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Flânerie and acrophilia in the postmetropolis: Rooftops in Hong Kong cinema

ABSTRACT

*Living in the spectacle of Hong Kong's skyscape, how often do its dwellers actually see, not to mention reach, its rooftops? Intriguingly, despite their apparent ephemerality and inaccessibility, the vertical fringes of the city feature frequently in Hong Kong cinema: the rooftop. In this article, we connect the cinematic trope of the rooftop to the anxiety of living in a postmetropolitan city like Hong Kong. We do so by walking with Georg Simmel's blasé attitude and Benjamin's flânerie in the metropolitan city, to meet Christoph Lindner's more (self-)destructive blasé individual trying to grapple with his postmetropolitan anxiety. Finally, we posit to understand the deployment of rooftops in Hong Kong cinema – in the crime thriller *Infernal Affairs*, the coming-of-age drama *High Noon* and the psychological horror *Inner Senses* – as a way out, literally and figuratively, a space where one negotiates and perhaps overcomes a blasé postmetropolitan individuality with moments of radical reconnection.*

KEYWORDS

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Inner Senses

The vertical, as a vector of meaning, the rising upwards, corresponds to the desire to overcome the earth's gravity, the desire to be elevated above the pressure and 'anxiety of the earthbound,' as well as the desire to gain a 'higher view of things,' as Ibsen says, from which man may shape, master, or, in a word, appropriate the known.

(Binswanger 1968 in LeBlanc 2011: 5)

VERTICAL LIMINALITY

Hong Kong is a vertical city. In its attempt to defy the limits of space, it has built layer upon layer, making it important for the city dweller to orient oneself not only horizontally but also vertically. Whereas the city's horizontal maps are strewn with shopping streets and demarcated with policed boundaries, its vertical fringes are often rendered invisible and inaccessible. Living in the spectacle of Hong Kong's skyscape, how often do its dwellers actually see, not to mention reach, its rooftops? Intriguingly, despite their apparent ephemerality and inaccessibility, the vertical fringes of the city feature frequently in Hong Kong cinema. We are referring to the trope of the rooftop. The rooftop, as we will show, is the space where gangsters point their guns at each other, where young people while away their youth, where lovers are poised to jump.

Why rooftops? What lures local film-makers and their characters to their rooftops? What is made possible up there that is not possible down here? In this article, these questions are addressed by connecting the cinematic trope of the rooftop to the anxiety of living in a postmetropolitan city like Hong Kong. We do so by walking with Georg Simmel's blasé attitude and Benjamin's *flânerie* in the metropolitan city, to meet Christoph Lindner's more (self-)destructive blasé individual trying to grapple with his postmetropolitan anxiety. Finally, we posit to understand the deployment of rooftops in Hong Kong cinema as a way out, literally and figuratively. The rooftop is thus read as one urban liminal space where one can force the city to suspend, to become on hold: it is the space, we argue, where the acrophilic *flâneurs* of the twenty-first century gather, a space beyond surveillance and outside of the logics of global capitalism, where one negotiates and perhaps overcomes a blasé postmetropolitan individuality with moments of radical reconnection. In the crime thriller *Wu Jian Dao* (*Mou Gaan Dou*)/*Infernal Affairs* (Lau and Mak, 2002), the rooftop becomes the space where one can reclaim one's subjectivity. In the coming-of-age drama *Lieri Dangkong* (*Lit Yat Dong Hung*)/*High Noon* (Mak, 2008), the rooftop is an affective space, where one can still feel. In the psychological horror *Yidu Kongjian* (*Yee Do Hung Aaan*)/*Inner Senses* (Law, 2002), the rooftop is the space of remembering oneself. The characters on the rooftop may not live happily hereafter, mostly don't; at least then and there they enjoy different modes and moments of living from fear, anxiety and alienation. In all cases, the rooftops open up the space where one comes to terms with oneself as well as with the city, albeit temporarily, albeit fraught with complexities and consequences wanted and unwanted, as we will see in the detailed analyses in the sections to follow. In the conclusion two afterthoughts will be discussed: one related to the materiality of rooftops, and the other to the possibility of rooftop cinema as a genre.

POSTMETROPOLITAN ANXIETY

Being a profoundly vertical city, Hong Kong's verticality poses new questions about the spatial boundaries of the city, questions the films under our enquiry engage with. These boundaries are related to the intricate ways in which

movements of the urban citizens are regulated, controlled and scrutinized, and the spatial anxieties, desires and phobias this may produce. Before engaging with these spatial anxieties, it is important to explore how Hong Kong's inhabitants may constitute their subjectivity vis-à-vis their material environment, how they experience the city, and more so, what possibilities they are offered to experience the city. Housing more than seven million people in a total area of 1,101 sq. km Hong Kong ranks high in terms of population density: 6,516 people per sq. km, heightening to 26,100 if only urbanized areas (275 sq. km) are taken into account (DWUA Report 2013). One corollary is the dominance of high-rise buildings; one report describes Hong Kong as a 'skyscraper city', with a total of 6,588 high-rise buildings, compared to New York's 5,818 (Fei 2012).

Cramped in such living conditions, people in the city experience a host of urban challenges such as noise. An official website claims that more than one million people are affected by traffic noise, while people are 'also exposed to different levels of pounding, roaring or shrill noises from construction work, ventilation systems, intruder alarm systems and their neighbours' (Environment Protection Department (EPD) 2013). Michael Wolf, who visualized the city's high-rise buildings in his *Architecture and Density*, compared his experience of, as if in anticipation of this study, living in both Paris and Hong Kong. In an interview Wolf said:

I've lived in Hong Kong since 1994. It's a very vibrant and exciting place, Asia ... Any place which is not predictable is exciting for me. If you compare it with Paris, for instance, Paris is totally predictable – everywhere you go everything looks the same, it hasn't changed in 100 years.

(quoted in Pasulka 2010)

Far from being the same, Hong Kong is a city that confronts us with a sensual overdose; it throws its inhabitants into a maelstrom of sounds, smells and images that are as exhausting as they are tantalizing. While such sensual overdose also characterized the early modern cities, what has changed, is the sheer intensity. To analyse this change, we draw on an essay by urban film studies scholar Lindner (2011), in which he describes the change from the metropolis (using the work of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin) to the postmetropolis (using the work of Edward Soja).

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, the time of the early modern cities, Simmel discusses what he calls 'the blasé outlook' in his famous essay 'The metropolis and mental life'. For Simmel, the blasé outlook is what individuals wear to protect themselves from the sensuous overdoses and money driven experiences of the metropolitan city. In his words,

There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. It is at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts and from which it seems to us the intensification of metropolitan intellectuality seems to be derived.

(Simmel 2002: 14)

In the same essay, Simmel writes,

the metropolitan type – which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications – creates a protective organ for itself against the profound

disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner [...]. This intellectualistic quality which is thus recognized as a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis, becomes ramified into numerous specific phenomena.

(Simmel 2002: 12)

The blasé metropolitan individual navigates skilfully amidst the money-driven forces of the modern city, the sensual and mental invasion requires the inhabitants to develop the defence mechanism of being blasé and staying aloof, of distancing oneself from the urban environment he is actually part of.

This, indeed, brings to mind the leisurely strolls of Benjamin's *flâneur*. Inspired by Baudelaire, Benjamin's *flâneur* is the new intellectual that leaves the dusty office to move around in the city, probing into modernity, with the streets as the new office, and using the walls that surround him as the metaphorical desk for his (more often than her) writing. The *flâneur* takes a turtle out on his strolls through the city. Yet, whereas around 1840 it was elegant to take turtles for a walk in the arcades, this soon became more and more dangerous, especially for the turtles, given the speeding up of the city, observes Benjamin (Buck-Morss 1992: 344). The speeding up of the city has declared, in Benjamin's words, a 'war on *flânerie*', the 'flow of humanity [...] has lost its gentleness and tranquillity, [...] now it is a torrent, where you are tossed, jostled, thrown back, carried to right and left' (quoted in Buck-Morss 1992: 344). The practices of *flânerie* may have evaporated with the speeding up of the modern city; as a figure, the *flâneur* remains important until today as 'a kind of modern intellectual capable of abstraction and rationality, but also deeply implicated in the urban spectacle' (Lindner 2011: 328). The *flâneur's* perceptive attitude is deeply enmeshed in modern existence, in the society of the spectacle and its thriving engine of mass consumption.

When moving from metropolitan Paris to postmetropolitan Hong Kong, what happens to Simmel's blasé individual, or to Benjamin's *flâneur*? In his analysis of Wong Kar-Wai's film *Duoluo Tianshi/Fallen Angels* (1995), Lindner proposes 'a state of radical detachment' as response to living in the postmetropolitan time. Lindner argues that 'the lived experience of the global city can lead to a state of radical detachment that is far more extreme, alienating, and destructive than the blasé attitude described by Simmel' (2011: 329). This state of radical detachment is what Lindner coins as *the blasé postmetropolitan attitude*, 'an attitude linked not to the great cities of western modernity, but instead to a transnational network of globalized city-spaces', producing 'disturbing patterns of nihilism and violence' (2011: 329).

In *Fallen Angels* Lindner observes that there are hardly open spaces or shots in natural light, while the indoor, fragmented, confined and cramped spaces dominate the film, turning the city into a claustrophobic machine. The only outdoor shot is of the skyscrapers, 'the corporate architecture of globalization: faceless, impersonal, unemotive' (2011: 334). Gina Marchetti's invocation of Marc Auge's notion of a non-place to describe the places as depicted in *Infernal Affairs*, one of the films we will discuss, resonates with Lindner's words. These non-spaces, among which she mentions rooftops, parking garages, convenience stores, bank branches and multiplex cinemas, could, in her view, 'be anywhere in the world, and they bear few, if any markers, of Hong Kong as a city of even Asia as a region' (2007: 42). While not necessarily

disagreeing with Marchetti's central argument, we want to propose that there is something peculiar about the rooftops we see. Rooftops are anything but a non-place, as they forcefully connect the materiality of global capitalism with their embeddedness in a local environment.

Furthermore, in this article, we like to give a twist to Lindner's blasé post-metropolitan attitude, a twist made possible by the trope of the rooftop. There, in contradistinction to the claustrophobic Hong Kong in *Fallen Angels*, on the rooftops in the films under our enquiry, we observe a potential way out of the detachment, nihilism and destruction of the postmetropolitan city. It comes as no surprise that the rooftop scenes are usually set in broad daylight, with the exception of the crucial rooftop scene in *Inner Senses*, which, nonetheless, stretches from nocturnal darkness to sunrise. Alongside the intricate links between rooftops and violence and danger, as acted out in various rooftop scenes of suicide and murder, the rooftop also allows for moments of radical reconnection, when the protagonists of the films recuperate the possibility to know, to feel, to remember who they are. It is at the vertical fringes of the city, when we are literally on top of the city, that we are offered such moments of immobility, of interrupting the 24/7 dynamics of the global city, of defying the laws of meaning and purpose. In this urban liminal zone of the rooftop, we can come to terms, albeit temporarily, albeit fraught with complexities and consequences wanted and unwanted, with both the city as well as with oneself.

The three films under our enquiry may lend themselves to political reading. For *Infernal Affairs*, others studies, most notably Alan Cameron and Sean Cubitt (2009), Law Wing-Sang (2006), Leung Wing-Fai (2008) and Gina Marchetti (2007), have already explored its political significance in connection with the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. For *High Noon* and *Inner Senses*, it is also possible to read them as commentaries on Sino-Hong Kong relationship.¹ In this article, however, we choose to examine the trope of the rooftop more generally in the light of postmetropolitan – rather than post-1997 or postcolonial – Hong Kong. Furthermore, the three films selected should not be seen as representative or exhaustive of the deployment of rooftop in Hong Kong cinema. *Laogang Zhengzhuan (Lo Kong Ching Chuen)/Mr. Cinema* (Chiu, 2007), for instance, features local people squatting on rooftop. There were also numerous action films involving martial arts and parkour-inflected sequences from rooftop to rooftop. In fact, when the Hong Kong Film Archive was preparing an exhibition titled '@location' in 2006, its Programmer Winnie Fu, after interviewing a number of film producers, found two location choices 'typical to Hong Kong', one being the rooftop. The producers cited pragmatic, production reasons for their choices, as rooftops offer 'more convenient slots for manipulations for a longer period (say 2 months' set design)'.² In that sense, the current study, focusing on the texts rather than production of the three selected films, should be understood as an exploratory enquiry about the use of rooftop specifically in its connection to experiences of living in a city like Hong Kong.

FLÂNERIE AND ACROPHILIA

The possibility of reconnection may very well be the reason why authorities are so keen on keeping us away from these vertical fringes, why the doors to rooftops are generally locked. Rather, we should be down there in the city, following the controlled horizontal spaces, moving, as dictated by global capitalism, with purpose, predictability and efficiency.

1. For instance, in *High Noon*, a girl's jump to her death on New Year's day is mingled with shots of the crowds celebrating the arrival of the Beijing Olympic year of 2008.
2. Private correspondence with Winnie Fu, Programmer of Hong Kong Film Archive, dated 8–9 April 2013. The other typical location choice was 'faked police stations'.

3. *Infernal Affairs*, partly due to its huge box office success, became a trilogy; both *Infernal Affairs II* and *III* (Lau and Mak) were released in 2003. The original and first episode, focus of our enquiry here, was subsequently turned into a Hollywood remake titled *The Departed*, directed by Martin Scorsese, released in 2006.

That the rooftops are often no-go zones in the ‘real’ city explains precisely the cinematic and metropolitan acrophilia as we see it. Let us revisit the city as horizontal space. The term *agoraphobia* refers to extreme horizontal space anxiety (LeBlanc 2011: 2), and an agoraphobic panic ‘is experienced as an unbearable attack on one’s sense of self in space, constituting an unmitigated existential threat [...] agoraphobia might be interpreted in terms of the anxiety that arises out of the problematizing of everyday “Being-in-the-world”’ (Davidson quoted in LeBlanc 2011: 2). This indeed brings to mind Simmel’s analysis of life in the city. There is a need to disentangle the notion of agoraphobia from the individual and the pathological; we understand agoraphobia as a fundamentally humane response to the multiple demands society imposes upon us, demands that are translated into a quite strict regulation of our movements within the city. How many mornings are we not confronted with a morbid fear of leaving home and facing the world? A collective agoraphobia is mapped onto the horizontal plane of the global neo-liberal city of the twenty-first century.

The demands imposed upon us at the horizontal plane of city life create the desire to break out, and a vertical move is one, if not the only one, possible option for that. But this move is not without its own dangers and phobias. Vertical space anxiety, or *acrophobia*, refers to the vertical orientation, the fear of heights, and has its inversion named *acrophilia*, a love for heights. In LeBlanc’s words, ‘vertical space anxiety arises not from a fear of falling, but from the fear of “throwing oneself over”. [...] The opposite affect, the attraction to heights and its accompanying thrill, is characterized by the urge to climb to the limit of one’s capabilities’ (2011: 7). Acrophilia is ‘based on seeing the vertical as a “vector of meaning” and bold ascent as a response to the desire to elevate oneself above the pressure and anxiety of the mundane’ (2011: 7). LeBlanc links this to existentialism, claiming that ‘Choosing oneself by assuming complete responsibility for one’s being-in-the-world as a “perpetual process of [existential] crisis management” is, in fact, the only way in which one might reasonably expect to live an authentic life’ (2011: 8).

The *flâneur* of the twenty-first century is not one that takes a stroll, but one that puts the city on hold, one that pauses as to interrupt the global-city-as-machine. Consequently, the *flâneur*, it seems to us, in order to escape from the horizontal plane of the city, moves upward; in his acrophilia, he goes to the rooftops of the city as to elevate himself above and beyond the pressures and anxieties of the mundane. The *flâneur* of today is the one that moves upwards, voluntarily or against his or her will, it is the acrophile that temporarily escapes from the blasé postmetropolitan attitude – and then? In the following, we will offer readings of the rooftop scenes in the three Hong Kong films and see what is going on, what moments of radical reconnection, what possibilities of subjectivities are evoked when the urban acrophiles reach the vertical fringes.

A BRIEF JOURNEY INTO HONG KONG’S ROOFTOP CINEMA

*Infernal Affairs*³

Infernal Affairs unfolds in a Hong Kong that has survived another vicissitude of its history: the political handover from British to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. The film, however, is not only set in post-handover Hong Kong, a horizontal cartographic linkage between the southern city and the northern capital; it evokes verticality, with the spectacular vertical skyscapes serving

as the backdrop and, if you like, backbone lending connection, fluidity and mobility to the scenes. Its narrative twists and turns centre on two men, Ming who joins the police to work as an undercover for the triad society and for his triad boss Sam, and Yan, who leaves the police to work as an undercover in the triad society and for his boss Superintendent Wong. The characters in the film, whether cops or gangsters, operate in a highly technologized environment, where multiple screens, broadcast devices, mobile phones and so forth are deployed not only as gadgets of surveillance but also as devices for survival. While discussing the same film from a predominantly political perspective, Cameron and Cubitt observe rightly the imbrications of verticality, technology and survival: 'Hong Kong is defined by its high-tech environment, and by an emphasis on the vertical, not only in the singular framing to encompass large-scale skylscapes but in the characters' ability to scan digital maps offering a bird's eye-perspective on the city' (2009: 153). In the course of the film, the characters who fail to manage this vertical perspective are the ones who die first: Superintendent Wong and triad boss Sam. One drops from the rooftop, literally, dead on the ground, while the other is shot in a car park, enclosed and underground. These are also the most stable, grounded characters, whereas the young, wired, techno savvy generation lives on, defying the ground and the underground to reach the vertical fringes of the city, the rooftop. But, for what?

The rooftops in *Infernal Affairs* are, in the words of Marchetti,

realms separate from the quotidian workings of the city, above the business being conducted on the floors below, as well as privileged vantage points for surveying the Hong Kong cityscape and, thus, being at the very heart of the urban centre. [...] The rooftop is a liminal space, barely visible from the street and not seen from the interior. It marks where the sky meets the human construction of the building, and it becomes a fitting threshold to explore other limits.

(2007: 44)

For Marchetti, the rooftop 'mirrors the psychological issues of identity [Ming and Yan] encounter as essentially anonymous cogs in the machinery of transnational capitalism managed by the state or as embodiments of a specific local identity associated with Hong Kong triads and the Hong Kong police (2007: 46–47). We agree with Marchetti, but, we want to argue, rooftops do more.

In the first rooftop scene, Yan, the undercover cop, is passing inside information to his police boss Wong.⁴ During this process, when Yan is doing what he, as a subordinate, is supposed to do, he also tells his boss, desperately, how his undercover mission, in other words, his job, is driving him crazy. What would otherwise pass as regular labour relation and job exchange morphs into an identity crisis, not unlike the experience of many working people in the city configured by global capitalism. The difference may well be, on this rooftop, Yan is able to articulate it, to articulate his fear of losing himself in the job he has been doing, of losing his identity in his loyalty to his boss. He is afraid of no longer knowing who he is. There, on the rooftop, standing still, he is trying to know. The fact that Yan reveals in this rooftop scene to his boss and to the audience that he never wears watches adds onto the precariousness of time and reality.

And we can trace this precariousness of time and reality back to one of the opening scenes showing us the younger Yan and Ming receiving training

4. Before this rooftop scene, a fragment appears in a collage that functions as a prelude to the film proper.

in the police academy. They wear the same crew cuts, the same uniforms, carrying out the same tasks; they look almost identical. If this uniformity, an inflection of the kind of conformity in the larger society, is the beginning of the issues of identity Marchetti mentioned, it evolves and intensifies to undermine the general wisdom, 'oh time will tell', that time will tell us more about reality, about who we are. In the final rooftop scene, we see Yan and his counterpart, or alter ego if you like, Ming having their showdown, bringing the film to its narrative heights. Put simply, Yan is trying to salvage his identity as a cop, while Ming makes a radical attempt to cleanse his triad past. It is more than coincidence that their respective bosses, the ones who give their subordinates instructions and thereby authenticate their identity, have to die before they are freed to deal with their identity issues. Who are we, if not defined by work?

The widely known (main film poster) image of Yan pointing a gun at Ming is an image of stillness, of both protagonists standing still, doing nothing, trying to deal with everything. The stillness captures the anxiety that is grounded in but at the same time goes beyond the everyday postmetropolitan life of contemporary urbanite, that tries to evade the good and the bad, to foreclose any identity crisis, to keep at bay the uncertainty, by constantly moving, working. Cops and gangsters offer probably the most salient but by no means atypical of the everyday practice of erasing the moral and the ontological with the professional – cops and gangsters are supposed not to think about themselves, nor to brood over the good or bad of their doing; they just do it because it is their job to do so. But there on the rooftop, both Yan and Ming are stripped of their professional purposefulness, exposed to possibilities of their knowing and being. When Ming, after killing his triad boss to attempt a new identity, a new certainty, a new life, cracks a self-referential joke: 'Do all undercover cops like rooftop?', Yan seems equally sure, and replies: 'Unlike you, I am not afraid of light'. If Ming knows who he wants to be, Yan knows who he is; he says, 'I am a cop'. To which, referring to the prior destruction of all the confidential files regarding Yan's police identity, Ming snaps: 'Who knows?' Ironically, the moment of Yan knowing who he is, is also the moment that points to the impossibility of knowing, at least for the rest of the world. The struggle, at the very least, the attempt, to know who we are, who we want to be, takes place on the rooftop, when people stand still.

In all rooftop scenes in *Infernal Affairs*, the backdrop is consistently Victoria Harbour, and its spectacular skyline of Hong Kong (see Figure 1), underlining



Figure 1.

the locality. The soundtrack is one that signifies danger, an eerie sound that sonifies the rooftop as a dangerous space. Standing still, articulating who you are, is in the end a risky business. The complexity of such acts is further accentuated by the mirroring of characters. When Wong approaches Yan in the first scene, we see him reflected into the windows of a neighbouring skyscraper. The same happens in the final rooftop scene, when Ming walks on the rooftop. Their mirroring in the windows conjures a visual effect that they are literally walking over the city of Hong Kong, as both their images as well as the reflection of the city of Hong Kong are collapsing onto one plane. While this gives a visual impression of mastering the city, of being in control, the mirroring takes place at the start of the respective scenes, suggesting that when they enter the space, they may still be haunted by the roles they perform in everyday life, that these are the selves that they can finally shed. The ambivalence between the mirrored and the 'real' self, underscored by a soundtrack that signifies danger rather than relief or liberation, prompts that the struggle to know who we are and who we want to be remains ridden with danger and uncertainty. The cinematic mastery over the city is articulated not only through the mirroring parts, but also through constantly positioning the characters against the backdrop of the city. Slow panning camera movements glide from the city to the characters. These establishing shots evoke a sense of danger as well as mastery, again stressing the ambivalence of the rooftop. In the final scene, such establishing shots are juxtaposed with close-ups of the characters, oscillating between the postmetropolis and the individual, searching for, but never reaching, a balance. In other words, whereas the rooftop operates in the plot of the film as the place where characters can claim their true self, the cinematography troubles this possibility, showing the ambivalences, dangers and anxieties that accompany such claims.

HIGH NOON

If rooftops open up the space for the undercover cop and gangster in *Infernal Affairs* to know of their being and becoming, the teenage boys in *High Noon* go to their rooftops to feel. While discussing the 'survival tactics' of Hong Kong film-makers in the time of shrinking number of productions and box office, Helen Leung draws attention to the emergence of 'lower-budget, small films' that ignore the national market, shun the co-production model, and cater to the local tastes, particularly the young (Leung 2011). 'Younger audience in Hong Kong now has more affection and support for the newer and less established film-makers whose films, they feel, are made for *them*', remarks *High Noon*'s scriptwriter and producer Derek Yee (cited in Leung 2011, original emphasis). In the case of *High Noon*, one of the small local films grouped by Leung under this survival tactic, we are presented with a bleak scenario of underclass teenage boys in a marginalized school, with 'cries of a generation failed by those who are supposed to nurture them' (Leung 2011).

A coming-of-age drama, *High Noon* follows a teenage boy Lo Wing who joins a new school, forms a burgeoning brotherhood with his new school-mates, goes through its deterioration and disintegration with guilt, remorse and death, finally to be on his own, again. As much as these teenage boys are trapped in a bad school and a bad city that deny them opportunities of upward mobility, the young losers in *High Noon* are lured to the top in another form: they find their way to the rooftop where a number of key scenes take place. The film, in fact, is saturated with the tension of entrapment and the desire

5. One telling instance is the part-time job of one schoolboy. He wedges open oysters and fantasizes finding, one day, a pearl inside.
6. Another recurring, but narratively less important, site in the film where the teenage boys gather is a group of giant pipes. They would stand on the pipes, screaming when a train passes and drowns their very screaming. The pipes, running through the countryside like global capitalism's veins inside out, lay bare the reality and brutality of the city. At the same time they offer the teenage boys a place not unlike the rooftop, farther from the city and closer to the sky, where they feel the paradoxical gain and loss of their voice.

to break out and go up.⁵ The opening sequence, for instance, glides from the school ground to the skyscape, with a mischievous, drastic cut to a highly confined space of the small flat shared by Lo Wing and his family. The claustrophobic atmosphere is accentuated by his fish tank, a confined space within a confined space. In *High Noon*, confined spaces like the family home and the prominent fish tank in that home are juxtaposed to outdoor scenes on playgrounds, wastelands at the outskirts of the city and, significantly to the narrative of the film, rooftops.⁶ Whereas the confined space signifies the control over youth by the family and the city, the open spaces present a flight away from these modes of control, sometimes innocently, sometimes disastrously.

Here, we focus on two rooftop scenes. The first one, which takes place shortly after the film opens, offers the narrative opportunity for Lo Wing, the newcomer of the school, to encounter and join a group of school friends. There, sitting at a corner of the rooftop, Lo Wing is having his lunch, on his own, apparently an outsider. The other young kids are eyeing him, obviously scheming. While this scene threatens to be one of school bullying, it enjoys a refreshing twist, and becomes a scene of sharing, inclusion and brotherhood. The other teenage boys, instead of bullying the newcomer, start sharing their food, and in the midst of which, the newcomer has become one of them. We see a lot of laughter, youthfulness and innocence. For a while, on this rooftop, above the classrooms where they are being disciplined into winners but at the same time reminded that they would most likely be losers, these acrophilic teenagers are able to eat their lunchboxes with fun, in leisure, to feel their very youth, to feel who they are – insouciant moments the urban working adults cannot afford. In a fast moving city like Hong Kong, working adults, dictated by efficiency and routine, eat their food fast. It follows that the very possibility of sharing, the mode of exchange made almost obsolete and ridiculous by global capitalism, is enacted on the rooftop, far from the sight and entrapment of the city.

Cinematically, this scene is strikingly different from *Infernal Affairs*. Here, the camera is more shaky, shots are shorter and there is no music; only the cheerful voices of the boys are heard. In this scene, there is no allusion to danger, except for the height of the place itself, and the combined feelings of acrophobia and acrophilia this height evokes. The whiteness of the school uniforms signifies innocence and purity, endearing, mischievous, and alive with hope and laughter. In the subsequent scene a happy sound accompanies the images, when the boys are dancing and smoking on top of a water tank, and playing games on a rooftop. The sound as well as the images underscore a sense of happiness: the rooftop is here indeed the place to feel who you are.

The theme of sharing continues in another rooftop, but with a radically different consequence: while the first rooftop scene accumulates to their brotherhood, this other rooftop scene contributes to its demise. This rooftop scene opens with the same group of school friends standing at the edge of the rooftop, smoking the same cigarette. Here, the act of sharing has become a game. The teenage boys take a puff of the cigarette and pass it around; when the ash falls, the one who is holding the cigarette has to jump, but just slightly over the rooftop to a protruding platform (see Figure 2). It is a game of thrills, of sensations, of feeling their own existence. It is precisely at this moment that a mobile phone of Smoothie, one member of this school brotherhood, is snatched away, stealthily but jokingly, by another member who subsequently watches and spreads a clip of Smoothie having sex with a girl who likes to do cosplay as Lolita. The camera zooms constantly in on the different faces as



Figure 2.

7. The sex video sharing in the film alludes to a 'real' incident. In 2008 entertainment celebrity and youth idol Edison Chen brought his laptop to a repair shop. Subsequently, images of him having sex with a number of female stars were leaked and circulated to millions of predominantly Chinese viewers on the Internet. The incident, dubbed as 'Sexy Photos Gate', sparked off fierce societal concern and discussion over sexual deprivation and youth morality (see Chow and de Kloet 2013).

well as the mobile phone, forging a link between intimacy, technology and betrayal. This other sharing act leads to public shaming of the girl, finally to her suicide and another rooftop scene when she jumps to her death.

It should be noted that in both acts of rooftop sharing, bodily needs are evoked: food and sex. While the food sharing makes the kids feel their youth, their being together, in the latter case, sex, or in its mediated form as a clip taken by, stored in and distributed through mobile phone technology, becomes alienated from its physical immediacy, and instead of making them feel young and together, they feel the pain of growing up, the beginning of the end, of drifting apart.⁷ While the first sharing scene is infused with innocence, this other is with guilt and shame, with innocence lost. But they feel, a luxury for adults surviving in everyday global capitalism. *High Noon* ends with a sequence that is infused with as much memory as fantasy; all the teenage boys are there, the brotherhood complete, on a beach, throwing stones to the water, and then they disappear, visually and metaphorically fading away, one after the other. The very final scene of the film sees Lo Wing back in the confined space of his home, smoking, alone, lackadaisically – unlike the other time, on the rooftop, when smoking is a game of sharing, when they still feel.

INNER SENSES

The third and final film we want to discuss, *Inner Senses*, opens in an uncannily similar manner as that of *High Noon*. Following the very first shots of an open, urban skyline, the film moves swiftly inside a rather worn out building when a young woman Yan is checking out an apartment to let. The subsequent sequence unfolds Yan's attempt to turn the apartment her home only to find out that she is seeing and hearing 'things' she is not supposed to. Audience familiar with the horror genre should know the place must be haunted and the things must be ghosts, or Yan is insane, or both. In any case, Yan's home in *Inner Senses* offers no more shelter from the scary city than Lo Wing's home in *High Noon*; if anything, it is an extension of that scary city, an uncanny space of entrapment, ghostly, from which one has to break out and

go up. Indeed, ultimately it is on the rooftop, the vertical fringes of the city, where the ghost is dispelled.

The opening sequence of the *Inner Senses*, however, is deceptive. While the film traces Yan, who keeps on experiencing strange things and suffers from insomnia, to her therapy sessions with psychiatrist Dr Law, we come to witness the sweet evolvment of romance and a bizarre reversal of fate – Yan gets better and better, and Dr Law starts to behave strangely. It gradually and subtly transpires that the recurring glimpses of a girl sometimes sitting on, sometimes jumping from, a rooftop do not belong to Yan, nor is the suicidal girl Yan herself – we are (mis)guided to think so by Yan’s scar-ridden wrist. The girl in question turns out to be the girl friend of a much younger Law, who committed suicide shortly after their tragic separation. They were young. And the young man survived the trauma and moved on with the defence mechanism that the anxieties and complexities of urban living have ceaselessly trained us: forgetting.

All of this revelation concerning Dr Law’s past takes place in the second half of *Inner Senses*. When Yan is still under his care, Dr Law is the perfect, enviable embodiment of rationality, confidence and professional excellence. In one of the earlier scenes, Dr Law is delivering a lecture where he coolly punctures the myth of ghosts with rational and critical thinking. According to him, ghosts are evoked by Chinese parents to discipline their children. ‘I don’t believe in ghosts’, he proudly proclaims. He is strong, immune, a survivor. During the course of the film, we are constantly presented with the portrayal of Dr Law as a capable, successful and busy psychiatrist, to the extent that when he starts to show symptoms of mental collapse, he as well as his colleagues readily attribute it to stress, burn-out or simply working too much, the common ailment of contemporary capitalist society. In the case of Dr Law, however, work is not the cause of his symptoms; it is a symptom in itself. Be rational, stay confident, work hard, and you will forget whatever you don’t want to remember – won’t you?

As Kevin Heffernan (2009) points out, *Inner Senses* is neatly separated into two halves, the first focusing on Yan, the patient, the second on Law, the psychiatrist. While this can be explained, as Heffernan suggests, by the workings of the star system, it also constitutes a trick played by the progress of the film: during the first half of the film, when it focuses on the neurotic, troubled Yan, who claims to see ghosts, we the audience, tempted by genre and gender conventions, assume that she is the crazy one. It is only in the second half of the film that we start to wonder – we start to wonder if the psychiatrist, who is a workaholic, a full-fledged, better paid, better respected member of the capitalist system (Yan is ‘only’ a free lance translator) is the truly haunted one. Confronted with his ghost, his past, his conscience, which his busy, highly materialistic life – including a spacious home with designer interior, private swimming pool and expensive wines – has managed but in the end failed to repress, Law finally remembers who the ghost is, who he is.

He remembers, in the concluding rooftop scene. Towards this narrative climax, we see Dr Law slowly driven mad by his ghost – in the form of mysterious flashbacks of the dead girl and her suicide. In the final sequence, Dr Law, in a desperate attempt to eschew his ubiquitous ghost, runs around through the streets of the city. This horizontal escapade, however, does not open up any line of flight until Dr Law is driven to the vertical, to the rooftop of the building where his girl friend committed the act of jumping, the act he has managed to forget for so long. Then, he remembers. He remembers not

only the past, but also, poignantly, the price of repressing it; he remembers his unhappiness. When he finally sheds his performance of a capable, successful professional and says 'I have been unhappy for so many years', his utterance is a tender echo of the predicament shared by many of his fellow city workers. Then his ghost embraces him, they kiss, and he is about to do the same as his former love, to jump. At this very moment, Yan appears and he (re)turns to the present reality, to his present love. When one is able to remember, to embrace one's past, it is possible to live on, so it seems.

The scene initially takes place in the dark. Accompanied by threatening music befitting the genre of horror, we see Dr Law standing on the edge of the rooftop, poised to jump. Acrophobia, rather than acrophilia, is established by a vertical shot from the top thrusting an immense depth to the ground. When he turns and talks to the ghost, a gentler, softer sound emerges; we hear violins play. The ghost becomes less threatening, now that Dr Law comes to terms with himself and his past. The scene is mixed with flashbacks, when they were young and in love. The romantic and happy flashbacks then morph into fights, and the girl friend cutting her wrist, and her final jump to death, on a white car. Then the scene returns to the darkness of the rooftop, where the two characters dare to kiss and hug. Dr Law has overcome his fear for his past and embrace the ghost. The camera circles around them, as if to encapsulate and round off their love. Then the ghost disappears, while in front of a brightly lit billboard Yan appears.

In *Inner Senses*, the rooftop is the stage for the dramatic conclusion of the film, the point of narrative closure, where the protagonist is forced to stop, to remember his past. In a demanding city where work enables one to forget and keep on forgetting, it takes the rooftop to offer the possibility of coming to terms with that forgetting, the possibility of remembering. After Dr Law reunites with Yan, they sit, closely together, at one corner of the rooftop, while the sun starts to rise and the camera tilts to reveal what lies at some distance behind the couple: the Kwai Chung container terminal, another icon of global capitalism in the city of Hong Kong. The camera first zooms in on the couple, slowly moving away, after which we get an establishing shot of the couple on the rooftop, with the terminal as the spectacular background (see Figure 3). But the couple is safely hidden from everyday reality, embracing each other



Figure 3.

8. As if to underline the fragile attempt to continue one's life, Leslie Cheung, who played the role of Dr Law, jumped to his death from a hotel window on 1 April 2003. *Inner Senses* became his last film. Since then, *Inner Senses* is always read with the knowledge of Cheung's own suicide. Some even connected Cheung's death with the unaccomplished suicide of his character in the film (see for instance Oh-blogger 2008).
9. Unless it is made deliberately into part of the shiny surface that incorporates such raw materiality as a fashion statement, as in, say, some of the ceilings of Pacific Coffee and Starbucks in Hong Kong.

intimately on the rooftop. But the establishing shot, like in *Infernal Affairs*, is also one of power, control and surveillance; it signifies a panoptic gaze. In a time of satellite and GPS technologies, even the rooftop may not be as safe as we think. Here, at the rooftop, *Inner Senses* ends, leaving us to wonder how long they are allowed to enjoy this moment of acrophilic content, of staying on the vertical fringes, beyond. But for as long as it lasts, the cuddling couple, and us, understand why urbanites are lured to the rooftop.⁸

AT THE FRINGES OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

In *Infernal Affairs*, the rooftop offers the space to know who you are, even though that knowledge may be fraught with complexities and contradictions. In *High Noon*, it is the space to feel who you are, the place to share, play and idle, while ironically triggering betrayal and guilt. In *Inner Senses* it is the space where you will be able to remember who you are, the place you go to end your life, but where, instead, you may manage to reconcile with your past in anticipation, however, of an ambiguous future. In all three films, the rooftop allows for that moment of radical reconnection, of slowness and introspection. While the speed of the global capitalist city does not allow oneself to walk like a *flâneur*, the rooftop enables one to stand still. The rooftop scenes we have discussed show us: it is this possibility of reconnection and acrophilia that holds the promise of a different subjectivity.

To conclude, we want to mention briefly two afterthoughts, concerning the materiality of rooftops and their correspondence with the genre of road films. Quite beyond the scope of the current enquiry, these two points should be, in our view, flagged up for future investigation and discussion on the cinematic deployment of the rooftop. First, we have studied the rooftops largely in the light of what takes place there. However, we find it equally pertinent to see rooftops not only as narrative devices, but also as material entities. The rooftops, with all the infrastructural facilities and postmetropolitan life writ large on their surfaces, allow city dwellers the rare occasion to be confronted with the raw, ugly materiality of the global city. The pipes, the tanks, the cables and the wires distended on the rooftops crawl imperceptibly into the everyday convenience of contemporary urbanites. Indeed, in the production of the global city, such material realities are hidden behind the shiny surface of consumption; the shopping malls are clean, soft and smooth spaces, the machinery that keeps them going, its climate and air control, is rendered invisible.⁹ What rooftop scenes do is that they hack, as it were, into the city; they lay bare the materiality of the city, a materiality that is deeply implicated in global capitalism. They unveil what needs to be concealed. In doing so, they resist the aestheticization of the global city, offering an alternative mode of experiencing the city, one that resists the shiny surfaces and probes deeper into the actual machinery and materiality of the global city and its intricate links with global capitalism. This, we propose, is one way to study rooftops in cinema.

Second, apart from proposing one way to study rooftops in cinema, we also ponder if we can talk of rooftop cinema. Here we like to observe an interesting parallel between the yet-to-be-enacted genre of rooftop cinema with that of its far more established, counterpart of the road film. The latter mobilizes the abundance of horizontal space for its *mise-en-scène*, an abundance so much lacking in the postmetropolis. Given the spectacularity of the Asian city, we wonder if the genre of rooftop cinema may be more prolific in Asian

cinema? Even films like *Skyfall* (Mendes, 2012) and *Mission: Impossible III* (Abrams, 2006) move to Asia to shoot their rooftop scenes (albeit with strikingly different implications from the films we studied in this article). The narrative structure of road films generally evolves around the physical journey of the protagonists that symbolizes their psychological evolution. In road films, freedom and social mobility have always been linked to physical mobility while 'the emphasis on the search for freedom and escapism recall the myth that it is possible to escape from the past and start again elsewhere, that roads eventually lead to freedom' (Sargeant and Watson 1999: 9; see also Eyerman and Logfre 1995).¹⁰

Does the narrative of the road film not resemble, we venture to ask, the structure of rooftop cinema, where the rooftop operates as the trope that signifies freedom, mobility and the psychological evolution of its protagonists? How does the agoraphilia of the road film relate to the acrophilia of the rooftop film? If vast landscapes offer the horizontal plane as a rural line of flight outside of the society in the genre of road films, would verticality and rooftop cinema be its generic urban twin brother?

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10. It is a topic for further investigation if this narrative of freedom is as strong in, for example, Chinese road films such as *Lai Xiao Zi/Walking on the Wild Side* by Han Jie (2006), *Luo Ye Gui Gen/Getting Home* by Zhang Yang (2007), *Ren Zai Jiong Tu/Lost on Journey* by Yip Wai Man (2010) and *Wu Ren Qu/Western Sunshine* by Ning Hao (2010).

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Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image

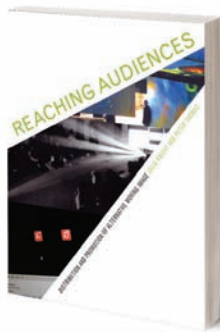
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