

# Love In The City

## *The Placing of Intimacy in Urban Romance Films*

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### Introduction: Romancing a Sunset Industry

“Our profession – it’s already a sunset industry.” So says the killer in the opening scene of *La Comédie Humaine* (Chan Hing-kai and Janet Chun, 2010). Affectionately dubbed by critics as “a love letter, in Cantonese, to Hong Kong cinema,” (Dengtu 2010: 59) the film deploys humor that requires from its audience a facility in Cantonese, and cinephilia at its most passionate. It tells the story of the unlikely friendship between a professional killer and a screenwriter through dexterous wordplay in Cantonese and insider jokes about films and the film industry. In its most celebrated sequence, the killer narrates his life story to his screenwriter friend using only the titles of (mostly Hong Kong) films. Although the film also contains physical humor and broad comedic moments, its reliance on both Cantonese and film knowledge positions local film buffs as its primary addressee, a gesture that has become increasingly rare as the majority of films made by Hong Kong filmmakers now aim for a pan-Chinese market. However, as the lament in the opening scene suggests, this return to the local seems to be an elegiac rather than a forward-looking endeavor.

The “sunset” discourse on the death of Hong Kong’s film industry is not a new one. As early as 1993, the year when *Jurassic Park* beat out local films to dominate the box office, the death knell of Hong Kong cinema had already begun to toll. It has simply become louder over the decades, and close to deafening in recent years. The number of productions and box office share have shrunk dramatically, from the over 200 per year during its heyday in the 1980s to the current 50 or so releases per year. More devastatingly, there is a steady exodus of established filmmakers

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who opt to work in Beijing or Shanghai. Derek Yee, who established his creative workshop in Beijing in 2009 and was one of the last amongst his generation to do so, starkly predicted at the time of his move that “Hong Kong cinema, as we know it, will be dead in three years” (Maizi 2010: 85).

Local film critics share Yee’s pessimism. Even when they celebrated an upsurge in well-received and high-quality local productions that seemed to be breathing new life into the industry, even going so far as to regard these films as possibly a new “New Wave,” they wrote as though the phenomenon signified not a renewal but a last gasp of air before death. For example, in a beaming review of *La Comedie Humaine*, a critic argued that genre films like action movies and romance in Hong Kong cinema should be regarded as legitimate forms of local culture that are deserving of preservation. Yet, he also saw the current localist revival as nothing more than a swan song: “These Hong Kong filmmakers are desperately trying to document the end times for themselves: Ivy Ho’s *Crossing Hennessy*, Pang Hock-chung’s *Love in a Puff*, Clement Cheung and Derek Kwok’s *Gallants*, Heiward Mak’s *Ex*, Barbara Wong’s *Breakup Club*... These films were not made without reasons” (Dengtu 2010: 60).

Admittedly, Hong Kong cinema during the last two decades has long struck critics and scholars as being in survival mode. Whether approached as “a cinema of disappearance” (Abbas 1997) or a “crisis cinema,” (Cheung and Chu 2004), there is a nagging sense that contemporary Hong Kong cinema is characterized by one form of *struggle* or another, be it with visuality, history, or self-identity. More intensely than ever before, it is now also struggling with its continued survival as a viable industry and a unique cinematic culture.

As I explore these questions, I am struck by the relevance of an unlikely film genre: the “urban romance” (*dushi aiqing xiaopin* 都市愛情小品) which, on the surface, seems to closely resemble the much maligned “rom-com” (romantic comedy) in Hollywood. In actuality, the two are entirely different beasts. Not only are urban romance films not always romantic or comedic, unlike the rom-com, they also tend to be rather restrained in expressions of sentimentality. Most of all, even though the Hollywood rom-com is predominantly urban, its sense of place is very weak. In other words, it matters little whether the lovers are sleepless in Seattle, trying to be friends with benefits in L.A., or going the distance between New York and San Francisco, the character of the specific urban setting is rendered virtually irrelevant by the formulaic narrative of the romance. By contrast, in many of the Hong Kong films, love is portrayed as a by-product of circumstances such as neighborhood dynamics, changes in city policies, or shifts in urban demographics. As I will discuss in the rest of this article, these films are not only telling stories about romantic love, they are at the same time detailing the nuance and complexity of a specific and ever-changing urban experience.

To explore these films as an affective form of urban documentation, my critical framework here relies on a body of “local theories.” I have used this strategy in various ways in my past work, where I made “conscious efforts to weave insights

from major theoretical works in English seamlessly into Hong Kong's local Chinese-language debates" which "advance sophisticated theoretical positions and are in explicit or implicit conversation with major formal academic works in the field" despite being published in non-academic venues (Leung 2008: 6). I have also argued for the theoretical character of local writings that do not legitimately "count" as theory within standard contexts of academic publishing (Leung 2007). While my previous efforts to marshal "local theories" have been queer endeavors, it strikes me that the fundamental spirit of the strategy goes deeper than my desire to acknowledge local debates on non-normative sexuality. In fact, the impulse is to be *critically* queer, i.e., to recognize non-normative forms of critical writings, on *any* subjects, that have the potential to transform the parameters that have excluded or marginalized them. In this article, even as I turn my attention to heterosexual romance, my analytical framework is guided by this critically "queer" impulse. It does not mean that I eschew scholarship "proper" or English-language debates outside of Hong Kong. Nor am I arguing for any essential authority or authenticity in local writings. It simply means that whenever possible, I choose to prioritize the critical insights of writers publishing in the local context: from the vast volume of writings on film in publications by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society and in the trade magazine *Hong Kong Film*, to the Chinese-language writings by Hong Kong-based intellectuals and artists as well as scholars who choose to publish some of their works outside of standard academic venues. In so doing, I hope to show that a critical framework that derives from locally published writings is just as relevant as one that draws primarily from the English-language works of internationally recognized theorists. There is also admittedly an affective aspect to this critical gesture: I, too, am writing a love letter of sorts to this local critical scene, as a tribute to its vibrant exchange of ideas and passionate concern over the city that, in the face of increased self-censorship and the creeping curtailing of press freedom, may also be in danger of disappearing.

## Cinema and Urban Heritage

What is cinema's role in the constitution of a city's history, memory, and heritage? A recent case illustrates the complexity involved in asking such a question. In 2010, a battle was brewing between heritage activists and the Urban Renewal Authority in Hong Kong over the planned demolition of Wing Lee Street, a neighborhood in Sheung Wan with an intact block of tenement buildings that were built in the 1950s. The street was one of the targets in a redevelopment project to convert the neighborhood into a high-rise condo complex. Despite passionate protests by heritage activists, the city planners had not budged. Meanwhile, *Echoes of the Rainbow* (Alex Law, 2010), a modest production about a young boy's experience in the 1960s that was set in the Wing Lee Street neighborhood and filmed on location

there, won the Crystal Bear Award for Best Film at the prestigious Berlinale. When news of the success of *Echoes of the Rainbow* hit home, Wing Lee Street suddenly attracted the attention of the general public. In the weeks to come, crowds armed with cameras would pour into the street, taking pictures and leaving messages on the placards placed there by protesting activists. Soon, even foreign tourists joined in, some coming to Hong Kong with the express purpose of visiting the famed street. This was the kind of publicity activists could never dream of creating. Finally, the Urban Renewal Authority announced that it had revised its plans and that Wing Lee Street had been taken out of the redevelopment zone.

There are some complex lessons to be drawn from the unexpected influence *Echoes of the Rainbow* had on the city's redevelopment strategy. What is the relation between urban development, cinema, and heritage activism? Is the "saving" of Wing Lee Street a victory for the latter or an amplification of the contradictions amongst the three? I want to consider the question through a little known, but curiously ironic, detail about *Echoes of the Rainbow*'s success in Berlin. The film was screened at Filmtheater am Friedrichschain, an art-house cinema in a quiet residential district on the edge of Prenzlauerberg in East Berlin. The theater was almost torn down in 1991, when private investors wanted to build an office and apartment complex in its location. Saved by protests from local residents, the theater was later bought and renovated by filmmaker Michael Verhoeven, who made sure that the building preserved much of its original character (Berlinale). Moreover, the preservation of the site was accompanied by efforts to make direct impact on the day-to-day culture of the neighborhood. For instance, the use of the theater to screen Berlinale's youth-adjudicated Generation Kplus program was designed to appeal to local young viewers, with specific provisions made for them such as early screen times and live simultaneous translation into German during screenings. The fact that a film like *Echoes of the Rainbow*, set in a time and place so far removed from that of the neighborhood's inhabitants, managed to garner enthusiastic local reception attests to the venue's role in creating a vital cosmopolitanism in a quiet corner of East Berlin.

By contrast, the eleventh-hour capitulation to preserve Wing Lee Street was a calculated response to manufactured nostalgia that did not include an integrated vision for the *future* of the neighborhood. Taiwanese writer Lung Ying-tai, whose sojourn in Hong Kong during 2003–2012 has produced some of the sharpest insights on the disconnection between the city's cultural and urban policies, tells this story:

I walked past a primary school and saw these drawings ... The children drew colorful dragons, the Great Wall, the eternal Yangtze River, the beautiful Forbidden City. Clearly, this is part of their "civic education." In these drawings, you cannot see the crowded market in Wan Chai, the layered and winding old streets of Sheung Wan, the fishing villages in Tai Po, or the beautiful Sunset of Sha Wan King. Why is it that in Hong Kong children's imagination and celebration, the one thing I do not see is the city of Hong Kong? (Lung 2008: 104).

This observation succinctly captures the spirit of Lung's sustained critique of Hong Kong's redevelopment strategies in many of her other writings, most famously her widely-circulated essay on the controversial development project of the West Kowloon Cultural District (Lung 2008: 19–39). For Lung, urban development must go hand in hand with cultural policies that nurture people's connection with their neighborhoods. Without such nurturing, even little children begin to lose their connection to the city. Their sense of belonging is severed from their lived experience and instead abstracted into formulaic symbols of “the nation.” The Urban Renewal Authority's decision to “save” Wing Lee Street only when it has become a consumer product of nostalgia illustrates precisely why this kind of “preservation” is incapable of achieving the goal Lung advocates. As Mathias Woo points out in his searing critique of Hong Kong's urban redevelopment policies, what gets preserved even after hard-fought battles is only the “hardware” (such as the old buildings themselves), whereas the “software” (the nurturing of “cultural infrastructure” and “community spirit”) is all but ignored (Woo 2006: 69–73).

If cinema simply serves to commodify nostalgia, albeit with dramatic results in this case, its significance would be limited, if not questionable. In an essay from *The Hong Kong I Love*, lyricist Lin Xi shows how cinematic nostalgia and heritage activism can even become disconnected from the lived experience of urban dwellers. Lin describes how, during his university days, he would saunter through the Western District late at night, admiring the old buildings from the 1950s and 1960s. He was drawn to the wooden window panels and brass door handles that open into spacious balconies, features so reminiscent of the settings in Eileen Chang's fiction. Yet, as Lin laments the way many owners destroy the architectural style of these buildings by encasing the balconies and turning them into an enclosed space with ugly steel windows, he also acknowledges that, without the steel-framed enclosure, “when there are leaks and flooding during storm season, William Chang would not come and clean up the balconies for you” (Lin 2007: 37). William Chang is Wong Kar-wai's artistic director who single-handedly recreates, through painstaking details of period architecture, decor, and clothing, the nostalgic splendor in films like *In The Mood For Love*. Yet, as Lin observes, the aesthetic longing for the beauty of the past sometimes contradicts the pragmatic need for comfort and convenience in the present. Lin goes on to caution that even as we support preservation, we “should not become blinded by the nostalgia in Wong Kar-wai's films because buildings are not built for eyes to watch, but for bodies to inhabit in comfort” (Lin 2007: 37).

What is most interesting about recent films by younger directors is that, unlike their more famous predecessors, their works actually favor the bodily experience of living in an ever-changing urban environment over the visual splendor of cityscapes from the vanished past. Even nostalgic films like *Merry-Go-Round* (Clement Cheng and Yan Yan Mak, 2010) and *Big Blue Lake* (Jessey Tsang, 2011) focus on the *impossibility* of ever rendering the past, rather than engage in aesthetic efforts to recreate it. Films from the urban romance genre generally

show little interest in dwelling on the past. Instead, they accomplish something quite different: they dramatize on screen how the changing particulars of the city affect its inhabitants in the most intimate ways.

### Love at Work: The Commute and the Smoking Break

To illustrate, I turn to a pair of seemingly very different films: the moody and melancholic *Claustrophobia* (Ivy Ho, 2008) and the cheeky, light-hearted *Love in a Puff* (Pang Ho-cheung, 2010). Each film portrays the nitty-gritty details of white collar work, the trials and tribulations of negotiating heterosexual romance, and the changing dynamics of urban living that are redrawing the boundaries of intimacy between young people in contemporary Hong Kong.

*Claustrophobia* is the directorial debut of acclaimed screenwriter Ivy Ho. Famous for her lyrical dialogues and intricate dramatic plot lines, Ho surprises her audience with a first film that relies more on mood and atmosphere than narrative development. In fact, the film's plot is minimal: it tells the story of a growing, but largely unexpressed, intimacy between a married manager, Tom, and one of his junior employees, Pearl. The narrative follows an episodic structure and leaves out crucial details between segments that unfold in reverse chronological order. Although an extra-marital affair (which may or may not have been consummated) is at its heart, the film is neither a morality tale nor a sexual drama. Rather, it illustrates an ambiguous experience of heterosexual intimacy amidst the urban changes of a city under economic stress.

The slippage between the film's English and Chinese titles, respectively "claustrophobia" and "intimacy" (*qinmi* 親密), is cleverly exploited to draw attention to the ambivalent nature of proximity. There are hints throughout the film that conditions for mid-level white-collar work in Hong Kong are deteriorating rapidly. During a meeting with potential mainland investors, Tom reminisces to Pearl about how promising it was during his early days at work, in contrast to the tough times currently. There is increased surveillance of workers, often from new investors from mainland China. Offices move further and further away to outlying areas where the rent is low. The company where Tom works, for instance, has recently moved to a location that is "not reachable by the MTR and costs a \$200 taxi ride from more central areas in the city." Thus, the spatial expansion of the city's commercial spaces ironically results in the contraction of an employee's lived experience of space as they are obliged to squeeze into a crowded car during the long commute and work punishing hours in isolated and crammed offices. The film shows that the proximity produced between people under these circumstances is both intimate and claustrophobic.

The opening shot shows a garage, through which Tom's car exits into the evening traffic. The section that follows, which lasts 23 minutes in total screen



time, follows the employees' daily commute. In his study of urban cinema, Yomi Braester identifies several distinct forms of camera work that recur in urban films: for example, recurrent alternation between extreme long shots of built environment and point-of-view shots that replicate the city dweller's experience of living in that environment (Braester 2012: 348), and pervasive tracking shots depicting the experience of roaming around the city (349–350). In *Claustrophobia*, these visual strategies are deployed to highlight the contrast between the expanse of the urban commute and the tight proximity of the commuters. Wide shots of the car moving through the city alternate with medium and close-up shots of the employees cramped in the car, where sexual and professional tension is constantly about to erupt. Tracking shots that follow the car's movement across the city make sure that the actual course of the commute is identifiable to local audience. This long segment follows the car as it leaves the company's office in Wong Chuk Hang in southern Hong Kong Island, through the Aberdeen tunnel, passing through Wan Chai and Causeway Bay, then through the Cross-Harbor Tunnel into Kowloon, and heading north towards the New Territories. Tom drops off each colleague along the way, until only Pearl is left, as they drive through the Lion Rock tunnel into Shatin. Thus, the film carefully places the intimate and claustrophobic experience of the commuters very specifically within Hong Kong's cityscape.

The lighting of this first segment is gloomy, accentuating the tension and repressed passion within the confined space of the car and in the darkness of the evening. As the film goes backward in time, however, the lighting brightens and there are more actions set during the day and in outdoor locations that open into an expansive vista. There is, moreover, a promise of developing intimacy in these spacious settings: a pier at Sai Kung where it is hinted that Pearl may have gone to meet Tom during his golf getaway and where she meets a kind taxi driver during a storm; the waterfront walkway outside of the office where Pearl develops her friendship with the taxi driver; the rooftop of the company where Pearl and Tom have a heartfelt conversation during a fire scare.

The chronologically reverse narrative creates a contradictory experience for the audience. On the one hand, the plot unfolds to reveal what leads ultimately to the repression and termination of Tom and Pearl's attraction in the end. On the other hand, the audience experiences the narrative form in reverse, thus in actuality going from darkness to light, from tension to connection, from claustrophobia to spaciousness, from despair to hopefulness. This formal contradiction echoes the ambivalent condition of heterosexual monogamy as depicted in the film. It is never made clear whether Tom's marriage is happy or how passionate is the attraction between him and Pearl. In this way, the film refrains from manipulating the audience into either rooting for or rejecting Tom and Pearl's potential union. Instead, the film seems more interested in simply provoking the question of whether, and how, one should approach the intimacy that is produced in the claustrophobic space of the cramped, isolated office and the long commute.

Stylistically unlike *Claustrophobia* in every way, *Love in a Puff* nonetheless tackles a similar set of themes: white-collar work, the vicissitude of heterosexual romance, and new spaces of intimacy. The film takes as its point of departure the implementation of a new health ordinance in January, 2007 that bans smoking in all indoor workplaces. As a consequence, an outdoor smoking-break culture begins to form. People from different walks of life come together as they congregate in alleyways to smoke. In effect, the ordinance has created a new spatial connector between work spaces. The community of smokers featured in the film consists of several advertising executives, a pizza delivery man who is South Asian, a waitress who is an immigrant from mainland China, a bell hop, and a Sephora saleswoman. The film tells the story of the blossoming romance between advertising executive Jimmy and saleswoman Cherie.

*Love in a Puff* is also episodic in structure, consisting of seven segments, each of which follows one day of the courtship during its first week. Embedded in this structure are three other types of narrative. First, faux documentary footage of interviews with Jimmy and Cherie's friends are inserted to provide day-to-day details of this white-collar world, such as the competitiveness of the advertising world, the ennui of working in sales, and details of sexual habits and rules of courtship. The second and third types of narrative inserts are scenes that dramatize the stories and gossip told by the "smoking citizens" around their "hotpot" everyday. Most famous of these scenes is the film's opening "gag": the sequence unfolds with all the generic expectations of a horror film, only to be revealed that it is a ghost story told enthusiastically by the pizza delivery man Bittu. Equally famous is the gossip told by Jimmy's colleague about how Jimmy discovered his ex-girlfriend cheated on him when she arrived at a party with another man's pubic hair visibly stuck on her bracelet. This salacious story, told with clever innuendo and dirty swear words, gives an unprecedentedly frank portrayal of the ingenious and playful ways in which Cantonese is used by Hong Kong's middle-class. This highly local use of language continues in another activity, texting, which becomes a main means of connection between Jimmy and Cherie when they are outside of the smokers' circle. The film often shows close-up of their texts, which combine the use of English, Chinese, Cantonese slangs, and digital language. Like the newly formed smoking culture, storytelling, gossip-mongering, and texting emerge in the film as means of connection between people who otherwise have little in common and whose paths may never have crossed. They are also uniquely local forms of communication that showcase Cantonese as a cinematic language that is not reducible to a dubbed Mandarin version. Like *La Comédie Humaine*, *Love in a Puff* creates a cinephilia that privileges the original Cantonese version.

Unlike *Claustrophobia*, the geographical setting of *Love in a Puff* does not replicate an actual movement across the city. The film's geography is actually an undisguised pastiche that provides another insider joke. When Cherie first meets Jimmy, she tells him that she works at Sephora. Jimmy looks surprised and asks, "Is there a Sephora around here?" In fact, the only Sephora store (now closed) that opened in Hong



Kong was in Mongkok, but none of Mongkok's landmarks are visible in the film's setting. As Pang details in his blog, the alleyway where the romance takes place is composed of shots of an alleyway in Tsim Sha Tsui, one near Admiralty, and an overpass in an industrial area in Kowloon Bay (Pang 2010). Jimmy's response tips the audience to the patchwork geography of the romance. Not unlike the pieced-together fragments of faux interviews, storytelling, gossip-mongering, and texting in the film, the quasi-fictional, cut-up urban scenes serve to provide the audience with new and entertaining ways of imagining connections and belonging.

Whereas *Love in a Puff* is distinctively located in the alleyways of Hong Kong's smoking-break culture, its sequel, *Love in the Buff* (Pang Ho-cheung, 2012), illustrates the *dislocation* many white-collar workers experience as a result of shrinking economic opportunities at home and the lure of upward mobility north of the border. Paralleling director Pang's own move to Beijing for work, the sensibility of the sequel has also moved northward. The plot has Jimmy and Cherie relocating to Beijing, now seen as a city of opportunities in contrast to the professional "dead end" in Hong Kong. In the film, the characters interact primarily in Mandarin. There is potential for the film to capture the street-level color and timbre of communication between Mandarin and Cantonese speakers in the sparkling and lively ways that characterize the dialogue of the previous film, but *Love in the Buff* does not capitalize on that potential. Instead, the dialogue is written in a generic fashion, with very little attempt at capturing local slangs or word play. In this sequel, the romance of Jimmy and Cherie is no longer tied to their streets,



**Figure 11.1** Jimmy and Cherie in *Love in a Puff* (Pang Ho-cheung, 2010). DVD still.

and the local colors that characterize their interactions in the first film seem to have vanished in a puff as the lovers stop smoking. Instead, the movement between Hong Kong and Beijing drives the film's plot, a theme that recurs as Hong Kong filmmakers themselves work more and more often across the border. What kinds of love are being imagined along this Hong Kong–Beijing axis?

### Migrant Love: Tales of Two Neighborhoods

In *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (Peter Chan, 1996), Li Qiao, a hard-working woman from Guangzhou, gradually climbs her way up the economic ladder in Hong Kong and views the pinnacle of her achievement as the moment she can “pass” as a Hong Kong woman. The film represents a perspective on migrant life that is specific to the circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s, when Hong Kong was still perceived to be in a position of economic and cultural advantage *vis-a-vis* China. In a detailed study of how mainland women have been imagined in Hong Kong cinema, Yang Meiyan suggests that the evolving images, from tragic victim and sexual predator to entrepreneurial heroine and idealized muse, are all underwritten by a narrative about the relation between China and Hong Kong. As the power dynamics between the two regions have shifted radically since the release of *Comrades*, it is no surprise that not only images of women, but migrant life across the border in general, are undergoing a sea change. Two recent romance films, *Crossing Hennessy* (Ivy Ho, 2010) and *A Beautiful Life* (Andrew Lau, 2011), have provoked comparisons to *Comrades*. As Ho penned the script of *Comrades*, *Crossing Hennessy* may well be a screenwriter's directorial “retake” of the story. *A Beautiful Life*, on the other hand, is an update to *Comrades*, featuring a reverse trajectory that is the new reality: it is now a Hong Kong woman who is a migrant seeking her fortune in Beijing. My discussion will focus on the films' contrasting geographical imagination and the ways in which each film “places” intimacy along the Hong Kong–Beijing axis. It is also tempting to view the films as opposite stances on the future of the industry: as *A Beautiful Life* idealizes a movement towards Beijing, *Crossing Hennessy* makes an affectionate case for remaining in Hong Kong.

*A Beautiful Life* opens with a tracking shot following the traffic into the nightlife of Beijing, then cuts to the inside of a karaoke bar in Sanlitun, a hip and cosmopolitan area of Beijing known for its clubs, bars, and upscale shopping malls. The two protagonists, whose chance meeting in the karaoke sows the seed of a long and crisis-ridden romantic entanglement, inhabit this space differently. Li Peiyu, a Hong Kong woman trying to build a real-estate career in Beijing and living an expensive life off an affair with a married man, navigates the bar scene with facility and familiarity. Despite being local, Fang Zhengdong, a Beijing-born policeman, looks uncomfortable and is clearly out of place with the surroundings. The film takes pains to reinforce this contrast continuously through the characters' habitat. In the

sequence after the karaoke meeting, scenes of Li's modern but sterile highrise condo, messily strewn with objects of her luxury lifestyle, are followed by images of the courtyard house where Zhengdong lives with his younger brother. Zhengdong is associated with the "old Beijing," portrayed to be one of family continuity (the house is left to the brothers by their parents) and community (the courtyard is shared by neighbors who also have long-standing roots in the neighborhood). As the romantic narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the contrast is also meant as a critique of Hong Kong migrants in China, like Peiyu, whose sole aspiration is for the *new* Beijing, signified by conspicuous consumption, sensual indulgence, and irresponsibility. Peiyu's initial relation with Zhengdong verges on being exploitative as she leverages his attraction for favors and money. The selfless Zhengdong is further idealized through tropes of disability and care-taking. Zhengdong's world consists of his autistic brother, his brother's mute girlfriend, and Zhengdong's best friend who is a blind musician. It is later revealed that even Zhengdong himself has a degenerative disease that will lead to early onset of dementia. The film's portrayal of disability, however, departs from how disability has been coded on Western screen: either, as McRuer has famously argued, in association with queerness (McRuer 2006) or, as Barounis has observed from more recent examples, with remasculinization (Barounis 2009). In *A Beautiful Life*, disability is instead made synonymous with *care-taking*: all the disabled characters in the film, male or female, are also themselves carers. Zhengdong's world signifies an idealized community of mutual care-taking and unconditional love that the film associates with old Beijing and contrasts with the world that Peiyu seeks when she moves north. Ultimately, Zhengdong's disability becomes a litmus test of redemption for the able-bodied, materialistic, and disloyal Hong Kong migrant.

After Peiyu loses money that Zhengdong has lent her (and causes him to lose his parental house), she runs back to Hong Kong in a cowardly way. As a setting, Hong Kong appears in the film, literally, as an unwelcoming and inhospitable closet: the claustrophobic space that Peiyu's unsympathetic brother confines her to at his home. When Peiyu finds the courage to leave Hong Kong again, Zhengdong, whose health and mental state have deteriorated, has moved with his brother and his brother's girlfriend to a village house in Muntougou, a rural area in West Beijing. This new setting is an extension of the courtyard house Zhengdong used to live in, with even clearer associations with remnants of the old Beijing. In this way, the film not only reverses the direction of the migrant journey in *Comrades*, it furthermore displaces its *telos*: Peiyu's journey from Hong Kong to Beijing to Muntougou does not lead her to a better life in materialistic terms, but parallels her transformation from a selfish woman in search of economic advancement to the film's vision of a selfless but emotionally fulfilled carer.

While the film's critical portrayal of Hong Kong migrants in Beijing may be breaking some new ground, what it offers as an alternative is highly nostalgic and implausible. The portrayal of Peiyu's life in Muntougou glosses over the harsh demands a primary carer in a non-urban setting would doubtless face in

a low-income household with very demanding medical needs. The film is not interested in exploring these aspects; it depicts disability as well as village life merely as metaphors for Peiyu's redemption. In the last sequence, after the couple have both survived health problems, Peiyu and a mentally deteriorating Zhengdong walk contentedly with their baby on the rural streets of Mentougou amidst a bustling scene of friendly villagers. Is this the film's vision for what a Hong Kong migrant should seek when heading north in search of a better life? Needless to say, the film was not particularly well received in Hong Kong. In fact, many critics and audience members were offended by its treatment of Hong Kong, both as a city and as a "character" embodied by Peiyu initially (Tang 2011; Chan 2011: 78–79). It appears that the northbound filmmaker now views Hong Kong as both a suffocating place from which to escape, as well as a morally weak character in need of redemption. Most of all, in his "placing" of intimacy, he has abandoned street-level nuance in favor of nostalgic and metaphorical broad strokes.

*Crossing Hennessy's* deliberately limited geographical imagination provides a good antidote to *A Beautiful Life*. Set entirely in Wan Chai, the film depicts a neighborhood within the day-to-day milieu of a modern, metropolitan city. It conceives of urban connections without nostalgia, much in the same way *Love in a Puff* shows storytelling, gossip-mongering, and texting as new means of connections for young urbanites. *Crossing Hennessy's* neighborhood consists of middle-class owners of small businesses, whose daily lives intersect as much through petty bickering as genuine kindness and a shared concern for their next generation. At the beginning of the film, the romantic protagonists – Loy, the son of a successful appliance shop owner and Oi Lin, the niece of a hardware store owner – are being match-made against their will. Loy is an only son to a successful business woman. The family business ensures he does not have to worry about his livelihood. Nor does he have to worry about anything else as his unmarried aunt devotedly takes care of all his domestic needs. Loy's good fortune, however, also breeds his shame: he is a version of the "failed man" (*feinan* 廢男) that has come to symbolize a generation of Hong Kong men who have been brought up under excessive protection. Loy is completely aware of his "failures": he recalls not being able to get out of bed even to go to his father's deathbed, and he realizes that his ex-girlfriend treats him more as a "pillow" than someone she loves and respects. Unlike in *A Beautiful Life*, however, this flawed character who embodies certain characteristics of Hong Kong is not in need of redemption. Rather, he comes to see his own worth through falling in love. Loy's romantic antagonist, Oi Lin, also represents a new generation: that of a migrant woman whose identity is no longer defined by a search for a better life or an aspiration to becoming a "real" Hong Konger. Instead, Oi Lin, who migrated from mainland China to live with her uncle and aunt in Hong Kong when her parents died, occupies a marginal space that straddles between belonging and alienation, much more reminiscent of the stories told in the anthology *Also Hong Kongers* (Cheng 2009) than of a film like *Comrades*. She tells Loy about her lonely girlhood, how it drives her to long for a protector which she sees in her violence-prone boyfriend, the fellow outsider A Xu.

The slow coming together of Loy and Oi Lin in the film is driven by two sets of circumstances. First, they both escape into fantasies through their love for detective novels. Loy has a penchant for imagining possible crime from scenes on the street and seeing his dead father talking to him, while Oi Lin loses herself in fiction to endure the boredom of work or the intense temper of her boyfriend. Ironically, even though they bond through a sense of humor and a taste for the fantastic, their romance is actually about leaving fantasies behind to face each other as ordinary people in real life. Neither protector nor muse, they become each other's beloved as lucky if lonely people who have lazy habits or teeth that need fillings, who are kind and decent and can make each other laugh. This very ordinary journey is borne out by a second factor: their geographical journey does not involve a heroic move like the one in *A Beautiful Life*. Loy's and Oi Lin's respective workplaces (both small businesses owned by their relatives) are located north and south of Hennessy Road, a major thoroughfare that bridges Central to Causeway Bay. As the title suggests, the mundane act of crossing the street is both a literal and metaphorical way in which they very gradually cross into the emotional center of each other's life.

The film also decenters the romance to give significant focus to the cast of characters that surround their lives: relatives, co-workers, hairdressers, teahouse waiters. These living and breathing inhabitants of the neighborhood have backstories of their own and are not just happy-looking props in the background. Most significantly, at the time of the film's production, the Urban Renewal Authority was



**Figure 11.2** Oi Lin and Loy in *Crossing Hennessy* (Ivy Ho, 2010). DVD still.



redeveloping Lee Tung Street despite long-standing efforts of heritage activists who petitioned for the preservations of the street's old houses. *Crossing Hennessy* draws attention to the street's fate by including many panning shots of the area cordoned off to be redeveloped. In the sequence after A Xu beats up Loy for not "being man enough to protect Oi Lin" and in the final sequence when Loy runs from his mother's wedding to find Oi Lin in the tea house, the camera shows Loy running along the street, now completely walled off by temporary partition with color posters of the Urban Renewal Authority's illustrated plans for the street's future looks. In both sequences, Loy is accepting his own worth despite his flaws. By placing Loy's moments of self-actualization against the backdrop of the city amidst ceaseless redevelopment, the film depicts a resilience and a faith in the life pulse of a neighborhood that will nonetheless continue because of its inhabitants.

The film's ending further decenters the romance to focus on the city's streetscape as an important character on its own. The concluding sequence comprises a series of empty shots of all the places Loy and Oi Lin frequent: Honolulu Tea House, where they share their love of detective fiction and fantasies, the street corner where both have wandered around in despair, tram stops where Loy has seen Oi Lin off, the pedestrian overpass where Oi Lin cries in despair. Thus, unlike *A Beautiful Life*, which sets its drama between a ruthless hunt for a piece of the economic pie in cold and heartless urban spaces and a redemptive recovery of old Beijing and sacrificial love in a rural town, *Crossing Hennessy* pays homage to an ordinary neighborhood that is pulsating with life despite the upheavals of urban changes. It suggests that instead of searching elsewhere for a nobler life, it may be better simply to stay put, to accept oneself and get to know one's neighbors and streets and, above all, to live a love far less extraordinary.

### All Cut Up: Shooting the Heartbroken City

While *Break Up Club* (Barbara Wong, 2010), a film about the on-again, off-again romance of a young couple Flora and Joe, is a generation apart from the romance in *Crossing Hennessy*, the two films actually tackle similar issues. Joe is arguably a younger version of Loy: an amiable young man who is unambitious and incapable of accomplishment. He goes from one part-time job to another, quitting when he feels bored, but is kind-hearted and obviously devoted to his girlfriend. Flora grows up poor in Tin Shui Wai, a neighborhood close to the border that is infamous for its social problems, and aspires towards a better life. The relationship is thrown into a crisis when Flora is asked by her boss to assist Lies, a famous Laos-born artist who sees something special in her and offers her a future in his accomplished, ambitious, and cosmopolitan life. Flora's romantic dilemma resembles a broader anxiety about the current state of Hong Kong: should one stay and accept mediocrity and lack of opportunities, or leave for greener pastures elsewhere?



**Figure 11.3** Flora and Joe in *Break Up Club* (Barbara Wong, 2010). DVD still.

What is most interesting about *Break Up Club*, and distinguishes it from other teen romance, is the significant role filmmaking plays in the plot. The romance is framed by a meta-narrative about a director Barbara Wong and producer Lawrence Cheng (played by the real life director and producer of the film) looking for inspiration for their next romance film. They invite young people to shoot scenes from their love life as ideas pitch for their movie. After Joe and Flora's first breakup, Joe tells his story to the director and is asked to film his story with Flora. Throughout the first section of the film, we see Joe filming frequently with his DV camera. After the couple gets back together, however, Joe is worried that Flora does not want to be filmed for a project, so he returns the equipment to Wong without any of the footage he has filmed. Unbeknown to him, his filmmaker friend Sunny makes an arrangement with Wong to secretly follow and capture Joe's and Flora's relationship on screen. Sunny plants secret cameras in their home and follows them around with a secret crew, documenting their every move. Towards the end of the film, the audience is shown that many scenes of what they see on screen are actually shown from the perspective of one of Sunny's secret cameras.

The entire film, then, is cut up into various kinds of footage shot from different points of view: from Joe's own camera (which the audience is aware of), from Sunny's secretly planted cameras as well as those filmed by the crew in secret (unbeknown to the audience), as well as the all-seeing narration of the actual film's point of view. The audience is only shown the "reveal" at a scene in the airport where Joe, his leg in a cast,

hobbles through the airport to beg Flora not to leave, to no avail. As Joe cries, the camera pulls back to reveal that the scene is a movie being shown at a test screening, where Joe is finally being told of Sunny's secret arrangement with the director.

This gimmick is significant not only as an entertaining plot line to surprise the audience. More importantly, it draws attention to the power of filmmaking as a form of memory-making, even when its motivation, execution, or aesthetic value may all be dubious. At the end of the film, what finally convinces Flora to abandon her trip to Barcelona (and a potential future with Lies) is the footage on the DV camera that Joe gives to her as a memento. As she watches fragmented scenes of their relationship, all "placed" across different corners of the city from karaoke bars to shopping malls to the harbor front, she becomes convinced that her love lies with these memories rather than with the foreign adventures Lies promises her. In "duping" the audience into watching the secret docudrama shot by Sunny for the fictional Barbara Wong, which in effect makes up most of the film the audience sees, *Break Up Club* also forces the audience to momentarily occupy Flora's place. In effect, the film challenges the audience to see filmmaking itself as a means to redeem a broken relationship through memory-making. The collective memory of a city captured in fragments on film is not always pretty. It may sometimes even be unethical in motivation and shoddy in execution. Yet, like Joe's footage, it is nonetheless what most emotionally connects a lover to her beloved, and a people to their city. It may ultimately be that which can most powerfully convince them that in the long run, it is worth staying for.

### Conclusion: Love of a Fallen Cinema

In an impressive study of film locations in Hong Kong cinema, independent researcher Kei Fu suggests that "our impressions of the city through films often feels more real than our actual experience" (Kei 2009: 9). Indeed, when a city has the good fortune of having been an active and dynamic character in a cinema as rich and diverse as Hong Kong's, its presence on film becomes a significant form of collective urban memory. Such memory can "feel more real" than actual experience when the actual cityscape changes so rapidly, when there is no concerted and systematic efforts at preservation, and when local culture and heritage do not play a major part in civic education.

Thus, whether it is an atmospheric rendering of a claustrophobic commute across the city, a playful dramatization of alleyway smoking culture, a loving portrayal of the romantic shenanigans in a Wan Chai neighborhood, or a postmodern pastiche of a young couple's sites of heartbreak, these fragments of fictional urban life form part of a cinematic memory of how the city is experienced at moments of change. In this way, these films are also relevant to heritage activism.

In a series of reflections on Hong Kong's streets, literary historian Lu Wei-luan criticizes the "dull or frivolous" character of many projects that attempt to document Hong Kong's urban history. By contrast, she praises an arts project in Taipei that "professionally and lovingly documents the process of a city in massive transformation" through *creatively* rendering the daily changes of streets in the city (Lu, 1996: 20). By portraying the trial and tribulations of romantic love as it is impacted at, literally, the street level, these urban romance films also accomplish the kind of creative documentation that Lu lauds.

As the whispers of the death of Hong Kong cinema continue, one wonders whether Hong Kong as a main character will also begin to disappear on-screen. Being a subject of creative documentation, having the nuance and complexity of its changes dramatized on screen, is a privilege not enjoyed by too many cities in the world. Only a handful of other cities (New York or Tokyo, for instance) have had treatment comparable to what Hong Kong has enjoyed. In my adopted home, Vancouver, which houses a vibrant film industry but one that mainly serves the needs of the far more powerful cinema across the border in the US, the city finds itself primarily as a stand-in and not a main character on screen. In the program notes to "On Location," an exhibition where writer and artist Michael Turner compiles scenes of Vancouver in over 167 films, the sentiment expressed is directly opposite to that of Kei Fu's: "Over the years, film production has had a strong impact on Vancouver, conflating our understanding of the reality of the city with its filmic representation. Indeed, there is a perceived anxiety about a city that spends more time standing in for other cities than it does in 'playing' itself" (Vancouver Art Gallery 2011). Unlike Hong Kong, Vancouver rarely plays itself. Most often, it is "passing" as a generic North American city or a fictional town on a planet far, far away. For Vancouverites, our city on screen signals amnesia and distortion more than collective memory and urban documentation.

Whether Hong Kong cinema survives remains to be seen. It is a real possibility that it will soon share the fate of Vancouver and become a service-provider for the needs of a far more powerful cinema across the border. For now, even as a new generation of filmmakers struggle to survive and create locally, their efforts have not always been received positively. Many recent films, including those studied in this article, have been criticized for being overly local, self-indulgent, or unsuccessfully experimental. Apparently, this generation of Hong Kong films has potential but may be far too narrow in market appeal to sustain the current industry, too small to ensure that there will even be a future for their filmmakers to develop. A stylistically young cinema that must die before it can mature is perhaps best described as "untimely." As products of Hong Kong cinema's possible end times, these films' untimeliness serves, in my view, as the most powerful indictment of the grim circumstances of their production. In this sense alone, regardless of how successful they may be in commercial or artistic terms, they already deserve our love.

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