From Neon Signs to Skyscrapers: The Spectacle of Fluidity in Hong Kong's Post/Modern Cityscape

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Abstract

This article looks at two recurring cinematic motifs—neon signs and skyscrapers—as constitutive signifiers of Hong Kong's urban topography, and charts the shifting construct of the city through its filmic representations. Focusing on Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* (2002) with the aid of a few others including *Her Fatal Ways* and Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell*, I aim to juxtapose the two architectural icons and their filmic presences alongside the city's changing symbolic landscape, and to remap its transition from a product of colonial modernity to that of post/modernity. Rather than fixing themselves to two successive temporalities, I argue, these motifs are often manifested in a way that inverts the time–space of Hong Kong on screen, giving rise to a fluid identity that is unique to its cityscape.

The terms "modernity" and "postmodernity," despite their metanarrative quality, often denote a sense of temporal succession as two phases of historical condition. And if modernity, as David Harvey suggests, still hinges on the quest for better futures, postmodernity is then stripped of its ability to "unify past, present, and future" (53), as the signifying chain no longer functions properly. In the case of Hong Kong, a city that belongs to the "third world" schemata geopolitically (according to Fredric Jameson's infamous taxonomy) yet prides itself on its capitalist modernity, such temporality is most explicitly highlighted in its visual manifestation in Hong Kong's urban cityscape and architecture. As early as 1879, when prominent scholar and reformer Kang Youwei arrived in Hong Kong, he had marveled at "the artistry of the architecture, neatness of the streets and orderliness of the law enforcers." Forty-four years later in 1923, Sun Yat-sen, commonly hailed as the "founding father" of modern China, would remark similarly in a speech at the University of Hong Kong: "While I was studying in Hong Kong thirty years ago, I would stroll around the streets whenever I had some free time. And the neat walks, impeccable buildings and signs of progression have left a profound impression on me. This contrast becomes especially striking when I go back to my hometown, Xiangshan" (Liu 242).

The city space of Hong Kong, so to speak, is *always already* conflated with modernity. I refer to Hilden Heynen's discussion of

modernity as an agent that "mediates between a process of socioeconomic development known as modernization and subjective responses to it," and "an attitude toward life that is associated with a continuous process of evolution and transformation, with an orientation toward a future that will be different from the past and from the present" (10); in other words, a rupture with the past. Inextricably entwined with Hong Kong's locality, these important figures of modernization and their nation-building discourses have herein placed a decisively temporal marker on the city space. Sun Yat-sen, in particular, had famously established the headquarters of the Revive China Society (興中會 *Xingzhonghui*) in Central, Hong Kong, where a heritage walk now known as the "Dr. Sun Yat-sen Historical Trail" is designated to commemorate and chart his early years and career in the city. Civilization and "progression" in colonial Hong Kong—through an active interplay between place and history—had taken on a corporeal existence in the form of urban space and architecture, which remain entrenched as *the* iconography of Hong Kong's self-image.

This essay seeks to investigate two architectural tropes—neon signs and skyscrapers—which are inextricably tied to this self-image of modernity. Commonly recognized as the most representative symbols of the Hong Kong cityscape, these two images are constantly invoked in posters, postcards, tourism advertisements and, of course, films on Hong Kong. But what is it that drew filmmakers, planners and designers alike to these symbols? I argue that, as reifications and products of modern and postmodern technoculture, these architectural icons are turned into media spectacles that not only intersect with Hong Kong's urban space, but also its identity formation. Building on a growing corpus of scholarly works on the mobility and circulation of urban models, this article aims to provide a rereading of "Hong Kong" not only as a political and physical entity, but also as a symbolic form of urban pattern that "travels" across borders *through* the medium of film.

Land and space—as ubiquitous as they are—seem to occupy an unusual place in the psyche of Hong Kong. As Rey Chow sums up in her essay "Things, Common/Places, Passages of the Port City," land in Hong Kong "is not some beloved 'native soil' but is first and foremost a commodity" (180) that pertains to a larger ethos grounded on materialism and rampant economic development. This ethos, coupled with a lack of land and an indeterminate political fate, foregrounds the city's own version of postmodernity—a space of in-betweenness (colonial and postcolonial, modern and postmodern) that makes it infinitely malleable, discursive, and elusive. And this uneasy transition from a future-oriented modernity to a postmodernity fixated on preserving the present, I argue, constitutes a state I term "post/modernity" due to the disjuncture between colonial modernity and a truly "postcolonial" postmodernity.

Whereas the sheer expanse of mainland China's terrain as well as the postsocialist economic policy to "let some people get rich first" have ruptured and placed a spatial delineation on modernity (note the huge gap in wealth and standard of living between, say, Shanghai and Gansu), the city–state structure of Hong Kong allows it to claim modernity as an indispensable part of its subjectivity. As Phoenix Lam and David Graddol elucidate, Hong Kong stands out from other "vertical cities" such as New York and Chicago in the sense that "verticality is not only found at the centre but also across the whole city" (523). This is not to say that such post/modern images as neon lights and skyscrapers are everywhere in the city, and that there are no gaps between various districts in Hong Kong—the city is among the most unequal ones in the world in terms of income gap—but that the small size of the city has enabled the formation of a centralized, cathectic identity relatively unobstructed by geographical distance or boundaries. Rather, the aim of this article is to explore the symbolic significance that these architectural motifs have come to assume *through* the mediation of the screen, as well as the identity politics that arises from a dialectic between cinema and the urban landscape.

In a world increasingly entangled in global media and technological flows, it would be quite impossible to study space without addressing the issue of media representations. Media theorists Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy have used the term "MediaSpace" to describe the dialectical process that encompasses "both the kinds of spaces created by media, and the effects that existing spatial arrangements have on media forms" (2). As the primal visual media that engages most actively and critically with spatiality, the cinema is arguably also the most effective MediaSpace that intervenes in the production of space. This article is hence an attempt to map the various media representations and genealogy of urban spectacles (from neon signs to skyscrapers), and how they are represented in local and foreign imaginations of the city's metropolitan landscape. The purpose of this article, however, is not to propose a paradigm shift that places the two tropes in a chronological order of succession, but an ontological shift in Hong Kong's self-perception by comparing representations of the city in foreign and local cinemas. While this article focuses primarily on Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's 2002 crime-thriller *Infernal Affairs* (無間道), I will also look briefly at a number of films such as Alfred Cheung's 1990 action-comedy *Her Fatal Ways* (表姐，你好野！) and Oshii Mamoru's 1995 animated sci-fi film *Ghost in the Shell* (攻殼機動隊). The disparate choice of film genres—arbitrary though it may seem—serves precisely to highlight the omnipresence of these urban spectacles that figure in a wide variety of films.

By "spectacle," I refer to the French philosopher Guy Debord's influential conception of "the society of the spectacle" in his eponymous book in 1967. A leading figure of the Situationist International, Debord

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developed said concept in response to the rampant consumer society in his times. In his ground-breaking book, he declares that "the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (1). In other words, society, rather than being a lived reality, is now perceived through representations (images) in what can be considered a once-removed manner.

His point is also echoed in the media theorist Douglas Kellner's book *Media Spectacle*, where he observes that culture industries nowadays have "multiplied media spectacles in novel spaces and sites, and spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life" (1). In this regard, spectacles are not only random fragmentary components of the city, but are themselves the very visual code that governs and configures the representational space—to invoke Henri Lefebvre—of Hong Kong. As a space "directly lived through its associated images and symbols" (Lefebvre 39), the representational space provides a useful framework through which the urban space of Hong Kong is constructed and imagined. The neon signs and skyscrapers, far more than recurring motifs and film props, constitute media spectacles that are produced, consumed and disseminated in the same way as any other media image. The repetition and recycling of the same landscapes by both local and foreign films confirms the mechanical reproducibility of these images. The goal of this article, so to speak, is to examine how the diverse images of the city are produced by different renderings and configurations of the same spectacles.

The impetus behind my theoretical framework is twofold: first, the imbrication between urban (physical) space and cinematic space; and second, a discourse of "traveling" urban forms that has informed a growing body of scholarship. If the modern (and postmodern) subject can interact only via mediated images, it seems *a fortiori* that the city, the most significant form of social organization after twentieth century, should be read *through* images, in this case cinematic images. As Tony Fitzmaurice aptly summarizes,

> [the] film is the urban cultural form par excellence – that film is a highly capitalized and labor-intensive product, whose origins and destination (the now ubiquitous multiplex) are tied in with the fortunes of the twentieth-century city. Correspondingly, the city is constructed as much by images and representations as by the built environment. (19–20)

The close-knit relation between the cinema and the city, hinged on the common denominator of visuality, thereby offers an excellent point of departure from which I shall begin my investigation of the spatial

coding of spectacles. In recent decades, we see a burgeoning scholarly interest in the interface between cinema and space, exemplified by such works as David Clarke's edited volume *The Cinematic City* and Merrill Schleier's *Skyscraper Cinema*. The key to this unique interface, as Stephen Heath aptly puts it, lies in the *narrative* drive behind the medium of cinema, which propels a "unity of action and place" and a succession of spaces that "reconstitutes a homogeneous space, but a space unlike that from which these elements were subtracted" (86–87)—what he calls the "narrative space." Simply put, the filmic space, constructed from non-diegetic spaces, are at once real and phantasmagorical as it assumes a life of its own. This distinct quality of the narrative space, I contend, is particularly relevant in the case of Hong Kong, as its in-betweenness—neither here nor there—seems to offer a perfect vessel for the visual indeterminacy of filmic spaces, which is perhaps why the city has become a favorite subject (setting) for foreign, especially Hollywood films.

As objects that exist eminently both onscreen and in social reality, neon signs and skyscrapers form an eerily liminal space that intrudes onto the physical boundaries of the movie screen, and establish a reciprocal exchange between the diegetic and the real. Whereas the radio and television, as posited by Daniel Dayan, have become a medium of "segmentation" that subdivides audiences by age and education (393), Hong Kong cinema is able to maintain its momentum as a medium of communal integration via readily recognizable images.

Neon Signs

The neon sign was introduced to Hong Kong in the 1920s, with Nathan Road becoming one of the first areas of congregation. But the sign itself did not become a regular in Hong Kong's streetscape until the 1950s, when the city entered a phase of rapid economic growth after the Second World War (Tam). With its flashy, eye-catching lights, the neon sign offered not only a practical solution to businesses that sought to grab the attention of the emerging middle-class clientele, but more importantly, a cultural icon that embodies the charm and prosperity of "the Pearl of the Orient" (*dongfang zhi zhu*). As urban planner and architect Peter Cookson Smith asserts, the bold usage of neon signs in Hong Kong creates a unique form of visual communication in itself and contributes to the distinct symbolic identity of the Hong Kong streetscape, which is "unified and made pleasurable by layers of superimposed signage, incidental detail and communication devices, rather than more orthodox architectural unification through formalistic repetition of building elements" (48).

What sets Hong Kong's neon signs apart from other metropoles in the world, though, are the Chinese characters, usually written in traditional calligraphic style. Integrating calligraphic aesthetics with

technology and architecture, the neon sign, as suggested by Keith Tam (2014), has inherited and appropriated the calligraphic tradition for the contemporary visual language, which succinctly encapsulates the zeitgeist of *zhongxi hebi* (mixture of Chinese and Western elements) that characterizes Hong Kong modernity. Though considered a specialized craft during the 60s, neon sign-making is now a dying art in Hong Kong with only a dozen craftsmen left in the industry.

In cinematic representations of Hong Kong's pre-1997 glamor, neon signs are almost an integral part of its urban identity. In films such as Alfred Cheung's *Her Fatal Ways* (1990), a crime-comedy that articulates the prevalent anxiety preceding Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China, the neon signs often function as a crude signifier of Hong Kong's capitalist modernity. The film itself is a parody of the various stereotypes of Hong Kong, China and even Taiwan. Revolving around the adventures of Shuonan, a policewoman from mainland China who comes to Hong Kong in order to track down a runaway criminal, the film focuses at length on Shuonan's initial encounter with colonial Hong Kong: touring the city on a double-decker bus with the handsome Inspector Ng, she is awestruck by the beauty of the glittering neon signs that abound in every corner of the commercial streets (see figure 1 below). Her initial skepticism of the capitalist city gradually gives way to a heartfelt attachment to the place, and it is during the bus tour that Shuonan, to her own embarrassment and Ng's surprise, drops a lipstick—something that the uncouth police official is never seen wearing. Commenting on the film's gender politics, Shih Shu-mei muses that "the suppressed, private self is discovered soon after she enters seductive, urban capitalist Hong Kong and is gradually released" (310). The film ends with a sorrowful farewell at the Hong Kong–China border and Shuonan's voiceover in a letter addressed to Inspector Ng, asking him to forgive her "bossy attitude," since she has to arm herself as she "did not understand this society well." This "modernity" captured by the neon signs has therefore become associated with the "seductive" allure of the city that appears to overwrite and play with the national discourse that is due for arrival in 1997.

Figure 1

The gradual decrease in the use of neon signs and their replacement by safer, more efficient LED lighting coincide with the emergence of high-rise buildings (often photographed in extreme long shots in contrast to the long and medium shots used for neon signs in postcards and adverts), which seems to indicate both the globalizing drive of technology and the city's own sociopolitical transition. Owing to the HKSAR government's shifting attitude and regulations that now see the overhanging neon signs as unsafe structures, as well as the advent of more modern-looking LED displays, the neon lights are diminished at a steady rate and largely relegated to a distant colonial past. James Tweedie argues that "both voids and solids, these signs beckon toward an era when information emanating from projectors or backlit screens will be the dominant form of public communication, but they are also burdened by their archaic materiality" (92). That is to say, neon signs, stripped of their practical, discursive function as advertising signboards and a system of communication, are now reduced to an empty signifier of the glory of the past.

Given the neon sign's "archaic materiality," it is then interesting to see the employment of signage in foreign films such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) as a symbol of postmodern world—a world where referents are lost and simulacra take over the real. Directed by auteur director Oshii Mamoru, the critically acclaimed animated film has earned a canonical status in both anime and science fiction films, inspiring numerous spin-offs and remakes including a Hollywood version in 2017. A less well-known fact, however, is that the film's posthuman, digitized setting is modeled largely on the cityscape of Hong Kong.

The designer and animator of the film, Takeuchi Atsushi, has made an insightful observation about the intertextuality between the

streetscape in *Ghost in the Shell* and in Hong Kong, which is worth quoting at length:

> *Ghost in the Shell* does not have a definite chosen set, but in terms of street scenes and general atmosphere, it is obvious that Hong Kong is the model. Such a choice has, of course, something to do with the theme: on the streets there flows an excess or a flood of information, along with everything this excess brings out [...] There is a sharp contrast between old streets and new ones on which skyscrapers are built. My feeling is that these two, originally very different, are now in a situation where one is invading the other [...] It's a situation in which two entities are kept in a strange neighbouring relationship. Perhaps it is what the future is. (qtd. in Wong 13)

What Takeuchi sees as a (dystopianly) futuristic trait of Hong Kong's cityscape is perhaps the return of a colonial past that comes incessantly to haunt the present. This colonial revenant, I argue, runs parallel to a maxim of fluidity that defines the ever-evolving visual tropes in cinema. From a symbol of modernity/object of admiration to an empty signifier of bygone modernity, the materiality of neon signs—manifest in words that literally float in the air—goes surprisingly well with the representation of a dystopian postmodern city marked by an excess of information. In a scene where the protagonist Major Kusanagi fights a suspect (see figure 2 below), a forest of neon signboards dominates the background, but on closer look the signs simply appear jumbled on the walls of a single building, rather than scattered across in different heights and structures as in the "real" Hong Kong streetscape. Moreover, both traditional and simplified Chinese characters are featured on these signboards, rendering the place at once surreal and hyperreal (perhaps a reference to the impending integration). It is thus fitting that a fractured cityscape informed by pastiches of old and new is used as the backdrop of the film, as it conjures a site of disjointed space–times in which the fragmented, mutable cyborg body of Major Kusanagi is at its best. Writing on postmodern Chinese culture, Sheldon Lu posits non-Western postmodernity persuasively as a paradigm in which "multiple temporalities superimposed on one another" and "the pre-modern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in the same space and at the same moment" (13). By the same token, the neon sign that stands for Hong Kong's modernity—convertible into a transnational currency of *archaic* modernity—has therewith lent itself perfectly to a postmodern narrative.

Figure 2

What is of interest here is how foreign film productions from *Ghost in the Shell*, *Johnny English Reborn* (2011), *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) to *Doctor Strange* (2016) seem to be so persistently fixated on Hong Kong's image as a bricolage of neon signs, skyscrapers and claustrophobic streetscapes. It is, unfortunately, out of the scope here to discuss how the "West" imagines Hong Kong, but as Lo Kwai-Cheung remarks, the "significance of Hong Kong for the West lies in its challenging or subverting of an emerging China and also in its mirroring of a superior Western cultural identity and values" (15). In *Doctor Strange*, for example, magic and technology converge in an almost uncanny fashion as colorful magic bursts of the superhuman characters coalesce seamlessly with bright neon signs in a bustling street of Hong Kong. It is intriguing that the streetscape of Hong Kong becomes the site of resolution where peace is finally restored—which situates it in a "safe" realm where Western order of "justice" could prevail.[1]

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[1] In Hollywood films set in a Hong Kong locale, tectonic features are turned into a sensational "playground" through which a Western order of justice triumphs over an exoticized "heretic" order. It is hence worth noting that another architectural trope, bamboo scaffolds—a structure largely unique to Hong Kong—had figured prominently in both *Doctor Strange* and *Johnny English Reborn*. In the latter, particularly, the bamboo scaffolds serve as an interesting venue of tension between the East and the West. When the agent Johnny English fights on a rooftop with a Chinese-looking kungfu assassin who steals away an important key, the latter tries to run away by climbing down the building along the bamboo scaffolds, while English (in an obviously comical fashion) effortlessly catches up by taking the elevator. The dichotomy between East and West, tradition (bamboo scaffolds) and modernity (elevator), is played against each other in a comedic manner.

Meanwhile, local films such as *Infernal Affairs* and the *Overheard* series (竊聽風雲, 2009–2014) seem to be more at ease with the new landscape of Hong Kong in the "post-neon" era. By "post-neon" I do not mean that neon signs have completely disappeared, but that they no longer assume the symbolic signification of colonial modernity. The presumed discrepancy between foreign and local films in their depiction of Hong Kong cityscape, however, is more illusory than real, as local productions such as *Echoes of the Rainbow* (歲月神偷, 2010) seem to be readily capitalizing on the Orientalized, neon-filled urban image of Hong Kong, where neon signs are turned into symbols of nostalgia as a colonial Hong Kong from the 1960s is filtered through the romanticized lens of a young boy, Chun-yi.

Citing Tweedie again, what neon signs connote is a "utopian promise or dystopian threat of a city devoid of substance, a city of spectacle, a city tantalizingly or threateningly close to cinema [... which is why] few objects capture the faded but still enticing dream of the future city better than the blinking neon sign" (92). In other words, the neon sign, despite its outmodedness in the age of LED lights, would always carry a sense of futurity that enables it to slip between colonial and post/colonial temporalities. In this sense, the gradual displacement of neon signs by skyscrapers should be read not just as a symbol of Hong Kong's transition from coloniality to postcoloniality, but also an attestation of the city's fluid identity.

Skyscrapers

The rise of sleek, modernist architectures as the new "face" of Hong Kong is not only a matter of teleology but one of praxis. Hong Kong's land shortage has forced buildings to go upward, thereby fashioning itself into a "vertical city." In 1955, the Buildings Ordinance was amended to loosen the control on building heights, which led to a flowering of high-rise mixed-use buildings and consequently a revolutionary change in Hong Kong's urban landscape. The architectural restructuring of Hong Kong reached its peak in the 1970s to 80s, when the 52-storey Connaught Centre (now known as Jardine House) was completed in 1974 and became the tallest building in South East Asia (Wang 288–89), cementing the place of skyscrapers as a staple of Hong Kong architecture.

After the Handover, this colonial staple is swiftly carried over into the new age. With the completion of the International Finance Centre in 2003 (the world's 23rd tallest building as of 2018) and International Commerce Centre in 2010 (the world's 10th tallest) respectively ("100 Tallest"), the "city of skyscrapers" has become, in a sense, the most pronounced representation of Hong Kong's postmodernity. However, as Clarke points out, such construction projects after the Handover seem to serve a purpose of distracting "from the absence of democratic

development in Hong Kong, to create [...] a deceptive sense that things are moving forward" (357). In this regard, the post/modern stagnation is ironically glossed over by a *modern* rhetoric of progress and futurity to which the official narrative still obstinately clings.

While sociologists and geographers such as Michelle Huang Tsung-yi are quick to read Hong Kong's skyscrapers as embodying a form of "monumentality" that serves as a "mirage of collective will, [or] in Hong Kong's case, a will to achieve phenomenal economic success from its liberal economic system and global city status" (18), film critics tend to be more skeptical about this newfound symbol and its cultural connotations. Reflecting on the change in Hong Kong cinema after the Handover, Chu Yingchi notes that "in contrast to the 1980s [...] Hong Kong's pride in its modern buildings and confidence in the control of its technology are absent in the post-1997 films" (130). While there are notable exceptions to Chu's observation such as the 2012 film *Cold War* (寒戰), upon which this article will touch later, it is nonetheless apparent that a general mood of nostalgia and abandonment pervades more recent Hong Kong films. In filmic representations of skyscrapers, it is easy to see that they are in fact much more problematic than meets the eye, particularly when it comes to liminal spaces adjunct to skyscrapers.

The verticality that characterizes the post-1997 Hong Kong cityscape, then, is best captured in crime-thrillers like *Infernal Affairs*, where skyscrapers and their associated spaces (such as rooftops and parking lots) are turned into sites of adventure, confession, and deception. The story revolves around Yan, a police agent who infiltrates the triad gang under the command of Superintendent Wong; and Ming, a triad member who joins the police as an undercover for triad boss Sam. As both sides try to uncover the mole in their respective organizations, the two men find themselves driven gradually to the verge of life and death as well as the fringe of their identities.

As observed by Allan Cameron and Sean Cubitt, the Hong Kong portrayed in the film is "defined by its high-tech environment, and by an emphasis on the vertical, not only in the singular framing to encompass large-scale skyscapes but in the characters' ability to scan digital maps offering a bird's-eye perspective on the city" (153). Encapsulated in cool sleek skyscrapers clad in glass and steel, this technologized, vertical world, devoid of any "local" features, appears to fall under what Marc Augé calls a non-place—a space where a person is "relieved of his usual determinants [... and] becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver" (101–03). Gina Marchetti, for instance, has noted how interstitial spaces such as parking garages, hotel and hospital waiting rooms have dominated the mise-en-scène of the film and its sequels, in which characters are rendered into "ephemeral images reflected in television or computer monitors or blurred figures on the skin of glass skyscrapers"

(43), paralleling the indeterminacy and fluidity of the characters' identities. Often read as an allegory in relation to the city's own political fate (Law 392), the film's bluish-grey, postmodern "placeless" landscape seems to have added an extra dimension of alienation and moral ambiguity to the story.

But despite the featureless cityscape that permeates the film, I would like to suggest that the spatial politics played out in *Infernal Affairs* is nowhere as simple as it looks. Ackbar Abbas, for example, has commented on the interlayering of chronotopes in the film:

> The film begins with an image of the Buddhist continuous hell, an afterworld of fire and brimstone […] But this opening image is very quickly overlaid with images of cell phones, computers, coded messages, and so on, i.e., the world of information. The moral / physical world of Buddhist retribution is dissolved into and recoded as the world of information. The two worlds are fused and confused with each other. ("Affective Spaces" 33)

In this particular moment, the world of coded messages and the world of spiritual order almost bleed into each other. The brief and seemingly unconnected mythical space of a Buddhist hell, though later replaced by the world of information and technology, looms continuously in the background as the film's Chinese title, 無間道 *Mou Gaan Dou* (which means "continuous hell" in Buddhist terminology) would always remind us of the flipside of modern rationality, and the narrative's refusal to be pinned down by a fixed, modern time–space.

Here I would like to bring to light the marginal, if not subordinate, spaces associated with skyscrapers. As a massive, complex architectural organism, the skyscraper is made up of numerous compartments, from the façade and the lobby, to office interiors and parking lots. Even though most filmic narratives tend to focus on visible exposed spaces as sites of action, it is the invisible, marginal spaces in *Infernal Affairs*—the rooftop and elevator—that give rise to actions and stories.

Attached to, yet independent of, the building itself, the rooftop forms an interstitial space that is at once part of and outside the building. Chow and Kloet have expounded on the significance of rooftops as the "urban liminal space […] beyond surveillance and outside of the logics of global capitalism, where one negotiates […] with moments of radical reconnection" (140). The rooftop has served as the venue for the film's most significant moments: where Yan and Superintendent Wong meet and bond (in one of the rare heart-warming moments in the film); and where the final showdown between Yan and Ming takes place (see figure 3). Interestingly, these are also the only moments when the characters can be stripped of their disguises and forged identities. As vertical fringes are out of reach for most people,

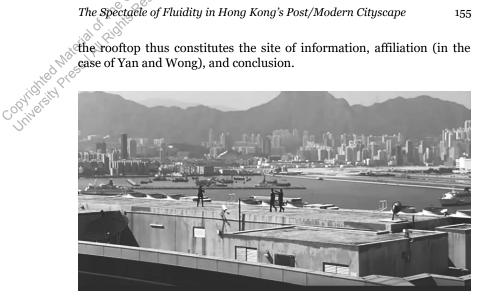the rooftop thus constitutes the site of information, affiliation (in the case of Yan and Wong), and conclusion.

Figure 3

In addition, it is also notable that the rooftop, albeit its drab and featureless outlook, has provided the vantage point for semi-omniscient viewpoint and knowledge exchange. In all those rooftop scenes, the famous Victoria Harbor of Hong Kong is almost always present in sight, thereby ensuring a sense of locality outside the constraints of interior spaces (Chow and Kloet 146). Apart from the place where Yan and Wong exchange information, the rooftop is also where Ming enters the inner circle of the police force as he is invited to his seniors' golf practice on the rooftop (Marchetti 44)—that is to say, an avenue of secrecy and intimacy. In the end, it is only at a soaring height far removed from the hassles of the horizontals, at the boundary between interiority and exteriority, place and non-place, can the characters navigate through the fragmented world and reclaim their identities.

The elevator, in contrast, is a much neglected trope by scholars and critics, yet it has functioned as one of the most tragic and powerful motifs in the film. It is the place where, sadly, the "good" characters meet their demise: Superintendent Wong is caught in the elevator by Sam's henchmen and, refusing to expose the identity of his undercover agent, hurled from the building; Yan, while taking Ming hostage in the final scene, is shot dead by one of Ming's co-conspirators. Similar to trains, which epitomize and anticipate early modernity during the industrial age, the elevator forms a crucial part of the postmodern spectacle (skyscraper), but is always relegated to a corner and never fixes itself at one place—a non-place *par excellence*. It is hence revealing that Yan, a person without identity, is killed in the elevator—a space that does not belong anywhere (see figure 4). In perhaps one of
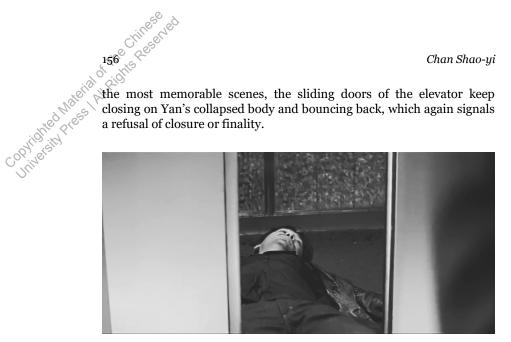
the most memorable scenes, the sliding doors of the elevator keep closing on Yan's collapsed body and bouncing back, which again signals a refusal of closure or finality.

Figure 4

As Li Jinhua has written eloquently, the skyscrapers as spatial signifiers in *Infernal Affairs* have defined Hong Kong's "homogenizing global economy and transnational commerce, while the city exists as a postmodern floating city, perpetually suspended 'at the intersections of different times or speeds'" (30). The interface of textual narrative and spatial mapping, exhibited by the fluid identities of Yan and Ming as well as the decentered landscape of Hong Kong, has, in this way, pinpointed the city's own discourse of fluidity.

Conclusion

In a postmodern cityscape out of joint with its present time–space, the filmic representation of Hong Kong is as unsettling as it is alluring. At the same time, the cinema as a powerful medium ensures the dissemination of these images and consolidation of an imagined community through the collective consumption of commonly recognized landscapes such as skyscrapers and Victoria Harbor—which also comprises, I surmise, the biggest difference between local and foreign films.

In more recent films such as *Cold War*, technology and space become all the more entangled in a delocalized non-place. The opening scene, which introduces the film's major characters, is presented as profile entries in the form of digital interfaces, while most of the scenes are shot in ultramodern office buildings and skyscrapers. As Chu Yiu-wai comments, a major theme of *Cold War* is to celebrate law and order as a core value of Hong Kong (117), and technology and skyscrapers

seem to provide the last resort and foothold where such values can be upheld.

Notwithstanding the diverse images of Hong Kong in local and foreign film productions, they do, in fact, share a common feature: a juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar by means of recycling, encoding and decoding the same visual tropes of neon signs and skyscrapers. As Eom Sujin rightly points out, the geographical notion of "Asia" is itself a problematic one that eschews a "contested territory, torn between the Cold War Orientalism and the allure of its economic ascendancy" (711). The uncannily malleable and "mobile" urban space of Hong Kong herein attests to a logic of fluidity that underlies both its cityscape and its identity. If neon signs beckon us to a nostalgic, irretrievable past, the timeless, spaceless skyscraper should be seen as a post/modern recoding of nostalgia that gives rise to a fluid subjectivity. In Pam Cook's words, this form of nostalgia is a "way of coming to terms with the past" which forms "part of a transition to progress and modernity" (4). Closely linked with the historical memories of Hong Kongers from coloniality to post/coloniality, the neon signs and skyscrapers have together configured a spectrum of modernity that interpellates the body into an urban city-statehood unique to Hong Kong. This space that is born of an original "lack" of political autonomy, to use Rey Chow's words, is indeed a testimony to Hong Kong's post/modern identity.

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