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Cinematic Images of a Neoliberal Hong Kong

Mark Walters

Neoliberalism is a political-economic philosophy that, although it promotes individual and market freedom, succeeds most ardently in securing wealth for the world's elite through policies and practices of market deregulation and financial speculation. As its chief concern is therefore one of money and a moneyed existence, neoliberalism is strongly manifest in the primary centers of finance capital and consumer culture – global cities. Cities project utopian ideals of opportunity, upward mobility, and endless leisure activities, yet they are simultaneously highly uneven spaces of social and power conflicts. Where cinema plays an important role is in its ability to make visible that unevenness or depict it in unique ways indiscernible in our everyday observations that promote dialogue. It does this through various cinematic techniques and by the simple act of turning the camera on city space. In this paper, using Ann Hui's *The Way We Are* (2008) and Pang Ho-Cheung's *Dream Home* (2010), I want to focus on how images of the city of Hong Kong in cinema are used to frame and construct characters as human consequences of neoliberal policies in order to expose how those policies structure human activity within city space.

Before I get to the films and their implications, I want to briefly explain what makes Hong Kong unique among global cities in the context of neoliberalism. As a massive urban space, Hong Kong of course has many of the same features and sights to be found in other cities, yet it first stands out structurally due to geographic constraints placed on development. With relatively little suitable land on which to build (both on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula), it is an incredibly dense city, with all manner of businesses, shops, and residences existing in close proximity to one another and occasionally in the same building. Hong Kong Island is also very

mountainous, so construction can only go *up* as opposed to *out* (though land reclamation efforts are underway along the northern part of the island to remedy this limitation). It is therefore the world's most vertical city with the highest number of skyscrapers, including the International Commerce Center and both International Finance Center towers. Aside from housing luxury hotels and shopping centers, these massive structures also house banks, investment firms, and real estate firms, making Hong Kong one of the world's most significant finance centers.

For residents to navigate the geography and reach other parts of the city, everything from major financial and shopping centers to universities are linked by Hong Kong's highly-efficient public transportation system, the MTR, which consists of subway lines, bus and minibus routes, and a multitude of ferries (such as Star Ferry) that connect Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula, and the surrounding islands. Buses run from Causeway Bay on the northern part of the Island to Stanley Market in the south, and the Peak is accessible via buses and the Peak Tram, the latter being an attraction all its own. Other means of transportation and walking paths include Central Hong Kong's Mid-Levels escalators and sky bridges, which ensure that you need not even set foot on the streets to go from one center of consumption to the next.

Yet, for all the conveniences of increased physical mobility and connectedness, like other cities, Hong Kong's development has been and continues to be highly uneven. Beneath the shiny veneer of its glass and steel façade, disabled and disadvantaged men, women, and children beg for money, some housing areas fall by the wayside due to neglect, pollution has wreaked havoc on the environment (particularly the surrounding waters), and prostitutes and low-level hustlers populate heavily-crowded tourist districts such as Mongkok on Kowloon Peninsula. Perhaps Hong Kong is thus better analyzed as an example of what sociologist Saskia Sassen (2003) refers to as spatialized power, a space in which physical and digital architecture funnel people and

resources in a way that maintains a specific power structure. After all, Hong Kong is structured in such a way that residents are guided to its many consumerist trappings by the available routes of transportation, remaining essentially blind to the city's inequity and unevenness, while bank-centered digital networks maintain an intensely capitalist environment.

Second, Hong Kong's uniqueness comes from its geopolitical designation, for despite how we talk about it specifically in terms of language and culture, it is not and never will be a nation as we conceptualize the term today. Its transcendent essence is split between a historic cultural connection to China and a political/economic/judicial connection to Britain, and its central authority has always existed outside of the city itself. Hong Kong cinema and cultural theorists Ackbar Abbas (1997) and Dominic Pettman (2000) refer to Hong Kong as a "floating city," freed from its moorings and culturally adrift. They also refer to it as a city of transients, a city through which people flow on their way to somewhere else. This description has long been Hong Kong's constructed reality as the fabled "Pearl of the Orient" and the "Gateway between the East and West," a temporary haven and lucrative trading post more so than a permanent home. During my own visit to Hong Kong in March of 2012, a roommate in my youth hostel remarked that "eight days in Hong Kong is too long," a snide comment that Hong Kong has little to offer beyond fleeting distractions and prurient pleasures. I did not tell him that I was staying for 10 days. To his point, though, the advances in international travel coupled with Hong Kong's location and exorbitantly high housing prices have perhaps contributed to Hong Kong's still-reality as a stopover rather than a home.

However, more so than people, Hong Kong is also defined by the free flow of capital. In this non-nation, the finance industry has been spared government regulations as Hong Kong long existed as a neoliberal, money-making experiment for Britain and now for China. In this analysis,

I therefore acknowledge that governments play a central role in the creation and maintenance of free markets through deregulation and policies that allow multinational corporations to exist and thrive in those markets. This position runs contrary to that of Negri and Hardt established in *Empire* (2000), where they argue, to state it briefly, that capital is superseding the nation-state. I instead align myself with Kapur (2002) in her critique of Negri and Hardt for lacking historical specificity in which to ground their theory. After all, Hong Kong's economic expansion beginning in the 1960s cannot simply be whittled down to the assertion that capital superseded Britain's imperial authority as a self-sustaining reality. Not only has Britain implemented a number of social programs in Hong Kong over time, but, more importantly, China's lease of the New Territories (consisting of the northern part of Kowloon Peninsula, Lantau Island to the west, and other surrounding islands) to Britain in 1898 was in part so Britain could establish a larger military presence in the area to protect its lucrative colony. Now with China overseeing Hong Kong, its approach is more or less the same (albeit with greater military authoritarianism), but the stakes in the volatile global economy are much higher. This historic and continuing confluence of government policy and military power in Hong Kong has created a space of rampant capitalism and is what I argue works against the individual as explored in cinema.

Dream Home

Pang Ho-Cheung, the director of *Dream Home*, has a reputation as a "bad boy" of Hong Kong cinema, satirizing all aspects of Hong Kong life from the institution of marriage in *Men Suddenly in Black* (2003) to the film industry itself in *You Shoot, I Shoot* (2001). With *Dream Home*, a thriller about Hong Kong's housing crisis, he eschews his comedic satirical approach and comments directly on the 2008 global economic recession and its effects on the housing market and individual livelihood in Hong Kong through the allegorical use of graphic violence.

The film begins by showing statistics stating that Hong Kong residents' monthly salaries have increased by 1% since 1997, while housing prices in 2007 alone rose by 15%. These numbers are then followed on screen by the film's perverted sort of rationalization for the story to follow: "In a crazy city, if one is to survive, one has to be crazier." Opening the film in this manner allows Pang to provide background information and establish the context in which the film takes place, which is societal obsession with property that in most cases can only be obtained by going deep into debt.

We first see the female protagonist Sheung (Josie Ho) enter a secure apartment building as seen via the building's CCTV cameras, but its security is diminished by the sleeping security guard. Sheung then enters the security room and strangles the guard with a plastic zip tie. While slowly asphyxiating, the guard reaches into a toolbox and grabs an exacto knife. He means to cut the tie around his neck, but it is too tight, and he only succeeds in slashing open his own neck. After he dies in a grotesque pool of his own blood, Sheung grabs the security tapes and leaves. What follows are the opening credits, played over a montage of images of Hong Kong apartment buildings set to the film's ominous score. The images are intercut with schematics of apartment layouts and are framed in such a way that the seemingly endless floors of apartments and absence of visible sky mirrors the hypnotic effect of actually walking through Hong Kong, where high-rise apartments and skyscrapers block out the sky and command attention by virtue of their abundance.

In these opening sequences, Pang depicts Hong Kong as a space of conflict, a city where its citizens are not only under surveillance by an invisible power, but are also defined and validated by their private property. The importance of private property is therefore visually reinforced throughout the film. In one early scene, Sheung is talking with coworkers outside their

workplace. What could conventionally be framed from outside the group as a four-shot at eye level is instead framed from within the center of the group at an absolute low angle so that the people are completely dwarfed by the skyscrapers that stretch into the sky above them. Even short transitional scenes are shot to reinforce the presence, and therefore importance, of private property, such as a scene where Sheung is riding on a bus contemplating how to afford her dream home, an expensive flat overlooking Victoria Harbor. Positioned at a distance behind the bus as it snakes along an overpass between apartments with a wide-angle perspective, the camera is zoomed in, which flattens the image and makes it appear as though there is no space between the buildings, effectively creating a visual sense of thickness, density, and suffocation.

To the audience, the city quickly becomes an oppressive force, but it has long been one to Sheung who works two jobs to afford her dream home: the first at Jetway Bank and the second selling handbags in a department store. In the former, she persuades clients to reinvest their money in risky ventures or sign up for extra services and is often subject to their verbal abuse over the phone for calling at inconvenient times. In this position, she is an agent of capital who necessarily must cannibalize others' wealth on behalf of wealthier elite in order to keep her job. In the latter, she looks visibly uncomfortable when framed against what come across as superfluous commodities (brand name, designer handbags and accessories) while simultaneously trying to buy the penultimate symbol of free market capitalism. After eventually making a bid on her dream home, the owners turn her down and ask for a higher price in the currently booming market. Having already taken out as large a loan as possible given her income, Sheung, who has no qualms about going into debt, is understandably devastated. At this point, we learn that Sheung's killing of the security guard was only the first in a one-night killing spree of tenants in her target building intended to drive down the price of the flat through bad publicity. As she

gruesomely kills a pregnant woman, her husband, and their maid in one flat and three young men, two prostitutes, and two police officers in another, she never forgets her ultimate goal of property ownership.

Making Sheung's obsession with property more significant is her back story. As a child, her best friend and his family were forcibly evicted from their flat by triads at the order of property developers, and her dream home went up in its place. She should detest such luxury flats, but the visual oppressiveness of the city and the film's general lack of wide shots or long shots with three-dimensional depth suffocate her and make her deny that she is not a member of the wealthy elite. At the end of the film, her murderous rampage (shown in flash-forward segments interspersed throughout the film) becomes all the more absurd as the final shot reveals that she bought her apartment on the eve of the global economic recession in 2008, so noted by an English-language radio program playing in the background that warns of further hardships to come for the now volatile global housing market. With the implication that her actions (both going into debt and her murders) will forever cripple both her financial security and her psychological state, the film ends on a very explicit note in its leap from a Hong Kong issue to a global one. At this moment, Hong Kong ceases to be a specific place and is revealed as just another node in the urban network that is fundamentally tied to the global economy and that structures the increasingly harsh and illogical rules by which individuals in that economy must abide.

The Way We Are

The Way We Are is a slow-paced drama about a single mother and her teenage son who live in Tin Shui Wai, an economically-depressed community in the northwestern New Territories close to the Hong Kong-China border. It was originally conceived as a housing district for

workers in the area's growing industrial sector until manufacturers opted to move their operations north to China to make use of cheaper labor. Tin Shui Wai has thus been sensationalized in the news and other films as the "city of sadness" for its depressed state, high-crime rate, and rash of suicides. *The Way We Are*, however, does not sensationalize Tin Shui Wai with lingering shots of slums or squalid conditions, but neither does it glamorize it. Director Ann Hui opens the film with a black-and-white photograph of undeveloped marshland that dissolves into a static shot of the same marshland, Hong Kong high-rises faintly visible in the far distance, before panning right to Tin Shui Wai's dense gathering of stale apartment buildings. The dissolve's encapsulation of more than 100 years of development in the span of a few seconds is less a visual metaphor for Hong Kong as an economic miracle (after all, we never see Hong Kong proper) and is instead more wary of the benign promises of modern urban development, for Tin Shui Wai is visually separated from Hong Kong as a locus of power, and it and its inhabitants are therefore forgotten in the global context of modern finance capital.

The Chinese title of the film translates to "Tin Shui Wai at day and night," which first implies a personal connection with the city. Hui achieves this by mostly positioning the camera in the interior. However, in contrast to *Dream Home*'s portrayal of urban space as one of violence, *The Way We Are*'s spaces of cramped apartment flats, grocery stores, hospitals, and churches within Tin Shui Wai's nondescript high-rises are intimate and lived-in. Second, then, the title implies recognition of Tin Shui Wai's residents within those intimate spaces as marginalized figures. The central characters are Mrs. Cheung (Bau Hei-Jing) and her son Ka-On (Juno Leung). Mrs. Cheung works at a grocery story where she packages fruits and vegetables. Her son spends summer break lazing at home while watching TV or occasionally visiting with friends to play videogames or mahjong. A third character, Granny (Chan Wai-Lun), enters the

story when she moves into the same building as Mrs. Cheung and eventually comes to work in the same grocery store. As with the city, Hui makes no attempt to glamorize the characters' lives. Long stretches of time pass without any dialogue, and character action is both routinized and minimized. Ka-On's daily routine mostly consists of waking up and watching television while his mother simply goes to-and-from her workplace. For her part, Granny (without family, employment, or other obligations) spends most of her time cooking for herself or sitting alone at her small dining room table, framed against a wall of pictures of deceased and long-forgotten family members. The characters' on-screen lives, then, are essentially stripped down to the essentials of eat, work, and sleep.

If we consider Sheung's neoliberal crisis in *Dream Home* to be an unhealthy fixation with time and space, then the characters' collective crisis in *The Way We Are* is anything but. In contrast to that film's sense of urgency, Hui's minimalist approach complements *The Way We Are*'s overarching theme of urban malaise and character inaction to comment on forgotten urban space. Like two sides of the same coin, the result is equally relatable characters (though few of us could say we actually agree with Sheung's cannibalistic killings in *Dream Home*, her sense of hopelessness and despair is palpable) who instead acquiesce to power rather than violently confront it. Beaten down by a society that imposes routines and restrictions on human action, they embody the crisis of everyday life that de Certeau (1984) argues defines late-capitalist societies.

The film's primary implication, then, is that people are little more than unfulfilled automatons. As Tin Shui Wai itself appears bland and unappealing, so the characters venture more toward alienation. Ka-On's immediate space is often filled with commercial products from Japan and the U.S., such as Dragon Ball Z and Chicago Bulls posters, and he is literally in bed

with Disney on his Minnie Mouse bed sheets. In one scene at a friend's apartment, also adorned with posters of sports icons, he is wearing a "Party's Over" t-shirt with the hammer and sickle insignia, an ironic comment on the global domination by icons of Western capitalism. Yet, Ka-On is almost completely sedate, finding fleeting fulfillment playing video games with his friends and seemingly having no interest in his church youth group, despite the best efforts of group leaders to get him involved. His mother, meanwhile, has nothing but work. Even when her own mother is admitted to the hospital, she is unable to see her due to her work obligations, prompting a flashback (told through black-and-white photographs of young women working in various textile industries in Tin Shui Wai) wherein Mrs. Cheung's mother reminisces about her daughter's systematic dehumanization through exploitative labor. Similarly, Granny begins the film as a solitary figure. She cooks a large amount of food in an enormous wok for herself, eats in silence by herself, and goes grocery shopping by herself. Later, she also attempts to reconnect with her son-in-law and grandson (her daughter having passed away prior to events in the film), but her son-in-law expresses to her his desire to move on, away from his deceased wife's family. Whether shuffling among Tin Shui Wai's colorless architecture to go grocery shopping or silently staring out her apartment window, Granny's withered frame and sullen countenance speak to human expendability in a global economy that privileges wealth while marginalizing a majority of the global population.

However, as de Certeau (1984) continues to argue, despite the rigors of a routinized society as structured by capital, individuals can subvert expectations capital has of them by restructuring their everyday lives. In depicting this restructuring in the film, Hui foregrounds the strength of meaningful human relationships as a coping strategy in the new global economic order. This is not a radical subversion, but a realization that collective human experiences

supersede a fixation on wealth and property. For example, mid-way through the film, Granny decides to buy a television to serve as a makeshift companion in her apartment. This proves to be a monumental sequence in the film, not for the impact that media subsequently has on her life, but for the connection it fosters between herself and Mrs. Cheung and Ka-On. Ka-On not only carries the television from the shop to her apartment, but he installs it and configures the antennae to receive stations via the airwaves. Afterward, Mrs. Cheung notices that some of Granny's light bulbs need to be replaced, so she sends Ka-On to buy new ones. This begins a cycle of reciprocation that results in Granny buying mushrooms for Mrs. Cheung and Ka-On, Mrs. Cheung consoling Granny after her son-in-law shuns her efforts to reconnect, and finally the trio celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival together over a home-cooked meal. The final sequence of the film occurs after the camera pushes past the three main characters to peer out the kitchen window to Tin Shui Wai below, dissolving to documentary-like scenes of families gathered in a park celebrating the festival. As families light fireworks together and children playfully mug for the camera, we are left with the feeling that the film's exterior shots of Tin Shui Wai's buildings do not create an oppressive atmosphere, but instead remind us of the human connections within those spaces where individuals try to live with a modicum of dignity in a profoundly undignified system.

Conclusion

The global implementation of neoliberalism is an incredibly complex phenomenon, but films can help us understand its effects through powerful allegories, honest dramatizations, and creative employment of various cinematic techniques. As evinced in *Dream Home*'s depiction of a Hong Kong that drives individuals to murder and *The Way We Are*'s use of intimate space in Tin Shui Wai to foreground meaningful human relationships, media can help us begin or

continue to articulate specific consequences of neoliberal policies in order to tease out the larger picture of its impact on individuals. That impact is perhaps not as beneficial as neoliberal discourse would have us believe, for instead of being empowered by neoliberal principles, countless individuals are financially, politically, and socially left behind. Furthermore, these films demonstrate an awareness of larger economic forces beyond the local that is Hong Kong. Whether that is *Dream Home*'s final radio broadcast or *The Way We Are*'s silent indictment of finance capital, films can be relevant as local texts and can also function as part of a growing global dialogue on neoliberalism, a dialogue that also includes such actions as voter enfranchisement and grassroots protests against corporatism. Indeed, the intersection of media and neoliberalism should be explored further as economies continue to liberalize and media have the potential to play a larger social role as more than just entertainment.

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