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THE REPRESENTATION OF HONG KONG AS A SUBJECT OF NOSTALGIA IN THE KAR-WAI'S TRILOGY

Abstract: *Hong Kong is a city which has been amalgamating Eastern and Western cultures, and formed identity of its own multicultural structure. Hong Kong from colonial times until the transition in the 90's, experienced a vicious cycle of capitalist-based economy and the ever increasing economic-social pressure of China(1). The phenomenon has affected the Hong Kong cinema's reflection of the notion of dual identity and identity confusion in the postcolonial era. This identity confusion showed itself as a deep feeling of nostalgia in the works of Wong Kar-wai, a member of Hong Kong cinema. In Kar-wai's films, Hong Kong is not just his individual reality but also a portrayal of the country's history. His films present cultural and social transformations to the audience. In Kar-wai's films, Hong Kong is a metaphor of these cultural artifacts, and additionally reflecting the existential anxiety of ambivalence and duality. His focus on themes such as love, deception, loneliness, disidentification and alienation is rising from the tension between Hong Kong, China, Britain, and Japan. Moving from the fact that a cinematic space reflects ideologies, political system and social relationship, this study aims to analyse Wong Kar-wai's trilogy which includes Days of Being Wild (1990) In the Mood for Love (2000) and 2046 (2004) in a sociological perspective to understand the representation of Hong Kong's colonial and diasporic identity – taking a Lefebvre framework which asserts that (social) space is organic, lively, and changeable and it is a social product, into consideration. The study is focused on the daily life of the film characters to understand their relationship with space.*

Key words: *Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong, Modernization, identity crises, nostalgia*

Introduction

Lefebvr¹ explains the production of the space with the conceptual triad; spatial practice, representation of space and representational spaces. The space is a producer of social relations and at the same time product of these social relations. The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space, creates its own space. The transformation of the space can be explained by the transformation of individual existence, society, power and the life as a whole. According to Lefebvre, transformation takes place in everyday life (daily routine or daily reality); the space is politics and leads us to power. To Lefebvre, capitalism has built new spaces, occupied existing spaces to solve the crises and thus succeeded in growing. New spaces have created new social relations. This point of view built by Lefebvre is the conceptual triad which also points out -within the space- both resistance and dominance.

In order to apply Lefebvre's theory to the cinema, one should focus on the production of space in the cinematic narrative. A physical place is different from cinematic space (setting): Setting combines all cinematic elements such as cinematic narrative, characters, cinematic times, settings, lenses, light, edit, colour, etc. which supports each other. It is fictionalized by the director's view as a representation of the world. It is more about human experience than being a historical and political narration. Cinematic spaces are building of reality; they not only shed light on collective history, mind-set, and psychology, but also create an analytical environment that describes the human being as an individual and the society as a whole. Setting includes economic, political, cultural, ideological, and sociological elements which describe society and character (the character itself and situations of them). These elements provide directors necessary tools to disseminate their message to the public. It is also crucial to study how the space itself produces meaning, power, ideology and discourse, and how it is provided through cinema.

In recent years, criticism of cinematic space has been reflected by studies in film studies. Although new studies criticising the cinematic space, some of which approach cinematic space as a film element and focus on the importance of constructing its narrative, has been published in the recent years. There is still

1 Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, translated Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell: UK; Lefebvre, H. (2013) *Kentsel Devrim*, Türkçesi: Selim Sezer, Sel Yayıncılık: İstanbul.

a gap in the existing literature. Realizing this gap, this study attempts to conduct a sociological analysis of the space.

The history of Hong Kong is different from the histories of other colonial communities. Hong Kong is an exception in the sense that it is more prosperous than colonial countries. The colonial history is marked by an interesting journey starting from a fishing village to a post-modern metropolis. Hong Kong has been experiencing many conflicts and dualities, e.g. modern vs. postmodern, Chinese identity vs. Hong Konger identity, colonial era vs. postcolonial era. Kar-wai's cinematic experience is crucial because he has lived in this country and he has reflected these conflicts and dualities to cinematic representations. These conflicts created a strong feeling of nostalgia and identity crises. Understanding Kar-wai's cinema is vitally important while studying the society, their relationship and history of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong as a Cinematic Landscape in the new wave of Hong Kong Cinema

By the end of 1970s and early 1980s, a cinema movement, *the new wave of Hong Kong Cinema* inspired by the French New Wave, was developed by foreign-educated directors in Hong Kong. "In the changing sociocultural and political context of 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of more cosmopolitan and better-financed filmmakers, mostly graduates of American film schools, including Ann Hui, Allen Fong, Tsui Hark/Xu Ke, and Michael Hui, emerged to reinvigorate local cinema by articulating an aesthetic of local identification with Western inspired film language."² *The Extra* (Yim Ho-1978) is widely accepted as the beginning of the New Wave, and followed by *The Secret* (Ann Hui-1979), *The Butterfly Murders* (Tsui Hark-1979), *Cops and Robbers* (Alex Cheung-1979), etc. The directors of the movement do not have common cinematographic styles, techniques, narratives, genres or etc. but have idiosyncratic cinematographic view.

Changes in history of Hong Kong took role in the Hong Kong New Wave Movement as the main theme. Recurring themes of this new wave can be listed as follows: gender crisis, political anxiety due to Chinese take-over, identity-belonging issues, and westernization. For example, "Their loss of self-confidence was reflected in films showing that protagonists were unable to control their fate and therefore were forced to cooperate

2 Poshek, F. (2002) The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema, in: *The Cinema of Hong Kong History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Fu, P. and Desser, D. (2002), USA, Cambridge University Press; pp. 71-89.

with Beijing. This was perhaps an allegory of the partnership between China and Hong Kong.”³ It possible to give an example from Mandarin film too. “While the Shanghainese attempted to build a Shanghai in Hong Kong, Hong Kong eventually asserted its own reality and assimilated the Shanghainese. By the 1960s, the Mandarin cinema had made a transition from a conscious nostalgia for Shanghai to a fuller integration with Hong Kong and its environment. (...) The characters in Mandarin films increasingly acknowledged Hong Kong not as a place of exile but a destination to put down roots.”⁴

These revolutionary directors (e.g. Ann Hui, Stanley Kwan, John Woo, and Wong Kar-wai) have used local scenes in new perspective and locations shooting leaving studios: to Kar “*The New Wave films made Hong Kong itself a star.*”⁵ Space plays a vital role in The New Wave Hong Kong Cinema because it reflects the anxieties and issues of the society. Hong Kong is a heterogeneous city has inherent conflicts of traditional vs. modern.

This paper is focused on Kar-wai’s cinematic space in order to understand the changes Hong Kong and its people has gone through. I choose Kar-wai’s cinema because of its larger scope compared to his contemporaries. He is a writer-director of *As Tears Go By* (1987), *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express* (1994), *Ashes of Time* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *The Follow* (2001), *2046* (2004), *The Hand* (2004), *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), *The Grandmaster* (2013). “Cinematic space in Wong’s films requires close and sustained study because the construction of urban Hong Kong is closely related to the development of local identity. In Wong’s films, space has a critical role in shaping individual identity, determining who and what the characters are and what their relations are.”⁶ I will selectively focus the following films: *Days of Being Wild* (1990) *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and, *2046* (2004) because settings of these films are 60s Hong Kong itself and they focus on modern, colonial and diasporic Hong Kong identity. So, in all films, characters have strong

3 Botang, Z. and Cheuk, P. T. (2008) *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978-2000)*, Intellect: Bristol, Uk/Chicago, USA, Accessed: 01. 06. 2017, p. 25.

4 Kaufman, A. (2008) *Buffolo film seminars*, (XVII:13), <http://csac.buffalo.edu/moodforlove.pdf>csac.buffalo.edu, Accessed: 01. 06. 2017.

5 Kar, L. (2001) An overview of Hong Kong’s New Wave Cinema, in: *Hong Kong’s New Wave Cinema*, ed. Esther, C. and Yau, M. University of Minnesota Press: London, pp. 31-52.

6 Li, H. (2012) *Cinematic Hong Kong of Wong Kar-wai*, Doctor of Philosophy, Athens, Georgia, Accessed: 01. 06. 2017, p. 1.

nostalgic wishes. The characters of these movies have a similar background to Kar-wai himself - just like any first-generation Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. Other movies of Kar-wai present post-Joint Declaration (1984) Hong Kong reflecting postmodern, postcolonial and Hongkongese identity.

*The Presentation of Hong Kong as a Subject of
Nostalgia in the Kar-wai's Trilogy*

This part looks at the representation of space (Hong-Kong) with conceptual triad in Kar-wai's movies by focusing on its nostalgia aspect. As Lefebvre claims, the space is a producer of social relations and product of these relations. Changing economic, social and political conditions would have impacts on the space and the people using that space. The city of Hong Kong went through rapid changes that had impacts on the life of its inhabitants(2) including Kar-wai's life. To Ackbar Abbas "*The Hong Kong person is a bird of a different feather, perhaps a kind of Maltese Falcon.*"⁷ Kar-wai explains his reason to choose Hong Kong as the setting of *In the Mood for Love* in an interview with Scott Tobias as follows:⁸

"At first, we thought the story was just about these two people, but then we realized it was really about the period, 1962 Hong Kong. I was born in Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong the year I was five. In those days, there were a lot of people moving from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and they lived in their own isolated part of the city. They had their own culture, they had their own language, and they had their own music and cinema. For me, it was a very memorable time. In those days, the housing problems were such that you'd have two or three families living under the same roof, and they'd have to share the kitchen and toilets, even their privacy. I wanted to make a film about those days, and I wanted to go back to that period, because at that time, we still knew all our neighbors. And nowadays, we don't even know who lives next-door to us."

Nostalgia is defined as an experience of melancholy stemming from missing the past. To Chow⁹ *It is commonly understood to*

7 Ackbar, A. (2002) Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance, 3rd printing, Minnnesota Press: USA, Accessed: 01. 06. 2017. p. 2. in introduce.

8 Tobias, S. (2001) *Interview with Wong Kar-wai*, The Onion, Vol. 37, No. 07, <http://www.avclub.com/wong-kar-wai-1798208135>, Accessed: 01.06.2017

9 Chow, R. (2001) A souvenir of Love in At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World, ed. Esther, C. and Yau, M., University of Minnesota Press, London, UK, Accessed: 01. 06. 2017, p. 210.

*be a longing for the past or etymologically, a homesickness. The Chinese huaijiu literally means missing or reminiscing the past. Nostalgia is often assumed to be a movement backward in time. Recent studies have pointed to issues such as diaspora, exile, journey, migration related to home/homeless. The motivation of the trilogy is the common feeling of nostalgia that many Hong Kongers have experienced. "(...) Hong Kong, a society with a huge number of immigrants from Mainland China, who are used to hold a strong national identity. Although these immigrants share the same cultural heritage and language with local-born people, the two groups are remarkably different in their values, beliefs, and life style. In the process of acculturation, the Chinese immigrants tend to develop various degrees of cultural identity to the host and home society. Hong Kong thus provides a unique context to examine the relationship between cultural identity and outcomes of adaptation for Chinese immigrants."*¹⁰

This trilogy has an autobiographical aspect. They represent Kar-wai's childhood, his family, conditions of his childhood and his emotions in that period when he moved to Hong Kong as the 5-year-old son of a Shanghai family in some ways. "*Wong has spoken of feeling isolated as a Shanghainese child living in Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong, and it may be said that this perception has translated into his status as a maverick filmmaker in the Hong Kong film industry. On the other hand, like most mainland migrants who grew up in Hong Kong, Wong has assimilated into Hong Kong Cantonese society, and his films also reflect this condition.*"¹¹ Kar-wai was missing the Hong Kong where he was a child. So, all elements of the trilogy: the narrative, the character, the choice of colour, setting, editing, etc. sets a nostalgic atmosphere for audience.

In the narrative of *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddy (Leslie Cheung) wants to find his mother, because he believes his biological mother could cover himself as if he was born. In *In the Mood for Love*, Mr. Chow (Tony Leung) and Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung) look for metaphysical love in the old times. In *2046*, main characters want to recapture lost memories in which they were happy. As Lacanian literature suggests, it was mostly 'desired objects' (*objecti petita*) that the main characters misses and wishes. To reach their *objeti petita*, characters begin a journey. An example would be Yuddy's journey to the Philippines to find his birth mother in the movie *Days of Being Wild*. This journey

10 Ngo, H. and Hui, L. (2016) *American Behavioral Scientist*; "Cultural Identity and Adaptation of Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Hong Kong", Vol. 60 (5-6), Sage Publication, USA. pp. 730-749.

11 Kaufman, A. (2008) Buffalo film seminars, (XVII:13), <http://csac.buffalo.edu/moodforlove.pdf>; csac.buffalo.edu, Accessed: 01. 06. 2017.

brings his death. Mr. Chow travels to Singapore to find Miss Su in 2046. In *In the Mood for Love*, Mr. Chow goes to a temple of Buddhist in Kampuchea to tell his secret to a tree hollow in Angkor Wat. Actually, all these journeys were internal journeys through which the characters aimed to shape their identities.

The search for identity shows itself in the use of the actors in different roles or in their reincarnated versions and in the use of same space in these three movies. Tony Leung who appears as Mr. Chow in the movie *In the Mood for Love* also appears as Tide in *Days of Being Wild*. However, in this movie the character Tide is presented as a reincarnated version of another character, Yuddy. Leung also appears as Chiu Wai in the movie 2046. In 2046, Chiu Wai stays in the hotel 2046 where Mr Chow and Mrs Chan meets in *In the Mood for Love*. The intertwined character of these movies, the characters' looking at mirrors in those movies represents the search for social identity in which way they have tried to find their identity.

Remembering and 'memory' are two inherent features of nostalgia, Kar-wai's films underline the fact that the director knows the future and shapes the story-line/perspective respectively. A dialogue about 'remembering' from film of *Days of Being Wild* would be an example: "At one minute before 3 pm. on April the 16th, 1960, you are together with me. Because of you, I will remember that one minute. From now on, we are friends for one minute. This is a fact, you cannot deny. It is done." The film focuses on belonging issue in China by way of Yuddy. At the end of the film, Yuddy said to Tide: "Tell Su that I forgot each minute with her." So audiences would think about if people do not belong anywhere, they do not have a chance to embrace anything such as love, life, home, etc.

Other example is the name of the movie *Days of Being Wild* itself. The two words of *A Fei Zheng Chuan* -the original name of the movie- means the alienated youth in the daily language of Cantonese. The film of *The Days of Being Wild* tells the story of the Yuddy's youth. Yuddy wants to find his biological mother. Yuddy's search for his mother can be interpreted as a search for an identity. This search for mother/identity also symbolizes the society's search for identity - which is very much related to the feeling of nostalgia, as well. Yuddy, who is often seen in front of a mirror and has nothing to give to another woman, is actually the metaphor of Hong Kong and China. "The migratory theme prevalent in pre-1997 films when Hong Kongers looked outward for clues to their identity also returns with scenes or character connections in Singapore, Phnom Penh, Japan and Hong Kong. Neither place nor time is fixed and the film is therefore very disjointed. The nostalgic theme also returns, through the

inclusion of the 1960s scenes as well as with the core purpose of travellers going to 2046 – for old memories.¹²”

The director, who wants to recreate the mood of the 1960s through his films, transforms the characters into the social story of the space and the time they live in. More importantly, all of these feelings/mood that the director feels are aimed to pass through to the audience. The director shows the characters in a constant movement. For example they are going from one place to another by taxi, or walking on the road or moving from one room to another. In the same way, the character of *Days of Being Wilds* starts his journey as a passenger in a train. 2046 is also about a train journey. In all three films, characters are in shared houses, in hotel rooms, in the cars or trains. These places symbolize identity crisis of Hong Kongese people. The director prefers narrow and claustrophobic places. Main characters are distressed regardless they are being inside or outside; they sweat and frequently clean their faces.

The director chooses costumes such as traditional Chinese cheongsams with flowers which has not been used in the contemporary China in nostalgic purposes. In Chinese culture, flowers and their meanings are so important. The director rebuilds meaning and atmosphere of film with flowers such as Chinese rose, azalea, peony, etc. For instance flowers on the cheongsams in the films symbolize main character situation like Chinese rose symbols of brave soul in *In the Mood for Love*.

Conclusion

All the movies analysed shows the importance of nostalgia in the Kar-wai films. We also saw all the interactions of the cinematographic subjects reflects and confirms Lefebvrian view of space. Nostalgia, as expected, has been one of the main subjects of art produced by the societies that has gone through drastic changes. Drastic changes, even if it does not go for the worse, might create such inclinations towards to the past. From this perspective, Hong Kong cinema, justifiably, used nostalgia as a main subject in many movies. Nostalgia, not only as a matter of subject but also a feeling aimed to pass through the audience needs a strong cinematographic construction. Space, as we used as a key notion of Lefebvre, is one of the main building blocks of this construction. Therefore, space became one of the leading

12 Ferguson, L. (2010) Hong Kong: Communicating 1997 and beyond through Film Author(s): eSharp, Special Issue: Communicating Change: Representing Self and Community in a Technological World http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_141049_en.pdf, pp. 30-49; Accessed: 01. 06. 2017, p. 43.

tools used by directors of Hong Kong cinema in order to create an atmosphere for the audience's experience.

NOTES

(1) We could mention on important events in Hong Kong; 1842, China ceded the island to the British as a colony after the First Opium War, it was controlled of Britain until 1997 except the date between 1941-45 Japanese occupation during World War II. 1970s - Hong Kong is established as an "Asian Tiger"; 1984, Britain and China signed Sino-British Joint Declaration; 1997 July - Hong Kong is handed back to the Chinese authorities after more than 150 years of British control. Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China under the principle of "One Country, Two Systems."

(2) The history of migration from mainland China to Hong Kong can generally be divided into four stages: First stage is the period from the British reoccupation of Hong Kong to the introduction of immigration control in 1950. Second one is the period from 50s until 1974, when the colonial government restrict immigrations, 3rd one is the years between from 1974 till 1980. And last one is the period of after 1984. In detailed and with further information: (Mizuoka, F. 2017).¹³

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13 Mizuoka, F. (2017) *British Colonialism and 'Illegal' Immigration from Mainland China to Hong Kong*, Url: <http://hdl.handle.net.10086/28669>.

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ПРИКАЗ НОСТАЛГИЈЕ ХОНГ КОНГА
КАО ТЕМЕ У ТРИЛОГИЈИ КАР-ВАЈА

Сажетак

Хонг Конг је град који представља спој источне и западне културе и који је свој идентитет формирао на мултикултуралним структурама. Од колонијалног периода до транзиције деведесетих, Хонг Конг је прошао зачарани круг економије базиране на капитализму и растућем друштвено-економском притиску Кине (1). Ово је утицало на начин на који кинематографија Хонг Конга одсликава појам свог дуалног идентитета и конфузије идентитета у постколонијалној ери. Идентитетска збрка огледа се у дубоком осећању носталгије у остварењима Вонг Кар-Ваја, једног од представника кинематографије Хонг Конга. У његовим филмовима, Хонг Конг није само део његове личне стварности већ и портрет историје ове државе. Његови филмови гледаоцима приказују културне и друштвене трансформације. Хонг Конг је у његовим остварењима метафора културних артефаката и додатно одсликава егзистенцијални немир услед амбивалентне дуалности. Он се фокусира на теме као што су љубав, обмана, усамљеност, губитак идентитета и отуђење насталих услед тензија између Хонг Конга, Кине, Британије и Јапана. Полазећи од чињенице да кинематографски простор одсликава идеологије, политичке системе и друштвене односе, ова студија има за циљ да анализира трилогију Вонг Кар-Ваја која се састоји од филмова *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *In the Mood for Love* (2000) и *2046* (2004), из једне социолошке перспективе, ради разумевања представе колонијалног идентитета Хонг Конга као дијаспоре – полазећи од Лефавровог оквира који уважава (друштвени) простор као органски, животан и променљив друштвени производ. Студија се фокусира на свакодневицу филмских ликова ради схватања њиховог односа према простору.

Кључне речи: *Вонг Кар-Вај, Хонг Конг, модернизација, криза идентитета, носталгија*