GLOBAL STORYTELLING

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GLOBAL STORYTELLING: JOURNAL OF DIGITAL AND MOVING IMAGES

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Letter from the Editor

YING ZHU

When I began to draft this letter in Hong Kong in the wee hours of the morning on November 8, 2020, media outlets had just declared Joe Biden the winner of the US presidential election, following days of slow-motion ballot counting. As Biden and running mate Kamala Harris issued calls for unity, Trump was busy tweeting allegations of election fraud. Six months have since passed, but the United States remains a profoundly polarized country. The US is not alone in this regard. At the core of the divide is the rise of populism around the globe in the past two decades, which has brought the far-right Alternative for Germany to the German national parliament; catapulted Trump to the US presidency in 2016; Brexit in the UK; and the ascent of populist parties in Austria, Brazil, Bolivia, France, Hungary, Israel, Italy, India, Indonesia, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Poland, Scandinavian regions, and more. Things have come full circle for me to be drafting this letter during the immediate aftermath of a US election that brought out record numbers of voters from two major parties to cast their verdict on the tumultuous four years of the Trump presidency.

A bit of a historical background for the journal is in order, if a four-year span can be counted as history: When first approached about launching a film and media journal in 2017, I was skeptical as to the need for yet another academic publication, given the proliferation of new journals in recent years, many of which were short-lived. I was also mindful of our field's trademark opaque and jargon-filled writing and was wary of perpetuating the same ritual.

As I waited for inspiration to strike for a cutting-edge idea that might move beyond these conventions, I struggled to make sense of the rapidly evolving political climate and landscape shaped by the concurrent of populism, tribalism, isolationism, and authoritarianism, with the humanities writ large under deepening assault globally. I recall an observation made to me during the 2016 US election by a college intern tasked with checking the pulse of the election by replaying hours upon hours of Trump's campaign speeches and rallies. A key takeaway the intern shared based on this grueling exercise

1. Yasmeen Serhan, "Populism Is Morphing in Insidious Ways," *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/01/future-populism-2020s/604393/.

https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.791

was that Trump was an affective speaker and an effective storyteller. She sensed how people could get sucked into Trump's narrative of how the world was and what the world ought to be, which clearly echoed his supporters' implicit view of the world. The gut-wrenching observation by the young intern was an epiphany and brought me clarity and purpose as to what a new journal might explore, eventually leading to the birth of this new peer-reviewed and open access (OA) academic journal, *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*. This new journal aims to bring scholarly engagement in film and media studies back to the fundamentals of storytelling—both in terms of its affect, which concerns emotional engagement, and its effects, which concern social impact.

Affect and effects are important frameworks that allow us to understand our relationship with the world and with each other. In our journal's coinage of terms, we pay special attention on affects and effects of *audiovisual* storytelling across multiple platforms (including both theatrical and digital distribution channels) to better understand how storytelling shapes our perception of the world both historically and in real time. Our journal will cover modes of storytelling from narrative features to documentaries, long journalistic videos, personal essays, broadcast series and serial dramas, and user-generated online content.

Storytelling remains fundamental to our understanding of reality. It frames our perception and experience of events, shapes our cultural affiliations and identifications, and empowers or impoverishes us by either enriching or depriving our individual agency. In the last decade, for instance, populist politicians around the world have utilized a particular flavor of narrative to appeal to voters. From Donald Trump in the United States to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Rodrigo Duterte, Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, etc., the ability of populist leaders to connect with the people via a potent narrative is palpable. In the case of Trump, he has kept his narrative premise simple with the catchy slogan, "Make America Great Again," and his evocation of an America in decline has been effective in summoning our deepest fears. In his storytelling, Trump is sent by God to defend people against all things evil and to bring back a better time—which happens to be a common trope in classic Hollywood films. Indeed, nowhere is the power of storytelling more pronounced and immediate than in the stories channeled through film and other audiovisual media. Leni Riefenstahl's Nuremburg films of Hitler rallies immediately come to mind. Elsewhere throughout history, the conspiracy-filled narrative of the common man against parasitic and corrupt elite institutions is another populist film trope that endows the movement with a moral purpose and credence. The flawed but strong masculine savior is another long-standing narrative in classic storytelling. The hero trope works well with the fear Trump stokes about an unknown future and the nostalgia he invokes about an imaginary rosy past; both prove brutally effective.

Storytelling plays a crucial role in the social construction of knowledge and perspective as we compulsively seek moral clarity, cultural certainty, and social cohesion. Audiovisual storytelling can trigger instant corporeal and emotional reactions that are central to our sensory engagement with the world. Proliferation of media conduits and content offer storytelling a contested terrain of competing cultural impulses and political inspiration that frequently renders images and meanings fluid and capricious. Competing narratives are frequently messy, uncivil, inflammatory, vulnerable to manipulation and deceit, and ripe with willful ignorance and denial. When it comes to storytelling in the digital world, a brief tweet or a short TikTok video can go viral and grow into a full-blown social movement in an instant. The effects, or social impact, of such supercharged affective audiovisual storytelling demands our scholarly attention. The characteristics and impacts of storytelling across both traditional and digital media thus become the foci of this new journal.

Our journal publishes traditional scholarly essays, book reviews, and film reviews, as well as provocative polemics by leading public intellectuals, policy makers, and film and media practitioners. It encourages diverse opinions as well as interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to facilitate spirited and rigorous debate for a better understanding of culturally diverse narratives. The goal is to foster engaged academic and intellectual debates concerning the politics, economy, culture, and technology of storytelling in its varied formats and formations from production to circulation to reception. It is global in scope and diverse in approaches that engage scholars of both humanities and social sciences. Though not adhering to any particular methodological approach, we do focus on storytelling as a particular field of inquiry.

We live in challenging times. Colleagues at the Academy of Film of the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University narrowly managed to host an international symposium on storytelling in Hong Kong in late January 2020, amidst lingering social unrest in Hong Kong and the arrival of COVID-19 on the horizon, which put the world into lockdown shortly thereafter. As contributor Robert A. Kapp notes in his book review in this issue, "At the conference in Hong Kong and on the streets of Hong Kong, in those waning days of January, people wore masks. Something serious was afoot in Wuhan. Hints of travel restrictions into and from Hong Kong were drifting about. Streets and malls were deserted in those first days of the epidemic alarm and those first days of the Chinese New Year shutdown." Owing to the dedication of our speakers, as well as our organizing team and the unwavering support from Hong Kong Baptist University, the symposium completed without major hiccups, though a couple of speakers failed to arrive in Hong Kong due to border lockdowns. Some of the papers and topics covered at the symposium are now part of the inaugural issue of our journal.

Within the context of political unrest in Hong Kong, a pandemic that has put much of the world into lockdown, rising Sino-US tensions that threaten to shatter

the existing global power dynamic, and the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections capping four years of populist insurgency, we chose to highlight in our inaugural issue questions related to the narrative of virus, the narrative of social unrest, and the narrative of China's global image campaign within shifting Sino-US relations.

Part reporting and part opinion piece, "Hong Kong Unraveled: Social Media and the 2019 Protest Movement," by a long-term US journalist and Hong Kong resident who wishes to remain anonymous, argues that social media played a toxic role in the Hong Kong protests of 2019 by overwhelming diverse voices and taxing mainstream media to a degree that it relinquished traditional principles of discovery and balance. As in other places where it has mixed with politics, social media polarized the Hong Kong public and dominated international views of the protests. Among other consequences, the author argues, Hong Kong became a pawn in geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, in part because both China and the United States accepted the view that Hong Kong was in the throes of full-fledged rebellion. Left behind were voices in the middle ground, the business community, and others who were mostly silent witnesses as representations of Hong Kong were reduced to widely traded scenes of violent protest.

Writing from a different perspective, though with equal reservation, Sam Ho's piece, "Tragedy of Errors at Warp Speed," expresses his wariness and misgivings about the way social protest unfolded in Hong Kong. Ho, a native Hong Konger and a veteran curator of Hong Kong film archives, shares his provocative yet heartfelt reflection on the past and future of his hometown. It is interesting to note that Ho moves freely and fluidly between the United States and Hong Kong and reserves his most scathing condemnation not for China's central government but rather for the British colonial legacy in Hong Kong and the xenophobic and racist undertone of the US government in its involvement in Hong Kong's affairs. Ho's almost quaint critique harks back to critical discourse of a different era when phrases such as (anti)imperialism and (anti) colonialism ruled the day—a different era indeed. Ho's piece opens a dialogue between different generations of Hong Kongers as they struggle to confront the new political reality. Most importantly, Ho's counterargument reflects the legacy of his own upbringing, suggesting to us that the narrative we acquire in our early life shapes our perceptions of the world.

In her article, "Unleashing the Sounds of Silence: Hong Kong's Story in Troubled Times," Andrea Riemenschnitter reminds us that "Hong Kong's story is difficult to tell." True to the interdisciplinary nature of our journal, Riemenschnitter's essay employs a cluster of methodologies (comprising concepts from ecocriticism, microhistorical discourse analysis, social anthropology, and other disciplinary fields) to address the ramifications of inscribing Hong Kong's story within protest-related literary, visual, and multimedia art productions, including street-art performance, handover-themed

art exhibitions, Wong King Fai's video "Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong," and Samson Young's sonic multimedia installations. Grouped together, Riemenschnitter's analysis complements Anonymous's and Ho's through her focus on the role of art in the Hong Kong protest movement and her nuanced exploration of how differing truth claims articulated by grassroots storytellers (including the protest-supporting artists and intellectuals), institutional stakeholders, external observers, and others negotiate with each other in an environment of growing mutual distrust. Riemenschnitter examines the role and function of storytelling in this escalating conflict and the kind of affective space thus created.

In her account of the Hong Kong protest, New York-based playwright Stefani Kuo published a video in December 2019, calling attention to the increasingly violent police actions against protesters in her hometown. As Riemenschnitter writes, "Pleading to America for support, she describes how she imagines herself dying as one of the movement's victims in Hong Kong's streets while her father at home apologizes to the authorities for her misconduct as a protester." I wonder how Ho might respond to his fellow bicultural traveler Kuo's pleading for help from Americans. Riemenschnitter's quote at the beginning of her essay, from the Book of Songs (ca. 600 BC), "Do not blame the speaker, take note of his warning," seems particularly apt at this critical historical conjuncture. As Ho submits his grand narrative of geopolitical and sociohistorical interpretations to articulate his reservations about unceasing social movements in recent years, he might yet have to reconsider the agencies of young committed activists and individual citizens across the demographic ladder or listen to their narratives of idealism and passions, hopes and fears, as they pursue a democratic polity in the city.

In his "Imagining a City-Based Democracy," a review of Laikwan Pang's *The Appearing Demos* (2020), Enoch Yee-lok Tam argues that the book urges us to think deeply about social movements, not only as political events, but also as they relate to citizenship and citizens' rights in a globalizing city—specifically, "how these individuals' exercise of autonomy and mutual respect can bring a new connectivity into being, one that denies the neoliberalist connectivity that continually morphs along with market conditions." While Pang, on the one hand, adopts a bottom-up and microscopic approach to interviewing several dozen protesters of different ages, genders, occupations, and educational backgrounds, on the other hand, her analysis of the political impasse in Hong Kong is macroscopic and has global reach. Pang obviously would not underestimate the conflict between city-based democracy and the primacy of state sovereignty, but she warns against forsaking our efforts to engage alternative political imaginations in actualizing a future for the city. As Tam points out, Pang puts several theories into dialogue when contextualizing the Umbrella Movement within global political movements. These theories include Hannah Arendt's philosophy and ethics of political action as well as ideas from Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015) and Manuel

Castells's *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012) that include the conceptualization of *demos*, the use of social media, the critique of a neoliberal economy, and the connectivity of global citizenship

Richard Peña, a veteran director of the New York Film Festival, remains a true cinephile with a singular focus on Chinese film. His piece, "China and the Film Festival," offers a historical overview of the circulation and ascendance of Chinese cinema within the world of film festivals and the role film festivals play in telling and shaping the story of national and regional cinemas. Peña reminds us of the role governments around the world have played in promoting their national cinemas and the attendant rise in "cinematic nationalism" after World War II that demonstrated "a new desire to make sure their histories and cultures would be represented." Peña's own career as a film-culture bureaucrat from Chicago to New York City closely paralleled the rise of Chinese cinema in the US art-house circuit. His rich and informative autoethnography describes his encounter with *Chinese cinema*, a term in his usage encompassing Chinese-language films from Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and Hong Kong. Regarding Hong Kong cinema, Peña highlights Wong Kar-Wai as the island's first internationally recognized auteur, whose films follow the narrative of modernism central to both European and US discourses on what counts as worthy cinema.

Jonathan Haynes's essay, "Nationalism from Below: State Failures, Nollywood, and Nigerian Pidgin," takes us away from Hong Kong, on the eastern edge of the Pearl River Delta, to Nigeria, on the Gulf of Guinea in Africa. The focus here is the Nigerian film industry, known as Nollywood, which was initially a low-budget feature-film industry grounded in the informal sector of Nigeria's national economy. While critical of the Nigerian government's (mis)handling of this nascent indigenous media industry, Haynes argues that Nollywood remains a powerful, unifying cultural force on both the national and Pan-African levels and that Nigerian Pidgin is more important than ever as a linguistic medium of communication and as a symbol of national, regional, and Pan-African unity and communicability. Here is a powerful instance of the ways national politics and policy intertwine with cinema as a storytelling medium.

Carl Plantinga's essay, "Collective Memory and the Rhetorical Power of the Historical Fiction Film," examines the rhetorical power of historical fiction as a tool to establish collective memory. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach grounded in our journal's mission, Plantinga draws on both media theory and social-science research to unpack scenes from films such as *Selma* (2014), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Black Klansman* (2018) to illustrate his argument in support of mainstream historical fictions for their affect and effect in keeping alive our collective memories of controversial social issues. As Plantinga reminds us, what happens in the recent past will one day become part of historical fiction, and historical fiction is a crucial way to narrate history and tell stories about history.

Michael Walsh's essay, "From Nations to Worlds: Chris Marker's *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*," brings back *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (1966), a forty-nine-minute-long documentary film composed of seven hundred and fifty still photographs taken in twenty-five countries around the world by Chris Marker, the French photographer, documentary film director, and film essayist. Walsh argues that this lesser-known film by the well-known director actually marks a pivot point in his work: the moment at which he broadens his creative imagination from the national to the global, a feature for which his later work is celebrated. *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* is the first of Marker's international films that takes us from Pyongyang to Havana, from the Dead Sea to the Arctic Circle, presenting us with the enduring challenge of a world system that is in perpetual configuration and reconfiguration (if not conflict) and jostling, politically, economically, and culturally.

Peter Hitchcock's essay, "*American Factory* and the Difficulties of Documenting Neoliberalism," takes a close look at Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's documentary *American Factory* (2020), a project produced by Netflix and distributed by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions. A poignant movie about how a Chinese company established an auto glass factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the site of a former GM production plant, the film won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the ninety-second Academy Awards in 2020 and is featured in discussions concerning ongoing Sino-US trade tensions. Using *American Factory* as a case study, Hitchcock focuses on the contemporary capacity of the documentary form to capture the specific logic of socioeconomic and geopolitical contradictions, which, in this case, is explored through the rubric of neoliberalism. Hitchcock argues that the conceptual framework of the documentary complicates how the story of a transnational factory might be told and how salient issues of labor and trade can be explored. The paper also connects the film's style of documenting workers to a longer cinematic history.

Along the Sino-US nexus, the eminent China watcher Robert A. Kapp reviews a new book, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, coedited by Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu (2019). Though charitably grading the book as a "fine contribution," Kapp calls the volume an elegy, if not a eulogy. As he puts it, "Within a few weeks, as the world writhed in the grip of a metastasizing pandemic, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* became . . . a work of history." In Kapp's assessment, neither China nor the United States under Trump has much global sway in terms of soft power. In the case of China, perhaps Kapp is right to say that the book is a swan song and that soft power was only an interval in China's global cultural projection. Yet the recently concluded Fifth Plenum of nineteenth Communist Party of China's Central Committee reiterated the imperative of "transforming China into a cultural power . . . by enhancing the country's soft power, promoting the cultural industry, and boosting people's confidence in Chinese culture." It remains to be seen whether China's continued use of the term will prove Kapp wrong.

Carlos Rojas offers a theme-based critical appraisal of writings about viruses, pulling from works such as Frank Snowden's *Epidemics and Society* (2020) and Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides* (2002). The latter in particular focuses on the juncture of disease and racial differences. Rojas concentrates on works that explore the narrative intersections between viruses and ethnicity (particularly Asian). In Rojas's telling, when a plague struck Manchuria in 1910, it moved southward, primarily along the trajectory of the railroad, and this event became the catalyst for the International Plague Conference held in Mukden in April 1911, the first international scientific meeting held in China that anticipated future international health-policy coordination. Coincidentally, it was in 1910 that the United States officially opened an immigration detention center on Angel Island, off the coast of San Francisco, which, from 1910 to 1940, became the Angel Island Immigration Station and the primary port of arrival for most Chinese seeking to visit or immigrate to the United States. Angel Island came to symbolize America's treatment of Chinese arrivals in the shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In addition to having to confirm their identities, immigrants passing through Angel Island were also carefully screened for infectious diseases, reflecting the widespread perception during this period that Chinese individuals and Chinese communities were prime vessels for disease. Rojas further takes us through the SARS pandemic, noting that the outbreak happened to coincide with a major shift in China's public-health system from "stopping disease in individuals" to "stopping the spread of disease" within society. Rojas concludes by suggesting that

> an underlying issue that runs through each work involves a set of imbricated assumptions about illness and ethnicity, including the widespread perception in the West and the Global North that infectious diseases are typically brought in from elsewhere, and particularly from the East and Global South, which has been perceived as bearing traits of high poverty levels, densely populated metropolises, and close contact between humans and wildlife, it is also compounded by a set of racist and Orientalist attitudes.

This is the case concerning COVID-19, which has been described as the Wuhan virus or the China virus or Kung Flu. As Rojas puts it, "That Wuhan, a major Chinese city with over ten million residents, was some sort of cultural backwater proved oddly compelling for many commentators." Rojas points out that the classic "outbreak narrative" has become a dominant way of framing the threat of infectious disease, which leads to the narrative of the North's successful containment and even eradication of diseases carried by patient zero as the super spreader from the Global South.

2. Sun Jiashan, "Films Likely to Feature More Original Stories," *China Daily*, November 3, 2020, http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202011/03/WS5fa095eba31024ad0ba82a4a.html.

Taken together, the research essays, polemics, and book reviews in this inaugural issue of our journal hope to ignite renewed interest in the affects and effects of audiovisual storytelling in the era of instantaneous and border-crossing transmission of stories. Last but not least, together with the Michigan Publishing, we have made a conscious decision to run our journal as an OA publication so as to provide articles online at no cost to either readers or contributors. The low-cost paperless model is possible due to the generous administrative support of the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. Our mission is to make our articles accessible to the widest possible scholarly and intellectual communities as well as media practitioners, policy makers, and the general public, as we engage in rigorous academic and intellectual policy debates concerning storytelling. Our model aims to ward off profiting from unpaid labor by our academic peers who contribute research, perform peer reviews, and serve as members of editorial boards with no remuneration.

Hong Kong and Social Movements

Hong Kong Unraveled

Social Media and the 2019 Protest Movement

ANONYMOUS

Abstract

Social media played a toxic role in the Hong Kong protests of 2019, overwhelming diverse voices and taxing mainstream media to a degree that it relinquished traditional principles of discovery and balance. As in other places where social media has mixed with politics, it helped polarize the Hong Kong public and dominated international views of the protests. Among other consequences, Hong Kong became a pawn in geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, in part because both China and the United States accepted the view that Hong Kong was in the throes of full-fledged rebellion. Left behind were voices in the middle ground, the business community, and others who were mostly silent witnesses as Hong Kong devolved into widely traded scenes of violent protest.

Keywords: social media, mainstream media, Hong Kong protests, media regulation

In the second half of 2019, as Hong Kong's prodemocracy protests gathered force, residents of the city who paid attention to international media were struck by the cognitive dissonance of headlines and images suggesting a city under siege. In my case—and I was hardly alone—relatives and friends outside Hong Kong contacted me with concern. Was I safe? Would I need to leave the city in a rush with no more than a suitcase in hand?

On one of those frenzied days when Hong Kong seemed to be burning, I strolled down Wyndham Street into the central business district on Hong Kong Island, at the junction of Peddar Street and Des Voeux Road, lined with high-end luxury stores and banks. In mid-November, demonstrators emerged twice daily, at noon and after work, to wave flags, obstruct traffic, and build artistic barriers from bricks and bamboo building materials that were quickly removed after each episode. A few hours before I walked down, after the noon break, riot police had stormed up Wyndham Street firing tear gas. Now all was calm.

A group of one hundred or so protestors—clad in black, the uniform of the protests, and mostly unmasked—stood chatting in the otherwise empty streets at about 6:30 p.m. Some gathered around traffic lights giving each other boosts to get to the height where they could smash signal lights. Others gathered to push over concrete planters. Earlier, someone had smashed the windows of China Commercial Construction Bank, one of China's state-owned banks. A black-clad young man walked back and forth with a large black flag, emblazoned in white letters: "Free Hong Kong: Revolution Now." There were no police in sight. Some of the protestors made distinctly fashionable statements in black, derived in part from video games. Nobody paid attention to a foreign woman passing through until I began taking photos with my mobile phone. Then the protestors made shushing motions with their hands and raised umbrellas to hide their identities. Half an hour later, in advance of a police cordon, the crowd melted away.

There were, of course, vast flows of people in organized marches, as many as a quarter of Hong Kong's population, in early June 2019, and focused violence, particularly against police and Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway system, or MTR, which had tried to block protestors by shutting down parts of its massive network. Masked and helmeted protestors in black T-shirts and jeans hurled petrol bombs and smashed MTR gates, turnstiles, and ticket machines. Protestors barricaded two major university campuses in November 2019, fighting off police in full riot gear with bows and arrows and catapults. Yet the genius of the movement was its ability to launch small-scale actions in many parts of the city simultaneously, from the skyscraper canyons of Central to the decaying shop houses of Kowloon and dense high-rises of the New Territories. Urban residents, including myself, had to go looking for the protests, learning to circumnavigate the more intrusive ones.

The drama that gripped the world for many months was many things, but it was not the full-fledged rebellion that it appeared to be on the evening news and which served the purposes of both China's central government, who denounced the protestors as terrorists and rioters, or the Trump administration in the United States, hailing them as "freedom fighters."[1] One reason for the disconnect was the masterly use of social media by the protestors, not as disinformation but as a megaphone, GPS-driven organizing tool and platform, with mainstream media accepting their message and delivering it directly to readers and viewers around the world.

The bureaucratic local government was caught flatfooted both by the scale and the use of social media by organizers to create constantly forming and dissolving nodes of protest across the city of 7.5 million. Unlike in Mainland China, where the government has long monitored social media and employed armies of so-called 50-centers to foil any

1. Michale R. Pompeo, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo with Bob Cusack, Editor-in-Chief of the Hill," interview, US Consulate General Hong Kong & Macau, July 15, 2020, https://hk.usconsulate.gov/n-2020071502/.

sign of dissent with counter-messaging, in Hong Kong, not only was social-media content nearly free from regulatory or political interference, it was wielded by some of the most tech-savvy kids on the planet. Protest movements elsewhere have quickly learned the methods and adopted them, from Paris to Bangkok. In Hong Kong, however, the initial success of the movement contributed to its own destruction, as protestors failed to seek compromise even after achieving at least one of their goals. Instead, some of the well-known features of social media worked against de-escalation, particularly its tendency to create filter bubbles against contrary fact and create self-reinforcing loops of information.

Social media did not create Hong Kong's 2019 protests but created enormous energy that amplified both their organizing capabilities and their messages. The quantum ecology of social-media instruments and platforms was readily understood and put to use by those outside the establishment. It has become one more instance of the immense power of a new way of building human community—in this case, around the identity politics of resisting the "mainlandization" of Hong Kong. Nearly everybody in Hong Kong owns a mobile phone, or several. But it was principally the young, who grew up after 2007 in the age of the iPhone and its shopping mall of software applications, for whom locational and messaging apps were an integral part of social life and who were able to integrate the technology organically as they became politicized.

The Weaponization of Social Media

The protests built up quickly from an unlikely beginning, a government bill to allow transfers of fugitives from Hong Kong courts to Mainland China, Macau, and Taiwan, which had been disallowed under existing law. While the local government contended it was designed merely to fill a procedural loophole, many in Hong Kong, including the business elite, saw it as a means to extend application of Mainland law to Hong Kong and potentially drag offenders across the border. The protests disrupted the city's airport and rail transport and sporadically halted road traffic as protestors used bricks, railings, rubbish bins, and other objects as barriers.

In 2019, more than one hundred groups on the messaging site Telegram, Instagram, and LIHKG, an online forum, crackled with activity, shaping the protests themselves as well as local and global media coverage. The local Hong Kong government was blindsided, but China, long aware of the risks of social media and accustomed to tight monitoring, saw the hyperactive expressions and political organizing through social media as the beginning of a color revolution in the manner of politically traumatized nations in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

Unlike the toxic ways in which actors as diverse as Russia, alt-right activists in the United States, and K-pop fans have put social media to use to destroy opponents largely

by spreading disinformation, there was a kind of wild innocence to the sprawling mass of social-media content generated by the Hong Kong protests.

Anjana Susarla, an associate professor of information systems at Michigan State University, argues that there are two mechanisms that make social media influential in digital activism: the role given to a few influencers with large networks to influence public opinion, and the tendency to engage on social media with like-minded people, which Professor Susarla calls homophily.[2] "Social media's opinion-making power and preference for like-minded connections also lead to online filter bubbles, echo chambers that amplify information that people are predisposed to agree with and filter out information that contradicts people's points of view," she writes.

Both were key elements of the Hong Kong protests, together with a third factor unique to Hong Kong: its admirably efficient public transportation network and its antithesis of absurdly congested streets. Using GPS-enabled messaging apps, the protestors literally flowed like water through the city while police forces and firefighters were consigned to the road system. This made the movement a nightmare to control, despite the MTR's efforts to shut down parts of the system to block the protests.

Another factor behind the successful deployment of social media by Hong Kong's digital activists was the sheer density of mobile phone use. The city's five competing telecommunications operators offer high bandwidth and immaculate coverage. According to Hong Kong's Office of the Communications Authority, Hong Kong's mobile subscriber penetration rate as of May 2020 was 273.9 percent and there were 23.1 million mobile subscriptions for its 7.5 million people, implying three subscriptions and three phones for every resident.[3] Hong Kong's mobile phone operators generally provide the latest handsets for free with every service renewal, making it even easier for residents to acquire the latest, most highly featured phones (see figure 1).

During the 2019 protests, mobile phones recorded each confrontation from multiple angles. Images went viral over the interlocking networks of the movement. Every encounter featured a thicket of upraised arms pointing camera phones at the action, with simultaneous uploads making it possible for viewers to conduct rudimentary real-time fact checking. The combination of a ubiquitous smartphone ecosystem, efficient MTR, and GPS-enabled social messaging apps made it possible for protestors to move across the Hong Kong landscape "like water," in a phrase adopted from kung fu icon Bruce Lee that lent itself to the protests later called the water movement, ebbing and flowing ahead of organized police actions and striking at locations across

2. Anjana Susarla, "What TikTok Teens Fooling Trump Means for the 2020 Election," Fast Company, July 4, 2020, https://www.fastcompany.com/90523591/what-tiktok-teens-fooling-trump-means-for-the-2020-election.
3. Office of the Communications Authority, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, "Data & Statistics: Key Communications Statistics," OFCA, accessed October 2020, https://www.ofca.gov.hk/en/data_statistics/data_statistics/key_stat/.

Figure 1.1: Central, November 13, 2019. *Source*: author.

the MTR system virtually at will. The water movement was not the only name given to the protests—yellow helmets were seen as its symbol in the early days—but it was the one that stuck.[4]

4. Nicolle Liu and Sue-Lin Wong, "Hong Kong Mood Darkens as Hard Hats Replace Yellow Umbrellas," *Financial Times*, June 14, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/b4eb3fb6-8d87-11e9-a1c1-51bf8f989972.

The fact that social-messaging apps were relatively open to all subscribers added another dimension. The protestors assumed that everyone in Hong Kong was as savvy as they were with messaging apps. As long as they gave a few minutes of warning before the next strike, they could recruit protestors to race to the scene as well as warn bystanders to stay away. Instead, traffic snarled up readily as protestors manned overpasses and blocked exits to the main tunnel under Victoria Harbor.

In August 2019, Reuters pieced together their modus operandi of protest social media based on more than one hundred groups on the messaging site Telegram, Instagram, and the LIHKG online forum: "The groups are used to post everything from news on upcoming protests to tips on dousing tear gas canisters fired by the police to the identities of suspected undercover police and the access codes to buildings in Hong Kong where protesters can hide," the Reuters story noted (see figure 2).[5]

Any observer subscribing to the messaging app Telegram, for instance, could access groups texting event lineups in Chinese and English on a daily and even hourly basis. Twitter feeds and Instagram were also readily accessible to observers outside the protest movement. Police could monitor the channels as well but were prevented by their own protocol and logistics—using the motorways and traveling in groups rather than individually—from effective action.

Social media also helped the protestors develop a specific style, which was replicated by other protest movements in its aftermath. The style mutated out of ubiquitously popular video games, with ninja-like black uniforms paired with helmets, goggles, and umbrellas, first seen on Hong Kong's streets in mid-June 2019. Dr. Tommy Tse, an assistant professor at Hong Kong University, was quoted saying: "Protestors wanted to use [the color of their clothes] to communicate their sorrow, anger and regret. . . . It also creates a stronger visual effect when it comes to the aerial photos by the media, symbolizing a sense of unity and determination against the unprecedentedly suppressive political environment."[6]

There is no question that Hong Kong's many young people are addicted to video games, and Hong Kong as a location for video games is popular globally, according to Hugh Davies, a games researcher at RMIT University.[7] According to a 2017 survey of upper primary students by the University of Hong Kong, students spent an average of eight hours a week gaming.[8] Among the games that are regularly cited by Hong Kong

5. James Pomfret, Greg Torode, Clare Jim, and Anne Marie Roantree, "A Reuters Special Report: Inside the Hong Kong Protesters' Anarchic Campaign against China," Reuters, August 16, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/hongkong-protests-protesters/.
6. Zoe Suen, "How Hong Kong's Protest Uniform Changed a Market," Business of Fashion, November 7, 2019, https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/china/the-aftermath-of-hong-kongs-protest-uniform.
7. Hugh Davies, "Why Is Hong Kong Such a Popular Video Game Location?" M+ Voices, October 15, 2018, https://stories.mplus.org.hk/en/blog/why-is-hong-kong-such-a-popular-video-game-location/.
8. "HKU Survey Reveals Gaming Addiction Problem among Hong Kong Upper Primary Students," press release, University of Hong Kong, June 20, 2017, https://www.hku.hk/press/news_detail_16488.html.

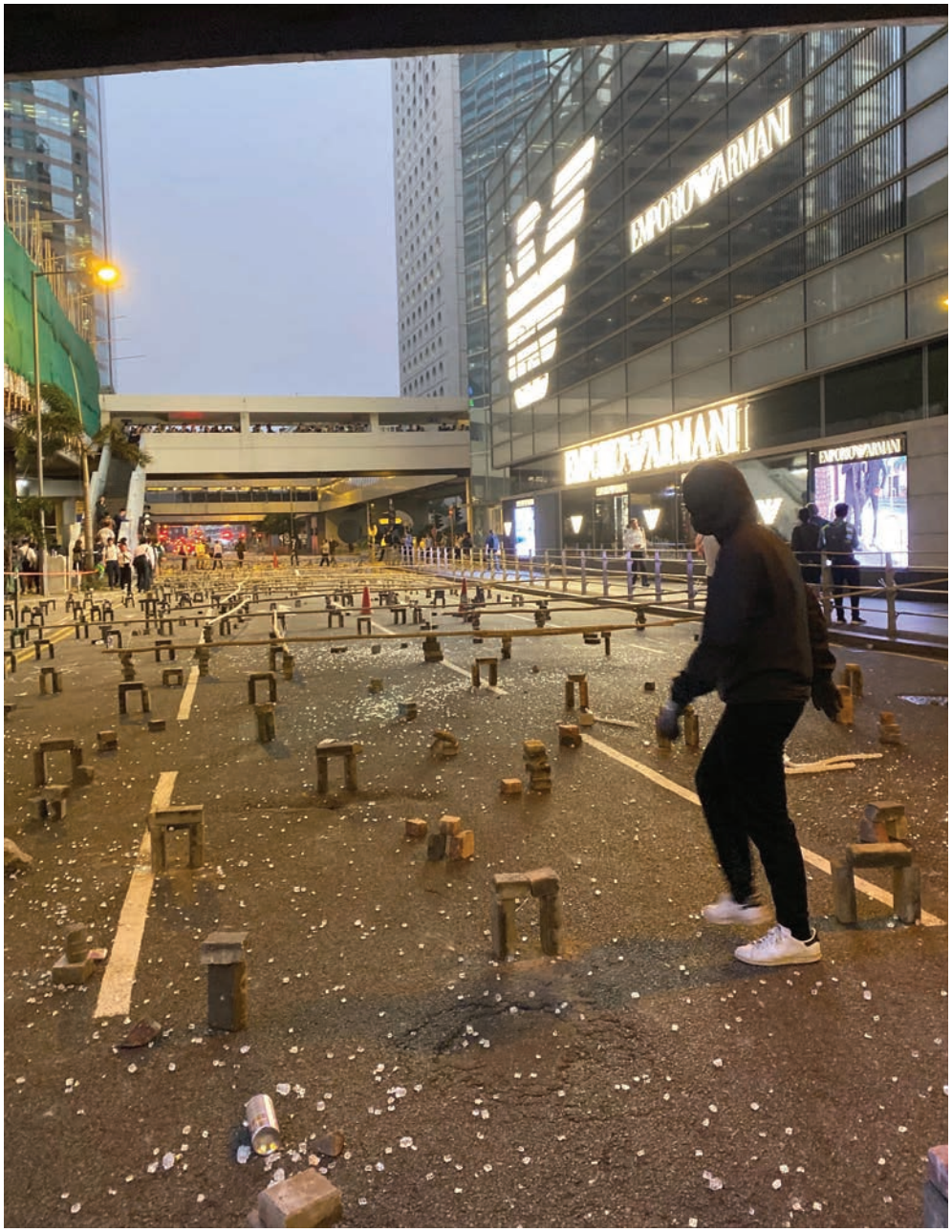

Figure 1.2: Central, November 13, 2019. *Source*: author.

media for their popularity is the 2016 game *Mini Metro*, which challenges users to understand transport systems and use them competitively. The Hong Kong edition of the game[9] is based around Kowloon and rewards players for delivering eleven hundred passengers using no more than eight stations and spookily seems as though it might have been a learning tool for the protests (see figure 3).

9. Mini Metro Wiki, "Hong Kong," Fandom, accessed December 22, 2020, https://mini-metro.fandom.com/wiki/Hong_Kong.

Figure 1.3: Admiralty footbridge, August 18, 2019. *Source*: author.

The point at which social-media narratives overwhelmed conventional reporting is unclear—traditional media valiantly provided saturation coverage—but the geographic fluidity of the movement and the absence of single-point communications made it inevitable. Nobody, not even the local Chinese broadcast and print media or the well-funded English-language *South China Morning Post*, could put enough reporters on the ground to cover a movement that popped up here, there, and everywhere as protestors shared spur-of-the-moment ideas about where to go next and what to do there. Virtual media live-streamed events.

In between the one hundred or so social media channels, citizen journalists, mobile-wielding protestors, and members of the public also wielding mobile phones, the volume of content was extraordinary, becoming a rich trove of images and information for mainstream media and accessible to anyone using the same apps anywhere. Telegram, for example, had English-language channels, which quickly translated instructions for the protests and served as message boards.

Social media became more than just a platform. Social media was the story itself, with its stark, dramatic, and appealing narrative. Prominent international journalists such as *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius dropped in on the events to see Hong Kong's "freedom fighters" for themselves.[10] The line between peaceful protest and violence was blurred; the protestors insistence on key principles of solidarity and leaderlessness prevented advocates of Gandhian civil disobedience advocates from speaking out against the radicals who drew their motto from the dystopian 2012 film *The Hunger Games*: "If we burn, you burn with us" (see figure 4).[11]

Figure 1.4: Central, November 13, 2019. *Source*: author.

10. David Ignatius, "The U.S. Has to Tread in the Middle When Handling the Hong Kong Protests," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-us-has-to-tread-in-the-middle-when-handling-the-hong-kong-protests/2019/08/15/ee89b7b0-bf88–11e9-a5c6–1e74f7ec4a93_story.html.
11. Translated pithily in Cantonese as laam chau, 攪炒, or "fry with me." Yuen Chan, @xinwenxiaojie, "Canto lesson," Twitter, August 16, 2019, https://twitter.com/xinwenxiaojie/status/1162047384152694787.

The line between social media as input and social media as proxy for direct reporting of individuals and events one by one may have seemed clear at the outset but became increasingly blurred. The fact checking of traditional journalism was challenged by the massive stream of content.

Consequences

A year later, the city has gone silent, partly as a result of restrictions on public gatherings during the COVID-19 outbreak. A new National Security Law enacted by China's National People's Congress has made the acts of posting social-media content, painting graffiti, using the slogans of the protests, and even displaying their art or performing its music into treasonable acts subject to lengthy prison sentences and potentially transfer to the grim administration of Mainland courts. The accounts have since closed, and a Stasi-like government hotline to report suspected violations of the National Security Law got more than ten thousand calls in its first week of operation.[12]

Despite the hyperventilation of social media and mainstream media combined, during the protests, civil liberties and the rule of law remained in place, even if they were under severe pressure. This was what made the images and headlines of mainstream media so discordant to local observers, activists aside. Images of fires and tear gas translated into impressions of a *City on Fire*, the title of a well-regarded book by Hong Kong-based lawyer Antony Dapiran.[13] It helped that Hong Kong was remote and exotic and that to viewers outside Asia, the geography might be indistinct.

Major international media accepted the story line of the protest movement and used the movement's social media as a source, despite evidence of many kinds of malfeasance to which it is prey, ranging from doxxing to leaking personal detail on social media[14] to false identities to conspiracy theories. While the protests lasted, roughly from June to November, there was virtually no oxygen for reporting the views of government,

12. Christy Leung, "Hong Kong's Controversial National Security Law Tip Line Gets 10,000 Messages in First Week of Operation," *South China Morning Post*, November 14, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/print/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3109867/hong-kongs-controversial-national-security-law-tip.

13. Bron Sibree, "Review: City on Fire Revisits Hong Kong's 2019 Protests and Asks, 'What Next'?" *South China Morning Post*, March 15, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/books/article/3074466/city-fire-revisits-hong-kongs-2019-protests-and-asks.

14. Lisa Lim, "Doxxing: The Powerful 'Weapon' in the Hong Kong Protests Had a Petty Beginning," *South China Morning Post,* November 11, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3036663/doxxing-powerful-weapon-hong-kong-protests-had; Sum Lok-kei, "Hong Kong Protests: With Nearly 5,000 Doxxing Complaints Since Unrest Erupted, Officials Mull New Powers for Privacy Commissioner," *South China Morning Post*, January 20, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3045239/hong-kong-protests-nearly-5000-doxxing-complaints-unrest.

business, or the roughly 40 percent of the population that opposed the protests. To be sure, behind closed doors, many within the city's political and business elite were furiously angry with the government of Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, the chief executive of Hong Kong, for allowing the protests to escalate and for failing to withdraw the extradition bill earlier. But there were also many who were angry with the protestors for their intransigence and for tearing the city apart. The chief victim was the loss of any sort of middle ground or space for constructive dialogue.

Among the untold—or at least under-told stories—was the protest movement's exclusion of outsiders, which ensured that Hong Kong's non–Cantonese-speaking population served mainly as bystanders to the movement, underlining the identity politics that were an essential part of the protest narrative. The movement welcomed international observers but not nonlocal participants, defining *local* as Chinese who were born and grew up in Hong Kong with local parents. Social media reinforced the barriers, not only because it was largely in Cantonese, which has many unique Chinese characters and grammatical variation from the standard spoken Chinese used in Mainland China, but also because the protestors began using alphabetic forms of Cantonese as a means of encrypting their communications.[15] More than one million Mainlanders resident in Hong Kong were not represented at all, and the protestors pointedly demonized the use of standard spoken Chinese, Mandarin, or Putonghua versus the local language, Cantonese.[16]

It rapidly became clear that taking sides for or against the protestors was risky in the extreme. Few of Hong Kong's seven hundred thousand international expats publicly embraced or denounced the protest movement, worried about jobs and education for their children when most schools cancelled classes due to the protests. Companies like Cathay Pacific, Hong Kong's flagship airline, fired employees just for displaying sympathy with the protests on their Facebook accounts.[17] Expatriate entry visa applications plummeted.[18]

There was, in fact, no middle ground from which to build dialogue. Some of those who self-identified as centrists tried to influence the course of events the traditional way of Hong Kong elites, by networking at the top. Their efforts were futile. Christine Loh, a respected former legislator and government official as well as the founder of the think tank Civic Exchange, concerned with urban sustainability, argued for a change

15. Lisa Lim, "Do You Speak Kongish? Hong Kong Protestors Harness Unique Language Code to Empower and Communicate," *South China Morning Post*, August 30, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3024863/do-you-speak-kongish-hong-kong-protesters.
16. Julie Zhu, "Mainlanders in Hong Kong Worry as Anti-China Sentiment Swells," Reuters, October 30, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-mainlanders-idUSKBN1X90Q8.
17. "Cathay Denounced for Firing Hong Kong Staff after Pressure from China," *The Guardian*, August 28, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/28/cathay-pacific-denounced-for-firing-hong-kong-staff-on-china-orders.
18. Frances Yoon, "Hong Kong Draws Fewer Expats as China Curbs City's Freedoms," *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-is-losing-its-charm-for-expats-as-china-tightens-the-screws-11596706202.

in mindset that would allow Hongkongers to put aside their British-colonial past and work toward a shared identity with Mainland China, particularly in southern China and the newly proclaimed "Greater Bay Area," including Hong Kong and its neighboring metropolitan areas in the Mainland.[19] This point of view, which might have gained traction with Beijing, was unappealing to middle-class Hongkongers accustomed to the civil liberties enshrined in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong and the 1990 Basic Law, or mini-constitution, enacted at the time of the handover in 1997 (see figure 5).

Figure 1.5: Admiralty, August 18, 2019. *Source*: author.

19. "New Book Announcement: 'No Third Person: Rewriting the Hong Kong Story' by Christine Loh and Richard Cullen," *Asian Review of Books*, October 1, 2018, https://asianreviewofbooks.com/content/new-book-announcement-no-third-person-rewriting-the-hong-kong-story-by-christine-loh-and-richard-cullen/.

City on Fire?

As theater, the protests were successful, but as political action, they failed. The protest movement gained momentum and broad public support based on fears that the Hong Kong government was eroding civil liberties guaranteed at the time of Hong Kong's handover in 1997, under the formula of "one country, two systems." The leaderless structure of the protests, however, combined with its apparent support for violence, gave key cards to the Hong Kong authorities and, behind them, Beijing.

The protestors' use of simple and vivid slogans to represent their demands helped in delivering their message if not too closely examined. The key slogan—"five demands, not one less"—continued to be repeated even after one of the core demands, removal of the extradition bill, had been met. The five demands,[20] including electoral democracy, were represented by the upheld hands and outspread five fingers of the protestors, with the other hand usually holding a mobile phone.[21] No serious set of proposals ever surfaced to negotiate the remaining four demands, due to absence of a leadership structure that might have designed a strategy.

Rowena He, a political scientist, was teaching Chinese politics in the fall semester of 2019 when the Chinese University of Hong Kong became a battleground.[22] Writing from a firsthand perspective, He argues that the intentional lack of leadership and open discussion, together with the imposition of a draconian unity rule, undermined the movement and led to its eventual failure.

To defend the absence of leadership, the protestors used the expression, "no main stage," referring back to prodemocracy protests in 2014 inspired partly by Occupy Wall Street and other centers of power. Factionalism and the later arrest of movement leaders were seen as fatal flaws of the earlier movement. To support their insistence on solidarity, the protestors used an archaic Chinese expression: "no mat cutting,"[23] referring to a late Han fable in which two students—one idealistic, the other pragmatic—sitting on a reed mat cut it to demonstrate their different values as well as the end of their friendship.[24]

20. Wong Tsui-kai, "Hong Kong Protests: What Are the 'Five Demands'? What Do Protestors Want?" *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3065950/hong-kong-protests-what-are-five-demands-what-do.
21. The five demands remained "five" even after the first one was met, for withdrawal of the extradition bill. The other four were to call a commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality, retraction of the use of the word *rioters* to describe protestors, amnesty for arrested protestors, and universal suffrage for both the Legislative Council and chief executive of Hong Kong.
22. Rowena He, "To Lead or Not to Lead: Campus Standoff in Hong Kong's Water Movement," *Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2020), 119–34.
23. *Bat got zik* in Cantonese, 不割席.
24. Wee Kek Koon, "Why Hong Kong's Protestors Do Not Want to 'Cut the Reed Mat'—They Believe They Are Stronger Together," *Post Magazine*, September 12, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3026830/why-hong-kongs-protesters-do-not-want-cut-reed.

He writes: "The animus toward [the] 'main stage' and the rejection of 'mat-cutting' were legacies of 2014's failures and its aftermath. In reacting to the perceived flaws of hierarchical power and centralized decision-making, Water Movement protesters swung too far in the opposite direction. When leaders were needed to make strategic and tactical decisions, the animus against leadership proved disabling."[25] While the use of social media was not responsible for creating the norms of the movement, it reinforced them through online filter bubbles, possibly preventing the protestors—and the mainstream media following them—from being more critical of their lack of strategy.

Outside Hong Kong, however, the water movement was a resounding success, arousing sympathy around the world and leading to punitive actions against the Hong Kong government, seen as a bad actor in the protests. Hong Kong became a live issue in the United States Congress and the White House. On July 14, 2020, US president Donald Trump signed an executive order ending the special-trade status granted to Hong Kong under the United States–Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, which gave Hong Kong-passport holders preferential treatment over Mainland China passport holders, allowed Hong Kong to import US military and defense equipment, and exempted it from tariffs imposed on China.[26] On the same day, he signed a bill into law requiring sanctions against individuals and banks contributing to the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy.[27] By August 11, 2020, the United States had issued sanctions on eleven Hong Kong figures, under the provisions of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act of 2016.[28]

As early as June 2020, hardliners in the United States had suggested using provisions of the Global Magnitsky Act against "China's rules," including Hong Kong officials, "to impose enduring pain on senior party officials and on the corrupt police and judges who implement policy at the street level in Hong Kong."[29] While Lam, the chief executive of Hong Kong, publicly derided the sanctions as "meaningless,"[30] their passage underlined that the United States considered Hong Kong to have surrendered

25. He, "To Lead or Not to Lead."
26. Denise Tsang, "United States Ending Hong Kong's Special Trading Status Will Hurt US Firms, City's American Chamber Of Commerce Says," *South China Morning Post*, July 17, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-economy/article/3093573/united-states-ending-hong-kongs-special-trading.
27. Owen Churchill, "US President Donald Trump Signs Hong Kong Autonomy Act, and Ends the City's Preferential Trade Status," *South China Morning Post*, July 15, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3093200/donald-trump-signs-hong-kong-autonomy-act-and-ends.
28. The original Magnitsky Act, or the Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012, was named for Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian tax lawyer who died in a Moscow prison cell after investigating a $230 million fraud involving Russian tax officials.
29. Paul Wolfowitz and Frances Tilney Burke, "Hong Kong Sanctions with Teeth," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-sanctions-with-teeth-11591119841.
30. Iain Marlow and Natalie Lung, "Hong Kong Leader Carrie Lam Has Credit Card Trouble after U.S. Sanctions," Bloomberg, August 19, 2020, https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/hong-kong-s-leader-has-credit-card-trouble-after-u-s-sanctions.

its autonomy under the "one country, two systems" formula, originally proposed by China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s.

Aftermath

Other than the withdrawal of the extradition bill, the protestors gained none of their objectives, and the relatively narrow extradition bill had been replaced by the sweeping National Security Law, including claims of extraterritoriality, which, by August 2020, placed a number of Hong Kong and American activists on an international wanted list published by the Hong Kong government. One could argue, as some did, that the protest movement would live on because of its principles and idealism and because the problems that fed the movement remained unresolved. But the movement itself, like the social media that had been its voice, went into deep freeze, with social distancing rules under the COVID-19 pandemic preventing most public gatherings beginning in January 2020. Time will tell, of course, whether the goals of the movement are met if and when China becomes more democratic, but that time was not in 2020.

Social media used for political advocacy may only be in its infancy, and the digital activists of Hong Kong in 2019 expanded its use in ways unique to the city and its population. The fact remains that its use threatened the world's second most powerful nation and played into the hands of a hostile and aggressive US administration focused on containment of its rival. The result was to crush Hong Kong's immediate aspirations for democratic evolution.

Without the flamethrowers of social media, the outcome may have been the same, given the geopolitical backdrop, but it would almost certainly have taken longer and been less extreme.

Unleashing the Sounds of Silence

Hong Kong's Story in Troubled Times

ANDREA RIEMENSCHNITTER

言之者无罪闻之者足以戒（诗经・周南・关雎・序）
Do not blame the speaker, take note of his warning.
—*Book of Songs*, ca. 600 BC

Abstract

Hong Kong's story is difficult to tell, commented Leung Ping-kwan (1949–2013) in consideration of the city's complicated historical configuration as well as of the aesthetic reflection on the same by the writers and artists that have come to shape and promote the colonial city's unique culture. Confronting the post-handover government's suppression of democratic decision-making with massive street protests, the next generation of cultural producers continues to critically interrogate, contest, and subvert the official genealogy and nationalist master narrative. In response to the various factors contributing to the ongoing silencing of the city's critical voices, many artists, directors, and writers have turned to (absent) sound as the aesthetic signifier of the sociopolitical turn from hope and reconciliation to despair. Their performative silence simultaneously protests and mourns the denunciation, suppression, and erasure of oppositional groups. In this paper, I apply a methodological cluster comprising concepts from ecocriticism, microhistorical-discourse analysis, social anthropology, and other disciplinary fields to address the ramifications of Hong Kong's story as inscribed within protest-related literary, visual and multimedia art productions. Street art performance, handover-themed art exhibitions, Wong King Fai's video "Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong," and Samson Young's sonic multimedia installations appositely illustrate the conundrum addressed.

Keywords: Hong Kong story, democracy movement, protest art, resistant silence, hope

Introduction

Storytelling is a fundamental human skill. It developed together with language and civilization and outlived the writing, print, and digital revolutions. Since public

communication shifted from earlier established mass media to the Internet, and from professional performers to anybody who wishes to put themselves in front of a digital camera to share their story with an anonymous crowd, video-recorded advice on the art of storytelling has gone viral too. Countless TED, YouTube, and other social-media presentations explain what constitutes a good story, how it enchants and mobilizes, how good stories can be distinguished from bad stories, and why stories can sell almost everything to audiences, including disposable commodities, customer services, and fake news.[1] Used wisely, stories unite and inspire people to act for the common good. They can effectively transmit moral values, offer solace and orientation in crises, disseminate calls for solidarity with disaster victims, or popularize scientific research results. Constructed foolishly or even with evil intentions, they can lead individuals and whole societies into a maelstrom of hatred, fanaticism, and escalating violence. This dangerous potential to stoke social antagonisms once again gains momentum today, in response to the increasingly destabilized world order brought about by such large-scale (non-) events as climate change, pandemic-sized diseases, the aggravating conflict between two superpowers on the geopolitical stage, the widening gap between the Global North and South, and many more symptoms of a global civilizational crisis.

In the battle of narratives over Hong Kong's recent problems, storytelling has also moved center stage. Old and young protesters take to the streets, sacrificing their private lives in order to proclaim their dream of a free and democratic Hong Kong. On the opposite side, officials handpicked by Beijing rather than democratically elected by the local people, and the Beijing leadership itself, are tightening their grip on the former British colony, thereby devaluing the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration's formula of one country, two systems. Despite continuous lip service to Hong Kong's special status, Beijing's intent to abrogate its independent legal framework is manifesting with the new national security law for Hong Kong passed in Beijing on occasion of the annual session of the People's National Congress in May 2020.[2] Mainland social media celebrate the government's uncompromising handling of the protests while accusing Western groups of illicit interference. Concomitantly, internal voices that criticize Beijing's policy are instantly silenced.[3] Originally tending to support the protesters, by now Hong Kong's business elite mostly approve of the suppression of prodemocracy activism whereas critical observers insist that it is an unacceptable infringement

1. David J. P. Phillips, "The Magical Science of Storytelling," TEDx Talks Stockholm, March 16, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nj-hdQMa3uA; Susan Duncan, "The Dark Side of Storytelling," TED@State Street, Boston, November 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_duncan_the_dark_side_of_storytelling; Andrew Stanton, "The Clues to a Great Story," TED 2012, Feburary 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story?language=en.
2. Yen Nee Lee, "China Approves Controversial National Security Bill for Hong Kong," CNBC, May, 28, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/28/china-approves-proposal-to-impose-national-security-law-in-hong-kong.html.
3. Javier C. Hernández, "China Deploys Propaganda Machine to Defend Move against Hong Kong." *New York Times*, May 23, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/world/asia/china-hong-kong-propaganda.html.

of the joint declaration granting the city political and legal autonomy until 2046.[4] Since January 2020, independent media diagnosed a fading out of protest vigor in the city upon the dispatch of new liaison office head Luo Huining, the Covid-19 outbreak, and the security law resolution. Despite these endgame calls, local activism goes on. It is changing dramatically, though, as Lisa Lim recently summarized in her description of the citizens' turn toward symbols and performative acts meant to expose the growing walls of government-imposed silence. Lennon Walls with empty Post-It stickers across the territory, pictures of groups of protesters with blank sheets of paper covering their faces, and icons on graffiti and social media platforms testify to Beijing's silencing policy, she argues. In her view, "Such erasure amplifies the message, giving voice to both what is being censored and the act of censorship"[5].

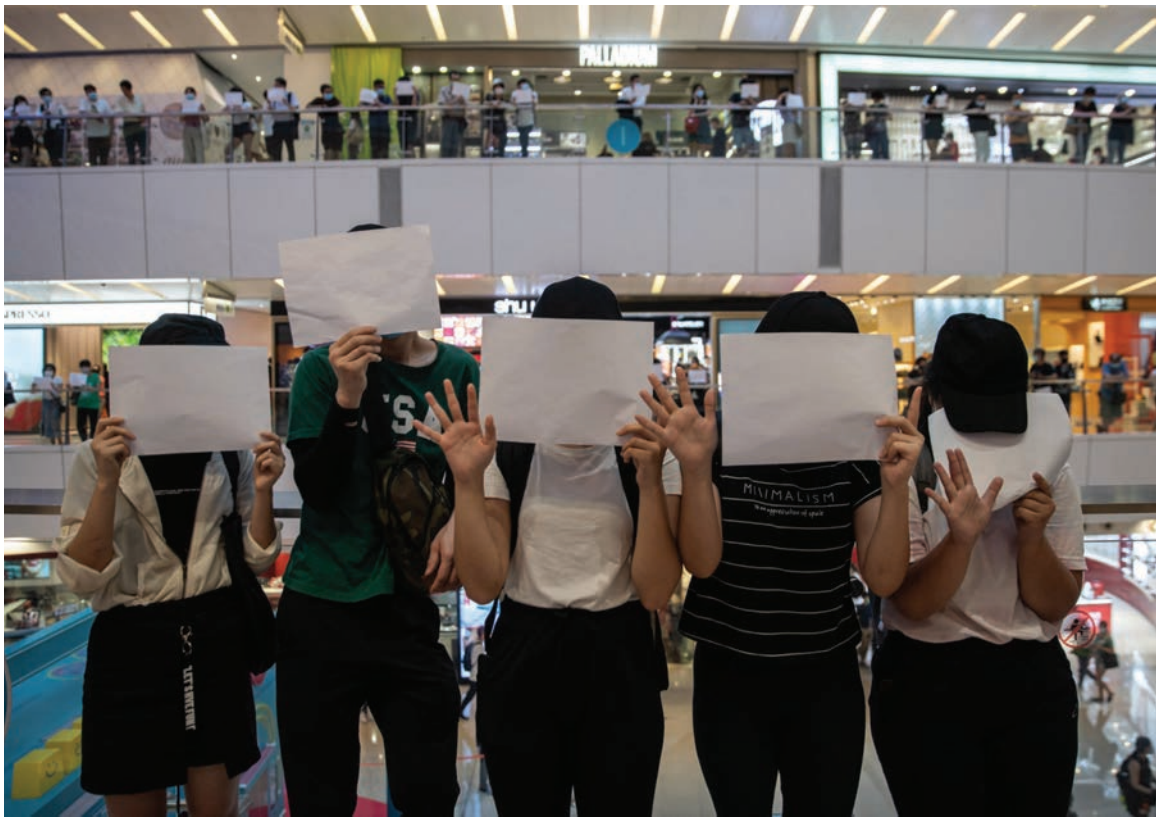

Figure 2.1: Protesters hold sheets of white paper during a protest in a Hong Kong shopping mall on July 6, 2020. *Source*: EPA-EFE.

4. Shirley Zhao, "Hong Kong Media Tycoon Jimmy Lai Says Businesses Kowtowing to Beijing," Bloomberg News, June 4, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-04/hong-kong-media-tycoon-says-businesses-kowtowing-to-beijing.
5. Lisa Lim, "When Silence Speaks Louder than Words—in Hong Kong, Blank Post-Its and Pages Used to Convey Meaning," *South China Morning Post*, July 21, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3093432/when-silence-speaks-louder-words-hong-kong.

In this paper, I will address the ramifications of Hong Kong's story as inscribed within recent literary, visual, and multimedia-art productions related to the protests by focusing on some of the key concerns transpiring in them. Using Wong King Fai's *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong*,[6] Samson Young's sonic multimedia installations, street-art performance events, and other examples, I will address the turn from words and noise to silence in artistic storytelling projects. I am mostly concerned with the following questions: First, under what conditions can politically engaged literature and art fulfill the role of storytelling as communication and as a community-building device,[7] and are these conditions given in Hong Kong's present situation? Second, how are the differing truth claims articulated by grassroots storytellers (including the protest-supporting artists and intellectuals), institutional stakeholders, external observers, and others, and how can they be negotiated in an environment of growing mutual distrust? What is the role and function of storytelling in this aggravating conflict? And third, what kind of affective space is created and circulated in the various arenas where cultural articulation and performance take place? How do the involved aesthetic forms and stories develop over time? Deriving insights from various theories tackling storytelling, activism, and (politically engaged) art—among them postcolonial sound and affect studies—I will engage with embedded meanings across a variety of cultural forms and representations through qualitative analysis to gain deeper understanding of one of a growing number of democracy movements that currently experience increasing intolerance and violent suppression in authoritarian states. Despite my focus on cinematic and artistic storytelling, I will not delve into deep readings. Rather, I am interested in the shared tropes and affective intensities of the stories told and, therefore, will base my approach on discourse analysis similar to what is practiced in related interstitial disciplinary fields such as social anthropology and indigenous microhistory.[8] I will contextualize the currently raging contest over Hong Kong storytellers' interpretative rights with the evolving battle over global leadership among a declining and a rising world power, arguing that the mood and content of the stories told through its cultural producers change accordingly: from hope to despair, and from reconciliation to confrontation.

The Multiple Affordances of Storytelling

The narrative inauguration, dissemination, and rehearsal of a group's shared values can be described as the core tasks of storytelling. Spiritual enlightenment, moral guidance,

6. King Fai Wong, *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong*, choreography by Chuek Yin Mui, Hong Kong, 2019.
7. Anthony Nanson, *Words of Re-Enchantment: Writings on Storytelling, Myth, and Ecological Desire* (Stroud: Awen Publications, 2011).
8. Don Kalb and Herman Tak, eds., *Critical Junctions: Anthropology and History beyond the Cultural Turn* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2005).

aesthetic pleasure, emotional balance, and longing for a better world are among the treasures a well-crafted story can provide. Adding to these, Anthony Nanson underscores the catalyst function of the storytelling imagination for tolerance and transformation, arguing that storytelling "brings people together, stimulates conversation, and thereby helps sustain community."[9] The stories about who we are, where we come from, and what we desire to become in the future determine a community's collective imagination and can spur the spirit of shared destiny.[10] Earlier in 1936, Walter Benjamin had critically reflected on the decline of oral storytelling, arguing that the type of slow cultural development accompanying oral communication was lost in industrialized societies. According to him, printed novels and mass-media-transmitted information have replaced the traditional storyteller's wisdom. Consequently, modernity's makers of history were often ill advised because the kind of counsel storytellers could offer—for instance, advice on how to act under the circumstances of a crisis—was no longer fashionable.[11]

Meanwhile, global capitalism has prompted an even less stable sociopolitical environment as mirrored in increasingly nervous cultural reverberations on the local plane. Its new mediascape stages a simulacrum of the ancient storytelling profession, wherein the world turns into an endless spectacle, while fake news and various kinds of crises and conspiracy tales threaten to annihilate the benign effects of this art like nothing before. Moreover, the widespread use of communication gadgets affords a new dimension of thought control and surveillance that by far exceeds the measures taken by totalitarian regimes in the past. Nanson argues that

> in fast capitalism, products are produced and sold as rapidly as possible to reap as much profit as possible as fast as possible. . . . In their pursuit of maximum profit the corporate media forge a conformity of thought and fashion, a homogenizing blandness that is destroying traditional culture around the world and that sanctions mediocrity and ignorance. . . . The political nature of decision-making sinks out of view. The ideology of market economics is not seriously questioned outside the polders of academia and counterculture; it is simply accepted as the way the world is. The supremacy of that ideology thereby undermines the possibility of ethical debate about its social, environmental, and spiritual consequences.[12]

Throughout the twentieth century, such ethical debates were relegated to the niches of noncommercial cultural production. Meanwhile, along with the formation of loosely organized local groups and larger institutionalized networks connecting socially engaged

9. Nanson, *Words of Re-Enchantment*, 79.
10. Nanson, 85.
11. Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Essays* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2019), 61–84 (ebook edition).
12. Nanson, *Words of Re-Enchantment*, 107.

art and cultural activism across the globe, change seems afoot. Empowered by new forms, themes, and theories, emergent social movements have begun to incorporate oral storytelling techniques into their discourse in order to further their environmental, feminist, queer, social-justice, and other trajectories.[13] These attempts to counter the ruling ideology and usher in alternative, less destructive worldviews are astutely outlined by Haraway in her collection of stories that advise how to "stay with the trouble":

> Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.[14]

The origin of said trouble is human-induced environmental degradation, and her recipe for a morally and socially satisfying life is to reach out beyond the prevailing political structures, ideologies, and utopian dreams by actively engaging with the present through reconciliation with the material world at large or, in her words, to make kin with "all the oddkin." On the sociopolitical plane, Hong Kong's population has gathered invaluable experience with such a politics of reconciliation from below through negotiating and making trouble under the British colonial regime and thereafter. To protest creatively in pursuit of improvements for the community's livelihood has been an essential strategy of enabling from below among the disenfranchised residents. Over time, it provided the unique cultural landscape of a place where, for a long period of time, the ruling elites considered aggressive promotion of business as the singular road toward prosperity and stability. Accompanying the recent escalation of dissent with Beijing's emulation of this policy, the residents' kin-making repertoire was enriched by new forms of community-centered art and environmental projects while the time-tested alternate rhythm of protesting and withdrawing is further developed and explicitly articulated in the "be water" tactics of various, loosely connected groups participating in the activities.[15]

13. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199678402.001.0001.
14. Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.
15. See, among others, Edmund W. Cheng, "Street Politics in a Hybrid Regime: The Diffusion of Political Activism in Post-Colonial Hong Kong," *China Quarterly* 226 (June 2016): 383–406, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000394; Stéphanie Cheung, "Taking Part: Participatory Art and the Emerging Civil Society in Hong Kong," *World Art* 5,

Storytelling In-between Worlds

Looking back at Hong Kong's literary, filmic, and artistic production from the 1950s to today, multiple stories constitute the undercurrent of the periodically erupting local struggles for human rights and livability. No matter whether articulating nostalgia for the distant home in case of the early mainland refugees or worries about the erasure of the city's history toward the end of the twentieth century and thereafter; whether temporarily escaping into the cinematographic dreamscapes of an imaginary Chinese empire or imagining the horrors of a dystopian future; whether addressing the city's housing problems or the population's anxieties in view of the 1997 handover, from the first wave of Mainland Chinese immigrants till now; a wealth of popular as well as highbrow literary, filmic, and other aesthetically packaged narratives pointed to these social issues while insisting on the legalization of citizen demands for active participation in their hometown's cultural and sociopolitical design. The stories, especially when turned into the globally successful, culturally hybrid Hong Kong-style movies, have spurred the formation of a local spirit based on the wish to feel at home, build a community, and be one's own master. Naturally, expectations were high when the 1984 joint declaration for what looked like a pathway to decolonization was signed—only to be shattered by the Beijing regime's violent suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen student protests. Since then, yearly Tiananmen vigils, culture festivals, mass protests against unpopular policies, and many other forms of highly visible activism proliferated.[16] To witness Hong Kong's citizens' eager political engagement for their city after the end of the colonial regime could have filled Beijing with pride and confidence. However, like Danny the Dog's patron in Louis Leterrier's movie *Unleashed* starring Jet Li,[17] Mainland China's officials tragically put their obsession with ownership above citizens' hopes for the future.

The officially circulated Hong Kong stories on the other hand, no matter whether under British colonialism or thereafter, continued to stress the place's miraculous economic success while painting the image of a happy, prosperous cosmopolitan community. Downplaying both regimes' clashes with the local population, this master narrative perpetuates the colonial story of Hong Kong's origins as a tiny fishing village awaiting

no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 143–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2015.1016584; Pei-yi Lu and Phoebe Wong, "Art/Movement as a Public Platform: Artistic Creations in the Sunflower Movement and the Umbrella Movement," in *Art and the City: Worlding the Discussion Through a Critical Artscape*, ed. Jason Luger and Julie Ren (London; New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 52–56; Tai-lok Lui, Stephen W. K. Chiu, and Ray Yep, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Hong Kong* (London: Routledge, 2019); Yau Wen, *Performing Identities: Performative Practices in Post-Handover Hong Kong Art & Activism* (PhD thesis, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong,, 2018), https://issuu.com/wenyau/docs/thesis_whole_print_a5_issuu; and Winnie L. M. Yee, "Contemplating Land: An Ecocritique of Hong Kong," in *Chinese Environmental Humanities: Practices of Environing at the Margins*, ed. Chia-ju Chang (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan Springer, 2019), 271–88.

16. Lui, Chiu, and Yep, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Hong Kong*.

17. Louis Leterrier, dir., Unleashed (in French: *Danny the Dog*; France, UK, and USA: EuropaCorp, 2005).

first British development and then Chinese decolonization. Since 1997, Mainland Chinese officials took control over Hong Kong's historiographic representation; for instance, by means of an exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of History, which offered a grand narrative of the city's smooth reunification with the homeland while glossing over the increasingly unpopular governance enacted by the post-handover chief executives.[18]

Underneath and beyond the master narratives, Hong Kong's story was told from many different perspectives and in multiple affective keys. In his literary oeuvre, Lingnan University professor of literature and film studies, poet, and fiction writer Ping-kwan Leung (1949–2013) depicted a troubled yet at the same time enchanted city between worlds and forever in motion. He moreover cooperated with colleagues and friends in interdisciplinary cultural projects that successfully broke through the conventional storyline. In his view, cultural reconciliation would be the silver bullet to overcome the ideological gap between the Mainland and the postcolonial city, to be reached through fostering the two protagonists' mutual understanding in full view of the different social, economic, and political background of the returned community. The 1989 Tiananmen incident exposed how narrow the space for dialogue had become, though, and Leung's elegiac poems contemplate this tragic turn of events in a gloomy mood.[19] However, he stubbornly continued to write poetry that clads the need for reconciliation into subtly humorous lyrical images of a tarnished yet indissoluble, intimate relationship. "Sushi for Two" (1997) is among the most well-known representing the latter type. A platter of sushi, shared by a couple of lovers whose relationship has grown tired over the years, offers the opportunity to contemplate their desires but also the grievances and lesions that contributed to their mutual estrangement. No matter what, the poem concludes, there is no other way than to continue negotiating in pursuit of whatever happiness may still be available under the circumstances:

> When love is no more evening meals are mere consumption of matter/When home is no more maybe only the soul of clams will give shelter?/From different cities we came, with different winters behind us/We enjoy each other's bright hues but what keeps us apart?/I chew slowly digesting your deep sea fibre/You go still in the noise as I melt on your tongue.[20]

18. Chu, *Found in Transition*; Wu, *Reconfiguring Colonial Local Relations*, 1–7, passim.
19. See Leung in Mary Shuk-han Wong and Betty Ng, eds., *Leung Ping Kwan, A Retrospective* 回看, 也斯*: 1949–2013* (Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2014), 92–113.
20. Ping-kwan Leung, "Sushi for Two," in *Travelling with a Bitter Melon: Selected Poems (1973–1998)*, ed Martha Cheung, trans. Martha Cheung and Ping-kwan Leung (Hong Kong: Asia 2000, 2000), 249.

In some of his post-Tiananmen works resignation prevails though. Reflecting on how to build and maintain a however makeshift home for oneself and one's beloved, his "Conversation among the Ruins" (1994) transposes Giorgio de Chirico's post–WWI painting into today's Hong Kong. Resounding with Sylvia Plath's poetic elegy on her broken relationship by the same title, this contemporary Hong Kong home is not an elegant mansion like hers but rather a modest place drummed up with "a few essential furnishings" and a "vestige of decorum," where "the feeling of home" is only temporarily forged before the pillars gradually fall apart and everything inside and outside the room "dissolve[s] in the twilight." In the end, nothing is left to remember, not even the couple's just-finished conversation over dinner:

> From the very beginning, it has all come to this. I find myself flopped out in some hollow in the wilds, suit completely rumpled. . . . The bric-a-brac of a lifetime strewn among the ruins of old abodes, never to be retrieved. . . . Before it's gone for good, I try to recollect our long conversation over the dinner table and I wonder: what was it we talked about?[21]

Obviously, Leung's restrained aesthetic reflections on the conflict, as well as his cautioning that Hong Kong's story is difficult to tell, continue to be valid today. As the statistics provided by Marcelo Duhalde and Han Huang (2019) show, there is a continuity of public protest activities from the leftist, anticolonial riots in the late 1960s to the 2014 Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) movement and further up to the 2019 demonstrations. Their figures also indicate a dramatic upsurge of mobilized protesters since 2003.[22]

Subjected to Beijing's two tales of one city—the official jubilant reunification theme and a semiofficial vituperating about the Hong Kong people's enduring colonial contamination—the city found itself stuck between two sovereigns' colonial and nationalist narratives. And whereas the British government had, if only to some modest extent, been responsive to negotiating with residents, events took a sharp turn when the post-handover regime began to implement its polarizing policy. Among the corrosive measures taken was a hotline pressuring Hongkongers to report on anyone taking part in a class boycott for universal suffrage in September 2014. According to Yiu-wai Chu, it resembled a cultural revolution-style action leading to the city's community becoming even more uprooted and torn apart.[23] Moreover, despite various efforts by the pro–Beijing political establishment to display their local engagement, nearly all critical decisions were ultimately made in China without much

21. Ping-kwan Leung, "Conversation among the Ruins," trans. Jennifer Feeley, in *Leung Ping Kwan*, *A Retrospective*, 149.
22. See also Cheng, "Street Politics."
23. Chu, *Found in Transition*, 39–40.

consideration for the residents' opinion after the 1997 handover. In response, an increasing number of mostly low-budget films began to tell apocalyptic stories that painted a dark picture of Hong Kong's declining institutions, economy, and local culture. Staging Hong Kong as a global neocolonial specter, these movies—among them *Ten Years*, *The Midnight After*, and *Aberdeen*[24]—forcefully convey residents' growing anxiety. Hope for the future gave way to disillusionment and an atmosphere of morbidity.

From Distant Kin to Intimate Enemies

Meanwhile, the battle of narratives goes on. On August 13, 2019, when the Hong Kong antiextradition law protests had gone into their tenth week, a blogger in the *People's Daily* recounted his experience with "Hong Kong's trash youth" at Hong Kong International Airport, where he claims to have overheard a "foreigner" admonishing a young protester by whom he felt incommoded:

> Hong Kong and Taiwan are part of China, this is publicly acknowledged by the world. If you need work, then go and look for work!

Adding that "the Hong Kong police already act with utmost restraint," the Laowai's (which literally translates as "foreign buddy") words of wisdom, however, could not awaken the young protester to reason, the anonymous blogger laments. Calling his counterpart deviant, narrow-minded and irrational, he concludes by repeating the foreigner's advice and adding his own words. Instead of making trouble and embarking on an evil path, the former should pursue a virtuous life.[25] The disrespectful mode of the narrative echoes earlier voices from the mainland.[26]

24. Zune Kwok, Fei-pang Wong, Jevons Au, Kwun-Wai Chow, Ka-leung Ng, dir., *Ten Years* (Hong Kong: Ten Years Studio, 2015); Fruit Chan, dir., *The Midnight After* (Hong Kong: One Ninety Films, 2014); Ho-cheung Pang, dir., *Aberdeen* (Hong Kong: Sun Entertainment Culture, 2014). On the impact of *Ten Years*, see Karen Fang, "*Ten Years*: What Happened to the Filmmakers behind the Dystopian Hong Kong Indy Film?" *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 10, 2017, https://hongkongfp.com/2017/07/10/ten-years-happened-filmmakers-behind-dystopian-hong-kong-indy-film/; and Helena Yuen-wai Wu, "Reconfiguring Colonial Local Relations through Things, Places and Bodies in Hong Kong Culture and Society" (PhD thesis, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, Zürich, 2019), https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/174131.

25. *People's Daily* (blog), "The Trash Youth That Refuses to Wake Up," (人民微评：叫不醒的废青), Sohu, August 13, 2019, http://www.sohu.com/a/333375376_260616.

26. Jonathan Watts reports on the conflict, quoting Peking University professor Qingdong Kong who, in an interview, called Hong Kong protesters bastards, thieves, and dogs of the British Imperialists. See Jonathan Watts, "Chinese Professor Calls Hong Kong Residents 'Dogs of British Imperialists,'" *The Guardian*, January 24, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/24/chinese-professor-hong-kong-dogs. See also Yiu-wai Chu, *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 29.

In an attempt to soothe this conflict, renowned Taiwanese writer and former culture minister Ying-tai Lung responded to the massive criticism of Hong Kong's protesters by Chinese state media. On September 2, 2019, she wrote on Facebook:

> There is an egg, on the ground, in the garden. The fear of brute military suppression sits heavily on everyone's mind. Each day it gets closer. And yet, many mainland Chinese view the protests in Hong Kong with scorn and derision, loudly sharing in the official critique. The violent tactics used by the protestors might prove to have been a grave strategic error, for which a heavy price will certainly be paid. But the masses of young people who have walked into the streets of Hong Kong in 2019 are not naïve. They know what kind of iron wall stands before them, and what puny, fragile eggs they are in the face of it. These teens and twenty-somethings know that when the moment for official reckoning arrives, their homes, their lives, their futures can all come to ruin.[27]

Lung furthermore contextualized the "five demands" of the protesters—social equity, distributive justice, thorough implementation of the rule of law, government transparency, and full participation of citizens in the polity—with the core principles articulated in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) constitution, arguing that these are identical with the protesters' demands. In fact, they are all "commonly held values." Rather than maligning Hongkongers as colonial collaborators and condemning them as unruly separatists or even "enemies of the nation," Mainland China would therefore be better advised to learn more about Hong Kong's complicated history and make an effort to understand, with a degree of humility, its citizens' local attachments and concerns. Lung hints at the role of historiography when stating that a violent suppression of the protests would be remembered as Beijing's betrayal of Hong Kong, not the other way around.[28]

The Chinese state media response was hostile, accusing her of "deliberately sowing discord between mainland China and Hong Kong."[29] Evidently, the two parties were telling a different story of the protests. While the blogger claimed to tell his story in order to wake the protesters from their alleged sleep of unreason, the other advocated in favor of these same, asking those in power to listen carefully to the protesters' claims and to develop a conciliatory attitude based on shared values and mutual understanding. Yet, they predictably both failed to reach their goals. Interestingly, the Taiwanese

27. YingtaiLung, "To Suppress Hongkongers with Military Force Is to Forsake Hong Kong," *Epoch Times*, September 5, 2019, http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/19/9/4/n11499276.htm; English translation by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow, " 'The Greatness of a Great Nation Cannot Come Only From Missiles': Lung Yingtai on the Hong Kong Protests," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (blog), October 1, 2019, https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/greatness-great-nation-come-missiles-lung-ying-tai-hong-kong-protests/.
28. Lung, "To Suppress Hongkongers."
29. Lung.

author's story is more in accordance with the early CCP's directives on handling contradictions among the people than the critical voices from today's mainland. On May 1, 1957, a directive of the Central Committee of the CCP was issued in the *People's Daily*. It offered advice on how to handle contradictions among the people. Using the ancient proverb quoted above, the text points out that

> when criticizing, or in dialogic conversation, one should encourage criticism, and resolutely implement to "allow everything that is known freely to be spoken out; do not blame the speaker and take note of the warning." The principle of "change what needs to be corrected and encourage [the speaker who criticizes] if there is no such issue" must be applied correctly in order to not sweepingly affirm our own affairs and reject other people's criticism.[30]

In historical hindsight, the 1950s leadership quickly abandoned its own principles, which leaves us worrying about modern Chinese history tragically repeating itself in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the local stories continue to expose the extraordinary spirit of attunement of Hongkongers, which helped them cope with their complicated colonial situation. In the wake of the recent protests and Beijing's increasingly unaccommodating reactions, however, their spirit of hope, tolerance, and reconciliation is giving way to narratives of anger or disillusionment. The picture of a street performance on Hong Kong Island in early December 2019 illustrates the increasingly poisoned "family affair" (see figure 2.2). The male actor is bringing home his bride by force, who is tied to a rope together with bricks and empty bottles. This hints at both China's traditional patriarchal system and the western habit of tying noisy stuff to the newlyweds' car so as to announce their happiness and bright future. The allegory of Hong Kong as the hapless token in an arranged marriage evokes memories of the fifth generation of Chinese directors' focus on abused wives and concubines in their 1990s movies. What is different in the present street theater scene is its hybrid symbolism: without a vigilant civil society, modernity only repeats the old system's oppressive patterns in new clothes, the scene suggests.

Sonic Histories

On occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the handover, curators at Karin Weber Gallery showed a 1997 immigrant's letter sent from Australia to eight artists, inviting

30. "Directive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Rectification Movement" (中国共产党中央委员会关于整风ff动的指示), *Renmin Ribao*, Beijing, May 1, 1957.

Figure 2.2: Two Street artists on Hong Kong Island, December 8, 2019. *Source*: © Mary Wong, courtesy of the photographer.

each of them to respond creatively to it. In the handwritten text, the refugee describes his new life as free but lacking the emotional comfort of being with his friends who had stayed behind. The resulting exhibition titled *Composing Stories with Fragments of Time* centers around messages having become partly illegible; for instance, because words (and narrative images) are missing or randomly reassembled.[31] The exhibition thus offers a haptic escape route by equaling the passing of time with the rapidly receding scripts and sounds of diverse experiences of displacement and exile. Art critic Yeung Yang interprets the artists' multisensory representations as successful efforts to sideline

31. Enid Tsui, "Hong Kong Handover-Themed Exhibitions Give Voice to Artists," *South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2017, https://www.scmp.com/culture/arts-entertainment/article/2101207/hong-kong-handover-themed-exhibitions-give-artists.

the "grand narratives of history in favor of an intimate, all-too-human encounter."[32] To follow Rey Chow's astute comments on the materiality and elusive character of sound, the aesthetic experience was thus extended beyond visual appeal and verbal communication, stimulating "acousmatic listening" to the letter writer's absent voice.[33] Absent sound was also invoked in Luke Ching's allusion to John Lennon's 1971 song "Imagine." His installation titled *Imagine There's No Countries, Imagine There's No Heaven*, comprised, for example, a pile of blank envelopes with a sunken well holding flip books with stamps from the colonial era (see figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Luke Ching Chin-wai, "Imagine There's No Countries, Imagine There's No Heaven," 2017. Featured in the exhibition *Composing Stories with Fragments of Time*. *Source*: South China Morning Post/Enid Tsui. © Karin Weber Gallery.

32. Yeung Yang, "Composing Stories with Fragments of Time—Eight Hong Kong Artists' Intimate Response to 20 Years of Changes," COBO Social, August 1, 2017, https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/composing-stories-with-fragments-of-time-eight-hong-kong-artists-intimate-response-to-20-years-of-changes/.
33. Rey Chow, "Listening after 'Acousmaticity,'" in *Sound Objects*, eds. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 113–29.

Reflecting on this turn to the as yet unspecified, or unidentified, aspects of chronotopic configurations, Yang draws attention to a third, frequently muted aesthetic category beyond the eye and the ear, the tactile sense,[34] suggesting that "sometimes, one doesn't have to rely on knowledge to be touched; to know, however, is to be touched differently."[35] It is precisely this embodied knowledge affording audiences "to be touched differently" that is seen to be endangered among Hong Kong's artists and activists.

Likewise, the acousmatic aspects of storytelling—the presence, or conspicuous absence, of sounds whose origin is concealed—were foregrounded in an earlier performance on occasion of Germany's Weimar Art Festival. *One Sound of the Histories* (2015) by Isaac Chong Wai, a Berlin-based artist from Hong Kong, united international participants in each telling his or her story simultaneously, and in their chosen language, on Weimarplatz.[36] The resulting "white noise" uncannily resounded with the historical inscriptions of Weimarplatz (renamed Jorge-Semprun-Platz in 2017), where not long before, the fascist and socialist regimes had successively produced dark political meanings. Employing Henri Lefebvre's threefold concept of space, and considering the geohistorical background of the artist, Liza Kam and Wing Man argue that the art performance on this location has something in common with the protest movement against the demolition of Hong Kong's Star Ferry and Queen's Piers in 2006 and 2007 and the ensuing developmental megaprojects. The similarly uneasy reckoning with the colonial inscriptions of Edinburgh Place, as articulated in one of the activist projects that collected grassroots memories connected to the place, did not prevent Hong Kong's city planning bureaucracy from destroying the last remaining architectural signs of the city's past (roughly) one and a half centuries. Connecting the buildings with their childhood, and thus demonstrating how lived urban space exceeds one particular time-space configuration and its political appropriations, the interviewees revealed their intense nostalgic feelings. In the eyes of citizens, the demolition was therefore not an act of decolonization but rather followed the government's cold developmentalist logic.[37]

If the aforementioned art works question and complicate the national historical master narrative, statistical figures may not fare any better—even if produced outside the interest-driven discourse of governments. For example, the discrepancy, and hence unreliability, of the number of broadcasted protest-march participants is exemplified by Marcelo Duhalde and Han Huang in their comparison of official and unofficial

34. Pablo Maurette, *The Forgotten Sense: Meditations on Touch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
35. Yang, "Composing Stories with Fragments."
36. Isaac Wai Chong, "One Sound of the Histories," *ArtAsiaPacific Almanac* 11 (2016): 241.
37. Liza Kam and Wing Man, "Artistic Activism as Essential Threshold from the 'Peaceful, Rational, Non-violence' Demonstrations towards Revolution: Social Actions in Hong Kong in the Pre-Umbrella Movement Era," *Art and the City: Worlding the Discussion through a Critical Artscape*, eds. Jason Luger and Julie Ren (New York: Routledge, 2017), 115–27.

statistics.[38] Yet, even the alluring audiovisual protest happenings orchestrated by local cultural celebrities and anonymous street artists alike were prone to misappropriations. The latter's impromptu art—among them the icons of the 2014 protest movement: protest anthem,[39] Lennon Wall, and Umbrella Man[40]—have positively surprised the world with their creativity and determination to bring about peaceful change. Nonetheless, even the most catchpenny stagings of public protest were inadvertently rendered toothless when encountering a well-meaning yet corrosive media publicity; for instance, by tourist guide Lonely Planet's advertisement of Hong Kong's protest scene as a colorful spectacle worth visiting in its "Top 10 cities for 2012" edition.[41] Reporting on the Lonely Planet's 2012 choice of places to go, CNN Travel offered a sunny ocean view picture accompanied by the unaffected catchphrase: "As Hong Kong protesters demand more democracy, enjoy the view from the harbour."[42] While the tourist industry's lobbying may have attracted affluent cosmopolitan travelers from across the globe, its blurring of global consumer spectacle and local activism fraught with personal risk was not necessarily helpful amidst the mounting unrest in the city.[43]

By highlighting the people's grief and suffering in the escalating conflict, King Fai Wong's award-winning video *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong* eschews such misreadings. Focusing on sound, color, and movement, it features choreographer and dancer Cheuk Yin Mui's dance performance with a traditional Chinese umbrella. The film's polyphonic, wordless storytelling provides a profoundly sensual, aesthetic abstraction that successfully evades diverted interpretations of the protests by either the political establishment's denunciation or commercial spectacularization. The dancer tells her story of the protests as a beautiful dream that quickly turns into a nightmare. From there, the camera travels with her into an empty, brightly lit space symbolizing suspense between death and transcendence. The opening, fast-forward shot of people gathering in the streets, many of them with umbrellas, is underlaid with the sound of church bells ringing, as if calling them to mass. While the bells continue to ring, a cut leads

38. Marcelo Duhalde and Han Huang, "History of Hong Kong Protests: Riots, Rallies and Brollies," *South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2019, https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/hong-kong/article/3016815/hong-kong-protest-city/index.html?src=social.

39. "'Glory to Hong Kong': Hundreds Gather to Sing 'Protest Anthem,'" *The Guardian*, September 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lEhgTBQX2kU.

40. Ivan Watson, Pamela Boykoff, and Vivian Kam, "Street Becomes Canvas for 'Silent Protest' in Hong Kong," CNN, November 11, 2014, https://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/08/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-art/index.html.

41. Antony Dapiran, *City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong* (Melbourne: Penguin Specials, 2017), 5.

42. Jane Leung, "Best Cities to Travel to in 2012," CNN, November 3, 2011, http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/escape/lonely-planet-best-cities-travel-2012–716747/.

43. Ming-sho Ho, *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 188–90. See also Hong Kong Free Press, "Video: In Full—The Dramatic 'Fishball Revolution' Clashes as They Unfolded," Hong Kong Free Press, February 10, 2016, https://hongkongfp.com/2016/02/10/video-in-full-and-uncut-the-dramatic-fishball-revolution-clashes-as-they-unfolded/.

onto a dark space with what looks like a card box opening, from where Mui enters the scene. In front of her, a heap of white paper flakes. They cover the umbrella she finally spots while excitedly scooping up handfuls of flakes and sending them into the air in wave-like movements. At this moment, Hin Yan Wong's musical arrangement[44] seeps into the bell sounds and gradually takes over. After all flakes have been sent floating, the closed umbrella is picked up by the dancer. In a slow gesture lasting twenty seconds (minutes 2:50 to 3:10), the dancer closes the umbrella while pointing its tip toward the camera lens for viewers to appreciate its shape of a flower—a hint at Hong Kong's local emblem, the bauhinia flower.

Next, she finds herself standing in front of street barriers. The background scenery of open umbrellas and police awakens to life, and the police who at first appeared in their regular blue uniforms are, from minute 4:42 onward, wearing riot gear. A sign with the message "Warning Tear Smoke" arises from the midst of the police blockage at minute 5:37, while Wong's voice intonates a wordless, elegiac melody. Smoke enters the scene at minute 6:06, quickly filling the whole screen (see figures 2.4 and 2.5).

By this time, the dancer is no longer on her feet but performing in bent, sitting, and crawling movements until she lies still on the flake-covered ground, seemingly defeated, umbrella by her side (minute 7:40). Upon this, she enters another realm indicated by the smoke's dissolution in soft back lighting that surrounds her upper body and upheld umbrella like a halo at minute 12:27, and the background scenery starts shifting to and fro between the real—marked by police, demonstrating people, umbrellas, and street barricades—and a dreamlike, dark empty space. As Mui slowly raises her umbrella, the music softens and the real and dreamlike backgrounds melt and collapse into each other, producing kaleidoscopic patterns into which the swirling umbrella poetically immerses itself. At minute 13:30, the camera abruptly shifts to the Hong Kong skyline by night seen from above, and from there down to the people in the streets. They pierce the darkness with their cellphone flashlights and perform human chains on a public screen while the camera passes by them. By the end of the performance, the camera's gaze rests on the umbrella spinning unhurriedly on the ground, as if moving by its own intent.

Despite its elegiac tune, the video's wordless, intensely poetic dramaturgy relies upon a restrained, contemplative mood. The final scene presents the dissolution of the violent real into a colorful dance of mirrored fragments and shadows and then moves further into the aimless, detached gesture of the spinning umbrella. This ending hints at a different temporality beyond the historical past/s and lived present. Neither utopian, nor hopeless, Wong's main protagonist Mui "stays with the trouble," to use Donna

44. Rive Gauche, "7° FFCF—L'angolo degli Autori—'Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong,'" Firenze Filmcorti Festival, accessed June 13, 2020, https://firenzefilmcortifestival.com/7-ffcf-langolo-degli-autori-umbrella-dance-for-hong-kong/.

Figure 2.4: Still from King Fai Wong, *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong*. *Source*: © King Fai Wong, courtesy of the director.

Figure 2.5: Still from King Fai Wong, *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong*. *Source*: © King Fai Wong, courtesy of the director.

Haraway's formula, by engaging with the real and indeed aesthetically sublimating it. Supported by the video's composition in sober colors laid out in a liminal space between dream and death, Mui's umbrella dance counteracts the noisy mode of the street protests while endorsing Hongkongers' peaceful struggle for civil rights and at the same time mourning the victims. In an essay on Mui written in 2004, Ping-kwan Leung

had praised her dialogic fusion of traditional Chinese folk dance with contemporary experimental forms.[45] Fifteen years later, the director of *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong* summoned Mui's transcultural art to engage the world in the city's struggle for democracy. The cinematographic call for action merges aesthetic pursuits and political gestures, which is transmitted in the cover image showing Mui and her defiantly upheld umbrella in front of the peaceful demonstrators (see figure 6).

Sonic artist Samson Young, in his multimedia art installations, addresses the contradictions of protest art by actively involving audiences in the performance.[46] His compositions foster critical reflection by means of foregrounding the hidden ideological operations of music and seek social reconciliation by working with the members of oppositional political factions. For his 2017 Venice Biennale creation *Songs for Disaster Relief*,[47] he invited the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions' (HKFTU) Kwan Sing Choir to take part. Though belonging to the pro–Beijing camp, the HKFTU choir eagerly agreed to coproduce Young's muted rendition of the charity song "We Are the

Figure 2.6: Still from King Fai Wong, *Umbrella Dance for Hong Kong*, 2019. *Source*: © King Fai Wong, courtesy of the director.

45. Ye Si (Ping-kwan Leung), *Ye Si kan Xianggang* 也斯看香港 (Hong Kong in Ye Si's eyes) (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2011), 153–57.
46. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012).
47. Kwok Ying, "Curatorial Statement," westKowloon, accessed June 14, 2020, https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/songsfordisasterrelief/curatorial-statement-2272. See also Hili Perlson, "Samson Young to Represent Hong Kong in Venice," artnet News, July 14, 2016, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/samson-young-represent-hong-kong-2017-venice-biennale-557369.

World." All that is left in the recording is agitated whisper.[48] Satisfied with his aesthetic criticism of the charity industry's compromising of music, he was moreover positively surprised by the success of his "reaching across the aisles."[49] In a similar vein, he performed birds' voices in an exhibition hall standing on a scaffold-like structure high above visitors in an installation titled *Canon* (2015–2016) wearing the colonial khaki uniform used by the Hong Kong police before blue uniforms were introduced in 2004. His nature-mimicking twittering questioned the anthropocentric approach of global art fares while also critically engaging with the contradictions of state violence as represented by the transitional uniform and his long-range acoustic device (LRAD) stick—a sonic weapon of crowd control that is also used to deter wildlife from

Figure 2.7: Samson Young, *Canon*, 2016, drawing (charcoal, ink, pastel, pencil, stamp and watercolor on paper), sound performance (for one performer with audio interface, laptop, Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), microphone), and installation (3D printed water basin, custom-designed bench, sound track, stamped text on wall, wired fencing); installation viewed at Art Basel Unlimited 2016. © Samson Young. Image courtesy of the artist, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Galerie Giesla Capitain and Team Gallery. Photo by Simon Vogel.

48. Samson Young, "We Are the World, as performed by the HK Federation of Trade Unions Choir (Muted Situation #21)," This Music Is False, 2017, https://www.thismusicisfalse.com/we-are-the-world.

49. Andrew Nunes, "You'll Never Hear 'We Are the World' the Same Way: 'Songs for Disaster Relief' Takes Aim at Charity Singles," Vice, July 11, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bjxd85/samson-young-we-are-the-world-hong-kong-biennale.

Figure 2.8: Samson Young, *Canon*, 2016. © Samson Young. Image courtesy of the artist, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Galerie Giesla Capitain and Team Gallery. Photo by Simon Vogel.

entering human security zones.[50] Therefore, Young's contribution to the Hong Kong story is at least threefold: it provides a fresh angle on musical performance and its ties to local community life, encourages the rapprochement of different ideological camps, and uncouples sound from music while underscoring its historical and geopolitical connectivities. If Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" (1970)[51] could inspire a Cantonese charity song version (1991), and the Cantonese charity song version inspired Samson Young to interrogate the global charity industry, then maybe the various emergent narrative and performative experiments with (re)telling Hong Kong's story without words can also help to solve the present storytellers' predicament—while resonating with Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence" (1966).[52]

Conclusion: Silent Hong Kong

On occasion of the new national security law for Hong Kong, local and international media warned that this would be the end of Hong Kong. Simultaneously, messages from concerned artists and cultural workers alerting to the city's impending cultural erasure appeared, uncannily resonating with Rachel Carson's warnings about species extinction due to the agroindustrial overuse of toxic substances.[53] Even until today, her evocation of future spring seasons without birdsong has not lost its power, inspiring environmental movements across the globe. In a similar vein, the decline of Hong Kong's local film industry was commented on melancholically as a case of cultural extinction. Fruit Chan's *The Midnight After* was advertised with the tagline of "Hong Kong was lost overnight"[54] whereas Ho-cheung Pang declared that his film *Aberdeen*, though also featuring symbols of death, was not about the end but "the beginning of the Hong Kong story."[55] On December 16, 2019, New York-based playwright Stefani Kuo published a video in response to the increasingly violent police actions against protesters in her hometown. Pleading to America for support, she describes how she imagines herself dying as one of the movement's victims in Hong Kong's streets while her father at home apologizes to the authorities for her misconduct as a protester.[56] Maybe the city's cultural survival is

50. CoBo, "Samson Young's Canon Performance at Art Basel Unlimited," YouTube, June 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foDd_DPAyA4.
51. Benirene Tang, "Bridge over Troubled Water Cantonese," YouTube, April 24, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfZAhF1vUb4.
52. A similar trajectory—namely, to defy the saber-rattling "battle of narratives" by focusing on the challenges, vicissitudes and moments of enchantment in daily life as faced by ordinary people in present Hong Kong—is pursued in the anthology of short stories titled *Quanri Gongying* (All-day breakfast). See Grace Mak et al., *Quanri Gongying* (全日供應) (All-day breakfast) (Hong Kong and Taipei: Wenhua gongfang/clickpress, 2017).
53. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston and Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Riverside Press, 1962).
54. Chu, *Found in Transition*, 1.
55. Chu, 181.
56. Stefani Kuo, "2047, #speechtohongkong," YouTube, accessed June 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ycvzUIZHjQ.

hanging by a thread but its citizens are determined to save their hometown. Even in the face of the failed dialogue leading to escalating state and protest violence, there are many literary, filmic, and art representations that convey hope that Hong Kong will be given another chance to reinvent itself from below.

In an essay on Samson Young's installation *Songs for Disaster Relief*, Yeung Yang muses on the meanings of honor and hope in our age of compromised humanitarianism.[57] In her view, the installation's neon lights resonate with Henry Giroux's concept of educated hope that not just envisions different histories but also different futures:

> Hope is . . . a pedagogical and performative practice that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents. Hope is the outcome of those educational practices and struggles. . . . Educated hope is a subversive force when it pluralizes politics by opening up a space for dissent, making authority accountable, and becoming an activating presence in promoting social transformation.[58]

So long as Hong Kong's fragmented, hybridized, muted histories continue to be told by its independent cultural producers, the future has not yet died. Multifarious aesthetic experiments with the amplitudes of discourse show that new narratives can be forged despite the narrowing space for public resistance. Attesting to Ferguson's argument about the multiple political functionalities of resistant silence,[59] the city seems to be staggering at the crossroads between the silence of death and extinction and the one foreboding a new beginning. Many of its residents are visionaries of alternative forms of kin making, among them environmental activists[60] and queer Sinophone communities[61] who passionately participate in this moment's departure. As the world sympathizes with their peaceful, art-inspired forms of resistance, it is to be hoped that a window of opportunity for dialogic reconciliation will open somewhere along the long march for democratic reforms so that the multiple reiterations of Bartleby's formula of "I would prefer not to" have a chance not to be the end but the beginning of a new story.

57. Yang Yeung, "Samson Young: 'Songs for Disaster Relief,' " International Association of Art Critics Hong Kong, August 21, 2017, http://www.aicahk.org/eng/reviews.asp?id=667&pg=1.
58. Henry A. Giroux, "When Hope Is Subversive," *Tikkun* 19, no. 6. (2004): 39.
59. Kennan Ferguson, "Silence: A Politics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 49–65.
60. Yee, "Contemplating Land."
61. Howard Chiang and Larissa Heinrich, eds., *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Tragedy of Errors at Warp Speed

The 2019 Unrest

SAM HO

Abstract

The 2019 unrest in Hong Kong was the result of complex factors simmering over the years, culminating in a tragedy of errors unreeling at warp speed. This paper examines a few of the factors from the personal perspective of a Hong Kong-born Chinese American. Since the 1997 Retrocession, Hong Kong had been engaged in a unique version of post-colonial condition, "one country, two systems" (OCTS), meaning that it must contend with not only ways of a new beginning and ways of the former days but also ways for a future beginning—that of future China when OCTS expires. Hong Kong had also been conditioned to look at itself through the Western gaze and its future through Western imagination, resulting in self-objectification. Many of its people were consumed by misguided idealism that compelled citizens toward a profound mistrust of China while turning a blind eye to the country's unique accomplishment. A powerful media dedicated to promoting the Western agenda further fanned the fire, turning the former colony into an unwitting proxy of the new Cold War waged by the United States on China. Such was a tragedy of errors that a movement launched against a worrisome rule, resulting in the passing of a law even more worrisome.

Keywords: 2019 Unrest in Hong Kong, post-colonial condition, proxy wars, Western gaze, Western media bias, China

Watching Hong Kong in the past year was like witnessing a tragedy of errors at seventy-two frames per second. The story begins as a comedy of manners on July 1, 1997, making errors of different magnitudes and on various sides. These errors occur slowly at first, then pick up the pace but will sometimes slow down. Repeating at intermittent speeds, the story sometimes accelerates, sometimes decelerates, and gradually turns tragic.

Then comes June 2019.

Developments pick up velocity exponentially; the story projects at warp speed, becoming a tragedy of epic proportions.

The Postcolonial Condition

The 2019 unrest in Hong Kong coalesced many factors into a complex mass of mostly well-meaning errors. Since 1997, parties on all sides, for the most part, intended to make Hong Kong better, but they took measures that clashed with each other. At variable intensities, tensions simmered until things exploded twenty-two years later. Many factors contributed to this conflagration and only a few are considered here.

Most former colonies cannot escape the postcolonial condition in which the conflict between a desire to establish new ways and an inability to discard old ones haunts the people in the developing or underdeveloped world after the departures of former colonizers. One major reason is that despite its evil nature, colonization was often implemented by developed countries with practices desirable, at least partly, in both practical and moral terms even though they were ironically implemented under far-from-moral circumstances. Making matters worse was that despite having a desirable moral dimension, those practices were often incongruous with local cultures. Making matters even worse was that the first decades of the post-colonial era after the end of World War II was dominated by two countries with powers that had been aptly labeled "super," a scenario characterized by profound ideological and political clashes. The entire world was dragged into the conflict named the Cold War, often against the will of the people who were not citizens of those two countries. The United States and the Soviet Union conducted proxy conflicts in many former colonies, plunging them into suffering of immense magnitude and preventing them from making meaningful attempts to try their own ways for their new beginnings.

Postcolonial Hong Kong is a unique variation of that condition. "One country, two systems" (OCTS) means the special administrative region (SAR) must contend with not only ways of a new beginning and ways of the former days but also ways for a future beginning—that of a future China when OCTS expires, when China will likely play an escalated role in the grand narrative. Balancing between the first two kinds of ways was difficult enough; adding a third kind to the mix made it much harder. Sadly, and obviously, all parties actively involved in trying to establish meaningful ways for postcolonial Hong Kong had not come close to finding a noteworthy balance in the first twenty-two years.

Western Gaze, Western Imagination

China had initially left the SAR pretty much alone, keeping watch but in all likelihood controlling in proxy through the proestablishment faction, which was engaged in an increasingly contentious conflict with the prodemocratic bloc. Neither side had

come up with viable plans to meet the complicated and difficult challenge. Both sides came off as simplistic, lacking political skills and ideological wisdom. The pro–China circle brandished the badge of patriotism to loyally do the bidding of Beijing; the pan-democracy camp hoisted the banner of universal suffrage to assume a posture of moral superiority. The latter's failure to muster any realistic political solution to balance the three kinds of ways mentioned previously was especially disappointing since not much was expected of the loyalists. To ascend the moral high ground by pursuing democracy was easy. To devise consequential ways to pursue democracy and to formulate a political system that can accommodate the complicated past of Hong Kong and China—and the geopolitical contentiousness of the present as well as the taxing, quickly evolving, and likely more contentious future—was hard. The pan-democrats settled for the easy.

Democracy is highly desirable. Yet, in an increasingly globalized era, democracy is proving increasingly lacking. Donald Trump being elected US president on an antienvironmental platform and keeping his campaign promise after winning the presidency is a vivid illustration. For those who believe in global warming, the environmental crisis is an urgent problem for all humanity. It is often argued that democracy gives people the power to vote off unacceptable officials. But when a democratically elected leader of a powerful country with under 5 percent of the world's population withdrew from international treaties to honor campaign promises, causing possibly irreparable damage to all humankind, the rest of the over 95 percent of humanity could do precious nothing about it. This is but one example of humanity's ongoing difficulty in finding balance between the part (in this case, a country) and the whole (all human beings). OCTS is a far-from-perfect system that needs constant adjustments and compromises to be effective; single-mindedly pursuing democracy for one "system" without consideration for how it works with the "country" is at best unwise.

In retrospect, the pan-democrats settling for the easy is not difficult to comprehend. Most of the early leaders on the prodemocracy side were colonial elites, many of them lawyers trained in and skilled with the common law observed by the British. They had never received any substantive education or training in political philosophy and practice. Nor were they conversant with the Chinese political and legal systems. That left them proficient in negotiating only one of the two systems and neglectful of the one country in OCTS, dutifully abiding by the West's narration of human history, leading the SAR's quest for democracy down the wrong path from the very beginning. Such was Hong Kong's political tradition that this significant deficiency continued to characterize the next generation of prodemocracy leaders and activists. The result was twenty-two continuous years of impasse, with less and less prospects for fruitful political agreement.

One major reason was that for over a hundred years, the people of Hong Kong had been guided to look at the world through Western eyes and to look at our future

through Western imagination. Asia is not the West, to state the obvious. Yet the West had never stopped trying to turn the East into a replica of itself, and such is the postcolonial condition that many in the East would eagerly go along. It is egotistic of the West and sad of the East—sadder still of humanity. Looking and imagining through the Western gaze, many Hong Kongers regarded ourselves—and Chinese people in general—with self-objectification, longing for political and moral solutions incongruous with the unique continuum of our history.

In films of the West, most pan shots move from left to right, in accordance with the left-to-right orientation of Western-written languages. Not all languages read from left to right. Right-to-left pans, when employed, usually signify something unusual will occur. Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, for example, opens with a leftward pan of the idyllic town where the story is set, subtly hinting that beneath all the peace and quiet lies unnoticed turbulence.

Right-to-left pans are routine in early Chinese and Japanese films, without the suggestiveness of Sirk's opening shot mentioned above and Westerners risk misreading some Asian films when watching with a Western gaze. Imagine if viewers in Hong Kong regarded their own cinema with the same gaze. Moreover, what if the postcolonial norms of gazing extend beyond cinema into how citizens of former colonies look at themselves, their cultures, and their histories?

Conditioned to pursue political orders without considerations for historical continuum and geopolitical reality, Hong Kong's pan-democrats strived to realize a Western ideal as though it was indeed universal. Their efforts were also driven by a conviction that in the practice of OCTS, China will become more like Hong Kong. Such a belief was well-intentioned but misguided, for China has its own idea for the future, an idea bolstered by forty years of progress and the development of an ecopolitical system alternative to that of the West. Its economic system, for example, is now often described as a free-market system with socialist and Chinese characteristics. After killing each other by the millions in the civil war arguing which Western system to adopt, the Chinese people finally figured out a way to help themselves—a system that blends capitalism and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Such a feat was consistent with East Asian culture, less inclined toward polarization like the West but more likely to find middle ways. "Cross the river touching one stone at a time," proposed Deng Xiaoping at the start of Reform and Opening (R&O). Instead of subscribing to any one established ideology, China would change course according to circumstances, dealing with the rapidly evolving world with flexibility. So significant was China developing an alternative system that the West's monopoly on writing humanity's narrative was meaningfully challenged.

The following short history of Hong Kong cinema demonstrates how a self-imposed Western gaze results in distorted views.

Misguided Idealism

In hindsight, it appears that the tragedy of errors started with the pan-democrats settling for the easy, mounting a moral high ground that was not difficult to scale. It was a failure in finding a balance between idealism and pragmatism. We wear our pragmatism like a badge of honor to complement our self-deprecating humor. From the folksy comedies of Yee Chau-shui and Sun Ma Sze Tsang in the 1950s to Michael Hui's urban clown fest and Jackie Chan's kung-fu slapstick in the 1970s to the *mo-lay-tau* masterpieces of Stephen Chow in the 1990s, celebrating the silly charm of pragmatism generated much laughter in Hong Kong theaters.[1]

Given China's long history of suffering and deprivation, audiences could relate with the dire necessity of pragmatism but take pleasure in deprecating it. A viewer using a Western gaze would never understand what makes pragmatism funny and relatable. The vast majority of Hongkongers simply focus on survival and life improvement. To pragmatic Hong Kong audiences, idealism is either a luxury for those who can afford it or an honor for the very few.

For a time, Hong Kong cinema most often celebrated idealism as a function of patriotism. Early and postwar films portray idealists fighting for a better China through physical prowess, intellectual endeavor, or selfless sacrifice. However, the tendency of Hong Kong cinema to portray idealism as driven by patriotism slowly began to change. Informed by social awareness and a sympathy toward the underprivileged, occasional films like Patrick Lung Kong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967) portrayed stories firmly rooted in Hong Kong, informed by sympathy toward the underprivileged.

Upon enjoying social and financial stability, Hong Kong audiences began to care about the marginalized and the unfortunate. These portrayals emanate an idealism not readily found in earlier films. During the booming 1980s of Hong Kong cinema, films like *Silent Love* (1986) and *The Lunatics* (1986) portrayed the physically and intellectually disabled. The compassion for the unfortunate in *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics* represents a collective awakening of the Hong Kong people that I term *fanrong lipin*: "doing good after becoming prosperous."

This prosperity idealism is a variation of the traditional Chinese idiom *facai lipin*, "doing good after becoming rich," that refers to those who perform good deeds to elevate their social status or self-image after making a fortune. Prosperous-but-not-rich

1. Chinese names in this essay will be cited in English according to translations or transliterations of how personalities are known, instead of the commonly-used "surname last" mode. This writer considers it a preferred way to capture the complicated transitions in history as China and its people adapt to the modern, increasingly globalized world. In certain instances, the use of surnames cannot be appropriately applied, such as "Sun Ma Sze Tsang," which means "New Ma Sze Tsang," an accepted stage name for the actor, who the public and the entertainment industry alike considered as a new version of the renowned opera and film star Ma Sze Tsang. In other words, there is no surname in the name "Sun Ma Sze Tsang." To insist on referring to him with a surname is actually imposing a Western notion on Hong Kong history.

audiences manifested a newfound idealism, whose focus shifted away from Chinese patriotism to Hong Kong concerns.[2]

Such an evolution of Hong Kong cinema illustrates how sustained prosperity further augments that tendency. The rise of what can be termed *simple realism* (*pingshi zhuyi*) evidences a narrative shift toward less patriotic but more altruistic idealism. Films like *Big Blue Lake* (2011), *Dot 2 Dot* (2014), and *Still Human* (2018) eschew the dramatic and the visceral, celebrating the restrained and the contemplative instead. Unlike the works of 1950s social realism, these low-budget films are less concerned with class injustice or wealth inequalities than with personal struggles and family dynamics. Informed by a humanistic longing for the natural and the basic, they aim not at escapist entertainment but at everyday authenticity. They are also anchored in local flavors, focusing not on metropolitan glamor but on the rhythms of humble neighborhoods.

Genuine idealism for the local infuses these otherwise apolitical films. Perhaps subconsciously they project a desire to reject burdens of China's past, refuse connections with the Mainland present, and ignore the looming Chinese future. This localized idealism is a fixation on the immediate, in both spatial and temporal terms. The idealism is also an attempt to establish a distinct identity, separate from the Chinese one but modeled after a Western one coalesced mostly from ways of the colonial past and values of the superpower present, that of the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. This postcolonial identity of localism materialized into an idealism prevalent among youths and millennials that magnifies Western values as though they are truly universal. Funneled into the former colony's political uniqueness, this idealism resulted in a single-minded quest for electoral democracy, imparted with a profound mistrust or even hatred of China. Colored by the self-loathing and white envy typical of the postcolonial psyche, the Hong Kong SAR's democratic movement came to be defined by a self-righteous pursuit of Western tenets, simplistic interpretations of Chinese history, and an unwitting prejudice toward present-day China.

This complex mix of emotions is in turn colored by increasingly intense social problems such as the housing crunch and diminishing career prospects due to the changing economic environment, resulting in misguided but passionate idealism that saw young protesters wielding signs saying, "President Trump, Please Liberate Hong Kong," waving flags of the United States and the United Kingdom, and, worst of all, the colonial flag. Colonialism is an enterprise of evil proportions. For idealistic youths raised in a postcolonial climate who had never experienced the injustice of colonization not to recognize it is at least understandable. For veteran political activists who regard themselves

2. Sam Ho, "An A for D & B for Its Cs: Middle-Class Sensibilities in the Studio's Early Years," in *A Different Brilliance: The D & B Story*, ed. Ching-ling Kwok, trans. Roberta Chow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020), 170, https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook_eng_03.pdf.

as democracy fighters not to denounce it is inexcusable. For seasoned Western journalists not to highlight it is disgraceful.

An Afghan Trap for China?

Part of the Hong Kong complexity is the United States. It is well documented that the United States has always interfered in other countries' internal affairs, both openly and covertly, the latter revealed only by delayed release of classified documents or occasional unsanctioned leaks like those by Michael Snowden. Here in Hong Kong, an important ideological battleground of the Cold War, the United States had been aggressive in efforts to win hearts and minds. Our film industry, for example, was divided into camps of left and right during that conflict, with right-wing companies receiving American backing, such as Asia Pictures, funded at least partly by the CIA-backed Committee for Free Asia.[3] The SAR remained a contested space after the Cold War, as tension between the United States and China slowly rose. The US Congress-funded National Endowment for Democracy, a CIA offshoot, is on record for financially supporting local democracy organizations; other activist groups had also received funds from US institution such as the labor organization Solidarity Center. Last year, former legislator Leung Chung-hang was captured on a leaked Skype conversation with regime-change activist Guo Wengui, who promised financial support and protection from the US government; Guo had partnered with former White House strategist and far-right hardliner Steve Bannon to form the Rule of Law Fund to challenge the People's Republic of China, later announcing plans to overthrow the Communist Party of China (CPC) to form the Federal State of New China.

The extent to which activist groups are supported by US and Western organizations remains unclear. Yet there is no denying that the United States had launched campaigns of various shades all over the world against foreign governments, often with declared altruism. Tension between respecting national sovereignty and promoting regime change in the name of so-called universal but mostly Western values is a contentious moral issue, with often-simpleminded arguments from both sides. Even intelligent views can be equally divergent. Scholar Gene Sharp, who championed nonviolent action to overthrow governments, for example, had inspired rebellions like those in the Arab Spring. Hailed by some as a defender of freedom and democracy,[4] he was criticized by others

3. Priscilla Roberts, "Cold War Hong Kong: Juggling Opposing Forces and Identities," in *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, eds. Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 43.
4. Howard Zinn, et al., "Open Letter in Support of Gene Sharp and Strategic Nonviolent Action," Stephen Zunes, September 16, 2013, http://stephenzunes.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Open-Letter_Academics_Zunes.pdf; John-Paul Flintoff, "Gene Sharp: The Machiavelli of Nonviolence," *New Statesman*, January 3, 2013, https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/your-democracy/2013/01/gene-sharp-machiavelli-non-violence.

as a "Cold War intellectual."[5] Though without concrete evidence, but given the United States' long history of foreign interventions both overt and covert, it is only responsible to be suspicious of the United States for having played a role in Hong Kong's unrest.

And this writer lives in mortal dread that Hong Kong is a latter-day Afghan trap, the 1970s ruse by then US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, supporting and arming a tribal-Islamist rebellion against the pro-Soviet government, creating unease in the Soviet Union and eventually provoking the Soviets into an invasion in December 1979. "Dedicated to weakening the Soviet Union by inflaming ethnic tensions" at its southern border, the design was "to give Moscow its own Vietnam."[6] Successfully goading the Soviets into invading its neighbor, the US plan came off with flying colors, the Afghan people's suffering be damned. This geopolitical ploy was informed by racism. Retired CIA analyst Rod McGovern remembers that Brzezinski would say, "Who cares what happens to these brown Afghans . . . when the prize is in Europe and the Soviet Union is going to fall?"[7] Would the United States care about what happens to Hong Kong when the prize is elsewhere and China is going to be weakened?

Despite the Afghan trap and other well-known precedents of interference, the possibility of an American role in Hong Kong's protest movement was either haughtily neglected or derisively dismissed by the Western media. The *New York Times* called it "shopworn canard" when the Chinese government asserted that foreign forces were behind the unrest.[8] Not surprising, therefore, that the media watchdog FAIR.org would find the *Times*, along with CNN, biased in their coverage. While violent protests also took place last year in Ecuador, Haiti, and Chile, some of them more violent than those in Hong Kong, these influential news outlets devoted excessively more attention to the SAR. Why? Because "the target of Hong Kong's protesting is an official enemy of the US."[9]

Yes, the United States had launched a new Cold War, and China is the enemy. It cannot be emphasized enough that, by all indications, it is not a war China wants to fight. The racism that informed the Afghan trap of the 1970s is also at play. "It's the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian," said Kiron Skinner, director of policy planning at the US State Department, at a 2019 conference. She made the comment while discussing Trump's China policy and how

5. Marcie Smith, "Gene Sharp, the Cold War Intellectual Whose Ideas Seduced the Left," Jacobin, September 4, 2019, https://jacobinmag.com/2019/06/gene-sharp-cold-war-intellectual-marcie-smith.
6. Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould, "Brzezinski Vision to Lure Soviets into 'Afghan Trap' Now Orlando's Nightmare," Huffpost, June 21, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brzezinski-vision-to-lure_b_10511358.
7. Rod McGovern, "The Afghan Trap," YouTube, interview by Paul Jay, Real News Network, February 21, 2009, 4:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKRS2A_2BCM.
8. Editorial Board, "The Hong Kong Protests Are about More Than an Extradition Law," *New York Times*, June 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/opinion/hong-kong-protests.html.
9. Alan Macleod, "With People in the Streets Worldwide, Media Focus Uniquely on Hong Kong," FAIR, December 6, 2019, https://fair.org/home/with-people-in-the-streets-worldwide-media-focus-uniquely-on-hong-kong/.

it differs from America's Cold War strategy. Skinner, who is black, was criticized for being racist. The criticism was unfair, because she went on to explain that "the foreign policy establishment is so narrowly defined, it's more homogenous than probably it should be, given our own demographics."[10] American foreign policy had always been dominated by Caucasian sensibilities, and the rise of a non-Caucasian power inevitably prompted racist reactions. Such reactions are manifestations of institutional racism of the United States, its domestic capacity exploding occasionally, as in the Black Lives Matter protests, while its global dimension was almost never addressed. Hence the periodical proxy wars in Asia, sponsored coups in Latin America, and invasions in the Middle East. Most of America's proxy conflicts, though launched with righteous declarations, involved non-Caucasian people.[11] The *New York Times* should think about that next time it doles out its own shopworn canard.

All the News That's Fit to Print?

The mainstream US media is in fact another part of the Hong Kong complexity. The media's role in the ideologically contested era since World War II had been a contentious issue. Historian Robert E. Herzstein, for example, maintains in his book *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* that *Time* magazine publisher Henry R. Luce had used his influential publication to advance an interventionist agenda in Asia. Herzstein cites journalist and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Theodore White, that "the history of the world would've changed" had *Time* covered China with more objectivity: "There would've been no Korean War; there would've been no Vietnam War."[12] Likely the most resourceful and influential journalistic enterprise in the history of humanity, the mainstream Western press yields a lot of power. But power corrupts. *Time* magazine's part in helping realize the proxy wars of Asia is a vivid example of Western journalism promoting the Western agenda, the suffering of the Korean people, the Vietnamese people, the Cambodian, and other Asian peoples be damned.

10. Tara Francis Chan, "State Department Official on China Threat: For First Time U.S. Has 'Great Power Competitor That Is Not Caucasian,'" *Newsweek*, May 2, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/china-threat-state-department-race-caucasian-1413202.
11. This racism can be readily seen in the United States' 2020 election cycle. "Attack China," instructs a memo distributed by the National Republican Senatorial Committee to party candidates. According to Politico, the fifty-seven-page document tells candidates to "address the coronavirus crisis by aggressively attacking China." This strategy is consistent with the party's racist practice of "dog-whistle politics," dating back at least to Ronald Reagan's notorious "welfare queen" tactic of 1976, demonizing black Americans with coded racial references but without direct mention of race. See Alex Isenstadt, "GOP Memo Urgest Anti-China Assault over Coronavirus," Politico, April 24, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/gop-memo-anti-china-coronavirus-207244.
12. Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 250.

This writer likes to think that the West and its media meant well, that they at least partly believed in the values they champion and that the political modes to realize those values were good for the rest of the world. Problem was, such belief ignored—conveniently, simplemindedly, condescendingly, irresponsibly, and even prejudicially—the unique continuums of history of different countries and cultures. The result was an imposition of misguided idealism by the powerful on the less powerful. And, when that idealism was promoted with ulterior motives like national interest, material profit, and racial superiority, the altruistic intentions were further corrupted.

Much of the non-Western world had, for the past few hundred years, been struggling to come to terms with the West. While the West had contributed greatly to humanity with its many benevolent developments,[13] it had also taken advantage of the non-Western world under the guise of promoting that benevolence. Colonialism could be practiced in the name of enlightening the backward, toppling of governments for gains in resources could be executed with declarations of liberation, violating the dignity of peoples and sovereignty of nations could be done with righteous proclamations. Such atrocities were often committed with quiet approval, at most mild criticism, and sometimes-enthusiastic backing by the Western media.

A new Cold War is upon us—or at least fast in the making. China's rise is a threat to the West, not only because of its supposed communism but also because it is a confluence of race and ideological innovation. A developing country coming up with an ecopolitical system not conforming to Western dictates is threatening enough. That it was realized by a non-Caucasian people is deeply disturbing. The mainstream media, which had been actively engaged in the writing of the grand narrative formulated by the West, faithfully followed the party line in its reporting on China, highlighting the negatives and downplaying or even ignoring the positives.

Granted, it is journalism's central duty to expose the wrongs and missteps of governments. The Chinese government had done lots of wrongs and made lots of missteps, and the media's vigilance exposing them should be applauded. Yet the Chinese government had also done lots of right and the ways they were done were not only exceptional but in fact important developments in human history. Informing the public of important human developments should also be one of journalism's primary duties, and the Western media had failed miserably on that count. Almost all the Americans this writer had talked to about China were very aware of China's offenses but utterly uninformed about what the country had done right; and these were Americans who diligently kept up with the news, many of them proud and avid readers of the *New York Times*. A free

13. Kishore Mahbubani calls it "the gift of western wisdom" in a recent book that examines the relationship between Asia and the West. An ethnic Indian from a Southeast Asian country where East Asian values played an important role in its stability and prosperity, the prolific Singaporean writer had provided unique insights that often challenge established Western views. Kishore Mahbubani, *Has the West Lost It? A Provocation* (London: Penguin UK, 2018).

press is one of the most cherished introductions to humanity by the West. Yet, as in most human endeavors of change, lofty intentions of unbiased journalism had been tempered by ideological stances, geopolitical considerations, and latent biases. American journalism's one-sided coverage of China distorts the truth, helping to create and continuing to reinforce the prejudice that the Chinese people are incapable of governing themselves without guidance from the West.

US media's vigilance in criticizing the US government had often been contrasted with the Chinese press's laudatory coverage of the Chinese government as illustrations of Western journalism's superiority and, by implication, the superiority of the West in general. Such comparisons are valid, maybe even necessary. Yet, they often ignore a key factor: the existential threat China had historically faced and still faces today. The United States had never faced the kind of security threat confronting China. While the United States is protected on both sides by oceans and enjoys dominance over its immediate neighbors, Canada and Mexico, China shares borders with fourteen countries, most with complicated historical disputes that date back centuries. Some of those conflicts flared up periodically, such as the recent skirmish with India near the Johnson Line and the Macartney-MacDonald Line, drawn forcefully and unilaterally by a western colonial power more than a century ago without the consent of China. Since gaining independence, the United States had never experienced anything close to the invasion, plundering, and exploitation forced upon China in the recent past. Perhaps even more importantly, the United States does not have to contend with a superpower that had proven to interfere actively or aggressively and sometimes covertly in other country's internal affairs; namely, the United States itself. Not remotely close to having such exceptionalism, China has legitimate needs for internal stability and legitimate concerns over potentially fragmenting dissents. Its stringent, heavy-handed control of media expression is therefore understandable, though certainly not desirable. To state the otherwise obvious, the United States can well afford to allow a negative press but China hardly can.

As such, America's mainstream media had been playing a dual role promoting the US agenda. Its dutiful criticisms of its own government projected an image of freedom and openness, helping the United States win hearts and minds all over the world. By a different token, its persistent fixation on the negatives of nonaligned nations served to demonize the US's foes, alienating—sometimes even separating—them from those whose hearts and minds had been won. Such fixations also dehumanized the people of nonaligned nations, providing justifications for America's many wars—hot, cold, or proxy. Whether by design or default, the United States' mainstream media functions as both soft power and hard power.

This dual role dovetailed into the sentiments prevalent in postcolonial Hong Kong concerning the West and China. The freedom and openness afforded by the United States appealed to white envy and the stringent heavy-handedness of China to

self-hatred, reinforcing the self-objectification of Hongkongers who looked at themselves through the Western gaze and imagination. It was a cyclical situation that fed on itself. Protests earned praises by the Western press, inviting protesters hungry for international approval to step up their action to earn more praises. By the same token, accolades by the Western media was craved and criticisms by the Chinese government savored, intensifying emotions and escalating opposition, in turn providing fodder for the press to continue or even heighten its portrayals of China with prejudiced morality. Furthermore, the very complicated cultural, economic, and geopolitical context of the protest movement was conveniently downplayed or ignored, instilling in many protesters and the worldwide public alike a narrative of simplified morality. Plausible evidence of the role played by right-wing US political forces in the Hong Kong movement, for example, had been provided by progressive press outlets,[14] but the mainstream press had either ignored or downplayed the evidence and its ramifications, insisting instead to view the Hong Kong complexity through simplistic Western eyes. Much of the world followed that guided gaze, perpetuating it. The spirit of Henry R. Luce lives on.

History Repeating Itself?

Five years ago, in a column for the *International Examiner*, the Asian American newspaper of Seattle, Washington, this writer warned that China-bashing by US politicians was "fanning the fire under an already highly volatile global pot, with a New Cold War simmering under the surface. . . . The Cold War had been extremely devastating to humankind. The Vietnam War, for example, was escalated by America on a dominoes theory proven to be utterly wrong, causing destructions of tragic proportions that Asian Americans knew only too well."[15] The Vietnam War was one of many proxy conflicts of the Cold War, evil undertakings in which the West dragged the people of developing countries into their power struggle, exacting great damages and suffering. Is Hong Kong a proxy conflict of the new Cold War?

So it was that Hong Kong, bathing in a postcolonial condition and conditioned into looking at itself through a Western gaze and its future through Western imagination, was consumed by a misguided idealism that compelled citizens toward a profound mistrust of China while turning a blind eye to its unique accomplishment, likely becoming an unwitting proxy of the new Cold War waged by the United States—a

14. See, for example, Julianne Tveten, "For US Corporate Media, Not Intervening in Chinese Politics Is Journalistically Suspect," FAIR, July 15, 2020, https://fair.org/home/for-us-corporate-media-not-intervening-in-chinese-politics-is-journalistically-suspect/, or, https://thegrayzone.com/category/hong-kong/.

15. Sam Ho, "China-Bashing Wrong: We Can Play a Part in Preventing Cold War 2.0," *International Examiner*, October 7–20, 2015, 3, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0BwOOea3vcRIBfk95Z2xBQmpJOUM1MVM0OVhyVkZFVFRjQXdlZGZkV2Y3Z0k2SjRXRWdkYUE.

tragedy of errors that started in 1997, playing out in twenty-two years, reaching warped speed in 2019.

Postscript: A Law Even More Worrisome[16]

Much of the above was written in June 2020, shortly before the National Security Law was announced. The new law warrants discussion as an extension of the 2019 unrest.

China's bottom line was finally crossed. Twenty-three years had passed since the 1997 retrocession and Hong Kong was still unable to pass the mandated national security law, Article 23. Meanwhile, the political situation had evolved. From fixating on only one "system" while neglecting the "one country," the opposition had developed into cries for outright "two countries, two systems," a separatist movement that became more and more vocal and virulent. The opposition had painted itself into a corner, with no wiggle room for political solutions. Beijing was likewise cornered, left with no choice but to step in.

It is worthwhile at this juncture to address how the 1997 retrocession had been termed. The return of sovereignty to China is commonly called *handover*, a term informed by Western-centric bias. Why not *take back*? Considering Hong Kong as something to be handed over objectified its people. Yet the British and many in the West, including news outlets, persisted in using the term. Denying Hong Kong people of humanity, the term is a contradiction of the very universal values the West supposedly cherish and aggressively advocate. That many in Hong Kong routinely use the term today is a vivid example of the people being guided to negotiate the world through Western perspectives, regarding ourselves with self-objectification. In an age when English has become the universal language largely because of the power yielded by English-speaking countries, Western-centric biases are routinely and subtly perpetuated by the language.

Meanwhile, the worrisome National Security Law kicked immediately into action in July. The law enabled the prosecution of opposition figures, banned candidates from running, and the dismissal of a primary school teacher. The people of Hong Kong were nervous. Fears about erosion of freedoms and judicial independence abounded. Our future looked even gloomier. Such was the tragedy of errors that a movement launched against the worrisome Extradition Law resulted in an even more worrisome law.

Yet, it was also politics as usual. Rhetoric heated up, politicians bickered, lawyers argued, commentators debated, government officials assured, and social media exploded

16. This additional section was written upon request by the editors after the National Security Law was passed.

with shouting matches. None of the involved parties offered a viable plan to make things better. All the while, the people of Hong Kong wearily dealt with another devastating crisis: COVID-19. For this, we did not have to suffer alone. Nature haunted all of humanity, serving as a reminder that we are but part of a bigger whole.

Humanity was also haunted by another malaise: geopolitical posturing. Western politicians and media ignored the reminder from nature, politicizing COVID-19 instead. The Trump administration and the Republican Party in the United States ratcheted up anti–China rhetoric, trying to win elections by demonizing a nonaligned, non–Caucasian nation, complete with "dog-whistle politics" that shamelessly appealed to latent racism against the Chinese people. The president and his officials wore their racism on their sleeves, calling the illness "kung flu" or the "China virus," spiting the World Health Organization's advice not to name diseases after places. Much of the developed West dutifully circled their wagons with the superpower, following Washington's lead to project, in various degrees, fear of the virus onto the ancient savage waking up in the East. The mainstream press launched into its usual orbit, covering the disease's early outbreak with sneering condescendence, ill preparing the world for the coming catastrophe. "To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China" screams a *New York Times* headline in February. When the epidemic later escalated to a pandemic, the media would not have the decency to acknowledge its earlier mistakes, playing along with the Trump administration's Cold War politics instead.[17] The spirit of Henry R. Luce lives on.

The *New York Times* headline helps to illustrate the Hong Kong complexity. The very dog-whistle locution "Mao-Style Social Control" conjures notions of Communism and Chinese otherness. The coded prejudice is elucidated by another headline, in the media-watchdog site FAIR.org, for a report exposing the mainstream media's bias: "Coronavirus Alarm Blends Yellow Peril and Red Scare."[18] The *Times* and the rest of the mainstream media complemented the Trump administration's blatant racism, coupling portrayals of non-Caucasian China with references to Communism, stacking racist sentiments onto Cold War fear of Soviet-style threat, distorting the truth that the Communist Party of China is fundamentally different from America's former foe. Coverage like that by powerful Western journalistic institutions, readily exemplified by that sensational headline, fed into the white envy and self-hatred typical of the postcolonial condition as well as the fear of Communism in Hong Kong, further alienating

17. Again, FAIR.org had been diligent in exposing the mainstream media's misdeeds. See, for example, Joshua Cho, "No, China Didn't 'Stall' Critical Covid Information at Outbreak's Start," October 14, 2020, https://fair.org/home/no-china-didnt-stall-critical-covid-information-at-outbreaks-start/, or, Ari Paul, "Covid-19 Speculation Goes from Margin to Center," April 17, 2020, https://fair.org/home/covid-19-speculation-goes-from-margin-to-center/.
18. Joshua Cho, "Coronavirus Alarm Blends Yellow Peril and Red Scare," FAIR, March 6, 2020, https://fair.org/home/coronavirus-alarm-blends-yellow-peril-and-red-scare/.

the people from the "One Country." An effective hard-power move by the media, by design or default.[19]

And when the National Security Law was announced, one can easily predict the West's reaction. On cue, it cried foul. Politicians voiced indignance, the press sounded alarm, official sanctions were imposed, international alliances of denouncement were formed, amnesty for the persecuted was offered by governments. The Trump administration dialed up its "dog-whistle politics" against China, complemented by a chorus of Western states, harmonizing a silent but orchestrated symphony of Yellow Peril geopolitics. The media sang its corresponding tune alongside. China's concerns for security were ignored or downplayed, its oppressive threat emphasized, when both the concerns and the threat were legitimate issues. Western politicians and media outlets that did not seem bothered by earlier calls for "two countries, two systems" suddenly and vociferously mourned the death of "one country, two systems."

That Hong Kong is a proxy battleground of the new Cold War became obvious. The United States aggressively linked the troubles of Hong Kong to its ideological agenda, expanding the scope of its aggressive campaign against China to include the SAR. Sanctions were imposed; officials blacklisted. Britain—the SAR's former colonizer, the Unites States' closest ally, and a dedicated promoter of the Western agenda—joined ranks. United Kingdom officials, current and former, condemned the National Security Law's passing, making clever end runs around the law's mandate by the Basic Law, Hong Kong's regional constitution, and conveniently ignoring the facts that, according to former court of final appeal judge Henry Litton, "Every country on earth has national security laws" and that "Hong Kong had (and still has) in its statute book national security laws left over from the colonial era."[20]

The United Kingdom then came up with a maneuver, announcing that a special pathway for citizenship would be granted for holders of British National Overseas (BNO) passports. While other countries like Australia and Japan had also adjusted immigration quotas for Hong Kong, the United Kingdom promise was especially striking, with potential eligibility for up to three million. This generosity by London was in sharp contrast to its treatment of Rohingya refugees. The genocide of ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar was a glaring atrocity resulting from century-long conflicts greatly exacerbated by colonization, when mass migration was engineered to serve the British Empire's economic scheme. The British did little to undo the harm at the end of

19. The different measures taken by the Chinese and Western governments to contain COVID-19 help illustrate the misguidedness of promoting Western values in non-Western countries. China's rigorous, even severe, approach to locking down cities had proven more effective than most of the Western government's comparatively restrained measures, which were nonetheless consistent with the latter nations' unique historical continuums. Imagine the reactions if China, in the name of saving Western lives, starts lecturing Western countries about adopting more stringent measures.
20. Henry Litton, "Ignorance or Malice on New Security Laws for Hong Kong?" John Menadue, July 27, 2020. https://johnmenadue.com/how-long-can-hong-kong-last/.

colonization, leaving behind a heated cauldron of racial tension that exploded in 2017 with the genocide. About a million displaced Rohingya now live in dismal conditions in refugee camps. Short of the ideal scenario of their moving back to their homeland and living in peace with the majority population, the United Kingdom granting them residency would be a responsible and humane solution. While London had contributed financially to benefit the refugees, only a small percentage of the displaced had been resettled in Britain. Yet, after Hong Kong's National Security Law was announced, citizenship was promptly offered to three million.[21] Not by coincidence, shortly before China announced the National Security Law, it was embroiled in the aforementioned conflict with India near the Johnson Line and the Macartney-MacDonald Line, drawn forcibly and unilaterally by the colonial British Empire.

Colonialism is an enterprise of evil proportions. In its imperialist era, the West had exacted great damages on the non-Western world. Reforming itself in the twentieth century, the West finally doing the right thing and withdrawing from the abominable enterprise was a welcome step for humanity. But the reformation was far from complete. Former colonial governments leaving behind unresolved conflicts was bad enough; not doing much to help during the difficult period of postcolonial transition was worse. Even worse was exploiting the very troubles they left behind for ideological gain, continuing to wreak havoc in the lands on which they had trampled. The British opening up political representation in Hong Kong mostly in the last decade of its one hundred and fifty-year rule was bad enough. Doing so without adequately preparing the colony with political education and practice could only mean combative chaos and partisan stalemate would follow.

Hong Kong's democratic leaders, seriously malnourished in political knowledge and wisdom, were reduced to mostly self-righteous grandstanding and obstructionist partisanship, copying parliamentary tactics like filibusters from the West without learning or adopting statesmanship, squandering precious opportunities to pursue their idealism, denying Hong Kong from meaningful implementation of "one country, two systems" in the process. Refusing to cross the river one stone at a time, they insisted on a single, unbending path and ended up putting themselves and Hong Kong in dire straits. The SAR government, inheriting from the former rulers a bureaucratic structure marked by an unimaginative efficiency, predictably failed in rising to the occasion, unable to foster any semblance of effective solutions to the political quagmire. China, by the same measure, was also unskilled in dealing with the unique politics of "one country,

21. The number of refugees differs in different accounts. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, over a million Rohingya had fled Myanmar since the 1990s. See UNHCR, "Rohingya Emergency," UNHCR, accessed December 16, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html; the BBC maintains that over six hundred thousand refugees are in Bangladesh as of January 2020. See BBC, "Myanmar Rohingya: What You Need to Know About the Crisis," January 23, accessed December 16, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561.

two systems." Beijing initially tried to balance the two systems through proxy, but the proestablishment faction was even more malnourished in political skills than the opposition, conversant in neither Western political thought or the unique blend of capitalism and socialism formulated by the Chinese authoritarian meritocracy. The result? Combative chaos and partisan stalemate.

The United Kingdom and other Western governments' immigration offers might mean well and certainly sounded noble, but they also continued to stir up dissent. Activists with anti-China sentiments, assured that they will be granted safe haven, would be emboldened. Again, China's legitimate concerns about stability and security will likely be heightened, potentially leading to more stringent measures. Divide and weaken, by design or default.

The 2019 unrest was a powerful, compelling event, driven by genuine pursuit of ideals. The National Security Law passed a year later was imposed over genuine concerns for national unity and security. The chain of events was the result of all involved parties bringing out the worst of each other, the East and the West alike. From the mostly youthful protesters who saw and imagined our historical continuum through the Western gaze, to prodemocracy politicians and activists who simplemindedly pursued Western values, to a government run with leftover efficiency and political inadequacy, to proestablishment flag wavers who had no choice but to follow instructions and were left with no room for alternative solutions, to a central government that had fostered progress but still failed to ease the mistrust of its reunified citizens, to a former colonial government that had ill prepared its former subjects to face their new reality while continuing to fan the fire after ceding power, to a powerful media dedicated to promoting the western agenda, to a superpower addicted to maintaining its own version of world order by staging proxy conflicts. To paraphrase Octave in Jean Renoir's *La Regle du jeu* (1939), every party had its reasons.[22]

Hong Kong was doomed to a continual tragedy of errors.

22. This writer considers Jean Renoir one of the West's gifts to humanity. It was his humanism that inspired this writer to recognize the flaws and perils of the Western gaze.

Imagining a City-Based Democracy

Review of *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong During and After the Umbrella Movement* by Laikwan Pang, University of Michigan Press, 2020

ENOCH YEE-LOK TAM

In the past five to six years, Hong Kong has gone through a drastic change. Six years ago, after the end of the Umbrella Movement, people resumed normal lives. It was hardly to be imagined that another large-scale social movement would occur within a decade. However, because of the extradition law proposed by the government, that is precisely what happened in 2019. The situation is changing on a daily basis; intellectual responses may already look dated at the time they are published. Yet, Laikwan Pang's attempt at theorization and dialogue with Hannah Arendt's philosophy, *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong During and After the Umbrella Movement*,[1] maintains its freshness, providing fruitful intellectual resources for readers to rethink the current situation of Hong Kong.

The book can be divided into three parts. First, it positions the Umbrella Movement against the context of the Occupy Movement in the first decade of the new century. What Pang finds in common is not only the form of occupation but also the intersubjectivity behind the apparent form (i.e., the bonding of individuals to form a community during collective political actions and protests). Her major concern in this part is to investigate how these individuals' exercise of autonomy and mutual respect can bring a new connectivity into being, one that denies the neoliberalist connectivity that continually morphs along with market conditions.

Second, through interviews of participants of the movement, combined with Pang's own observations, the book attempts to delineate what happened. Pang interviews several dozen protesters with different ages, genders, occupations, and educational backgrounds. They include secondary-school students, university students, design students, a group of boys' love (BL) fans,[2] documentary and feature-film directors, a female

1. See Laikwan Pang, *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong During and After the Umbrella Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).
2. *Yaoi*, also known as boys' love or BL, is a genre of fictional media originating in Japan that features homoerotic relationships between male characters.

https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.853

dancer and choreographer, an old farmer who used to live and work in the rural part of Hong Kong, and a grandmother who stayed in the occupation area throughout the movement. Through these interviews, Pang is able to delineate the confusion and endurance of the protestors. With the information provided by the BL fans, Pang is able to explain how their desires and fascinations could mobilize them to participate in the movement. By incorporating design students' self-expression into her account, Pang is able to conceptualize why the functional desks and ladders that appeared in the occupation areas can be recognized as works of art. Through her observation of the dance performances that took place in the areas of occupation, Pang is able to put forward the political significance of the events that involved spectators and participants as active political subjects. Based on her detailed analysis of the documentaries about the movement, Pang is able to theorize the notion of potentiality for imagining and actualizing the future through the recorded past in moving images.

Third, Pang attempts to offer a more macroscopic analysis of the political situation of Hong Kong, discussing the notions of right to the city, of liberty and freedom, and of rule of law. One of the difficult questions Pang seeks to deal with here is whether a city-based democracy is possible. She highlights the conflict between city-based democracy and the primacy of state sovereignty. This is the conflict the Hong Kong people have been witnessing and experiencing since the handover of sovereignty in 1997. The Mainland China government always regards Hong Kong's city-based democracy as a threat to unification, and thus the Umbrella Movement can be considered a symptom of this forced identification and unification. By underlining the differences between Arendt's "political life" (*bio politikos*) and Michel Foucault's "biopolitics," Pang once again confirms Arendt's politics of appearance by theorizing the individual political actor as a political subject. This political subject raises questions and brings challenges to the state concerning whether heterogeneity is allowed under sovereignty. Finally, Pang sincerely hopes that the people of Mainland China can perceive the heterogeneity of Hong Kong as an encouragement to engage in more alternative political imaginations instead of interpreting these prodemocratic efforts as direct insults to them.

The author vigorously creates a theoretical framework in dialogue with Arendt. Pang explicitly states in the introduction that her approach is grounded in the thought of Arendt; she also indicates that the notion of "politics of appearance" is mainly derived from Arendt's philosophy. It is not hard to discover, for example, how Arendt influences Pang's interrogation of the arts. Pang paraphrases Arendt's three dimensions of human activities—labor, work, and action—to discuss artistic practices in the occupation area of the Umbrella Movement. By reworking Edward Said's concept of traveling theory, Pang justifies her appropriation of Arendt's theory and philosophy.

Yet, in addition to the explicit and self-conscious use of Arendt's theory, I want to point out other implicit but equally important theoretical resources of the book. The

first concerns its title, *Appearing Demos*. As for "appearing," the author notes that it is drawn from Arendt. But what about the notion of demos? Pang mentions more than once in the book and elsewhere that the notion of demos is mainly based on Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Brown suggests that neoliberalism vigorously tears apart the demos, dispatching the demos back to the individual and private level: "The neoliberal triumph of *homo oeconomicus* as the exhaustive figure of the human is undermining democratic practices and a democratic imaginary by vanquishing the subject that governs itself through moral autonomy and governs with others through popular sovereignty."[3] This description fits perfectly the situation of a neoliberalist city like Hong Kong, where people are reduced to homo oeconomicus while their political subjectivity is continually diminishing. Yet, in the Umbrella Movement, the dispatched demos unexpectedly appeared and occupied a space. This triggers Pang to reinterrogate the notion of demos against the situation of Hong Kong and to put forward the concept of an "appearing demos." Apart from the theorization of demos, we can see Brown's influence in how Pang conceptualizes the latter part of *The Appearing Demos*: Brown discusses political rationality and governance, law and legal reason, and educating human capital in the second part of her book while Pang raises questions about the concepts of right to the city, of liberty, and of rule of law.

Meanwhile, the notion of "appearing" has its own origin in the Hong Kong context. The most crucial reference point should be Ackbar Abbas's *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*.[4] Published in the year of the handover of sovereignty from Britain to China, this seminal work discussed Hong Kong cultural identity as a simultaneous process of *appearing* and *disappearing*, a cultural characteristic that can be found in many visual art forms such as cinema and architecture, as well as in writings of Hong Kong. Abbas suggests that the reason for the emergence of "Hong Kong" is because of its imminent disappearance in the process of nationalization. The influence of this book can still be observed today. In response to this thread of cultural discussion, Pang proposes that twenty years after the handover, Hong Kong has not yet entirely been absorbed into nationalization, has not yet disappeared, and does not appear through its disappearance. Rather, a large number of people actively appear in large-scale social movements, and by this means Hong Kong people redefine Hong Kong itself and reject nationalization as it is unfolding in the territory.

This narration of the Hong Kong story from the perspective of transition from disappearance to appearance can also be found in Jeffrey Wasserstrom's *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*. Wasserstrom entitles his introduction "Disappearance," starting his story of Hong Kong from his observation that "the distinction between Hong Kong and

3. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 79.
4. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

mainland China is disappearing."[5] Later, he examines several large-scale social movements, especially the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019, to argue how Hong Kong evolves from "Negotiations" (chapter 2) to "Battles" (chapter 5). This example illuminates how the notion of disappearance influences our discussion of post-1997 Hong Kong and highlights how Pang's "appearing demos" can be understood as a response to "the politics of disappearance."

Another important reference point is Manuel Castells's *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Castells investigates several occupying movements of the past decade, from Tunisia to Egypt, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street. He discovers how outrage and hope galvanize the people in these social movements. Of Occupy Wall Street he says, "The movement surged as a largely spontaneous expression of *outrage*. It was infused with *hope* for a better world, which began to materialize in the daily life of the camps, in the dialogue and cooperation of social networks, and in the courageous street demonstrations where the bonding was enacted."[6] These lines capture the Umbrella Movement described in Pang's book. From the interviews of protestors Pang conducts in *The Appearing Demos*, one can easily discover their outrage and their hopes. Yet, the relationship between the two books does not stop at this point. What concerns Castells most in his book—social movements in the Internet age—also constitutes the most significant part of Pang's book.

Castells concentrates on the role of the Internet in recent social movements. He suggests that the Internet provides people with a new institutional public space: "By constructing a free community in a symbolic place, social movements create a public space, a space for deliberation, which ultimately becomes a political space, a space for sovereign assemblies to meet and to recover their rights of representation, which have been captured in political institutions predominantly tailored for the convenience of the dominant interests and values."[7] One can easily identify a similar role played by the Internet in the Umbrella Movement. Yet, where Pang differs from Castells is that Pang interviews several dozen participants of the Umbrella Movement; this gives her a rich and firsthand ground for her analysis. She records on the one hand the "outrage and hope" of the participants, an aspect that has been discussed by Castells. On the other hand, Pang also documents the self-suspicion, reservations, hesitation, and stagnancy of the protestors, the affects and desires that Castells may not have been able to discover through his reading of secondary texts and materials. This is one of the most precious parts of *The Appearing Demos*: the interviews provide more details about the varied

5. Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020), 16.
6. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 187. My emphasis.
7. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 11.

identities of the protestors while also explaining the complexity of feeling the protestors carried throughout the movement.

The Appearing Demos comprehensively analyzes what was happening during and after the Umbrella Movement with the help of information provided by protestors from different generations, genders, educational backgrounds, and social statuses. Yet, it omits a crucial aspect of the movement—the difficult lives of Hong Kong people in this extremely neoliberal and capitalist city. Recent studies have attempted to conceptualize this living situation in the new millennium by the notion of precarity. For example, Guy Standing suggests in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* that the term can be used to designate people living with the perils of neoliberalism.[8] Although the major demand of the Umbrella Movement was a request for universal suffrage, one should not forget that most of the participants led such precarious lives in Standing's terms.

Here, Victor Fan's discussion on the documentaries about the Umbrella Movement sheds light. In designating the 2010s as "the age of precarity," Fan explains that the older generations in Hong Kong call many millennials and post-millennials *faicing*, meaning that these young people are "wasted, disabled and disqualified, abandoned and ostracised, rendered useless and hopeless, and anti-social."[9] In fact, they have lost their social mobility, are stigmatized by the older generations, and comprise the lowest of society even though they usually have better qualifications and educational background than their seniors. One may wonder how this precarious situation can play a part in the understanding of the Umbrella Movement. It is the question *The Appearing Demos* did not ask; it awaits future studies to be answered.

8. Standing Guy, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).
9. Victor Fan, *Extraterritoriality: Locating Hong Kong Cinema and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 201.

Building and Documenting National and Transnational Cinema

China and the Film Festival

RICHARD PEÑA

I find the recent emergence of the film festival studies subfield, alongside a number of historical surveys and critical texts, rather intriguing. One could say, Why not? The festival indeed has become an institution of sorts, as much as the film archive or even the film studio, and can trace a history of film festivals that will soon be one hundred years old. The festival influenced patterns of exhibition and, in many cases, made a decisive impact on film culture. Yet I guess as someone who worked "in the trenches" for twenty-five years, I find it amusing to read somewhat long-winded analyses around decisions of what to show or exhibition structure when so often those decisions are the result of far more mundane preoccupations, such as the availability of a director or a venue.

Festivals, defined crudely as collections of films presented at a given place and time, began to evolve in the 1920s in Europe, as groups of what might be called *independent filmmakers* would occasionally gather and show work that was considered nontraditional or at least noncommercial. But the emergence of the festival proper usually dates back to 1932, with the introduction of a film section as part of the Venice Biennale. Very much promoted by Il Duce's movie-obsessed son Vittorio Mussolini, the Venice program, despite its obvious glamour and chic, continued a theme that had been present in those first festivals organized by independents: the film festival as protest, as the creation of an alternative space for exhibition, and promotion of a cinema that was not Hollywood commercial production. Hollywood, of course, completely dominated world film exhibition, even after the coming of synchronized sound cinema; there had been a number of efforts to compete with that hegemony, especially in Europe, from the promotion of "national film styles" such as German expressionism to the notion of "Film Europe," a series of economic agreements among nations that would try to treat all of Europe as one big filmmaking region, an idea that has had renewed currency since the nineties. The creation of a film festival was yet another: if the nations of the world could send their finest films to a competition in which Hollywood would simply be another participant, the resulting publicity could perhaps raise awareness and open markets to non-Hollywood films.

The economic and political turbulence of the thirties discouraged other festivals from emerging—the first Cannes festival was scheduled to begin on September 2, 1939; that is, the day after the Germans invaded Poland and triggered World War II in Europe—but in the years right after the war, they proliferated rapidly: Cannes and Locarno in 1946,

https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.829

Edinburgh in 1947, and Berlin in 1950. By the late fifties, most decent-sized cities had developed or were developing their own festivals. Yet this new breed of festivals—such as Pesaro, New York, or Rotterdam—had a somewhat different character: the idea of festivals as reflection of the taste and political/aesthetic positions of their organizers. Until the late sixties, many of these festivals were actually assembled by requesting participating countries to submit a film; there was little independent curating. Festivals might still be offering a kind of alternative to Hollywood—by the fifties there were many of them—but now they were also being used for something else: for the projection of national identity and culture. Films represented not only themselves and their organizers' visions; they also, it was proposed, represented something like a national ethos. After the extensive involvement of governments around the world in promoting national filmmaking in the thirties and, of course, during the war, this promotion of films as representing nations might be seen as a somewhat logical next step. Indeed, one can point to a marked rise in cinematic nationalism after World War II, during which so many countries featured not only impressive growth of their production numbers but also a new desire to make sure their histories and cultures would be represented. My own history as a film-culture bureaucrat, first as the director of the Film Center at the Art Institute of Chicago, now known as the Gene Siskel Film Center, and then at Lincoln Center, very much paralleled the emergence of Chinese cinema into the consciousness and on to the screens of US filmgoers. Prior to coming to work in Chicago, I was barely acquainted with Chinese cinema: in college, I had seen that cultural-revolution classic *Breaking with Old Ideas* (决裂, Li, 1975; see figure 5.1), as well as a few examples of *wuxia* films in Chinatown theaters.

Figure 5.1: Poster of *Breaking with Old Ideas*.
Source: fair use

Sadly, I had missed the famous screening of King Hu's *Touch of Zen* (俠女, 1971) at the New York Film Festival (NYFF). Thus, I was delighted to have the chance to see what Chinese filmmakers had been up to when one of my first duties in Chicago was to supervise the very first traveling film series from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1980—the United States had just established diplomatic relations, and we exchanged films. The package we sent included *Bambi* (Hand, 1942) and *Singin' in the Rain* (Kelly and Donen, 1952). One of the films in the Chinese film package that sounded intriguing was something called *Two Stage Sisters* (舞台姐妹, Xie, 1964; see figure 5.2).

I had seen and enjoyed Chinese opera a few times, so a film on the subject seemed intriguing. Moreover, Madame Mao has labeled the film a "poisonous weed,"[1] so what better recommendation?

At the end of the screening, I could hardly get up from my seat. As any artistic masterwork should, the film stunned me, but what kept me immobilized was the realization that this great, great film was completely unknown outside of China. I searched in vain for references to it or to its director; I found none. That such an extraordinary

Figure 5.2: Poster of *Two Stage Sisters*. *Source:* fair use

1. I first read Mao's description in a brochure for a series, *Electric Shadows: Early Chinese Cinema*, presented in 1979 by the San Francisco Film Festival and curated by Stephen Horowitz.

work—and the impressive level of production that had made it possible—should exist completely outside of the purview of even the most dedicated filmgoers in the United States powerfully illustrated how little about film history we actually knew. *Two Stage Sisters* was simply too good to exist on its own. It would have emerged from a fertile cinematic tradition and been the product of strong artistic vision. So over the next decade, learning about Chinese cinema first became an interest for me and then a passion, both of which I could indulge somewhat through my work at the Film Center. One could argue that Chinese cinema very much dominated the entire field of museum and archival programming in the eighties, with retrospectives of older films, dedicated issues of leading film magazines, and of course the remarkable new films and filmmakers who began to emerge from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC (the fifth generation). I had always envied those critics and scholars who had been around for the Western discovery of Japanese cinema in the fifties, and now I had the chance to experience some of the same exhilaration with Chinese cinema. It was as if a giant treasure chest had suddenly been flung open for all of us and we couldn't unpack its offerings fast enough.

In 1988, I moved back to New York to work at Lincoln Center; now, I was in an even better position to indulge my growing interest in Chinese cinema. The NYFF, which would occupy a large part of my work, had been an enormous influence on my life and thinking about cinema, and I believe it's had a similar effect on US film culture over the years. To understand what you might call the ethos of the NYFF, you must return to the year it was founded: 1963. The inaugural NYFF pioneered a new style of the "curated film festival." Rather than request and accept entries from around the world, the festival organizers made their own choices, after traveling to other festivals or inviting films in for consideration. Two critical tendencies that were influential at that moment were also decisive in setting the festival's direction: auteurism and modernism. *Film Culture* had just published Andrew Sarris's hugely influential article "Notes on the Auteur Theory" in 1962. Not only did scholars begin applying the notion of the cinematic auteur retroactively to the great artists of classic Hollywood but, more importantly for the festival, they proactively applied the label to a small group of contemporary film directors—Jean-Luc Godard, Bernardo Bertolucci, Miklós Jancsó, Nagisa Ōshima, Luis Buñuel, John Cassavetes, Agnès Varda—with whom the festival very quickly became identified. These were artists not only making personally expressive works but they also saw themselves in dialogue with other contemporary arts and artists. Indeed, one could say the NYFF has been a quintessential auteurist program, its small size generating the sense that festival appearances, for better or worse, constituted membership in an elite club.

The festival's commitment to the idea of cinematic modernism emerged from a kind of a split in the foreign films being shown in the United States. The fifties had opened

US markets to international cinema and thus audiences were enjoying Japanese samurai films, Italian comedies, and French literary adaptations, but audiences for foreign films began to fragment in the 1960s with films such as *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960), *À bout de souffle* (Jean-Godard, 1960), *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959), and *L'Avventura* (Antonioni, 1960) on offer. The NYFF was founded partly as a way of defending and creating a platform for this new, more difficult cinema that challenged the practices and conventions of what we now call classical cinema.

When I arrived at Lincoln Center in 1988, these two pillars were still very much in place even though many of the auteurs who made the festival's reputation no longer worked, or worked less, and something called *postmodernism* actively challenged the principles of cinematic modernism. Of course, I wanted to introduce the new Chinese cinema that I had already been promoting in Chicago to the festival; frankly, the NYFF had been slow in noticing all that was happening in Asia at that time, especially compared to other festivals. Both Hou Hsiao-hsien had appeared already in the festival, and both Hou and Edward Yang had shown in the New Directors/New Films program copresented by Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art. Jackie Chan himself had made a festival appearance with *Police Story* (警察故事, Chan and Chen, 1985) in 1986, helping launch a wave of interest in his work. New Directors/New Films had also presented a number of fifth generation films, notably *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, Chen, 1984) and *The Horse Thief* (黄土地, Tian, 1986).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, the festival and indeed the critical community found a way of approaching Chinese cinema through the aforementioned filters of auteurism and modernism. In that sense, both the PRC's fifth generation and the Taiwanese New Wave were tailor-made for the auteurist narrative: in each case, ambitious young directors were seen as breaking free of the traditions and stereotypes that had dominated their respective cinemas and had instead developed their own cinematic approaches that dialogued with contemporary approaches found in other countries. The fifth generation also took on the mantle of being dissidents of a sort, creating works that chafed against what we thought was the weakening communist ideology imposed by the state. The new cinema of the PRC and Taiwan, which by the late eighties had become staples not only of the New York Film Festival but of festivals around the world, came ready-made with a selection of discernible auteurs whose works could immediately fit into a certain kind of critical structure.

Curiously, Hong Kong cinema was the outlier. By the late 1980s, John Woo, and perhaps Ringo Lam, stood out as auteurs, but their bodies of work seemed overly tied to genre—wonderfully made and often innovative but less "personal" in the sense promoted by proponents of auteurism. We'd have to wait for Wong Kar-wei to appear on the scene for Hong Kong to have its first internationally recognized auteur in the traditional sense. Earlier interest in the films of Allen Fong or Ann Hui such as *Ah Ying*

(半邊人, Fong, 1983) or *Boat People* (投奔怒海, Hui, 1982) never really coalesced, and their subsequent films garnered even less interest.

The interest in Hong Kong films seemed to follow the other option: modernism. In what ways could Hong Kong cinema, either in its wuxia or gunplay varieties, be read back through the ideas about modernism that had been so important to both European and US discourses on film? How were we to see the deliberate flouting of the conventions of time and space seen so often in the films, as well as their marked tendency toward presentation instead of representation? While new waves from France to Brazil were struggling to come up with film styles alternative to that of classic Hollywood, had the Hong Kong filmmakers somewhat effortlessly invented their own and within a commercial context? Indeed, the growing awareness of Chinese (and later Japanese and South Korean) cinema called into question many of the ideas of modernism that had become somewhat institutionalized in the United States. Many of the stylistic tendencies seen in these films—the lightning-speed montages that burst into the films of King Hu or the staid, austere camera of Yasujiro Ozu—were in fact much less disruptions of some classical film style than the expression of these filmmakers' deep roots in very traditional ideas about artistic practice.

Finally, where did this leave audiences? Although New York Film Festival audiences are as adventurous as any, the overall arthouse audience has, without a doubt, grown more conservative; perhaps as they aged, its members liked being challenged less than when they were in college. These changing preferences created a divergence in the auteurist tendencies I mentioned earlier with regards to the Chinese fifth generation and the Taiwanese New Wave. Rather quickly, PRC filmmakers, especially Zhang Yimou, found in the historical spectacle a form that provided both the necessary exoticism as well as familiar narrative frameworks. For whatever reasons—most probably because they truly were auteurs, dedicated above all else to self-expression—Taiwanese directors created works that were simply too off-putting, too hermetic to penetrate the defenses for US audiences. Even Hou's *Flowers of Shanghai* (海上花, 1998), although enormously praised for its plastic beauty, told too obscure a story to appeal to the taste of US art film audiences. As for the Hong Kong filmmakers already facing the collapse of their own industry, their style was readily domesticated by a wide range of directors, from Guy Ritchie to Quentin Tarantino, rendering the need for the original less pressing—as seen by the transformation of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (無間道, Lau and Mak, 2002–2003) into *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006).

Recently PRC cinema seems to be making a festival comeback: Jia Zhangke and to an extent Lou Ye are certainly among the major festival filmmakers working today, despite the fact that neither has had a success that has crossed over to larger audiences. Hu Bo's enormously impressive *An Elephant Sitting Still* (大象席地而坐, 2018), the films of Bi Gan, and Diao Yinan's *The Wild Goose Lake* (南方車站的聚會, 2019) have all

made the trek from festival appearances to the dwindling art-house circuit. I watched a wonderful film, Gu Xiaogang's debut *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (春江水暖, 2019), in Paris, where it generated much critical interest (see figures 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5).

Figure 5.3: Film still of *An Elephant Sitting Still*. *Source:* fair use

Figure 5.4: Film still of *The Wide Goose Lake*. *Source:* fair use

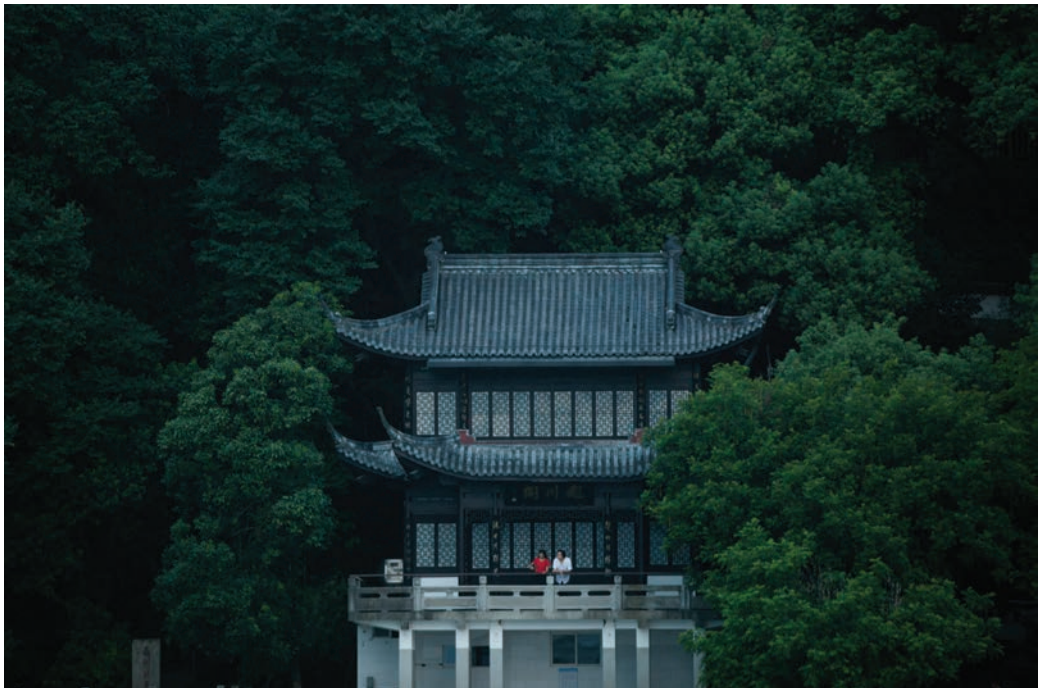

Figure 5.5: Film still of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. *Source:* fair use

All of these are films that had a major festival premiere, from which they moved on to other festivals and, in most cases, to the art-house circuit. It's an old pattern, and one whose demise keeps being predicted, yet, as we head into our third decade of the twenty-first century, it's a means that the Chinese—from the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—continue to use effectively to market their films to the world.

Nationalism from Below

State Failures, Nollywood, and Nigerian Pidgin

JONATHAN HAYNES

Abstract

The Nigerian film industry known as "Nollywood" was shaped (and even created) by profound weaknesses of the Nigerian state, but it inherited and carried forward one of the state's major accomplishments: the creation of a national culture on and through television. This mission was reinterpreted in the context of a low-budget feature-film industry grounded in the informal sector of the economy. Twenty-five years on, governmental failures continue to structure the industry, even as new distribution technologies and the transnational corporations that have entered with them have created a whole new sector of production alongside the original one and have fractured the audience along class lines, adding to original linguistic and cultural divisions. Still, through its storytelling, Nollywood remains a powerful unifying cultural force on the national and Pan-African levels. In this context, Nigerian Pidgin is more important than ever as a linguistic medium of communication and as a symbol of national, regional, and Pan-African unity and communicability.

Keywords: Nollywood, Nigerian Pidgin, nationalism, Nigerian cinema, Nigeria

The Nollywood film industry expresses, among other things, a powerful Nigerian national pride. Nigeria's size (two hundred million people, 20 percent of the world's Black population) and ethnic diversity (four hundred languages are spoken) give it an exceptional dynamism, power, and significance in many dimensions. The government of Nigeria is not, generally, the source or focus of pride. This essay describes two analogous and intertwined sources of national identity that have welled up from below, unofficially, out of popular culture: Nollywood and the lingua franca Nigerian Pidgin. Between them, they provide crucial media through which Nigerian stories get told and the notion of Nigeria as a nation is created and reproduced.

State Failures (and Some Successes)

Nigeria is certainly not a *failed state*, as the term is applied to places like Somalia. But the government of Nigeria has failed in conspicuous ways. Life expectancy is only fifty-four years. Nigeria has surpassed India as the country with the largest population of the desperately poor, and a fifth of the world's out-of-school children are in Nigeria.[1] The whole educational system, once ambitious and still vast, is in abysmal shape—a looming catastrophe in a nation where the median age is eighteen and an economy dependent on oil exports approaches a foreseeable dead end. Electricity and running water are unreliable where they exist at all. The state has no monopoly of violence. Kidnapping for ransom afflicts most of the country, and armed insurgencies, banditry, and warlordism affect five of the nation's six geopolitical zones—all but the southwest, home of Lagos, the commercial capital and center of Nollywood. Spectacular levels of corruption underlie all these failures.

Generations of political leaders, and indeed Nigerian society itself, must be held responsible for this situation, but Nigeria's historical insertion into the world system is also a very important factor. During the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, Europeans called what became Nigeria "the Slave Coast." The huge demand for African bodies created a political and moral race to the bottom that reached far inland. Firearms, available only through the Europeans, enabled the acquisition of enslaved people and were indispensable for defense against aggressive slave traders. It was difficult or impossible to opt out of trading. Powerful new political formations—"secondary empires" such as the kingdoms of Oyo and Benin and the "canoe houses" of the Niger Delta and Cross River—arose on this basis, often displacing more consensual forms of governance.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the European "scramble" to impose direct colonization on Africa created what the historian Basil Davidson called "the Black Man's Burden": a state imposed by colonial masters on societies that did not want it, a state utterly foreign in language, culture, historical evolution, and ideology, and clearly exploitative in intention. The colonized naturally regarded this government with cynicism. The morality produced by Africa's myriad indigenous political cultures did not apply. The tragedy of postcolonial Africa is that Africa could not do without the structures of the modern nation-state, and as a practical matter, undoing the absurd borders the Europeans had drawn was impossibly difficult. African elites rushed to fill positions vacated by the colonizers, but the structures remained basically the same, as did the problem of political legitimacy.[2]

1. UNICEF, "Nigeria: Education," UNICEF, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education.
2. Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (London: James Currey, 1992).

Obafemi Awolowo, a leading nationalist architect of independent Nigeria, famously remarked, "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographic expression."[3] The name "Nigeria" was invented by the girlfriend of the British colonial governor general Frederick Lugard, who amalgamated two colonial holdings: a predominantly Muslim north and a south that would become predominantly Christian. More than a century later, this remains a profound division. But it is only the most dangerous conflict in a nation assembled for the convenience of the colonizer out of peoples from hundreds of different cultures and thousands of different polities. The British engineered a system of politics based on ethnic competition among these many groups, which was reformulated at the time of independence as the issue of "how to divide the national cake"—a spoils system in which communities sent politicians to the center of power to get whatever they could.

By the end of the first decade after independence in 1960, this system exploded in coups and a horrendous civil war. The'70s brought an oil boom and the "resource curse," amplifying corruption as the essential logic of the system. Exuberant "kleptocracy" under restored civilian rule led to another round of coups in the 1980s, but corruption continued unabated and the military oversaw a criminalization of the state—political scientists were busy creating a vocabulary to describe processes at work across Africa.[4] In the mid-1980s, neoliberal structural-adjustment programs were imposed on heavily indebted nations around the world by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other lenders, with uniformly disastrous results. Projects of national development crashed along with the whole formal economic sector. Governments no longer had the revenues or capacities to carry out basic functions of education, health care, and security.[5]

In the midst of all this, somehow a sense of Nigerian national identity took hold. Generations grew up saluting the flag, singing the national anthem, and supporting the national football team. The national educational system—entirely in English, the official language, at least past primary school—aimed at universal, free primary education and created universities where important work of intellectual decolonization took place.

Not least in importance was television, which began in Nigeria in 1959—the first in Africa. Stations sponsored by regional (later, state) governments carried a lot of programming in indigenous languages and featuring local cultures. The national network—the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA)—was more deliberate in creating a sense of national culture, a role national televisions have often played. The national

3. Obafemi Awolowo, *The Path to Nigerian Freedom* (London: Faber, 1947), 47–48.

4. On "resource curse," see Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner, "The Curse of Natural Resources," *European Economic Review* 45, no. 4–6 (2001): 827–38; on "kleptocracy," see Stanislav Andreski, *The African Predicament: A Study in the Pathology of Modernisation* (London: Joseph, 1968); and on the "criminalization of the state," see, Béatrice Hibou, Stephen Ellis, and Jean-François Bayart, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (New York: Oxford, 1999).

5. James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

news broadcasts may have been turgid, but they addressed Nigerians as one. So did the extremely popular television serials, which were crucial in creating a national linguistic medium.[6] Though typically centered in one household, they contained characters from various ethnicities—a casting formula that continues up to today in Nigerian screen media. This deliberately created an image of the multicultural nation, responding to the challenge of making a nation out of an exceptionally diverse population.

The linguist Nicholas Faraclas describes that complexity: "Home to a highly mobile, vibrantly enterprising, and intensely commercially-oriented population, the territory known today as Nigeria has for millennia been one of the most pluri-cultural and pluri-linguistic parts of the world. Its people speak nearly 400 ancestral languages." Faraclas also describes methods of dealing with this complexity, long embedded in the population: "From well before European contact to the present, the average West African child has grown up with a command of at least one or two local languages as well as a pidginized, creolized, and/or koineized regional market language. When the Europeans arrived, pidginized, creolized and standard varieties of European languages were added to this rich linguistic repertoire."[7]

The NTA's multiculturalism, then, was not (just) a state imposition but a reflection of a lived reality. In line with the NTA's nationalist purposes, Nigerian Standard English was the framing language. The great original serial, *The Village Headmaster* (on air from 1968 to 1988), was about an apostle of modernity in a fictional Yoruba community. The village was on a road, so all sorts of people passed through or settled, adding their varieties of speech, with loan words from various languages; Nigerian Pidgin English was used extensively. The result was a playful, rich, and pungent linguistic "soup"—an endless source of comedy, and a way for the whole audience to find itself in the show. Being a Nigerian was made to seem fun.

The NTA television serials are the most important of all the sources of the later video film industry known as Nollywood.[8] Nollywood films immediately spread far beyond Nigeria's borders—across the African continent, the Caribbean, and beyond—through no effort of the films' producers and usually without their knowledge, first carried by informal market traders and pirates and later through satellite broadcasting and the Internet. Nigerian film culture could travel in this remarkable fashion because it was already multicultural.

6. Segun Olusola, "Film-TV and the Arts—the African Experience," in *Mass Communication in Nigeria: A Book of Readings*, ed. O. E. Nwuneli (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1986), 161–78; Oluyinka Esan, *Nigerian Television: Fifty Years of Television in Africa* (Princeton, NJ: AMV Publishing, 2009).
7. Nicholas Faraclas, "Nigerian Pidgin," in *The Survey of Pidgin and Creole Languages, Volume I: English-based and Dutch-based Languages*, ed. Susanne Michaelis, Philippe Maurer, Martin Haspelmath, and Magnus Huber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
8. Don Pedro Obaseki, "Nigerian Video as the 'Child of Television,'" in *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*, ed. Pierre Barrot (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 72–76.

Nollywood

Nollywood burst onto the world scene in 1992 as a dramatically new phenomenon: a major film industry based entirely on analog video technologies, from cameras through postproduction work to distribution on cassettes. The economic crisis stemming from the structural adjustment program destroyed Nigerian celluloid film production and exhibition and greatly weakened the NTA. Trained personnel from the NTA found a video-distribution system in the "infrastructure of piracy" (Brian Larkin's phrase[9]) that had been created in the informal economic sector to service the VCRs of the middle class with pirated Hollywood, Bollywood, and Hong Kong films. And, they found a model for production in the Yoruba Travelling Theatre tradition, whose artists had moved dexterously from itinerant stage performances to television and celluloid film. They, too, operated in the informal sector. (Seminal academic work by Biodun Jeyifo and Karin Barber on "the African popular arts," defined as informally produced, springing from and addressed to the heterogeneous masses of African cities, and requiring little capital or formal education, had the Yoruba Travelling Theatre as their subject.[10])

Three parallel video film industries were created at the same moment, divided on a linguistic basis. The one that would later be called Nollywood began by making films in Igbo, the language of the "marketers" (so-called because they operated in the informal markets of Lagos and the cities of southeastern Nigeria). But production soon switched over to English because profits were greater on the national market for films in the national language, and personnel from numerous ethnic groups joined the industry, though the Igbo marketers maintained their dominance of distribution and much of film financing. Yoruba Travelling Theatre artists established their own Yoruba-language industry, and a Hausa-language industry was established in northern Nigeria, centered in Kano.[11] These three branches of the Nigerian video industry still have their own professional organizations and marketing systems. The triplication is a sign of its grassroots origins and the lack of any centralized control or encouragement.

The government paid very little attention to the new industry. The parastatal charged with regulation and classification changed its name to the National Film and Video Censors Board, but in practice, it has done very little censoring, aside from occasional, often ill-conceived interventions. (According to many producers, it has done very little

9. Brian Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 289–314.

10. Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1984); Karin Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (1987): 1–78.

11. Sometimes all three industries are lumped together as *Nollywood*; I believe many Yoruba filmmakers would not complain about this, but many Hausa filmmakers would. I use the term in the more restricted sense. On the early history and structure of the three industries, see Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome, "Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films," *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 3 (1998): 106–28; and Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

of anything besides collect envelopes of cash in return for the stamp of clearance.) The higher officials—like nearly all the producers and directors who had been working in celluloid film and like the more educated sector of the population generally—looked down on the rough productions of the upstart medium, with their raw expressions of "superstitious" beliefs, crime, and other embarrassments to the national image, and for a long time hoped that the video films would just go away.[12]

The Hausa film industry has had a difficult time with Kano State's censorship board and with restrictions of a conservative Muslim culture, against which the movies have often gently pushed.[13] But the Nollywood and Yoruba industries have seldom given the censors much to worry about. Producers are, and feel, vulnerable to the losses that would result from even a single film being banned. In any case, they have, in large part, picked up the NTA's mantle as a unifying national force and as the champion both of modernization and of the preservation of "tradition." National unity is assumed as a value; the truly dangerous religious division between Islam and Christianity never comes up (though it is common to see a Christian pastor doing battle with the forces of darkness, which frequently wear the face of indigenous religions). This restraint is striking in light of Nollywood's predilection for the scandalous. From the beginning, excitement about the new film culture was generated partly by its difference from the kinds of things the NTA would broadcast. The "get-rich-quick" films that initially branded Nollywood film culture featured murderous occult money rituals, witchcraft, demonic possession, prostitution, drug dealing, criminal fraud, and so on.[14]

A second parastatal, the Nigerian Film Corporation, has mattered even less. Denja Abdullahi, surveying the history of the government's relationship with the film industry, writes, "Well or badly led, the parastatals are inert, ineffective, irrelevant bureaucracies. . . . merely fulfilling the motions of officialdom. . . . The flurry of recent government interventionist measures in the industry is akin to that of an architect rushing to a building site with a blueprint after the builders and craftsmen have completed the building of the house."[15]

It is what the government has failed to do that has structured the industry. Piracy is a problem for all film industries. The whole Nollywood business model of churning

12. See Onookome Okome, "Nollywood and Its Critics," in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Raul Austen and Mahir Saul (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 26–41.
13. Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Islam, Hausa Culture, and Censorship in Northern Nigerian Video Film," in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Ralph Austen and Mahir Saul (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 63–73; Carmen McCain, "Nollywood, Kannywood and a Decade of Hausa Film Censorship in Nigeria: 2001 to 2011," in *Silencing Cinema*, eds. Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 223–40.
14. Haynes, *Nollywood*, chapter 2.
15. Abdullahi, Denja, "Teaching an Old Dog a New Trick: Reviewing Government's Interventions in the Nollywood Industry," paper presented at the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA) Annual International Conference, Abuja, August 2015, 2–3.

films out rapidly on very low budgets is premised on the fact that films will be pirated before a larger investment can be recovered. The Nigerian government has never been serious about solving or even limiting this problem. The penalties are so mild they encourage rather than deter piracy. Intellectual property rights, or indeed any form of contract law, are generally not respected in Nigeria, and there is strong evidence of official collusion.[16] Politicians take money from the pirates at election time and so will not prosecute them. The largest pirate in Lagos is said to be sheltered in a military cantonment where the police cannot come.

In 2007, the censors board tried to transform the distribution structure from the "informal" system set up by the marketers, where virtually nothing was written down, to a formal, more transparent one in which larger-scale capitalist corporations could invest. The marketers saw this as an attempt to take away control of the business they had built; the opacity of their methods served to maintain their dominance.[17] They fought this initiative to a standstill.

But the intervention of formal capitalism was inevitable, given the enormous potential profits in this underdeveloped sector of the global media market. The period of Afropessimism, during which the international community largely wrote off Nigeria's future, was replaced in about 2005 by the "Africa rising" narrative: for a decade, African countries had some of the highest growth rates in the world as foreign investors realized the potential of a reviving middle class. Nigeria remained a difficult place to do business, but the government of Lagos State turned the nation's commercial capital into a plausible destination for direct foreign investment. Telecom companies were the star performers. Upscale shopping malls began to appear in Nigeria's major cities and multiplex cinemas in them.

Simultaneously, media distribution across the globe was shifting from material media such as video discs to immaterial transmission through Internet streaming and satellite or cable broadcasting systems.[18] Such technologies are far beyond the capacities of the tiny Nollywood production companies. In Nigeria, the two most consequential corporations in this new world were the transnational Internet startup iROKOtv—"the Netflix of Africa"—and the South African satellite broadcaster MultiChoice. MultiChoice's Africa Magic channel—now a bouquet of eight channels—soon reached nearly everywhere on the African continent. Both satellite broadcasting and Internet streaming require massive amounts of content and would have been inconceivable without the enormous volume of films produced by Nollywood and their attractiveness to audiences outside of Nigeria. In 2013, both of the aforementioned corporations and others

16. Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2014), 76–78.
17. Jade Miller, *Nollywood Central* (London: BFI/Palgrave, 2016).
18. Alessandro Jedlowski, "African Media and the Corporate Takeover: Video Film Circulation in the Age of Neoliberal Transformations," *African Affairs* 116, no. 465 (2017): 671–91.

began investing in the production of their own original content, both feature films and serials.[19]

The current state of the industry is as follows.[20] The original Nollywood industry, based on the disc market, still exists and still makes the same kind of movies, but its center of gravity has shifted from Lagos to the Igbo part of the country, where the marketers are from. Profit margins and budgets are lower than ever, and it gets much less media coverage than it used to. It is hard not to see it as provincialized if not residual, though predictions of its demise have always been wrong.

The term *New Nollywood* began to be used around 2010 to describe films of higher technical and artistic quality, made possible by and designed for the new multiplex cinemas.[21] There are still very few cinemas and, aside from the occasional blockbuster, filmmakers mostly make little or no money in them, but investors in all but low-budget films want assurance of a coveted slot on the big screens. This means pleasing the very specific demographic of the cinema audience: disproportionately young, affluent, educated, and shaped by transnational (United States) tastes. From the cinemas, films are "windowed" through video on demand, satellite subscription services, sale to airlines, and so on. Often, distribution to the impoverished masses on disc or by downloading to phones is left to pirates. The satellite and Internet corporations pay for great quantities of cheap content—$10,000 per film or less—that must meet minimal technical standards and often feature beautiful people in beautiful settings, but mostly are negligible artistically.

This system is thoroughly neoliberalized, the various platforms corresponding to class divisions, and is very unlike the fundamentally democratic system imposed by the piracy of discs, which requires that the film reach everyone at once, before the pirates got at it. Nollywood began at a moment of crisis when the creative personnel who deserted or were deserted by the national institution of the NTA found common cause with a whole nation suffering from extreme precarity and disgust at the wickedness of their rulers, and so Nollywood often mounted a stinging social critique. Filmmakers saw market women as their target demographic—dogged workers in the informal economy who would have the price of a movie at the end of the week. Now, at the pinnacle of Nollywood, privileged cinemagoers watch slickly produced images of the lives of successful professionals in enclaves of wealth, in films that largely accept the premises of this life.

19. Jonathan Haynes, "Keeping Up: The Corporatization of Nollywood's Economy and Paradigms for Studying African Screen Media," *Africa Today* 64, no. 4 (2018): 3–29.
20. For a more detailed description, see Haynes, "Keeping Up."
21. Moradewun Adejunmobi, "Evolving Nollywood Templates for Minor Transnational Film," *Black Camera* 5, no. 2 (2014): 74–94; Connor Ryan, "New Nollywood: A Sketch of Nollywood's Metropolitan New Style," *African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (2015): 55–76.

The formation of social classes and the consolidation of distinct class cultures is a relatively recent phenomenon in Nigeria—of course, this is not a simple matter—but it is proceeding rapidly and Nollywood is implicated in it. But the creation of divisions is by no means the whole story. The logic of the most highly capitalized media platforms—satellite broadcasting and Internet streaming—depends on aggregating diverse audiences all willing to pay a subscription fee rather than producing a single product imposed on the whole audience. People channel surf between New Nollywood and the old; Africa Magic has channels in Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and Swahili as well as English, and many people watch films that are not in their mother tongues.[22]

It is possible to see the increasing range of Nigeria's film production structures not as balkanization but as a source of strength. If at the top end Nollywood is more open than ever to foreign models and inspirations, its popularity depends on staying open at the bottom, maintaining the sense the audience has always had that it tells "true stories"—meaning what is felt to be their own stories, in the form they want them told. From the beginning, Nigerian consumers were willing to pay more for a Nigerian film made on a budget of $15,000, with all the deficiencies that budget entails, than for a (pirated) $250 million Hollywood film, because Nollywood expressed their world. Nigeria's film culture and film industry still depend on this intimate relationship with its audience's desires and sense of identity and, as always, the linguistic dimension is key.

Nigerian Pidgin

Nigerian Pidgin figures in this essay as an important element in Nollywood films and a significant ingredient in their success. It also figures as a strong parallel phenomenon: it, too, is a central and unifying cultural expression, grounded in multiethnic popular culture; it, too, has been largely ignored if not opposed by the government and other official institutions, but nevertheless, it, too, has become a major or even dominant cultural force.

Nigerian Pidgin is a creole (i.e., spoken as a first language) for about five million Nigerians, mostly in the Niger Delta region where the language was formed. But, according to Nicholas Faraclas,

> at least half of all Nigerians (along with millions more in the diaspora) speak Nigerian Pidgin in some form. With a speech community of over 75 million [this number should be revised upwards in line with the current estimated population of 200 million

22. Hyginus Ekwuazi, "The Perception/Reception of DSTV/Multichoice's Africa Magic Channels by Selected Nigerian Audiences," *Journal of African Cinemas* 6, no. 1 (2014): 21–48.

> or more], Nigerian Pidgin is not only the African language with the largest number of speakers, but also the most widely spoken pidgin/creole language in the world. . . . Nigerian Pidgin has become far and away the most popular, widely spoken, readily learned, practically useful, and fastest growing language in Nigeria today.[23]

It has been estimated that, "given the rapid spread of Nigerian Pidgin (NPE) among younger Nigerians, this proportion should increase to cover over seventy or eighty percent by the time the present generation of children reaches adulthood."[24] Only something like 57 percent of Nigerians have some proficiency in Standard English.

Nigerian Pidgin is not evenly distributed geographically. In northern Nigeria, Hausa serves as the lingua franca. In the cities of the north, Pidgin flourishes in the neighborhoods of nonindigenes and in the shadow of the institutions of the national government, with their multiethnic personnel: military and police barracks, offices of the bureaucracy, boarding schools and universities, and the highway network. In southern Nigeria, Pidgin flourishes in these contexts also, but commerce and polyglot urbanism are far more important in making a working knowledge of Pidgin nearly indispensable.

National languages of this level of importance are normally promoted in a standardized form by the powers that be. But Nigerian Pidgin spread without any such form of political or cultural patronage, and it has been given no recognition by the Nigerian government. English, French, and the three most widely spoken indigenous African languages (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo) are official languages, but Pidgin is not mentioned in the Nigerian Constitution or in government policy. The educational system ignores and actively discriminates against it: much of English-language instruction involves beating Nigerianisms out of students, who have often been punished for using Pidgin. Discourses of contamination and contagion are regularly invoked in this context.[25] Nigerian linguists have been divided on the subject of the status Pidgin should have. Some eminent figures have for decades advocated recognizing Pidgin as an indigenous Nigerian language (Ayo Banjo) and adopting it as an official language (B. O. Elugbe). But prejudices against it have been deeply entrenched.[26]

The Nigerian linguist Charles C. Mann calls Pidgin "the language of sociocommunication, intimate and familiar conversation, humour, anger and proverbs" and "in many urban centres, the principal medium of public trading and exchanges." He quotes

23. Faraclas, "Nigerian Pidgin."
24. Ifechelobi, Jane Nkechi, and Chiagozie Uzoma Ifechelobi, "Beyond Barriers: The Changing Status of Nigerian Pidgin," *International Journal of Language and Literature* 3, no.1 (June 2015): 213.
25. Herbert Igboanusi, "Empowering Nigerian Pidgin: A Challenge for Status Planning?" *World Englishes* 27, no. 1 (2008): 68–82.
26. See Igboanusi, "Empowering," 69; Jenny Benjamin Inyang, "The *Naija* Language and the 'Naija Languej Akademi' as an Ideological Movement," *AFRREV LALIGENS: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies* 5, no. 2 (October 2016): 19.

B. Mafeni: "Many Nigerians, although they use Pidgin as a register in certain, especially familiar contexts, are nevertheless ashamed to be associated with the language in public. This is probably a result of the influence of parents and school authorities, who have often discouraged its use because they consider it a debased form of English and not a language in its own right."[27] In a later study, Mann critiques a system for gauging "ethnolinguistic vitality" that uses three criteria—status, demography, and institutional support—pointing out that Nigerian Pidgin has none of these: its status has been very low, it is not the traditional language of any ethnic group, and it has gotten no institutional support.[28] Pidgin has flourished anyway, and when the government really needs to reach the masses of the population—in public-health campaigns, for example—it has always turned to Pidgin. Without the prestige of "authentic," "traditional" culture or of elite modernity, Pidgin is associated with the intermediate zone, vastly fertile but often disrespected, from which African popular culture comes.[29]

Nigerian Pidgin was created in the context of early British trading on the coast, when human beings were the most important commodity. Pidgin was a necessary means for the enslavers to communicate with those on shore and those in the holds of their ships. It remains a language of command, what masters speak to their servants and what police bark at those they stop on the roads. But the passage by Nicholas Faraclas quoted earlier suggests a different and more important genealogy, one rooted in the long history of intercommunicability among the peoples of this exceptionally rich linguistic region. Kelechukwu Ihemere stresses that "at every stage of its history, Nigerian Pidgin has been used primarily as a means of communication among Nigerians rather than between Nigerians and traders, missionaries or other foreigners."[30] But it has had a strong association with the lower classes, those without the formal education through which they would learn "proper" English.

In 2008, the linguist Herbert Igboanusi published an essay titled "Empowering Nigerian Pidgin: A Challenge for Status Planning?" in which he makes solemn recommendations for measures that the government and other institutions could take to improve the status of Pidgin.[31] But Nigerian society was already dramatically altering its attitude toward Pidgin, whose place in the culture has been transformed.

27. Charles C. Mann, "Language, Mass Communication, and National Development: The Role, Perceptions and Potential of Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin in the Nigerian Mass Media," paper presented at the International Conference on Language in Development, Langkawi, Malaysia, July 1997, 7; Mafeni, B. "Nigerian Pidgin," in *The English Language in Africa*, ed. J. Spencer (London: Longman, 1971), 99.
28. Charles C. Mann, "Reviewing Ethnolinguistic Vitality: The Case of Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4, no. 3 (2000): 458–74.
29. Barber, "Popular Arts."
30. Kelechukwu Uchechukwu Ihemere, "A Basic Description and Analytic Treatment of Noun Clauses in Nigerian Pidgin," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): 299.
31. Igboanusi, "Empowering."

By the mid-1980s, "it was no secret that the most socially popular adverts, public awareness jingles, drama sketches, record request programmes, etc." were in Pidgin, and it had begun to be used for news and debate broadcasts on radio and television in the Niger Delta region.[32] Wale Adenuga's 1984 Pidginphone celluloid film *Papa Adjasco* was a huge hit as was his later television serial of the same name. *Hotel de Jordan* (1988) was the first popular Pidgin television serial. All these exploited Pidgin's association with humor.

To the extent that one person can be said to be the agent of Pidgin's new prestige as a language of serious discourse, that person is the musician Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti (1938–1997). Fela was born into the cultural and nationalist political elite of the Yoruba city of Abeokuta. He was radicalized during a sojourn to the United States in 1969, which exposed him to the Black Panther Party and other revolutionary currents in African American and Pan-African thinking. Thereafter an implacable foe of successive Nigerian governments, he was frequently jailed and severely injured by the police and soldiers. Fela's public persona was a calculated affront to Nigerian norms of respectability. He performed wearing nothing but underwear, smoked marijuana constantly onstage and off, and once married twenty-seven women in one ceremony (all dancers at his club, thereby protecting them from police harassment).

At the beginning of his career, Fela sang in Yoruba and English; after his radicalization, he sang in Yoruba and Pidgin, the change expressing a commitment to linguistic solidarity with the oppressed masses and to a recognition that Pidgin was the key to actually reaching those masses and to the political unity that might result.[33] Pidgin was the language of his "yabis," the fierce commentaries on political and cultural matters that were interspersed with music.

Fela's funeral in 1997, near the end of a long period of military dictatorship, drew a crowd of one million people who effectively shut down the center of Lagos. His stature has only increased since then. His music is the indispensable soundtrack for Lagos life and his songs became anthems for a generation or two of professionals who came of age under military rule. The strange conversion of Fela into something like official culture seemed complete when president Emmanuel Macron of France visited Nigeria in 2018. He had interned at the French embassy in Lagos and become a Fela fan, so on the occasion of his visit, a meeting with stakeholders in the media and culture industries convened at the New Afrika Shrine run by Fela's children. A far cry from Fela's original club, which was a rough structure in a rough neighborhood and protected from the

32. Mann, "Language, Mass Communication," 7.

33. Rotimi Fasan, " 'Wetin Dey Happen?' Wazobia, Popular Arts, and Nationhood," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 2015): 10–11. On Fela's life and significance, see also Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); and Sola Olorunyomi, *Afrobeat! Fela and the Imagined Continent* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003).

police by local street gangs, the New Afrika Shrine is a stone's throw from the Federal High Court and the seat of Lagos State government, and is adorned with corporate advertising.

In 2007, an all-Pidgin radio station, Wazobia FM, began broadcasting in Lagos. According to Yomi Kazeem, "In its early days, Wazobia faced doubters from advertising circles and even among some of its own staff. Indeed, as professional broadcasters seemed unsure of taking up Pidgin, Wazobia's first radio hosts were cleaners hired from the restaurant business owned by its parent company."[34] But it quickly became the most popular station in Lagos. More than 60 percent of the radio audience in Nigeria's four major cities listens to all-Pidgin stations.[35] Sports commentary is now often in Pidgin, including on transnational satellite channels, and stand-up comedy, which has become a major form of popular culture and big business with corporate-sponsored tours, almost invariably is in Pidgin. The lyrics of Afrobeats, the hip-hop-influenced reigning Nigerian musical style, have Pidgin at the center of their constant code switching.[36] In 2011, Google launched a Pidgin interface, and the BBC established an immediately successful Pidgin language service in 2017. All the telecommunications companies offer their call center customers the option of using Pidgin.[37]

Dramatic evidence of how far Pidgin has come since it was seen as the language of the lower, uneducated classes is that it is widely used as a primary language for text messages and for all kinds of online commentary and customer comments. In this context, Theresa Heyd and Christian Mair argue that Nigerian Pidgin's new coolness puts it on a trajectory (previously followed by African American Vernacular English and Jamaican Creole) from a stigmatized vernacular "to social capital, to an asset that can be marketed and, ultimately, monetized . . . our data can be seen as evidence of early-stage commodification" of the language. They associate this development with Nollywood and the increasing international popularity of Nigerian musicians.[38]

In 2009, the Naija Languej Akademi was founded, aiming to rebrand Nigerian Pidgin as Naija, to create a standard orthography and generally to promote its use and study. *Naija* is a slang term for the nation of Nigeria, which had begun also to be used to name its lingua franca. Jenny Benjamin Inyang identifies the name change as an ideological move designed to do several things. It jettisons the term *Pidgin* on the grounds that Nigerian Pidgin has become creolized as the first language of many of

34. Yomi Kazeem, "How Pidgin English Became the Voice of International Media in West Africa," Quartz Africa, September 6, 2018, https://qz.com/africa/1349143/why-pidgin-english-is-the-new-cool-for-foreign-media-in-west-africa/.
35. Odirin Victor Abonyi, "Re-Visiting the National Language Question: the Nigerian Pidgin Nexus," in *Scholarship and Commitment: Essays in Honour of G. G. Darah*, eds. Enajite Ojaruega and Peter Omoko (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2018), 406.
36. Akinmade Akande, "Code-Switching in Nigerian Hip-Hop Lyrics," *Language Matters* 44, no. 1 (March 2013): 39–57.
37. Ifechelobi, Nkechi, and Ifechelobi, "Beyond Barriers," 214.
38. Theresa Heyd and Christian Mair, "From Vernacular to Digital Ethnolinguistic Repertoire: The Case of Nigerian Pidgin," in *Indexing Authenticity*, eds. Véronique Lacoste, Jakob Leimgruber, and Thiemo Breyer (Berlin, München, and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 251.

its speakers, that the language now serves many purposes beyond those of a contact language, and that *Pidgin* carries connotations of inferiority, of being derivative and less than an independent language in its own right. The name change embraces *Naija* because it identifies the language with the nation and its values—a unifying gesture, celebrating the lingua franca that has functioned so powerfully to allow communication among Nigerians, thereby making this multiethnic nation possible. And the move also marks the language that Nigerians have created for themselves as distinct from all the other closely related pidgins and creoles spoken in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia, Ghana, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea.[39]

Proponents of Naija/Nigerian Pidgin point to the fact that communicating across ethnicities is in its very nature. Unlike all other Nigerian languages, it is spoken by people from every regional, ethnolinguistic, and religious group in the country, and unlike Nigerian Standard English, it is spoken by all social classes rather than only by the relatively privileged who have had the years of formal education needed to reach proficiency.[40] It has been credited with downplaying differences and engendering peaceful coexistence in ethnically heterogeneous cities such as Warri, Sapele, and Port Harcourt.[41] Well over a million people for whom it is their first language are the offspring of multiethnic marriages.[42]

Nigerians have agreed to keep English as their main official national language in no small part because it is not the language of any particular Nigerian ethnic group that might be suspected of ambitions to dominate the whole country. Pidgin has the unique advantage of being a "language that is both home grown and ethnically detached."[43] Faraclas observes that the sounds of Pidgin—its particular selection of consonants and vowels, and its tonal patterning—come from the commonalities of the indigenous substrate languages.[44] So it feels familiar and homey to Nigerian ears, not foreign like English. Even for those who do not speak it or understand it well, it expresses a will to communicate and a faith that communication is possible.

Those who are opposed to Pidgin may fear its supposed corrupting influence on "proper" English; they may also fear its erosion of indigenous Nigerian languages. Even the largest and strongest Nigerian languages are to be in danger of disappearance as the younger generation declines to learn or at least to master them. They often are supported in this by their parents, who see English as "the language of success" (a phrase used by Moradewun Adejunmobi in an early and important essay on the linguistic

39. Inyang, "The Naija Language."
40. Ihemere, "A Basic Description."
41. Nneka Umera-Okeke, "Still on the National Language Question: Can the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) Suffice?" *Revue Africaine et Malgache de Recherche Scientifique* 7, no. 1 (2018): 107.
42. Inyang, quoting C. Mokwenye, "The Naija Laguage," 19.
43. Ifechelobi, Nkechi, and Ifechelobi, "Beyond Barriers," 215.
44. Faraclas, "Nigerian Pidgin."

character of Nigerian video films)[45], or, as the filmmaker Tunde Kelani put it to me, they see English as the language of those who have pillaged the Nigerian economy and they want their children to be among the pillagers, not the pillaged.[46] Nigerian cultures largely did not use writing before the advent of Islam and European colonialism. Much of Nigerian culture exists only in the oral tradition, which is suffering catastrophic loses as urbanized, often de-ethnicized Nigerian youth decline the slow processes of linguistic and cultural transmission and the long discipline of mastering traditional verbal arts.

As elsewhere, young people are glued to their phones, where they find a world saturated with transnational media. But this does not mean that Nigerian youth want to stop being Nigerian. Speaking Pidgin, listening to polyglot Afrobeats music, attending Pidgin stand-up comedy performances, and watching Nollywood films all are ways of being proudly African while also being urban, modern, and open to a globalized media environment. Rudolf Gaudio demonstrates how precisely Nigerian musicians have located Nigerian culture within that environment:

> Their performances often combine elements of coastal west African musical styles, such as highlife and Afrobeat, with African American and Afro-Caribbean styles, especially hip hop and reggae; and their lyrics juxtapose NP, English, and various Nigerian languages alongside African American English and occasionally Jamaican Creole. By aligning Nigerians' cultural and political experiences with those of African Americans and Jamaicans—whose languages have also been stigmatized as "broken English"—these artists engage what Thompson (1984) and Gilroy (1993) have called the Black Atlantic artistic tradition. At the same time they index a distinctly Nigerian public within that transnational cultural space.[47]

Elsewhere, Gaudio makes a parallel argument for the cultural work of stand-up comedians:

> Through their use of NP and English, Nigerian comedians are helping to forge a racially conscious Nigerian national (and transnational) public by highlighting and making fun of the country's fraught historical and contemporary relationships with predominantly White, English-speaking nations, especially the United Kingdom and the United States.[48]

45. Moradewun Adejunmobi, "English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture," *Cultural Critique* 50 (2002), 74–103.
46. Tunde Kelani, personal communication, Lagos, 2015.
47. Rudolf P. Gaudio, "The Blackness of 'Broken English,'" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2011): 230–46, 231.
48. Rudolph P. Gaudio, "Pidgin Pride and Prejudice: Race, Gender and Stylistic Codeswitching in Nigerian Stand-Up Comedy," In *Routledge Companion to the Work of John R. Rickford*, eds. Renée Blake and Isabelle Buchstaller, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2019), 331–39, 334.

For musicians, stand-up comedians, and Nollywood film producers, using Pidgin and code switching are a commercial strategy—a strategy to increase the potential national market, in the first place, but also to amplify their roles as regional media hegemons across the continent and the Black Atlantic. Pidgin creates intercommunicability or at least resonances of a shared heritage with other West African pidgins and creoles, Jamaican Patois and Barbadian Creole, and African American Vernacular English. Nigerian Afrobeats stars are collaborating with leading US hip-hop artists, and the business of Internet streaming of Nigerian films has, because of the slow speeds and high data costs of the Internet in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, depended principally on the enormous Nigerian and African diaspora created by decades of brain drain. In Brooklyn and in London, having parents from Nigeria—or (for that matter) Bangladesh or Egypt—is now cool in a way it wasn't ten years ago, and in this world held together by phones and laptops, Nigerian Pidgin and Nollywood films are major elements.

Nigerian Pidgin on Screen

As far as I am aware, there is nothing like a comprehensive academic account of the role Pidgin has played as a language of Nigerian filmmaking. Often it is left out entirely. The National Film and Video Censors Board categorizes films according to language, recognizing English, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Bini, Esan, Ibibio, Urhobo, Etsako, and Itsekiri—but not Pidgin, which is silently assimilated to English.[49] Debates on what language(s) African filmmakers should use in their films closely parallel those about African literature; in both cases, the debates are as old as the media. They tend to be cast in binary terms as a choice between indigenous African languages, which have the virtues and advantages of "authenticity," and English or the other "world" languages imposed by colonialism, which are now also national languages in Africa, which can reach beyond a particular ethnic group to national and international audiences.[50] Pidgin slips through the cracks of this debate. The most detailed analysis of code switching in Nollywood films centers on a film (*Jenifa*, 2008) that constantly mingles Yoruba and English; Pidgin is scarcely mentioned and is treated as a subset of English.[51] There has been no equivalent to the attention devoted to the use of Pidgin by musicians, stand-up comics, and Internet users.

49. National Film and Video Censors Board, *Film & Video Directory in Nigeria*, vol. 3, eds. D. R. Gana and Clement D. Edekor (Abuja: National Film and Video Censors Board, 2006), 272–73.

50. A classic early (1965) statement is Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," in *Gods and Soldiers: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary African Writing*, ed. Rob Spillman (New York: Penguin, 2009), 3–12; for a recent discussion, see James Tar Tsaaior, "Another Tower of Babel or a Future of Possibilities? The Language of Nollywood and the Politics of Cultural Communication in Postcolonial Nigeria," *in Nigerian Culture and the Idea of the Nation*, eds. James Tar Tsaaior and Francoise Ugochukwu (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2017), 47–71.

51. Adedun Emmanuel Adebayo, "The Sociolinguistics of a Nollywood Movie," *Journal of Global Analysis* 1 (2010): 113–38.

My purpose here is not to argue that Pidgin should be *the* language of Nollywood, but rather to shift the debate to recognize Pidgin's central role as a binder in a polyglot multiethnic environment where people slide naturally from one language to another depending on context and where code switching (within a conversation) and code mixing (within a sentence) are endemic.

The history of Nollywood's use of Pidgin runs parallel to the story of its rise outlined prior. The first video films entirely in Pidgin—comedies—appeared the same year (1994) as the first English-language Nollywood film. Jagua (Afolabi Afolayan), who had had a popular show on the NTA and who came out of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre tradition but was based in Jos, outside of Yorubaland, and so worked in Pidgin, made *Devil's Money*, a comic take on the occult money-ritual theme. This is low comedy, set in a village full of foolishness and debility; it is an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "the carnivalesque," a popular form that emphasizes "the lower bodily stratum" and its desires and functions—a world of drunkenness, hunger, defecation, frank sexual desire, and grotesquely enlarged stomachs and buttocks. This crude fecundity is linked to a laughing acceptance of life that punctures refined pretentions and seriousness of any kind. Language is handled playfully as a material thing.[52] All these characteristics are associated with Pidgin itself.

Lagos Na Wah!! (another film from 1994), advertised on its jacket as "Pidgin Comedy," joined the forces of two leading troupes of television comedians, one Yoruba, playing native Lagosians, the other from the Igbo part of the country, cast as bewildered visitors to the metropolis. Again, the emphasis was on improvised fooling in a world of fools and sly tricksters. Pidgin was the natural language for interactions among lower-class characters from different ethnicities, and the linguistic play to which Pidgin lends itself was fully exploited. This comic tradition is still going strong: *Lagos Real Fake Life*, a direct descendant of *Lagos Na Wah!!*, made good money in the multiplexes in 2018.

But, outside the comic tradition, few films have been entirely in Pidgin. There is a strong analogy with the Nigerian novel, where some dialog in Pidgin is a routine feature—it would be nearly impossible to represent urban life realistically without it—but where novels written entirely in Pidgin are extremely rare. The narrative voice remains a bastion of Nigerian Standard English. This is surely one reason why Pidgin is underestimated as an element in film culture: it nearly always has a frame around it in a more respectable language.

But Pidgin turns up in many places, even in *Violated* (1996), Amaka Igwe's sophisticated romance, whose extravagantly luxurious settings and psychological depth were designed to appeal to the Nigerian upper classes. But the heroine is working as a sales clerk when the film begins, and her work friends keep up an earthy, disabused

52. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

commentary in Pidgin on her unfolding relationship with her Prince Charming. Films about cross-class romances continue to exploit Pidgin in this way, as in Kunle Afolayan's *Phone Swap* (2012) and Tope Oshin's *New Money* (2018).

Zeb Ejiro's *Domitilla: The Story of a Prostitute* 1 and 2 (1996, 1998) represents both the use of Pidgin as a vehicle for the socially conscious exploration of the life of Lagos's streets and the expression of the culture of the Niger Delta, Pidgin's epicenter, from which the film's heroine and her friends come. Recently, two of the most sensitive explorations of the dire situation of underprivileged youth in Lagos, Uduak-Obong Patrick's *Just Not Married* (2016) and Ema Edosio Deelen's *Kasala!* (2018), are, true to their settings, entirely in Pidgin or nearly so.

The new millennium brought a crop of new Nollywood genres,[53] nearly all of which featured Pidgin. In crime films (like Chico Ejiro's *Outkast* [2001]) and vigilante films (like Lancelot Imasuen's *Issakaba* series [2000, 2001]), Pidgin is the natural language of criminals. In the genre of films about Nigerian emigrants struggling to establish themselves abroad (such as *Goodbye New York* [2004], *Dollars from Germany* [2004], *The London Boy* [2004], *Toronto Connection* [2007], and *Europe by Road* [2007]), Pidgin figures for several overlapping reasons: it is a pungent reminder of home and a bond between Nigerians of various ethnicities; forged in the slave trade and associated with poverty, Pidgin is also the language of hard times and the most direct expression of emotional need.

Those who can afford foreign visas and airfare are generally middle class, though usually they are shown being driven abroad by some kind of acute distress—if nothing else, the depressed economy—and, in the films, they always encounter harsh trials. Students at Nigerian universities are also predominantly middle class, and the genre of "campus films" devoted to their experiences (for example, *Girls Hostel* [2001], *Campus Queen* [2004], *The Cat* [2004], and *Dangerous Angels* [2010]) also invariably presents the campus as a harsh environment, dominated by "campus cults" (i.e., fraternities gone bad that violently organize social hierarchies, sexual predation, intimidation of faculty, and perhaps also prostitution, drug dealing, and robberies). University students are noted for their affection for Pidgin: never heard in lecture halls, it is the language of student hostels and (often) of faculty staff clubs. The population of students in Nigerian universities has continued to rise steeply, even as the extreme dysfunction of the educational system encourages radical perspectives. Pidgin is the language students use as a sign of toughness in their constant confrontations, in vying for social status, and for "gisting" (getting to the gist, the pith, or heart of something) with their roommates about their love lives. If English is the official language of lectures, readings, and exams, unofficial life in this modern and relatively de-ethnicized environment takes place in Pidgin (see figure 6.1).

53. See Haynes, *Nollywood*, chapters 7–12.

This rough sketch of the history of Pidgin in Nollywood intersects at this point with the history of Pidgin's rise from subaltern status to fashionableness, driven (as noted) in no small part by university students and graduates, and it intersects with the history of the transformations of Nollywood and its culture(s) by the intervention of formal capitalism. New Nollywood was based on the new multiplexes, which are disproportionately patronized by university graduates, and the later films sponsored by transnational corporations often represent professionals successfully adapted to the glossy dimension of the new world of transnational neoliberal capitalism.

Code switching and code mixing are the order of the day in these films, even when they never leave the world of sophisticated privilege: the blockbuster *Fifty* (2015), a *Sex and the City*-style film about a group of women professionals approaching middle age, for example, is in English, Pidgin, Yoruba, and Igbo. Omoni Oboli's *Okafor's Law* (2016), another film about the sexual mores of prosperous Lagosians, centers on three

Figure 6.1: *Fifty*, a blockbuster from the media mogul Mo Abudu: Pidgin infiltrates even the most fashionable settings. *Source*: fair use.

extremely eligible bachelors who switch constantly from English to Pidgin, a habit linked to their friendship dating back to university.

Some of the most talented current younger directors have turned to the crime film (inspired by foreign directors ranging from Francis Ford Coppola and Quentin Tarantino to the Brazilian Fernando Meirelles) as a genre with which to present a panorama of Nigerian society held together by corruption, from low-life criminals to the heights of wealth and power. Walter Taylaur's *Gbomo Gbomo Express* (2015) is in English and Pidgin as is Toka Mcbaror's *Merry Men: The Real Yoruba Demons* (2108). Dare Olaitan's *Ojukokoro* (Greed) (2016) and Kemi Adetiba's *King of Boys* (2018) switch among English, Pidgin, Yoruba, and Hausa.

In her 2002 essay "English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture," Moradewun Adejunmobi wrote that English-language Nollywood films represented not a particular Nigerian class or cultural fraction, but

> a sodality of social aspiration. The specific attraction of the films resides in their deployment of narratives of mobility that feed upon the anxieties and desires of disparate social groups seeking to rise beyond their present station in life. . . . If the producers had been merely seeking to communicate across ethnic and class lines, Pidgin would have sufficed for that purpose. . . . But . . . within the Nigerian imaginary, Pidgin retains its associations with illiteracy, poverty, and sexual license. English, on the other hand, operates as linguistic signifier of affluence in the popular arts. . . . In my opinion, a film about the well-to-do made entirely in Pidgin would be a contradiction in terms. . . . When the rich are represented in Nigerian texts, they are almost never imagined as speaking Pidgin.[54]

This was a brilliantly insightful analysis of the situation when she wrote, and it remains true that a film in which wealthy people spoke entirely in Pidgin would be strange. But there has been a profound shift: sophisticated and affluent Nigerians are now eager to claim Pidgin as part of their repertoire.

The Ghost and the Tout

Directed by Charles Uwagbai, *The Ghost and the Tout* (2018) has not been chosen as my central example because it is a masterpiece. Everything about the film reflects the persona of Toyin Abraham, who produced and cowrote it and plays the central character. She has typecast herself as a boisterous, crude, uneducated, irrepressible person—Pidginphone, naturally—who wreaks havoc around her. The filmmaking has the same

54. Adejunmobi, "English," 85, 96, 100n16.

Figure 6.2: *The Ghost and the Tout*: an establishing shot contrasts the "ghetto" with its affluent surroundings. *Source*: fair use.

Figure 6.3: *The Ghost and the Tout*: the slum is prone to chaotic eruptions in voluble Pidgin. *Source*: fair use.

slapdash manner characteristic of the low end of "old" Nollywood comedies. Abraham's films generally get bad reviews because the reviewers are offended by their presence in the multiplex cinemas that are the preserve of the aspirational New Nollywood. But the Nigerian films that have made the most money in those theaters are evenly split between slickly crafted, high-budget, Hollywood-style blockbusters and broad (mostly Pidgin) comedies by the actress Funke Akindele, whose persona greatly resembles Abraham's, and the stand-up comic AY Makun, who also expresses himself naturally in Pidgin. Abraham's projects are a favorite investment for FilmOne, the biggest of the distributors serving the cinemas and a major investor in productions, because they cost a small fraction of the blockbusters. There is more filmmaking craft under the rough surface than meets the eye—enough that the film has been picked up by Netflix, which is the aspiration for many Nigerian film projects.

The story: Mike, a prosperous young Lagos businessman, is murdered in the street by hitmen and finds himself a ghost, looking on at the scene but not understanding who sent the killers. He wanders the streets, unseen and unable to communicate with anyone, until he bumps into Isila the tout, who alone can see and talk with him. The door to the supernatural was thrown open for her by an accidental encounter, as she was making her way home from her boyfriend's, with masqueraders of the Yoruba Oro cult. (The Oro festival celebrates the patrilineage of a town, and women and outsiders are strictly forbidden to see its masquerades. Isila is suffering retribution for her transgression.) Mike pleads with (and then pays) Isila to act as intermediary with his fiancée Adunni, and together the ghost and the tout solve the mystery of who ordered his murder, after suspicion had fallen in various directions (see figure 6.4).

The ghost is in an intermediary relation between the worlds of the living and the dead; the tout is a professional intermediary in business transactions, a role that Isila extends to sticking her nose into everyone's business in her community. But she is not at all eager to take on Mike's assignment, as it requires her to be the intermediary between social classes, which makes her uncomfortable and does not go well: when trying to enter Adunni's environment, she is repeatedly beaten up, dismissed as crazy, and hauled away by security men. She is at home in the "ghetto" (as it is called) while he is upper-middle class. Drone shots emphasize the contrast between her wedge of slum and the vast surrounding new development for the prosperous on the Lekki Peninsula of eastern Lagos.

Both settings are amply developed. In the ghetto, where people switch between Yoruba and Pidgin, the Oro masks are powerful but appear only fleetingly in this multiethnic, recently constructed settlement. We see much more of the community organization that is collecting funds for a modest neighborhood carnival. Many episodes demonstrate the contagion of rumor in the neighborhood, the gullibility that

Figure 6.4: Invisible to everyone else, the ghost Mike pleads with Isila the tout for her help.
Source: fair use.

keeps fraudsters in business, the constant explosion of loud disputes—a vast reservoir of comic idiocy, among other things, but presented with genial familiarity and amusement. In presenting the hanging around that is the substance of social life, the production seems to be continuing the practice of the filmmaking tradition that descends from the Yoruba Travelling Theatre of casting everyone they know in bit parts, but in this case, the faces are not familiar from stage, film, or television appearances but from Instagram and other forms of social media—the fertile soil of the new grassroots.

Mike's world is also multicultural. In repeated scenes, his father hurls Igbo proverbs at his Yoruba business associate; they are always shouting at one another but have been friends since secondary school. (In contrast to the Instagram-famous ghetto cast, the two men are played by iconic actors from the Nollywood and Yoruba film industries. Igbos are the second-largest ethnic group in Lagos, after the Yoruba.) Mike's Igbo father married a Yoruba woman, of excellent character. She demands strict but gracious manners, including respect for social inferiors, from her daughter and is evidently the source of Mike's own calm, quiet, balanced, intelligent, and generous bearing. These are the virtues of elders and kings, highly prized in Nigerian cultures, and a blessed relief from the chaotic noise generated by everyone else. Mike inherits an Igbo identity from his father, but his beautiful fiancée is Yoruba. Mike's best friend is Yoruba but the friend's fiancée is Igbo. (She distinguishes herself for her noisiness and jealousy,

even in this film that is full of both things. The motorbike-mounted, stick-wielding posse of angry women she mobilizes to confront her boyfriend for his [incorrectly] suspected infidelity is one of the film's memorable moments.) Mike the ghost is still Igbo, and Isila the tout is Yoruba. But she speaks Pidgin half the time. Much of the film's comedy is generated around her deficiencies as an intermediary. Moody, distractible, garrulous, uneducated, and none too intelligent, her mind fractured to the verge of mental impairment, she is often opaque as a medium of communication. But she does get through.

Throughout the film, there are repeated appeals to the notion of family, community, and even the nation. In one incident in the ghetto, Isila tries to prevent an irate woman from beating her husband who is busy getting drunk; the woman slaps Isila, who is stunned for a second and then bursts into a rendition of the Nigerian national anthem followed by the declaration "We are one family." "Don't come between a couple," is the reply she gets. When Adunni tells Isila that what they have undergone together has made them family, Isila rejects the idea out of hand: "We can never be family." Of course Isila eventually bonds with Adunni and with Mike: this is a comedy, and things work out. (It's also a romance—there are touching scenes of love and grief between Adunni and the invisible Mike—and it's a melodrama, a murder mystery, a ghost story, and a social satire. This kind of genre mash-up has become common.) There is a hard-headedness in the film that keeps its sentimentality in check (see figure 5).

Figure 6.5: A fake iPhone 10 causes a brief sensation. *Source*: fair use.

The drone shots that show the small ghetto surrounded by a sea of middle-class development invert the reality of Lagos, where two-thirds of the population works in the informal sector and lives in slum conditions on less than two dollars a day. Nigeria's class problem becomes manageable, in the imagination, when presented in this way. Another suggestive image comes from the interior of Isila's boyfriend's place—a shack, with walls partly composed of a poster for an event cosponsored by FilmOne—*The Ghost and the Tout*'s distributor—the Ford Foundation, and the United States embassy. A self-reflexive in-joke, doubtless, but this also shows understanding that people do really shelter behind corporate refuse and perhaps makes a comment on how few degrees of separation there are between the elite and the masses.

The film is profoundly urban in the way essential plot points depend on accidental encounters—people bumping into one another on the street, being out when the masquerades appear, catching glimpses in a crowd. The city is a melting pot where ethnicities have bonded through generations of friendship and erotic love. (The realm of intimacy is where problems are generated: jealousy of one kind or another motivates most of the plot lines.) The class division is harder to overcome, and it is hardening, but the long history of social fluidity and mobility is not over.

As is often true in Nollywood films, there is little sign of political consciousness. This film also does not suggest a teleology or historical temporality. The classes have always been there; the ghetto does not represent "tradition" in spite of the Oro masquerade (the residents are much more excited about the advent of the iPhone 10, though the only one they actually see is a fake, with nothing inside of it—an emblem perhaps of the "modernity" of the periphery). The ghetto isn't sentimentalized as something left behind because it hasn't been left behind.

But the work of social integration is there to be done, and the film does it. When Nollywood first appeared, it was heralded as the voice of the grassroots. Can the subaltern make movies? This was always a simplification: university-educated, NTA-trained personnel were always an important part of the phenomenon. But it is deeply consequential that story ideas and the money to make these films often came out of the same informal markets where people went to buy the films—it was an expression by and for the masses. It is too much to say that *The Ghost and the Tout*'s point of view or social center of gravity are in the ghetto, or that anything is settled by the fact that Toyin Abraham, the film's driving spirit, makes herself at home in the part of the ghetto heroine. Similarly, Pidgin is no guarantee of authenticity or a subaltern perspective: it has been coopted for advertising by predatory corporations and politicians. But the film culture of Nollywood's early days is still alive in this film and so infuses it with vitality, with humor, with the power to express a popular vision, that it can't be kept out of the air-conditioned multiplex theaters in the new Nigerian shopping malls, those nodes of transnational corporate capitalist consumption. The

mall's educated and affluent patrons speak Pidgin as part of their linguistic repertoire, thoroughly over the condescension of previous generations, because Pidgin is in them on the most intimate level and expresses their rootedness in a Nigerian national reality and national identity.

Collective Memory and the Rhetorical Power of the Historical Fiction Film

CARL PLANTINGA

Abstract

As tools to establish collective memory, historical fiction films either connect or don't connect with audiences depending on the historical context in which they are seen. It also makes sense, however, to account for their function psychologically as prompts for experience. In that regard, at least the following three sources account for their rhetorical power. First, for most viewers, they have an ambiguous reference to historical reality that puts into play the "sleeper effect," which inhibits counterarguing and thus promotes the establishment of historical memory. Second, historical fiction films are mass media disseminated widely to millions of viewers. They also possess medium characteristics that foster viewer immersion and a sense of "presentness." Third, the ritualized use of conventional narrative schemas elicits emotions that assist memory formation. To make these points, I draw on both media theory and social science research. I give examples and analyze scenes from films such as *Selma* (2014), *Lincoln* (2012), and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) to illustrate my points. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the ethics of the historical fiction film, arguing that a blanket dismissal of mainstream historical fictions would be wrong, for it would deny the possibility of establishing beneficial collective memories that have to do, for example, with antiracism or other values that should be widely embraced.

Keywords: historical fiction film, docudrama, collective memory, sleeper effect, mainstream narrative

In 1965, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a Christian pastor and African American civil rights leader, led a group of activists on a five-day, fifty-four-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to publicize the obstacles facing black voters and to promote the need for a national voting rights act. The march was especially dramatic because previous attempts by the marchers had been met by violence, made famous by news photographs of police using batons, teargas, and dogs against protesters. By the time

the marchers reached Montgomery, their numbers had swelled to twenty-five thousand people.

Like all historical events, this march had a multiplicity of possible meanings. Meaning is not usually obvious when an event initially occurs and meaning is contested as it develops.[1] This march occurred in the midst of a civil rights movement that divided Americans on issues of race and human rights. Was the march a courageous stand for equal voting rights or an unwelcome challenge to white privilege? Would this march lead to meaningful change? Would it become an icon of the civil rights movement or would it be forgotten? Meanings themselves change over time, even after they have been congealed or solidified. Meanings are thus continually negotiated. Will this march remain a part of the fabric of US collective memory and public imagination? And, if so, how might that happen?

A historical fiction film, backed by a multimillion-dollar marketing and advertising campaign, and through the employment of cinematography, mise-en-scène, star power, dramatic music, and intense and emotional storytelling may become a powerful force in the process by which this meaning is interpreted, focused, and sedimented in a particular culture. For this reason, Ava DuVernay's 2014 film *Selma*, which provides a powerful account of the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, and which puts the march into a clear ideological framework, is a powerful force in the formation and preservation of collective memory.

The effect of historical fiction films, whether intended or not, is to create, change, and/or preserve the collective memory of a people or nation.[2] How do they accomplish this task? How do historical fictions contribute to cultural mythmaking and collective memory? There is no simple answer to this question, of course. The sociocultural conditions into which the film is introduced are central. The impact of the film depends on who sees it, the circumstances in which it is seen, and how it is later used and invoked. This essay, however, focuses on a different aspect of the answer to this question, an equally important though partial account of the power of historical fiction. This essay focuses on the kind of embodied cognitive experience that historical fictions offer to viewers and how that contributes to the formation of collective memory. It also details the most salient tools and technologies by which collective memory is created, sedimented, preserved, ritually shared, and passed on through the work of historical fiction film.

My claim here is that as tools of collective memory, historical fiction films derive their persuasive power from at least these three sources: (1) an ambiguous reference

1. At the time of this writing, for example, the meaning of the Black Lives Matter movement is being hotly contested across the United States.
2. By *film* here I mean a work in any of the moving-image media, from theatrical films to television programs to shows that stream on the Internet.

to historical reality, (2) medium characteristics that foster viewer immersion and a sense of "presentness," and (3) the use of conventional narrative schemas that elicit emotions that assist memory formation. I draw examples and analyze scenes from films such as *Selma*, *Lincoln* (2012), and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) to illustrate my points.

I conclude with a consideration of the ethics of the mainstream historical fiction film, arguing that rather than condemning such films *tout court*, we should consider them on a case-by-case basis and remain open to their possible benefits. As Miriam Hansen argues in her assessment of the radically different critical responses to *Schindler's List* and *Shoah*, the maintenance of a strict opposition between "bad" mainstream and "good" modernist cinema "does not yield a productive way of dealing with either the films or the larger issues involved."[3] Similarly, a blanket rejection of mainstream historical fictions for their supposed deleterious effects would be premature.

Historical Fiction and Collective Memory

By *historical fiction film* I mean fictionalized accounts of history in a moving-image medium that purport to tell a more or less true story about, or provide a historically more or less accurate account of, some element of the past. The point is that all of these films are ostensibly based on historical events. This does not mean that viewers understand *how closely* they adhere to or diverge from the historical record. (Most viewers, as I argue later, are unclear about these issues.) Other terms for historical fiction are *docudrama* and *dramatic documentary*, all referring to a somewhat nebulous genre that consists of hybrids of fiction and nonfiction.[4] Film scholar Steve Lipkin writes that what he terms *docudramas* "ride the fence" between fictional narrative and documentary, "blending strategies of both, belonging wholly to neither."[5] This hybrid nature, as I later argue, is an important source of the influence of the historical fiction film.

Examples of historical fiction film would include *Selma*, *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Band of Brothers* (2001), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *City of Life and Death* (2009), *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Twelve Years*

3. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "*Schindler's List* Is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marsha Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 201–17.

4. Some might argue that the terms *historical fiction film*, *docudrama*, and *dramatic documentary* name separate genres. While one could perhaps make that argument, such an attempt at precise definitions would bring us too far afield for the purposes of this article. Thus, I will here consider these terms to name a single loosely defined genre.

5. Steve N. Lipkin, *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), x.

a Slave (2013), *Lincoln*, *Chernobyl* (2019), and *Goya's Ghosts* (2006). Historical fiction films sometimes attain especially powerful cultural significance when they cover issues that become salient due to current events. An example of this is *Just Mercy* (2019), a film about racial injustice and the exoneration of a black man falsely convicted of murder, which, at the time of this writing, has become an important tool in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Historical fiction films date back to early film history but in the United States, at least, have become increasingly popular since the 1990s.

By *collective memory* I mean the *shared* memories of a group about its history and identity. The term *collective memory* is sometimes used as a synonym for *cultural mythology* or *national imaginary*. Strictly speaking, however, the collective memory of a group such as a nation is but one component of that mythology or "imaginary." A cultural mythology, for example, is not simply about the collective memory of the past but also a conception of group identity in the present and a teleology for the future. Some might be inclined to say that collective memories are not necessarily memories at all but can be mythologies of the past. Our memories may be infused with our corporate and individual fantasies (what we would like to believe about the past) or fabrications (such as

Figure 7.1: Martin Luther King Jr. (David Oyelowo) leads a march for civil rights in *Selma* (2014). *Source*: fair use.

false memories or propaganda that has come to be believed as true). Cultural memory, as Erika Dross puts it, is typically colored "by the fevered pitch of public feelings such as grief, gratitude, fear, shame, and anger."[6] Both personal and collective memories are like mythologies in that they are often the product of narrative reconstruction and can become something like myth. Memories take the form of narratives, the result of choices among past events—some highlighted, some forgotten—and, most importantly, all are assigned meaning within the narrative patchwork.

Fiction films such as *Rebecca* (1940), *Memento* (2000), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and documentaries such as *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and *The Act of Killing* (2012) highlight the degree to which personal and collective memories (and also the act of forgetting) are in part constitutive of our identities. Collective memories, as they figure within cultural mythologies, are similarly constitutive of the identity of any tribe or affiliation, be it a nation, ethnicity, family, gang, club, political party, or other institution. And while calling this a *tribal mythology* seems to imply a wholly imaginary construct, that need not necessarily be the case. The march from Selma to Montgomery did actually take place. Yet it is in how the event is narrativized in memory that it takes on its meaning. This is where the controversies and contestations begin.

The makers of historical fictions, either by necessity or artistic license, take liberties with the historical record in narrativizing the events in question. For example, Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* tells the story of Ron Stallworth, the first-ever African American member of the Colorado Springs, Colorado, police force who sets out to infiltrate the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, a racist hate group. The bomb plot foiled in the film, however, was based on an actual KKK bombing from a different time and place, and Patrice (Laura Harrier), who is portrayed as an activist leader and love interest of Stallworth (John David Washington) in the film, is a wholly fictional character. The liberties that most historical fiction makers take with the historical record sometimes generate significant controversy. Thus *Selma* elicited much discussion about the film's portrayal of US president Lyndon B. Johnson as just as much an antagonist to Martin Luther King Jr. as an ally.[7]

Competing historical accounts are often struggles to establish collective memory. Collective memory is thus a construction and negotiation of group identity through a process of narrativization. As Hanna Meretoja writes, "Memory work is something we do in the present; like narrative, it is an interpretative activity. Instead of simple retrieval

6. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.
7. Alex Woodson, "Ethics on Film: Discussion of 'Selma,'" Carnegie Council for Ethics in Public Affairs, August 22, 2016, https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/ethics_onfilm/0018.

of what is stored in our minds, it is a present activity that is intertwined with a narrative process of meaning-making."[8]

Scholar Alison Landsberg coined the term "prosthetic memory," which she uses to refer to the "deeply felt memory of a past event" through which the person remembering did not actually live. Prosthetic memories, she claims, are powerful, having the capacity to shape a person's "subjectivity and politics."[9] The importance of prosthetic memory has been greatly amplified by mass culture; for example, by monuments, museums, movies, and television. Landsberg is optimistic about the possible ethical and political significance of prosthetic memory, a topic that I will return to later.

The fact that collective memories are like myths does not imply that they are wholly fabrications; this article is not a postmodernist dismissal of truth or accuracy. Like historical fiction films, collective memories can be more or less accurate, more or less comprehensive, and the question of historical accuracy is an important one. It is not the *only* question however, and it is sometimes overshadowed by the ethical significance of the function of a collective memory in the present. In other words, the role of *BlacKkKlansman* in establishing or questioning collective memory in the present may be more important than questions about its fidelity to the past.[10]

The process of narrativization lends a certain "value added" to any account of the past. If we distinguish between a chronicle (a mere list of events in chronological order) and a narrative, we can see how this could be the case. As Hayden White argues, the historian must fashion the chronicle into a *story*, with a discernible beginning, middle, and end; motifs of inauguration, termination, and transition; and a determination of a hierarchy of significance to the recounted events.[11] Among what is added is valuation—that is, an evaluative perspective, either implicit or explicit. In popular historical fiction film, this evaluative perspective is typically pronounced and explicit.

Narrativization comes in different modes, styles, and genres. Miriam Hansen notes that the classical Hollywood narrative made use of in many mainstream historical fiction films is widely thought to be inadequate to the task of representing complex history. Here she refers specifically to the use of classical Hollywood narrative in

8. Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 33.
9. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.
10. Historical divergences that fundamentally alter the meaning of a historical event might be seen as ethically problematic while others that hold little significance for that meaning might be seen as trivial or unimportant.
11. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

representations the holocaust: "It relies on neoclassicist principles of compositional unity, motivation, linearity, equilibrium, and closure—principles singularly inadequate in the face of an event that by its very nature defies our narrative urge to make sense of, to impose order on the discontinuity and otherness of historical experience."[12] To be sure, Hansen's warnings here are not exclusive to Hollywood storytelling but could be extended to any narrative representation of the past that relies on the conventions of the "well told tale."

Ambiguous Reference and the "Sleeper Effect"

I previously claimed that there are at least three keys to the power of historical fiction in forming collective memory. The first is the hybrid nature of the historical fiction film; it rides the fence between fiction and nonfiction. Since it occupies a liminal space, audiences will be uncertain about whether to take the film as history, fiction, or some hybrid of the two. Such ambiguity is sometimes highlighted by film techniques, such as the mixing of archival footage with reconstructed footage designed to *appear* to be archival. This technique was famously used in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), about the assassination of US president John F. Kennedy. Stone combines the Zapruder film, the only known footage of the actual assassination, with staged footage shot on Super-8, 16 mm, and video, designed to appear to be authentic. As I write elsewhere, this "makes it impossible for the typical viewer to discriminate between reenactments and archival material."[13] Similarly, at the end of *Selma*, DuVernay mixes archival footage of the march with reconstructed black and white footage that *appears* to be archival.

When we view a standard nonfiction film, we expect that the film is presented to us as what I have elsewhere called an "asserted veridical representation."[14] This term simply means that audiences expect that the typical documentary is presented as a discourse through which the filmmakers make truth claims about the film's subject[15] *and/or* provide images and sounds that are presented as reliable guides to that subject.[16] However, audiences typically make no such assumptions about fiction. Fictional events are imaginary events. They may refer to the actual world but when they do, they do so through metaphor or analogy. We understand that there is no actual Luke Skywalker, no droids

12. Hansen, "*Schindler's List* Is Not *Shoah*," 205.
13. Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23.
14. Carl Plantinga, "What a Documentary Is, After All," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 105–17.
15. Filmmakers explicitly or implicitly make claims about the subject represented in the film through voice-over narration, editing patterns, intertitles, framing, musical underscoring, or any of the other registers of film style.
16. In other words, the moving photographic images presented by the filmmaker do not necessarily embody clear propositional claims but are sometimes designed to show what something looked or sounded like. This would be a case of "showing" rather than "telling." Documentaries often involve both showing and telling simultaneously.

like R2-D2, and no nefarious Death Star even though these represented entities may refer to the actual world as types or metaphors.

With regard to historical fiction, however, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction become quite porous. It is precisely this ambiguity that can impact collective memory. For many viewers, the vivid images and emotional effects of historical fictions seep into their storehouse of memories and images regarding the film's subjects such that aspects of these stories, rightly or wrongly, become prosthetic memories, as Angela Lansberg would say.

Empirical research tends to bear this out. In fact, it may not matter so much if audiences take historical fictions to be mostly fictional rather than accurate historical accounts. Psychologist Jeffrey Zacks, in his book *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*, argues that the persuasive effect of stories holds for both fiction *and* nonfiction. Zachs writes: "When we experience a story, our default is to accept what it tells us as true. We have to do extra work to override that default and question what we are reading. Rather than needing to *suspend* disbelief, we have to engage in a willing *construction* of disbelief in order to keep the story world from infecting our real-world beliefs and attitudes."[17] In other words, Zacks holds that it takes a conscious effort to prevent fictional representation from influencing our beliefs about the world. When one considers the ambiguous status of historical fiction in relation to the historical record—it is based on a "true story," after all—the easiest pattern of response is to file the narrative account into memory as plausible.

Later on, that plausible account may become a prosthetic memory of the past through what psychologists call the "sleeper effect."[18] The influence of a narrative may actually increase over time as viewers forget the source of their memories about historical events depicted in a historical fiction. In other words, our ideas and images regarding the historical march from Selma to Montgomery, as Landsberg might say, may in large part derive from our viewing of the film *Selma*, but viewers will often forget the source of their ideas and images. Given many viewers' uncertainty about whether to take the historical drama as history or fiction, it is likely that some will unwittingly take the drama as history. Zacks claims that these processes occur without the conscious knowledge of viewers and independent of the viewer's intentions.

This claim has interesting parallels to claims about mainstream film viewing promulgated by the apparatus theory that held its grip on film and media studies in the '70s and '80s. These theories melded Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the critical theory of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and Bertolt Brecht's writings

17. Jeffrey M. Zacks, *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 108.
18. Zacks, *Flicker*, 101.

on the alienation effect and epic theater.[19] Elsewhere I call these *estrangement theories* because they all critique mainstream narrative, finding it to be stultifying and mystifying for viewers, and propose the elicitation of various sorts of reflexive and alienated spectator responses as an antidote.[20]

I would argue that apparatus theory exaggerated the passivity and mystification ostensibly caused in viewers by classical storytelling and thus was too quick to reject mainstream films as ethically dismissable.[21] Yet both apparatus theory and contemporary media psychology share the hypothesis that mainstream stories on screens are often highly persuasive and ideologically powerful in their effects. And both point to film medium itself as a source of that power.

Medium Specificity and Immersion

Is there something about the film medium that makes it particularly powerful as a way to form, sediment, and/or alter collective memory? First and most obviously, film is a mass medium. Screen stories can be easily mass produced, copies or screenings widely disseminated via several distribution platforms or screened before large audiences. Although box office figures are an imperfect measure, we can partly gauge the impact of historical fictions by noting their box office and thus their popularity. The 2012 biopic *Lincoln*, about Abraham Lincoln and the passing of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution (which made slavery unconstitutional), grossed over $275 million worldwide. The 2000 film *Erin Brockovich*, about a single mom who nearly brings down a polluting power company, brought in $256 million, and the 1995 account of a space voyage, *Apollo 13*, brought in $353 million in worldwide box office gross.[22]

The kind of *experience* provided by the medium of historical fiction films is also key to their power. Many have noted that a movie is something like a representation of human conscious experience. As Oliver Sacks writes, a movie, "with its taut stream of thematically connected images, its visual narrative integrated by the viewpoint and values of its director, is not at all a bad metaphor for the stream of consciousness itself."[23] It goes without saying that when we remember the past, we are having a kind of conscious experience; it is also often visual and sometimes sonic in nature. Perhaps a movie approximates the experience of remembering, albeit in a hyper-coherent, clarified form. It

19. For an overview of apparatus theory, see Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 140–92.
20. Carl Plantinga, *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 99–116.
21. For an extended argument of this point, see Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 97–134.
22. All figures from Box Office Mojo, "Home," Box Office Mojo, accessed June 2, 2020, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/.
23. Oliver Sacks, "In the River of Consciousness," *New York Review of Books*, January 15, 2004, 41.

is worth noting that this film experience, an experience that in its appeal to perception and the senses mimics human consciousness itself, is also embodied and emotional. As I will detail later on, the affective nature of film spectatorship is a key to the power of historical narrative film.

The presentness of the experience of a film is also sometimes cited as a factor in its power to create collective memory. Those who teach about film know that when students write about films, they often refer to the film in the past tense, as though it were a thing of the past. Students may write, for example, that the film "*was* beautiful" or "*had* a stunning soundtrack." Although the film obviously continues to exist, their *experience* of the film becomes a part of their past lives, a part of their storehouse of memories. Thus, it is easy to equate that experience, which occurred in the past, with the film itself. Anton Kaes writes that films can represent historical events with a "presentness" that is peculiar to the medium. Film and television, he writes, have become "institutional vehicles for the shaping of public consciousness. They are powerful because they can make history come alive more readily than commemorative addresses, lectures, exhibitions, or museums; they can resituate past events in the immediate experience of the viewer."[24]

As many have observed, this sort of storytelling not only exhibits presentness but also immersiveness. Discussions of immersion and its implications, of course, were central in film studies in the seventies and eighties, at the height of the influence of the apparatus theory mentioned previously. Mainstream films, including historical fiction films, follow conventional story patterns that attempt to elicit absorption, fascination, rapt attention, and immersion.[25] Sigmund Freud thought that such immersion, in the case of literature at least, was beneficial to the individual, since it leads to the release of tensions and allows us to experience "our daydreams without reproach or shame."[26] Apparatus theories, on the other hand, are much less sanguine about the effects of immersion, finding immersion to be a hegemonic process that results in mystification and passivity.[27]

Once again, we find that contemporary media psychology aligns with apparatus theory in that both see the immersive nature of the film experience as key to its persuasive power. Media psychologists tend to call this immersive capacity "psychological transportation." With regard to the persuasive effects of fiction and dramatic documentaries, viewers or readers immersed in a story are more likely to experience belief change than those who are not. Immersed viewers or readers are less likely to notice "false notes" or inconsistencies in the narrative and more likely to endorse beliefs implied by the narrative.[28]

24. Anton Kaes, "History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination," *History and Memory* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 114, 112.
25. A summary of these arguments can be found in Stam, *Film Theory*, 140–58.
26. Sigmund Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming," in *Creativity and the Unconscious* [editor?] (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 44–54.
27. Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 117–19.
28. Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, "In the Mind's Eye: Transportation-Imagery Model of Narrative Persuasion,"

Immersion, together with the ambiguous status of historical fiction, may well constitute an especially powerful tandem. When I read a political tract or listen to a political speech that is discrepant with my beliefs, I engage in counterarguing, or, in other words, I consciously find ways to dismiss the claims being made. Based on social scientific research, Michael Slater argues that the spectator's immersion in a narrative inhibits counterarguing and other forms of potential resistance to whatever the story is attempting to promote. Slater claims that due to their capacity to bypass "biased processing" in viewers, the use of narratives may be one of the only tools available to those who wish to persuade people to alter previously held perspectives.[29] It isn't clear whether historical fictions inhibit counterarguing since their referents are often actual historical events, often with politically contested meanings. Yet it is plausible to speculate that the immersion encouraged by the films often discourages counterarguing and critical response. As we will see, it is the ordering of events in the well-told tale, or the conventional narrative, that facilitates spectator immersion.

Narrative, Emotion, and Ritual

As various psychologists have argued, collective and individual memory formation are analogous processes that occur on different levels.[30] According to Maurice Halbwachs, who is credited with introducing the idea of collective memory, we reconstruct our individual memories according to the attitudes and customs of the groups of which we are a part. "It is in this sense," writes Halbwachs, "that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection."[31]

What are some of the features of this interface between individual and collective memory? What are some of the social frameworks for memory of which Halbwachs writes? Storytelling in multiple media, and conventional story structures in particular, function as one of the chief conduits between personal and collective memory. The conventional narrative is not simply about structuring information; it also structures

in *Narrative Persuasion: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, eds. Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey L. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 315–41. Also see Zacks, *Flicker*, 108.

29. Michael Slater, "Entertainment Education and the Persuasive Impact of Narratives," in *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Implications*, eds. Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey L. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 173–75.
30. Thomas J. Anastasio, Kirsten Ann Ehrenberger, Patricks Watson, and Wenyi Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation: Analogous Processes on Different Levels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 1–2.
31. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective* Memory, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925/1992), 38.

an embodied experience that consists of moods and emotions.[32] It promises drama, suspense, rising action, and climactic resolutions, all of which have the capacity to organize memory and sediment it through powerful affective responses.

Schemas, the generalized frameworks that organize knowledge and aid recall, have long been recognized as important in the formation of memory. One of the dominant schemas for collective memory is the conventional narrative, which in film largely takes the form of what David Bordwell and others have called the classical Hollywood narrative.[33] Certain psychological factors make this sort of narrative a powerful means of forming and preserving collective memory. Most important, people are more likely to remember emotion-arousing events than neutral, everyday events.[34] Thus the well-told tale, in the form of a vivid and dramatic historical fiction, is an apt vehicle for the formation and preservation of the collective memories of individuals.

The classical narrative is expressly designed to elicit powerful emotions.[35] It features a goal-oriented protagonist, conflict, rising action, and a focus on a dramatic conflict and resolution. It isn't simply that the classical narrative, with its familiar structuring of information, forms a mental map onto which new information can be placed. The classical narrative is not merely a schematic structure for the structuring, conveyance, and remembering of information. It is also means of eliciting strong emotions that facilitate memory uptake and preservation. The *purpose* of eliciting emotion is to provide viewer pleasure; the *effect* of eliciting emotion is to impact memory.

One can find out much about the ideology of a historical fiction by how it fits historical events into the familiar framework of classical narrative form and the degree to which it does so. *Lincoln*, *Selma*, *BlacKkKlansman*, and *Just Mercy*, it should be mentioned, feature sympathetic, goal-oriented heroes who face strong obstacles as they pursue their righteous goals. The sympathy and the goals provide an avenue for spectator desire; spectators desire the goals to be achieved. Obstacles to those goals elicit suspense, fear, relief, and other strong emotions (or release from emotion).

In this regard, the climax and resolution of any narrative structure is a focal point through which one can gauge its primary ideological effect. The climactic point of the *Lincoln* narrative, for example, is the passage of the 13th Amendment to the US

32. I develop a theory of the emotional power of movies in *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

33. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

34. Sven-Ake Christianson and Martin A. Safer, "Emotional Events and Emotions in Autobiographical Memories," in *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory*, ed. David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 219.

35. Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 78–111.

Constitution; the film pegs its celebration of Abraham Lincoln as an American hero onto this focal point and climax. The climactic point of *Selma* is a rousing speech given by Martin Luther King Jr. after he successfully leads a civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama; the film pegs its celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. as an American hero onto this focal point and climax. Thus collective memory, to the extent that either of these films contributes to it, is established in a context that first relies on a powerfully affective spectator experience, an experience that is both cognitive and embodied. The emotions elicited by these films are not free-floating feelings but elicited in support of the films' particular perspectives.

British social anthropologist Paul Connerton, in his book *How Societies Remember*, singles out ritual ceremonies and body practices as essential in the formation and preservation of cultural memory. Ritual ceremonies such as patriotic holiday celebrations, public funerals, parades, and football halftime celebrations and body practices such as singing, chanting, responsive readings, marching, and saluting are means by which "memory is sedimented, or amassed, in the body."[36] Connerton draws his inspiration in part from Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs, as I previously mentioned, thought that it is through membership in a social group that individuals are able to acquire, localize, and recall their memories. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided

Figure 7.2: Abraham Lincoln (Daniel Day Lewis) in *Lincoln* (2014). *Source*: fair use.

36. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 72.

by the group. By extension, then, collective memories are solidified, or sedimented, through collective rituals and body practices.

Historical documentaries often depict such collective rituals and body practices in their accounts of historical events and thus offer the spectator a kind of virtual or once-removed ritualistic experience that replicates the sights and sounds such rituals offer. In *Lincoln*, as I have mentioned, the passage of the 13th Amendment becomes the dramatic climax of the film. After the amendment passes, watchers are shown ritual celebrations that form spontaneously, improbably within minutes of the congressional action. Church bells ring. The members of Congress break into a loud chorus of the "Battle Cry of Freedom," which morphs into a swelling musical underscoring (with more voices and orchestral accompaniment) as the scene cuts to parades of celebrants outside the Capitol Building. The passage of this amendment is ritually shown to have national significance because the rousing music champions the growing crowds of celebrants that the film depicts.

In *Selma*, as I mentioned, the climax comes with the completion of the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, a fifty-mile march of twenty-five thousand people that, according to the film, leads to the passage of national voting rights legislation. Post-march, we see King, one of the finest orators of his time, delivering his famous "How Long? Not Long" speech. DuVernay intermixes reconstructions of the march that use actors and CGI special effects, with black and white archival footage of the actual march. This clearly signals to the viewer that the film represents history, not fiction. As we hear the voice of King (played by David Oyelawo) give his famous speech, the film cuts to various cross sections of the United States—the bystanders of the march and counter protesters. The march ends at the foot of the Alabama State Capitol building, a symbolic gesture and fitting for the ritual celebration of the progress the march has engendered. As the film cuts to close-ups of members of the entire nation listening in (including President Johnson and governor George Wallace), titles show us their futures and relate what we have seen to present times. The ritual speech and its presentation expand outward from Montgomery, Alabama, to the entire nation.

Historical fictions often represent national or other group rituals that are put into a collective meaning structure. But one might claim that historical fictions *themselves*—in their repetition of common dramatic patterns such as rising action, climactic confrontation, escalating suspense, resolution, and relief—enact a ritual in each instance of their viewing. The body practices they involve have less to do with marching or chanting than with a viewing experience and intended structure of feeling that is replayed again and again and, in some cases, millions of times.[37] This is a structure of feeling into

37. The term *structure of feeling* is borrowed from Raymond Williams. Structures of feeling, or emotive scripts, circulate in a culture; filmmakers draw from these to focus a film emotively. For more on structures of feeling, see my *Screen Stories*, 67–69 and 164–65.

which historical events are molded into place and through which cultural mythologies and collective memories are preserved, amassed, and passed on.

If a museum is a collective memory structure through which one walks, a historical fiction film is a collective memory structure before which one sits, watches, and listens. That sitting, watching, and listening constitutes a cultural ritual in which national mythologies, inspirational tales, and warnings against folly are replayed and repeated to mass audiences. As Marita Sturken writes, "Cinema is a particularly powerful tool in the incitement of desire and the fantasy of history precisely because of the classic ways in which it invites us to view the past as if we were there. The apparatus of cinema provides the spectator with an experience of the past, one of duration, identification, and emotion, of both anxiety and pleasure."[38] Historical fictions fit history into neat narrative formulas and elicit powerful emotions that solidify valuations of those historical accounts. Each viewing becomes a kind of ritual experience.

The Implications of Historical Fiction

So far, I have made the case that mainstream historical fiction films have the capacity to form, consolidate, and/or change cultural memory in part due to their medium and to the kind of emotionally powerful experiences they offer viewers. This raises the obvious question of whether such films are to be feared or welcomed, dismissed as shallow hegemonic tools of the powerful or celebrated for their beneficial effects.

My own position, which is somewhat similar to that of Landsberg, is that mainstream historical fiction films have potential benefits but that this determination needs to be made on a case-by-case basis and always in historical context. Before I make this case, however, let us first examine the more pessimistic accounts of the effects of historical fiction films. The apparatus theories I mentioned previously embodied a deep distrust of mainstream storytelling generally. Some of the critiques of historical fiction emerge from this generalized position and hold that mainstream films are epistemically mystifying and psychologically stultifying. They ostensibly encourage a passive spectatorship.

Mass media portrayals of history are seen by various scholars to have the effect of homogenizing audiences and controlling popular memory. To take one prominent example, Michel Foucault fits the historical fiction film into an overall theory of hegemony, claiming that in the struggle over popular memory, the historical fiction film is a tool of the powerful. He sees television and film as ways of "reencoding popular

38. Marita Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 72, 73.

memory," showing people not what they actually were but rather "what they need to remember themselves as having been." Historical fiction film becomes an essential tool of the hegemon. As Foucault notes, "If you are in charge of the memory of the people, you are in charge of their vitality."[39]

This position, however, seems to assume a monolithic system in which the voices of media are wholly controlled by a unified hegemonic force. Are these "dangerous" ideological forces responsible for *Selma*, *BlacKkKlansmen*, *Just Mercy*, and *Malcolm X* (1992)? And, if so, should these mainstream historical fiction films be dismissed as mystifying tools of the powerful? At the time of this writing, protests are spreading across the United States and elsewhere, demanding an end to racism and especially police brutality against African Americans. During a time when racial tensions threaten the very fabric of US culture, would it be wrong to welcome a collective memory that recognizes racism in this culture and puts civil rights movements and antiracism firmly at the center cultural memory?

Another criticism of the historical fiction film has to do with the very possibility of adequately representing the past. Historical fiction films sometimes imply that there is one neat historical account that we call history, neglecting the essential messiness, ambiguity, and mystery of the past. Documentary scholar Bill Nichols writes of the "magnitudes that exceed any text," meaning that no textual representation could possibly "capture" or fully represent the fullness of history.[40] For that reason, any narrative that presents a single linear thread with clear plot points and closure surely misrepresents not only its particular historical topic but the nature of history itself. Thus, Nichols advocates certain textual features that counter these errors, such as the open text and open ending, a willingness to embrace contradiction and ambiguity, the recognition of counter narratives, and self-reflexivity. Nichols argues that an "awareness of the tension between representation and that which is represented, of magnitudes beyond representation, is the foundation for praxis informed by a text."[41]

Specifically in regard to the historical fiction film, several film scholars embrace perspectives similar to this. Anton Kaes writes that mainstream historical fictions "colonize the audience's historical imagination instead of liberating it."[42] Kaes, like many other intellectuals, favors films such as *Shoah* (1985) because director Lanzmann realizes that the past cannot be fully represented and acknowledges this throughout the film. Paula Rabinowitz, likewise, argues that *Shoah* is a "powerful and revolutionary film" because it recognizes the partial nature of historical truth, deconstructs the forms

39. Michel Foucault, Patrice Maniglier, and Dork Zabunyan, "Film, History, and Popular Memory," in *Foucault at the Movies*, trans. and ed. Clare O'Farrell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 106.
40. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 229–33.
41. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 233.
42. Kaes, "History and Film," 118.

and conventions of the historical film, and interrogates the very notion of historical memory. Marta Sturken, similarly, celebrates Oliver Stone's *JFK* for the way it so obviously mixes fact and fantasy, the real and the imaginary, and makes no attempt to present itself as history. The fact that it "flaunts its fantasies" is what makes *JFK* ethically laudable, she claims, because it "interrupts any notion that history can be told outside of fantasy–the fantasy of knowing what really happened, what people were really thinking, what took place, and what could have been."[43] Certainly films that question the notion of a simple history or truth, such as Jill Godmilow's *Far From Poland* (1984), Chris Marker's *San Soleil* (1983), and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), have a place in a strategy to encourage creative, reflective spectatorship.

Despite all this, I wonder if we should or even can give up on the idea of representing the past though conventional narrative structures and styles such as those we find in classical Hollywood cinema. Or another question: Should the inadequacy of narrative in representing the past in all of its complexity negate the value of creating a cultural memory that unifies a people in relation to common values, responses, principles, and symbols? After all, once we deconstruct, critique, and pull apart, we need to reconstruct something around which people can rally. No ethics or politics can be based on pure negation. Critique must eventually give way to affirmation. It strikes me that films such as *Selma*, even with their historical imperfections and their limitation to a single antiracist perspective, are right to construct a cultural memory rooted in the goodness of the civil rights struggle. Moreover, a film such as *Lincoln*, which makes the passage of the 13th Amendment a centerpiece of its dramatic movement, is arguably right to focus on the centrality of that amendment to what the United States hopes to be, or should hope to be.

Given that I have elsewhere argued for "an ethics of engagement,"[44] it should come as no surprise that I harmonize with Landberg's more sanguine estimation of the ethics and politics of the historical fiction film and of what she terms "prosthetic memory." Landsberg counts film among the "experiential" mass-mediated forms that can serve as the basis for "mediated" collective identification that has the potential to shape a person's subjectivity and politics. She recognizes that the sensuous, embodied nature of film spectatorship is central to the power of the medium since, as she puts it, memory "remains a sensuous phenomenon experienced by the body" and it derives much of its power through affect.[45] She finds that historical fiction films, and indeed mass culture generally, have the potential for an opening up or sharing, to promote empathy, and to

43. Sturken, "Reenactment Fantasy," 79.
44. Plantinga, *Screen Stories*.
45. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 8.

make "group specific memories available to a diverse and varied populace."[46] One could certainly make this case in relation to recent historical fiction films such as *Selma* and *Just Mercy*, which can potentially introduce audiences to elements of black history and perspectives that they were previously unfamiliar with.

I would also argue that historical fictions such as *BlacKkKlansman* not only have the potential to elicit empathy for those who feel the brunt of racial discrimination but also incorporate various neo–Brechtian techniques that encourage audience reflection. Elsewhere I have argued that perhaps the best strategy in this regard would be to combine mainstream storytelling conventions designed to fascinate and move audiences, with various formal devices and uses of content that encourage reflective spectatorship.[47]

BlacKkKlansmen, I argue, is an example of what Miriam Hansen would call "popular modernism." While very entertaining and able to attract large audiences, it features the dialectical movement so favored by Brecht. It uses reflexive techniques, highlighting the history of racist representation with clips from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and

Figure 7.3: Ron (John David Washington) and Patrice (Laura Harrier) approach the camera near the end of *BlacKkKlansman* (2018). *Source*: fair use.

46. Landsberg, 11.

47. See Carl Plantinga, "Brecht, Emotion and the Reflective Spectator: The case of *BlacKkKlansmen*," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 151–69.

Gone with the Wind (1939), all during an opening scene featuring Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard (Alec Baldwin), a fictional character apparently providing voice-over for some kind of promotional film for an unnamed racist organization. *BlacKkKlansman* features political speeches from contradictory political perspectives, often putting the spectator into the position of the audience through frontal framing that is almost confrontational in its directness. The film also mixes fictional and newsreel footage, as it ends with a transition from its narrative thread to newsreel footage of the various Unite the Right groups marching in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Donald Trump's claim that there are "good people" on "both sides." *BlacKkKlansmen* is yet another example of the "compulsive *pas-de-deux*," as Andreas Huyssen puts it, that has characterized modernism and mass culture since the mid-nineteenth century.[48]

Conclusion

The historical fiction film is a form of global storytelling with the potential for significant influence in the formation, consolidation, and/or alteration of collective memory. Thus, the historical fiction film will often be at the center of struggles to define a nation or other social group. I have argued that historical fictions have important features that make them effective in their function. They play on the sleeper effect and an ambiguous reference to reality in their storytelling. They take advantage of the presentness of the medium and the capacity of the classical Hollywood structure to immerse audiences, inhibit counter arguing, and thus persuade. The experience of viewing a historical fiction film is of course embodied and, when it does its work successfully, suffused with affect. All of this contributes to its potential to impact the collective memory of viewers and of a culture.

From an ethical perspective, what can we legitimately expect from a historical fiction film? Such a film is neither history nor journalism, and so it seems inappropriate to demand strict fidelity to the historical record, at least in regard to the less relevant events or details. I would argue, however, that as ethical critics, we can advocate for at least two things. The first is a form that invites critical thinking on the part of audiences. This should not mean the wholesale rejection of mainstream conventions of storytelling. Although reflexive and formally difficult films may in fact encourage critical thinking, they tend to appeal to a rarefied audience and one that is in many cases already in agreement with the sort of political position taken up by the film. Films that offer both mainstream appeals and modernist, reflection-inducing techniques may be the

48. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 24.

best strategy. *BlacKkKlansman*, as I have argued, is an example of such a film. It is not solely a work of estrangement or alienation but a work of engagement. Judging from its simultaneous box office and critical success, it fascinates and moves many viewers emotionally. It encourages rapt attention and immersion. It encourages strong sympathies and antipathies for characters. Yet it also provokes and elicits questions through contradiction, dialectics, interruption, and political content.

Second, the critic should inquire whether a historical fiction film will make an ethical contribution to the collective memory of a particular culture at a particular time. Granted, what *ethical* means in this case will be both contested and subject to a variety of interpretations. The fact that what is *ethical* or *beneficial* is not easy to define apart from particular historical circumstances should not dissuade us from pursuing it, however. The point is that instead of rejecting what is perceived as mainstream or conventional storytelling in total, we should first examine the contribution a particular screen story is likely to make to collective memory in a particular historical context. What is right for the United States may be wrong for Hong Kong, for example, and vice versa. A historical fiction film may unify a culture by celebrating key events in its past. Or, it might demonstrate how positive change can occur only through decisive action, persistence, courage, and sacrifice, as it is shown to occur in *Selma*, *Just Mercy*, *BlacKkKlansman*, and *Lincoln*. These are collective memories to be built on.

From Nations to Worlds

Chris Marker's *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*

MICHAEL WALSH

Abstract

Si j'avais quatre dromadaires (If I had four dromedaries), Chris Marker's underrated film of 1966, is a forty-nine-minute montage of seven hundred and fifty still photographs taken in twenty-five countries around the world. The film is a pivot-point in Marker's work, the moment at which he passes from an implicit but insistent imagination of the world in terms of nations toward the global scope for which his later work is so celebrated. Before 1966, Marker had made films in six different countries and had edited volumes on two dozen countries in the Petite Planète series of travel guides. *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* is the first of Marker's international films, the first to pass across a cut from Pyongyang to Havana, from the Dead Sea to the Arctic Circle. Closely examining the film's opening sequence and coda, the article proposes that Marker's transition from nations to worlds can be understood as heralding an issue that still looms large in cultural criticism, the simultaneous thinkability and unthinkability of the world-system. Thinkability: on some accounts, economic production has been organized globally since the emergence of capitalist banking in the Renaissance, so that all any of us have ever known is a globalized economy. Unthinkability: we struggle to say anything meaningful about the planetary flow of capital, goods, people, and information, and if we are film scholars, it is not obvious that such questions even belong in our discipline. Yet, if we throw up our hands, we will find that these questions are thought for us, without our input. The article follows Marker's passage from nations to worlds by following the prompts found in the formal strategies of the film, which may in turn enable us to connect the history of what Denning calls "the age of three worlds" to the philosophical understanding of "worlds" proposed by Badiou.

Keywords: marker, *si j'avais quatre dromadaires*, globalization, world-systems theory, badiou

Chris Marker is generally agreed to have been born Christian-François Bouche-Villeneuve in Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1921 and is said by many sources to have taken his nom-de-plume from the Magic Marker.[1] This is a marvelous story. It makes great imaginative sense for such a democratic filmmaker to get rid of that double-barreled bourgeois-sounding legal name and adopt something more artistic, more indexical, more telling. The Magic Marker was so-called because it could write on so many different kinds of surfaces, and as a novelist, educator, photographer, filmmaker, organizer of collective films, video artist, installation artist, author of CD-ROMs, web cartoonist, and online virtual gallerist, Marker has certainly made many different kinds of marks.

But when did Bouche-Villeneuve become Marker? At the latest by 1947 with the publication of *Un coeur net*, a novel about airmail pioneers in Indochina, reminiscent by turns of André Malraux and Howard Hawks.[2] And when was the Magic Marker developed and first marketed? 1952. So the Magic Marker story bears little scrutiny. Is there even any reliable evidence that Marker ever told anyone this story? Secondary sources are plentiful, but I have not been able to find anything that can be considered primary, unless we are willing to count the credits of *Toute la mémoire du monde* (All the memory of the world), Alain Resnais's 1956 documentary on the Bibliothèque Nationale where, as Raymond Bellour has noted,[3] Marker's credit reads "Chris and Magic Marker." This whole legend of the Magic Marker seems to begin with that credit, itself a kind of joke or pun among filmmaker friends. Note that Marker's contribution to *Toute la mémoire* was a simulation or fabrication, an imaginary tourist guide to the planet Mars that appears as the example book in a sequence showing how a book is delivered to the library, processed, catalogued, and shelved.

But if not from the felt-tip pen, where did Bouche-Villeneuve get the name Marker? Note that Marker is not really a word in French at all, even if some, no doubt assuming that the French know best how to pronounce the name of a Frenchman, insist on pronouncing it "mark-air." It cannot be by chance that Marker should disavow the name of the father by choosing an alternative not known in his mother tongue, though the man himself seems resistant to any such speculation: "I chose a pseudonym, Chris Marker, pronounceable in most languages because I intended to travel. You need look no further than that."[4] Fair enough, one might think. But this quotation is taken from an interview conducted by e-mail by Sergei Murasaki, the avatar of Chris Marker

1. David Thomson, "Chris Marker: Already Living in Cinema's Future," *New York Times*, June 1, 2003.
2. Chris Marker, *Le coeur net* (Paris: Seuil, 1950). Translated by Robert Kee and Terence Kilmartin as *The Forthright Spirit* (London: Allan Wingate, 1951).
3. Raymond Bellour, "The Book, Back and Forth," in *Chris Marker: A Propos du CD-ROM Immemory, Qu'est-ce qu'une Madeleine?*, eds. Laurent Roth and Raymond Bellour (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997), 108.
4. "La Seconde Vie de Chris Marker," *Les inrockuptibles* 29, April 2008, https://www.lesinrocks.com/2008/04/29/cinema/actualite-cinema/la-seconde-vie-de-chris-marker.

on Second Life, a "3D virtual world." Now there is something contradictory, even self-deconstructing, in the avatar of a person with a nom de plume claiming that the meaning of a pseudonym is really straightforward. At the same time, it is significant for the argument that I will make that Bouche-Villeneuve wanted to rename himself in a way that would work internationally.

Among the connotations of *marker*, three seem particularly resonant. First, and as noted, Marker makes many different kinds of marks. Second, a marker is a memorial tablet, most fitting for a filmmaker who is as preoccupied with memory as Henri Bergson or Marcel Proust. And third, "marker!" is one variant of something shouted by the person with the clapperboard at the beginning of every take in an English-language film; other options are *mark* and *mark it*. In other words, *marker* may refer to sound as well as image, a point that seems to have escaped those who have happily repeated the Magic Marker story.

Marker's legal name has a social connotation about which there is no point in being squeamish. To anyone who knows French culture, the double barreling of both Christian-François and Bouche-Villeneuve indicates bourgeois social status, as does birth in Neuilly, long one of the wealthiest suburbs of Paris. Yet, after close to seventy years of left-wing political commitment, Marker can hardly be counted as indifferent to the fate of the people. On the contrary, he could be a case study in Alain Badiou's conception of subjectivity as fidelity to a political and artistic truth.[5] So my point is not to pass some spurious political judgement. Instead, I am suggesting that the name Chris Marker is the first work of Chris Marker; that one common account of its provenance is fictional, that this fiction is weighted with contradictions, and that such caveats should be kept in mind in any study of the work signed with this name.

In a productive decade between 1956 and 1966, Marker made films in China (*Dimanche à Pékin* [Sunday in Peking], 1956), the USSR (*Lettre de Sibérie* [Letter from Siberia], 1958), Israel (*Description d'un combat* [Description of a struggle], 1960), Cuba (*Cuba si!*, 1961), Japan (*Le mystère Koumiko* [The Koumiko mystery], 1965), and France (*La jetée* [The jetty], 1962, and *Le joli Mai* [In the merry month of May], 1963) and produced the texts for two "imaginary films," one about the United States (*L'Amérique reve* [America dreams], 1959) and the other about Mexico (*Soy Mexico* [I am Mexico], 1965). During the same period, he published a booklet of photographs taken in China (*Claire de Chine*, 1956), a book of photographs taken in Korea (*Coréennes* [Korean women], 1959), and served between 1954 and 1958 as editorial director of the Petite Planète series of travel guides, overseeing and sometimes contributing photographs and layouts to volumes on Austria, Sweden, Italy, Holland, Ireland, Greece, Germany,

5. Alain Badiou, *L'etre et l'evénement* (Paris, Seuil, 1988). Translated by Oliver Feltham as *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2006). See especially part 5, "The Event: Intervention and Fidelity."

Tunisia, Switzerland, Spain, Turkey, China, Iran, Israel, Denmark, Portugal, Tahiti, Belgium, and India. Why am I spelling out all these names of countries? In order to stress the extent to which, for the ten years following his first film as a director, the unit of Marker's imaginative world was the nation-state.

Against the background of this implicit but insistent habit of thinking the world in terms of nations, Marker's much underrated film of 1966, *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (If I had four dromedaries), a forty-nine-minute montage made up of more than seven hundred and fifty still photos taken in more than twenty-five countries around the world, represents a pivot-point, the moment at which his work first turns toward the planetary or global scope for which later efforts like the epic New Left history *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (Red is in the air, 1977) and the widely acknowledged masterpiece *Sans soleil* (Sunless, 1983) would become celebrated.

Of course, Marker's work has a kind of international sensibility from the beginning. *Dimanche à Pékin* begins with a shot from a window with a view of the Eiffel Tower and a voice-over that tells us that the film is not really about Peking but instead about dreams and images of Peking remembered from childhood. Meanwhile, *Lettre de Sibérie* proposes that the autumn scenes with which it begins could just as well come from Ermenonville (northern France) or New England and later goes on an advertising-parody tour of the "housewives of the world." But, apart from this bare handful of shots, everything in *Dimanche à Pékin* and *Lettre de Sibérie* comes from Peking and Siberia, respectively, so that the comparison of the distant Asian location with somewhere European or North American, while significant as an inoculation against an easy exoticism, is an opposition involving just two places or two types of place. Not until 1966 and *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (henceforth *Si j'avais*) do we see cutting across the world from Paris to Pyonyang, North Korea, to Havana, Cuba, as a montage principle that structures an entire film.

Nor is thinking the world in terms of nations something that simply disappears from Marker's work after 1966; he made a second film about Cuba (*La bataille des dix millions* [The battle of the ten million], 1971), and in 1997, he republished his Korean pictures within the photography section of the CD-ROM *Immemory*. And *Si j'avais* explicitly retains something of the idea of nations. Just a few moments into the film, a voice that is casting around for a definition of art settles on a somewhat awkward analogy with nationality: "Art, my brothers, is neither inferior or superior, it is art. It doesn't always have to do with puffing oneself up, it is not a quality, it is . . . a nationality, if you like."[6] However, the idea that we are all citizens of the nation of art should not prevent us from recognizing the newly planetary scope of *Si j'avais*, whose cuts from the Arctic Circle to the Dead Sea; from Amsterdam, Holland, to Beijing, China; from Lisbon,

6. Chris Marker, *Commentaires 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 88, my translation.

Portugal, to Shanghai, China open onto the transnational terrain of much of the later work of Marker.

Si j'avais does not identify all the places that it visits, but we can at different moments be confident that we are in North Korea, the Soviet Union, Japan, Norway, Ireland, Cuba, Spain, France, Iran, Hungary, China, Greece, Iceland, Sweden, Israel, Austria, and Italy. Note that this list of countries consists predominantly of what the period became accustomed to calling the first and second worlds—that is, the rich or developed countries and the countries of the Communist bloc; third-worlders are represented in *Si j'avais* primarily as immigrants, as in a sequence showing Algerians in the Paris suburb of Nanterre celebrating the independence of Algeria. Marker, who went on a 1958 visit to North Korea in the company of Claude Lanzmann and Armand Gatti,[7] and in the 1970s made documentaries on such celebrity members of the French Communist Party as François Maspero, Yves Montand, and Simone Signoret, clearly had good access to the socialist countries, which were de–Stalinizing at the beginning of the period the film covers. Keep in mind that the historical links between Zionism and socialism and the idealization of the kibbutzim meant that Israel, too, could in this period be perceived as a socialist country, a point that has been made previously by one of the most interesting of French critics of Marker, Arnaud Lambert,[8] who is also codirector of a documentary titled *Chris Marker, Never Complain, Never Explain* (2017).

A text of *Si j'avais* was published in 1967 in *Commentaires 2*, prefaced by a note that reads: "This film was made entirely on an animation stand, on the basis of still photos taken in twenty-six countries between 1955 and 1965."[9] The fact that *Si j'avais* is made of still photos means that it compares directly with the much more famous *La jetée*. Like that earlier film, it has just one moment that comes close to the conventional impression of motion in the cinema, and just as in *La jetée*, this is a sequence of intensely romantic overlapping dissolves of a woman's face. Where in *La jetée* the woman opens her eyes, in *Si j'avais*, she smiles. Any doubt that the latter sequence is intended to evoke the former vanishes when the animation of the smiling face is followed by a high-contrast image of a white bird against a dark hillside; this high-contrast X-shape in the middle of the frame is a distinct motif throughout *La jetée*.

However, *La jetée* was photographed to follow a storyboard; it is a fiction, with actors playing dramatic roles. *Si j'avais* is an album of actuality photographs, which were assembled as a film after the fact. The film does contain an occasional image that

7. For an account of this trip, see Antoine Coppola, *Ciné-voyage en Corée du Nord: L'experience du film moranbong* (Paris: Atelier Cahiers, 2012).
8. Arnaud Lambert, *Also Known as Chris Marker* (Paris: Le Point du Jour, 2008), 171.
9. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, 89, my translation.

can't be understood as documentary, such as its ninth shot, which gives the Mona Lisa the face of an owl, a collage idea that Marker was still exploring in the "X-plugs" of *Immemory* thirty years later. But these are rare exceptions. Events in the film that can be specifically dated include the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in July 1957; the American National Exhibition in Moscow in July 1959; a Paris protest against the Bay of Pigs invasion in spring 1961; crowds attending the funerals of the victims of the Charonne massacre in Paris in February 1962, and the independence of Algeria in March 1962. Other period indicators include the commentary's parodies of the 1959 Esso slogan "Put a tiger in your tank," the currency of the Cuban Revolution and the Sino-Soviet split, political signs critical of 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, and mention of the Beatles.

Si j'avais was originally produced for German television and was not seen in France until the mid-1970s. It remains unknown to the general public and was for a long time quite fugitive even for specialists; some published discussions seem to have less to do with the film than with the commentary. Yet there are substantial differences between that text and the film itself. The film contains more than seven hundred and fifty still photos, of which the text reproduces one hundred and thirty; the text contains another forty photos that do not appear in the film. The text is eighty-one pages long but some sixteen of these (just about one-fifth) contain words that are not heard in the film. Conversely, the film contains a few short speeches that are not found in the printed commentary.

The film's title is taken from a short poem of Apollinaire called "The Dromedary," included in *Le bestiare* (The bestiary, 1911) and recited at a rapid clip at the very beginning of the film. The singsong rhythms and nursery rhymes defy translation, but the first three lines tell us of one "Don Pedro Alfaroubeira" who, with his four camels, traveled the world and liked what he saw. The last two lines are in the first person: "Il fit ce que je voudrais faire/Si j'avais quatres dromadaires" (He did what I would like to do/If I had four dromedaries). However, only the first four lines are spoken by the voice-over, which means that the viewer effectively completes the rhyme by reading the main title as it flashes up in sudden silence.

The subject of the film is explained by a title card at the beginning: "A photographer and two of his friends comment on images taken here and there around the world." Thus, the voice-over is for three voices, which are given the names of the actors playing them (Pierre, Nicolas, and Catherine). Pierre is the photographer, and thus the avatar of Marker, and gets significantly more airtime than the others, including several long soliloquies, though both Nicolas and Catherine are at different points given their own interior monologues. The printed text of the film indicates a number of different and slightly comical tones for line readings, such as "between the teeth," "proverbial," and "promotional." It also indicates pauses, silences, and resumptions of the conversation.

So the film is a large album of actuality photographs, almost all of which can be understood as documentary, but with its imagined personae and actively directed voice performances, it also borders on fiction.

Si j'avais is in two parts: "the Castle" (shades of Kafka) and "the Garden" (shades of the Bible). The Castle is the world in which we live, with all its social oppressions: "The distance between those who have power and those who don't. . . . The line between the races. That's the Castle. The poor live in its shadow."[10] The Garden is the world in which we would like to live, the world of happiness and grace: "It's there, it's in us, just as much as cruelty and the will to live. Yes, there is a law of the Garden, which is expressed in . . . the simplest of gestures."[11] The Castle begins in good modernist fashion with a discourse on photography, moves on to a comparison of mornings around the world, visits Moscow and (following a train of association) the Russian Orthodox monastery on Mount Athos in Greece, sketches a Nanterre celebration of Algerian independence, and closes with some thoughts on social division as a refutation of the idea of "the family of man," which is also the name of the MoMA exhibition and Edward Steichen book of 1955 that period viewers would quite likely associate with Marker's film. The Garden begins with animals and children, tours North Korea and Scandinavia, offers some ideas on mortality and femininity, and concludes with the assertion that there is such a thing as grace; thus, there is some hope for happiness despite "the horror, the madness, the monsters" that surround us.

Along with Dziga Vertov and Bruce Conner, Marker is one of the great associational montage makers of the twentieth century, and I want to give a flavor of that in practice by looking at some formal specifics selected from the first six and the last two-and-a-half minutes of the film.[12] I will argue that we can follow Marker's transition from nations to worlds by the simple expedient of following the prompts suggested by the film, stressing in particular patterns of editing, where one will see the film moving back and forth across the world by graphic match and mismatch. Apart from a few nicely dialectical pages by Nora Alter,[13] a few thoughtful pages by Catherine Lupton,[14] and a few descriptive pages by Sarah Cooper,[15] previous discussion of *Si j'avais* is scant. There is no previous work that attends to the formal strategies of the film in any detail.

10. Marker, 133, my translation.
11. Marker, 167, my translation.
12. Readers interested in seeing the film for themselves can find a good-quality copy with English subtitles on YouTube, or seek out the French DVD. This last is beautifully produced, has English subtitles, and is region free; that is, it will play in any DVD player. See note 17.
13. Nora Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 96–101.
14. Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 103–08.
15. Sarah Cooper, *Chris Marker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 60–65.

In the first six minutes, *Si j'avais* begins with a quick fade-up from black to a bright circle of sunlight ringed by a much larger circle of darkness. The elementary nature of the forms combined with the high level of contrast makes for an image verging on abstraction, yet still the denotation is plain; viewers are looking straight down the barrel of a cannon. There is the impression that this is a large cannon mounted on blocks for public display, but the head-on perspective and the closeness of the shot make it difficult to be sure. As a thematically appropriate voice-over begins ("Photography is hunting; it is the hunting instinct without the wish to kill. . . . You track, you aim, you shoot and click!, instead of a death, you have something eternal"[16]), the camera tracks in closer, emphasizing the rifling inside the gun's barrel. When the camera movement stops, the metal spirals closing around a central point of light are distinctly reminiscent of a diaphragm-type camera shutter. Of course, the idea that the photographic apparatus shares something with weapons systems is commonplace; many an introductory class on photography or cinematography makes the point that one talks about "shooting" in both cases. However, what matters here is not so much the originality of the concept as the effectiveness of its rendering (see figure 8.1).

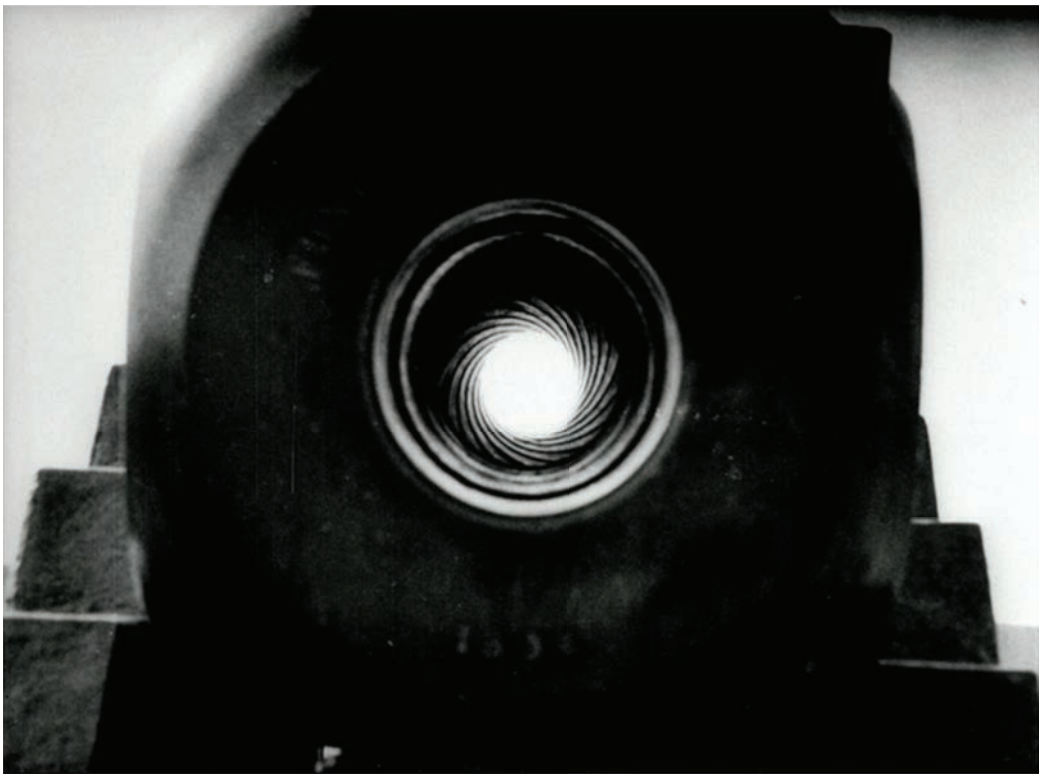

Figure 8.1: The first three shots of *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*. *Source*: fair use.

16. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, 87, my translation.

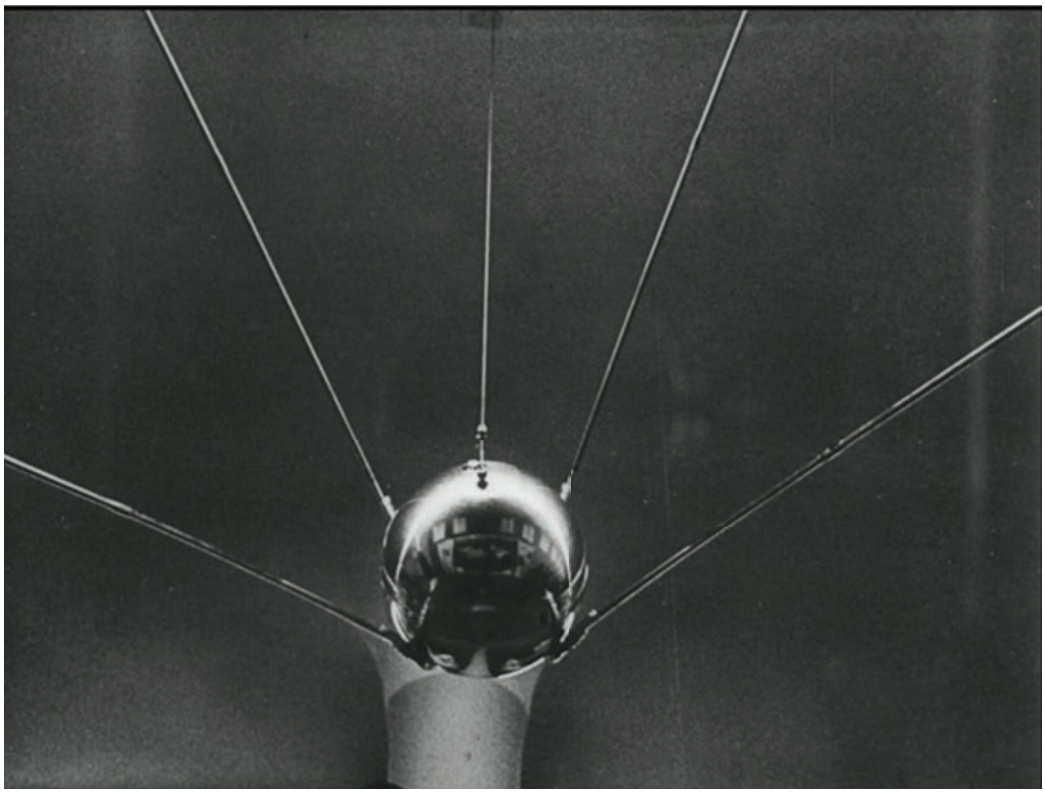

Figure 8.1: (continued)

The camera cuts to a second shot strongly graphically matched with the first. Another bright circle of sunlight sits inside a darker circle, though this is a wider framing so that the darker circle is itself ringed by another brighter one. Somewhere in Asia, probably Korea, a worker in light-colored clothing sits in the shade of a giant pipe. As with the cannon, the viewer sees down the length of the pipe into the strong backlight provided by the sun. Such shots are something of a period signature for Marker; compare, for example, the opening sequences of *La jetée* with dark figures silhouetted against the low-hanging sun. The worker crouches, and his body is contained exactly within the ring of darkness that defines the pipe. Above his head, the circle of light at the other end of the pipe is crossed by two wooden planks or poles. These verticals are aligned one on each side of the worker's head, making a triangle of lines that converge but do not meet. This triangle is itself crossed by a horizontal sequence of dark rectangles, building materials placed by a curbside that curves in the background from the lower right to the center left. In other words, a small miracle of constructivism is found on a Korean building site, and the second shot replies to the first in that a technology of destruction is followed by an image of construction.

The third shot is another bowl of light in the darkness, more difficult to read but apparently a convex mirror seen from below, with brighter lines radiating outward like the ribs of an umbrella. The fourth shot is a fisheye perspective drawing of a bearded old man standing underneath a tree in the garden of a house by some water, and it replies to the third in that its anamorphic perspective is intended to be seen in a convex or cylindrical mirror. This shot moves away from the high levels of contrast found in the first three but holds to the motif of circular forms, as does the fifth, which shows a dense web of orbits around a nucleus, apparently a display, perhaps a scientific or educational model. The sixth shot returns dramatically to the contrast values of the first two—an ancient sculpture of a woman's face is shown as a bright oval floating in a dark field. This shot is lit from below without fill so that the woman's mouth, nose, cheekbones, eyelids, and forehead are all shadowed. The framing begins as a close-up and then tracks in for an extreme close-up in which the eyes fill the frame, slightly canted from left to right. Now, in words that do not appear in the published commentary, the voice-over speaks of a play of gazes, of time and eternity: "A sculptor has eternalized a certain face with a certain look. Now you, with the photo, you eternalize your own look at this look."[17] (See figure 8.2).

17. Chris Marker, dir., *Si j'avais quatres dromadaires* (Paris: Les Mutins de Panoir and ISKRA, 2018), timecode 1:28, my translation.

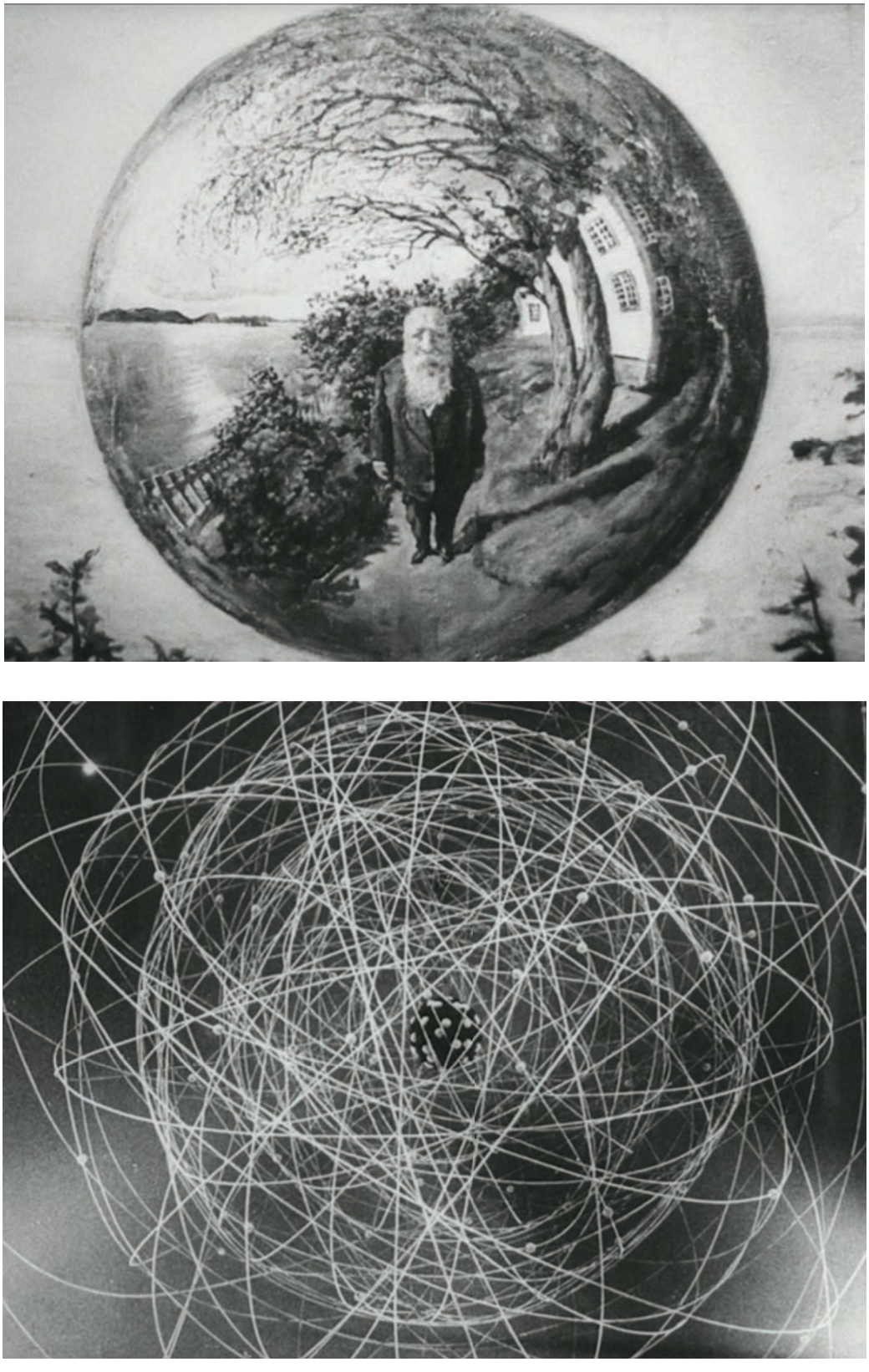

Figure 8.2: *Si j'avais quatres dromadaires*, shots 4–6. *Source*: fair use.

Figure 8.2: (continued)

The film's first shot lasts fourteen seconds, a long take for a film that shows us more than seven hundred still photographs in forty-nine minutes, for an average shot length of fractionally more than four seconds. The second and third shots last three seconds each, the fourth and fifth five seconds each, the sixth a full fifteen seconds. Editing is by straight cut for the first three shots, then by lap dissolve for the third through sixth. Apart from the voice-over, the only sound is a high-pitched flute, playing slowly and waveringly and gradually rising in volume. These first half-dozen shots establish editing rhythms and introduce the graphic match as a visual principle while the first words on the soundtrack establish photography as the film's first topic. Thus the voice of Pierre tells us not only that photography is hunting without the wish to kill, and that it eternalizes a moment, but that it belongs not to the world but to its double; that it belongs not to living humanity but to a life and death of images; that it is a game of hide and seek; that it is a bit like television, which does not inform us about the world so much as treat the world as a spectacle; and that like cinema and television, it causes a disorientation of the balance between the real and the imaginary. With simile piled upon metaphor and analogy dissolving into comparison, all of this is covered in less than two minutes as though the montage of ideas is at least as important as any one of them in itself. We might think here of the arguments of John Tagg over the last thirty years that the medium of photography is not "given and unified," that "it has to be constituted

and is multiply defined."[18] Such complications of the idea of photography as simply transparent or adequate to actuality are especially significant in a film many of whose images might on the face of it seem available to humanist and/or realist readings.

After the first half-dozen shots, the picture track, too, begins to address the question of photography. During the second and third minutes of the film, the viewer sees a shot taken inside a Korean portrait studio, a shot in which a man in battle dress displays an album of photos, a shot in which an easel with photographs for sale stands in front of an ancient ruin, and a Korean street scene in which the left half of the frame is dominated by a Rolleiflex on its tripod while on the right a man looks out through a window. Very likely the Rolleiflex is Marker's own; a picture of him holding such a camera appears on the back cover of *Commentaires 2*, which contains the text of *Si j'avais*. This sequence concludes with a title card with a quotation from a libretto by Jean Cocteau: "Since these mysteries in fact surpass us, let us pretend to be their organizer." Though the film doesn't tell us this, it is hardly a surprise to find that the Cocteau character in question is a photographer who takes pictures of newlyweds at the Eiffel Tower. This ends the film's direct discussion of photography, though of course any film with three voices commenting on more than seven hundred stills can be generally understood as a discussion of photography.

What follows is a pair of graphically matched shots from widely geographically separated locations. The first is a medium close-up of a sign that gives a distance of 9.5 km to the northern Finland town of Napapiiri and also reads "Arctic Circle" in English, French, and German; the zone "Travel" on the CD-ROM *Immemory* includes a much wider view of the same shot, indicating that another of Marker's decisions with any given photograph in *Si j'avais* was whether or not to crop. The second is a medium-long shot of a roadside in the Negev Desert, with a sign reading "Sea Level" in English, French, and Hebrew. Both signs are framed to the left, and both are multilingual; this matching of what the commentary calls "the two ends of the world" is further emphasized by the featurelessness of the respective terrains. The polar desert compares visually with the sand desert, a point that is taken up in a whole subsequent series of lap-dissolving long shots of beaches, rocky landscapes, bare hillsides, and wide waterways. These all have one or two focal points in an otherwise empty vista—a large rock in the foreground, a person at the waterline in the background, a man and horse on a distant horizon, a dark boat on bright water. The sense that these road signs and landscapes are the beginning of a new topic is underlined by the introduction on the soundtrack of the Barney Wilen Trio playing a free-jazz dirge, a bit reminiscent of the 1960s music of Ornette Coleman.

18. John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxviii.

The snow and sand deserts modulate into waterscapes of glassy stillness. What follows is the most-celebrated passage in the film (quoted, for example, as the epigraph to *Staring Back*, the Wexner Center's 2007 book of Marker's photographs), when Pierre's voice-over begins to speak of a global morning: "I can't resist the sort of film which takes you from one dawn to another saying things like: it is six a.m. all over the world, six a.m. on the Canal Saint-Martin, six a.m. on the Gotha Canal in Sweden, six a.m. in Havana, six a.m. in the Forbidden City of Peking."[19] The voice here adopts a tone somewhere between portentous and pious, which the text archly captions as "like the commentary of a film." As we hear about more and more places where it is six a.m. (Brussels, Prague, Teheran, Berlin), multitracked voices begin to overlap and chime together.

This passage appeals to followers of Marker because it is so characteristic of his work both to pose questions about time and to move across a cut around the world, from Paris to Amsterdam to Nice to the Great Wall of China. However, what tends to be forgotten when the lines in question are quoted is that it is introduced as a kind of weakness ("I can't resist") and presented, if not outright ironically, certainly wryly or citationally ("like the commentary of a film"). Note too that the first four shots in the sequence are immediately followed by three different views of a jet airliner, which is Marker's deadpan acknowledgment of the material conditions enabling his lyric dissolves from Paris to Sweden to Havana to Peking. It is also worth noting that "six a.m. all over the world" is strictly impossible, in fact suggests we are not clear on the concept of six a.m., though of course this is very much the romantic appeal of the sequence. Underlying this is a philosophical conundrum about the nature of time and whether or not there is a difference between symbolic systems of measuring time and the real of duration.

What begins with the "six a.m. all over the world" incantation is the first of the truly global tours in Marker's work. In less than three minutes of running time (from 3:30 to 6:22, to be exact), we visit Sweden, Yugoslavia, Korea, Paris, Havana, Peking, Brussels (Belgium), Prague (Czech Republic), Teheran (Iran), Berlin (Germany), Amsterdam, Nice, Rome (Italy), La Ciotat (France), Jerusalem (Israel), Tokyo (Japan), Lausanne (Switzerland), Santiago de Cuba, Tel Aviv (Israel), Moscow (Russia), Oslo (Norway), and Lisbon (Portugal). As suggested by the predominance in this list of names of cities, what we see is very much the urban world of the built environment, the world of streets and billboards, subways and stores, construction sites and hospitals, graveyards and pachinko parlors. Even a Yugoslavian pig, which appears toward the end of the sequence and most likely lives on a farm, is "urbanized" by being shown in a tight close-up with just its face showing through the walls of its pen.

19. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, 98, my translation.

Also noteworthy is that all of these places are directly identified by the voice-over. The opening sequence shows both Asians and Europeans but does not specifically identify any locations—we know that the construction worker in the second shot is most likely Korean because we know that Marker worked in Korea, not because the film says so. And, as might by now begin to be clear, *Si j'avais* travels by contrast and comparison, by graphic match and mismatch. Thus a train leaving the Lumière brothers' station of La Ciotat is matched first with a train leaving Jerusalem ("Leaving Jerusalem By Railway" was also a Lumière actuality of 1897) and then with a train arriving in Tokyo; a high angle looking down on a crowded Promenade des Anglais in Nice is paired with a high angle looking down on an almost deserted Great Wall of China; the sidewalk stalls of Moscow are compared with the sidewalk stalls of Tel Aviv; the lottery in Cuba is matched with the lottery in Lisbon and the pachinko parlors of Japan; billboards in the Paris metro are linked with billboards in Switzerland; and the Yugoslavian pig is comically contrasted with the young women of Paris. The sequence includes a brief excursus on the dozing passengers of the Japanese commuter railways, an idea that is taken up once again in one of the most memorable sequences in *Sans soleil* almost twenty years later. And the protagonist of *La jetée*, subjected in his hammock to the mind-shattering experiments of the doctors in a postnuclear shelter, is recalled by pictures of an open heart operation in Santiago de Cuba, which shows the staring eye of an anesthetized patient surrounded by nurses.

At the end of this bravura sequence, Marker's camera picks out two classes apart, the priests and the police, so that the tone shifts from romantic or utopian toward a consciousness of social division. This new subtopic retains something of the globalizing tendency, since the first religious person we see is a Buddhist monk, shown in two different framings. Next, however, we jump to a uniformed French policeman on duty in a crowded city street, followed by a pair of European priests in cassocks, and then by a group of French policemen on the viewing platform of the Eiffel Tower. Parisian policemen were the subject of *Cinétract 004*, from May 1968 (anonymous but clearly by Marker) and were still interesting to him more than forty years later; on Mayday 2009, he posted on the web a photo of a grim-faced quartet of *police nationale* arrayed around a phone-box flyer for a performance of *Ave Maria*, an image very precisely recalling his 1966 combination of priests and police.

In the last two-and-a-half minutes, *Si j'avais* ends with a coda containing forty-eight shots in 154 seconds, for an average shot length of 3.2 seconds, which is to say about 25 percent faster than the film's overall average. This faster tempo is particularly marked in the first twenty-five shots of the coda, which go by in a total of fifty seconds, including one rapid flurry of six shots in seven seconds. The coda is separated from the rest of the film by four seconds of black leader and begins reflexively with a low-angle shot of a street sign reading "Sortie" (way out), beneath which are the numerals for the hours

and minutes set at zero. The next shot is a high angle looking down on a flight of stairs descending to a wet dockside or flight apron. This suggestion of a traveler's return is followed by another low-angle shot, a diagrammatic map of France showing roads radiating out in all directions from Paris, which is a sign for a store or restaurant with the unlikely name "Du soir au lendemain et vice versa" (From the evening to the next day and vice versa). The film makes a minor motif out of such odd signs.

The sound accompanying these first shots in the coda is muffled and much harder to follow than the generally distinct speech of the film as a whole. It becomes clear that this is intended as a kind of abstraction when the voices slow and slur, producing the wowing characteristic of recorded sound played back at below-standard speed. The words "du soir au lendemain" are read out on the soundtrack by Pierre, but these are the only lines in this segment that are easily intelligible. After this, the human voices slow and stop and are replaced by the screeches of monkeys. The first half of the coda goes on to include another dozen shots of various kinds of street signs, mostly billboards, which advertise movies, political candidates, holidays, and back remedies. Before that, however, we see an elderly woman standing at a game machine of the kind in which a claw is used to catch soft toys. A quick track down within this shot emphasizes the skeletal qualities of the arms and hands inside the machine, which is linked with shots of horror masks and cutaway anatomical faces in store windows, pictures that belong in the tradition of the surrealist enthusiasm for the early twentieth-century photographer of Paris Eugène Atget.

So the chain of associations is France, Paris, the street, signs, stores. The urbanism on which this all rests is spelled out in another pair of graphically matched shots; a woman seated on a bench in the right of the frame with a misty cityscape visible above and behind her (a shot identified in *Immemory* as having been taken in Prague) is paired with a shot in many ways similar, except that in the second picture the woman on the bench is placed to the left and has become a statue about twice the size of life. These matched shots are followed by another kind of representation of woman, a billboard advertising Triumph bras. This image has been torn in such a way that the woman's face and waistline remain visible while the bra itself has completely disappeared.

There follow a dozen shots of torn and pasted-over billboards that develop a similar emphasis on the found surrealism of accidental juxtaposition. Viewers are shown a swastika spray-painted onto a grinning publicity face, an ancient carving on a street in Rome beneath which a modern graffitist has scrawled "Il Duce," a giant pop guitarist supplemented with an election slogan reading "De Gaulle c'est la paix" (De Gaulle means peace), a poster of De Gaulle himself hanging in tatters, and a quick track up from a figure crouching on the sidewalk to a huge poster of Sean Connery as James Bond, this last another iteration of the film's ongoing study of giant signs dwarfing the humans. Note that a whole school of Parisian artists (Jacques Villeglé, Raymond Hains,

François Dufresne) was working contemporaneously in this vein of *décollage*, though these artists typically acquired and tore their own advertising materials rather than relying on what could be found in actuality.

The sequence of publicity posters reaches a climax in a series of shots in which women's faces are reduced by tearing and/or by framing to pairs of eyes combined with various shreds of lettering. In one case, the lettering actually reads "la lettre" (the letter); in another, viewers are exhorted to "act together against American aggression," a reminder that these pictures were taken in the era of the Bay of Pigs and the escalation in Vietnam; in yet another, apparently an advertisement for package holidays, the words "voir et connaître" (see and know) are placed beneath a giant female face. An axial reframing takes viewers in for a closer view, realizing that the woman in question will have a hard time seeing and knowing anything since her paper eyes have been gouged out, presumably by vandals. Meanwhile, a kind of editorializing is heard on the soundtrack; the quicker and faster the torn faces of the politicians and holidaymakers are seen, the louder and shriller becomes the shrieking of a monkey.

The intense, almost bird-like cries of the monkey abruptly cease. There follow a few seconds of silence, and then a resumption of the conversation among the three voices along with a shot of holes scraped into a wall that is held for four seconds. Rapid-fire straight cutting gives way to dissolves, a repunctuation that establishes a new, somewhat slower tempo and a new subtopic, graffiti, described by Pierre as "une autre espèce de musée" (another kind of museum). I am calling graffiti a subtopic since it remains continuous with the previous thematic of signs in the street. After the holes in the wall, a graffito so heavily written over with so many scribbled letters that nothing can be understood is seen. Then come three different shots that all have in common a kind of dejection: "Ont ne nous aime encore" (they still don't love us [or, they don't love us yet]), "la vie est moche" (life is awful), and "j'aime personne" (I love no one).

When Marker cuts from a long shot of a woman seated beside a large white dog to a long shot of a white horse being nuzzled by a dark horse, and then to a medium close-up of the neck and mane of a blonde horse, he reintroduces the motif of animals and introduces a motif of pairs or couples. Of the last eighteen shots in the film, seven show animals. The other eleven show couples; these are variously romantic, or friendly, or familial, and each one includes a linked arm or an arm around the shoulder. At the very end of the film, Marker is cutting back and forth between pairs of humans (a young Scandinavian couple walking in a park, a Cuban elder and adolescent, a man and a woman in motorcycle helmets, a young couple silhouetted against the sunlight) and pairs of animals (two groundhogs embracing, a monkey with its hand on the head of its mate).

To think of Marker as moving from a strong emphasis on nations to an emergent globalism is to say that he can be understood as one herald of an issue that continues

to loom large in cultural criticism, the simultaneous thinkability and unthinkability of the world-system. Thinkability: according to *longue durée* historians such as Fernand Braudel and world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, and Janet Abu-Lughod, economic production has been organized globally at least since the emergence of capitalist banking in the Italian Renaissance. From this perspective, all that any of us has ever known is a globalized economy, and the world-systems school has a long shelf of books that write its history and prehistory.[20] I mention this account not because it is inarguable (in fact, it is much argued), but because it is a valuable counter to the buzzword version of globalization that became so prevalent in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union only to be abruptly declared dead after the 2008 financial crisis. That crisis was itself a global experience (failures in the US real-estate market crashed banks around the world), so the idea that globalization had been finished off by the crisis suggested that the term had been used in some wishful or uncritical ways.[21]

Unthinkability: we struggle to say anything meaningful about a topic as gigantic and complex as the planetary flow of people, goods, capital, and information. If we are film scholars, it is not obvious that such questions even belong in our discipline. Yet, if we throw up our hands and declare the problem beyond our intellectual abilities or disciplinary boundaries, we will find that these issues are in fact thought for us and without our input. Saying this does not, of course, magically solve the problem of knowing how to say anything worthwhile about such sweeping issues. In this essay, I am suggesting that we can trace Marker's passage from nations to worlds by the simple expedient of following the prompts suggested by the film. This may in turn enable us to connect the history of what Michael Denning has called "the age of three worlds" to the philosophical understanding of "worlds" proposed by Alain Badiou in *Logics of Worlds*.[22]

Denning's age of three worlds (first, second, and third) runs from 1945 to 1989, and he remarks that the idea was durable enough to withstand attempts from a variety of quarters to reduce it to a binary, either East versus West (that is, communism versus

20. For the history of the world-system, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994); and Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

21. For a variety of thoughtful perspectives on globalization, see the trilogy of anthologies that appeared in the final years of the last century: Anthony King, ed,, *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). More recent years have seen a flood of globalization readers intended as textbooks for college classes.

22. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 1994). Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2008).

capitalism) or North versus South (that is, development versus underdevelopment).[23] For Badiou, whose philosophical celebrity coincides more or less exactly with the end of the age of three worlds, *world* is a term of art for "networks, trajectories, and paths, which together give topological coherence to a universe of appearing," a useful definition I have borrowed from Bruno Bosteels.[24] For Badiou, things that exist are always and only elements of a world, yet any world is at the same time conditioned by its "inexistent," its "zero-signifier." In one sense, the inexistent is incalculable, radically unpredictable; in another, it is the sudden salience of an element that did not count in the previous world system. I would suggest that during the period in which Marker was making *Si j'avais*, this was very much the status of the decolonizing third world.

Finally, *Si j'avais* can be understood as an essayistic attempt to map multiplicity by mosaic, selectively constructing the three worlds as (1) the social democracies of western Europe, (2) the "people's democracies" of North Korea and the USSR, and (3) the global poor in the shape of African and Algerian migrants to Paris. As noted, Marker renders all three worlds as urban, presaging the moment in the early twenty-first century at which urban populations would outnumber rural for the first time in history.[25] Crossed by the contradictions of an early project of "thinking globally" on the part of an independent filmmaker, the result is a complex of residual and emergent worlds that anticipates a globalization to come while remaining marked by the previous historical and political situation.

23. Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, 26.
24. Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 169.
25. On this point, see Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 1–20.

Sino-US Relations

American Factory and the Difficulties of Documenting Neoliberalism

PETER HITCHCOCK

Abstract

Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's documentary *American Factory*, a project purchased by Netflix and distributed by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions, won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020. It is a stunning and poignant movie about how a Chinese company comes to establish an auto glass factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the site of a former GM production plant. In light of *American Factory's* critical success, this essay focuses on the contemporary capacity of the documentary form to capture the specific logic of socioeconomic and geopolitical contradictions. This is explored through the rubric of neoliberalism, especially as it complicates how a story of a factory might be told. It also links the style of documenting workers to a longer cinematic history.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, labor, China, Obama, representation

Introduction

Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's documentary *American Factory*, a project purchased by Netflix and distributed by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions, won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020.[1] It is a stunning and poignant movie about how a Chinese company comes to establish an auto-glass factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the site of a former General Motors (GM) production plant. For some, it may not better Reichert and Bognar's other work on US labor and gender issues and, as they aver, it is strenuously apolitical.[2]

1. The awards ceremony took place on February 9, 2020, at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, Los Angeles. Bognar and Reichert received their Oscar from the actor/producer Mark Ruffalo. Both filmmakers had their heads shaved. Reichert has been struggling against terminal cancer for two years. Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, dir., *American Factory* (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2019).
2. See Alissa Wilkinson, "Work Is Going Global: *American Factory*'s Directors Explain How They Captured Its Challenges," Vox, August 21, 2019, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/21/20812012/american-factory-interview-netflix-reichert-bognar.

Reichert is no stranger to the Oscars: several of her films (*Union Maids* [1976], with Jim Klein and Miles Mogulescu; *Seeing Red* [1984] with Klein; and *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* [2010], with Bognar—a preface to the Oscar winner based on the same factory) have been nominated for awards before, and Reichert is one of the top US documentarians of the last fifty years (even her early work such as *Growing Up Female* and *Methadone* strike one as radically rigorous, resonant, and politically incisive).[3] The economic aura of Hollywood will hover at the edge of this critique but here we will focus on the contemporary capacity of the documentary form to capture the specific logic of socioeconomic and geopolitical contradictions.

Figure 9.1: Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert filming *American Factory*. *Source*: © David Holm, Netflix, 2020.

3. In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented a retrospective of Reichert's contributions to cinematic history: Museum of Modern Art, "Julia Reichert: 50 Years in Film," MoMa, May 30–June 8, 2019, https://www.moma.org/calendar/film/5068. Also, see Jim Klein, Miles Mogulescu, Julia Reichert, dir., *Union Maids* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1976); Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, dir., *Seeing Red* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1984); Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, dir., *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (New York: HBO, 2010); Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, dir., *Growing Up Female* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1971); and Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, dir., *Methadone* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1974).

Neoliberalism

In order to understand both the achievements of *American Factory* and the problem of representing the major themes in play, it may be useful to consider the political and economic ideology that forms its backdrop and space of contention. Neoliberalism set out to break the hold of Keynesian nostrums on the function of capital markets and the state.[4] For at least the past forty years, using a heady mix of free trade, globalization, and deregulation, neoliberalism has significantly changed the landscape of production and consumption, and it is hardly extraordinary that culture both expresses and resists this hegemony in political economy. It is certainly the case that cinema as an industry is broadly symptomatic of such changes, but to what extent does film offer a counter logic at the level of form? Several studies have already noted the ways in which documentary and film in general relate to the homilies associated with faith in market forces,[5] but can a critique of neoliberal globalization as a subject also confront the perquisites of marketization in the form of documentary itself?[6] Rather than place the burden of this aesthetic struggle on a single film, I would like to think of *American Factory* as being caught up within significant structural antinomies of representation, for which some of its solutions are both prescient and problematic in addressing, for instance, the future of the US workplace in a world of globalization. Neoliberalism can be told as story by documentary but not in a way that necessarily changes the manner in which that story is told.

One way to negotiate the intervention of *American Factory* is to consider its forthright attempt to make tangible the material conditions of globalization concretized in the opening of a factory by Fuyao Glass Industry Group Co., Ltd., (a major Chinese corporation and globally the seventh largest producer of auto glass).[7] The very title,

4. There is a veritable publishing industry dedicated to the exegesis of neoliberalism. Some useful texts in this regard include Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2016); and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
5. See, for instance, Daniel Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Anna Cooper, "Neoliberal Theory and Film Studies," *New Review of Film and Televisions Studies* 17, no. 3 (2019): 265–77; Michael J. Blouin, *Magical Thinking, Fantastic Film, and the Illusions of Neoliberalism* (London: Springer, 2016); Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, eds., *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Shakti Jaising, "Cinema and Neoliberalism: Network Form and the Politics of Connection in Icíar Bollaín's *Even the Rain*," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 56, (Winter 2014–2015).
6. While such questions may not drive the filming decisions of the documentarians, it can affect the editing process (see note 2). In general, Bognar and Reichert aimed to represent a multiplicity of viewpoints from their almost-three years of shooting and twelve hundred hours of film. For Netflix, this certainly helped smooth issues around marketing and exhibition and, at last count, the documentary was available in at least twenty-eight languages—a remarkable achievement that accentuates the importance of globalization as an underlying theme.
7. For basic background on the emergence of Fuyao in the auto-glass industry, see Forbes, "Fuyao Glass Industry Group," Forbes, accessed December 24, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/companies/fuyao-glass-industry-group/#3b540a5124a2.

American Factory, announces the paradoxical dilemma of such a project. Does *American* reclaim a historical identity for industrial production and does that sound not unlike "Make America Great Again"—an ideology and policy vigorously opposed by Reichert and Bognar (although a phrase enunciated by Jeff Liu, the Chinese manager of the factory in the current film)? Interestingly, in *The Last Truck*, one of the GM workers about to be fired says, "Let's take care of our own people here. Let's make it here, buy it here. Take care of our own." Is this not the sentiment behind a slogan such as "America First"? "Popeye," the nickname of a vital interlocutor in *The Last Truck* (he also provided some of the factory interior film when GM refused access to the documentarians), notes that Walmart does not sell anything that is made in the United States (actually, Walmart sells a lot of groceries that are made in the United States, although 80 percent of its total goods suppliers are Chinese[8]). Popeye continues, "We don't have a manufacturing base anymore—it's going to be foreign-owned." This way of viewing the world serves as a reminder that, in the 2016 presidential election, Trump won Ohio by 8.13 percent (a 10 percent swing—he also won the state's union vote by 9 percent).[9] To call the factory owned and run by Fuyao "American" is simultaneously to identify and misunderstand the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Reichert and Bognar's documentary demonstrates this problem, which, for narrative, can be indicated in the contradictory logics of neoliberalism itself rather than primarily in the language of image.

To clarify this further: neoliberalism is not a monolith. It is not simply a mantra or a slogan (and cannot be defeated by one). It is not a single directive and, in true postmodern or post-postmodern parataxis, it does not submit to logical location (this is why, within actually existing globalization, the United States is not solely American; China is not only Chinese). As a further example of the peculiar locution of location, Occupy Wall Street saw no point in actually occupying Wall Street, since all of the stock-trading servers are elsewhere and global finance has no street address. You cannot beat an algorithm with a barricade, but the latter is at least photogenic, representable.[10] If neoliberalism has dimension, it is one of relation, specifically and primarily, of complex economic exchange. It emphasizes individual entrepreneurship, private property, and the decisiveness of markets. It never merely abjures the state but desires one that supports its operative logic strategically. In fact, it can appear sovereign

8. There is much contention over the exact proportions of Walmart's product sourcing. On its website, the company claims that its domestic purchases account for two-thirds of the total, but obviously the dollar amount is not distributed evenly for goods procured. Nevertheless, the company promises to purchase $250 billion of US goods per year by 2023.

9. Despite victory, the margins were hardly uniform across the state. In Montgomery County, for instance, where Dayton is located, Trump won by less than two thousand votes. My point here is that the sentiments expressed by the local workforce are relatively consistent with Trump's appeals to his base at that time.

10. Obviously, the political tactics of the Occupy Movement were varied and situational and, at times, included taking space itself. For an interesting if informal account of how to "occupy" at the level of economics, see Richard D. Wolff, *Occupy the Economy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012).

and nonsovereign, nationalist and wildly postnationalist, without ever giving up on its central tenets of flexible accumulation and what David Harvey refers to as "accumulation by dispossession."[11] Shade it a little further toward markets and it becomes quasi-libertarian; color it with more policy and it becomes benevolent state capitalism; mix in some arch ethnocentrism and it can sanction forced labor. Because there is no scenario in which neoliberalism could fully deliver redistribution as public good, it cannot embrace postcapitalism of any kind (which of course does not negate the possibility of it as a precondition). If, as some contend, neoliberalism is on the wane, folks at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the majority of central banks are not yet losing sleep over the prospect.[12] If capital is "dead," as Mackenzie Wark offers in the title of one of his books, or capitalism is a "zombie," as Chris Harman puts it in the title of one of his, we have reached the afterlife before actual extinction, and we live in a world of speculation as veritable specters (a novel reinterpretation of Marx on dead labor).[13] This may not sublate in advance the possibility of narrating neoliberalism via documentary and/or social realism, as Reichert and Bognar effectively do, or perhaps even displace, it to a degree, through emphasis on human and humanist empathy, which is very much in evidence in *American Factory*, but it deeply questions how the globe gets told and who, from within neoliberalism and within any transition from it, gets to tell it.

The Factory Today

To the extent that the ideologies of neoliberalism get sutured at the level of information, *American Factory* attempts to tell a different story, a mode of counter factualism, whose very anachronism might function as an intervention. It is almost as if because the film does not have time to say, or is not in the time to say it, it disturbs its own field of representation.[14] To some extent, this is indicative of the immanence of labor in the

11. Harvey is interested in, among other important factors, the spatial and territorial desires of neoliberal accumulation. See David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63–87.
12. For a critique of the centrality of these institutions, see, for instance, Richard Peet, *The Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO* (London: Zed, 2009); Eric Toussaint and Damien Miller, *Debt, the IMF, and the World Bank: Sixty Questions, Sixty Answers* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); and Ngaire Woods, *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and Their Borrowers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).
13. See McKenzie Wark, *Capitalism Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London: Verso, 2019); and Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (London: Bookmarks, 2009).
14. The problem of time in documentary film is well discussed. I am thinking in particular of temporal noncoincidence in how film "documents" and the extent to which this can be materially specified. For work on the phenomenological implications of such temporality, see Mahlin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For the most part, *American Factory* follows spatial disjunction/continuity between the United States and China but it is difficult to relate the longue *durée* of neoliberal globalization as a function of living memory alone. In what ways could one edit not just the footage of the film but the time of neoliberalism itself?

production of the documentary in contrast to the form of labor to which it otherwise dedicates representionality; yet this is compounded by a kind of temporal disjunction, as if US factory labor can only exist as a phantasm that floats among the ruins of postindustrialism.[15] Work today is obviously never only factory bound (and never was, of course), but because wage labor saturates the socius, it places greater pressure on a narrative hook, a mode of distinction at once vulnerable to aesthetics of displacement. One of the many achievements of *American Factory* is that, in the twenty-first century, it dares to show a factory with labor by workers laboring within it (a cinematic anomaly even at the height of industrialization and rarer still in an economy dominated by service industries). Much commentary has attempted to slot the visual aesthetics of *American Factory* into a veritable Cold War discourse that pits China against the United States, a kind of bad exploitation of the worker versus an eminently humane version (which is at least one reason why one needs to see Bognar and Reichert's *The Last Truck* too). Even at the annual World Economic Forum at Davos, there have been calls for a more fair, equal, and sustainable capitalism, and an early booster of neoliberal rapacity, Joseph Stiglitz, can today appear on the progressive talk show *Democracy Now!*, urge Apple to pay taxes, and believe in a kinder, gentler capitalism.[16] Postcolonial states of the Global South are increasingly overdetermined by this geopolitical tension/whiplash, which, for some, is preferable to rejecting the substance of a false opposition (false only because the winner is still capitalism).[17] Certainly, there are moments in the documentary when the narrative comes close to endorsing a stark China/US division. In a training seminar, when the Chinese expert on US labor relations tells the Chinese workers, "We're better than them [Americans]," there is a strong possibility that Chinese viewers might agree while US viewers may discover a complementary reflex of jingoistic or xenophobic opprobrium. Certainly, the narrative fights this hopeless binary, but it is not easy because its very form seems to edit out the conditions of its own possibility. Could the absence of such frames or framing be a mode of documentary interpellation, a way

15. Phantom labor usually describes undocumented or unaccounted labor, often deployed to exploit lax rules over migrant workers and terms of employment or else refers to various scams to claim wages for workers who do not otherwise exist. Here I am thinking more of the spectral remains of industrial labor left behind by strategic deindustrialization; for instance, a real person with skills rendered ethereal by changes in the form or location of work. As Reichert indicates at the end of this piece, such workers are specters, not just of what was but of what could be.

16. There are many examples of this kind of thinking, but Stiglitz is particularly noteworthy because of his expertise and the gusto with which he argues the case. See, for instance, Joseph Stiglitz, *People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

17. Aihwa Ong is not the first to note how neoliberalism collapses inside/outside demarcations, even if several critics, including Harvey as she points out, seem to reinscribe an earlier dichotomy of the West and the rest. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). For an alternative reading of both postcolonialism and globalization in this regard, see Sankaran Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). If indeed the Global South is being drawn into a new Cold War between China and the United States, it is over the grounds of capitalist modernity rather than through alternatives to the same.

of hailing the underlying relation the antinomy of *American Factory* otherwise represents? Is it useful to think of documentary as symptomatic of what it cannot convey through images? While the pertinence of the nonvisualized is a standard approach to the possibility of the image (in the off screen and off frame, for instance), here it bears crucially on how temporality is perceived, how the "event" of the factory is managed, situated, captured.[18]

The History of the Factory

There is, then, the history of this factory. Briefly, Moraine Assembly began as a Frigidaire production facility in 1951—a key moment of US working-class prosperity (after the hardships of the Second World War and previously in the Great Depression) when workers could start to buy the appliances they made. When GM came to this suburb of Dayton in the late seventies, they decided to go big, and the factory became a behemoth larger than the Pentagon, with a capacity to produce over two hundred and fifty thousand cars and trucks a year. Yet, at this very moment, political economy was undergoing key structural changes (in part produced by the upheavals of the early seventies: the oil crisis, the end of the gold standard and Bretton Woods, automated trading, and a growing perception that state-sponsored social-safety nets and unions stood in the way of robust accumulation on a global scale).[19] Not long after the first Chevrolets rolled off the line at Moraine, president Ronald Reagan was already working hard to reduce state and corporate responsibility and ramp up antiunionism. In 1978 China, Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations program kickstarted capital accumulation and joint ventures, soon followed by rapid intensification of the industrial base, the unleashing of a vast reserve of Chinese labor power, and a flood of foreign direct investment and foreign-currency reserves.[20] One of the early victims of the new global order was the US steel industry, leaving the greater Cleveland area and the Mons Valley of Pennsylvania

18. *Event* here has to be seen in contrast to Alain Badiou's conception, which philosophically (and perhaps mathematically) more or less ties *Event* to a rupture in the conditions of Being, and is thus transformative. Here, event exists as potential and perhaps could only figure in Badiou's idea as a future conditional. The factory is indeed a historical site, as I detail, but the adequacy of its meaning also arrives from the future, which may necessitate alternative visual registers. This theme is connected to that indicated elsewhere as precarity and automation. It is also related to Badiou's following comment: "In France, where we're under the illusion that we live without workers now, we're aware, thanks to the cinema, that workers still exist in China. A great Chinese cinema has grown up around this very question: What is becoming of our factories and our workers? Such testimony about the world is unique to cinema; no documentary-style reporting can ever be a substitute for it." See, Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

19. This narrative can be told in several ways. A good example is that of Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*, especially part four in which he considers the changed dynamics of the US economy within financial globalization. See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994).

20. The Four Modernizations do not constitute an uncontentious topic in recent Chinese history. For an economic perspective, see Satyananda J. Gabriel, *Chinese Capitalism and the Modernist Vision* (London: Routledge, 2006), especially chapter 8.

some of the original postindustrial wastelands (pertinently, several complete steelworks were dismantled, shipped by container vessels, and then rebuilt in China). Coincidentally, beginning in 1982, the heartland was visited by the Japanese car industry, and anti–Japanese populism quickly bubbled close to the surface of US culture (seen in films like *Gung Ho*, *Black Rain*, etc.[21]). Yet, the reason Moraine did not close earlier was because labor costs and demand were relatively stable domestically. What changed?

Globalization rapidly reduced labor costs per unit in the car industry. Audi recognized this in China by the late eighties (the Audi 100 was then made in Changchun), but they did not move more aggressively because of legal and economic restrictions on private car ownership in China. By the time GM got their investment strategy together and built a factory in China, companies like Volkswagen (VW) were already well entrenched. At last measurement, GM now has ten joint ventures in China, two wholly owned factories, and fifty-eight thousand workers, each of whom costs less than a quarter of their US counterparts in the United Auto Workers (UAW). In 2018, GM produced over 3.5 million vehicles in China.[22] On the outskirts of Shanghai, the Cadillac Jinqiao factory alone has a capacity to produce one hundred and sixty thousand cars a year. As part of its strategy in China, GM first marketed a US cast off, the Buick Regal, with the logic being that Chinese executives would buy or requisition large sedans of this kind. When the Moraine plant closed in 2008, the last car off the line was an SUV, the GMC Envoy. It is featured both in *The Last Truck*, of course, and in *American Factory*, and it now sits in the Carillon Historical Park in Dayton next to a piece of Fuyao auto glass signed by its CEO (the signing event is included in *American Factory*). The Envoy was cobranded as the Chevy Trailblazer (which was also made in Moraine). This is significant because the latter became part of GM's model lineup in China (made in Shanghai). In 2009, the year following the closure of the plant in Ohio that Fuyao would then buy in 2014, GM built 727,620 cars and trucks in China. This capitalist chiasmus is not represented in *American Factory* at all, but it could be argued that it is its material condition. In its story of globalization, *American Factory* primarily resorts to "slice of life" aesthetics, which foregrounds the human drama of Moraine but radically truncates an understanding of the worker at a world scale (including

21. Some of the stereotypes seen in a film like *Gung Ho* feed off discourses with a long history in US culture. I mention these examples from the 1980s because they tend not only to trivialize culture difference (Americans are also stereotyped) but displace the political unconscious at work in the narratives around the newfound power of the Japanese economy. See Ron Howard, dir., *Gung Ho* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1986); and Ridley Scott, dir., *Black Rain* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1989).

22. Much of this data can be found on GM websites. See, for instance, General Motors, "About GM China," General Motors, accessed December 24, 2020, https://www.gmchina.com/company/cn/en/gm/company/about-gm-china.html. Michael J. Dunne's book, *American Wheels, Chinese Roads*, paints a somewhat rosy picture of GM's move to the Chinese market. See Michael J. Dunne, *American Wheels, Chinese Roads* (Singapore: Wiley, 2011). For a critical assessment of GM's China strategy, see also Edward Neidermeyer, "The Secret History of GM's Chinese Bailout," Quartz, January, 24, 2016, https://qz.com/594984/the-secret-history-of-gms-chinese-bailout/.

the meaning of *American* in its title). The largest and most luxurious version of the Envoy was called the Denali (an anagram of denial).[23] It is not that the documentary consciously refuses the circumstances of its story, but it is as if the field of vision is also structured by an optical unconscious mediated by necessary economic elisions.[24] Even the most fervent documentary realism cannot assimilate or represent these absences without jeopardizing its capacity to narrate—especially, as in this example, when the film participates directly in the process it might otherwise critique. The logic of the factory in contemporary capitalism is a dynamic relation that does not easily distill in the subject of the factory itself, and film is compelled to measure the difficulty of that disjunction (see figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2: The last truck to leave the GM factory in Moraine, Ohio.

23. Denali (meaning "high" or "tall") is the Koyukon name for the highest mountain peak in North America. Given the carbon footprint of some GM SUVs, I find the anagram somewhat apposite.
24. For more on what Walter Benjamin means by the "optical unconscious," see Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, ed. and trans. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015). Benjamin believes that photography is the first technology to reveal this possibility; that is, a visual space at the limits of human intentionality. I invoke it here as a cinematic corollary, particularly regarding how the image figures the logic of the capital/labor relation.

The closure of the Moraine factory occurred because GM (United States) basically presented itself as broke. In the same year it produced those vehicles in China, it declared bankruptcy in the United States, with $82.29 billion in assets and $172.81 billion in debt (the relationship between the debt and the investment in its GM Chinese subsidiaries makes for an interesting narrative by itself, not least because it would lead to GM importing its joint-venture Chinese production to the United States following the bailout). If the prelude to GM's foray into China was a global reorganization of capital and labor, it was the financial crisis that almost killed the US-based auto industry as a whole. Again, this is absent as the ground for *American Factory*, as is the controversial story of the bailout of GM at that time led, coincidentally, by President Obama.[25] Because of the conditions attached to the bailout, the autoworkers featured in *The Last Truck* were largely sacrificed as a cost of neoliberal disruption and labor reorganization. The debate about the financial bailout and the terms of globalization continues (Elizabeth Warren, for instance, who chaired the congressional oversight panel of the Troubled Asset Relief Program, wondered how GM's financial-services division came to be caught out speculating in the housing market in Spain?[26]). The point is, the story of this factory is indeed a template for understanding the contradictory logic of neoliberalism (and its afterlife). Even with the Obamas' direct support, the filmmakers do not paper over the excesses of free-market/state-capitalist doublespeak, but the circumstances of *The Last Truck* present them with nigh impossible narrative demands so that the story of *American Factory* (which begins with some shots taken directly from its predecessor) tends to record cultural differences around labor practice—some of which, as Reichert and Bognar clearly indicate, are filtered through crude stereotypes. For instance, Americans, we learn from the Chinese cultural consultants in the film, are very obvious: "They don't hide anything"; "They dislike abstraction and theory in their daily lives"; at work, "they're pretty slow and have fat fingers" and are even alleged to be scared of heat. The Chinese, according to the American workers at the factory, "refer to us as foreigners, they don't help us at all, they don't respect you, and don't even know what the rules [in the United States] are." Such prejudice is leavened by comic interludes and genuine human warmth. There is a scene of recently arrived Chinese workers fishing and exchanging pleasantries with local Ohioans. Later, the documentary records a US delegation performing the Village People's "YMCA" at a Fuyao party in China, and one rep, albeit tipsy, gets teary

25. Given that GM had received an almost $50 billion bailout from the Obama administration, critics were surprised at this eventuality. See, again, Neidermeyer, "The Secret History of GM's Chinese Bailout."

26. Warren's point was that, given the taxpayers' ownership of GM at the time (61 percent), some explanation was owed regarding GM's financial speculation in property markets across the globe. Partisan critiques quickly followed that accused Warren herself of property speculation in the 1990s. Here, the fate of GM and its factories is mediated by financial decisions typical of neoliberal economics.

repeating "we are one" to his Chinese counterparts. And so it goes on, dialogically, perhaps, feeding a narrative about labor relations as basically a question of cultural attitude, not a condition deeply embroiled in market forces. While one position obviously does not exclude the other, the question for the documentary is how they can be effectively mediated.

The Workers

But then, even as cultural difference has generated the most discussion about the documentary among Chinese and US communities (and sometimes between them),[27] the documentary is careful to humanize both sides. Wong He, the furnace expert (and shown to be an inveterate Twinkie eater), is separated from his family for up to two years, which is not just a proclivity of Chinese capitalism but is seen as a necessary condition of labor mobility in the present. The consanguine idea of remittance is old, for instance, but it has become a central mechanism of worker migration (temporary or relatively permanent) in developing countries and a symbol of cheap labor in the developed world (particularly, of course, among agricultural, construction, and domestic workers). While three quarters of labor migration globally is internal—a process of proletarianization from the countryside to the city (led in the last forty years by China, one that stands as the largest migration in history)—almost one hundred and eighty million workers now find themselves in foreign countries.[28] Importantly, both *The Last Truck* and *American Factory* signal new regimes of labor management through the precarity this entails. One worker, Rob Haerr, befriends the Chinese at the factory and has them come over for Thanksgiving to shoot his guns but later he is dismissed from Fuyao (apparently for being too slow). Even the head of the company Cao Dewang, referred to as "Chairman Cao" (a title which cannot help invoking Mao Zedong), has reason to worry, not just because of the challenge of US unionism (ostensibly in contrast to the shadow

27. Much of the discussion is overdetermined by the state of China/US relations, which have markedly deteriorated in recent years. The online debate in China is particularly interesting, since the documentary is not officially available for viewing there. That some of the labor issues discussed have such global reach is also testimony to the achievement of Bognar and Reichert in this film.

28. The question of global labor migration is at the margin of *American Factory* yet has a significant role in how the factory today can be cognized at a world scale. A consistently reliable source for research initiatives in this area is the International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN agency. See International Labour Organization, "Labour Migration," ILO, accessed December 24, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm. Much polemical research is available. See, for instance, Michele Ford, *From Migrant to Worker: Global Unions and Temporary Labor Migration in Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China: Post-Socialist Transformations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

Figure 9.3: Inspecting windshields at Fuyao Glass America.

Figure 9.4: Cleaning windshields at Fuyao Glass America.

of unionism seen at Fuyao's headquarters in Fuqing, Fujian[29]), but because, as a billionaire, Cao is unsure of the benefits of all of the factories he has built (which may or may not spur his extensive philanthropy). Reichert and Bognar suggest, correctly, that capitalism is always a people's story but, as I have attempted to indicate, the factory itself is a key interlocutor of narrative possibility that yet resists its story in images. The question of unionism is important and long-standing (one activist invokes Sally Field's character of Norma Rae in this regard), but surely the factory itself is the last gasp of industrialism and that, even though Cao believes it is an important vehicle for enhancing the image of China transnationally, *American Factory* remains a tombstone to human productive capacity under the terms of labor globalization.[30] Despite this caveat, it is clear that the unionization of any worker across the globe remains an existential threat to capital accumulation. When, on the official opening day of the factory, the Ohio senator Sherrod Brown mentions that he hopes the company acknowledges the workers' desire for a union, the American managers of Fuyao are apoplectic; one, Dave Burrows, says Brown's people will never be allowed in the factory again while Cao says bluntly, "If a union comes in, I'm shutting down." This is read as Fuyao's imperative but, given the history of the factory and the circumstances of GM's departure, it is very much part of the political economy of neoliberalism.

Labor Unions and Globalization

If the conversation between the filmmakers and the Obamas is to be believed (recorded as a supplementary document to *American Factory* itself), much of the friction portrayed in the main film will become superfluous through the rise of automation.[31] Therefore, if the tone and taxonomy of the documentary is demonstrably and appreciably for labor, the resolution of its story comes close to displacement, as if the mise-en-scène of worker struggle is rendered moot in a flourish. Since Marx wrote of factories as automatons in the nineteenth century, automation is hardly a new discourse (interestingly, it

29. Again, given the filmmakers' career-long commitment to labor issues, it is somewhat surprising such differences are not explored further. How a putatively worker state inhibits unions and unionism is a topic too large for the present discussion but it is obviously connected both to GM's move to China and Fuyao's deep resistance to the UAW. Given the difficulties in union-organized collective bargaining, Chinese workers have had to resort to other forms of agency. See, for instance, Hao Ren, ed., *China on Strike: Narratives of Workers' Resistance* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016).
30. Joshua Freeman shows in his extensive research that, while the functions and form of the factory have changed demonstrably, it still maintains a remarkable presence in the production and reproduction of everyday life. See Joshua B. Freeman, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).
31. See Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, *American Factory: A Conversation with the Obamas* (Chicago: Higher Ground Productions, 2019).

was not seen by Marx as simply regressive regarding the end of capitalism[32]), but the sight of robotic arms juxtaposed directly with the firing of American workers in the film remains a warning, if not an obvious imaginary mediatory condition for all that has come before. To be fair, automation is indeed a framing device of the documentary (the opening shots are also machine filled), and yet it is clearly not its thesis. You do not have to feature a Chinese auto-glass corporation in Ohio to illustrate the prospect of automation. GM did not flee Ohio because it could not automate its production. The chronotope of the documentary is positioned, if not overdetermined by, transformations in the globalization of capital (accepting, with Trinh Minha, that such determinants do not an unalloyed objectivity make[33]). Yet, GM goes to China because of its market and because surplus is easy when labor is cheap and relatively unprotected. Fuyao comes to the United States because Americans still buy a lot of cars, and who wants to pay import tariffs and shipping costs? At the heart of *American Factory* is a constitutive nonsaid—by which, I mean that its formal surfaces seem constrained not to narrate the conflicted globality that is its very possibility.[34] But surely all Reichert and Bognar have to do is invite a few talking heads onscreen to relate the above and the narrative will be said, verifiable, real? *American Factory* is not completed by making it more sociological, or more attune to political economy, or more consistent with the skillful socialist syntax of *Union Maids*, a standout film in Reichert's justly revered career.[35] Even if we say the factory "speaks" in the film, albeit of its own dereliction and aphanisis (its fading or disappearing subjectivity[36]), are its images adequate to

32. Marx conceived of the factory itself as a vast automaton that would, in order not just to harness but to control labor power, intensify automation. Yet, since automation presupposes "superfluous hands," as Marx puts it, "capital thus works towards its own dissolution as the form dominating production." The production of abject alienation from labor activity is also a sign of how the worker via automation can be liberated from that form of production itself. As Marx puts it, "This will redound to the benefit of emancipated labor, and is the condition of its emancipation." Of course, the individual experience of such redundancy will be severe where socialization still pivots on the sale of labor power, but Marx is attempting to identify the antinomies of capital accumulation. To this extent, the robot arms in *American Factory* are, like the figuration of labor itself, "gravediggers." See, Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. and foreword Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 690–711.

33. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity," in *The Documentary Reader*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 758–62. Trinh puts pressure on the false assumption that the mechanics of documentary cinema permit "authenticity" in representation. In art mediated by difference, difference itself challenges the basis, the "eye," of the cinematic apparatus.

34. In part, this recalls Benjamin's point again regarding intentionality but it also accentuates the importance of attending to the silences of storytelling that are not themselves produced by the filmmakers' expressive will. To the art of cinematic silence, one must consider, too, the silences of the text produced by more than cinema itself, including ideological imperatives.

35. Reichert's contributions to feminist and labor documentary art are immense and individual films beyond the discussion of *American Factory* here would require much more space. Among many pertinent assessments one might include the long interview with Reichert in Alexandra Juhasz, ed., *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 121–36; and Bob Kotyck, "The Good Fight: the Films of Julia Reichert," *Cinema Scope* 79 (Summer 2019), https://cinema-scope.com/features/the-good-fight-the-films-of-julia-reichert/.

36. I use this in Jacques Lacan's sense rather than that deployed by Ernest Jones regarding desire, primarily because it permits a focus on the status of the subject in narrative beyond empirical detail sui generis, the seen, *and* the sensibility. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 207–8.

the contradictions of its logic? Is its success its affective approach, a sensitivity to the dilemmas posed that lets even viewers less defined by precarity in the workplace the possibility of appreciation (the problem of audience here would provide another crucial line of inquiry[37])? While I do not think the film is primed by an appeal to a bourgeois liberal *I*, it nevertheless tends to obfuscate any outright rejection of that warm embrace. Does the factory, however, become a touchstone about the US economy rather than a tombstone because it is now owned by a Chinese corporation? This question is also not devoid of structural antinomy in how contemporary neoliberalism comes to haunt storytelling in the present.

The polemical heart of *American Factory* is a lot more than whether China and the United States play political games around tariffs within globalization, but it is a lot less than a critique of the neoliberalism, waning or otherwise, that links global workers through value extraction and exploitation. In part, this tussle between insight and provocation is produced by what has elsewhere been termed the cognitive capture of neoliberalism or, perhaps more formally, dissonance or disruption as itself the salve for global cognition; the logic of neoliberalism's slippery register disables counter critique by immediately absorbing its discourse as negotiable and/or as monetized.[38] In terms of narrative, several alternative strategies have been proposed, including those that favor some kind of oppositional synthesis and cohesion in the face of discursive fragmentation and blatant incoherence.[39] On the face of it, this sounds user friendly and pedagogically promising, and there are sequences in *American Factory* that could be deployed in this way, even as such an approach might risk didacticism and stridency. We have mentioned the human story, and Reichert and Bognar are particularly adept at linking cultural difference around the Fuyao project by foregrounding moments of desire for basic understanding and social exchange. This, indeed, is the most translatable aspect of the film's meaning, often enhanced by the Coplandesque vernacular of Chad Cannon's score, which, like Lindsay Utz's editing (a first for Reichert and Bognar), carefully integrates the workers' experience of each other. Wong's story, for instance, that of the aforementioned dedicated glass-furnace expert who struggles with separation from his family, provides a sympathetic image of the human costs of globalization. Even so, Wong is willing to defer happiness in order for the Fuyao experiment in the United States to work: "I think the most important thing is mutual understanding." This is something that Reichert and Bognar's juxtaposition of

37. See, for instance, Julian Hanich, *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

38. See Judith Barish and Richard Healey, "Beyond Neoliberalism: A Narrative Approach," *Narrative Initiative*, August 2019, https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Beyond-Neoliberalism-Final-8.21.2019-v-1.2.pdf.

39. This can also be seen in Lazzarato's post-Foucauldian critique of autonomy. See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Neoliberalism in Action: Inequality, Insecurity and the Reconstitution of the Social," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26, no. 6 (2009): 109–33.

personal narrative—mixed with fly-on-the wall misrepresentations of each other by the Chinese and Americans—aims to complicate: how can one now read a corporate multinational? Another worker, Jill Lamantia, a forklift operator, has suffered through the lean times of Ohio's economy, and we first see her living in her sister's basement. Regular pay at Fuyao allows her to rent her own apartment and, for a while at least, her life appears to resume some form of normality. Yet the question of labor organization as a way to mitigate the will to precarity in neoliberalism hangs over Fuyao and the film as a whole (see figure 5).

The crisis over the unionization of Fuyao's Ohio factory is the closest the documentary comes to themes that Reichert's career in particular has emphasized: labor rights, women's rights, worker dignity, and the capacities of class consciousness. The film offers a significant ideological divide among the workers themselves, some of whom believe that, after years of just getting by (particularly after GM's controversial departure), management's job demands are a hardship worth risking. Other workers at the factory side with the efforts of the UAW to bargain on behalf of Fuyao's labor force, and some join the demonstrations outside the factory gates in support of the unionization effort (those who are deemed "agitators," including Lamantia, are denied further access to

Figure 9.5: UAW union organization drive outside Fuyao Glass America.

the work site and are fired). To head off the possibility of a union, Fuyao hires (for a reported $1 million fee) a consulting firm, Labor Relations Institute, who are tasked with conducting seminars (with mandatory worker attendance) to go over what might be lost and gained in this regard. The filmmakers include audio secretly recorded by a worker at one of these meetings, where it is clear what kind of "labor relations" the company desires: one based on individual decision (basic stakeholder parlance) rather than the power of collective bargaining. The "no" vote is overwhelming, and the idea of the factory is then much closer to Cao's vision: a project to improve China/US relations, but not by sacrificing the very work regimens that have made that relationship relevant in the past forty years. While Reichert and Bognar are hardly cheerleaders for this position, Cao himself does not come off as an archcapitalist roader. Indeed, one of the striking elements of the directors' approach is to provide backstory to Cao's position, which he seems more than willing to offer (they film him on his corporate jet, but we also see him praying at a Buddhist temple, with his voiceover appreciating the fact that while he was poor when he was young, the simplicity of peasant life was bound up with the intimacy of nature). For Cao now, the idea is stripped of romanticization: "The point of living is to work."

Cao's worldview is not beyond contradiction and however much he might simultaneously pine for the bucolic and the necessity of labor, his monologue is quickly juxtaposed with what we might read as a visual denouement via the rollout of factory robotic arms that almost literally occlude workers on the shop floor. Subtitles solemnly declare: "Up to 375 million people globally will have to find entirely new kinds of jobs by 2030 because of automation. How workers, governments, and businesses tackle these seismic shifts will define the future of work." As we have noted, technological advance is not simply a function of neoliberal efficiency, even as it clearly permits a narratological pass for opposing unionism and firing workers on behalf of progress.[40] The subtitles at the end of the film document a certain inexorability to this process that Cao's company both accelerates and heroically inhibits: "Fuyao Glass America made a profit from 2018. Starting wages remain $14 an hour. The company now employs about 2200 American workers and 200 Chinese workers." There is profit, there is work, and there is a framework for crosscultural China/US understanding. Must the documentary settle for a description of globalization rather than a syntax that might more forcefully challenge its inertia?

40. There are certainly critiques that think through the implications of automation with employment and class constituency although not beyond dire consequences. See, for instance, Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work* (New York: Putnam, 1996). As I have already indicated, the specter of automation is not simply outside narratives of emancipation. The question is not about whether automation is coming; it is about the optimum form of economic socialization in which that can take place.

Documenting Labor

Daniel Worden's *Neoliberal Nonfictions* argues for the salience of a "documentary aesthetic," one that, for instance, is "a rejoinder and accompaniment to the ways in which finance capitalism and its intensifications of exploitation, dispossession, and state-sanctioned violence have made the world seem vertiginous and precarious."[41] On the surface, such a view appears at one with the ambivalent position of the factory at the center of this narrative, although we have suggested its material history could be supplemented and engaged. Nevertheless, when Worden notes that "works that employ the documentary aesthetic engage in juxtaposition, offsetting emotional and personal experience with the structures that produce their possibilities,"[42] *American Factory* signifies within this lineage, even as documentary itself is mediated by multiple and disparate narrative modes. The question remains about the extent to which the proximity to neoliberal subject relations disables or otherwise renders obtuse reflexive narration and creative modes of critique. On what level might we think of *American Factory* as counter hegemonic?

In Gramscian terms, this is something of a war of position that intimates a new vision and builds toward an alternative and liberatory hegemony. True, one could be more confrontational as in war of maneuver in Gramsci's parlance, that seizes on crisis to shake power—but taking it to the streets also depends on a high degree of relative autonomy from the braided front of state and civil society, and its effects are assessed on a case-by-case basis.[43] In the documentary, this would be registered primarily as content, in the struggle to unionize the factory space, yet of course this is neither the scale nor the form of the labor/capital relation I have otherwise indicated. Between gradualism and insurrection, there is no formula for telling the story of the world system as such. Thus, the idea is not to embrace such generic inability but is at least to reflect on the limits globality represents and the persistence of abstraction/displacement that neoliberalism, even in decline, pursues. If naming the factory *American* introduces a primary antinomy of contemporary capitalism (how to reconcile labor identity with global circulation), are the film's formal components under any obligation to concretize that reality? In the documentary's denouement, Reichert and Bognar juxtapose eye-level shots of workers leaving Fuyao factories in both China and the United States. It is a powerful montage that intimates several layers of signification. Some of the distinctions the filmmakers' visualize include differences in dress (the Chinese uniforms evoke the workers'

41. See Daniel Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 7.
42. Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions*, 9.
43. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), particularly part 2, section 2. Gramsci's ideas on cultural hegemony continue to influence theory across a range of disciplines. See, for instance, Lee Artz and Bren O. Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (London: Sage, 2000).

version of the Mao suit, a sign both of solidarity and the negative link between uniform and uniformity—the Americans by contrast are not uniformly uniformed through that connotation); the figures of the US workers are much more racially diverse, suggesting a specific and irreducible history of racial capitalism that also pinpoints a key dimension of how a factory might indeed be deemed "American"; the regimen of labor is indicated by revealing the Chinese workers in a shift change (workers are filing in and out at the same rate and an assistant keeps the lines separate and moving; and the differences in facial expressions are more subtle but there is perhaps an unsurprising relief in those for whom the workday is ending, perhaps mediated to some degree by the visibility of the camera and the depth of vision deployed). Cinematic referentiality in this sequence is just as provocative and reminds us that films tell stories that are simultaneously stories about film itself. There is a certain invisibility in worker identity and practice (derived in part from the abstraction of labor as concept in political economy) that cinema has insistently sought to overcome, to compensate for, or radically displace. One thinks, for instance, of one of the first films, the Auguste and Louis Lumière brothers' project of 1895 called *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*.[44] It is not just happenstance that workers are "captured" in this way; as I have argued elsewhere, the problem of representing labor as relation haunts cinema, as if film must assume worker subjectivity is available, eminently visual, and communicable or else reveal its absence as constitutive to modernity as such.[45] From *Metropolis* (1927) to *24 City* (2008), the workers leaving the factory and/or entering it is a primary if changing challenge of visual art.[46] Labor was always and more so now much greater than the factory worker, yet exiting the factory is a punctum of sorts, a reminder of the passage of a particular form of work and those who do it. It is part of the narrative of neoliberalism that "advanced" or "mature" economies are service based and that Fuyao's factory near Dayton is a last gasp in postindustrialism. Yet one of the many lessons of China's participation in globalization in the past forty years is that the farm-to-factory transition is integral to what neoliberalism represents. Such proletarianization in the Global South dwarfs all narratives of industrialization in the West and is a key reason that Fuyao has the capital to locate

44. Auguste and Louis Lumière, "La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon" (often translated as "workers leaving the Lumière factory"), first exhibited in Lyon, France, December 28, 1895.

45. See Peter Hitchcock, *Labor in Culture: or, Worker of the World(s)* (London: Palgrave, 2017), especially chapter 6.

46. See, for instance, Ewa Mazierska, ed., *Work in Cinema: Labor and the Human Condition* (London: Palgrave, 2013). See also Harun Farocki, "Workers Leaving the Factory," translated by Laurent Faasch-Ibrahim, *Senses of Cinema*, 21 (July 2002). Farocki notes, "The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory." The number of films on or about labor is, of course, immense. Those mentioned here that reflect on workers leaving the factory are Fritz Lang, dir., *Metropolis* (Berlin: UFA GmbH, 1927); and, Jia Zhangke, dir., *24 City* (*Er shi si cheng ji*) (North Chelmsford, MA: Xstream Productions, LLC, 2008). The Labor Film Database is extremely useful in this regard but is, itself, like the Lumières's film, only a provocation. See the Labor Film Database, "Home," Labor Film Database, accessed December 24, 2020, https://laborfilms.com/.

Figure 9.6: Workers leaving the factory, Fuyao Glass America.

Figure 9.7: Workers leaving the factory, Fuyao Glass, Fuqing, China.

itself in the US auto market, and GM has the capacity to produce in China. The workers are leaving the factory, but for neoliberalism, crucially, they have not quite left it.

Conclusion

It is too soon, perhaps, to judge whether *American Factory* marks a key juncture in the reorganization of labor and cinema's relationship to it, or whether it marks time by being vaguely anachronistic or workerist. The Obamas, in the face of the quandary *American Factory* presents, argue for uplifting stories, a "higher ground," and a stubborn yet conscious capitalism. There are few places where Reichert and Bognar polemically challenge that prescription in their documentary, not because the Obamas' distribution facility becomes part of its process, but because the film's images empathize with and humanize its subjects so closely as to reproduce the substance of their dilemma. The "last truck" is seen in a museum in *American Factory*. The reason and systemic logic behind it have yet to be consigned to or to be imaged as history (the image of history as collective—and how to image this time, this socialization). Such a history remains a provocative challenge for storytelling and more, as Reichert put it in her acceptance speech at the Oscars: "Working people have it harder and harder these days—and we believe that things will get better when workers of the world unite."

R.I.P. Soft Power

China's Story Meets the Reset Button
Review of *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, edited by Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, Routledge, 2019

ROBERT A. KAPP

This brief note, conceived of as a book review when commissioned, has turned into an elegy, if not a eulogy, in the space of a few months.

I first encountered this fine collection of readable, solidly researched essays on China's experience with soft power at the end of January 2020 at a Hong Kong conference organized by coeditor Ying Zhu of Hong Kong Baptist University and attended by one of the other two coeditors Stanley Rosen of the University of Southern California. Conferees enjoyed a brief and very informal "rollout" of the book, emceed by me about ten minutes after glimpsing the book for the first time. Even the most cursory glance, however, told me that this was going to be a fine contribution to our understanding of a historic, globally significant leap into the world's consciousness by a gigantic and ambitious rising power: the People's Republic of China (PRC).

At the conference in Hong Kong and on the streets of Hong Kong, in those waning days of January, people wore masks. Something serious was afoot in Wuhan. Hints of travel restrictions into and from Hong Kong were drifting about. Streets and malls were deserted in those first days of the epidemic alarm and those first days of the Chinese New Year shutdown.

Within a few weeks, as the world writhed in the grip of a metastasizing pandemic, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* became something that, surely, was not originally what it intended to be: a work of history.[1]

1. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, eds., *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

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It seems likely, a few months later, that "soft power" has already vanished from the Chinese lexicon, from the lexicon of foreign contemporary China analysts, and very probably from the overall PRC domestic and global policy agenda. Propaganda will of course remain, now somewhat stumblingly renamed "public relations." And, like any large country with global involvements, China will surely seek to build and sustain positive relations with peoples near and far, even if soft power as concept and mantra fades from view.

Perhaps it was inevitable, this demise of the Chinese soft power discourse. The whole fixation, after all, derived from a term coined by a foreigner. Joseph Nye (who has contributed a very useful introduction to the volume) came up with the phrase more than two decades ago. That sparked, in China, what ultimately became a significant intellectual and political project, first to figure out what Nye was talking about, and then to come up with a PRC version that could compete successfully with ubiquitous and increasingly resented Western instruments of soft power.

Fixation on vocabulary terms tends not to last in any country and certainly not in China. This reviewer cut his teeth on "friendship first, competition second," the favored formula of a PRC venturing into the global mainstream at the end of the cultural revolution. Mention of that formula today evokes reactions ranging from the "secret smile" observed so long ago by Graham Peck (in his wonderful wartime memoir *Two Kinds of Time*) to outright mirth.[2] "Peaceful rise" had its day but is defunct. Robert Zoellick's 2005 call for China to be a "responsible stakeholder" set off a flurry of inquiry there,[3] and maybe even a bit of optimistic hope for the future, before it disappeared in a cloud of nationalistic annoyance with the patronizing rhetoric of otherwise well-intentioned US public figures. The slogan "New Type of Great Power Relations" had its moment in the Sunnylands sun, where Xi Jinping and Barack Obama strolled in their shirtsleeves, but the phrase fizzled as the two principals in the new type of relations stumbled into deepening disenchantment.[4]

So, these things come and go. We are left for now with the "China dream," mainly for domestic consumption in the PRC and, to the wider world, the ideal of a "community of common destiny with mankind." We will have to see how these play out in the months and years to come, but the chronicle of such formulae does not suggest longevity.

Meanwhile, in the United States—the "established power" that did more than any other nation since World War II to set global terms of reference—there is now nothing

2. Graham Peck, *Two Kinds of Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950) and (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).
3. Robert Zoellick, "Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility," September 21, 2005, https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf.
4. "President Obama and President Xi Hold Historic Meetings at Sunnylands," Sunnylands, June 12, 2013, https://sunnylands.org/article/president-obama-and-president-xi-hold-historic-meetings-at-sunnylands/.

to hold onto. America's message to the world in recent years has become a nullity, a contradiction in terms. No American clarion call stirs responsive audiences abroad, to say nothing of China. There remains only the heavy breathing of a political class and a growing phalanx of policy intellectuals, convinced that the US and the PRC are destined for conflicts of indeterminate purpose and ill-defined outer limits. "Constructive engagement," once the most widely deployed (but never universally agreed) US formula describing Sino-American relations, is dead and buried, though some pretenders to the invention of its replacement are still stomping on its grave. China's soft power ambitions may turn out to be better served by America's all too visible failings than by anything that PRC manipulators could come up with themselves under the soft power umbrella. In short, R.I.P. "soft power." It had a good if fairly short run, both in the anglophone policy world and in China.

I have a hunch that this book will turn out to be the last serious publication on this topic. I can conjure in my mind's eye earnest graduate students, just choosing their PhD dissertation topics, pushing the reset button on their plans to pursue Chinese soft power research knowing that they have arrived too late and that events have just passed them by.

"Wolf warrior diplomacy"; the accumulating slowdown in China's economic expansion, suddenly magnified by the coronavirus-induced economic stall; the recent muddled and seemingly cynical messaging campaign around China's early handling of the virus crisis in China; the contemporaneous evidence of Chinese deployment of "hard power" in sensitive areas of the world; the hubbub over excessive supply-chain dependence on China in nations whose economies have been sucker-punched by the global pandemic; and the ugly tit-for-tat rhetorical and commercial battles between the United States and China decorating the darkening strategic picture all have come to define the altered global discourse on China today, with nary a hat-tip to soft power. The definitional boundary between soft power and "influence operations" has faded as well, leaving many nations hypersensitized to supposed nefarious Chinese Communist Party plots to infect (formerly "win") the hearts and minds of their own people.[5]

But if soft power has passed its prime, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* is nevertheless a fine and worthy read. As long as readers think of its contents as works of modern history, with implications for the future, rather than as portraits of a current and future reality, there is much to gain here.

The book contains fourteen essays, seven in each of its two parts, respectively dubbed "Debating China's Soft Power Strategy" and "China's Global Soft Power under Xi Jinping." To take the latter half first, seven pieces treat China's soft power efforts

5. "Influence ops" publications abound, but an American classic of the genre would be Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *Chinese Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*(Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2019), https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/diamond-schell_corrected-april2020finalfile.pdf.

and challenges in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Japan and South Korea, Taiwan, and East Asia more generally. In each of these essays, one finds solidly based, well-sourced information and analysis. Taken as a whole, these essays leave the impression that the purposeful pursuit of soft power objectives, initiated by China's ruling Communist Party and carried out by actors bound to party central, has been met with very limited success. Although the vaunted soft power attractions displayed by the United States have encountered their own heavy weather in recent years—especially since the arrival in Washington, DC, of the Trump circus—there is little in these essays to suggest that China's approach to the task of winning hearts and minds through the development of a uniquely Chinese style of soft power has proven effective, either at undermining US soft power impacts or at erecting invincible Chinese alternatives.

The essays in the first part of the book, under the somewhat vague rubric of "Debating China's Soft Power Strategy," are stimulating and will remain so even as the once-jangling noise surrounding soft power in China fades to a faint background rumble.

That is because the profound meanings of China's rapid advance from global isolation and weakness to global influence and strength remain in flux, certainly in the "outside world" and perhaps among thoughtful people in China as well. What does China "stand for" globally? Does it matter? Must it "stand for" anything? How can China stay strong, and become stronger around the world, if people around the world cannot form a coherent framework—in their own languages and contexts—with which to understand China's aims and foundational definitions? If the soft power interval, which these essays explore in such stimulating and unsentimental ways, turns out now to be over, the ambiguities that gave birth to China's extended flirtation with soft power in the first place remain to be addressed, by China and by the world.

Taken in this light, the essays by Suisheng Zhao, Daniel C. Lynch, Stanley Rosen, Wanning Sun, Ying Zhu, Janet Borgerson, Jonathan Schroeder, Zhiyan Wu (the latter three conjointly), and Falk Hartig more than retain their informative value. Zhao is in his element in his piece on "Projection of China's Soft Power." Lynch, who has been skeptical for years about the discrepancy, as he sees it, between the soaring rhetoric flowing from China's phrase-making apparatus and the darker realities evident in social and economic statistics, lays out his case that Chinese soft power exegetes have stayed in left field too long. Rosen finds that fundamental differences with regard to the relationship of the individual to the collectivity or nation render Chinese soft power a nearly impossible sell in the developed market-economy nations, but stand less in the way of China's image-building efforts in the developing world. Zhu's engrossing account of the tortuous playing-out of Chinese policies governing motion picture entertainment, where the Hollywood cinema juggernaut was the object of ardent imitation and intense ideological hostility, will ring especially true for Westerners long familiar with the US

film culture she details. Wanning Sun's piece on Chinese soft power efforts aimed at diaspora Chinese, particularly in Australia and Southeast Asia, has perhaps the greatest knock-on significance, as questions of China's connections to—and influence over—other nations' domestic constituencies of Chinese extraction have risen to sometimes white-hot prominence today.

The remaining two essays in part one, dealing respectively with "branding" issues, with special emphasis on the staging of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and with the saga of China's Confucius Institutes (CIs), constitute good case studies. But, intentionally or not, they also exemplify the ways in which the entire soft power endeavor has by now become something of a historical curiosity. The dazzling Olympic extravaganza, coming just as the imploding United States was leading the world into global financial catastrophe, provided China with a joyful, heart-stopping, global annunciation, which turned out over the ensuing ten-plus years to be less transformative than the ecstasies of the moment might have predicted. As for the CIs, it is probably premature to declare that experiment at its end, but even if the mindless paranoia of some politicized critics of the CIs in the United States and Europe is discounted, the world continues to revolve; the great soft power scheme behind the CIs, if indeed there was one at all, now seems quaint rather than globe-stopping.

In sum, this is a fine set of thoughtful essays by a group of lively scholars and writers. Different readers will find different nuggets in its wide-ranging papers. But, if they accept that the entire soft power enterprise has only very recently started to become a historical interlude rather than a current and future policy challenge, the volume will provide much value. Ironically, perhaps the best prospects for China's pretensions to soft power lie not with China itself but with the trembling of US and European political, economic, and even ideological structures from which, it was assumed, soft power had not only originated but would derive its strengths as far into the future as the eye could see.

The Narrative of Virus

On Epidemics, Epidemiology, and Global Storytelling

CARLOS ROJAS

Reviews of

Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown by Nayan Shah, University of California Press, 2002

SARS in China: Prelude to Pandemic? edited by Arthur Kleinman and James Watson, Stanford University Press, 2016

Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative by Priscilla Wald, Duke University Press, 2008

The Great Manchurian Plague of 1910–1911: The Geopolitics of an Epidemic by William Summers, Yale University Press, 2012

Infectious Change: Reinventing Chinese Public Health after an Epidemic by Katherine Mason, Stanford University Press, 2016

Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present by Frank M. Snowden, Yale University Press, 2020

Near the end of his 2019/2020 book *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*,[1] Frank Snowden quotes from a 1998 report by the US Department of Defense that concluded, "Historians in the next millennium may find that the 20th century's greatest fallacy was the belief that infectious diseases were nearing elimination. The resultant complacency has actually increased the threat."[2] Surveying a variety of different

1. As noted below, Snowden's book was first published in late 2019 but was republished in paperback, with a new preface, in early 2020. See Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).
2. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society*, 465.

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infectious diseases that have plagued humanity from antiquity to the present, Snowden argues that although these diseases have had a devastating impact on human society, the threat they posed has also catalyzed a series of advances in public health and biomedical knowledge. In particular, he points to the "sanitary revolution" and the "germ revolution" that began in the mid- and late-nineteenth-century periods, respectively—suggesting that it was the success of these two overlapping revolutions that led to the mid-twentieth-century optimism that it might be possible, as US Surgeon General William Stewart allegedly put it in 1969, to "close the book on infectious diseases."[3] At the same time, however, Snowden also argues that, in many instances, these same medical advances fostered a culture of complacency that made it easier for new infectious diseases to spread.

Indeed, despite the mid-twentieth-century optimism that it might soon be possible to make epidemics things of the past, smallpox remains the only major infectious disease to have been successfully eradicated, and new pathogens continue to emerge at a relentless pace. Snowden notes that since 1970, more than forty new diseases ("emerging infectious diseases") have been identified, and in the five-year span from 2002 to 2007 alone, there were "a record of eleven hundred worldwide epidemic 'events.' "[4] Moreover, given the growing number of people who live in densely populated urban areas around the world and who travel routinely from place to place, once new infectious diseases emerge or reemerge, there is an ever-present possibility that they will reach epidemic proportions.

In fact, just two months after the initial October 2019 hardcover publication of Snowden's book—which is based on a lecture course he had been teaching annually at Yale over a seven-year period—the first documented cases of the new viral influenza that would come to be known as Covid-19 were reported in Wuhan, China. Snowden's book was then rereleased in a paperback edition in May 2020, with a new preface addressing the study's implications for this new disease.[5] In this new preface, Snowden argues that the global response to Covid-19 up to that point had been symptomatic of a more general pattern in public health policy since World War II wherein "each [new] microbial challenge has been followed by a period of frenetic activity at every level, nationally and internationally, but has concluded with a lapse into forgetfulness."[6] It is precisely this "forgetfulness," he argues, that facilitates the subsequent emergence and spread of new infectious diseases.

3. Snowden, 452–53; although, as Belinda Kong details in a recent article, this quote attributed to Stewart is actually apocryphal. The fact that it has been quoted in a wide array of authoritative sources suggests the degree to which it captured an attitude that was prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century. See Belinda Kong, "Pandemic as Method," *PRISM: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 16, no. 2 (October 2019): 368–89.

4. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society*, 465.

5. See Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

6. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society*, x–xi.

Even as Snowden argues that responses to new infectious diseases have been hobbled by a pattern of generalized amnesia, however, he also makes the inverse argument—that, historically, health experts have often been *too* reliant on the memory of earlier responses to infectious outbreaks, and as a result they frequently fail to tailor their health policies to address the specificities of new threats. In particular, he contends that, despite the significant advances in public health and medical knowledge since the mid-nineteenth century, modern responses to new infectious diseases are influenced by strategies that were initially developed to combat the plague in the medieval era, and particularly policies of compulsory segregation and quarantine. Snowden notes that these measures,

> however successfully deployed against bubonic plague, proved to be useless or even counterproductive when used against infections with profoundly different modes of transmission. In this manner the plague regulations established a style of public health that remained a permanent temptation, partly because they were thought to have worked in the past and because, in a time of uncertainty and fear, they provided the reassuring sense of being able to do something. In addition, they conferred upon authorities the legitimating appearance of acting resolutely, knowledgeably, and in accord with precedent.[7]

One of the key themes that runs through Snowden's book, accordingly, involves a persistent mismatch between the threat posed by infectious diseases, on one hand, and the policies that have been used to address that threat, on the other.

As indicated by his subtitle, *From the Black Death to the Present*, Snowden's study traces a trajectory from the fourteenth-century Black Death pandemic to twenty-first-century epidemics like SARS and Ebola. Black Death was, of course, the most notorious outbreak of a deadly disease whose English name, the plague, has become virtually synonymous with mass pestilence. It is now understood that the plague is caused by the bacterium Yersinia pestis and takes three distinct forms—bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic plague—depending on which organ systems the bacterium infects. There have also been at least three major plague pandemics in human history. The first, known as the Justinianic plague, first erupted in the sixth century in the Nile Delta and then ravaged the Byzantine Empire and surrounding regions in successive waves for the next two centuries. The second, the Black Death, was transmitted in the fourteenth century from Central Asia to Europe, where a series of lethal outbreaks devastated the continent until the early eighteenth century. Finally, the so-called Third Pandemic broke out in southwestern China in the mid-nineteenth century, and after reaching Hong Kong in

7. Snowden, 81.

1894 it was quickly transmitted around the world primarily along British trade routes, resulting in a pandemic that was not officially suppressed until 1960.

What makes the Third Pandemic particularly interesting is that it is not only synonymous with a devastating and deadly infectious disease, it was also the first pandemic to emerge in the era of modern biomedicine. That is to say, while humanity had few tools other than quarantine to confront the first two plague pandemics, the Third Pandemic coincided with the late-nineteenth-century "germ revolution," and within months of the disease's arrival in Hong Kong in 1894 the French microbiologist Alexandre Yersin had already succeeded in isolating the relevant pathogen.[8] Four years later, the French physician Paul-Louis Simond theorized that rats and fleas might play a key role in transmitting the disease to humans, and this hypothesis was effectively confirmed a decade later by a series of studies conducted by the Indian Plague Commission between 1908 and 1909.

Despite this new biomedical knowledge regarding the etiology of the disease, however, there remained considerable variation in how different communities responded to plague outbreaks. For instance, in the fall of 1910, shortly after confirmation of the plague's primary vector of transmission, one of the worst outbreaks of the Third Pandemic began to unfold in Manchuria, in northeastern China, and the resulting crisis offered a test case in the ways in which public health policy was conditioned by underlying cultural tendencies and sociopolitical orientations. As William Summers notes in his study *The Great Manchurian Plague of 1910–1911: The Geopolitics of an Epidemic*, the Manchurian outbreak (primarily taking the form of pneumonic plague, which infects the lungs and can be spread from person to person via airborne droplets) ultimately killed as many as sixty thousand people in the region. This created a humanitarian catastrophe that rivaled or exceeded that of the mid-seventeenth century Great Plague of London, which Daniel Defoe famously chronicled in a quasi-fictionalized manner in his *A Journal of the Plague Year*.[9] Moreover, what makes the Manchurian outbreak particularly instructive is that not only did it emerge at a crucial juncture in medical understandings of the disease, it also unfolded in a multiethnic and multinational territory positioned at the interstices of three sociopolitical regimes, each with very different approaches to public health.

In particular, in the early twentieth century, Manchuria—a region that is regarded as the ancestral homeland of the Manchus, the ethnic group of the Qing Dynasty, which ruled China from 1644 to 1911—was the site of a complex geopolitical power struggle

8. The Japanese microbiologist Shibasaburo Kitasato is often credited with having isolated the bacterium virtually simultaneously yet independently of Yersin. However, as William Summers notes, what Kitasato isolated was in fact an unrelated contaminant. See William C. Summers, *The Great Manchurian Plague of 1910–1911: The Geopolitics of an Epidemic Disease* (New Have, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 155.

9. Summers, *The Great Manchurian Plague of 1910–1911*, 198.

between China, Russia, and Japan. At the time, Russia controlled parts of Manchuria resulting from an 1896 secret accord between Russia and China, even as Japan, building on concessions it obtained following its victory in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, was beginning to stake its own imperial claims in the region. As a result, when the plague struck Manchuria in 1910, the region was still nominally under the control of China, though the strategically important Chinese Eastern Railroad (running across the northern part of the region and southward to the city of Changchun) was controlled by Russia and the South Manchuria Railroad (running south from Changchun to the city of Dairen) was controlled by Japan.

Just as the Third Pandemic spread around the world primarily along maritime trade routes, once it reached Manchuria, it then moved southward primarily along the trajectory of the railroad, and Summers examines how different cities along the railroad responded to the health crisis. The first city in Manchuria affected was Harbin, in the north. At the time, Harbin was a new town under Russian control, and it quickly implemented a system of strictly enforced quarantines that ultimately contained the epidemic but generated considerable internal tension and discord. Meanwhile, when the plague reached the Chinese towns of Mukden and Changchun to the south, they had less coordinated responses that "maintained sensitivity to local custom and a sense of autonomy," but which do not appear to have been significantly less effective than the responses in Harbin.[10] Finally, even further south, the new city of Dairen had been planned by the Russians and later developed by the Japanese and had a comparatively efficient military administration, though the city's approaches to public health were never put to the test given that the plague never fully arrived there. At the same time, however, even as Summers emphasizes the divergent sociomedical responses adopted by different cities in response to the Manchurian plague, he also points out that this outbreak was also the catalyst for the International Plague Conference held in Mukden in April 1911, which was the first international scientific meeting held in China and anticipated the sort of international health-policy coordination that has become more common in the contemporary period.

Coincidentally, it was also in 1910—the same year the plague struck Manchuria—that the United States officially opened an immigration detention center on Angel Island, off the coast of San Francisco. Angel Island was already a health inspection and quarantine station starting in the early 1890s, but from 1910 to 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station was the primary port of arrival for most Chinese people seeking to visit or immigrate to the United States, and therefore came to symbolize America's treatment of Chinese arrivals in the shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In addition to having to confirm their identity, immigrants passing through Angel Island

10. Summers, 1054

were also carefully screened for a variety of infectious diseases, including parasites such as hookworm, whipworm, and roundworm, as well bacterial infections such as cholera, leprosy, or the plague—reflecting the widespread perception during this period that Chinese individuals and Chinese communities were prime repositories of disease.[11]

It is the resulting intersection of concerns with disease and racial difference that is the focus of Nayan Shah's 2002 book *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. In his study, Shah examines the intersection of immigration and public health as they relate the city of San Francisco from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In particular, he argues that during this period, popular perceptions of the city's Chinatown and its Chinese residents underwent a crucial transformation, shifting from a late nineteenth-century focus on the threat that Chinatown and its residents posed to the health of the rest of the city to a later attention, as early as the 1930s, to Chinatown's residents as deserving citizens who were entitled to the support of the city's medical establishment. Shah argues that a key factor in this transition from regulation to entitlement was a wave of political activism on the part of university-educated second-generation Chinese immigrants who succeeded in shifting the discursive parameters surrounding the city's Chinese residents and neighborhoods.

Just as the Third Pandemic was the first "new" global health crisis in the twentieth century, SARS similarly marked the first new global health crisis of the twenty-first century. Both epidemics followed a similar geographic trajectory, and just as the Third Pandemic appears to have originated in southwestern China before being transmitted to Hong Kong, the earliest known cases of what would come to be identified as SARS were similarly reported in southern China in late 2002. By early 2003, the virus had reached Hong Kong, from which it then quickly spread to Taipei, Singapore, Hanoi, Toronto, and several other cities around the world. Moreover, just as the Third Pandemic coincided with important developments in biomedical research and public-health policy, the SARS epidemic also occurred at an important inflection point in medical knowledge and public-health policies—both at global and at national levels.

In her study *Infectious Change: Reinventing Chinese Public Health After an Epidemic*, for instance, Katherine Mason notes that the SARS outbreak happened to coincide with a major shift in China's public-health system.[12] In particular, in 2002, on the very eve of the SARS outbreak, China split each of its Soviet-style Anti-Epidemic Stations into two subunits consisting of a Health Inspection Institute, on one hand, and US-style Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on the other. Unlike the original Anti-Epidemic Stations, which focused primarily on public sanitation inspections, the new CDCs concentrated instead on medical research and broad epidemiological

11. Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
12. Katherine Mason, *Infectious Change: Reinventing Chinese Public Health after an Epidemic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

analysis. Mason argues that one result of this structural transformation is that the medical establishment's attention shifted from "stopping disease in individuals" to "stopping the spread of disease" within society.[13] This shift, in turn, had important implications not only for the nation's public-health policy but also for the medical establishment's attitudes toward individual patients. At the same time, however, Mason—who spent much of 2008 and 2009 embedded in the CDC of a newly established southern Chinese city referred to pseudonymously as "Tianmai" (though, as Mason observes, "readers familiar with China may have little difficulty identifying the true identity of Tianmai")—notes that it remains possible for highly motivated medical professionals to pursue a strategy of "personal, individualized investment and trust acting as a gateway for good public health stewardship,"[14] as in the case of one highly motivated HIV researcher she came to know who was unusually attentive to the personal challenges faced by his patients and who served as a role model for the other physicians on his team.

Another study published in the aftermath of the SARS crisis is Arthur Kleinman and James Watson's 2006 edited volume *SARS in China: Prelude to Pandemic?*[15] Based on a conference held at Harvard in September 2003, *SARS in China* features papers that use a variety of different disciplinary perspectives to look back at the SARS epidemic. Although SARS brought Hong Kong and other regions in Greater China to a virtual standstill in the late winter and spring of 2003, the outbreak fortunately remained relatively contained and ultimately resulted in less than eight hundred confirmed deaths worldwide. By the mid-summer of 2003, most of the previously affected regions were reporting no new local transmission, and since mid-2004 there have been no known cases of SARS anywhere in the world. However, the fact that the SARS outbreak was ultimately not as dangerous as it could have been does not mean that it should now be ignored, and, as Kleinman and Watson explain in their preface, they hope that the volume will not only offer a better understanding of the SARS outbreak itself but also that it "will be put to practical use—in ways that we cannot anticipate—by people who find themselves in the firing line of the next global epidemic."[16]

Written by a combination of historians and anthropologists, each of the preceding four volumes examine infectious disease in a global context but with a focus on regional differences. Although one of the key concerns of each of these studies involves the ramifications of different approaches to public-health policy, an underlying issue that runs through each work involves a set of imbricated assumptions about illness and ethnicity, including the widespread perception in the West and the Global North that infectious

13. Mason, *Infectious Change*, 16.
14. Mason, 199.
15. Arthur Kleinman and James Watson, *SARS in China: Prelude to a Pandemic?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
16. Kleinman and Watson, *SARS in China*, viii.

diseases are typically brought in from elsewhere, and particularly from the East and Global South. Although this association of the East and the Global South with infectious disease is often linked to a perception that the regions in question are characterized by high poverty levels, densely populated metropolises, and close contact between humans and wildlife, it is also compounded by a set of racist and Orientalist attitudes. When Covid-19 began circulating worldwide, for instance, many international commentators called it as the Wuhan virus, the China virus, and so forth, emphasizing the outbreak's apparent origins in Wuhan's "wet markets" (open-air markets selling fish, meat, and, sometimes, live animals). Although the precise origins of the virus have not been conclusively established, the notion that Wuhan, a major Chinese city with over ten million residents, was some sort of cultural backwater proved oddly compelling for many commentators.

In her 2007 study *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, meanwhile, literary scholar Priscilla Wald focuses precisely on these questions of cultural representations of disease and the assumptions on which they are predicated.[17] In particular, Wald focuses on what she calls "the outbreak narrative" that emerged in the late twentieth century following the identification of HIV and argues that this narrative became a dominant way of framing the threat of infectious disease in scientific, journalistic, and fictional discourses. In Wald's account, the outbreak narrative possesses a set of distinctive characteristics, including a focus on a "patient zero," an initial outbreak in a putatively remote location (remote, at least, from the perspective of the Global North), a subsequent process of transregional dissemination via carriers and "superspreaders," ultimately concluding with the North's successful containment and even eradication of the disease. For instance, Wald opens *Contagious* with an example of how the outbreak narrative shaped accounts of and responses to the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak, and particularly how the syndrome caused by this "brand-new coronavirus" was quickly linked to the category of "emerging infections" (a term coined only two decades earlier) and sparked fears that this might mark the long-expected arrival of the "coming plague."[18] These observations apply equally well to scientific and popular coverage of the Covid-19 crisis, particularly in the media's emphasis on the outbreak's origins in Wuhan's wet markets, the repeated comparisons to devastating pandemics such as the 1918 Spanish influenza, and the widespread confidence that an effective vaccine will soon be widely available.

Wald argues that that the growing influence of this narrative has important implications for our understanding not only of infectious disease itself but also of the underlying processes of globalization that facilitate their emergence and transnational

17. Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
18. Wald, *Contagious*, 270.

dissemination. In particular, she observes that the outbreak narrative fosters a perception of the Global North continually threatened by the infectious threat posed by the Global South. She proposes, accordingly, that it would be productive to rethink the stories that we tell about disease and globalization and to replace the existing pandemic narrative with alternative narratives (new "stories") that instead "tell the story of disease emergence and human connection in the language of social justice rather than of susceptibility." In particular, she suggests that these new narratives could underscore the degree to which disease emergence "is an urgent problem in the North not only, or even primarily, because disease may spread from the South to the North, but because of the role of the North in perpetuating the conditions of thirdworldification worldwide."[19] In this way, these alternate discourses could help improve not only how we discuss infectious disease itself but also how we understand and address the underlying causal factors (and their attendant sociopolitical implications) that contribute to specific disease outbreaks.

19. Wald, 270.

CONTRIBUTORS

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