Capturing the Present Past: Reconstructing Hong Kong in Recent Hong Kong Films
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Longing for the Loss

With the effect of globalization of Hollywood, exodus of talents to the West and other reasons, both the quantity and box office of Hong Kong films had gradually declined from late 1990s (Davis & Yeh, 2008, 30-33). The financial crisis and SARS after handover further struck the industry. At the same time, China gradually opened its film market and started to establish a mutual relationship with Hong Kong filmmakers. In this context, the enactment of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) launched in 2004 and provided a chance for the further development of the industry. Hong Kong-mainland co-productions proliferated and changed the Hong Kong film productions habitat. The effect of the “development” would be the Hong Kong film industry further polarized (Hong Kong Film 1, 2007, 45). Only a few extravagant co-productions could share the major box office with Hollywood blockbusters. Those co-productions focused on the mainland, pan-Chinese or even global market. The stories were usually not related to Hong Kong. At the same time, our domestic culture also gradually assimilated with the mainland culture. Films reflecting the domestic culture were marginalized.

As Huyszen stated, ‘The faster we are pushed into a global future that does not inspire confidence, the stronger we feel the desire to slow down, the more we turn to memory for comfort’ (2003, 25). It is because memory could ‘counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change’ (23) and ‘create the illusion of a momentary return a lost past’ (King, 2000, 11). Facing the gradually vanishing of our distinctive culture both on screens and off screens, Hong Kong peoples were aroused to capture the memory of those losing culture. However,
as Liliane Weissberg indicated, ‘Memory was desired, but could never fully recover what had been lost’ (1999, 11). We could only sustain our memory through the *lieux de mémoire*. Pierre Nora, a French historian, proponed that though the *milieux de mémoire*, the environment in which experience and its recollection can take place, have disappeared, the *lieux de mémoire* remained (16, 17). *Lieux de mémoire* could acknowledge a loss of national or communal identity and trust in our ability to make up for it (Huyssten, 2003, 23). Film would be one of the most important *lieux de mémoire* to make up our memory in modern society. This article would illustrate how films acted as *lieux de mémoire* to capture our losing culture.

Hong Kong had a glamorous and relative stable distinct culture in the past. As Weissberg said, memory ‘has meaning only in the present’ (1999, 17). Remembering our past could comfort us at present and providing us a better future. Many Hong Kong people still long for our past. Our past experience would tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present. These influences would reach into the most minute and everyday details of our lives (Connerton, 1989, 2). In this article, three films reflecting the everyday life of ordinary Hong Kong people will be chosen for the analysis. These recent films premiered in 2008. The casts and crews were mainly Hong Kong filmmakers. They had references to different aspects of vanishing Hong Kong culture. These three films are *Sparrow* (文雀, dir. Johnnie To), *The Way We Are* (天水圍的日與夜, dir. Ann Hui) and *Claustrophobia* (親密, dir. Ivy Ho). From these films, we could capture the gradually losing past of Hong Kong landscapes, virtues and hope at present through scenic, embodied and narrative memory.
Capturing the Vanishing Landscapes

Hong Kong is a highly developed city but there are lots of things that the government should keep. Star Ferry Pier, Queen’s Pier or some older buildings are collective memories to us. They are the recollection of Hong Kong people through all those changes. They started to vanish a few years ago. When I made Sparrow, I wanted to capture Hong Kong, its cultural history or details, as well as some memories.

Johnnie To (Johnnie To Interview, Sparrow DVD, 2008)

Ian Hacking suggested that all memory begins with scenes and feelings (King, 2000, 26). Scenic memory would be one of the modes remembering our experience (Assman, 2006, 2). Unlike other lieux de mémoire, like archives or libraries, film has a dimension of continuous motion and can act as ‘temporal location’ to realize and capture a place across time (Lee, 2008, 3). With the purpose of capturing the landscape of Hong Kong, directors would integrate protagonist or vehicle travelling scenes into the plot of the films. Through those travelling scenes, it would create a visual flow of Hong Kong landscapes. This visual flow liked a moving showcase which could let us touring around the contemporary Hong Kong with emphasis on its reminiscence.

At the beginning of the film, Simon Yam rode his bicycle along the tram road and passing the Woo Cheong Pawn Shop, a revitalized pre-war Chinese tenements building, in Wan Chai. In the later scene, he carried his vintage Rolleiflex twin lens reflex camera taking some black and white photos of the life of ordinary people in Sheung Wan. Sheung Wan, an old district in Hong Kong Island, was the main landscape of Sparrow but those recollections was embedded in a modern context. The trams, the pawn shop, the Rolleiflex camera, black and white photos and the people captured had the sensibility of the past. But the images captured existed in contemporary Hong Kong. In the course of travelling in Central, Yam met a mysterious modern lady, Kelly Lin, in the Ladder Street (Potting
Street. Ladder Street has a long history with historical significance but is now surrounded by commercial buildings. Yam attracted by Lin and chased after her. Then, the story led by Lin. She also ran around the Sheung Wan district and led us viewing a significant historical architecture, the Western Market. Later, Yam took photos near another historic building, Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences, in mid-level. He walked around and followed the disguised Lin. Besides, To also showed us the old residential area with tenement buildings (Tong lau, 唐樓) through the pickpocket team journey. On the other hand, they pick pocketed in the commercial area in Causeway Bay. Their co-operation in the pickpocket process also provided a visual flow of the multiracial landscape in Hong Kong. Multiracial was recognized by To as the tradition of Hong Kong in 60s (Johnnie To Interview, Sparrow DVD, 2008).

When To captured the daytime scenery of Hong Kong purposely (Hong Kong Film 5, 77), Ivy Ho chose to capture the Hong Kong nocturnal sight in Claustrophobia. For the wageworkers, they could not escape from trapping in vehicles and passing through the tunnels in their daily life. The Hong Kong night scenery in Claustrophobia would be framed by tunnels. Tunnel not only connected different locales spatially but also as ‘temporal location’ of the carpool rides temporally. Through the point of view of Karena Lam, reflection of the windows and different stopping locales, we could see the nightscape of Hong Kong from Aberdeen to Shatin, from industrial and commercial area to residential area connecting by the tunnel visual flow. In addition, the tunnel vision with a significant vanishing point visually was also analogous to the time tunnel passing through the time endlessly. Visual flow was also part of the narration of this film. In the end of the first scene (chronologically the end of the story), Lam walked along the riverside in Shatin and Ekin Cheng drove by to follow her home. Cheng left only after Lam entering the gate of the estate. Cheng tried to make sure Lam safe till the last moment he could. This visual
flow gave us the feeling that their relationship would end but their feelings still carried on in their memories. The feeling of loss was also expressed by watching through the windows in a bounded space. Many shots were on Lam looking outside the car through the window with reflections of the coloured neon lights in the dark. This resembled the limitation of lieux de mémoire which concealed the chosen memory for preservation of endless memories.

Looking through the windows from the building blocks day and night was one of the visual motifs in *The Way We Are*. Instead of tenement houses shown in *Sparrow*, most of the Hong Kong people were living in the housing estates. These aggregated buildings formed closed communities in different districts. This film depicted a remote community, Tin Shui Wai. Tin Shui Wai was originally famed by its beautiful natural environment like the opening black and white snapshots in the film. Tin Shui Wai was covered by a large area of mangrove, wetland and fishponds. The “Sky” and “Water” in its Chinese name would be come from its natural environment. By the government and real estates enterprises development, housing estates were built in the district and low incoming families moved in. After several family tragedies, the community attracted a lot of attention. This film was shot under this circumstance. However, modern buildings were just the wallpaper of the new town. Ann Hui felt that the exterior of the estates like the high-end residences but the flats in the buildings were very small and lack of private area. It was inhuman and uncomfortable (*East Touch*, 2009, April 28). What she showed us was the lonely Chan Lai-wun sitting by and looking through the windows in her flats from day and night. The flat liked a prison rather than a home. Her life was not hampered by her physical inability but her small ‘home’ and sorrow past. Hui also focused on articulating the ordinary residents in the public estates. We could see many of them with boring faces and scattering in the shopping arcade to kill time on the home journey of Paw Hee-Ching.
and Chan.

In contrary to The Way We Are or Claustrophobia, looking through the windows was fantasy and possibility of communication in Sparrow though Yam and its team members finally found that they and Lin were like the sparrows caged in the tenement house. Caged birds were hung everywhere in restaurants in the past. It was also shown in an important lieu de mémoire with Hong Kong characteristic, the Hong Kong Style Café (茶餐廳). The Cheung Lee Restaurant (祥利冰室) in Sparrow would be a over half-century Hong Kong Style Café in North Point (Wu, 2009, May 24). Although the locale is present in contemporary moment, it reputes the dietetic culture in the past. It is a ‘memorial container’. Nevertheless, locale is not the only category of ‘memorial container’. Our bodies could also be a ‘memorial container’.

**Capturing the Vanishing Virtues**

*There are some black and white inserts of working girls in factory in The Way We Are. That is my impression on the 1960s and 1970s. I saw many Cantonese movies of factory girls. Mrs. Cheung was also a factory girl who supported her two little brothers’ studies. Inserted those photos is due to my passion on that era.*

Ann Hui (Wenweipo, 2008, July 22)

‘Man is the sole possessor of a memory’ (Assman, 2006. 8). Hui, like Paw’s mother, remembered and treasured the devotion of factory girls. Factory girls were the financial mainstay of many families in the past. They were also the icon for the development of Hong Kong economy in 60s and 70s. As time goes by, the Hong Kong economic structure transformed. Factory workers were weeded out. ‘Edward Casey has described the body as
a ‘memorial container’, holding memories of joy or pain which can be relived involuntarily. For Casey the body is, precisely, embodied memory, in that it is constitutive of our experience of living in time’ (King, 2000, 27). On one hand, Paw acted as a narrator to tell her son about the personal history of Chan and her relatives. On the other hand, she was also one of the ‘memorial containers’ of Hong Kong virtues in The Way We Are. She was not glamourous enough to be a canonical figure. Her goodness could only be revealed in her daily life as an ordinary Hong Kong people. From her working life, we found her diligent and the characteristic of working through action rather than empty words. From her family life, her devotion to rather than demanding from family impressed her family members and also the audiences. Her generosity and fidelity did not restrict in her family but also extended to her neighbour. When her mother said life is hard, she just replied patiently it is no big deal. Her high tolerance and acceptance towards her adversity of life emerged with the silence after the conversation. All these were the grassroots virtues which were boosted by most Cantonese movies in 50s and 60s.

While Paw showed her virtues in an instinctive way, To portrayed the pickpockets as ordinary people in a more ambiguous way in Sparrow. Cantonese movies in 50s and 60s did not praise the pickpockets because stealing is a bad behaviour. Nevertheless, To decided to tell a story about sparrows, a Cantonese synonym to pickpockets, because it is a dying profession. Unlike robbery, pickpocket needs thorough skills training and is teamwork. Thus, To chose sparrows to tie with his nostalgic expression of the film (Hong Kong Film 5, 76). The appearance of Lin elicited the conflict of virtues and weakness of the pickpockets and violated their team spirit. This incidence also tested their faith towards righteousness. The team members against Yam chose helping Lin to steal the save key for getting back her passport. They failed and were caught. Yam then had to get involved due to brotherhood. Even the opposite leader, Lo Hoi-pang, wanted to keep his favourite lady,
Lin. But thieves had their code of honour. Lo kept promise and let Lin go after losing the pickpocket duel. Righteousness, brotherhood and keeping promise were all the virtues of swordsmen in the wu xia films in the past. In contrary, Lin represented another type of Hong Kong people, the immigrants. As To said in an interview, Hong Kong was a temporary home to many mainland immigrants for years. Hong Kong liked a station. Many of the immigrants used Hong Kong as a stepping stone to the world. It is part of the history of Hong Kong (Johnnie To Interview, Sparrow DVD, 2008).

The feeling of vulnerability and transiency was also shown in Claustrophobia but on the middle class. Cheng was a middle-aged managerial staff in a trading company and was also a family man with a wife and daughter. He followed his father’s instruction to study commerce in college for earning a better living. He had tried hard to take his responsibility to be a good supervisor, father and husband. He put efforts to do everything good for the integrity and future of the company and the family. Unfortunately, the milieu changed endlessly and too fast that he could not cope with. He could not share the reward of his endeavour with the privileged class. His insecurity reflected the assiduous middle class facing the menace of losing control of their own business with the assimilation to mainland after handover and the human relationship in a temporal and spatial compressed environment. Lam would be attracted by Cheng’s responsible, diligent, attentive but not complaining character in an involuntary moment. Cheng’s character especially the insecurity was also a typical intellectual character in the Cantonese melodrama after the war.
Capturing the Vanishing Hope

The reversal construction gives you a sense of irreversibility. Everybody reminisces, turning the past in his head. The rewind function doesn’t just belong to your VCR. We have a built-in rewind mode, too......Your memories keep going back. You retrieve the things contributing to your poor judgment. Our minds flash backward all the time.

Ivy Ho (Making of, Claustraphobia DVD)

The reversal construction of narration in Claustraphobia by Ho mimicked the remembering process. Narrative memory is another mode of remembering our experience. Its interpretative factors brought the emotion to us more intensively (Assman, 2006, 2-3). ‘Narrative organization is constitutive of diachronic time’ (King, 2000, 24). It helped us to capture our past feeling in the present moment in a more coherent and organized way. When important event happened, we would recall our memory to trace back what happened before to cause the present result. ‘Many forms of art have been and will continue to be integral to remembering narratives and personal experiences’ (Eber & Neal, 2001, 6). Personal memory was closely related to the context of our life in society.

Claustraphobia consists of eight episodes. Lam’s personal memory was embedded in the Hong Kong cultural memory. In the first scene, Cheng paved a new employment in another company for Lam in the context of layoff wave. Layoff wave was an important phenomenon these years. In the second scene, Lam wanted to find out how romantic relationship started. She went to a clinic to see her family doctor, Eric Tsang, who had subtle romantic relationship with her mother in the past. They talked about the working stress. Tsang told her that patients seemed suddenly disappearing due to the loss of medical insurance package of the jobs after economic crisis. In the next scene, we saw the confined and crowd office of Lam and Cheng. It was a low rent factory building in a remote area. In comparison in the later scene, the office of their potential mainland new
boss was much wider office in a commercial building and had floor-to-ceiling glass windows full of sunlight. These two scenes revealed the trend of mainland enterprises absorbing the small companies in Hong Kong. Before that, lowering the expenses by restriction on using air-conditioning in weekends emphasized the struggle of this small company. The close relationship of Lam and Cheng would be developed through these sharing and passing through predicaments bit by bit.

‘The recall of past events takes the form of memory fragments rather than complete narratives on the unfolding of events’ (Eber & Neal, 2001, 5). Lam found that fragmenting the story into episodes in Claustrophobia was another way imitating our remembering process (Making of, Claustrophobia DVD, 2008). We would recollect our past bits and pieces with stronger emotional feeling at the recalling moment. In this runaway world, ‘We need both past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfactions with the present state of the world’ (Huyssen, 2003, 6). In the last scene of the film (but the earliest chronologically), Lam hummed The Trout Quintet (鱒魚) to comfort nervous Cheng. This Schubert romantic period music was a beautiful and vivid piece. She learned it in primary school and listened to it when she felt stressed. It came up to her mind when she saw Cheng frustrated in the fire accident. In contrary to the sorrow traditional Chinese nanyi, A Wayfarer’s Autumn Lament (客途秋恨), in the beginning of the film (supposed to be the latest span of the story), it provided a dimension of hope with the references of the pleasant past in the ever changing world. Interplay of east and west; traditional and modern music is also an important reference to Sparrow but its narrative style and references of the past was different from Claustrophobia.

Screen memories are both subjunctive and definitive to our memories (Silverstone, 1999, 130). Genre films would be a kind of tradition and also narrative style on screens. To shot
Sparrow because of a French musicals, Les parapluies de Cherbourg (aka Umbrellas of Cherbourg, 1964). Originally, he wanted to shot Sparrow as a musical but the budget did not allow him to shoot a full length musical. Thus, he chose to shoot the last scene of pickpocket duel in a “musical” action style (Johnnie To Interview, Sparrow DVD, 2008; Hong Kong Film 5, 76). As a famous director of east noir films, To mixed this raining “musical” action scene with his most familiar noir style. This scene full of past references especially film references: two gangs dressed in black and Yam dressed in trench coats (dress code of hero films in the 80s and also noir films in 40s and 50s Hollywood) holding umbrellas with significant rhythmic motion (Les parapluies de Cherbourg), walking across the trams (a traditional transportation in Hong Kong island), in a rainy night with low key lighting rich in chiascuro, water reflection (noir films) and western style music with Chinese elements (Collier, 2007, 138-140). This is a scene happened in contemporary Hong Kong but with nostalgic style (Elley, 2008, 29). Another interesting stylish scene full of past film references would be the scene of Yam jumping into Lin’s convertible. Yam rode on his bicycle (a traditional transportation) met mysterious Lin driving in a convertible (another popular transportation in 60s). The plot of meeting a strange female on the road and femme fatale character (Lin) were important iconographies of noir films. Though Lin initiating the pickpocket duel of the gangs, the significant difference between Sparrow and noir films would be Lin let the pickpockets reconfirm their virtues and fantasies. This left behind a good memory for all of them in the future.

Fantasy in Sparrow did not always experience by ordinary people. It is no doubt that the memory of ordinary and traditional events will be the important narrative component of our memories and also our culture. Hui believed that living apart family members occasionally met in special events like wedding banquets and funerals. Although they may not show intimacy explicitly, they would support each other (Deng, 2008, April 23).
Traditional funeral of a relative would be an important family event to Paw’s family. During the event, Chinese conventions like sending funeral wreath, folding paper gold were shown. Paw, the eldest sister of the family, acted as the leading figure of the siblings though her working class background was lower than her siblings socially. On the other hand, we noticed that the class gap of the next generation in their conversation of folding clothes when folding paper gold but their relations were on equal basis. Each members of the family were in a harmony with strong but subtle family bonding. Hui deemed harmony in a family was not enough. She extended the depth and width of harmony from a family to society through a mid-autumn festival event. Traditional festivals are important events of Chinese collective memory. By dissolving black and white photos of mid-autumn festival night to the present scenes, she made her wish to sustain the harmony through generations with a mandarin popular song in 40s, Romance Across the Miles (明月千里寄相思). The tradition of Chinese drama requesting a happy ending was also resonated by this grand union. This memorial event helped washing away the violent images of Tin Shui Wai portraying by the media.

**Present, Past and Future**

‘While our language separates time dimensions into past, present, and future, our experience tends to unify them…’ (Eber & Neal, 2001, 9). Films act as *lieux de mémoire*. We can capture the present and also reconstructed and re-presented the past in films for the present and also for the future. When the audiences view the films, they would experience the ‘past’ at their present moment and would be the references for their future memory. Films can connect the present, past and future. Films can capture the living locales, the landscapes through incorporating visual flow into the plot and inserting images or film clips in the past to serve as scenic memory. The characters in the films can
act as “memorial containers” to reveal their personal history and values in the past as embodied memory. Film could also construct narrative memory on or off the screens by imitating reality, memory, films, traditional events or other references.

‘The past is called into play when questions are raised and decisions must be made’ (Eber & Neal, 2001, 7). Facing the decline and waning Hong Kong, some Hong Kong filmmakers tried to excavate and re-appreciate the past with different initial motives. To wanted to preserve the landscape of Hong Kong. Then brought us visit the old districts in a nostalgic mood through a story of some sunset professionals, pickpockets, with past film references. Hui felt passion on the past humanity. She walked through the everyday life and events of those ordinary but kind and respectable people hand in hand with us. Being an official lady in the past and experienced scriptwriter at present, Ho searched for the past to articulate the claustrophobic working life of middle class in the natural selective commercial world. Capturing the present past would be their reaction to face the problem of having strong feelings on the vanishing domestic culture.

These three films and the directors also had some other common features. All three films were not a big or even low budget films. All of them had good response in film festivals (Johnnie To Interview, Sparrow DVD, 2008; Wenweipo, 2008, July 22; sina.com.cn, 2008, March 1). These three directors were all over middle age. They experienced the golden age of Hong Kong film industry and had already established their reputation for years. These similarities brought us some questions. Would only low budget films or festival films allow showing our local culture? Would the people reach certain age be more nostalgic? Or would those people experienced a better past concerning more to the past? Would the past domestic culture more distinctive for capturing? Does the younger generation want to capture their past? Do they have the chance to shot a film on Hong
Kong in a polarized market? This reminds us the statement of Silverstone, ‘the memory is the site, now, of struggles for identity, and for the ownership of a past’ (1999, 125).

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