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Transnational Exchanges, Questions of Culture, and Global Cinema: Defining the Dynamics of Changing Relationships

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In recent years, the terms "nation" and "culture" have provided the fuel for countless discussions involving borders, border crossings, transnationalism, and globalization within media studies. There seems to be general agreement that changing economic, political, social, and other relationships precipitated by new technologies have dramatically changed the cultural landscape. However, moving down from the theoretical plane to the level of scholarly practice, established categories tend to dominate research. In the case of motion picture studies, for example, books on "national" cinemas abound, and the idea of "culture" as self-evident, self-contained, bordered, and monolingual is still taken for granted.

Scholarship coming from a variety of disciplines has sought to engage this dilemma. Postcolonial theory has contributed the notion of hybridity to these debates, and a call to place all notions of an "essential" identity into question within the multiple identities available within the postmodern metropolis. Others call for a "radical" multiculturalism that refuses to disguise the issues of power and struggle behind the "melting pot" veneer of contemporary culture. Within these debates, the centrality of the economy and globalization of the culture industry cannot be neglected. Filmmakers, for example, may live in one country, make all their films in a second country, and find
financing in a third, while hoping to address a global, polyglot audience with what may be a localized narrative. Because of the transnational nature of these films, a new, "transcultural" politics of representation needs to be elucidated.

This is an investigation of some of the attempts to rethink cultural relationships within the dynamics of an increasingly globalized media environment, using the case of transnational motion picture production as the specific case in point. To ground the discussion in a specific case study, the work of Evans Chan will be taken as an example of the difficulty and the necessity of developing a transcultural approach. Chan is a New York-based filmmaker, born in mainland China, bred in Macao, educated in Hong Kong and America, who makes independent narrative films primarily for a Hong Kong, overseas Chinese, "greater China" audience. His films straddle the gulf between the international art film and Hong Kong commercial cinema, and, thus, have also gotten some art film viewers globally. In addition, his work has been picked up by several Asian American film festivals in the United States. To date, Chan has completed two features, TO LIV(E) (1991) and CROSSINGS (1994). Both of these films openly address issues that find only a marginal voice in the mainstream cinema of Hong Kong, the United States, and other Chinese cinemas globally. His work will be used here as an illustration of the necessity for a new approach to nation and culture within media criticism.

With one foot in the United States and the other in Hong Kong, Chan can freely address issues as diverse as Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997, the legacy of the events of June 4th in Tian’anmen Square, the role of women in the world economy (in
both the “official” economy and the “informal sector” that can include prostitutes and traffickers in narcotics), and the processes of immigration and dispersal involving the Chinese globally. While fears of censorship arising from Hong Kong’s laws and the unofficial censorship of the marketplace in the United States place a boundary around what can and cannot be said in the cinema, Chan, with his transnational production team, manages to seriously explore controversial issues. In this way, Chan creates a transnational, transcultural discourse through the medium of the motion picture, pointing to a new type of cultural sphere that must be noted within media studies.

TO LIV(E) and CROSSINGS can be seen as works suspended between the modern and the postmodern; indeed, their textual strategies rely on this deeply rooted indeterminacy to explore people and issues that are themselves difficult to determine. Chan is profoundly influenced by European art cinema. The English title, TO LIV(E), for example, conjures up both Godard and Gorin’s LETTER TO JANE as well as Ingmar Bergman’s many works with Liv Ullmann. Chan characterizes the film as “inevitably a response to both Bergman and Godard.” In her insightful essay on the film, “The Aesthetics of Protest: Evans Chan’s TO LIV(E),” Patricia Brett Erens outlines the various ways in which the film draws on Godard. TO LIV(E) is organized around a series of letters addressed to Liv Ullmann, admonishing her for her criticism of Hong Kong’s deportation of Vietnamese “boat people” in December, 1989, without any mention of Hong Kong’s own uncertain future when it becomes part of the People’s Republic of China, still bloodied from the events that June. Rubie (Lindzay Chan) composes these
letters, which are sometimes read as voice-overs, sometimes read by the character directly addressing the camera. The letters run parallel to other plot lines involving Rubie’s lover, family, and circle of friends.

By taking the scene in which Rubie reads her first letter to Liv as a case in point, the impact of Godard can be very clearly seen. Using a shot of boats as a transitional device, the tinny, hollow sound of a recording of Cui Jian's "Nothing To My Name" comes up on the sound track. The film pans across an audience; Rubie is seated in the auditorium. A dance performance ("Exhausted Silkworms"), inspired by the events of June 4th in Tian'anmen Square, takes place on stage. Three male dancers, dressed simply in white shirts and black pants, tear their clothes to form gags and, later, nooses. A red scarf is pulled out of one dancer's shirt like spurting blood. As "Nothing To My Name" ends, one dancer falls, as if shot. Suspended for a moment with a freeze frame, he finally lands on the ground, as the audience applauds.

[SHOW VIDEO CLIP NUMBER ONE HERE.]

This performance is layered by the inclusion of Rubie's first letter as a voice-over. As the dancers perform, Rubie's address to Liv Ullmann (and, through her, to the world at large) adds another dimension to both Cui Jian's rock music, which says nothing explicit about "democracy" or politics at all, and to the performers' reenactment of the Tian'anmen demonstration and its suppression. As the dancers act out this violence, accompanied by Cui Jian's harsh and direct vocals, Rubie likens Liv Ullmann to a respected, distant portrait coming to life and slapping her in the face with accusations of cruelty and indifference. Rubie complains not only of Ullmann's ignorance about the Hong Kong
situation that this public condemnation of the treatment of the Vietnamese displays, but
also questions her timing. Coming just months after Tian'anmen, an event that was taken
by many in Hong Kong as a barometer of what to expect after 1997, Rubie reminds
Ullmann that the population of Hong Kong may soon find themselves in the same boat,
so to speak, as the Vietnamese.

However, it may be too tempting, at this point, to conclude that TO LIV(E) is
simply imitation Godard. There is another element to the scene that takes the film in a
radically different direction. While Rubie is presented as an agent addressing Ullmann, a
spokesperson for Hong Kong, and as a spectator of a dance piece (and, by extension, a
political event), Rubie is also depicted as distracted. Near the beginning of the scene, she
looks at her watch and looks around the auditorium. Later, the fact that Rubie is waiting
for her brother, Tony, is revealed. Rubie's relationship with her brother, his fiancee, and
her family propels the film into another, totally different arena, i.e., the realm of the love
story and family melodrama. Rubie may be the voice of Hong Kong, but she also plays
the roles of daughter, sister, lover, and friend in other parts of the narrative. Her
distraction as a character points to a more general "distraction" found within the narrative
itself.

There is a similar sense of distraction in CROSSINGS. While less directly
indebted to the European New Wave, CROSSINGS still bears the marks of cinematic
modernism. Again, fiction and non-fiction overlap as actual footage of Tian'anmen 1989
is cut into newscasts in which fictional characters appear. Dance presentations divide the
diegesis further into self-contained fictional realms. Characters again function as
mouthpieces for policies or ideas as well as fictional creations involved in narrative events. Rubie (again played by Lindzay Chan) reappears to serve this function again, featured on New York television as the public voice of the Chinatown community and, through voice-over excerpts from a diary, as the personal voice of the Hong Kong emigrant. However, while TO LIV(E) has more clearly demarcated divisions between the various layers of the discourse, CROSSINGS, closer to Yang's TERRORIZER and other works of the Taiwanese and Hong Kong New Wave, experiments with time and space to a much larger degree. Distraction, in fact, becomes disorientation, since, from scene to scene, it is often difficult to figure out whether the location is New York or Hong Kong, before or after coming to America.

The films, as Fredric Jameson might say, have a "schizophrenic" quality that can be seen in their titles. Not only is the English title, TO LIV(E), a deconstructed play on words referring to Liv Ullmann, LETTER TO JANE, and a heartfelt desire for the people of Hong Kong to somehow endure and "to live," the title in Chinese, roughly translated as LOVE SONGS FROM A FLOATING WORLD, seems to refer to another face of the film that deals with romantic relationships and a Chinese tradition of misdirected and/or impossible love. CROSSINGS offers a similar case in point. The English title conjures up images of immigration, exile, nomadism, the modern metropolis as a "crossroads," while the Chinese title, WRONG LOVE, refers to unhappy affairs of the heart. As the titles imply, these polyglot films offer a divided address and, potentially, multiple interpretations, or at least a divided ordering of narrative hierarchies, for the English-speaking film audience at festivals and art cinemas globally, for the slowly expanding
circle of Asian American film spectators, and for the Chinese-speaking audience looking at the films in relation to the standard Hong Kong commercial product.

However, it is wrong to look at the films exclusively as split discourses in this way, because there is another possible address that needs to be taken into consideration. Rather than operating as a dialectic between the art film and the commercial love story, between English and Chinese, the films can be taken as palimpsests where the elements overlay one another, obscuring meaning for some, illuminating a different kind of meaning for others. A new meaning is not created through the clash of contradictory discourses, as can be seen in the work of Godard. Rather, layers sit on top of one another, some (almost) postcolonial in English, some diasporic and accented in American English, some (almost) post-socialist in Chinese, some modern and part of the tail end of an international New Wave, others postmodern and part of contemporary global cinema culture.

Although TO LIV(E) and CROSSINGS are quite different, more than a single director links the works together. Taken as a set, they comment on certain common themes (e.g., Hong Kong 1997, immigration, changing family and social relationships in "Greater China," etc.) from two different temporal and spatial perspectives. TO LIV(E) primarily looks at the edginess of Hong Kong residents who are able to leave, but may or may not leave before July 1997. CROSSINGS looks primarily at newly transplanted Hong Kong émigrés in New York City, i.e., at immigration as a fait accompli rather than as a possibility.
Rubie acts as a bridge between the two films. Her roots are found among the poorer quarters of Hong Kong society. Rubie is a journalist, who becomes a community activist/social worker in New York. Her brother, Tony, is a highly skilled radiologist, and the eldest brother has successfully established himself in Canada. Unlike their parents, the children have the education and skills to move outside a Chinese environment into a global, English-based, diasporic community of post-colonial professionals and intellectuals plying their trades along the path of the former British empire—from Canada to Australia, the United States, and South Africa. They come from an impoverished China, but they move now in other circles. Ironically, it is the experience of colonialism that makes this movement and this upward mobility possible.

Rubie speaks in two voices, in fluent Cantonese and in impeccable British-accented English. Like Hong Kong itself, sometimes she looks Western, British, Caucasian and sometimes she looks Chinese and Asian. For example, in TO LIV(E), she reads several of her letters in English, directly addressing the camera in medium shots, seated against a British union jack, the American stars and stripes, and the flag of People's Republic of China. Interestingly, when she is shot in front of the red Chinese flag, the lighting of her hair accentuates its reddish highlights. The light allows her to blend in with the flag at the same time it emphasizes her distinctiveness as a Eurasian performer. Rubie plays the role of a British subject, the role of an ethnic Chinese, the role of an Asian American immigrant, and, most importantly, the role of a character of an indeterminate identity.
In CROSSINGS, Rubie tells another story about her origins. She explains her Caucasian features to another displaced woman, Mo-Yung, as a throw back to the Tang Dynasty when she must have acquired some European ancestor from exchanges on the Silk Route. Rubie, then, functions as the voice of Hong Kong and as the voice of the Chinese beyond Hong Kong and China, expressing, through her letters in TO LIV(E) and her diary and appearances on the television news as an "expert" insider in CROSSINGS, the hopes and fears of her community. Her identity and the identity of that community, however, are difficult to pin down as they slip among Britain, America, Hong Kong, and China, between the lower, small merchant classes and the upwardly mobile professionals, between a "traditional" older generation and a more urbane younger one. Still, Rubie manages to embody this cacophony of "voices."

However, Rubie is more than a "mouth," she is also an "ear." If Rubie functions in both films as a public, intellectual ear that is able to hear and validate the various voices that present themselves, she also serves as a private, personal ear. In both films, Rubie listens to an array of personal problems voiced by those in her circle of family, friends, and acquaintances. Perhaps, because of the very nature of her indeterminate identity, all the characters, in both films, feel free to express themselves in her presence. With few exceptions, all the films' characters talk to Rubie, and Rubie listens. As this narrative ear, Rubie holds the plots of both films together.

Although Chan works, like Brecht, Eisenstein, and Godard, to alienate his characters from the audience, using them often as types to illustrate particular points, the filmmaker also uses these characters in more conventional ways, underscoring their
individuality, allowing them to speak as distinct entities as well as representatives of ideological positions and abstract social categories.

To illustrate this point, it might be instructive to look at a scene from CROSSINGS. Rubie meets Mo-Yung in a café near Times Square. The camera is positioned outside as the scene begins, then moves inside to frame Rubie and Mo-Yung, silhouetted against the café’s window as the traffic of New York passes by outside. Throughout the scene, the camera moves between the two women, using a vase with dried flowers on the table as a pivotal point. Mo-Yung talks about coming from Suzhou; Rubie talks about her features and the imagined Silk Route ancestor. Both laugh that they are “two barbarians invading New York.” The camera cuts away to a shot of Mo-Yung framed through the café window, and the mood changes. Rubie fills Mo-Yung in on her own situation, and her desire to get a green card and open America as a possibility for her son. Mo-Yung asks, “What if your son doesn’t like America and blames you?” When Rubie replies that he can always go back, Mo-Yung counters, “Do you think you can recreate the past just like that?” The scene ends on a close shot of Mo-Yung putting out her cigarette in an ashtray near the dried flowers, flanked by the empty coffee cups.

This scene highlights elements that move the narrative into the realm of the women’s film. The emphasis is on the relationship between women, their solidarity in the face of the trials of immigration, as well as in the face of changing sexual mores and family relationships. Here, as friends, mothers, lovers, ex-wives, fiancées, and confidantes, Rubie and Mo-Yung illustrate the personal dimension of the political
concerns of 1997. Women experience a different type of “crossing” than men.

Traditional roles for women dissolve in the diaspora. Families become unhinged, scattered; romantic relationships become more fleeting. Cast adrift by a desire to escape from rigid families, ex-husbands, and the feeling of being alienated from the traditional world in which they were born and bred, these women move off with a different sense of loss, different fears, and for reasons that go far beyond the political dynamics of 1997.

Following Rubie as the “ear,” the camera invites the spectator to share these intimate moments.

Like the in-between, transnational, transcultural characters they depict, TO LIV(E) and CROSSINGS also defy easy classification. However, while identities may be uncertain and fluctuating, the issues these characters embody remain concrete and disturbingly fixed.

Chan’s treatment of these issues involves ambivalent feelings. TO LIV(E) concludes with cautious optimism on two fronts. In her last letter to Liv Ullmann, Rubie ends with the hope that China, Vietnam, and, by extension, Hong Kong will improve their respective situations so that all, including Rubie and Liv, will be able to meet as friends. In fact, she signs her letter, “Love, Rubie.” The last image of the film shows Rubie’s brother and his fiancee, saved from near suicide and break-up, alight from their taxi at the airport, baggage in hand, on their way to Australia.

CROSSINGS, on the other hand, ends on a pessimistic note. Rubie burns incense in memory of Mo-Yung on the subway platform where she was murdered. The last shot
shows a graveyard in Hong Kong. Rubie has promised to return Mo-Yung’s bones to Hong Kong, presumably to that same cemetery.

While TO LIV(E) ends with death averted and hope in the future, CROSSINGS concludes with the finality of death and the uncertainty of Rubie’s future. She returns to Hong Kong with Mo-Yung’s bones, but it is not certain whether or not she’ll return to New York, stay in Hong Kong, or go elsewhere. Since, after death, even bones continue to drift between continents, Rubie’s continued “crossings” between roles and professions, among nation-states, and between Asia and the West also seem to be one of the few certainties in a very uncertain, fictional world. That global filmmakers themselves will continue to drift and make films about this “floating world” of displacement and hybridity also seems fairly certain. To bring Chan’s pessimism back around to a more hopeful note, a quote from Bhabha’s “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” as follows:

For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity. iv

ENDNOTES

1 The transnational dimension of Chinese film has been noted by a number of film scholars, including Sheldon Lu (see, for example, his Transnational Chinese Cinemas, forthcoming from the University of Hawaii Press), Steve Fore (see “Golden Harvest”), among others.

2 Evans Chan, “Forward to TO LIV(E),” in Tak-wai Wong, ed. Evans Chan’s TO LIV(E): Screenplay and Essays (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, Department of Comparative Literature, 1996), p. 6.