



Can Art Save Hong Kong? - A Case Study of Preserving Hong Kong Cinema as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

In media arts discourse, the term post-digital describes art practices in relation to digital technologies. However, its concerns are humans and cultures rather than the technologies themselves, and the emphasis is on the aesthetics inherited through audience participation in artworks. This research project introduces a post-digital strategy for the preservation of local cinema and, at the conjunction of ubiquitous post-digital technologies, arts and the humanities, seeks to foster a new public awareness of the issues at stake in the city's most representative cultural industry. The aim of the project is to re-forge the severed link between citizens and the cinematic representation of their own living space in the post-digital era. It argues that in the years to come, Hong Kong's public cultural institutions should be able to conserve the city's technological edge while reaffirming its modern specificity; to create a renewed sense of its own identity; and ultimately to propose to the general public an innovative feature of heritage mediation.

Keywords

post-digital, augmented reality, Hong Kong cinema, intangible cultural heritage, local culture, ubiquitous technology

Introduction

At the crossroads of the arts, social sciences and ubiquitous technologies, this research project aims to explore, in the still broadly defined field of the digital humanities, new ways to create academic knowledge through a collective process. Therefore, a corpus of definitions is required to create a collective vision of how the consumption of Hong Kong cinema is evolving in the post-digital era. In the process of rethinking the use of cinema practitioners through participatory methods, the project will reassess the foundational position of Hong Kong cinema in Hong Kong's identity. The project will also develop a Participatory Action Research (PAR) plan to unite, drive

and understand the many processes at stake in such an interdisciplinary project.

Historical Background

Hong Kong offers a unique case in world history, where a colonized space, once returned to sovereignty, had very little in common with its pre-colonial past. In the meantime, it has returned to a so called "motherland" that it ignores completely.¹ Furthermore, the lives of most of the Hong Kong population have been tempered in one way or another by the dramatic events that occurred during the difficult first decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the throes of exile.² For these reasons, Hong Kong has created a very resilient and spirited way of doing things that is best illustrated in its unique cinematic production.

This very broad historical overview provides an understanding of the evanescence, the very fragility of self-representation, in a space and time borrowed from colonialism and exile. It also provides an important key to understanding the very peculiar importance of cinema as an identification tool within the *very* tight boundaries of the territory. In 1984, the already mature movie industry received a blow, along with the rest of the population, when Hong Kong learned that it would be handed back to the PRC in 1997. This decision created intense anxiety among Hongkongers and triggered intense reflections on the very existence of a rich and distinct Hong Kong Chinese culture and identity. Through this process, Hong Kong cinema encountered its most innovative momentum, as the only discursive medium able to interpret the depth of this introspective moment. This surge of imaginative talent gained international fame for the inventive skills and artistic achievements of Hong Kong cinema.

¹ Hong Kong was lost by the Manchu during the Qing Empire and returned to the Han Chinese People's Republic of China.

² Over a million mainland Chinese flooded into the city in 1949 alone, mainly businessmen, artists and writers, transforming it into an illegitimate daughter of twentieth century Chinese culture. Most of the movie industry in Shanghai settled in Hong Kong at that time.

Since the handover, the Hong Kong film industry has met the challenge of multiple crises that seem to have severed the link between the city, its inhabitants and their most representative creative industry. First, the global pursuit of the logic of (neo)liberal economics in creative spheres has resulted in a global “depoliticization” of issues that has flattened the realist and self-conscious outlook of the industry. Second, the PRC has recently emerged as a central actor in the entertainment business, both as a market and as a financial resource, under the conditionality of political correctness.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the arts and cinema in Hong Kong have been haunted by reflections about the city’s space and history, and by the search for an identity defined by local specificity, often reduced to fragile vestiges, or even to their absence (PERNIN, 2014, p. 659). The latest official research on the cinema industry suggests that the situation for Hong Kong’s industry is “astounding” in terms of financial, technical and artistic collaboration with the outside world (mainly the PRC). Revenues are growing steadily under the auspices of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement signed in June 2003 (HKTDC, 2014). Nevertheless, reading a little further on the same official website, doubts seem to remain about the real potential of such an organization (SHACKELTON, 2014). The number of movies made in Hong Kong is decreasing steadily and Hong Kong’s “starring role” in the movie business in China seems less evident or certain.

Finally, the ever-increasing rhythm of technological invention in recent years, combined with the ever-increasing number of images at our disposal, has changed the nature of film production, consumption and preservation, and has thus imposed a redefinition of the basic features of the cinema experience on the whole industry.

Pocket Cinema Hong Kong (PCHK)

The PCHK project was born from this array of complex but contiguous issues, with the modest conviction that if it could not answer those questions, it could at least create an innovative podium to further reflections on the central questions at stake, with the core idea that researching human experience through the arts makes complete sense to people. At the crossroads of the arts, social sciences and ubiquitous technologies, this research project aims to explore, in the still broadly defined field of the digital humanities, the triple direction at the core of the problem.

First, and most importantly, it is now officially recognized that the Hong Kong Chinese identity is problematic. The PCHK project, in fostering reflection on

a creative industry located at the heart of its creative cultural distinctiveness, aims to contribute to the formulation of a singular global identity for Hong Kong, drawing on the possibility, the relevance and the legitimacy of a modern, cosmopolitan and legitimate Chinese ego that is at peace with itself and aware of what is at stake both inside and outside its own boundaries. Within this soul-searching effort might lie a free and open future for the Chinese identity in the contemporary world.

Second, using the latest ubiquitous post-digital technologies, the PCHK project aims to acknowledge the telescopic time-scale of contemporary obsolescence that seems to condemn, simultaneously, all of the past habits of our cinema practitioners. Indeed, regardless of their status, analog films, videos and DVDS, and even the Web, all seem to be dying in the face of the new needs and requirements of a borderless, individual, digital mobility that is urging us, as individuals and as a community, to re-think the modality of cinema to re-invent the extent of and dependence on technology. All of those essential questions for our time must nurture a global reflection on how cinema in general, and in terms of our interest, Hong Kong cinema in particular—as an art form and as a cultural assessment—needs to cope with evolution. This mandatory exercise imposed by the era is necessary to confirm and pursue the technological edge that Hong Kong has always had, and to reaffirm its pioneering role in scrutinizing the future. This epochal change should be seen not as an obstacle, but as an incentive to invent new means of survival and dissemination for Hong Kong’s cinema heritage.

Third, regardless of how much it is transformed, caricatured, fabricated and sublimated, Hong Kong is the central actor in Hong Kong cinema. The city is a contender for the title of “cinema city” along with Rome, Paris or New-York. As such, the purpose of the PCHK project is to develop a coherent and innovative digital strategy for urban cultural development. The institutions involved in the artistic development of Hong Kong will be able to propose a cultural guided tour of the city through its memorable cinematic moments. In other words, as Vivian P.Y. Lee brilliantly put it, if cinema and heritage can be jointly defined as two modes of cultural production, the PCHK project needs to rethink heritage through cinema, and to rethink cinema through heritage. The PCHK argues that in the years to come, Hong Kong’s cultural public institutions should be able to propose to the general public an innovative feature of film and urban heritage mediation in relation to the development of Web technology and digital services in mobile situations.

Research Methodology

By the very nature of the issues it tackles, the PCHK project can only be a collaborative undertaking. Combining the latest technologies in satellite localization (GPS) with nomadic application design, the PCHK project can be considered a post-digital undertaking because technology is not its end, but only a means to its end. It is much more concerned with humans and culture through a process in which art—both the film corpus and the application, a form of digital art—are the basis of the research. Methodological breakthroughs using art both as an end (cinema) and as a means (application) are needed to focus/foster/invent a community of practice. Therefore, an emphasis on the process rather than the method will allow an active space for participation that lies between existing disciplines and their methodologies while proposing the formation of new methodological criteria. It is this process space that alludes to the conditions for the research.

PCHK aims to penetrate the city, film and the public, and to question the symbiotic nature of those three elements (technology – humanities – art). The art of the arts-based researcher extends to the creation of a process of inquiry. In its eagerness to explore new ways to create academic knowledge through a collective process of urban development and cultural heritage, the need to involve the local public to feed and further our research creates the need for a participatory methodology, whereby public feedback can lead us to develop a more acute sense of our purpose. At the crossroads of Participatory Action Research (our method) and Art Based Research (our assessment), the project intends to reassess the foundational position of Hong Kong cinema in Hong Kong's identity.

Project Description

Imagine wandering through the urban setting of Hong Kong, where your steps are loosely driven by your own mobile device, through a game of digital image recognition that takes you through the different steps of a seminal movie abstract, filmed on the very same spot. You would, at the very same time, share the space with its cultural significance—a meaning probably unknown to others. A way to (re)create an intimacy with the evolving setting of Hong Kong's moving urban disposition and to (re)discover how much the city is a central part of its own representation.

Once the application is downloaded onto a mobile device, the public audience, transformed into a mediated *flâneur*, will be invited to join cultural tours in which they are free to stroll through the cultural identity of the

territory and experience its intense physical heritage through its rich cinematographic legacy. The superimposition of dynamic data-dense spaces over physical ones ultimately creates a kind of aesthetic paradigm that questions how spectators can interact with a renewed experience of cinema and a renewed experience of the city. A constant engagement between the informational and the material space finally creates an informational continuum that informs the technological transformation of our relationship with urban spaces while simultaneously seeming to renew our experience of cultural heritage.



Figure 1. One of the tours with around 15 participants. ©Hong Kong Baptist University.

Ultimately, the potential extensions are limitless. Depending, of course, on the participation of private and institutional partners, one could develop the PCHK by movie genre, by actor, by director or by area, with each trail providing a different perspective on the city. The Web platform could help in planning the walks by providing information on the area, on the movies and its players. Participants could create their own stories about the city with their memories of films and/or places. Then, the PCHK could also be translated into different languages to deepen the understanding of visitors to Hong Kong by giving them deeper access to the city's intimacy more eloquently than the obsolete and speechless East/West binary cliché. It will allow a reinvention of Hong Kong's story by rewriting stories with insiders and outsiders. Official institutions that specialize in the preservation of cultural heritage (museums, archives, libraries) are well aware that making a heritage alive and meaningful to insiders and newcomers involves its usage and distribution through ubiquitous new media forms. Preservation today seems to turn to usage within the frames of nomadic consumption.

The application is now functional and, although it is

still only in a beta version, it is already advanced enough for us to use in practice. We organized 4 initial tours with our partners. We programmed 7 steps, each related to a place and a movie abstract from three films that were filmed on the available spots. Total number of 35 people was provided with information about both film and place to connect and react automatically to the digital location and to the image recognition device.

To conclude our first trial, we gave the audience a short questionnaire to collect some feedback on the experience. The answers were encouraging. The three questions regarding the fluidity of the application usage and the will to follow its development suggest a great deal of confidence. More remarkably, the process seemed to trigger the interest and the curiosity of a majority of participants in the pursuit of PCHK for Hong Kong cinema production. Finally, learning more about the films through this new application seemed to provoke a desire to further the experience with the prospect of seeing more local films in their home environment.



Figure 2. Participants experienced the film “My Life as McDull” during the tour. ©Hong Kong Baptist University.



Figure 3. Participants experienced the film “Crossing Hennessy” during the tour. ©Hong Kong Baptist University.

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Author Biography

Annie On Ni Wan is an international media artist, often creates artworks focus on relationships between spaces and sites, materials and immaterial. In 2012 she earned a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Washington in Digital Arts and Experimental Media, United States. Wan is currently an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication (Academy of Film), Hong Kong Baptist University.

Her works have been exhibited in festivals in Europe, Asia and North America, including Art+Communication Festival 2004 (Riga, Latvia), Multimedia Art Asia Pacific Conference 2004 (Singapore), ZeroOne/ ISEA 2006 (San Jose, United States),

FrenchPavilion in10th Venice Architecture Biennale (Venice, Italy), Ogaki Biennale 2010 (Ogaki, Japan), Hong Kong Contemporary Art Awards 2012 (Hong Kong, China) and International Festival of Creativity, Innovation & Digital Culture (Canary Islands, Spain) etc. She was also an Artist-in-Residence at the Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Science (IAMAS), Japan in 2010.