Hong Kong:
Other Histories, Other Politics

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$\mathcal{P}$arachutists tell us that at 6,000 feet above ground level, the falling body does not notice the earth getting closer at all. It feels itself to be freely floating. However, at around 2,000 feet, the body begins to experience things differently, perspectives change. The earth seems to be coming at it, not just getting closer, but opening up, as if the ground were splitting.[1] Perhaps, in similar fashion, critical moments in history are subject to an effect analogous to gravitational pull: they are seen differently when they are close up than when they are far away. As Hong Kong nears the appointed date of the handover to China, the historical ground begins to open up, perspectives on things split and multiply. This is History with a capital H, sensational and veritiginous; and just in case we should forget it, there is the world's media to remind us.

30 June 1997 will be, among many other things, a media event of the first order. It is an event that has been gathering speed over the past 15 years or so, ever since Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing in 1982, which culminated in the signing of the Sino-British Joint Agreement of 1984 returning Hong Kong to Chinese rule. What is also very evident by now is that this event, full of all kinds of historical reverberations, is in danger of being turned into an *event type*, classifiable under "colonialism, end of," and cross-referenced with "free society, threats to"; on the one hand, the Evils of the West, on the other, Asiatic Despotism.

1. See Paul Virilio, "Perspectives of Real Time," trans. Chris Kraus and Yvonne Shafir, in *Metropolis*, ed. Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 59–64.

It is therefore perhaps to be expected that the handover, for all its social, economic and political import, is also taking on the appearance of soap opera on a world historical scale. The many festivals, conferences, interviews and documentaries, many put together by organizations unfamiliar with Hong Kong, provide the spectacle. The seriousness of the issues themselves — will the twenty-first century be the Chinese century? will "one country, two systems" work? is the retrocession a righting of the wrongs of the past? will the Hang Seng index (the Hong Kong stock market indicator) collapse? — provide merely the twists and turns of an edge-of-the-seat plot, punctuated now and again by moments of comic relief — will Lu Ping, the director of Hong Kong and Macau affairs, shake hands with Chris Patten when the last colonial governor departs? There are also the antics of the dramatis personae: to begin with, the clash between an imperial Iron Lady and an imperious Ailing Patriarch; more recently, skirmishes between their more plodding and less colourful successors, who have been waiting in the wings. Moreover, the world audience watching this historical show, particularly the United States, see it as a kind of interactive game, where the spectator can influence the outcome to some extent, for example, by pressing a button marked MFN.

In the few months before the handover the newspapers and the streets are full of stories that would have delighted Lu Xun or Karl Kraus. For example, some time in October 1996 on the first day when application forms for the post of Chief Executive (the post-1997 equivalent of the Governor) were available, 10 unlikely candidates showed up. Some had no identity cards, others were under-aged or unemployed, none had a ghost of a chance, yet everyone seemed full of confidence and visionary schemes for running Hong Kong. *Everyone it seems is an expert*, on everything ranging from politics to the caprices of the Hang Seng index or the vagaries of the property market. One of the most abstruse economic analyses I have heard is a disquisition by a mini-bus driver in a 45 minute ride from Western to Causeway Bay. In the streets the people come and go, speaking of Li Ka Shing and Stanley Ho. Meanwhile, the expert trouble-shooter chosen by Britain to lead Hong Kong through the transition, Chris Patten, tries hard to maintain his dignity as Hong Kong's last governor, while being daily more marginalized and outflanked by China. The more events go against him, the more he tries to enlist History on his side. All this somehow fits well with the case of Pun Sing-lui, a performance artist from the Mainland who claims to be a graduate of Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Art. After a project of his was turned down by the Hong Kong Arts Centre, he took a pot of red paint to Victoria Park and poured it over the 100-year old bronze statue of Queen Victoria sitting in state there, and followed up by knocking the old lady's nose askew with a hammer.

"A blow against colonialism" was how he described his tour de farce, as he was arrested by the local gendarmerie for vandalism; as if colonialism could be so easily identified or disfigured. For a week or two, he was a hot topic in the very popular Chinese language evening info-tainment television programs, which vigorously debated the issue of whether he was an artist or a sociopath. And then he was forgotten. More and more incidents like these are beginning to appear, like so many hysterical symptoms, as the city awaits the summer of 1997.

What, we might ask, do all these details and incidents—some serious, others apparently trivial—indicate? What they indicate, it seems to me, is that something has happened to history. There is to be sure a public, consensual history which is very much the subject of intense speculation and discussion in the media. But this history of facts and events is beginning to look more and more *staged*.[2] There is also another more elusive history which is slipping away from the public and consensual into some other dimension. It shows itself only in a special quality of events, in the intimation that behind every situation serious or trivial there is a tacit history hard to explain, especially to those who have not lived through the changes that have taken place in the city.

This other history cannot be subsumed in a mere chronology or in a narrative of successive governors and bureaucratic regimes, which are no more than the cardboard sets and figures against which another drama is played out. Nor can this history be described simply as that of the city's successful growth, as in the standard phrase "from a fishing village to a thriving metropolis." "Growth" is hardly the right metaphor. It is really a question of mutations, of trauma followed by transformations of the ground rules, of successive reinventions. The end of the Japanese occupation, the Communist takeover of China, the Korean War and the U.S. trade embargo against China that followed, the Cultural Revolution, the Hong Kong riots of 1968, Thatcher's China visit of 1982, the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, and now 1997; each of these was a shock and a challenge to Hong Kong's self-understanding of its "way of life"; each required a radical change of paradigms, a half-conscious shift of experiential grids. And in each case so far, the city has adapted, Zelig-like and without full understanding, to the new situation. At one level, it might be possible to describe the shift in terms of a movement from trade to manufacturing, and then to service and finance. But the cultural and affective readjustments which necessarily accompany these shifts are much harder to gauge, and these too have important political and historical implications.

2. Many believe that the recent election which returned Mr. Tung Chee-hwa to the office of Chief Executive was very much a "show" election. Mr. Tung had Beijing's approval—and no serious rivals.

In the not too distant past, it was possible to deal with contradictions and discrepancies with a shrug of the shoulders or by muttering "That's Hong Kong." But today, with the exigencies of the handover upon us, it is exactly the question of what *is* Hong Kong that is at issue. In this regard, William Blake, the English romantic poet and critic of industrial capitalism, seems able to capture, even if only by coincidence, one of the dilemmas of Hong Kong life today, when he wrote his little lyric on the perversities of love:

> Never seek to tell thy love
> Love that never told can be
> For the gentle wind does move
> Silently, invisibly.

Applied to the Hong Kong situation, the dilemma Blake's lyric points to is that this is decidedly a moment that demands open declarations, when the tacit has to become explicit, when the ambiguities of the place have to be quickly straightened by one or another formula. We can see what happens in such a situation by considering the much discussed question of "Hong Kong identity." The need for quick answers has created a hothouse atmosphere for such discussions. The inevitable result is that what we hear are mostly clichés of identity, whether these are clichés of the pure ("Chineseness") or of the hybrid (Hong Kong as a "mixture of East and West").

It was another poet, the precociously gifted French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who spoke of his impatience to find "the place and the formula" where his fellow poet and travel companion Paul Verlaine might be restored to "his primitive state of child of the sun."[3] We know that eventually he succeeded in finding neither, and that the partnership with Verlaine ended badly. But this does not diminish either the poignancy or indeed the hopefulness of the phrase, which we are using in the title of this special issue of *Public Culture*. "The place and the formula" can be taken as an apotropaic emblem of Hong Kong 1997; an emblem that is certainly more ambiguous and problematic, but also more thought-provoking, than the official emblem of the bauhinia, chosen for its neutrality and blandness, and the fact that it is a botanical hybrid.

Both through accident and design, Hong Kong has always seemed to be a special enough place which only required finding the right formula for it to work. The preferred formula used to be "a policy of laissez-faire"; now it is "one country,

3. See Arthur Rimbaud, "Vagabonds," in *Illuminations*, trans. Louise Varese (New York: New Directions, 1957). 67.

two systems." However, there are many indications that these formulae cannot address the complexities and historical specificity of place, which remain within the tacit. How then can this other, tacit history be evoked? Perhaps as history slips away from the public and consensual it is only through the *effects* that it has had on the cultural life of the city—its urban space, its art, cinema and architecture, its everyday life—that traces of it might be found. If so, it may be possible to pursue questions of history and politics through an interrogation of cultural forms—not, let me hasten to add, in order to depoliticize the situation, but only to follow the displacements of history and politics into the recesses of social and cultural life. Let me address these questions by first discussing Hong Kong's urban space, and its relation to urban culture.

Urban Space

Ever since Simmel, we have been alerted to the problematic effects of urban space on our ways of seeing and feeling.[4] Using nineteenth century Berlin as his model of the modern metropolis, Simmel described the city ambiguously as both the site of new and challenging experiences and the site of the *avoidance* of experience. He interpreted the big city dweller's blasé attitude, abstract intellectualism and emotional reserve as so many defenses against the overloading of the senses that we find in a metropolitan environment. To describe Hong Kong's urban space today, we will have to take Simmel's thesis a step further. As the city becomes larger, more densely populated, and socially and politically more complex, there comes a point of implosion when it can be experienced only through contradictions; which means when it cannot be experienced directly at all. In an important sense, Hong Kong is no longer a city of experience. There is so much of it that cannot be perceived, only deduced, by extrapolating from the aporias of experience. More and more, it comes into existence on the ruins of experience. It is as if its very complexity has the catastrophic effect of making the city nondescript. Preliminary evidence can be found when we look at the urban image. As something has happened to history, so something too seems to have happened to images. Even as they proliferate, images of the city do not tell us very much about it. A picture is no longer worth a thousand words. Henceforth images follow their own agenda, leaving the city that much more difficult to describe.

How we might ask did the city acquire its negative spatial qualities? It was

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4. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *On Individuality and Social Form*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324–339.

decidedly not through a process of attrition, through isolating itself from history. Quite the contrary, it is Hong Kong's involvement, by choice or by necessity, with the twists and turns of events in China and the world that has shaped its urban space. To explain what the city has become, we will have to consider how a number of historical factors worked together, so that it is now all at once a fractal city, a global city, a colonial city, and a mediatized city.

As the city expands physically, it begins to display two characteristics found in fractals. Firstly, it expands through a process of self-replication, where new districts repeat the structures of the city center, producing not suburbia (spaces designed to be different) but exurbia (which is a repetition of the same). Hong Kong's nine New Towns, some with a population of over half a million and placed in what once were the suburbs of the less developed New Territories, are good examples of exurbia. More recently, the construction of the new airport and the large-scale infrastructural projects associated with it (bridges, roads, railways, land reclamation) promise to further expand the city's urban space, but following the same model of self-replication. As the airport infrastructure spreads through the city, we will have, as one local architect noted, not just a large airport or the airport as city, but something else, *the city as airport.*[5] While some of the city's expansion is planned, many of the *effects* of this expansion are fortuitous and unpredictable. The appeal of Hong Kong then is not that of "the city as a work of art." That is to say, it cannot be perceived as a consciously planned, coherent, uniquely original entity, but rather in terms of the problematics of the copy and repetition, which requires a different kind of perception. Fractals also display a second more fascinating characteristic: they seem to exist in some in-between dimension, like say the "blue note" in jazz. In an analogous way, the city too confuses and conflates our sense of dimension, spatial and temporal.[6] The cloning of urban space expands the reach of the urban into almost every part of the New Territories; but it is also a contraction, in that the development and evolution of new towns is also a devolution into the generic. We may know the city is big, because of statistics, for example, but we do not necessarily experience it that way. Big and small begin to lose any meaning.

Confusion of dimensions can also be seen in another way and this might provide a link between the fractal city and the global city of information: confusion of dimensions is if anything enhanced by the high-resolution images and real-time

5. This is the argument of Naonori Matsuda, whose essay unfortunately could not be included in this issue.

6. See Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

transmissions of information technologies. Unlike older kinds of photographic images where enlargement of the image goes together with a certain blurred look (think of Antonioni's film *Blow-up*), the digital image is clear whatever the size (think about photographic enlargement in *Bladerunner*). However, what this clarity leads to is a kind of confusion, an indifference, about size and dimension, as big and small are equally clear. Henceforth, images are that new thing, the *clear confusion*. The same observation can be made about time, which also loses its dimensionality in a general dedifferentiation somewhat like the transformation of suburbs to exurbs. To see the past as a suburb of time is to see it as different. Are there exurbs of time then, where, for example, the 60's resemble the 90's, just as exurbs replicate the city center? We have indeed been seeing this in a special kind of Hong Kong "nostalgia" film, whose most distinguished examples are Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1988) and Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990), where the past now begins to have a new feel and look. It takes on some of the noir qualities of the present, and resembles the suburbs in the films of David Lynch, whose influence on Wong Kar-wai is evident in the images and some of the titles of his films. In fact, the characters in these films can be described as exurban subjects, or what the architect Mario Gandelsonas calls "X-urban subjects." And the X-urban subject finds its raison d'etre, its whY, in the images of film and television.

We will come back later to the relation between Hong Kong's urban space and its cinema. For the moment, the confusions I am alluding to allow us to see "globalism" in relation to Hong Kong in a particular way. Globalism means not just a⁰ generally greater inter-connectedness and efficiency achieved through mastery of the speed of electronic technologies. It means also a violation of spatial experience at the level of everyday life. Small wonder then that cyberpunk writer William Gibson can set his new novel *Idoru* (a Japanese corruption of the word "idol") partly in Hong Kong, in Hong Kong's notorious Wall City, simply by consulting a book of lavish highly detailed color photographs of the by now demolished Wall City. All this would suggest that the spaces we have to deal with are no longer specular or discursive in any way that we are familiar with. We have to find other ways of seeing and talking about them, i.e. of historizing them, if we are to evoke their peculiar fascination.

There is yet another level of complexity. In common with some other Asian cities—Bombay and Singapore come to mind here—Hong Kong grew from the ruins of colonial experience and is a relative latecomer to the global economy. Up to the present moment, colonialism is both the most obvious fact about Hong Kong and that which produces the most elusive effect. One explanation is that

colonialism is one thing in the era of imperialism and something else in the era of globalism. The history of Hong Kong is enmeshed with and complicated by these mutations in the history of colonialism. But, for better or for worse, it is the colonial experience in all its incarnations that returns, unbidden, as its main source of authenticity. The result then is not so much that Hong Kong is a city without a history, which is patently untrue, as that it is a city with a skewed sense of history. Consider one aspect of its architecture. The city shows pride in itself nowadays by beginning to preserve old buildings; but it is always, *faute de mieux*, colonial style structures that are chosen: Flagstaff House, Western Market, the Hong Kong-Canton railway clock tower, the Supreme court building. All this gives it some tenuous sense of civic identity. On the other hand, when the city constructs new buildings, all scruples about identity are discarded, and it just gets on with the job, following the aims of producing cost-effective or high-profile structures. In contrast to old European cities like Paris or London, or an Asian city like Taipei which makes implicit claims to being recognised as the custodian of Chinese tradition, Hong Kong does not allow concerns about the "character" of the city to act as a brake on urban design. While excessive concern for a city's character might make Paris today seem like a kind of parody of itself, the opposite of this – an absence of character and definition as in the Hong Kong case – can produce its own aporias. The city might try to float in the space of flows of the global economy, but sooner or later, it has to peg itself to something, whether it is the value of the U.S. dollar or Chinese cultural tradition. At a certain point, like the parachutist, it is pulled in by some economic, political or cultural gravitational field. Its history is not its own.

Part of the meaning of colonialism in Hong Kong is that the city can neither identify nor break with the past. Neither continuity nor discontinuity is available, only an appearance of continuity that is already discontinuous. In this regard, consider what happens when Hong Kong BCC (British Crown Colony) becomes Xiang Gang SAR (Special Administrative Region). This will not be the same situation as presented in the Wim Wenders film, where one locale – Paris, Texas – tries to identify with somewhere else more glamorous – Paris, France. By contrast, the Hong Kong change of subtitles concerns one location not two, but a location that is in the process of being dislocated by contemporary history. One result of such dislocations is that experience acquires a paradoxical dimension. Take for example the strong patriotic feelings aroused in Hong Kong over the Diaoyu Islands. The territorial dispute with Japan (where the islands are known as the Senkakus) was taken up most enthusiastically in Hong Kong, from where it spread to Taiwan and Guangzhou. The incident had its tragic aspect. The leader of an expedition to plant the Chinese flag on the islands was accidentally

drowned. But what the event also clearly demonstrated was a case of temporal dislocation, of the contemporary as a replay of the past. It was as if the war with Japan could now be refought under new conditions, this time with a stronger China, just as the Vietnam war had been refought on the cinema screens of Hollywood. Even the new-found patriotism is an experience that is over-determined. On the one hand, the celebration of Hong Kong "Chineseness" is a laudable form of national self-affirmation, a rejection of colonialism. On the other hand, patriotism may well be the *frisson nouveau* of Hong Kong, as it is a sensation that under British colonial rule could only be experienced vicariously, if at all. In some devious way then, patriotism, especially the form it is taking, may be the last bequest of the departing colonizers. From this perspective, it is significant that Beijing itself wanted to play down the dispute in order not to jeopardize trade relations with Japan. One conclusion we will be drawing from all this is that it is only by addressing the dislocations that another kind of history might be conceived; a spatial history that would include cultural forms like cinema and architecture among its primary sources of historical evidence.

Meanwhile, let me turn to one final aspect of Hong Kong's urban space. It is not only the inter-relations between the fractal, global and colonial that make it so elusive; it is also the specific ways it is mediatized. Consider for example the intense media attention directed in pictures and words at everything remotely related to the June Handover. Every move and gesture by China and Britain is intensely scrutinised, every action is the subject of endless commentary. Three obscure writers in Beijing can produce a tract called "China Can Say No," and it becomes instant world news and they become instant celebrities. Hong Kong's Director of Immigration, Lawrence Leung, resigns or is asked to resign, and it produces a few weeks of newspaper speculation on why and what it all might mean. Jian Zemin or Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Designate, makes a statement and their words are turned this way and that. The examples can be multiplied, but the general point is clear: nothing is innocent anymore. Quite independently of Marx and Freud, it is the media that have learnt to be masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion, it is they who are now the new practitioners of the art of reading otherwise. Yet such intense and sometimes even well-informed attention to detail produces analyses that are not substantially very different from rumour or gossip, except for the seriousness of the style. It is a little like reading some learned discourse about the stock market. Such discourse is notoriously unreliable and for similar reasons: because the stock market too lies somewhere outside the specular and discursive dimension. And the truer this is, the greater the proliferation of tables, graphs and charts, all the visual aids that show us what is no longer there: sarabandes for a dead princess. There must

be something amiss then with the modes of attention themselves when serious-ness so often leads only to triviality.

On the other hand, when the Hong Kong media stops taking itself too seri-ously, it registers if only inadvertently a number of other histories. Let me give one quick example: the recent serialization on Hong Kong television of the classic Chinese story "Journey to the West." In its written form this popular text is a wonderful compendium of myths and fairy tales, full of magical transformations where the boundaries between animal and human are continually being dis-solved. There is constant metamorphoses to deceive one's opponents, often by taking on a harmless-looking form. Characters like Monkey have the ability to move at great speeds and see events happening at great distances. The television series is interesting for a different reason, namely in that metamorphosis finds its contemporary equivalent in techniques of morphing, while Monkey's magical ability to move and see is a precocious prefiguration of telematics. The necro-mancers of old are the neuromancers of today. The TV series has already taken certain changes for granted. It registers the fact that space today is defined more and more by technologies of reproduction and information, so that reality itself, as Walter Benjamin noted long ago, turns into that rare thing, "an orchid in the land of technology."[7] Myth and technology join hands and both imply a history that is not gradual and sequential, but sudden and instantaneous, and hence so much more difficult to grasp.

Placing these two aspects of the city's mediatization together—the serious which turns out to be frivolous, the fantastic which is symptomatic—allows us to be more specific about spatial dislocation. What dislocation points to is the co-presence of different spatial models which pull in different directions and move at different speeds. Seeing Hong Kong history then is not just a matter of following momentous events; it is also a matter of taking into account the dislo-cations of urban space in relation to which these events take place. Such a spatial history has yet to be written, but we can contribute to the project by bringing in the testimony of Hong Kong's urban culture which sometimes addresses, some-times represses the paradoxical experience of Hong Kong's urban space.

Urban Culture

Hong Kong's urban culture comes out of the "negative" space we have been analysing, but it is not merely a reflection of it. It is easier, at least initially,

7. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Books, 1973), 235.

to say what Hong Kong's urban culture is not, than to say what it is. It is not just a colonial culture, for the simple reason that the colonial itself is an unstable paradigm, enmeshed with the fractal, the global, and the mediatized. To attack "colonialism" in Hong Kong as if it were something self-evident is to attack an empty abstraction: nothing more dangerous than a superannuated bronze statue of Queen Victoria. Worse still, to use "the colonial" as an all-purpose weapon would be to miss the mutations of the colonial, its links with globalism for example. Finally, it is such ignorance that may serve to bolster the illusion that colonialism is over, when it has merely changed its form.

Secondly, unlike Chinese culture in Taiwan or on the Mainland, Hong Kong's urban culture cannot trace its links with a long tradition. Different though the idea and uses of culture may be in Taiwan or in Communist China – one sees itself as continuing a tradition, the other as breaking with it – there is still the presence of a tradition to continue or break with. This is not the case with Hong Kong, caught between the *not-quite-there* (it is Chinese but not quite) and the *more-than-there* (it is too open to other influences). Its relation to tradition then is an often frustrating game of hide-and-seek.

Thirdly, Hong Kong culture does not express the hopes and aspirations of a people or nation. In a society of migrants, immigrants and urban nomads, "the people" is hardly a unified concept. In this regard, it is no accident that unlike in the Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema is not at all seduced by the epic mode, i.e. by narratives of nation-building like what we find in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*. It would be hard to imagine a Hong Kong epic called *Fragrant Harbour*! We can make this point about who the people are from another angle. Consider the recent last minute decision of the British parliament to grant right of abode in Britain to Hong Kong's ethnic minorities threatened with statelessness after June, 1997. These concern Hong Kong belongers who will not be able to obtain SAR passports because they are not ethnic Chinese. But the tricky question is to decide who qualifies as a Hong Kong belonger. Besides the Indian community, it may have to include former United States and Canadian nationals who renounced their citizenship for tax purposes. The "people" is an argumentative category.

A final disclaimer: to see what is distinctive about Hong Kong's urban culture, it may be necessary to bracket the question of "quality" to begin with and to forego hasty judgments. This is not to encourage blind advocacy or to pass off the meretricious for merit, but a way of allowing the terms of judgment to clarify. We might add that these terms are not exclusively aesthetic or formal ones.

If Hong Kong's urban culture is based not on colonialism, or Chinese tradi-

tion, or "the people," or even quality, on what is it based? The answer will be to be something like: on a *situation* to which it is a response. Hong Kong culture is a mediated response to an historically unprecedented situation that since the 1980's has been becoming steadily more complicated and paradoxical, a situation that may have slipped away from under our commonsensical perceptions into a kind of negative space. There are those therefore who would want to hold on to something positive, even if it turns out to be chimerical; for example, an identity or a date like 30 June 1997, when something tangible might happen. But it may be that 30 June 1997 has already happened; i.e., the situation of which that date is an index has been with us already for some time. The eventualities have arrived before the event.

It was at a point when all the bases seemed to be shifting and firm ground was nowhere to be found that new Hong Kong urban culture began to develop. This does not imply that Hong Kong had no culture to speak of before the 1980's. There is certainly a history of writing, of cinema, of painting, of architecture, of design, and so on before that time; histories which today are being rediscovered — in retrospect. But it does imply that the new urban culture was involved in a space and a politics not only different from but also more complex than what was there before. It implies as well that culture was now *for the first time* the middle term between Hong Kong's urban space and its politics. By working through the paradoxes and negativities of such a space, the new urban culture managed to address, however indirectly, the social and political problems of the day. In doing so, it began to acquire a number of important characteristics.

• In the first place, culture in Hong Kong began to acquire a critical edge, seen best perhaps in the new cinema, but also in painting, writing, performance and design. Culture no longer served to substantiate and reassure, or to provide comforting formulae; rather, it interrogated. "Hong Kong culture" now means more than just a culture produced in Hong Kong (like clothing with a "made in Hong Kong" label); it means a culture that interrogates the very nature of Hong Kong and explores the possibility of its redefinition. It is in this way that culture began to acquire a quasi-political import that it never had before. It did this not by directly taking up political themes (which are too overcharged with meaning), but by finding ways of evoking the indeterminacies of urban space.

One way such indeterminacies can be evoked is by problematizing perception. It is a new attention to the problematics of perception, especially of visual perception, that is a second characteristic of Hong Kong culture. This brings us back to the earlier remark made about images of the city not showing us very much about the city. This is the dilemma of every spectacularized society, where ad-

vertisements, cinema, television, monumental buildings and so on compete for
visual attention. Images promote a certain kind of attention at the same time as
they prevent another kind of attention. The trick then is to use the image in an
unorthodox way, to invoke not the image's representational power, but what has
been called "the powers of the false."[8] That is to say, while images of the city do
not show the city, they nevertheless fail to do so *in a determinate way.* This then
is one method of discussing Hong Kong's urban culture: by attending to the kind
of image used in writing, painting, photography, cartoons, cinema, architecture
and so on, and asking whether these images can engage and transform the nega-
tive space of the city.

A specific instance of the problematization of perception is a problematization
of the perception of the local. Before the 1980's the local had only a local interest.
It was an exclusionary mode, a self-ghettoizing practice. Now the local has a
different address. It is as if it were the local issues of Hong Kong that have turned
the place into a nodal point of global politics, economics and culture. The best ex-
ample of this is the change of sovereignty itself, which at one level is a local affair
of China revoking the unequal treaties forced upon it by European powers in the
nineteenth century. But the Hong Kong handover directly affects Britain; it affects
Taiwan by raising the question of Chinese reunification; it affects Japan, the
United Sates, Europe and all those countries that have important trade relations
with China; it affects Canada and Australia, who have large numbers of Hong
Kong immigrants. By comparison, the return of the Portuguese enclave Macau
to China in 1999 will be a much quieter affair, with far fewer reverberations.

Let me now try to bring out the connections between space, culture and poli-
tics by discussing, necessarily briefly, the two most visible forms of Hong Kong's
urban culture, its cinema and architecture. While not many people outside Hong
Kong may be familiar with its writing or painting or music, many have seen a
Hong Kong movie, or have caught a glimpse of its architecture, even if it is only
I.M. Pei's China Bank Building or Norman Foster's Hong Kong Bank Building
that they remember. While cinema and architecture are indeed Hong Kong's
major cultural forms, their relation to its urban space, to visuality and to the local
is nevertheless very different. So far it has been the Hong Kong cinema in a few
of its outstanding examples that has managed to capture changes and contradic-
tions in our spatial experience of the city and by extension, the historical and po-
litical implications of such changes and contradiction. Hong Kong architecture

8. See Giles Deleuze, *Cinema II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: Uni-
versity of Minnesota Press, 1989), 126–155.

presents a different picture. There are now enough examples of outstanding buildings to make a coffee-table book, and this represents change at one level. Yet at another level it remains true that architecture still seems reluctant to address the paradoxes of urban space, and is interested only in building either cost-effective or impressive structures, without taking time to question building practices themselves. Up to now, it has been cinema that has been posing the important spatial questions, which should be questions for architecture as well.

The innovative Hong Kong cinema does not stake a claim to relevance by introducing the topical issues of the day at every turn. Thus, the experience of the city is introduced not by presenting head-on the question of "Hong Kong identity," the evils of colonialism, the anxieties about 1997 and so on; or by offering us simplistic allegories of Hong Kong-China relations. (In general, only the more run-of-the-mill films tend to do this.) There also seems to be some tacit agreement that a *cinema verité* style will not be able to capture what is there. The few attempts at *cinema verité*, notably by Allen Fong, achieved only a very limited success. Rather the experience of the city is introduced by presenting to us a space that slips away if we try to grasp it too directly, a space that cinema will have to coax into existence by whatever means at its disposal. Thus it is by eschewing a narrow idea of relevance and pursuing disreputable genres like melodrama, kung-fu and the fantastic that something else about the city which would otherwise be missed comes into view. To illustrate, I will limit myself to citing what by now are two classic and contrasting examples of the new Hong Kong cinema, both released in 1988: Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* and Wong Kar-wai's *As Tears Go By.*

Rouge is generically a ghost story about a woman, who died fifty years ago, returning to present-day Hong Kong in search of her lover. In her quest, she is aided by a young couple, both journalists. The genre is hardly realistic, but it allows Kwan not only to juxtapose two periods of Hong Kong history, but also more interestingly to play with the sense of time and space in the contemporary city. In the film, past and present are contiguous, like thin layers of transparent lacquer applied one over another, producing an historical palimpsest but one without depth. Everything now seems to be alluding to something else; there are correspondences everywhere, but these are fleeting, indefinite and hard to pin down: like the ghost's passion which survives even death, to which the luke-warm passion of the modern couple bears only a pale resemblance. These correspondences are like negative epiphanies, intuitions of something that has disappeared. Most paradoxical of all perhaps is the image of the ghost, who displays none of the bizarre features that Hong Kong's cinematic ghosts are supposed to display. She is presented essentially as being of another time; for example, in her old-

fashioned style of clothing, in certain mannerisms and in the way she applies make-up (shown in the film's opening shots). But as the film progresses, she gains in presence, an apparition and an anachronism that overshadows the other characters. It is not the ghost but history itself that begins to feel ghostly. The ghost story therefore becomes a device to evoke the uncanny nature of time and space in the contemporary city. It takes a ghost to catch a ghost.

In terms of style and genre, *As Tears Go By* is very different from *Rouge*. It is as fast-paced and frantic as *Rouge* is languid. Wong's film uses the gangster genre of violent action perfected by John Woo and is set in the mean streets of Mongkok, an area in Kowloon overrun by triads. But Wong finds the uncanny even here too, in such macho material. Unlike in Woo's films where violence is celebrated and calibrated in terms of power, and action is shown in slow motion so that we catch all the details, in *As Tears Go By* actions never resolve themselves into clear images. The color is always either under- or over-exposed, and even the use of slow motion fails to help viewer or director decide on what is happening. We are confronted therefore not so much by a spectacle of violence as by its epistemology: what do we *know* in what we *see*? What are the possibilities of knowledge and experience (to echo David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*)? In Wong's film, such questions find no clear *resolution*, in both senses of the word. And impotence, not power, is the secret of the city.

What even this necessarily hasty discussion of the two films show is that it is not subject matter that is decisive, but rather the emergence of a contemporary sense of space. Both films begin with the conventions of a genre, but transform them. Such transformation of a standard genre is also a transformation or estrangement of a too familiar space. What both films succeed in giving us is a negative experience of an invisible order of things, always just teetering on the brink of consciousness. But it is this "lived" experience of the negative, something we are never sure we are experiencing, that is the problematic ground against which both time and action unfold. These negative spaces of Hong Kong cinema are related, to be sure, to historical conditions, but their meaning and even effect on us are still beyond historical understanding. They are spaces punctuated by visual and discursive gaps and residues: fascinating spaces. Do these spaces have any political value?

It is perhaps by comparison with what we find in Hong Kong architecture that the historical importance of these fascinating spaces might be foregrounded. Hong Kong architecture, for all it impressiveness, shows us another face of Hong Kong culture, its more conservative face. This is not forgetting that there are always practical constraints on architecture like the client's brief or municipal

building regulations. But architecture also has a symbolic dimension which comes out both when it addresses and also when it ignores the space it is in. Like cinema (which incidentally is not free from constraints), architecture is a way of thinking about urban space, about visuality, about the local, and it is in some such terms that comparisons with cinema can be made.

When we look at Hong Kong architecture, what we seem to see to begin with is a variety of spatial practices. There is for example a vernacular mode that can be very ingenious and inventive in maximising a limited space. We see this in illegal roof structures or in additions to facades; in the construction of neon signs that jut into the streets; in street-sleepers' use of cardboard boxes (a form of "paper architecture," though not in the high theoretical sense); in adaptation to terrain, like squatters living on hillsides or boat people on water in their sampans, which function as live/work spaces; and so on. But these spatial practices are mostly imposed by poverty and necessity, and have not entered the mainstream. We should perhaps not romanticise them too much.

What happens on the other hand when there is relative freedom to build? At this point, variety disappears. What we see is basically "straight" architecture, "interesting" architecture, architecture very much concerned with doing the right thing; whether it is acquiring the services of renowned architects who can provide a "brand name" building, or more modestly simply following trends like "postmodernism." But this is postmodernism as an easily recognisable style: the addition of a pediment, the use of pastel colors or a "quotation" from *European* architectural history. We see this postmodernism not only in Central with its many international corporations, but also in the local districts of Shaukiwan and Western, where Italian copper-domed roofs and English battlements stand out rather incongruously. This is quotationism without the wit, where the model or genre is not transformed, only repeated. The result is the spread of the generic everywhere, whether it is the "high" genre of corporate towers or the "low" genre of housing estates. The generic here does not show us the interest of repetition (as in Pop Art for example or in Rem Koolhaas's argument for a "Generic City");[9] it shows us merely the repetition of the interesting. There is not very much that is subversive about this practice of the generic. It reflects nothing more than the discreet charm of the Hong Kong bourgeoisie, with the stress put on good behaviour, on manners and decorum. As a result, public space is in danger of being

9. See Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 1238–1264. Koolhaas says that when "it elevates mediocrity to a higher level," the Generic City is "at its most subversive, its most ideological" (1261).

deprived of what does not fit conventional ideas of affectivity and pleasure. It is deprived of perversity and fascination. It is deprived of choice.

While Hong Kong cinema suggests the existence of other histories and other politics than the immediately discernible ones—and comes up with fascinating spaces; architecture establishes the authority of the real, which can easily shade into the reality of authority, whether it is that of capital or of state power. Thus the tacit shaping of urban space by architectural forms that foreclose choice and perceive alternatives as deviancies may count as one of the most political acts of all.

New Publics

Cultural forms always raise the question of the public, and the public is where culture and politics meet. One of the major political issues of Hong Kong 1997 is the issue of democracy, particularly what form democracy will take or whether there will be any of it after 1997. This is what we have been reading about in the local and world press. As it was with colonialism, the Hong Kong situation, with all its anomalies, makes it necessary, as well as provides an opportunity, to re-think the question of democracy. One strategy for doing this would be to pose the question of democracy initially as a question of public space. This shift would involve as a necessary corollary learning how to listen to the testimony of cultural forms, and trying to understand what they are telling us.

Let me emphasize that making such a shift is not an attempt to gentrify "politics" into "culture." One reason for proposing it as a strategy is that the term democracy is at present very much overused, appropriated by all parties as a catch-all. The same word connotes very different things, from a concern for equal rights for all and the preservation of individual liberties, to a commitment to economic growth and toleration for the existence of social and economic disparities and inequalities. There is also a certain irony in the fact that it is the departing colonial administrators who at this late date have become some of the most passionate advocates of democracy—witness Chris Patten's "sixteen benchmarks" for a democratic Hong Kong after 1997 outlined in his final annual policy speech. The irony however is not as obvious as it seems, and the controversy over Patten's "democratic reforms" like liberalising the laws of public assembly and moving towards more direct forms of election to the Legislative Council (initiatives which China is more than likely to rescind after the handover) may require a word of historical explanation.

To a certain extent, Patten acts as if Hong Kong were a British colony going

through the process of decolonization, (even though the British Foreign Office has avoided the term "colony" for some time, substituting "territory" in its stead). As a last paternal gesture, the colonizer trains the colony in self-rule. But this is to ignore Hong Kong's anomalous position and the Chinese point of view. Since the Communist era, China has made it clear that it regards Hong Kong as Chinese territory that is only administered by the British. From this perspective, the question of self-rule does not arise. In fact, when we bear in mind China's even more important project of reunification with Taiwan that the return of Hong Kong presents a first step towards, then self-rule is almost tantamount to secession. Before Patten, the tacit understanding between China and Britain was, as one writer puts it, "a Chinese tolerance for British rule in return for British acceptance that there would be no self-rule."[10] Because Patten is seen to have broken these unspoken agreements, not only is China very critical of him; members of his own Tory party like Sir Percy Craddock are not very complimentary either. It is in this ambiguous context, where the "right" perception of the situation is on neither side, that we will have to consider Patten's "democratic reforms." We must surely endorse them in so far as they seem to break with the pattern of secret negotiations and move us towards some more transparent and representative form of government (though the nagging question of why now and not before still remains). What gives the game away a little however is Patten's rhetoric of democracy with its strong universalist overtones. The rhetoric suggests that enlightened reforms are introduced, knowing full well that there is no real chance of implementing them, in the spirit of "see what you are missing." "Democracy" in Patten's discourse functions then as a retroactive propping up of British legitimacy; a means of holding on to symbolic power, to benchmarks, when the bench has slipped from under him. This is one example of how the word democracy is now mired in confusion while the issues it points to are more urgent than ever. It is in order to keep these issues alive that we may want to change the terms of the discussion, and take up the question of publics and public space.

There is as yet no answer to this question of the public. All that we might hope to do is delineate the shape of the problem. We can start with the proposition that understanding the possibilities of the public means understanding its space. But what happens when this space itself, for the reasons discussed above, turns negative, becomes difficult to grasp and slips away from the consensual? We have

10. Michael Yahuda, *Hong Kong: China's Challenge* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 49. Though Yahuda is both perspicacious and perspicuous on many points, even he succumbs to the view that "British policy towards Hong Kong has been shaped by—moral obligation" (ibid, 73). A genealogy of political morals is long overdue.

seen that Hong Kong cinema (in some examples) and architecture make contrasting responses to this negative space: one by exploring the fascination and uncanny features of Hong Kong urban life and history, the other by letting the authority of the real go unchallenged. Both in their different ways are groping towards an idea of the public, and in doing so reveal the dilemmas that arise when we try to redefine the public in a problematic space.

What then are the possibilities of the public now? Contradictory signs are discernible. Let me describe my sense of what they are by means of two examples which can only claim to indicate, not exhaust, the range of options. The first concerns a disturbing new tendency in Hong Kong cinema which can only be called a new cynicism, exemplified in a film like Derek Yee's *Viva Erotica* (1996). The story is about an "artistic" film director who can only find work making soft porn or "Category III" films. The film then is about the making of films, which puts everything to begin with on a metadiscursive level. This could have provided a premise for playing with genre, as in the work of Stanley Kwan, Wong Kar-wai or even Tsui Hark. But *Viva Erotica* plays another game, a double game. As the film progresses, what started out as an ironization of the soft core movie genre becomes an exemplification of it. The climactic scene of the ironized soft porn film (both Derek Yee's and the protagonist/director's) is indistinguishable from soft porn. A certain reversal has taken place characteristic of cynicism, which has been defined by Peter Sloterdijk quite precisely as "enlightened false consciousness."[11] It is not the ignorant or the stupid who are unknowingly trapped in "false consciousness"; it is now the enlightened with their sophistication or irony who knowingly wallow in it. Cynicism exploits confusion, other people's and one's own, and turns it into a fine show. But no new sense of a public can emerge from it. Cynicism is conservative not wild at heart.

My other example is a performance piece by Stanley Kwan, the filmmaker's first attempt at writing for the stage. It is a short piece (under twenty minutes), one of six segments in the Zuni Icosahedron production of *Journey to the East*. Each segment (directed by either a Hong Kong, Chinese or Taiwanese filmmaker or stage director) uses as a basic prop one table and two chairs. If this alludes yet again to the formula of "one country, two systems," Kwan avoids such easy allegories and pursues other themes. The mise-en-scene plays with images and dimensions. There is a screen, large and flat, on which cinematic images are projected. There is the three-dimensional stage which extends in front of and behind the translucent screen. Behind the screen we see shadowy human figures;

11. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 5.

in front the two chairs and the table which will be pulled up and down with its top facing the audience. There is Kwan's voice speaking in Cantonese and Mandarin, a space of memory and confession. The piece begins with the sounds and images of Chinese opera (so important in his film *Rouge*) projected on the screen. Kwan's voice speaks in Cantonese of the importance of Chinese opera in his life and work. He remembers as a boy listening to Chinese opera at home while working at his school lessons. As he speaks, two male silhouettes can be seen behind the screen, disrobing and embracing. Kwan's voice now changes to that of confession: as he worked at his lessons at home, he could see a man's public toilet opposite. What fascinated him, without his knowing why, was the pane of translucent glass behind which the homosexual scene unfolded. Chinese opera then is a displacement, a metonymy; in fact, literally a screen memory.

Homosexuality is still a taboo subject in Hong Kong. In his program notes, Kwan speaks of flattening the stage (into the two-dimensional space of the screen) as an analogue for the flattening of social taboos. Kwan's piece however is about more than coming out of the closet. It does not stop there. In his confession as to what he loves, he also implies that we never love the right object, because it is at this point that he alludes to one of the best known scenes in the new Hong Kong cinema: the scene in Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* that took place one minute before 3 P.M. on 16 April 1960 when Yuddy and Lai Jun became friends, then lovers. The public minute that recurs every day becomes a special moment in the lovers' private time, like a daily appointment with the origin of passion. But in Wong's film, all appointments are disappointments. Passion dies and private time is swallowed up once again and becomes indistinguishable from public time, no matter how willfully one or both lovers try not to forget.

Kwan borrows Wong Kar-wai's problematic minute, and uses it firstly in order to link love to disappointment, and then even more interestingly, to public space. He confesses that his reactions after watching *Days of Being Wild* was one of disappointment with himself for wasting time and not doing more with his life. By a strange twist, the disappointing becomes a mark of love, the not entirely effective a sign of the affective. It is not that love is inevitably disappointing, which is a banal observation, but that disappointment—the recognition that things and people are not where we think them to be—may be the space of love. That in any case is what Kwan's performance piece suggests. His last statement is that the more angry and disappointed he is, the more he finds he loves "the place," where "the place" means all at once Kwan himself, his supposedly "deviant" sexuality, and Hong Kong. Interestingly enough, the last few minutes consist of images of people in public, riding on escalators or in the subway.

This pairing of love and disappointment may also be a way of re-imagining a space of the public. In thinking about Hong Kong's public space and the issues of democracy, it is perhaps disappointment rather than love of the place that needs at this point to be emphasized. Significantly enough, it is the Chief Executive Designate Tung Chu-hwa who has been insisting with ever greater vehemence that "love of China, love of Hong Kong" be the sine qua non of good citizenship. While this may sound innocuous, in context such rhetoric can be a means of discouraging criticism, including constructive criticism. But constructive criticism is not subversive, loyal opposition is not subversive, just as disappointment is not antithetical to love. There can be a new public space only if the other history and other politics intuited in the Hong Kong cinema are first allowed to become a part of public life. It cannot be done by inventing another universalist discourse or forging a statistical and sophistical consensus. As 30 June 1997 approaches, those who expect it to be a catastrophe or to open up a brave new world may very likely both be disappointed. And that might not be such a bad thing.

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