughout the film, that at this point the conventions of social taboo do not apply.

In a comment that reinforces my notions of characters placed within discursive fields, Rey Chow notes “that what Tsai has undertaken is a production of discursivity . . . that operates in the manner of an archeological excavation.”16 Pushing the archeology metaphor, Chow suggests, as I do, that Tsai’s characters become vestigial.17 As I see it, they continue to play the roles of sexual beings, but their attempts at affection and connection are rendered useless within the queer spaces of Tsai’s film. Subsequently, the frameworks of gender, identity, and sexuality that formed these characters become vestigial as well. More precisely, they become fossils, remaining only as the odd and overly uncomfortable foundation for a building with an ever-

- Grayson Hittle

3 Jagose 126
5 Chow 138.
Watermelons and Waterfalls: Intimacy and Fetish in The Wayward Cloud and Happy Together

In the second shot of Tsai Ming-Liang's most recent film The Wayward Cloud (2005) two characters have sex through a halved watermelon placed strategically over the woman’s vagina. Viewers familiar with Tsai's slow-paced films might be surprised with how quickly the film cuts to such frenetic action. Yet Tsai’s common themes of alienation and disconnection gradually emerge, as the intimacy that his characters (neighbors in a Taipei apartment complex) cannot attain in their globalized city is replaced diegetically by the watermelon as fetish object. In Wong Kar-Wai's 1997 film Happy Together, which follows the tumultuous relationship between two male lovers from Hong Kong as they attempt to start over in Buenos Aires, intimacy is also unattainable within the urban setting of the film and is again replaced with a fetish. These films suggest that postmodern urban spaces render traditional private and one-on-one intimacies impossible. By employing fetish objects (watermelons in The Wayward Cloud, and Iguazu Falls and their gaudy lamp souvenir in Happy Together) as a reorientation from the traditional forms of intimacy, these films suggest the need for new kinds of public intimacy in the globalized world.

Globalized urban space has been theorized as a site of disillusionment and disconnection. In Modernity at Large, Arjun Appadurai explains that the contemporary world is “schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups.”1 These qualities of confusion and constant change in the global city provoke the disillusionment of individuals searching for stable human connections. Such a dehumanized urban space is the setting for both films, which establish their context through exterior scenes that convey the speed of city life through the bustle of vehicles and people, and interior shots that construct walls as confining and separating. The experience of globalization within these cities has formed a space where private intimacy becomes difficult or impossible.

In The Wayward Cloud the characters' disconnection and isolation from each other is achieved through visual obstructions and reframing. There are many shots in which objects such as railings and walls obstruct our view of the action, separating characters from the audience. Other shots refame characters through the doorways and walls of the confining apartment building, and still others divide characters in the frame by inserting a wall between them. Such reframings further isolate the characters from the rest of the diegesis and especially from each other.

These visual motifs of disconnection are deployed narratively to illustrate that the characters in The
Wayward Cloud are unable to form lasting intimacy with one another, despite their many attempts. When Hsiao-Kang (Lee Kang-sheng) first visits Shiang-chyi's apartment, the frame is bisected by a wall that separates kitchen from living room. For the scene's duration, the two remain on opposite sides of the wall. Although it is clear Shiang-chyi likes him by the way she enthusiastically pours his watermelon juice, she avoids approaching Hsiao-Kang, offering the glass by reaching around the wall. Later there are two scenes in which they manage to make a small connection: when they cook in Shiang-chyi's apartment and when Hsiao-Kang rubs her foot. But any obvious intimacy ends here; when Shiang-chyi nearly catches Hsiao-Kang in the stairwell on a break from his porn acting job (which she is unaware of), Hsiao-Kang runs and throws a large bottle of water at her. His solution for keeping his job a secret is to become violent and aggressive, showing his complete ineptitude at gaining favor and forming intimacy.

To understand the function of the fetish in such scenes of isolation requires a brief return to Freud: he explains that the fetish acts as a kind of penis-substitute, which arises the moment a young boy first sees the female genitalia. Noting the lack of a penis and fearing his own castration, the little boy averts his eyes; “the last impression received before the uncanny traumatic one is preserved as a fetish.” Freud's theory explains the ubiquity of fetishes such as shoes, stockings and underwear, which are close to a child’s eye level. The boy carries this fetish into adulthood and requires it for sexual arousal, its presence serving as a distraction from the “horror” of the female genitals whose presence cannot be admitted.

The Wayward Cloud and Happy Together each employ a variation of Freud’s fetish. Watermelons in The Wayward Cloud function as substitute objects for the intimacy that is absent in the globalized space. In the sex sequence described above, the watermelon acts as a fetish for Hsiao-Kang and the Japanese porn actress with whom he has sex. The next scene further situates the watermelon as an object of intimacy. Shiang-chyi is watching a news story that explains how Taipei’s glut of watermelons has led to a lover’s code in which watermelon gifts take on different meanings based on the melon’s color. After Shiang-chyi brings a watermelon home, it becomes the physical substitute for the intimacy that she desires but cannot entertain with Hsiao-Kang. The watermelon is the only thing she allows other, it is unstable; even at the moments they are supposedly together again, they are almost always arguing. The only exceptions to this pattern are found in the film’s initial passionate sex scene, and a scene where Po-wing teaches Yiu-fai to dance (the only moment of intimacy between them in Buenos Aires). The rest of the time their arguments show the barriers blocking their intimacy: both are distrustful, reactionary and even violent on occasion. Yiu-fai goes to deceitful and manipulative measures in a desperate attempt to connect with Po-wing when he steals and hides Po-wing’s passport to prevent him from leaving.

Happy Together posits Iguazu Falls, the first place Yiu-fai and Po-wing try to visit in Argentina, as a replacement for sorts for the happiness and intimacy missing from the couple's relationship; in doing this, the film fetishizes the falls. On the way they get lost, their car breaks down, they argue and break up. Following Yiu-fai’s account of how they never made it to the waterfall, a magnificent aerial shot of Iguazu Falls moves in a circle around the huge waterfall, accompanied by music. As the camera seems to dance around and romance it, the film places the waterfall as a desired object; the falls are fetishized as a representation of an intimate happy relationship that the couple cannot attain. Not only that, the film makes a fetish of the falls' representation in a souvenir lamp. On their way to the waterfall Po-wing purchased a lamp with a flickering image of the falls on its shade. An initial shot establishes the lamp as central to the film as the camera tracks into the lamp on a hotel nightstand seemingly ignoring Po-wing, whose gaze is also fixed on the lamp. This lamp, as a representation of Iguazu Falls, is foregrounded throughout the film at moments of failed intimacy between the characters. When one of the characters misses the other, the camera pans to the lamp or the lamp is given a dominant position within the frame. At the end of the film when Yiu-fai has returned to Hong Kong, Po-wing searches for him and, finding him gone, moves into his
old apartment. We see Po-wing in a medium close-up gazing longingly at the lamp. The camera moves in closer to the lamp and Po-wing disappears behind it. Po-wing lovingly picks it up and there is a cut to an extreme close-up of the lamp that fills the entire frame. Po-wing mourns the loss of Yu-fai and again turns to the lamp as a replacement subject for his intimate caresses.

Near the end of the film Yu-fai finally reaches Iguazu Falls, although he is alone. The film reprises the aerial shot of the falls which also fills the entire frame, standing in contrast with the stifling close-ups and medium shots that dominate the rest of the film. Chris Berry notes: “The dynamic birds-eye long shot of the falls is therefore singularized, and its repetition turns it into a motif further drawing attention to it and suggesting it has more significance than as a tourist snapshot.” Berry goes on to give a description of the image of the waterfall that I believe can also describe the film’s attitude toward private intimacy in the globalized space. “At once frightening, the magnificent image is also compelling, and one is not sure whether to run or to throw oneself into the waters.” As it shows the waterfall as both frightening and compelling and situates the falls as a fetish for intimacy, the film establishes the desirability and impossibility of traditional intimacies within a globalized environment.

The Wayward Cloud and Happy Together both portray the difficulties and impossibilities of traditional one-on-one intimacies in private spaces as these spaces are situated in a globalized urban context, but both films also offer the possibility for a new type of intimacy that takes place in public spaces. In “The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-Wai,” Marc Siegel argues that Happy Together opens up the possibilities for public intimacies in the film’s portrayal of the sexual ghetto as a place for picking up lovers. “In Happy Together,” writes Siegel, “intimacy is not achieved within the couple and is not segregated to the private space of the apartment. Instead, the potential for intimacy exists outside in the public sexual world.” This possibility of public intimacy can also be read in the shocking final scene of The Wayward Cloud. As Hsiao-Kang is having sex for the camera with the now-passed-out Japanese porn actress, he stares at Shiung-chyi who stands on the other side of a decorative hole in the wall, looking back and making noises of sexual arousal as she watches them. At his moment of orgasm, Hsiao-Kang rushes over and shoves his penis through the hole into Shiung-chyi’s mouth. While there are many things that can be said about this finale (the forced thrust on Shiung-chyi can be read as misogynistic aggression, and, disturbingly, the porn actress’s body now performs the role of mediating object earlier taken on by the watermelon) such radical shock seems to be precisely the point: the action finally and paradoxically allows for a kind of intimacy between the two characters. Shiung-chyi remains there at the hole, unmoving, for minutes, perhaps indicating her acceptance of this radical lunge for connection (although it could also be argued that she is just too shocked to move).

This scene allows for the possibility of public intimacies as the hole in the wall becomes, in effect, a glory hole, like one might find in the public cruising grounds in Happy Together. A glory hole allows people to engage in anonymous sex; the hole in The Wayward Cloud allows the characters to be intimate while maintaining at once a kind of physical proximity and separation (remember the other walls, mentioned above). The Wayward Cloud thus suggests the possibility of semi-public spaces as sites of intimate connection in a way similar to Happy Together. As Siegel remarks, “If globalization generates the possibility for new kinds of looking, does it not also offer the potential for new kinds of intimacy?” These films show the challenges in creating private one-on-one intimacies within an increasingly globalized world by first depicting the struggle for traditional intimacy and then displacing that struggle via a fetish. In their recognition of the failures of traditional intimacy and the need for a new kind of intimacy in this globalized space, both films open up public space as a potential site of postmodern intimacy.

-Kristin Lipska

4 Berry 194.
5 Berry 194.
7 Siegel 288.
Under the Red Flag:
Censorship and Cinema in Mainland China

It's official: Jessica Rabbit has been barred from entering the PRC. On February 15, 2006, the Chinese government announced a ban on "TV shows and movies that blend animated elements with live-action actors," a move that has no doubt confounded and puzzled many foreign distributors whose works have often been a staple in the country's entertainment business. Nevertheless, the government is acclamant about this new policy. The country's main television and film regulator sent a notice out to all local broadcasters and theaters stating that "such films and shows could no longer be shown and that violators would be punished." Those familiar with the nation's fierce censorship practices may find the move to be simply another ban that they must deal with in the Chinese government's long history of regulating what they believe to be morally appropriate for their people. Even with the changes the Mainland has seen in the past few years in becoming one of the world's leading economic competitors, directors with international prowess may still find themselves and their work carefully surveilled under the watchful eye of China's authoritarian government.

In understanding the modern state of Chinese film, it is important to be familiar with its historical context. The end of the Cultural Revolution not only led to the re-opening of the country's prestigious Beijing Film Academy, but it also marked the end of a highly turbulent time in China's history. As Ni Zhen has argued, the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, "pitched China into a frenzied and irrational political movement... Over a ten-year period, it destroyed China's educational hopes and dreams." Towards the end of the movement, however, Chen saw the return of the university system, allowing many young people access to an education previously denied to them.

Thus, in May 1978 the Beijing Film Academy (earlier shut down due to its "bad influence") welcomed its first new wave of students who would go on to become known as Chinese cinema's Fifth Generation of filmmakers. This generation would include such talent as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, most of whom had suffered under the Cultural Revolution during their youth, and who would later be famous for constantly reflecting these tumultuous experiences in their works. At fourteen, Chen himself was forced to accuse his own father, a former member of the Nationalist KMT (Guomindang) Party during the Cultural Revolution. Never forgetting the "unforgivable wound he had inflicted on his father," Chen would reflect this unfortunate period of loved-ones-betraying-loved-ones in the shattering climax to his 1993 film, *Farewell My Concubine.* Chen Kaige became the first of his graduating class to make his own feature length film, *Yellow Earth* in 1984. Shot by Zhang Yimou, the film was received with international acclaim, and it announced to the world the arrival of the Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema. But while the film would go on to garner international critical acclaim, and turn Chen and Zhang both into stars, the film's release was highly scrutinized at home in China.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, the newly elected Deng Xiaoping "took hold of the reins of power and began a new wave of social, cultural, and political reforms to bring China back on its feet." For Deng, this meant instilling a sense of "forward-thinking" within the people, and the removal of anything that would prevent this. Chen's first film, *Yellow Earth* (which takes place in rural 1950s China and tells the story of young girl reluctant to be part of a traditional arranged marriage), was banned by the government for "exposing China's old-fashioned ways." Chen certainly wouldn't be the last of his generation to find himself under similar circumstances. Having spent most of their youth enduring
the atrocities of the Revolution, many of them found filmmaking to be an outlet for unleashing years of pent up anger and frustration after being “haunted by living spirits they [could not] drive away.” This memory of the Revolution would ultimately become a staple of many works of the Fifth Generation and subsequently would bring them under fire from the nation’s Film Bureau, “whose approval movies must have before being released.”

Nevertheless, there was no denying the emergence of China’s Fifth Generation as a major force in the international film circuit. Zhang Yimou burst on to the scene with Ju Dou (1989), which garnered wide critical success around the world, but which would still be banned for its supposed allegorical political references.

In his article “The Chinese Conundrum,” film scholar Jacob Wong notes that China’s strict regulation of its national cinema persists. “The People’s Republic to this day keeps a tight rein over filmmaking and parrots the dogma ‘cinema must serve the people.’” Wong describes Fifth Generation auteurs such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou as filmmakers who reflect the “dictums of 1930s ‘progressive’ Chinese cinema in using history to dissect the failings of the present.” This sort of “backwards-thinking” mindset didn’t sit well with the government’s plan of “progressivism.” Films such as Chen Kaige’s Farewell My Concubine and Tian Zhuangzhuang’s The Blue Kite (1993) depicted the lives of their protagonists as being turned drastically upside down by the Cultural Revolution, a situation both filmmakers soon found themselves in as well as their works began to fall under government scrutiny.

Unflattering political references were not the only concern of the government, however. While Chen’s and Tian’s films may have both revisited a highly tumultuous time in China’s history and portrayed it in negative light, Chen’s Farewell My Concubine would be barred for reasons other than political scrutiny. Produced in 1993, the film was based on Hong Kong author Lillian Lee’s novel about two childhood friends/apprentices of the Peking Opera and the woman that comes between them. It would soon earn the prestige of being the biggest feature to have come out of China, as it went on to win the coveted Palme D’Or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival (tying with Jane Campion’s The Piano). While it received audible international acclaim, the film was banned domestically for its frank depictions of relationships and particularly for its treatment of homosexuality. Recently, Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain (2005) has come under similar criticism. Though the director was acknowledged and praised by the Mainland as the “pride” of China, the film itself has yet to receive domestic distribution because of its transgressive theme.

As authoritarian as the Mainland’s regulations may seem, just because a film has been banned once does not always necessarily mean it will be barred for good. Sometimes the screening process for a film to be released may take anywhere from months to years. On April 20 it was announced that Zhang Ziyi’s film, Jasmine Women (2004), would finally be released in China three years after its completion. Even Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, two of the most world-renowned Fifth Generation filmmakers have had their films gutted and then released by the Film Bureau; however it may just as well be their international auteur status that offers them this advantage. Chen’s Farewell My Concubine was banned not once but twice for enraged government officials with its taboo subject matter and representations of the Cultural Revolution as a national trauma. But after garnering acclaim on the international film circuit, China relented due to immense outside pressure, and finally released the film, albeit in a heavily edited version. Similarly, two of Zhang’s most famous films, Ju Dou and Raise the Red Lantern (1991) would be banned upon completion for their supposed political overtones, but would win enough praise from the world’s international film circuits to see release in China within a few years.

In response to growing international reception, China announced in 1997 “that it would allow foreigners into the cinema business.” Since then, the country has seen a rising increase in multiplexes in major cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, with some of the most prominent ones coming from Golden Harvest and Warner Bros./Village Cinemas. But even so, the Film Bureau still keeps tight restrictions on Hollywood imports, seriously limiting the number of releases each year. The reason for this kind of regulation, however, may be more economic than solely content-based. In seeking to create a prosperous domestic film market for itself in recent years, China has been limiting the influx of foreign products in order to encourage and make way for their next new wave of auteurs. This may explain the country’s recent ban on features that combine live action and animation. As the Film Bureau
explained it, the ban was intended to "promote the development and prosperity of the cartoon industry in China." But of course, let's not forget the worry over "the influence of foreign pop culture on Chinese children."\(^{11}\) This is quite a decision, considering the fact that almost forty percent of all animated features and programs in the country are made up of Japanese and Western imports that have been dubbed into Chinese.\(^{12}\) The studios are nonetheless adamant about building their own stable market of animated hits, with their latest product being *Fireball* (2005), a variation on the popular *Monkey King* stories, which won Best Animated Film at the 42nd Golden Horse Awards (the Chinese equivalent of the Oscars).

China is now seeing the emergence of its Seventh Generation of new wave filmmakers following in the footsteps of predecessors such as Chen and Zhang, as well as such Sixth Generation auteurs like Wang Xiaoshuai (*Beijing Bicycle*, 2001) and Jia Zhang Ke (*Platform*, 2000). But unlike the Fifth Generation, this batch of fresh new faces is said to lack the "uncompromising seriousness"\(^{13}\) of their more seasoned elders. Take for instance, Seventh Generation director, Teng Huatao’s 2001 film, *One Hundred Thieves*. When presenting the film to China’s censors, Teng was told to change the title, in fears of depicting the motherland as a "vast den of criminality."\(^{14}\) Rather than taking a political stand as previous generations would in challenging the censors, Teng instead gladly adhered to the demands and simply agreed, renaming his film to *One Hundred*. This is arguably because the Seventh Generation lacked the same cultural memory as that of the Fifth Generation with regards to the Cultural Revolution or the Sixth Generation with Tiananmen Square Massacre. As director Xu Jinglei, who had rewritten the ending of her film *My Father* due to the censors' requests, states: "As long as the result is not
dead and destruction . . . you have to accept the changes they want," adding that "Living in China, you can’t be that stubborn."\(^{15}\) At least not anymore, right?

What does this say exactly about the future of Chinese cinema? Does this truly signal the end of an era dominated by the works of politically defiant filmmakers like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou? Has that generation completely gotten over China’s difficult past? Both Chen and Zhang have moved on to do more mainstream genre pieces like *The Promise* (2005), *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and the upcoming *The City of the Golden Armor* (2006). And with China’s new generation of filmmakers tending to focus on mostly smaller and less ambitious, but nonetheless exciting, fare like Lu Chuan’s *The Missing Gun* (2002) and his Golden Horse Award winning *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (Best Film of 2004), does this truly mark the end of an era? One thing for certain is that if something as seemingly simple as a title can still arouse concern over a negative portrayal of China’s image, there is no doubt that the country will continue to keep a tight grip over what products deserve to see the light of day under the red flag.

-Daniel Tong

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2. Olesen "China Bans Cartoons."
9. Willie Brent, "China Opens, But Film Supply Still Closed (China Allows Foreign Film Makers to Show Films with Heavy Restrictions)," *Variety* 373.3 (1998): 34.
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