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May 12, 2015

11.139 | Final Paper

Searching for Beauty and Meaning in Hong Kong

With its towering skyscrapers, teeming streets, and eclectic nightlife, Hong Kong in the East is perhaps only paralleled by New York City in the West as a center of culture, diversity, entertainment, and finance. And just like New York, Hong Kong has drawn in countless filmmakers trying to capture just a small fraction of its vibrant city life on screen. When Wong Fu Productions, an internationally acclaimed Asian American YouTube film group, vacationed together in Hong Kong for the first time, they were immediately captivated by “the energy of the city and just the massive size of it” (0:40).¹ Without hesitation, they turned their short vacation into film production time and began to shoot a collection of YouTube shorts they later titled *The One Days*, named after the amount of time they had to shoot each piece. With the exception of two, each of the six shorts within *The One Days* feature different characters in unrelated storylines. In “See Through,”² two tourists help each other find understanding in their respective breakups; in “Lost to Luck,”³ a brother and sister wander through the marketplace looking for a lucky fish; “Two True”⁴ focuses on a conversation about finding love between two brothers; “The Returning”⁵ follows two pickpockets through an afternoon; and finally “The Spare”⁶ and “Dream Line”⁷

¹ Behind the Scenes,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6C2zIFakkY&fmt=18&feature=iv&src_vid=9rFaGtx8PGw&annotation_id=annotation_529497

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brSo-F-QLzA>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9-qWUmD51w>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7_LXExvmQo

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arpLaUZel6k&feature=iv&src_vid=D9-qWUmD51w&annotation_id=annotation_773524

tell the story of a young couple's happiness and grief. Yet through the different perspectives and narratives emerge an underlying and unifying depiction of the nature of human relationships in the city. Unlike many of the films we watched this semester, which depicted the city as a lonely, humbling, marginalizing place that creates fragile relationships, Wong Fu stays optimistic. Scrutinized under their lens, each encounter or event within the city, no matter how random or fleeting, is fateful, precious, and ultimately meaningful.

"See Through," "Two True," and "The Spare" all touch on the ephemeral nature of the city, its events, and encounters within. The dialogue between the young couple within "The Spare" best captures this sentiment when the girl says to her boyfriend, "In this city, in one day, one moment you could see someone and never see them for the rest of your life" (2:25). "See Through" also echoes this idea when the male protagonist David's older brother urges him to talk to a random girl walking by to help him take his mind off his ex-girlfriend. When the protagonist dawdles, his brother pushes him forward and says, "Dude, she's about to go" (1:58). The fleeting window of opportunity for the interaction is further accentuated after David finally does approach Lily and learns that she is visiting Hong Kong from Taiwan for only a few days, just as he is from America. Had David not gone up to her within the brief moment that they crossed paths, the likelihood of them ever interacting would have been slim to none, like the millions of other people that pass each other in Hong Kong and never connect. Later on as they converse into the night, the camera cuts to a series of street-level cityscapes (6:22) focused on people, buses, and cars that are constantly moving. These urban scenes evoke a sense of the city's perpetual shapeshifting and continuous evolution, and the idea that no two collections of people and vehicles on any given street will ever be the same.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pGkcfBLuTM>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rFaGtx8PGw>

“Two True” depicts the same transient nature of urban interactions in a more comical light. An older brother Kinson tells his younger brother about how he found his dream girl (4:52). He was on a bus stuck in traffic when he looked out the window and saw a cute girl sitting in the bus next to his. Every time his bus inched forward a little, her bus would also inch forward; every time his bus fell back, hers would also fall back. “It was like we were dancing!” he exclaims (5:09). The caricature of interactions within the city painted by the absurdity of the situation increases when Kinson then boasts, “We actually looked at each other for five seconds. You know how long five seconds is?” (5:36), which once again emphasizes how brief most interactions are. After Kinson realizes the number he wrote down is fake, his brother consoles him sarcastically, “Don’t worry, you’ll probably see her again...someday” (7:14). But of course, they both understand that that is highly unlikely.

Although the ephemeral nature of and transient relationships within the city could be viewed pessimistically, the above three shorts choose to portray these aspects in an optimistic light. Among the movies we watched this semester, *Bicycle Thieves* provides one example of the desperation that comes with the capacity of the city to continuously change when the fortune teller tells Antonio Ricci that if he does not find his bike within the next few days, then he will never be able to find it again. In another example, *Blade Runner* portrays the fragility and tenuousness of relationships in the city through the loneliness of its characters and their fears of early death, accelerated decrepitude, and short-lived romance. In contrast, “The Spare” shows beauty in the same transience. In response to his girlfriend’s insight about the fleetingness of cities quoted above, the male protagonist says, “That’s not true. If you’re lucky you’ll see them again, right?” to which she says in return, “Then we must be pretty lucky!” (2:34) This exchange captures the idea present in “Two True” and “See Through” as well that transience is what makes every encounter within the city and every relationship that emerges from the city so precious and momentous.

Interestingly, the members of Wong Fu later described the experience of filming the shorts in a similar light. Wong Fu co-founder Wesley Chan said in “Behind The Scenes,” “I only had one day to shoot and asking for any more than that was pretty unrealistic” (0:47). Other Co-founder Phil Wang described the impact of such a short time frame on the production experience, “Just knowing that you can’t come back here for retakes or if you mess up you can’t come back to reshoot [was] a huge, huge challenge—it’s now or never” (1:20). As a result, every minute of filming was precious and every moment captured was unique and fleeting. Because the shorts did not follow a filming schedule, it took some amount of fate for Wesley to secure the actors he wanted too. As he said in the interview, he contacted two actors right before arriving in Hong Kong, and “lucky for me, they were both going to be in the area” (1:46). This lucky fatefulness brings beauty to the spontaneity and transience that characterizes city life.

Wong Fu further expounds the idea of fate and luck in chance encounters with “Dream Line” and “The Returning.” Beginning with “Dream Line,” which focuses on the same young couple from “The Spare,” they literally throw their life to chance when they play Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide whether they should take the subway or ferry to the movies. The short then plays out both scenarios as two alternate realities, revealing just the surface of the complex randomness of city life. From “The Spare,” the viewer learns that the couple met when the guy fell asleep on the girl’s bag in the subway and caused her to miss her stop. Coupled with the explicit exploration of chance in “Dream Line,” it becomes clear that had one of them taken the ferry or a bus or a taxi that day, they would have never met. But because they did, their relationship becomes all the more meaningful and special within a city filled with a multitude of options for transportation and activities that increase the randomness of urban interactions.

Among the movies we watched this semester, *Chunking Express*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *Modern Times* also echo the luckiness of people encountering and reencountering each other. In *Chunking*

Express Cop 223 runs into the woman he falls in love with first on the street and then again by complete accident in a bar late at night; whereas Cop 663 accidentally runs into the girl he met at a café he frequented before being staffed in a different location. Similarly in *Midnight Cowboy* Joe runs into Ratso after giving up on looking for him, and in *Modern Times* the tramp crosses paths with the Gamin twice by pure coincidence on the street and then in the police paddy wagon. In all of these narratives, it is the second fateful encounter between each pair of characters that causes them to stay together and begin to form meaningful relationships. This again demonstrates the luckiness and preciousness of meeting and reencountering people within the city amidst all of its hectic bustle and randomness.

“The Returning” explores random chance within the city through a subtler lens. After a day of work, two pickpockets go through their spoils. Chance plays a role in the value of each of their takes, when an expensive watch turns out to be fake or when a purse turns out to be loaded with cash. But what epitomizes the “luck of the draw” the most is when they discover a note within one of the stolen wallets filled with 10,000 HKD that says, “Dear Dad, I’m relieved the operation went well. Here’s some money for your medication. If there’s leftover, buy something for yourself. Love you” (3:28). By complete accident, they stole someone’s father’s medication money, which goes against their principles as pickpockets. Against the backdrop of the teeming streets in which the pickpockets took their spoils (0:07), the chance that this would happen accentuates the random, unpredictability of the city.

Finally, “Lost to Luck” and “See Through” depict one more insight into city life: the humbling reality of being one individual among millions. Several movies we saw this semester also explored this theme, most notably *The Crowd* and *Midnight Cowboy*, which both centered on a male protagonist who comes to New York City with the arrogant naivete of thinking he is special only to quickly fall into anonymity and marginalization. Wong Fu moves away from the humiliating depiction of city life by exploring a gentler and perhaps even empowering side of its inherent humility. “Lost to Luck” contains

many of the same elements as the above two movies. The short opens with a pan out the window of the male protagonist's apartment, revealing an extremely run-down building that gives a glimpse into the poverty that exists in the city, similar to *Midnight Cowboy*. As the camera shifts to the inside of the apartment, the conversation between brother and sister reveals that he has been struggling to get a job. "I always look sharp," he says, "but that never seems to help [with interviews]," to which she replies, "Other jobs are out there" (0:40). This dialogue exchange mirrors the tension present in *The Crowd* between the perception of the city as a place teeming with opportunity and the humbling reality that it is also teeming with other people competing for the same opportunities. It takes more than "looking sharp" to stand out of the crowd.

As the motif of being one among many recurs, however, Wong Fu deviates from the movies by keeping the tone hopeful. As the siblings walk through the marketplace in search of a lucky fish to replace the sister's lucky pet hamster, the brother exclaims exasperatedly, "There are thousands of fish here! How do we find [the lucky one]?" The sister simply replies, "He's a lucky fish, remember? We'll know when we see him" (2:54), evoking the idea that the number of fish doesn't change the fact that each one is still unique. Later on the brother reveals the metaphor of the short when he says to his sister, "Do you remember when we were little? Dad brought us here and said, 'People and fish aren't so different'" (4:04). She then says in a poignantly reassuring way, "You are a lost fish" (4:29), to which the brother smiles. Within this line is not only the encouraging realization that as one among millions, it can be okay to get lost but also the hopeful realization that within the city there are plenty of opportunities to find oneself and be found.

"See Through" further challenges the pessimism of being one among millions. The whole premise of the short focuses on two strangers who find comfort in each other's shared experience with breakups. The fact that they are coincidentally going through similar experiences pivots on the sheer

number of people in the city and the subsequent increased chance that many of them are going through the same trials in life. Both characters embrace this connection and use it to empathize with and help one another. When Lily finds out that David is still recovering from a previous breakup, she confides in him the concerns she has about her decision to break up with her boyfriend the next day. She says to him, “You remind me of [my boyfriend]” (6:09) because “like you, his heart has a good memory and I’m afraid he will also feel sorrow for a long time” (6:36). David is able to relate to her concerns from the other perspective, and Lily derives solace from his understanding. Later on she also explicitly states the humbling truth that she learned from growing up in Taipei, another big city, “[My boyfriend] will be happy again even without me. I’m not the only person in this world for him. I’m not that unique” (6:56). Although the truth sounds sad, Lily leverages it to her advantage and within it finds the strength to make the right decision about her relationship. Thus, rather than focus on the insignificance of being among millions of people, Wong Fu portrays the feeling of assurance that emerges from not being alone.

The truth is Wong Fu Productions never really intended to comment on the city through their shorts. They simply looked for a place to tell good stories and found within Hong Kong a vibrant mess of places, scenes, and people to develop their narratives. And yet the stories they told, the characters they portrayed are inextricably tied to the nature of the city, particularly of a megacity like Hong Kong. What is it about a city that imbues within its stories an urban quality? The sheer size? The chaos? The teeming population? I would argue that all of these factors contribute to the randomness, the fatefulness, the fleetingness, and the humility of living in and moving through the city. Through the contrasts between Wong Fu’s shorts and the movies we saw this semester, however, a new and beautiful idea emerges. Just as much as the city shapes the people who live in it, the people shape the city—shape how they experience it, how they love and grow within it. Because as city dwellers, we can find fragility or precious fatefulness in the fleeting chaos of our day-to-day interactions; we can find humiliation or

reassurance in the knowledge of being one individual among millions of others; we can find desolate loneliness or beautiful strength in the vast, mega-cityscape that we choose to call home.

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Spring 2015

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