

**Postcolonialism, Diaspora,
and Alternative Histories**

The Cinema of Evans Chan

Edited by Tony Williams

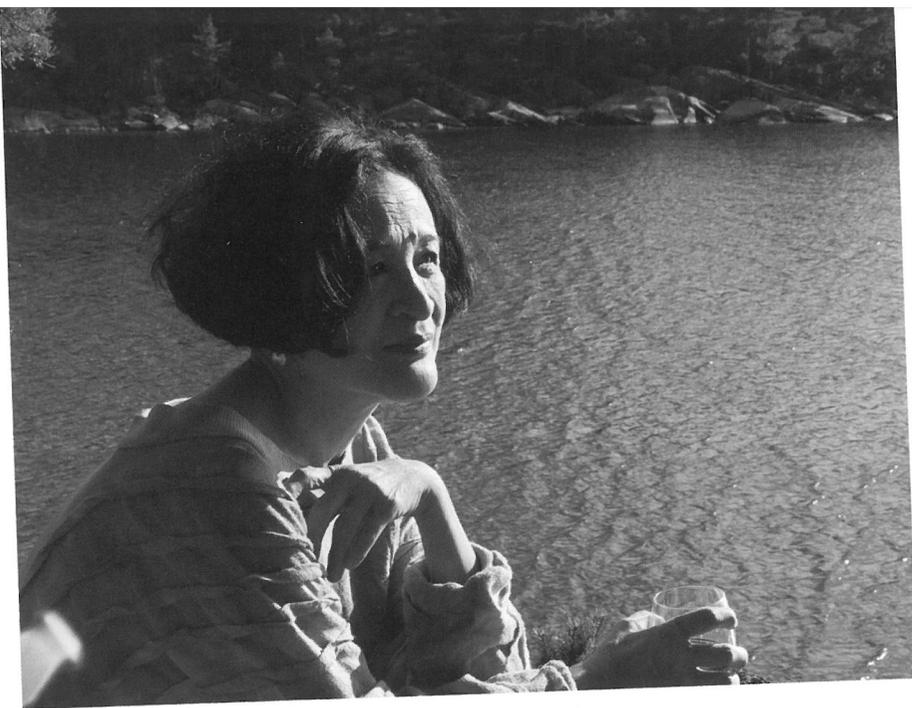


Plate 31 Chiang Ching in *Datong*



Plate 32 Lindzay Chan as Tung Pih in *Datong*

Chapter Four

Homelessness and Self-Disclosure

Evans Chan's "Minor" Cinema

Hector Rodriguez*

Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence; every form restores the absurd to its proper place as the vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning.

—Georg Lukács¹

Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács described all literature as a response to the broad existential problems that confronted their authors. An important feature is the close connection between metaphysical and historical questions. On the one hand, all literary forms articulate a general vision of what it means to be human. On the other hand, this vision is elaborated in response to the author's cultural and political context.

In Lukács's view, the novel arises out of a fundamental problem: deep-rooted frameworks of orientation have disappeared, social structures have become mere conventions, and objective moral standards no longer command absolute conviction. He describes this "transcendental homelessness" as a condition of possibility of the modern novel. The protagonist has become "problematical," in the sense that her home, her fundamental project, is no longer given in advance: "The novel tells of the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself."² The novel is essentially biographical, in the sense that the situation of the protagonist and the story of her life—her quest for some sense of orientation or rootedness in the world—form the basic principle of narrative composition. The experience of purposelessness in life as a whole is the basic structural core around which narrative material is organized. Thus an existential problem supplies literary authors with an urgent "problem of form," a principle of artistic composition, which superficially "looks like a problem of content."³

The novel selects only those events and situations relevant to the existential project of its main character. This literary structure requires a tight balancing act. Its protagonists often find themselves torn between two conflicting demands, the first being

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their desire for absolute self-containment or some lost perfection, away from a dissonant and disorientating world. Secondly, however, characters cannot sever all ties with external reality. It is a condition of the novel that life should be lived in a concrete environment. While the world is given meaning in relation to the protagonists and their quests, the world must remain objective, and this objectivity must be felt as such. Thus characters must in some sense navigate their yearning for isolation and harmony with the demands of an essentially disharmonious world. This is the "adventure" at the heart of the novelistic form.⁴

The "adventure of interiority" may take many forms. It may, for instance, involve the protagonist's existence in time, her efforts to formulate a project for the future while coping with the tyranny of the past. The problematical protagonist often negotiates the interconnected requirements of memory and expectation. By making sense of the past from the standpoint of the present, the character can generate order and meaning in the world. This method gives the structure, for instance, to such "novelistic" films as Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile* and (perhaps) Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild*, where the problem of memory is closely related to the situation of displaced persons.⁵ Their protagonists are exiles in a global community, both geographically and existentially homeless, whose life projects involve the reappropriation of their pasts. From an artistic point of view, the respective filmmakers have to confront difficult aesthetic problems concerning narrative order and completeness.

It is not necessary to endorse Lukács's analysis as a general theory of literary form to grasp its relevance to those films. The theory also seems particularly pertinent to Evans Chan's far more cerebral, but also equally personal, *The Map of Sex and Love*. Chan clearly believes that narrative structure should properly articulate questions at once existential and historical. The environment of the three protagonists in *The Map* is marked by homelessness, and their life problem is constituted by this experienced loss of direction and certainty. The frameworks of orientation that guided previous generations are no longer there, and this absence haunts the entire plot. The presence of religious and everyday rituals (from the placing of joss sticks in front of a small domestic altar to the conversation during a simple family meal) only underscores this consciousness of loss.

Homelessness permeates both the particular, private lives of marooned characters and the general, public predicament of the whole society. Impending changes in Hong Kong's physical landscape, associated with the impending arrival of Disneyland and the subsequent erosion of rural community and culture, give a sense of the precariousness of life, the instability of a world where everything solid melts into air. History is projected onto an environment that offers no stable anchorage. Wei Ming, one of the film's protagonists, views events with a certain detachment, through the lenses of his video camera. An observer rather than a participant, he embodies the ambivalence of a subjectivity neither unequivocally tied to his native land nor fully

isolated from the hold of the past. The central metaphor of the film, that of the map, marks a distance, a spacing: the temporal difference and geographic gap between Hong Kong and New York, "the two Manhattans." Wei Ming can freely move from one to the other, but never stand in both at the same time. Any sense of "being here" presupposes the awareness of "not being there" as its other, its necessary structural condition. In this context, the sea becomes a highly resonant and polyvalent image. The choice of Lamma and Lantau islands as key locations in the film highlights the presence of the water, with its connection to the origins of Hong Kong as a fishing village as well as the impulse to travel beyond the sea (both Wei Ming and Mimi have had formative experiences overseas).

The experience of distance, both emotional and geographic, characterizes the life of oppressed, diasporic persons. This marginality is grasped not only as the individual circumstance of the film's characters, but also as the collective condition of Chinese immigrants and displaced persons everywhere. *The Map* is to some extent a work of collective enunciation, where desire is political and the languages of "major" national totalities (China and the United States) are adapted to the experience of "minor" peoples. If we agree with Deleuze and Guattari that Kafka's culture, the culture of the Prague Jews, is a "minor literature" in the margins of the major European languages, we can equally well describe the work of Evans Chan as a "minor cinema."⁶ The film's characters themselves assert the kinship of the Jewish and the Chinese peoples—indeed of all displaced peoples mercilessly bandied about by the forces of history and globalization.

Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein has often observed that metaphor is a form of montage, the bringing together of seemingly unrelated elements, detached from their original contexts and thus brought into new connective relations: "Perception of the object is not only immediate and direct, but is extended beyond the bounds and tokens that normally delimit that object, a process which thus occurs in two dimensions."⁷ Fresh, unexpected connections between disparate materials generate surprise and insight, in a concretely perceptual manner. This principle of connectivity also underpins the work of Evans Chan.

The Map of Sex and Love, for example, draws a surprising connection between the plot of the Italian opera *La Bohème* and the recent history of Hong Kong. Through the character of Mimi, which is also the name of Evans Chan's protagonist, Puccini's opera suggests the precariousness of working-class life. In *The Map*, Wei Ming mentions how the destitution of Puccini's Mimi recalls an older generation of Hong Kong working-class women, whose difficult and underpaid labor made possible the territory's much-praised economic success. Wei Ming's comment is followed by a series of shots of Hong Kong streets at night, while Puccini's music continues non-diegetically. The connection between the opera and the territory is not only presented conceptually. Its meaning is projected onto perceptible images of the cityscape. We are thus led

to see the present fabric of Hong Kong daily life, the texture of its streets and people, as the product of a sad history of sacrifice and privation. Chan gives us not just a thematic idea, the montage of sound and image, but also supplies a paradigm of a mode of looking at city space as a document of historical time.

Connectivity underpins the entire film, whose manifold intertextual references embrace philosophy, Cantonese and Western opera, classical Chinese cinema, and Chinese- and English-language poetry. This display of references highlights the aesthetic of connectivity, the mutual illumination of dissimilar materials, which distinguishes the cinema of Evans Chan. In some cases, the dialogue clarifies the meaning (sometimes perhaps a little too much so) of those connections, but in other instances, the allusions are more ambiguous and suggestive: for instance, the first time we see Larry, a photograph of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima can be briefly glimpsed on the wall behind him.

The Map does not represent the external landscape of Hong Kong as a purely objective datum. The world is linked to the inner life and situation of the characters in various ways. For instance, the film's lyrical atmosphere helps to link subject and object. The "horizontal" development of the characters and their interactions coexists with "vertical" poetic interludes. Better put: the boundary between the narrative and the poetic is never sharply defined, because many dialogue sequences are suffused with a quietly lyrical tone, while lyrical sequences can be dramatically relevant. Interior and exterior worlds interpenetrate. While television footage of local activists and government officials reminds us that the world's objectivity is never absorbed into the experiences of the characters, the boundary between the self and the other continuously fluctuates. In developing this poetic approach, Chan turns the digital video camera into a richly expressive tool. Together with his outstanding director of photography, O Sing Pui, the filmmaker has developed uniquely digital effects, derived mainly from color temperature and shutter speed, reminiscent of O Sing Pui's own video project *Song of the Earth*. The poetic consciousness resolves the tension between the self and the world by allowing for a momentary blending of the two.

City space provides the setting for a drama of encounters and anonymity. It is all about the tension between making contact and asserting distance. Larry makes love to a stranger in a gay sauna but then gives him a false phone number. Mimi longs for "self-sufficiency" and "total self-containment." The dissonance between the self and the world, the fundamental trait of this novelistic film's problematical protagonists, breeds a desire for absolute isolation. *The Map*, however, also underlines the insufficiency and poverty of this desire, the necessity for interpersonal contact. In most of Chan's fiction films, moments of intimate revelation between friends or lovers play a central dramatic role. It is through the medium of conversation, whenever memory unfolds freely in the presence of another, that subjectivity can best attain clarity

about itself. The narrative of the film is oriented around this cognitive and affective "mapping" of oneself through interaction and dialogue with others.

The secret from the past is a staple of movie melodramas. (Psychoanalysis itself is to some extent a melodramatic activity.) *The Map* contains generic melodramatic devices, including devastating confessions and sudden revelations. A melodramatic sensibility typically aims towards public disclosure.⁸ Melodrama is to some extent about the interplay of concealment and self-revelation. This approach demands articulate characters, capable of indulging in long monologues and voice-over narration. The film embraces this desire for explicitness, but at the same time distances its melodramatic elements by the scope of its existential themes, by comparatively restrained performances, and by the presence of broader political themes. This combination of melodramatic conventions, often involving family secrets or domestic relations, together with self-conscious distancing devices is characteristic of the tradition that I would label "art melodrama." Ingmar Bergman is perhaps the key figure in this mode.

The narrative of *The Map* underlines the difference between secrets and enigmas. This distinction also helps to relativize the melodramatic stream. A secret has a fairly clear-cut explanation. The content of its mystery is eminently solvable. The relationship between Larry and his former teacher, for example, can be traced back to a car accident whose truth admits of a simple solution. In contrast, an enigma may be intrinsically contentless: a void, the absurd. As Wei Ming says in the film: "Some secrets are like a box, you open it to see what's inside. And yet some boxes open only to a total void—They're not secrets but enigmas—like my sexuality, like this world, like the gold my father used to weld. Maybe it came from Nazi Germany. But maybe not . . ." The distinction between a solvable mystery and an absurd enigma is not always sharply delimited. The "Nazi Gold" episode seems intrinsically open-ended, and yet the entire situation raises historical questions about political responsibility, which seem very real, and very much worth resolving.

The concept of a contentless mystery, an enigma that defeats our desire for knowledge and certainty, naturally recalls the work of surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel. An Asian patron in the brothel of *Belle de Jour* (1967) carries a small box whose contents frighten the women in the establishment; the audience is never allowed to look inside the box. Buñuel's surrealism is very different from Freudian psychoanalysis: while the latter has analytical intent and is concerned with unveiling the truth of subjectivity by showing the psychological mechanisms that determine its avatars, the former asserts the value of mystery for its own sake. In some way, *The Map* regards selfhood not only (and perhaps not mainly) as the efficient product of psychological mechanisms, but also as an existential project of self-construction predicated on the constant awareness of absurdity. The work of Evans Chan is underpinned by the conviction that narrative form should treat the absurd as a necessary condition of meaning.

Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT, 1971), 62.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.
3. *Ibid.*, 71.
4. Not every work that we would describe as a “novel” is novelistic in Lukács’s rather specialized sense: he noted, for instance, that Dostoevsky’s writings are not novels.
5. Following one of my lectures on transcendental homelessness in the films of Ann Hui, one of my students, Augusta Palmer, wrote an illuminating paper that shows how this framework is also applicable to the work of Wong Kar-wai.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
7. S. M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, vol. II, *Towards a Theory of Montage*, eds. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor, trans. Michael Glenny (London: BFI, 1991), 33.
8. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

Chapter Five

“Absurd Connections,” or Cosmopolitan Conviviality in *The Map of Sex and Love*

Kenneth Chan

This book celebrates Evans Chan as cultural critic, political filmmaker, and transcultural artist.¹ In dissecting Chan’s 2001 film *The Map of Sex and Love* in research for this chapter, I am moved to add to this string of accolades: cosmopolitan activist. There is a cultural political prescience that Chan demonstrates through this film, proving once more that he has his finger on the proverbial pulse of transnational/diasporic concerns. *The Map of Sex and Love* is an intriguing hybrid film that synergizes the generic energies of philosophical treatise, political critique, and performance art; so as to deliver to viewers a cinematic meditation on the foreboding despair of humanity’s inhumanity, a necessary sensitivity to human dilemmas, and an unflinching hope of human connectivity and healing. It is this deep consciousness of human complexity and connection that makes this pre-9/11 film such an ethically and politically relevant film for a post-9/11 era. (While the short film *Bauhinia* is Chan’s more immediate response to 9/11, *The Map of Sex and Love* was making its rounds at various festival venues during the lead-up to and the aftermath of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. Hence, the symbolic significance of the film sitting on the very cusp of global political change should not go unnoticed.) In presenting, as the film’s narrative premise, a moment where three Hong Kong lives intersect, Chan marries the local with the global, in ironic resistance to and contestation of unrelenting transnational capitalist strategies, to envision a world of codependence, connection, and conviviality. But the film also refuses to eschew political complicities and the complexities of human failings, by bravely embracing the notion of shared responsibility and critique, to create a roadmap guiding us into an uncertain global future. This chapter will thus deliberate on Chan’s critical vision in terms of the film’s “absurd connections,” while refracting theoretically through Paul Gilroy’s conception of “demotic cosmopolitanism.”

Cartography

The titular reference to cartography deserves a theoretical pause, not only because it is a productive metaphor for the film’s acknowledgment of the epistemological