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Translating the Language of Film: East Asian Films and Their Hollywood Remakes

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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

**TRANSLATING THE LANGUAGE OF FILM: EAST ASIAN FILMS AND THEIR
HOLLYWOOD REMAKES**

SUBMITTED TO
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AND
DEAN GREGORY HESS
BY
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INTRODUCTION

In a discussion of big blockbusters and movie culture in the world today, it is almost standard to think simply of Hollywood's ubiquitous influence, given its dominance in box offices around the world. Indeed, for many East Asian countries that have undergone rapid economic growth over the past century, modernization has been inextricably linked with Westernization. Hong Kong, as a British colony until 1997, and South Korea, which still has American military presence in its capital today, saw their native cultures "assaulted by Western approaches to science and technology, Western customs, institutions modeled on Western structures... and – as the American culture industry successfully continued to dominate the globe – Western popular culture and its ideologies" (Gateward, 118). As technology and globalization have made it easier for American popular culture to disseminate around the world, certain scholars have come to fear a "cultural synchronization" in which the diversity of the world's cultural systems would become homogenized by a one-directional force (Desser, 180). While it is true that American cultural influences have permeated much of the globe, the view that a unilateral pop-culture force based in "U.S. cultural imperialism, a branch of U.S. economic imperialism...[that] imposes Hollywood film and television programming, along with a host of other symbols, images, and products, ranging from Walt Disney's cartoon creations to Coca-Cola" on the world was never really the whole story (Desser, 179-180).

Although film production in both Hong Kong and South Korea has been heavily influenced by Hollywood's power, both have developed strong film industries within the unique contexts of their own local culture and history. South Korean cinema began in a very harsh climate, enduring wars, political instability, stringent control, and a rather adversarial

relationship with the American film industry. Up to 1945, Korean “mass media, including film, were subject to strict legal statutes and censorship” which were strengthened repeatedly until “in 1942 all the major studios were forced to close under the Choson Motion Picture Ordinance, which established one production company, the Choson Film Company, Ltd., which produced Japanese propaganda” (Gateward, 119). The Korean War followed shortly after the Liberation from Japanese occupation and Korean film was only allowed to slowly reestablish itself after 1955. It was not until the 1980s that government censorship policies loosened to allow for more artistic freedom.

In the early days of Korean cinema that followed the Liberation, an overwhelming percentage of feature films consisted of melodramas, establishing a trend that came to characterize Korean films. The genre was marketed towards women and “dealt with such subjects as postwar circumstances and the separation of families, widowhood, and failed romance,” a trend which many film scholars have read “as a manifestation of *han*, a uniquely Korean sentiment that Ahn Byun-sup describes as ‘a frame of mind characterized by sorrowful lament or suffering from heavy persecution” (Gateward, 116). Although there were notable exceptions, most of these heavily sentimental melodramas “(often of poor quality) [were] made expressly for the purposes of gaining licenses to screen more profitable Hollywood exports” (Robinson, 15).

1985 saw a turning point in Korean film history following a complaint by the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) (Paquet, 34). Essentially, the “Reagan government made movies a trade issue, threatening retaliatory tariffs on Korean videocassette recorders” (Gateward, 120). Since South Korea was still relatively dependent on its relations with the United States, discussions resulted in the signing of the Korea-US Film Agreement,

which abolished import quotas, import price ceilings, taxes, and allowed American film companies to set up operations on Korean soil (Paquet, 35). This opened the fledgling industry to intense competition from American products, sparking fear and outrage amongst the Korean film community. “When UIP released its first title, *Fatal Attraction* (US, 1987), in 1988, a group of protestors sparked a media frenzy by releasing live snakes into a theatre screening the film” (Paquet, 36). On the other hand, however, perhaps as a measure to make Korean films more competitive, the government also loosened censorship regulations, which allowed filmmakers to finally experiment with social themes and criticism. This New Korean Cinema that emerged was marked by “recurring themes and subjects...[that included] anti-United States and nationalist sentiments...gender issues, social stratification, alienation in urban landscapes, the destruction of the family structure and community, and focus on youth and youth subcultures” (Gateward, 120). The new generation of filmmakers was the first to grow up without personal memories of the Japanese occupation or the Korean civil war, and reflected the shifting socio-cultural concerns as Korea began to emerge as an economic power onto the world stage.

1992 marked another milestone in Korean film history with the release of *Marriage Story* (Kyorhon iyagi) directed by Kim Ui-sok. The film was not only a great hit at the box office, but it was also “25 per cent financed by Samsung... Other *chaebol* would quickly follow suit, and soon these conglomerates would become the Korean film industry’s most important source of finance” (Paquet, 36). The move by these national powerhouses was partially motivated by the desire for access to cheaper video rights to supply content for their VCR industry, but it can also be interpreted as a show of nationalist solidarity in the face of competitive Hollywood branch offices that had begun their own video businesses in Korea (Paquet, 37). The entrance of the *chaebol* into the Korean film industry had a profound effect on the development of the Korean

film industry, and gave rise to what became known as the 'planned film'. The planned film essentially sought to bring business strategy and rationality to the film industry, with careful budgeting, market research, and advertising strategies. Inspired partly by Hollywood's 'high concept' filmmaking, the planned film "involved pre-selecting a target audience and marketing strategy, and using a long period of script development to improve chances of success at the box-office" (Paquet, 41). The presence of these new corporate investors led to a more singular focus on producing commercial films, and the planned film strategy remained strong until the late 1990s when a more modern Hollywood-style producer system was adopted after venture capitalists replaced the *chaebol* as the primary financiers of the Korean film industry.

Today, "very few countries around the world possess so many local film companies of the size and strength of those in Korea" (Paquet, 49). While it is still difficult for independent films or those with low advertising budgets to make a profit at the box office, The Korean Film Commission (KOFIC) and government moves to create art-house cinema chains provide some small support for less commercial films. In more recent years, greater interaction on the global festival circuit have allowed directors with more international recognition to find European co-production and distribution for their films. Korea's own Pusan International Film Festival has been making efforts towards facilitating such co-productions with the "Pusan Promotion Plan (PPP), a project market that brings together international film finance companies and selected film-makers" (Paquet, 49). Since the late 1990s, the Korean government has offered "support without control" and provides subsidies for travel, subtitling, and cash rewards to help Korean filmmakers promote their work abroad and "elevat[e] Korean cinema's international profile" in pursuit of "strong nationalist interests...[and] globalization ...through Koreanisation" (Shin, 55-56).

In contrast, Hong Kong cinema evolved in a far more temperate climate with no such nationalist agendas. Instead, Hong Kong cinema was largely born out of an imitation of Hollywood. “Whereas Japanese studios encouraged experimentation, Hong Kong filmmakers stuck fairly closely to those guidelines for shot design and continuity editing first formulated in Hollywood” (Bordwell, 18). On levels of both style and content, Hong Kong directors were keenly attuned to what Hollywood was doing and borrowed techniques and plots as models for their own work. “Local directors have intuitively preserved the swift pacing, the precise staging, and economical cutting, the proliferating plot twists, and the trust in genre roles...that one finds in classic American studio cinema” (Bordwell, 24). Since the 1930s, Hong Kong filmmakers were studying and remaking American films. Some more modern remakes and references of Hollywood films included “*Top Gun* (1986) [which] became *Proud and Confident* (1989), *Witness* (1985) was recast as *Wild Search* (1989)...[and] *The Big Bullet* (1996) [references] *Lethal Weapon*” (Bordwell, 18).

Despite the imitative quality of Hong Kong’s cinema production, the unique culture of Hong Kong continued to play a part in shaping a film culture that rivaled that of Hollywood. As a small territory off the South China coast that was taken over by the British in 1849 following the Opium War, Hong Kong has seen a unique blend of Chinese and Western cultures. While Hong Kong citizens still hold to the principles of traditional Chinese values such loyalty to family, respect for elders, as well as belief in feng shui and many traditional superstitions, personal rights, freedom of speech, and a well-respected legal system had also been established by the British colonizers. Despite not having enough land to feed itself, Hong Kong became one of the wealthiest territories in Asia, moving from industry and exports to investment and banking that attracted companies and immigrants from around the world, particularly businessmen from

Shanghai. With the English education and growing wealth, many young people went abroad to study in Europe, Australia, and North America, bringing home tastes for pop culture and Western forms of media entertainment.

The economic boom that began in the 1970s brought with it a strong sense of Hong Kong cultural identity distinctive from that of Britain or China. “There emerged the new *gang-chan-pian* (Hong Kong-made films), characterized by swift pace, Cantonese slang, and the absence of Confucian moralizing” (Bordwell 32). In this economically prosperous, fast-paced, high-demand environment, Hong Kongers became “the world’s most frequent movie-goers...In 1959...the average attendance per capita was twenty-two visits per year –by far the highest in the world and about twice that of the United States” (Bordwell, 34). More importantly, the Hong Kong film industry was able to keep up with demand both in terms of quality and new releases. “In 1965 the colony turned out 235 pictures, more than France and Germany put together” (Bordwell, 35). This prolific production also allowed the local industry to restrict the number of venues available for screenings of American imports, thus limiting Hollywood’s earnings until the 1990s (Bordwell 34).

Because of these various factors, between the 70s and late 80s, Hong Kong films consistently beat out American imports at the local box office, and a marketing practice began in the 70s that further developed a culture around local film. Due to limited advertising budgets, producers began to give midnight preview screenings that would generate word-of-mouth. Unlike structured Hollywood test-screenings, the Hong Kong audience of students and young people off the street would respond riotously with abuse or cheering for the director, who was required to attend by the producers. “The ritual of attending the midnight show also nurtured a local film culture; cinéphiles would rendezvous at a show and then debate the film over tea and

snacks until dawn. And the midnight screenings influenced the creative process itself” (Bordwell, 33). The instant and intense feedback provided by these screenings forced filmmakers to make rapid changes before the official release. “Hong Kong filmmakers participate in a quick-moving dialogue with one another and with their public. Cinema is woven into the city’s life” (Bordwell, 34). This direct dialogue between filmmakers and their audiences had profound effects upon the creative decisions and filmmaking styles that have come to shape Hong Kong cinema. The knowledge that he would have to face such tough crowds led director Kirk Wong to characterize the typical Hong Kong film as “a film that tries very hard to please the audience all the time” (Bordwell, 28).

This hyperactivity, in visuals, action, leaping plot lines, and unmotivated actions, is perhaps the most notable aspect that differentiates typical Hong Kong films from Hollywood productions. “Hollywood pours its energies into endless script rewrites and lavish sets and costumes. Hong Kong filmmakers devote much of theirs to furious, prolonged, elaborate, often massively implausible violence” (Bordwell, 19). In order to keep their audiences’ attentions, Hong Kong filmmakers used their relatively smaller budgets to play with their generic characters and borrowed contents to create scenes of visual and physical intensity. “Idiosyncra[sies that]...American audiences can’t accept” figure prominently in Hong Kong films, from cross-eyed clowns, bodily humor and toilet jokes, to “thrashings, torture, and sudden, almost offhand death” (Bordwell, 19).

Despite the somewhat eccentric and sensationalistic styles of these films, during the 1970s, Hong Kong action and kung-fu films became popular in the United States. “On 16 May 1973, the Hong Kong films *Fists of Fury*, *Deep-Thrust –The Hand of Death*, and *Five fingers of Death* were number 1, 2, and 3 respectively on the *Variety* list of the week’s top box-office

domestic draws” (Desser, 186). While this kind of amazing box-office success lasted only until the end of that year, Bruce Lee had attained a cult following in certain populations of the United States. Martial arts films from various origins in Asia continued to appeal to more marginalized subcultures of inner-city and colored youth in limited distribution and later, television programming. Even into the 1990s, “Hong Kong film ...was perhaps the most popular foreign cinema in the United States (Desser, 185-188).

Particularly in more recent decades, “Hollywood as the dominant global form of cinema obviously shapes other cinemas, but in the case of Hong Kong action film, we also see the influence of Hong Kong action on a generation of younger U.S. directors such as Tarantino and Rodriguez” (Kleinans (171). Given this responding influx of films and culture from Asia to the United States, the supposed unilateral force of Hollywood on film cultures in the rest of the world can actually be thought of as a relationship of reciprocal influences. For instance, “imagine the Hollywood cinema without the influence of British, French, German, Austrian, and Scandinavian talent in the 1920s and 1930s. [or]...without the Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants and their offspring” (Desser, 180). Indeed, Hollywood has long looked abroad for stories and inspiration, and perhaps the most immediately traceable vestige of that is the Hollywood remake.

Remakes of classic American films often receive a great deal of scorn from critics and laypeople alike, based on the assumption that Hollywood is out of original ideas and needs to repackage its old materials in order to keep bringing people back to the theater. Yet audiences tend to be more likely to watch a remake of a foreign film than to go see the original. While this may partly be an issue of distribution and marketing, Roy Lee, a producer who has gained a reputation in Hollywood as the ‘Remake King’ told interviewers

that Korean films will never be seen in America at the rate that American films are seen in Korea simply because “[Americans] don’t like to read subtitles. The last big subtitle movie after “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” was “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” which made about 10 million dollars but I’m sure the U.S. remake will make over 100 million” (“Hollywood’s Remake King”). As long as there are factors holding American audiences back from seeking out foreign films for themselves, Hollywood is happy to create American versions of international gems for U.S. audiences and the world to enjoy. “Remakes appeal to Hollywood executives because they carry lower risk” (“Korean Hit”). Studios can “regard the film as a script that someone has taken the trouble to film, and that happened to have been tested and proved as a hit in its home country” (Friend, 5). From a business perspective, remakes are a clever, low-risk investment tactic that also provides a continuous supply of fresh material. From a film and cultural studies perspective, remakes clearly change more than just the language of a film, and the choices that producers and directors make in order to tailor a foreign film so that it better appeals to American audiences creates an entry point that allows for a more direct comparison of aesthetic styles, cultural tastes, and narrative conventions.

CHAPTER ONE

Adaptation may attempt to reuse something that seems tried and true, yet the commercial success of a film cross-culturally is often not as predictable as it studios may hope. One case of this failed translation of box office value is the remake of South Korean blockbuster *My Sassy Girl* (2001). While the original became the highest grossing South Korean comedy of all time and was also a huge hit across much of East and Southeast Asia, the American remake of the same title in 2008 went straight to DVD and only showed on twenty-four screens in Thailand (IMDB). Numerous unforeseen factors probably came into play in the transformation from smash hit to flop that reflect subtle differences in cultural conceptions of both romance and humor. While it is unclear whether or not the original film would have been well-received by American audiences, Hollywood filmmakers who attempted to tailor a more plausible, rational film for Western tastes succeeded only in clipping out the subtle charm and humor created by the outrageousness of the original film.

When Hollywood releases a big blockbuster, it tends to be shown all across the world, often grossing more in the international market than it does domestically. Yet even with the power and influence of Hollywood studios, “[t]he action film is triumphant in the international market” (Kleinhans, 168). The highest grossing films on the international scale are limited to huge epics or disaster films such as *Avatar* and *Titanic*, or fantasy films based on bestselling books such as the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series. Like

action and fantasy, one would expect romance and laughter to appeal universally to audiences across cultures as well, yet this does not seem to be the case. Although simpler romance films, particularly contemporary romantic comedies, are constant staples of popular film culture in both East Asia and America, they very rarely make it across the Pacific in either direction on any considerable scale. One case in which a romantic comedy failed to make it successfully across cultures is the Hollywood remake of the South Korean hit film *My Sassy Girl* (2001). While some may argue that love and laughter are universal, a thorough look at director Yann Samuell's choices for Americanizing the film show that, while the content was hardly so culturally entrenched and complex as to make it untranslatable, the differences in traditions of narrative style and social contexts between South Korea and Hollywood meant that what was lost in translation was not the content, but the language itself.

First of all, the influence of the 'planned films' strategy from the 90s is clear in the production of this film. In fact, Shin Cho'ol, whose production company Shinicine produced *My Sassy Girl*, was credited with planning *Marriage Story*(1992), which "remains the most widely cited example of a planned film" (Paquet, 41). *My Sassy Girl* explicitly targets teenaged and young adult audiences, banking on the fact that South Korean "movie-going audiences are primarily under thirty" (Paquet, 48). This market-based strategy has created "the overall trend ...to cater for younger viewers [by] increasing number of films adapted from internet novels written by teens, such as *My Sassy Girl* (2001)" (Paquet, 48). The popularity of blogging and internet culture is inseparable from contemporary youth culture. By reworking a true story that had been posted on the internet and later turned into a novel by a young teen, Ho-Sik Kim, chronicling his experiences with his girlfriend, the

film's producers were consciously tapping into both the younger generation of moviegoers, and the pre-existing fan following of the blog and the novel. In contrast, the producers of the American remake were less explicit about their targeted audience and had far less of a preexisting fan-base. The generic romantic comedy that was created was only differentiated from other similar films in that genre, which often rely on the star power of its leads, by its marketing as "a remake of the Korean smash hit" (DVD). Rather than attracting audiences, these two identifiers that were attached to the film, "Korean remake" and "romantic comedy" may have been received as a blending of genres that confused viewers on what to expect.

Of the top ten grossing East Asian films that have made it to the American market, the top seven are all action epics featuring stylized martial arts sequences and historical costumes. While Japanese horror films and Korean melodramas have also made themselves known in the Western film consciousness, limited exposure to East Asian films has led American audiences and distributors to expect only particular genre conventions of these nations. While this can be helpful for the purposes of handling marketing for certain films, the collapse of a nation or culture with particular genre conventions is hugely problematic. Not only do such conceptions "characterize [a national] cinema in a culturally essentialist manner," but it also leads to homogenization and stereotyping of Asian people, for example, that all people from Asia know kung fu (Stringer, 97). Furthermore, rather than allowing "Korean spectators to construct distinctions between various types of cinema in order to help assert and validate their own particular identities," the process of exporting films puts pressure on Koreans to make choices on how best to represent a homogenized version of themselves and their culture to foreign audiences (Stringer, 96). "Intense struggles

therefore take place in the domestic context over which genres should be named and claimed for this or that preferred version of Korean cinema, and for this or that interpretation of the ‘cultural character’”(Stringer, 96-7).

Given that Korean national cinema has historically been characterized by the melodrama, representing “female resilience, catharsis deeply felt emotion, pain”, the relatively recent surge in Korean comedies lead even film scholars to be confused and concerned over the new trends in Korean cinema (Stringer, 97). As such, a quirky, hyperbolic romantic comedy such as *My Sassy Girl* would be even more unsettling to foreign audiences’ expectations.

One of the most notable differences between the original and its remake is the style of the comedy. The original film uses a wide variety of verbal, physical, and situational comedy, often reaching into the realm of the ridiculous and absurd. For example, the male character, Gyeon-Woo, played by Cha Tae-hyun, is chased around the house and yard by his mother upon trying to sneak in after a night out. The chase scene is very cartoonish as the characters scurry in and out across the screen, rolling on the floor and clambering over walls. To top it off, the mother yells abuse unceasingly, and beats him with the plastic extension of a vacuum hose.

The physical comedy of this film is best represented by the performances of both the main actors. Jun Ji-hyun and Cha Tae-hyun, use comically exaggerated facial expressions – the Girl’s fierce, bug-eyed glare and Gyeon-Woo’s bewildered, fearful grimace – that become representative of their characters and their relationship. Gyeon-Woo’s voiceover throughout the film also provides a humorous commentary that sets up amusing comic

reversals between the character's imagination and his reality. This occurs several throughout the film and generally involves a statement in which Gyeon-Woo asserts himself, such as when he proclaims that "I'm cleverer than I look," before his disguise backfires, "I never want to lose a game, so I play until I win," before he is thoroughly vanquished in every sport by the Girl, and "I decided to take revenge on her" before he passes out on the subway, gets pick-pocketed, and then wakes up in jail where he is bullied by felons until the Girl bails him out. Each of these reversals and series of misfortunes continuously underscores Gyeon-Woo's haplessness as a character, which is a constant source of comedy throughout the film.

Along with a few chase scenes and much physical slapstick comedy, Kwak Jae-yong also includes references to well-known Western comedies from the last century. For example, in the chase scene between Gyeon-Woo and his mother, Gyeon-Woo wears a tank top with a picture of the *Loony Tunes'* Wile E. Coyote, a character famous for being on the losing end of comic chases. Another reference to fun and silly shows is worked in more subtly when the cab driver that turns to whistle at a pretty girl on the street before crashing headlong into a sewage truck has a small plush toy of a *Bananas in Pyjamas* character hanging from his rearview mirror. Since the Australian children's show began in 1992, and was later syndicated in various languages across the world, only teenaged audience members who had grown up in the 90's would be able to recognize and appreciate the reference.

The film also makes effective use of non-diegetic sound throughout the film. Several of the scenes of physical comedy, such as Gyeon-Woo being repeatedly hit in the face by the

ball when he plays squash, and when the Girl beats him at every turn of kumdo, a kind of Korean fencing, are laid over a recurring soundtrack piece of piano accompaniment, reminiscent of the old, silent American comedies. One scene in particular that makes effective comic use of the music contains almost no dialogue and is played in fast-motion so that the subway passengers sway comically to the bouncy rhythm. The historical references to a comedic tradition in film is further emphasized in a scene of missed connections that is slightly sped up so that Gyeon-Woo's shuffling walk becomes a rapid waddle much like that of Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp.

The use of foreign comic references points to the extent to which popular culture has become a globalized presence in the lives of young people around the world. "Like their own domestic audiences, young directors have been deeply influence by foreign, particularly Western, cultures and media" (Shin, 57). Yet the casual interweaving and use of such references throughout the film to create a coherent style of its own also demonstrates an understanding of the circulating nature of popular culture. "These hybrid cultural forms provide an important means for their self definition...that not only distances itself from a xenophobic and moralizing adherence to local cultural 'tradition' but also challenges Western cultural hegemony" (Shin, 57). By incorporating foreign influences and refusing to maintain a 'native authenticity', Kwak claims these varied cultural legacies for himself, providing affirmation for young Koreans that even Australian pre-school shows are a real and legitimate part of the South Korea youth experience.

In contrast, the remake is thirty-one minutes shorter than the original, leaving little space for comic sequences that do not contribute to forwarding the plot. The comedy of the

remake is also much more subdued, with more dialogue-based scenes and no slapstick sequences. While there are some scenes that are very similar to ones in the original, the slight changes that are made show a clear emphasis towards the film's priority of building the romance rather than making audiences laugh. For instance, one scene in the original has the Girl wondering how deep a lake is, and then shoving Gyeon-Woo in to find out. He flounders about screaming and gurgling water and almost drowns from not knowing how to swim while she stands for a long time, considering how deep the water must be. She finally jumps in to save him just as he passes out to a dark screen that reopens onto a new scene. In the remake however, Charlie falls into the water by accident when he tries to prove that he is not a "wuss." Jordan then jumps in to save him and, huddled together under her coat, they run soaking wet and giggling through the rain to her house where they almost kiss.

Another example of parallel scenes in which the ludicrousness is toned down considerably in the remake is the scene in which the Girl's feet hurt from her high heels, so she forces Gyeon-Woo to switch shoes with her. In the remake, the scene is a fairly abbreviated episode in which Charlie simply rejects her suggestion and, although she clomps around briefly in his shoes while he carries hers, they walk and laugh together before deciding to switch back. In the original however, the scene plays out for much longer and is far more humiliating for Gyeon-Woo. His fear of displeasing the girl is evident when he is unable to voice an actual refusal, and keeps trying to get up to walk away instead as the Girl repeatedly drags him back down by his shirt. When she finally does get angry and stomps away, Gyeon-Woo scurries after her offering a foot massage, to buy her a pair of sneakers, to let her wear his shoes while he carries hers, and finally, agreeing to swap shoes

with her. The girl then gleefully orders him to chase her while wearing the heels. Her teasing and prancing while he scuttles painfully behind to the laughter of other people in the park show that he is completely and absurdly at her command. The scene is made even more amusing for the audience with the ironic use of The Temptations' "My Girl" as the soundtrack throughout the chase.

The comedy of the original film relies on extremes both of characters' reactions and situations, which are toned down considerably for the remake. The playful, cartoonish quality that functions through much of the Korean version is also no longer detectable in the American version. This difference in comic tone is perhaps a result of cultural traditions of narrative and performance. A look at Western theatre traditions will reveal in the prevalence of techniques such as Stanislavsky's method acting that traditional Western performance aesthetics value verisimilitude and realism. This has, in part, carried over to American film culture since, "[a]s popular cinemas go, Hollywood is unusually fastidious about realism of detail, restraint of emotion, and plausibility of plot" (Bordwell, 19). Contrastingly, Asian theatre traditions such as Chinese Opera, Japanese Kabuki and Noh, and Korean Noh placed value in spectacle and stylized performance rather than plot-driven realism. Thus, many films arising out of this tradition focus on the experience of visuals and find enjoyment in the experience that can be created around a simple plot. The original *My Sassy Girl* takes its time playing out entertaining comic sequences, silly situations, and "spinning stylistic cadenzas around the narrative core...What Western fans consider 'over the top'...is partly...an effort to see how delightful...one can make the mix of dialogue, music, sound effects, light, color, and movement" (Bordwell, 8). For Americans however, these films can often be considered slow-moving or excessive, so in the remake,

Samuell trims off unnecessary comic scenes to keep the plot moving and reduces the exaggerated zaniness of the film as a whole.

In their attempts to recreate *My Sassy Girl* into a Hollywood movie, the filmmakers also attempted to develop the plot beyond that of the original film. While the Korean film creates some complications such as the Girl's parents' disapproval and the Girl's own crazy behavior, these events are cursory and never really feature as prominently as the humorous episodes in the story. In the remake, the filmmakers put far greater emphasis on Jordan's father, who is stern and protective rather than a drunken fool. Charlie also spends several scenes talking to his friend about his conflicting feelings for Jordan, and seeking advice about how to proceed in their relationship. These changes demonstrate an attempt to create a typical Hollywood structure for the film by building up these central conflicts to serve as obstacles in the romance story.

Another aspect of the original film's comedy is the main characters' bizarrely dysfunctional, yet sometimes tender, relationship that they have. Gyeon-Woo's character of pathetic, bumbling ineptitude is counterbalanced in the story by the Girl. Her rapid mood swings from sweet and gentle to fierce, temperamental, and often violent lead her to not only bully Gyeon-Woo, but to accost strangers and yell at them for misdeeds as well. The greatest comic reversal, then, is that of traditional gender expectations, which operates as the premise of the film.

The characters in the remake, while still retaining some of the characteristics of the original are much more "normal" in their behavior. Instead of being an effeminate boy that is mocked by his friends, henpecked by his mother, and hankers slavishly after pretty girls,

Gyeon-Woo is remade as Charlie, a hardworking first generation college student from a small town, who can sometimes be a little too nice for his own good, but is still able to stand up for himself. Jordan, who is characterized by Charlie and his friend as “a freaking nut,” “clinically insane,” and a “possibly bi-polar, violent, drunken, arrogant, rude woman,” nevertheless behaves more reasonably than the Girl of the original (*My Sassy Girl*, Samuel). The main addition to her character that makes her more ‘normal’ is the femininity of her general behavior throughout the film. While the original Girl plays simpering girlishness as exaggeratedly as, and in counterpoint to, her aggressive ferocity, Jordan has moments where she simply foos around and giggles with Charlie, runs behind him as he leads her by the hand, and rushes into his arms at an emotional moment. The difference in the two versions of this character is perhaps most easily captured by the rules that the male lead passes on to her new date as tips to follow when dealing with her. While several of the rules remained the same in the remake, the number one rule in the original: “Don’t tell her to be feminine” was replaced by “learn to say the following phrase over and over to yourself: ‘It’s all part of her charm’” (*My Sassy Girl*, Kwak, *My Sassy Girl*, Samuel). While the original rule forbids the judgment and admonition of ‘un-ladylike behavior’, the new one says to re-categorize individual peculiarities as part of the pre-constructed role of the female gender to be amusing and attractive. The changing of a challenge towards explicit gender stereotypes to a reassertion of them in these rules speaks to a larger reconfiguring of gender roles that takes place in the Hollywood remaking of this story as a whole.

The social structure of gender roles in society is, perhaps, one of the most culturally determined systems in both South Korea and the United States. While the original *My Sassy Girl* portrays the Girl as the dominant female and Gyeon-Woo as the comically submissive

boyfriend, the Girl is never named. The film is also narrated entirely by Gyeon-Woo, thus giving him control of the story, which is ultimately a tale of how he got the girl. The possessive “my” in *My Sassy Girl* rather than *The Sassy Girl* also reinforces the male character’s claim over this seemingly dominant female character. Film theorists on contemporary Korean cinema have also argued that

“increased male anxieties in the wake of the 1997 IMF crisis...are responsible for...this symbolic annihilation of women deemed threatening and aggressive – an anxiety best demonstrated by such titles as *My Wife Is a Gangster* (*Chop’ok manura*, 2001) and *My Sassy Girl* (*Yopgijokin gunyo*, 2001)”

(Chung and Diffrient, 199).

In both of these examples, the women are wildly divorced from the conventions of socially acceptable female behavior, but are nonetheless domesticated in a sense when they are brought under the traditional patriarchal system by being made girlfriends and wives.

South Korea is a traditionally male dominated society in which “the wife is the “inside person,” whose chief responsibility is maintenance of the household...[and where] women tend to leave the labor force when they get married” (Library of Congress). Thus, the humor of the original film works because of the absurdity of the extreme gender role-reversal. While Hollywood is also fairly traditional in its portrayals of gender roles, the social reality of gender relations in America is not quite off-balanced enough for the reversal to work. Executive Producer of the remake, Roy Lee, claimed in an interview “the original film succeeded in South Korea because the concept of a bossy girlfriend is a novelty in Asia, while it is not uncommon in the U.S.” (Lee). Lee also reveals that the remake “went straight to video in the US because men rejected its premise of a male character putting up with a bossy love interest in American test screenings” (Lee). The novelty of the Girl’s behavior is

captured in the original Korean title, *Yeopgijeogin geunyeo*, since what was translated as ‘sassy’ actually translates more directly to ‘bizarre,’ which carries none of the playful, feminine connotations. However, *My Bizarre Girl* would hardly have been approved as a title for an American romantic comedy, perhaps a missed indication that the concept itself would be lost in translation as well.

Despite the universal topics of romance and comedy, and the inclusion of references to a Western comedic tradition in the Korean smash-hit *My Sassy Girl*, the remake did not to become commercially successful in the U.S. market. Hollywood’s attempts to adapt the outrageous, performance-based comedy into a plot-driven romance missed what was, for the original, the entertaining purpose of the film that had garnered it so many fans across Asia. Even reconfiguring the main characters to better fit the conventional gender roles of Hollywood romances and adding culturally relevant details for American audiences failed to win over American viewers since the premise of the film does not work well with the socio-cultural reality of the U.S.

CHAPTER TWO

Between 2002 and 2003, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak directed the three films of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy. Altogether, the films grossed over HKD \$110 million and were considered box-office miracles. They were also highly acclaimed and won numerous film awards for best picture, director, acting, and screenplay from the Golden Horse, Golden Bauhinia, Hong Kong Film Awards, and Hong Kong Film Critics Society, giving many new hope for a revival in Hong Kong cinema. In 2006, Martin Scorsese remade the trilogy as *The Departed*, making over USD \$289 million and winning the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Director, Editing, and Adapted Screenplay. The remake is an abbreviated adaptation of the trilogy and while the setting is changed from Hong Kong to Boston, many of the key characters and plot points remain consistent with the original. Despite these similarities, more subtle changes in characterization and plot details reveal a fundamentally different sensibility between the two cultures that produced and received each film. *Infernal Affairs* creates a morally complex world where darkness and uncertainty are everywhere, reflecting both storytelling traditions throughout Chinese history and the contemporary socio-political implications of the handover of Hong Kong from colonial British to Chinese rule. In *The Departed*, the story is recreated in the world of a conventional Hollywood narrative in which moral judgments are clearly defined, and, with the inevitable outcome that good will cleanse the world of evil, creates a sense of realism for the audience with its focus on specific characters as they develop throughout the story.

The plots of both films are based around a neat twist on the basic cops versus gangsters model, with a police agent working undercover in the mafia and a mafia member masquerading as a police officer. When both sides discover that they have a mole in their midst, the two undercover men race to discover the other before they are found themselves. The remake largely follows the plot of the first film, but the original trilogy has *Infernal Affairs II* as the prequel to the first, using different actors to play the main characters as youths, and *Infernal Affairs III*, which largely follows the surviving gang mole and the events that lead to his unraveling. Besides a temporal condensing of the plot from a trilogy that spans sixteen years to a single feature film that retains a relative unity of time, the treatment of issues such as power, morality, legitimacy, humanity, and characterization in the remake also show a proclivity towards streamlining and simplifying the original film.

In *The Departed*, the structure of the mafia is based around the single totalitarian figure of Frank Costello played by Jack Nicholson. While Costello has a right hand man in Mr. French, he maintains absolute power over the activities of the gang, refuses to be close to, or dependent, on anyone, and indulges in his own temperamental whims of desire, fear, or rage. In one scene after he smashes Costigan's cast off and pounds it with a boot as a method of interrogation, Costello sits chatting with Mr. French and begins to sing. As Costello sings, Scorsese intercuts his joyful face with shots of the bound and bloody bodies of the Providence men that were killed on Costello's orders. The juxtaposition of such grim scenes with Costello's glee pointedly portrays his complete lack of remorse and plays up the discomfiting sense of insanity created by Jack Nicholson's hyperbolic performance. Another sequence that serves to emphasize Costello's depraved character occurs over halfway through the film after Costigan reveals Costello's status as an FBI informant to

Queenan. The cut from the fatherly kindness that Queenan extends towards Costigan forms an intense juxtaposition with a close-up of Costello's stern, unmoving face. The mise en scene of this shot is particularly striking with Costello dressed formally in a suit and his face drenched in red lighting, with a split black and red background behind him, giving him a glorified satanic appearance. The sound of a female soprano revealed to be diegetic in a reverse shot of the opera stage that Costello is watching contributes to a dramatization of his figure, which is flanked by two beautiful but haughty looking women. The operatic voices continue as the film then cuts to a slow-motion burst of white powder against a ceiling, followed by Costello hand plunging into a basin of coke, which he sprinkles and hurls for a provocatively dressed woman. This dissolves quickly into another slow motion shot of a fistful of coke bursting against the ceiling which then dissolves slowly into a shot of Costello's face, thus momentarily superimposing his look of intense, bloodshot eyes with the slow shower of coke falling from the ceiling.

As neither the coke, the opera, or the women are ever seen again in this film, this aesthetically powerful and dramatic sequence contributes nothing towards progressing the plot. Instead, this scene is conceived for the service of reinforcing Costello's characterization as a thoroughly corrupt, racist, misogynistic man whose only enjoyments are violence and indulging in drugs and whores. Costello's tyrannical, violent, and ultimately traitorous behavior towards supporters and enemies alike makes him a decidedly unsympathetic character that fits easily into the standard role of a villain in the story.

In contrast to Costello's gang, the Triad in the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy undergoes power shifts and structural changes over the course of the three films. From the "Big Four" gangs that all paid tribute to the Ngai family, to the assassinations and seizing of power that put Sam in charge, the underground world of Hong Kong is depicted as far more complex than the singular antagonistic entity represented by Costello. Unlike Costello's isolated figure of irrational violence and destruction, the mafia head Ngai Wing Hau is portrayed as being caring towards his family, and is often seen in his own home in the company of his siblings or elderly mother. One scene in the second *Infernal Affairs* film depicts a family birthday party for Ngai Wing Hau's young daughter, in which a seemingly ordinary family, albeit phenomenally wealthy, chatters and entertains company in their own backyard. Ngai Wing Hau also tries to step into politics so that his family can move out of the shadow of underworld life. This attempt is foiled however and Ngai Wing Hau is ultimately brought down when his family is taken hostage despite his attempts to protect them by sending them to Hawaii.

Even Sam, who is perhaps the most direct forerunner to Costello's mob boss character in the first *Infernal Affairs* film, is developed in the later films as having a loving relationship with his wife, rewarding his followers with promotions, such as with Keung, and being relatively calm or even jovial in his interactions with other characters. In a few instances from the second film, Sam demonstrates empathy and even love towards others. Upon the death of Ngai Wing Hau, Sam shows a desire to release the Ngai family whom he has taken hostage by suggesting to his Thai collaborators "Maybe we shouldn't go too far". The Thai boss Paul responds by telling Sam to "...forget you ever knew the meaning of too far," followed by a long shot of a Hawaiian mansion with gunshots announcing the murder

of the entire family (Lau and Mak, 2003). This exchange demonstrates not only Sam's ability to exercise judgment and restraint, but also reveals his tendency towards mercy, - a clearly unusual sentiment in his line of work. Another moment that highlights Sam's humanity occurs just before he walks into a cheering party of supporters to celebrate his takeover of power. Alone in a dimly lit room, Sam stands at the window gazing at a photo of him with his wife Mary who was killed in her attempts to warn him about Hau's assassins. The close, soft focus shot and play of soft lighting and shadow on Sam's face as tears well up and drop from his eyes are a clear attempt by the film's directors to create empathy for Sam by highlighting a more tender side of this character. Emotional, ceremonial violin music plays throughout this scene and carries over into the next shot where Sam enters the resplendent room of party-goers to shake hands and drink to the cheers and congratulations of an anonymous crowd. The slow motion visuals and lack of diegetic sound in this scene further presses audiences to identify with Sam's sense of emotional loss despite his outward display of triumph.

Although both Sam and Costello serve essentially the same function in the plotlines of their respective films, the disparity in their performances and the directors' choices with regards to their characterizations creates fundamentally different characters. While *The Departed* convinces its audience time and again that they should have no qualms about writing Costello off as a thoroughly despicable villain, *Infernal Affairs* complicates the characterizations of the gangsters, making them relatable through connection to their families and humanizing them through expressions of empathy, grief, and tenderness. By remaking Sam's character as Costello, *The Departed* drastically cuts down on the complexity of the character, flattening him out into a stock antagonist figure. This change in

characterization demonstrates a removal of moral ambiguity and contributes to a simplification of logic and narrative more characteristic of Hollywood's storytelling style.

On the opposing side of the story, both *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed* have a team of police who are working to convict the mafia leader and bring down its illicit operations. In the remake, the Boston police as a whole are portrayed in a manner that is far from flattering. During the scene in which the police are working with the FBI to try and catch Costello smuggling microprocessors to the Chinese, a mistake with the cameras forces the entire unit to sit watching blank screens, until it is clear that they have failed. Frustrated, Sergeant Dignam yells and curses at the camera tech, and Captain Ellerby loses control completely, shoving the man into a wall, causing chaos to erupt as a mass of cops wrestle to control the fistfight. The ineffective, unprofessional manner in which the police handled the situation and themselves detracts from their legitimacy as an authority, making them seem relatively powerless in comparison to Costello's bold and aggressive operations.

Despite the overall problems with the police as an institution however, the individual police characters are characterized as morally upright figures with an unwavering commitment to justice. Captain Queenan is characterized as an older, fatherly figure that looks out for Costigan. Although Queenan is perhaps the most reliable and even-keeled character in the film, he is unable to lead the department to be more effective as a whole and poses little threat to Costello. Queenan's character counterpart, Sergeant Dignam, is far more volatile. Dignam is known for his constant barrage of foul language and his aggressive, impulsive manner. Nevertheless, the moral purpose of both of these characters never comes under question. Although Dignam's temperament leads him to a

forced leave of absence for punching a coworker, and, in the final scene, to break into Sullivan's house and kill him point blank, the film always absolves Dignam's actions. In the first instance, Dignam launches himself at Sullivan out of grief and anger for Queenan's death, and because he knows that Sullivan is lying but cannot reveal it without putting Costigan in danger. In the second instance, which is also the final scene of the film, Dignam appears in Sullivan's house out of nowhere after an extended absence from the film. Dignam is wrapped up in gloves and hospital footies to prevent leaving any trace, placing him in the role of a rogue policeman that reappears briefly and at his own risk in order to serve justice in a final retribution against the mole that almost got away. Thus, despite his temper, ineffectiveness, and a tendency for violence, Dignam, and by extension, the police department as well, is still operating within the system by which police work in pursuit of justice and are unquestionably 'the good guys'.

While a sensitive Chinese government policy restricts the portrayal of the state or state officials in negative ways, and even forced the directors to create an alternative ending for the first film in order for it to be released in China, *Infernal Affairs* manages to go beyond creating a simple, heroic image of the police, and instead, builds up an ensemble of individual characters whose personalities, weaknesses, and struggles over power and politics come into play. Unlike the police in *The Departed* whose loyalty is never questioned, the relationship between police and mafia members at the individual level is not necessarily directly oppositional, leading to more uncertainty in the identities and commitments of certain characters.

Both versions of the film contain scenes in which the police captain and the gang leader meet under tense circumstances but are unable to take any action. In *Infernal Affairs*, just after the police run an unsuccessful bust of Sam's drug exchange, Sam sits in the police station eating a variety of takeout while a handful of his men stand behind him. SP Wong and several police officers mirror Sam's group on the other side of the table as the two heads converse. Although both sides have just learned that there is a mole in their midst, their conversation is controlled and even humorous.

"Sam: You haven't had us over [for dinner] for some time. I'm surprised it's not poisoned.

SP Wong: There's always dessert, you know.

Sam: I'll pass. But I feel bad that you prepared all this for nothing.

SP Wong: I feel bad that this meal cost you people a couple hundred grand tonight"

(Lau and Mak, 2002)

SP Wong then tells a story about two men who play a game of life and death by guessing each other's playing cards that figures as a direct metaphor to their current circumstances in that they each know who the mole in the other's unit is. While there is real tension and huge stakes, both Wong and Sam recognize the irony in the situation and smile with wry amusement. Yet the layers of tension and emotion are further thickened in this scene as the two characters' winking performances of mock seriousness and playful threats resonate directly with the grim undertones of the actual situation, as evidenced by Sam's reaction of dropping his chopsticks and swiping the containers of food across the table in a moment of rage before recomposing himself.

In the corresponding scene from *The Departed*, Captain Queenan and Sergeant Dignam wait for Costello under an arch after a failed mission to catch Costello selling

microprocessors to the Chinese government. Whilst exchanging petty insults about their respective fathers, Costello laughs at the police for trying to seize his smuggled goods and instead, arresting men who were only carrying light sockets. The embarrassment and frustration of the cops at this debacle is evident as the only response they can give to Costello's mocking is vague threats, which he easily brushes aside.

"Dignam: I can't wait to wipe that fucking smirk right off of your face.
Costello: Would you rather wipe my ass for me?
Queenan: I'm gonna get you.
Costello: If you could've, you would've."

(Scorsese, 2006).

The overt enmity between the two sides is further highlighted by reverse shots from Costello's gloating face to Dignam's terse, sarcastic smile and Queenan's angry glare.

When comparing the two exchanges, they clearly set very different tones in terms of how the films are dealing with relationships of power and legitimacy. The traditional cops and gangsters genre posts the two sides as fundamentally at odds, and *The Departed* embodies this in the righteous anger that Queenan expresses towards the figure of the taunting villain. While the relationship between the police and the mafia in *Infernal Affairs* is certainly one of opposition, there is also awareness that this is an opposition dictated by the systems of power that they inhabit. The individuals within these systems understand and play their roles, but also realize that it does not preclude humanity on both sides and the possibility of mutual understanding of each other's positions. This awareness of the systems within which they operate, provides a more complex subtext wherein each character is more complex than the role he or she is given in the world of the film.

One example of this occurs in the second film after Ngai Wing Hau punishes the men who accepted bribes to kill his father by having his henchman shoot them point blank. The character of the henchman only appears in this film and is largely silent. His only role to this point has been to accompany Ngai around and look tough. Thus, it is a shocking turn of events for the audience when Ngai then turns the gun on the henchman and accuses him of being a cop. The accusation is calm and matter-of-fact, and demonstrates an awareness of the stock roles that police and gangsters have acquired in popular culture. Before shooting his henchman several times, Ngai tells him: "You're a cop. We're the bad guys. Time to accept our fates. You can't blame me" (Lau and Mak, 2003). At the same time that these roles are being invoked as justification for violence, the film also underscores the extent to which the characters of the film do not fit neatly into these stereotypes. Until this point in the film, the henchman was only a marginal character, providing an ominous, thuggish threat to Ngai's smooth gentlemanly demeanor. Just before Ngai turns the gun on him, the henchman shoots three men point blank, obeying Ngai's non-verbal orders without the slightest hesitation or protest. For all appearances, he looks and acts the part of a ruthless gangster, such that the fact that he is actually a cop that has been undercover for seven years comes as a shocking revelation not only of this particular character's identity, but also revises the nature of this binary identification system in which a cop is necessarily a righteous protector of people and a gangster necessarily selfish, greedy, and ruthless.

The variability of characters within these roles is further highlighted in this scene by the constant cuts to reaction shots of Yan. When asked why he wanted to be a cop, Yan stated: "I want to be a righteous person," which, when translated literally, can also be read as: "I want to be a good guy" (Lau and Mak, 2003). As a new undercover agent whose

hands are still clean, watching a fellow agent kill three men in cold blood before meeting his own brutal fate has powerful implications for Yan's own future not only in terms of the risk to his life, but also in terms of the endangerment of his ability to maintain that righteousness.

The figure of the undercover agent that lies at the center of these films perhaps best embodies the possibility of sliding between identities, and the moral hazards that that entails. While *Infernal Affairs* works in many ways to flesh out the reality of that moral spectrum, *The Departed* sticks far more closely to a classic binary system of good and evil. In *Infernal Affairs II*, the prequel set some sixteen years before the events of *Infernal Affairs*, the film opens on a scene in which Wong is seen describing his first arrest as a rookie when he emptied six bullets into a guy that killed his partner, but still regrets not having killed him instead. A reverse cut punctuated by the twang of a plucked string instrument as non-diegetic Chinese guzheng music suddenly kicks in reveals that the man to whom Wong is pouring his heart out to is none other than Sam. The two sit in a courtroom over a takeout lunch and, to the surprise to viewers of the first film, hold an amicable conversation free from tension or aggression.

“Wong: Do you know why I haven't messed with you?

Sam: 'Cause I'm so handsome.

Wong: (smiling) Maybe so. 'Cause I think you're a decent guy. I'd rather you be in charge in Tsim Sha Tsui.

Sam: Forget it. You couldn't waste the kid even with six bullets. That makes you a decent guy too. Right?

Wong: Let's put it this way. I'd rather not be one.

Sam: Kwun gave me everything, even my life. If I killed him, I'd be despicable even in your eyes. Right? (chuckling)”

(Lau and Mak, 2003)

Even if the first *Infernal Affairs* constructed a more traditional relationship between cops and gangsters, it is clear in this extract that this world recognizes a system of evaluating moral decency that goes beyond group identity or which power you work for. Instead, the measure of decency lies in whether or not you kill people, and the extent to which you are loyal to those who have helped you.

Later in the same film, a videotape surfaces revealing that Wong colluded with Sam's wife to have Kwun, the head of the Ngai family, killed. In retrospect, it is clear that Wong was trying to convince Sam to kill Kwun in this very conversation. Although Kwun was a Triad boss that was undoubtedly the orchestrator of countless criminal activities, the film still presents conspiring to murder as a reprehensible act by showing the shame and punishments that Wong must endure as a consequence of his actions. Later, Wong even helps Sam to overthrow Ngai Wing Hau, and is the one to actually shoot Hau in the head during a standoff. Although Inspector Wong was a morally upright figure who led police actions against the Triads and acted as the sole friend and supporter of Yan, the main protagonist and undercover cop, in the first film, his actions in the second film draw him into a moral grey area with moments where even his fundamental allegiances become questionable to the audience in a way that Queenan's, and even Dignam's never are. Even Inspector Yeung, who is also ultimately the one to catch the undercover gangster, is first introduced to the audience in a scene where he threatens to frame a Hong Kong gangster for dealing drugs unless the gangster helps to beat up a Taiwanese gangster. The inclusion of sympathetic and humanizing portrayals of gangsters throughout the *Infernal Affairs* films along with the morally ambiguous or even reprehensible actions of the police, creates a confusing world of uncertainty in which allegiance and identity do not necessarily entail

moral decency or lack thereof. In the remake by Hollywood, these uncertainties are erased to create a much more binary world, reducing the moral ambiguity of the film as a whole, creating a more black and white situation that can end in easier judgments and a more stable resolution as a more conventional cop and gangster genre film would be.

Perhaps the most morally conflicted character in either version of the story is Lau Kin Ming, the gang mole. In *Infernal Affairs II*, it is revealed that his motivations for joining the gang were largely out of his attempts to impress Mary, Sam's wife, who proclaims that she would do anything for a man that treats her well. Lau also has a lust for fine things and covets Mary's Rolex watch and expensive music speaker system. Throughout the story, he manages to buy his own Rolex, speaker system, and become engaged to another girl named Mary. Despite his greed and obsessive nature, Lau is seen having serious moral qualms over his position as an undercover gangster, and cannot seem to enjoy his rapid promotions through the police ranks because he is living a lie. The films highlight the anxieties caused by Lau's conscience through constant flashbacks to the moment when he watches Yan being expelled from the police academy, and muttering under his breath his desire to escape his role as well. In the first film, when Lau finally corners and kills Sam, he justifies his betrayal of his boss by simply stating: "I have chosen," and goes on to bask in the glory of being the hero who finally took down the Triad boss. From that point on, Lau attempts to turn over a new leaf and restart his life as a true police investigator.

Throughout the third film, Lau begins to lose his mind as he attempts to clear his tracks while his conscience wrestles with the reality of what he's done. In one delusional scene, Lau offers to help Yan and Wong, both of whom were killed thanks to Lau's work as a

mole. In the dream sequence, his regret and moral angst over his actions are clearly revealed when he tells them: “ I only want to be a good guy, I didn’t expect it to turn out like that. Can you give me another chance?” (Lau and Mak, 2003). Lau soon becomes obsessed with Yan, the true hero who loses his life as an undercover agent, and attempts to become Yan by retracing his steps and breaking into Dr. Lee’s office to steal her records of Yan’s psychotherapy sessions. In a session of hypnotherapy with Dr. Lee, Lau relives Yan’s experience and imagines that both he and Yan are sitting together in the office. He reveals that

“I didn’t want to join the traids, I want to be a good guy. But then I met Mary...My job is to betray those around me. I don’t know when I can stop...I’m a cop. I don’t want to be Sam’s mole”

(Lau and Mak, 2003).

In the end, Lau loses his mind and declares that he will arrest the gang mole himself, only to implicate himself and be cornered by Yeung and Shen. At that point, Lau explodes and screams repeatedly: “I worked so hard. I helped you catch all of Sam’s moles. Why can’t you give me a chance? I only want to be a good guy” (Lau and Mak 2003). Finally, Lau turns his gun upon himself and shoots, ultimately ending up in the confines of a mental hospital.

Lau’s counterpart in *The Departed*, Colin Sullivan, faces pangs of conscience as well, but on a far diminished scale when compared to Lau. He got involved with the Mafia as a child mostly out of his own greed when Costello promised to help him get some extra money. Sullivan does seem discontent and even trapped in his role as Costello’s rat however, and constantly gazes up at Beacon Hill and the golden dome of the Boston State House, which becomes an icon of his ambition throughout the film. In one heartfelt moment

of intimacy with his girlfriend, Sullivan muses about getting a law degree and starting fresh in a new city. Despite Sullivan's occasional misgivings about his underground life, the film still clearly classifies him as a 'bad guy' through a few key details that are changed from the original version. The first of these is the scene in which Sullivan realizes that someone is tailing him through the streets of Chinatown and mistakenly stabs a passing man. Unlike in *Infernal Affairs* in which Lau only shoots Sam and another of Sam's moles, the fact that Sullivan personally stabs an innocent person and then runs from the scene incriminates him further in the minds of the audience. The moment in which Lau shoots Sam as a meditated attempt to choose his legitimate life is changed in *The Departed* when Sullivan shoots Costello only because he discovers that Costello is an FBI informant who could sell him out. The change in motivation from one of attempting to become righteous, no matter how delusional that might be, to an avenging of betrayal and a means of self-protection removes Sullivan's conscience from the equation and further implicates him such that the audience has no lingering attachments or regrets, and feel that full justice has been served when Dignam returns to kill Sullivan in the final scene.

These differing structures of good, evil, and justice between the two films are particularly interesting when analyzed in terms of cultural beliefs and in the context of how religious imagery and references are used throughout both versions. In both the original and the remake, the mafia boss is the character most associated with religious imagery. The first scene of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy shows Sam praying at a monastery in memory of the 'brothers' he lost in the early years of his gang, and as a sort of induction ceremony for his new gang members whom he is sending to infiltrate the police department. Throughout the trilogy, mafia bosses Sam and Ngai Wing Hau are seen engaging in Buddhist and

Chinese customs of burning paper money for their victims to use in the afterlife, and offering sticks of incense to the Big Buddha, a giant bronze statue and famous landmark of Hong Kong, before entering a new business venture. In contrast, the police show no such religious affiliations except in the second film, when Yeung and Shen meet on a rooftop and light cigarettes as makeshift incense in honor of Yan's death. Their dialogue hints at a skepticism of tradition typical of 20th century Chinese intellectualism, which looks down on religion and superstition as ignorant and backwards. Despite their doubts however, they still go ahead with the improvised ceremony, noting that: "there are some things that simply must be done" (Lau and Mak, 2003).

In *The Departed*, religious imagery is used much more ironically with regards to Costello's character. While Costello comments on the role of the Catholic Church as a rallying point for the Irish-American community, his voiceover narration that opens the film also criticizes the Church for its strictness and control. He pulls young Sullivan under his wing and tells him "the Church wants you in your place. Kneel, stand, kneel, stand, - if you go for that sort of thing, I don't know what to do for you" (Scorsese, 2006). Costello is later seen attending a "Festival of Angels" after having gotten away with a major smuggling deal. This scene is followed by a shot of a black and white television show depicting a man standing with arms outstretched before a life-size statue of the crucifixion, which cuts to a vibrantly colorful painting of Jesus that Costigan uses to smash in a petty crook's head in attempts to collect money for Costello. The irony of this series of religious imagery is further punctuated when Costigan discovers from the petty crook that Costello is a protected FBI informer who betrays member of the mafia to the feds, thus removing any sense of sympathy for a man who is loyal to no one but himself.

The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy is distinctly marked by religious mysticism, most notably in the title itself. While the English title makes a play on the police department of Internal Affairs and the notion of a hellish inferno, the original Cantonese name, 无间道 (Mou Gaan Dou), literally means 'endless way' and refers to Avici, or Continuous Hell, which is the worst of the eight levels of Buddhist hell in which sinners are reborn into the same hell for up to 100 million years, and hence are said to suffer endlessly. Each of the three films, with exception to the beginning of the last one, is bookended with beginning and ending quotations from Buddhist writings that describe Avici: "Says the Buddha: He who is in Continuous Hell never dies. Longevity is a big hardship in Continuous Hell" (Lau and Mak, 2002). Such references to eternal suffering without escape help to explain the distribution of justice in the fate of the characters. While the 'good cops' Yan, Wong, Luk and Yeung are ultimately killed in the line of duty, they are given heroes' funerals. Yan's tombstone is engraved with what essentially translates into "Heroes give their lives, but their great spirits last forever" (Lau and Mak, 2002). In contrast, Lau survives through all three films and slowly loses his mind until he is finally committed to a mental institution with self-inflicted brain damage. Although none of the characters in the film commit any of the Five Deadly Sins that would officially land them in Avici according to the Buddhist texts, the endless suffering that the film quotes applies directly to Lau's entrapment, whether in service to a mafia that he cannot escape, or in the continuous torments of his own mind and conscience.

"The Departed" also carries some religious connotation in that both Costigan and his mother are given the same epitaph by a Catholic priest, who asks that "his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace" (Scorsese, 2006).

This title, while referring to the dead, has none of the judgmental connotations of sins and suffering that the original film title had. While *Infernal Affairs* traps Lau in a life of suffering and denies him the liberation of death, the American remake chooses death as the suitable punishment for Sullivan's crimes of betrayal. *The Departed* also takes a much more 'life for a life' structure wherein Queenan's and Costigan's deaths are balanced out with Costello's and Sullivan's.

The sense of resolution once Sullivan has been killed, that order has been restored and the world has been cleansed of Costello's evil runs very contrary to the worldview of the original film, indicating a fundamental difference in American and Asian cultural outlooks. In Asian cultures, the ancient teachings of Buddhism operate on the premise that this world is suffering and the ultimate goal of Nirvana is to be released from the cycle of rebirth. Even throughout Chinese history and *wuxia* mythology, there is an "absence of a constitution and of the idea of civil rights' ...the larger community offers no legal recourse; indeed, often the villains rule. Violence becomes the only solution" (Bordwell, 194). In this world of corruption and self-serving authorities, people cannot trust in an objective law to protect them. Instead, "the hero [must] possess... righteousness (*yi*)" even when taking justice into their own hands such as in the instances in which Yan, Wong, and Yeung become "the rogue cop...pursu[ing] illegal investigation, intimidation, [and] torture" (Bordwell, 194).

Although Sergeant Dignam ultimately takes it upon himself to punish Sullivan outside legal means, American history has created a mindset in which people generally rely on official authority and a rule of law for justice. This outlook is reflected in American

myths and films, for example, “[i]n the American western, the hero may bring civilized justice or right the wrongs that have evaded authority” (Bordwell, 194). *The Departed*, like many Hollywood films, operates on this premise that the world is largely moral, and that evil arises as an aberration that can and will be obliterated such that things can return to a state of normalcy envisioned as peaceful and good. To this end, Costello is demonized and he and his agent, Sullivan, suffer the penalty of death for their crimes. On the larger scale, the enemy whom Costello sells his smuggled microprocessors to, are members of the Chinese government. These figures, which appear only in one scene carrying automatic weapons in the shadows of an old warehouse, are constructed as foreign Others whose screaming, raging leader is given no subtitles, thus rendering him a meaningless bogey threat that can be ridiculed by Costello and then dismissed once the scene is over.

In contrast, *Infernal Affairs* subscribes to a much darker view of the world in which evil is not easily contained in one form but rather, present within each character and a constantly looming possibility for each decision that they make. The sources of wealth for the mafia, who make their drug operations possible at all, is not some foreign threat outside of the normal operations and authorities in the world of the film, but rather, the drug consuming population of ordinary Hong Kong citizens themselves. While these users are never directly portrayed in the films, the simple difference in choice of illicit activity that Sam’s and Costello’s gangs are respectively involved in locates the problem in very different spheres of immediacy versus distance that affect the overall outlook and tone of the narrative of the two films.

Another marked change in the tone of the remake from the original film is the nature of a person's fate. A scene at the end of the trilogy has Shen telling Dr. Lee that: "This is destiny. Usually, it is events that change people. People cannot change events. But [Yeung and Yan], they changed a few things" (Lau and Mak, 2006). Scorsese may have thought that such a fatalistic worldview would not play well to audiences raised with individualistic values, and instead, has Costello assuring audiences throughout the film in a thoroughly American fashion that "a man makes his own way. No one gives it to you. You have to take it...When you decide to be something, you can be it" (Scorsese, 2006). This self-centered ideology is also revealed in the subtle shift of a remarkably similar line that Sam and Costello share about the bloodshed in their business. Sam's declaration that: "what thousands died so that Caesar could be great," (Lau and Mak, 2002) speaks to a grander scale of fate and a historical rise and fall of power than Costello's musing that "a lot of people had to die for me to be me" (Scorsese, 2006). The idea that suffering and death are woven into the very fabric of the world is reinforced in *Infernal Affairs II* when Inspector Wong tells Sam that "evil prevails, only the good die young...the world shouldn't be like this." The sense of helplessness and overwhelming darkness would probably not play out well to audience expectations of a Hollywood film, however, and the tone was radically changed in Scorsese's remake where both good and bad people die, but good ultimately triumphs over evil. Although the Festival of Angels scene is an ironic setting that highlights Costello's demonic character, the parade of young children dressed as angels that walk by singing reinforces the innocence and virtue that still exists within the general population, according to Hollywood.

Unlike this honorable and pure narrative space that Hollywood stories tend to create, Hong Kong films generally reflect a more chaotic moral reality based on a historical and culturally entrenched mistrust of governing authority. From a political standpoint, the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy not only reflects a darker worldview, it is also very reflective of the political climate of fear and uncertainty that was pervasive throughout Hong Kong in the years leading up to the handover. Given that Hong Kong citizens had been allowed many economic and personal freedoms by the British, the Chinese government's record on individual rights and especially the 1989 Tiananmen Crackdown caused many Hong Kong citizens to become fearful of what life under Chinese rule would be like. People with financial means sought to emigrate to Australia or Singapore, and many applied for British or other citizenships in hopes of some protection should the need arise. "Business decisions, family plans, and career choices came to be ruled by the deadline...When the handover arrived, over half a million of the colony's most talented had gone" (Bordwell, 31).

While the trilogy reflects these fears through the story and characters in the paranoia of being trapped and the confusion over whom is trustworthy, the second film addresses these issues directly, having the official handover ceremony coincide with Sam's takeover of Ngai Wing Hau's power as the top mafia boss in Hong Kong. The radio broadcast of the ceremony itself plays over images of the police changing the badges on their uniforms, Wong replacing Hau's photo with a picture of Sam on his office wall, and the raising of the new Hong Kong SAR flag. The mixed emotions accompanying this regime change are also conveyed through Sam's tears as he prepares for his moment of triumph and gazes out the window at the fireworks bursting in the pouring rain.

None of this was included in the American remake because of its irrelevance to U.S. audiences, but it was not replaced with American political sentiments either. Instead, *The Departed* tells a very specific story about specific characters. This reveals another essential difference between the Hong Kong films and their American remake in that while Lau and Mak chose to include real historical events which could prompt audience members to reflect on their own memories and experiences of the recent past, Hollywood films often aim to suture the audience into another world of adventure or fantasy created by the story. Since the simplification of the story and the conventional portrayals of good and evil are standard Hollywood procedure, the filmmakers must pursue realism through concrete details about the setting and characters. The thick Boston accent adopted by most of the actors locates the film within a precise community and differentiates their world from that of the generalized American public. Unlike the vaguely allegorical and much larger ensemble cast of *Infernal Affairs* in which characters are defined more by their role in the story and their relations to each other than by their personalities or backgrounds, the characters of *The Departed* are given families and additional characteristics that are not essential to the plot in order to create more fully fleshed and realistic people.

While we are given virtually no details of Wong's personal life, Scorsese takes us to Queenan's home where we discover he has a wife and a son, Patrick, who attends Notre Dame. Costello is characterized by numerous eccentricities, Dignam, by what Queenan calls "a style of his own" consisting mainly of his rude manner and bad language, and Costigan, by his broken family relations and background in a double-life switching between living with his poor father and upper-middle class mother. The specific details of the characters work to bring them to life as 'real individuals' that the audience can feel as though they

actually know, giving the story more believability and emotional pull that would help suture viewers into the world of the film.

The addition of these details to an otherwise simplified narrative world is indicative of another trademark of Hollywood cinema. “Contrary to what many critics believe, the plot of an American movie often centers upon character development” (Bordwell, 20). The Hollywood devotion to creating character arcs or building internal psychology such as in the love triangle affair between Costigan and Sullivan’s girlfriend, or in Costigan’s confrontation with his uncle is not to be found in the original films. Instead, *Infernal Affairs* creates a complex world that only brings character psychology to the forefront when it serves a purpose such as moral dilemmas or building tension in the overall story.

In remaking the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy into an Academy Award winning Hollywood film, Scorsese kept the major plot points of the original film, but, through more specific characterization, more polarized notions of good and evil, and a firmer resolution, made the film a better fit for the Hollywood mode of storytelling.

CONCLUSION

At this point in history, the story of Hollywood remakes based on Asian films has really only just begun. Thus far, a single man – Roy Lee the ‘Remake King’ – has been behind the production of almost all of the most prominent cases. Beginning with *The Ring* (2002), which was based on the Japanese film *Ringu* (1998), Lee has since bought and sold the rights to numerous remakes such as *The Grudge* (2004), *The Departed* (2006), *The Lake House* (2006), and *My Sassy Girl* (2009). The rise in remakes based on Asian films within the last decade have established that “we can no longer afford our knee-jerk anti-Americanisms or ignore the very real and palpable influence of other cultures on the U.S. entertainment and leisure industry, however powerful it may continue to be” (Desser, 180). In fact, given this increasingly global playing field of popular culture, it is more important than ever to investigate and appreciate not only the content and stories of foreign films, but the nuances of their narrative and cinematic style as well.

In remaking East Asian films, diversity of film language is often lost – sometimes to the detriment of the film itself. As a man who makes his living on remakes, Roy Lee told interviewers that Korean films are more “director-driven and that they have a lot more latitude to do the movie they want to do as opposed to the U.S. structure of catering toward the general population all the time where you water down the story, sort of dumb it down” (INTERVIEW). This simple, though somewhat inelegant, description of the American filmmaking process speaks to a Hollywood tendency to rely on formulas that have always worked, especially when dealing with foreign material. Whether it is erasing moral

ambiguities, creating a three-act structure, reverting to familiar gender roles, or building up conflicts for empathetic, psychologically realistic protagonists to clamber and triumph over, Hollywood has a thick book of rules on how films should work.

The rulebook, as we have seen, is certainly not foolproof, but it does provide fascinating insight into Western cultural values of logic and rationality. The emphases on character motivation, realism, and plausibility are all grounded in a fundamental need for things to make sense. To this end, both the remakes examined in this essay have a great deal more dialogue-based scenes than the originals, which serves the purpose of both condensing the story and explaining the thoughts of the characters. While both *Infernal Affairs* and *My Sassy Girl* are also highly commercial films in their own territories, they are in many ways more given to devoting energies towards creating sources of emotion or entertainment that do not serve the purposes of plot or realism. In comparison to American filmmakers, for Hong Kong directors, “realism is less important than a bold expressiveness in every dimension” (Bordwell, 8). One Hong Kong director noted that “if the plots are simple, the stylistic delivery will be even richer,” indicating that even plot can take a backseat to the creation of intense situations, complex, thought provoking worlds, and dynamic visuals (Bordwell, 8). These moments of style and dynamism reveal a somewhat different purpose in that the demands of viewers have pushed many Hong Kong directors “to make hyperactive films, movies that tried to glue the viewer to the screen every second” (Bordwell, 33). The visual nature of these Asian cinemas has driven them to “revitalize... silent-film techniques. Slow- and fast-motion, dynamic editing, striking camera angles, and other devices that the avant-garde of the 1920s declared to be ‘purely cinematic’” whilst combining in narrative innovations and film languages of their own.

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