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VISIONS OF DEAF VOICES: WONG KAR WAI'S GENERIC SUBVERSIONS OF DEAFNESS AS DISABILITY

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Abstract: Out of an analysis of the 1984 film *Silent Romance*, Wong Kar Wai's first film as a credited screenwriter and a film in which he appears in an onscreen cameo, this essay explores film genre and representations of disability through theories of labor. Proposing that Wong Kar Wai responds to genre as a cinematic reordering of relations of production, the essay shows that depictions of disability as alienated labor in Wong's films interrupt stable genre formations and expose the forces that interpolate ostensibly able-bodied subjects into being. A screwball comedy, *Silent Romance* presents deafness as an impairment that leads to creative ruptures within the working day for the deaf protagonist. With comedic gags that play upon the tension between deafness and disability—and deafness as culture formed within norms enforced by audism—the cartoonist's sensory difference makes him subject to abuse but is the basis for a rich fantasy life that drives his work as storyteller and illustrator. Wong Kar Wai returned to a central character with sensory difference a decade later in the 1994 film *Fallen Angels*. In *Fallen Angels*, Ho Chi Moo (played by singer Jin Chengwu) is not framed by impairment or loss but becomes emblematic of visible surplus as a prankster who seizes capitalist modes of production in eccentrically small and everyday ways. Petty criminal, hapless lover, and devoted son, Ho is both the axis of the narrative and a character that turns notions of deafness as disability on their head. As sensory and communication differences also turn genre formations of the gangster film, romantic comedy, and melodrama inside out, Ho disrupts representations of disability in both film history and the political economy. The latter film thus fulfills and expands Wong's earliest interests as a screenwriter to expose idealist and positivist notions of human value as an alibi for the ableist production of subjects under capital.

Introduction: Deaf and Mute Disablement in the Political Economy and the Narrative Economy of Wong Kar Wai's Cinema

Deaf and mute characters have a powerful voice in two of Wong Kar Wai's films. In *Silent Romance* (1984), the first screenplay for which he was credited as a lead screenwriter—and in which he appears in a cameo role—Wong presents the deaf and mute protagonist Xiao Chen as a figure that challenges the social and economic forces that threaten to exclude him. This film only depicts the social conditions of disability in the most rudimentary way and is ultimately a comic

meditation on genre film production in Hong Kong. Wong later revisits representations of disability in deaf and mute characters through the protagonist of *Fallen Angels* (1995) to create a cinematic theory of labor and genre. No longer simply conflating deafness and muteness as in the early film screenplay, the complex physical variation of the mute character Ho Chi Moo engenders a filmic consciousness of the way that systemic forces of disablement construct and define disability within the narrative and political economy. As the film's central narrator, Ho fully mobilizes voice and body to confront the inequitable and unjust social relations of neoliberal capitalism that become reified in genre form and aesthetics.

Encompassing a range of physical variations, deafness and muteness can be socially constructed as forms of disability (imposed institutionally and systemically) but are more often active sites of community and political affiliation. These affiliations can seem additionally complex in places like Hong Kong where membership in a nation or culture can be construed linguistically (with a gag on lip reading the Shanghainese dialect that seems highly aware of these conditions, Wong debunks this perception as an essentialism at the very start of his first screenplay for *Silent Romance*).¹ It must be stated at the outset that although Wong's films do not perpetuate stereotypes of disability—in fact they almost always dramatically counter audience expectations of stereotypes associated with disability—Wong's portrayal of deaf and mute characters in his first screenplay constitutes what Martin Norden identifies as “the cinema of isolation” in Hollywood narratives that present disabled characters as radically disconnected from other characters and each other.² The narratives of Wong's films that feature deaf and mute characters only briefly touch upon the social terms of disablement that deaf and mute individuals face in Hong Kong and instead engage the political economy at a theoretical and metacinematic level: deaf and mute characters catalyze a self-consciousness in the narrative economy of Wong's films that also ruptures how the audience sees and hears cinema. This self-consciousness

¹ The inspiration for the gag may have come from the screenwriter's knowledge of, or research into Hong Kong deaf communities. One of the first Hong Kong schools for the deaf was established by an educator from China and, as a result, parts of Hong Kong Sign Language derived from of sign language used in Shanghai (Sze, Lo, Lo, and Chu, 2013: 169-170).

² Notably, the narrative of *Silent Romance* contains fragments of what appear to be Chaplin-inspired combinations of humor and disability but may also deliberately refer to these sources to challenge paternalism with which Hollywood films like *City Lights* treated disabled characters. Like *City Lights*, the main plot of the film centers around a loveable but awkward wordless protagonist however, instead of being the love interest of the main character, the blind girl, following the archetype of Norden calls a “Sweet Innocent,” enters the film in a subplot. The ending of *Silent Romance* also echoes the final moment of recognition of *City Lights* in which the female lead finally sees the Tramp (See Norden, 1994: 127-128).

becomes grounds for a critical engagement with the broader conditions of the political economy of which cinema is a constituent part.

In Wong's cinema of characters desperately, and often hopelessly, seeking human connection and communication, physical difference in mind and body further isolates and frustrates the protagonists of these films. However, unlike other characters conceived from within the normative bounds of ableism, disabled characters are presented in the films as exceptionally unproductive (either economically or socially). From within narratives of stigmatization and exclusion, Xiao Chen and Ho Chi Moo voice an autonomy that introduces a self-conscious cinema that is urgently critical of systems—both economic and narrative—that define the human by alienating and exploiting human labor.

As Michel Chion has extensively illustrated, deaf and mute characters introduce an audiovisual complexity at the level of film form that draws upon the history of cinema as a medium. Wong Kar Wai's deaf and mute characters introduce this complexity at the level of both the material economy and narrative economies. A screenwriter for more than a decade before he began to direct films, Wong Kar Wai's career was built upon work in the production of popular commercial genre films with the Always Good production company, Cinema City, D & B Films (Duk-Bou), and In-Gear. Plotlines of his genre films depicted bodies engaged in labor or gendered bodies involved in relationships in line with perceptions of normativity of a mass audience. At points, Wong's screenplays also explicitly transgress the boundaries of normativity, either for comic effect or to engage in critique. Michel Chion points out that deaf and mute characters in cinema entail a slippage in the boundaries between body and voice by creating a space of doubt between what is seen on the image track and what is heard on the soundtrack (Chion, 2009: 100). For Chion, a mute character in a film “elicits the question of all and not-all, of economy and excess in the film's narrative” by referring back to the matrix of early cinema in effects of “masking, exclusion, [and] offscreen space.” Chion further states that a mute character “problematizes the film narrative's ‘final word,’ which putatively closes off the narrative as a whole” (2009: 100).³ While genre conventions are oriented towards a clear and closed narrative system, deaf and mute characters in Wong Kar Wai's films proscribe narrative completion and

³ Chion avers an extremely close association between muteness and deafness in cinematic representation to the extent that silent (or mute) cinema could be called “deaf cinema” (Chion, 2009: 7).

completeness. The doubt these characters introduce opens a critical space for raising complicated questions of the body and labor.

Examples of genre films created by Wong Kar Wai and his screenwriting colleagues in the 1980s show genre conventions formed as a response to mass audience's desire to explore the boundaries of normativity around sexed, gendered, racialized, and classed bodies. Within all these dimensions of human difference, variation, and identity, characters are also socially marked as able or disabled according to their perceived roles within a given economic system. As theorists of social theory of disability have shown, norms of ability and disability function to control and regulate labor but have largely been excluded from social theories labor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Abberley, 1998: 87-89). Nonetheless, Wong's deaf and mute characters present a radical filmic theory of labor through active, even rebellious, agency. They willfully run up against and resist what Genie Gertz has described as "dyconscious audism," in which the norms and privileges of an audist world distort the identity of deaf persons and create a "disabled consciousness"—compromised by deficit thinking about, and medicalization of, deafness (Gertz, 2008: 220-224). Wong's films depict deaf and mute characters who are assertive and creative, as well as uniquely and self-consciously flawed, and who challenge definitions of economic productivity by introducing excess into the narrative economy.

Silent Romance is the first screenplay in which Wong Kar is credited as lead screenwriter. A history of Hong Kong commercial cinema in miniature, the film moves through the opera, martial arts, spy, and assassin genre films that had great popularity beginning in the 1960s and ends with conventions of triad films gaining popularity in the early 1980s.⁴ The film concludes with an ambiguity that looks forward and outward: beyond the strict gendering of popular genres that characterized local film industry productions since the 1960s, and towards films like *Fallen Angels*, which subvert genre with the aim of deeper philosophical meditations on cinema within cosmopolitan cultural and economic circuits. Wong's engagement with the cinematic and economic terms of disablement for a deaf and mute character in the film's script is deepened and complicated in *Fallen Angels* through a mute character who voices resistance to consumer and finance capitalism.

⁴ Tan See-Kam places the heyday of *huangmei* opera films from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s and notes that the genre may have evolved into the *fengyue* genre of soft pornography—the beginning of *Silent Romance* also contains a brief scene that parodies the aesthetics of *fengyue* films (2007). David Desser has profiled the shift from female-centered genre films to male-dominated *yanggang*, or "staunch masculinity," martial arts films in the 1970s (2005). Desser has also documented the popularity of assassin films with female protagonists in the 1960s and 1970s (2017).

Echoing Susan Wendell's memorable call for a feminist theory of disability, in which disability, like gender can be viewed as "socially constructed from biological reality" (Wendell, 1989: 104), the films begin by breaking down gendered conventions of cinematic genre to offer deaf and mute voices of resistance to the socially constructed place of the disabled within a world dominated by ableism. Today the social model of disability has a broad consensus. Movements in "Crip" politics have established radical theoretical interventions inspired by queer theory and postcolonial fronts of nationalist resistance.⁵ While Wong's films attend to the politics of disablement on much smaller scale, these narratives touched upon multiple forms of intersectional oppression faced by the disabled in the long period of uneven rights and recognition of people physical and cognitive difference in Hong Kong, where the first regulations surrounding disability rights were passed in 1996.⁶ While the first deaf and mute character to be featured in Wong's 1984 screenplay is depicted as painfully subjected to stigma and exclusion, in *Fallen Angels* mute narrator is the film's central voice: a voice of self-conscious reflection on his own body under terms of disablement, he articulates visions of his history and future to profoundly assert the contradictions of labor and capital.

Gendered Genre to Genre Labor

Slipping between several sets of genre conventions in the first ten minutes of the film, an opening prologue sequence in *Silent Romance* establishes a relationship between genre and labor that will recur throughout the film. Entering the climatic scenes of an opera *in media res*, the prologue introduces the film's protagonist, Xiao Chen, as deaf and mute immediately after his birth in an interrupted performance of a classical Chinese opera. The performance is an episode in the saga of Tang-dynasty heroine Fan Lihua. In this false start to the film, titles and mise en scène indicate that the film is about opera performers—ostensibly a backstage drama. The scene contains both the visible birth of the protagonist that begins the narrative and the figurative birth of transnational Hong Kong cinema production: to begin the film with a classical opera scene ties the film to the origins of the first regional boom of Hong Kong cinema that occurred through

⁵ See, for example, McRuer (2010) and Kafer (2013).

⁶ Hong Kong's Disability Discrimination Ordinance has been heralded as making great progress in offering structural and legal support to persons with disabilities, but it has subsequently been criticized for limited enforcement and reporting practices that are voluntary and inconsistent (see Peterson, 2005).

huangmei opera films, which led to the international expansion of studios like Shaw Brothers (Chen, 2013: 177-178, 185).

The female lead of the opera in the prologue scene stays on the wings ready to perform despite the fact that she is about to give birth. She exhorts the director of the troupe, “we have been jobless for too long.” A male understudy steps in front of her and appears onstage in the female singer’s role and is greeted by the male lead already on stage and asks him, “Who are you?” The understudy replies that they are Fan Lihua. The crowd reacts with outrage yelling towards the stage: “How can a man play that role?” Xiangyang Chen remarks that the initial feminizing of the first regional blockbuster opera films, such as the Hong Kong production *The Love Eterne*, was deeply connected to the subsequent push towards masculinization martial arts films. Strong associations with the feminine and masculine suggesting that form part of the appeal these films was that they enlisted the connections between genre and gender, especially as cross-dressing in the earlier films to foster “spectator participation in a performance of [gender] role-playing” (Chen, 2013: 189-190). The scene that unfolds plays out as an audience’s reaction to the transgression involved in crossing genre and gender boundaries. The opera scene reiterates that engagement with genre derives from oppositions of purity, contamination, and exclusion.⁷

Explicitly signaling this gendered history of the genre, the female opera performer rushes onstage and intervenes with the improvised line: “How dare you impersonate me?” and she ousts the male understudy.⁸ The opera briefly resumes but the performer soon collapses on stage and begins to give birth. Beginning in a space of gender fluidity and, ultimately, contestation and consensus over how a narrative should be gendered, the scene and the one that follows recapitulates the genre cycles of Hong Kong cinema. As the boy grows up his gender and his body appear as rigid and defined. However, the audience will soon find another condition of

⁷ As the alternation of gendered conventions in film genres presented in *Silent Romance* suggests, the knotty problem of genre and gender goes beyond the simple etymological association in Latinate languages. As Jacques Derrida memorably demonstrated both create a kind of law that generates its own oppositions: by creating the imperative that genre, or gender, cannot be mixed it is implied that they should be mixed. Amidst the terms of inclusion and exclusion that principles of classification naturalize, the disabled body stands for the “axiom of nonclosure” interrupts the completeness of genre narratives (Derrida, 1980: 65).

⁸ The scene also parodies the long history of gender impersonation in live theater opera and film. For example, Guanda Wu tracks gender impersonation in opera from legitimacy under the Qing imperial government to fierce debates between reformers that coincided with early twentieth century nation building projects (2013). Dessler notes the dominance of an “all-female cast of box office champions” in Hong Kong until the 1960s, with prominent stars like Ivy Ling playing gender impersonation roles in opera genre films (Dessler, 2005: 21).

physical difference that will mean he will remain relatively fluid but trapped within the constraints of an ableist society.

The invocation of labor in the scene is twofold: the devotion of the characters to their profession within the precarity of a stage actor's life of work is carried to the extreme of going into labor on stage. The performer is still in costume while she screams in labor pains. Her fellow actors and stagehands carry her offstage where she immediately gives birth. The protagonist, Xiao Chen, is born offstage. After the boy fails to cry upon being spanked after birth, the parents realize he is mute and express worry that he will be unable to have the opera career that they have planned for him. Just after the birth, his father holds him and discusses the remaining career options for someone that is mute in their family and decides that must be a musician. Moving from the strict coding of gender within the opera genre directly into the labor that defines identity within the family and economy, the scene shifts the genre-gender formulation into a genre-labor formulation. A post-birth cliché of assigning a sex-gender identity to the child after it is spanked (the "it's a boy" moment) reiterates this: the midwives stare in shock at the child's upturned body as it emits no cry after the spank. This deviation from the closure associated with gendering—and with questions over the ability of the body in its place—leaves what Chion describes as a space of doubt in the narrative exposing relationships between genre, labor, and physical difference (Chion, 2009: 100).

Using a cymbal to test Xiao Chen's hearing in the next scene, the performers discover that the baby is also deaf. The scene cuts to Xiao Chen as an older child looking longingly through a shop window at a musical instrument. His mother tells him that the instruments are not for him and hands him a comic book. The boy looks at the comic with wonder and walks off reading it, oblivious to his surroundings. The scene cuts on an insert shot of an open comic book with a dolly shot of Xiao Chen as a grown man still engrossed in the book. In the logic of the sequence, rather than bodily difference appearing as purely impairment, loss, or lack, it is defined within the larger political economy of which his family of working-class performers is a part.

The representation of Xiao Chen's physical difference exposes the linkage of genre with the social reproduction of labor as it anticipates foundational texts presenting a "social theory of disability" that would intervene into naturalized or essentialist notions of physical disability. Examining the way that disability is institutionalized as a form of systemic oppression, Paul

Abberley shifts the emphasis from specific physical difference to systems that propagate and reproduce disability as oppression. Abberley notes that under capitalism disablement becomes rendered as a state of being as part of the “compulsion to work” and the medical ideology that arises under capital devalues “impaired modes of being, at the same time that it naturalizes the causes of impairment” (Abberley, 1987: 17-18). The film’s narrative destabilizes genre to present these interlocking effects of the totality of capital upon characters viewed as unproductive because of physical variation.

Enter the Crane: Wong’s Self-Reflexive Expressions of Production Labor and Genre

The opening title sequence of *Silent Romance* exhibits a self-consciousness of the connection between genre and labor. The film begins with a cops and robbers chase sequence that is at once a send up of crime genre films but also exposes the labor behind the creation of the film. The sequence is a play upon scenes of police chasing unlicensed vendors that would remind audiences of police crackdowns that would be a daily occurrence on the streets of Hong Kong. Such a scene will also memorably be replayed as the police target the fishball cart dutifully manned by Fly in Wong Kar Wai’s triad film *As Tears Go By*. These moments are captured by the idiomatic phrase “the ghosts are scattering,” which is heard in an off-screen call of “*zou gui ah!*” in the background of the film as the chase begins. Wong Kar Wai is the head of the patrol in the chase scene in *Silent Romance* (Fig. 1) and chases an errant unlicensed street vendor selling oranges, played by screenwriting partner Barry Wong. The scene unfolds with the oblivious protagonist of the film, Xiao Chen, (played by the film’s director, Frankie Chan), walking through Hong Kong reading a comic book and unaware of the chase going on around him.



Fig. 1: Wong Kar Wai as the head of the police patrol in *Silent Romance*, Source: Always Good Film

The scene is both a way of the screenwriters putting their signature on the film and a metacinematic statement on the labor involved in filmmaking. As the chase concludes, the vendor's cart is destroyed and Wong Kar Wai and Barry Wong break character and share an intimate laugh (Fig. 2). While the scene is whimsical, the way that they position their onscreen personas on opposite sides of the law outlines their radically different approaches and contributions to the film. The breaking of verisimilitude in the sequence, signals a cinephilic self-reflexivity and consciousness of the labor of film production that is characteristic of Wong Kar Wai's screenplays and will later feature in his films as director. As the criminal initiating the chase, Barry Wong represents the controlled chaos of the kind of action sequence for which he was already becoming noteworthy in Hong Kong production circles in the early 1980s. The plots of Barry Wong's action comedies, including the crime-themed action comedies that he wrote previous to *Silent Romance*—*Winners and Sinners* and *Carry on Pickpocket*—revolve around wild chase sequences. Dressed as a cop, Wong Kar Wai will bring order to the film by reigning in the madcap moments to make them legible within a diverse set of genre conventions. However, such an enforcement of a generic order will also entail a slippage of genre that occurs as crime-action sequences frame a romantic comedy that becomes another frame narrative from within which proliferates a multiplicity of miniature genre films.



Fig. 2: Screenwriters Wong Kar-Wai and Barry Wong share a knowing glance at the end of the title sequence's chase scene, Source: Always Good Film

The multiple plots of the film develop through Xiao Chen's work of illustrating a comic book series. The series of comic book illustrations turn into cinematic vignettes and become short genre films within the comedy film. In these genre films, Xiao Chen is depicted in the role of the male protagonist of the assassin "Number One Assassin" working for "the syndicate" and his neighbor and love interest, Cactus (played by Ni Shujun), is the female assassin "Thousand-Feather Crane." Transformed from Xiao Chen's illustrations into miniature films, the audience views the ongoing labor of Xiao Chen's work as an artist while they also enter his unconscious mind. After showing Xiao Chen at work on an illustration in his studio, title screens show the film opening into a vignette from an episode in the comic book series (Fig. 3).



Fig 3: Entering the parallel narrative through artist's mind (Frankie Chan as Xiao Chen) in *Silent Romance*, Source: Always Good Film

An extended boat chase in these vignettes has a clear similarity to the final sequence of the 1966 Hong Kong film *The Dark Heroine at the Gates of Hell* (1966). *Silent Romance* thus connects audiences back to Hong Kong films featuring an early female film hero that became a genre archetype for later female assassin films. In these films, “The Dark Heroine,” played by Xue Ni, led a series of films of action and suspense from 1966 to 1967. Her screen name, “Mu Lanhua,” references the Hua Mulan legend. Echoing this, Fan Lihua—a revered martial arts master in the folktales of her life—steps on stage at the beginning of *Silent Romance*. Fan Lihua is often named alongside Hua Mulan as China’s most iconic female folk hero. In “Cool Women Killers in Hong Kong Cinema,” David Desser notes a connection between film’s influenced by “The Dark Heroine” series that come to be called “Jane Bond” films and films featuring characters based on the Jade Girl, an ancient Chinese mythological and historical figure associated with Fan Lihua (Desser, 2017: 121). By invoking this legendary provenance and depicting the crowd’s embrace of female actors to play the character as a favorite opera lead, the film begins by connecting genre and gender more broadly in popular culture. Nonetheless, the film does so to overturn these expectations, in much the same way female heroines of the 1960s and 1970s exploited the historical appeal of characters with origins in popular storytelling traditions.

The vignettes of the parallel narrative in *Silent Romance* open and close with screen title cards indicating comic book chapter headings and chapter endings to create two alternative and parallel cinematic diegeses (see Figs. 4, 5, and 6). The fonts of the title screen closely match the brushstroke-style characters of renowned action director Jeong Chang Hwa's 1973 film *Devil's Treasure*, one of the many assassin genre films from which the vignettes take inspiration (Fig. 7). The parallel narrative of *Silent Romance* recasts characters from the primary narrative settings of offices and apartments in Hong Kong in exotic locations where they sport sunglasses and leisure suits in the style of the competing assassins of Jeong's *Devil's Treasure* and the subsequent *Double Crossers* (1976).

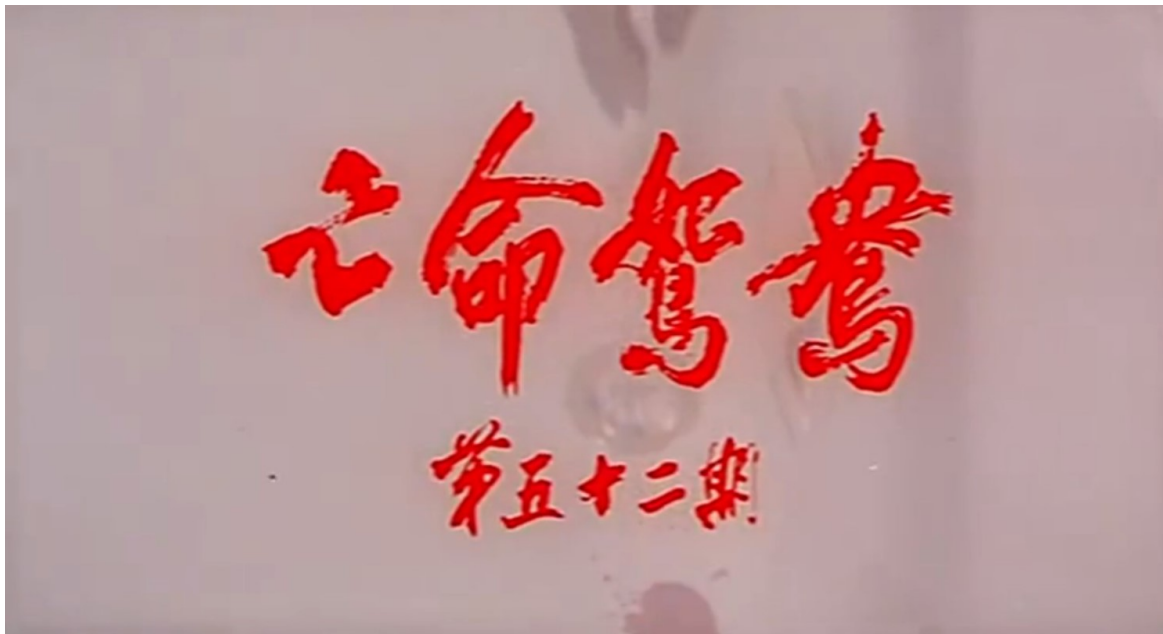


Fig 4: Title for the vignette “Lovers’ Exile” in *Silent Romance*, Source: Always Good Film



Fig 5: “Lovers’ Exile” chapter title with Number One Assassin and Thousand Feather Crane on a snowmobile, in *Silent Romance*, Source: Always Good Film



Fig 6: Number One Assassin and Thousand-Feather Crane on a jet ski with the title “End of [this] Chapter – To Be Continued in the Next Issue,” Source: Always Good Film



Fig. 7: The main title card for Jeong Chang Hwa's 1973 action film *Devil's Treasure*, Source: Golden Harvest

Each vignette contains exaggerated popular genre conventions, many of which are drawn from historical examples of highly gendered genre in the Hong Kong and regional commercial film industries. Moreover, following the pattern set in the Chinese opera prologue, the film draws upon these earlier female assassin films to put the connection between genre and gender under pressure. The vignettes arise from Xiao Chen's comic book illustrations and the narrative revolves around a female assassin, so the viewer is most prominently aware of the connection with the manga-inspired *Lady Snowblood* (1973) and later *jidai-geki* genre films (period dramas) featuring assassin and ninja protagonists (in a climactic scene in the series of vignettes, Thousand-Feather Crane appears in the classic head-to-toe ninja outfit first popularized in the 1960s *Shinobi no mono* series). While the initial vignettes spoof comic-to-film period films reminiscent of *Lady Snowblood*, Thousand-Feather Crane fends off would-be assassins that follow her through motorboat chases and snowy landscapes in subsequent scenes.

The vignettes redistribute the character traits and relationships in Xiao Chen's life within the trappings of genre conventions. Xiao Chen becomes a James Bond-like operative, "Number One Assassin," working for an organization called "the syndicate." In the first such vignette he displays his hypermasculinity by urinating in a more powerful stream than his subordinate, "Number Two Assassin." In an over-the-top comic montage sequence and ostentatious display of

what Travis S.K. Kong calls “hegemonic masculinity” (Kong, 2005: 58), the stream of Xiao Chen’s urination cuts to a roaring waterfall. Xiao Chen is tasked with killing Cactus, who lives as a reclusive nun at a temple. In this narrative, Cactus is deaf and mute and the last remaining female ninja of the centuries-old Thousand-Feather Crane order. After Xiao Chen discovers that she is deaf and mute, he refuses to kill her and saves her from a competing assassin. Seeing Thousand-feather Crane dispatch one of these assassins with an origami explosive, Assassin Number One gradually begins to realize that she is a more sophisticated assassin than he. The vignettes continue in parallel with the primary diegesis of *Silent Romance* into the final scenes of the film, which cuts erratically through a shot-reverse-shot split between the primary and parallel narratives. The split narratives finally converge in an epilogue that features a conclusive de-gendering of genre in a scene of comedic castration where Xiao Chen must accept a role as a surrogate father for Cactus’s children.

By transferring Xiao Chen’s physical difference onto Cactus in genre vignettes, *Silent Romance* projects Xiao Chen’s struggles with the mundane prejudices of ableism onto the long history of martial arts’ film representations of physical disability and impairment from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. The proliferation of these films occurred in the 1960 and 1970s and reached points of gratuitous excess with the 1978 film *The Crippled Avengers* (aka *The Incomplete*), a *wuxia* film with a narrative premise of a trio of blind, deaf, and maimed heroes who seek revenge upon a villain who has deliberately given them disabilities instead of killing them. The film was directed by Chang Cheh, who also directed the film that is likely the basis for Thousand-Feather Crane’s character, *Golden Swallow*.

The parallel narrative in *Silent Romance* begins with Thousand-Feather Crane living in the temple, and dressed in a kimono, indicating that the vignettes will tie into representations of heroes with physical impairments dating back to even earlier precedents in the Japanese *Zatoichi* series. Man-Fung Yip has carefully traced regional interconnections of representations of disability in martial arts films beginning with the now classic portrayal of the blind masseur in Kenji Misumi’s *The Tale of Zatoichi* (1962). He follows the martial arts genre’s fixation on representations of disability through a proliferation of *Zatoichi*-inspired films in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in the 1960s (Yip, 2017: 20-21). Yip remarks that the appeal of these films was already embedded in the martial arts genre as an “imaginary emancipation” for an array of marginalized groups that offered a sense of triumph against injustice. He finally

contends that the decades-long attraction to films featuring representations of the disabled suggests that these films were allegorical of a fractured or divided nation and presented trauma, mutilation, and a promise of “social regeneration” (2017: 22). In direct contrast to this current of representations of impairment as a fault to be corrected or redeemed, the genericized vignettes in *Silent Romance* maintain a comic and cinephilic reflections on film as a site of “imaginary emancipation” while disavowing recourse to allegory. By using genre to consciously reframe the representational, and socially constructed, nature of disability, the film resists a verisimilitude that would render disabled bodies into raw imagery for the working out of historical anxieties.

The genre vignettes in *Silent Romance* are influenced by a long line of “Jane Bond” films that were well known to Hong Kong audiences and thereby offer a network of genre texts that play with gender. The fact that Wong’s first screenplay goes back to these sources is not surprising. In interviews, Wong Kar Wai has described the great influence moviegoing with his mother had on his early life. Wong says that his mother regularly took him to the movies after school and they would watch two to three movies a day (Lee and Lee, 2017: 68). Wong’s first encounters with cinema were as part of an audience consuming Hong Kong genre films geared toward a predominately female audience. Wong’s mother was primarily interested in Hollywood genre films but he notes that the two “later started watching Mandarin movies.” The timeline suggests Wong and his mother began watching films in Mandarin at a time when Hong Kong action genre cinema—produced by the Shaw and Cathay studios for export—was on the rise and most Cantonese films were dubbed into Mandarin (Bordwell, 2010, 42). Bordwell notes that Hong Kong films made under the influence of Japanese *jidai-geki* genre films began around the year 1966 and dominated the local and regional film market by 1971—right in the middle of Wong’s early adolescence (2010, 42). Two of these films, King Hu’s *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and Chang Cheh’s *Golden Swallow* (1967), star a female hero named Golden Swallow, who was a likely inspiration for the Thousand-Feather Crane character in *Silent Romance*. The latter also featured monastery scenes shot in Japan that resurface in the initial vignettes of Wong’s film. Although they may not reflect the more sophisticated films of the European New Waves that Wong came to love as an adult, the vignettes of *Silent Romance* glimpse the Hong Kong genre cinema at the early roots of Wong Kar Wai’s cinephilia.

Even within the conventional female assassin film, strictly gendered genre tropes are redeployed in a way that expands narrative possibilities for action by countering expectations

surrounding gender roles. Dessler notes that action films featuring female protagonists of this era were “highly responsive to their female-dominated audience” (Dessler, 2017: 121). In Jeong Chang Hwa’s 1969’s *Temptress of the Thousand Faces*, for example, women play the lead detectives and investigative reporters in the case of an infamous female thief and a newsroom is headed by hard-nosed female manager. The tension created by momentarily loosening the rigidity of gendered conventions is a primary source of entertainment in the film: dialogue and action scenes entertain and shock because they engage anxieties around roles and behaviors deemed appropriate for men or women. By referencing these films, Wong Kar Wai circles back to the catharsis offered by classical Hong Kong cinema but brings it to an extreme that completely interrupts connections between genre and gender.

Labors of Love: Genre De-Gendered and the Destiny of the Neutered, Disabled Body in the Ableist Economy

In the workplace drama that underlies the narrative of *Silent Romance*, we see another instance of Wong productively fraying the connection between genre and gender. Xiao Chen’s physical experience of disablement as a deaf and mute character in this context opens onto a larger problematic of his exclusion from narratives of love and intimacy because his body is represented as impaired. This eventually prepares the way for a direct confrontation with genre as a mirror of social relations in an economic system in which bodies are either exploited for capital or reduced to terms of disablement and disability.

Working as an illustrator for a comic book press, Xiao Chen is shown in several sequences as encountering hardship and hostility as a result of his physical difference. After the initial scenes of Xiao Chen’s passage from newborn to adult, he enters the office building where he works, and coworkers make a bet that he cannot read lips in the Shanghai dialect. Xiao Chen figures out the subterfuge and gets the upper hand by faking an inability to read lips in dialect in order to misinterpret his coworker’s words as an invitation for a kiss. While the coworker reacts in dismay, the scene is a small triumph for Xiao Chen. Instead of being viewed as a de-sexualized body because of his impairment, and made a target for jokes, he is perceived as both savvy of the trick and willing to engage in physical affection.

Outside of the action-packed generic interludes of the vignettes, Xiao Chen falls victim to further hostilities in an ableist world. In each instance that he is subject to embarrassment and

frustration as he encounters Cactus, who does not notice him. Comic scenes of Xiao Chen attacked by a python or nearly speared by bamboo stakes illustrate that his impairment is also symbolically phallic. Very much in the style that Wong Kar Wai would establish in his later screenplays and directorial work, these hostilities are often excessively, even absurdly, cruel. Often framed as sight gags involving Xiao Chen, the scenes redouble the violence of disablement and castration by drawing upon Oedipal associations of power and sight—the audience’s gaze fixates on Xiao Chen’s wordless, and thus presumably helpless, body.

Xiao Chen enters the elevator of his apartment building and observes a young blind woman being escorted by a child in a scene that shows the disabled rendered powerless by social agents that gain power in the process. In the scene, the child even wields ableist ideologies to his advantage. The meeting will be crucial to the narrative because it is the genesis of a relationship between Xiao Chen and the boy that will develop in the final scenes as the boy becomes his smart-aleck sidekick. In a subplot of the primary narrative, the boy lays out a scheme to help her get cornea implant surgery by courting a man who will fall in love and donate his cornea. In this first meeting, however, the blind woman’s nephew coldly and mercilessly toys with Xiao Chen. Xiao Chen watches in horror as the boy remarks “just because my aunt is blind you shouldn’t take off your pants.” The boy fondles the young woman and then yells at Xiao Chen not to touch her. The boy now has total power over both adults within the sealed off world of the elevator. Cactus next enters the elevator and Xiao Chen’s face shows his hopeless affection towards her. The boy continues the charade by touching Cactus’ exposed back and blaming it on Xiao Chen. The blind woman finally attacks Xiao Chen. Xiao Chen is writhing in pain as the elevator reaches the first floor. The boy glares at Xiao Chen with pity and tells him that this is his lot in life with the idiom “the blind chew on goldthread” (a bitter Chinese medicine and the equivalent of the English phrase “grin and bear it” or “to suffer in silence”).

As the primary narrative advances, Xiao Chen attempts to court Cactus with the help of the young boy. Cactus and the other dancers at the nightclub are romantically involved with a group of young gangsters, which results in a scene that launches a brief parody of triad films as older brothers protect younger brothers from the wiles of the female escorts. After Cactus beats up one of the gangsters, the leader of the group arranges to meet the women at a Wendy’s restaurant the next evening to “teach them a lesson.” During the showdown between the women and the gangsters, negotiations take place over dates and gifts that must be repaid to the offended

gangsters. Xiao Chen and the boy show up with a plan to rescue the women. Negotiations break down violently in a climatic action scene that showcases the acrobatic martial arts moves of Xiao Chen, Cactus, and a range of other characters encountered earlier in the film. Xiao Chen attempts to save Cactus by attacking the gangster's henchmen with roundhouse sweeps and flying kicks—and the boy helps by throwing hamburgers at the gangsters—but Cactus is shown to be fully capable of her own self-defense with martial arts moves that exceed those of Xiao Chen. The women prevail as the police arrive at the Wendy's. Xiao Chen is arrested and then bailed out by Cactus. Cactus tells Xiao Chen that she learned that he is in love with her after the boy showed her Xiao Chen's sketches of her for his comic earlier in the film.

As the film concludes, Xiao Chen is chagrined to hear that Cactus loves him but is choosing an arranged marriage abroad out of practicality. A final vignette shows Xiao Chen and Cactus fighting a maniacal assassin sliding down snow-covered slopes on a snowmobile. Cactus, as Thousand-Feather Crane dressed in a full ninja costume, fades into the snow and unleashes an origami throwing star while Xiao Chen shoots the assassin in the head. During the fight, Xiao Chen, as the Number One Assassin, is fatally shot. In their final embrace, Xiao Chen makes an entreaty that reflects his feelings in the parallel narrative (and will also be echoed in the sentiments expressed in the voice-over narration of the assassin in *Fallen Angels*): "I was a professional killer. The people I killed, I never liked or disliked them. I just did it for the money...Money used to be very important to me but it's different now. You've changed me." Xiao Chen dies in Cactus' arms. Back in Hong Kong, Xiao Chen's comic hits the presses and he rushes to give a copy to Cactus but doesn't reach her before she leaves on a boat to New Zealand. In an epilogue sequence, Cactus returns to Hong Kong to marry Xiao Chen but under the condition that he will raise the four monstrously large foreign children from her arranged marriage. Xiao Chen is once more powerless, and the film ends without the narrative closure that an ableist audience might desire: he is neither emancipated from disability and or in possession of the hegemonic masculine power of an action star in a genre film.

Theorizing the Laboring Body through Generic Rupture: Raced, Gendered, and Disabled Bodies in Wong Kar Wai's Triad Films and *Fallen Angels*

As the metafictional and metacinematic nuances of *Silent Romance* makes clear, Wong Kar Wai's long filmmaking career precedes his early work as a director and films like *Fallen Angels* are best interpreted from within the context of Wong's long-term engagement with genre

films. As suggested in the final vignette scene of the dying assassin, Wong constantly returns to core themes from genre films in the films that he directs as he further develops and embellishes his earlier play with the genre productions at the core of Hong Kong's commercial film industry. *Fallen Angels* is Wong's most extended return to the examination of disability and disablement that dominated his first screenplay. Through the mute character Ho Chi Moo, Wong reimagines bodily difference as a means of cinematic rupture to expose the means of production as symbolic value imposed upon human bodies—either as productive capital inscribed upon ostensibly able bodies or as lack that signifies bodies as impaired.

Much of Wong's reputation as a director of "offbeat genre films" comes from the recognition that he ultimately finds genre as cinema's most faithful reflection of the symbolic economies of capital: rather than seeking verisimilitude, entering the worlds of genre, cinema constructs narrative worlds in which the proportions of realism fit perfectly to the measure of audience perceptions of value and labor (Bordwell 2010: 74). Insofar as it is possible, a departure from genre promises the experience of getting closer to some indexical trace of bodies—at least in some prelapsarian sense and in a way that is always technologically mediated. One might think of Ho Chi Moo's romance with the DV camera in *Fallen Angels* as an embodiment of this promise and its mediation. However, by actively deferring this impossible fantasy, Wong's films as a director are instead fueled by generating audience desire to rupture genre.

Wong Kar Wai's screenwriting career spanned more than a decade. In the 1980s, he wrote or co-wrote around fifty films, receiving screenwriting credit for around ten (Lee and Lee, 2017: 69). While at many points Wong's triad screenplays begin by developing the tension between genre and gender in the way that *Silent Romance* does, the later films also exhibit Wong's tendency to challenge the gendering of genre to move towards connections between genre and labor. In a series of scripts that Wong wrote for now classic triad films starring Chow Yun Fat, Alan Tang, Eric Tsang, and Tsui Hark, the triad gangster film becomes a representation of the devaluation of individual labor within an unforgiving and hopeless economic totality.

Wong began to explore the genre as a laboratory for exploring human labor in writing his first scripts for triad films with the 1987 film *Final Victory* (dir. Patrick Tam) and *Flaming Brothers* (dir. Joe Cheung). In *Final Victory*, an incompetent subordinate in a criminal organization is tasked with collecting debts and watching over his boss's wife and mistress but becomes uncomfortably entangled in a love triangle with the mistress. In the 1987 film *Flaming*

Brothers, Tin (Chow Yun Fat) seeks a way out of the criminal profession as a departure from the gangster's life of debased and unforgiving labor. The dialogue of the film self-reflexively references John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* to create an overt commentary the fuzzy lines between homosexuality and homosociality in the relationships between the "older brothers" and "younger brothers" of triad organizations. Sections of the film also spontaneously transform out of the masculinist conventions of the gangster genre film: abruptly flipping into romantic comedy and musical. For example, in a central musical interlude that disrupts a clear gendering of the triad anti-hero, Chow Yun-Fat appears in drag while lip syncing Anita Mui's "I'm a Bad Girl" (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Chow Yun Fat lip syncing Anita Mui's "I'm a Bad Girl" in *Flaming Brothers*, Source: In-Gear Film

Wong's subsequent triad film, *Return Engagement* (1990; dir. Joe Cheung), begins with a triad gangster, Ho-tin, losing his family in single-minded devotion to the codes of his profession. An experiment in amalgamating features of two gangster genres—Chinese triad films and Hollywood mafia films—the film eventually turns into a father-daughter melodrama. Set in Vancouver against a background of racist sentiment against the Chinese, scenes in which the protagonist Ho-tin is in a Canadian prison borrow from the *mise en scène* and music of blaxploitation films to show Ho-tin's solidarity with other groups facing racist oppression. In a scene in which members of the Italian mafia try to force feed pizza to elderly members of the

triad in an act of gratuitous racism, a gun is smuggled into a banquet room inside of a Peking Duck. Again breaking apart generic conventions with exaggerated comic symbolism, Ho-tin blasts the mafia goons with the duck (Fig. 9). Through these moments of comic violence, Wong's screenplay puts on display the racializing of bodies that is characteristic of both triad and mafia films. This interruption of genre through absurd excess will also become a key feature of *Fallen Angels*.



Fig. 9: Ho-tin (Alan Tang) shoots at gangsters with a Peking Duck in *Return Engagement*, Source: In-Gear Film

With these films, Wong developed a repertoire of highly original triad narratives. Unlike the triad films of John Woo, which have been read as masculinized variations on operatic martial arts films or as male melodrama, Wong's triad narratives consciously seek to bring the genre under self-examination as a representation of individual labor within an economic totality.⁹ In much the same way that Travis S. K. Kong has noted, drawing on Eve Sedgwick, masculinity in Wong's films is not about sex but involves "threshold effects" that "allow for reflection upon the fact that we are made up of myriad "masculinities and femininities" (Kong, 2005: 71). Instead of repeating triad conventions of homosocial bonding under the terms of hegemonic masculinity,

⁹ Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park writes that "John Woo's action aesthetics is a modernisation and modification of Chang Cheh's signature *yanggang* (staunch masculinity) approach to cinematic action and heroics" (Park, 2007: 36)

Wong takes up the tangled associations between gender and genre to get to a critique of labor. Much as *Silent Romance* played on assertions of masculine and feminine codes in genre films to glimpse the divergent social construction of physical difference in terms of labor, *Fallen Angels* begins by distorting the connections between gender and genre to move towards reflection on the totality of systems that define bodies in the modern economy.

Genre conventions of triad films suggest that the protagonist of *Fallen Angels* will be a skilled, if flawed, hypermasculine assassin who will encounter a mysterious femme fatale. However, the assassin, Wong Chi-min (played by Leon Lai) lacks these attributes. Remarking noncommittally on his job: “One’s profession is often determined by their personality...The best thing about my profession is that there’s no need to make any decisions...I’m a lazy person.” Despite her dark and moody style, the assassin’s partner, the dispatcher (played by Michelle Reis), counters expectations for a femme fatale by her deep connections to domestic labor. She seeks pleasure in a warped intimacy of cleaning and arranging the assassin’s living space in his absence. These depictions of the assassin’s dependency on the dispatcher and the hidden feminized labor underpinning the work of the assassin serve to split and recombine genre by ironically invoking normative forms of masculinity and femininity contrary to the generic conventions of assassin narratives in triad films. The shared but separate spaces of the domestic drive home the economic logic within genre representation: the triad film thus becomes a story of the social reproduction of labor.

Through an ironic splitting of gendered generic conventions, anxieties over labor surface in the film. After expectations of a romance between the two is thwarted, the dispatcher reflects on the working day in the scene that follows: “Some people work nine to five. I’m quite the opposite,” she reflects as she eats a dumpling in an ultra-wide-angle shot that breaks apart a coherent view of her body. The shot forces the viewer to consider the onscreen body as a collection of bulbous surfaces rather than as a coherent or seamless entity assembled through expectations of gender. Thus, in narrative and visual form, the film creates a break in symmetrical relations of genre and gender and thereupon slides into meditations on the way that labor is inscribed in genre.

In a vexing comingling of work and pleasure, the audience is left with uncertainty as to how to interpret the cinematic personas of characters outside of the boundaries of genre. Visits to a bar and masturbating in the assassin’s room seem to be extensions of work (which also seems

indistinguishable from the dispatcher's relationships of intimacy). *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love* both feature numerous cuts to inserts of large clocks that mark a division between spaces of labor and the intimate interior spaces of lovers, but in *Fallen Angels* there is no such separation: a clock looms in the background as the dispatcher orgasms (Fig. 10). Positioned both uncomfortably close and, subsequently, as voyeur, the audience anxiously wonders if this is a liberating moment or just a part of the job—in a sense, it is neither and her sexuality is defined from within a political economy that extracts labor from her body.

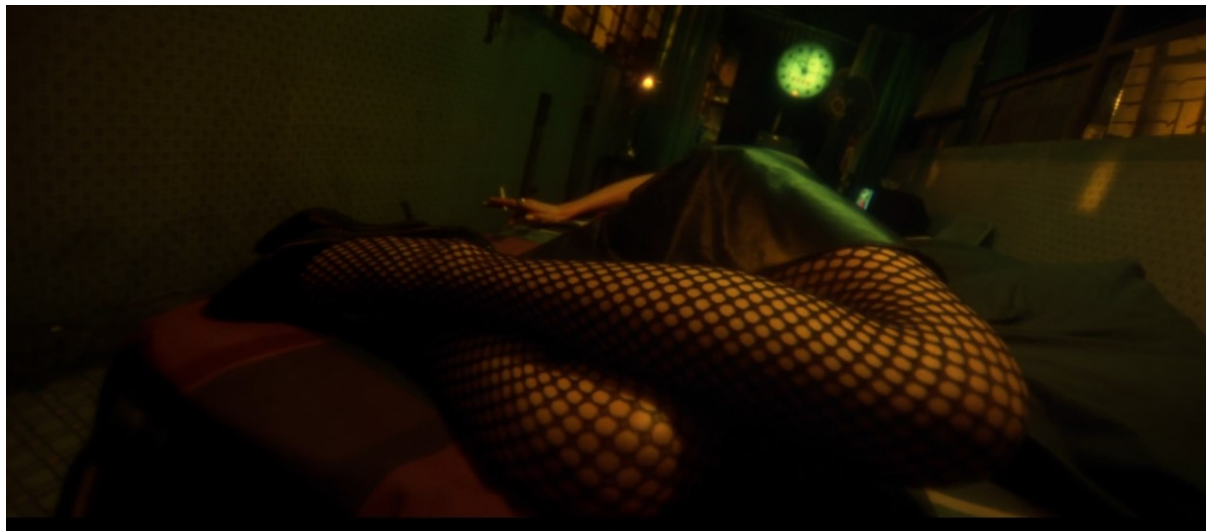


Fig. 10: Sexuality and pleasure determined within the limits of the working day in *Fallen Angels*, Source: Kino International

Later scenes exaggerate the connection between labor and the experience of genre. As the assassin gets on a bus to escape the scene of a crime, he is recognized by a former schoolmate who annoys him with questions that define his identity in terms of labor. “What kind of work do you do?” the man asks. “Maybe we could work together,” he says excitedly. A further irony reiterates the way that identity and labor are forced into connection as the assassin wonders whether the man, an insurance salesman, would insure a professional killer. Conclusively embedding the film’s genre representation within social systems of labor under finance capital, the assassin asks: “How much is a human life worth?” and responds that “demand fluctuates.” Human affect is part of the immaterial variability of a neoliberal economy in which genre and labor intersect and are mutually defined: our feelings towards others introduce instability in the value of a hitman’s labor on the open market of genre that is constructed in the film.

Amidst the linking of genre and labor in Wong's rethinking of the triad film, Ho Chi Moo becomes the primary and anchoring voice of *Fallen Angels*. He explains contradictions of labor, human connection, technology from a profusely and explicitly nonnormative viewpoint. Reminding the audience that speech is not equivalent to voice, Ho declares that he was talkative before he lost the ability to speak when he was a child. Freeing narrative from the prescriptive limits of ableism that governs bodies, the use of voiceover in these sequences presents the audience with the internal of Ho's consciousness—what Mladen Dolar calls “the very texture of the social” and “the intimate kernel of subjectivity” (Dolar, 2006: 14). The voice is categorially not equated to speech in the film. In voiceover sequences in Taiwanese *guoyu*, Ho responds to the Cantonese of his neighbors and the Hokkien dialect of his father. In Dolar's terms, the voice is a “materiality” opposed to the “ideality” of speech (2006: 15). As non-speech, his is voice does not fall within the semiotic order and it cannot be essentialized to represent one group or to speak for the city or the nation. Consequently, rather than impairment that would turn him into an Other for allegorical readings—for example, because he seemingly lacks speech as connection to a community or a nation—Ho is anti-allegorical. He displays a heterogeneity that resists reduction to an allegorical Other that might speak to anxieties of Hong Kong as colony or surrounding the impending reunification with the mainland that will come in two years. Ho's voice is a material element of a laboring body that fits unevenly within a system pressing to define it and attribute value to it. In the subsequent passages of Ho's voiceover, the audience finds that the disabled body seems impossible to define as productive within the general economic totality as it shifts between symbolic lack and excess.

Of course, Ho is more excess than lack. The viewer is introduced to Ho in a sequence in which he flamboyantly poses for the police booking camera. Throughout the film, he pantomimes in expressive performances of love, boredom, and despair. Providing endless ice cream to the chronically insolvent, he exposes the lie of supply and demand: to be a consumer or a customer in a globalized capitalist economy does not necessarily entail that one is an entirely willing party in any transaction. In response to a state built upon debt, he exorcises the ghosts of capital by turning debtors into hoarders and speculators—driving them to exhaustion with pure exchange value (Derrida, 2012: 57, 117). Within an economy of credit and debt, scenes of Ho's promiscuous jobs remind the audience that need rather than demand drives immaterial economies in converting labor into surplus value—the need to work, the need to keep busy, the

need to be needed and, in cinema, the need to be entertained. Later, illegally manning a pork butcher's cart, Ho will state, in a paraphrase of Marx's "to each according to his needs," that in doing business, things "must be done according to the needs of every guest." In an uneven blending of entrepreneurship with tenets of communism, Ho appears as a naive and organic kind of revolutionary—the lumpenproletariat whose labor is excluded from the ledgers of the economic totality. Nonetheless, such an exceptional figure is a material voice of resistance to a system that extracts value from human life.

In in scenes of the hijacked butcher stand, the handheld camerawork results in a shifting of camera distance and angle of view that creates a first-person effect so that the viewer feels they are unwarily wandering the alleys of the city after dark and, finally, are compelled into becoming Ho's customer. The scenes are a visual metonymic for the attraction to cinema and also places the audience into the role of hapless consumer. Hui Yimchau's 1960's Cantopop tune "The Night is Truly Lovely" plays nondiegetically in the background. The lyrics of Hui's song describe carelessly walking the city at night and provide an ironic contrast to Ho's coercive business practices. The song also forms a chain of referentiality across Wong Kar Wai's films in scenes that invoke time and capital: the same song plays in the background as the heavy bank doors shut with Maggie Cheung's Li-zhen on the outside in *Days of Being Wild*. In *Fallen Angels*, Ho wraps a pig foot and holds it up for a close-up while he signals demand for payment with his fingers. The scene interrupts the tacit voyeurism of classical cinema—no longer anonymous and omniscient connoisseurs of the image on other side of the screen or camera, Ho visibly gestures to the viewer to pay up. The viewer becomes aware that they are part of the scene, part of the film, and also entangled in the business of cinema. The scene ultimately reiterates the affective and economic transactions behind cinematic entertainment as an intimate contract formed between the viewer and performer (especially for an audience that recognizes the actor as pop star Jin Chengwu). The film's audience thus becomes subject to Ho's extortion schemes at multiple levels as, in one way or another, the viewer will be made to pay up for the services rendered onscreen.

The voiceover then shifts to an advanced lesson on capital. Ho tells us that because he is not able to talk, he cannot get a job. He states he has no "capital...to start a business." His only choice to work is to enter shops after hours and clandestinely use the owner's shop. What follows from this is a meditation on the difference between variable capital and constant capital.

Ho states that it is “wasteful” to not run a business twenty-four hours and says that rent is paid for the full day so a business should run the entire day. Implicit in his statement is a critique of capital: workers cannot possibly work for all the hours for which the rent is paid, so waste is factored into surplus value extracted from the worker. Ho’s statement is a provocative way of pointing out a fundamental contradiction of the system: the landlord, the capitalist, is always stealing. Ho’s manning of shops after hours is therefore an act of protest and resistance to this theft. Comically, he only abandons these efforts after he felt he had treated the shops poorly. In other words, he felt that he was irresponsible to the (constant) capital but not to the capitalist. Ho’s monologue then ends with “there’s no such thing as a free lunch”—a phrase that in this context applies to capitalists instead of struggling workers.

Ho’s acts of resistance are based on what has been discussed as one of the most difficult questions in understanding capitalism for Marxian economics. Large sections of Karl Marx’s notes for *Capital: Volume Three*, compiled posthumously by Friedrich Engels, are devoted to detailing the diminishing rate of profit—a serious flaw of capitalism that Marx theorized from the relationship between constant capital and variable capital. The shops that Ho occupies are a form of constant capital and variable capital is derived from labor (Moseley, 2018: 97-99). Working illegitimately after hours, Ho symbolically retains control of both while inverting any notion of profit.¹⁰ Finally, Ho states that he is “his own boss” and thereby flips the parlance of classical economics that so disturbs Marx: Ho refuses to be part of a system that buys dead labor for a wage, one in which the worker first advances the “capacity of a living being” and later receives a wage—the unacknowledged form of credit at the core of the exploitation of labor. In opposition to the alienation of labor that Marx describes in *Grundrisse*, Ho resists impoverishing himself and does not “surrender...[the] creative power” of his life (Marx, 1974: 454).

Ho’s physical difference makes his labor unproductive from the standpoint of a system based on human exploitation for profit, but it makes him a powerful voice of critique within a narrative organized around labor. With Ho as the film’s guiding ethical voice, *Fallen Angels* unsettles triad genre conventions to release a wild and irreverent comedy based on a critique of the neoliberal economy. Scenes anticipating Ho’s antics and their implicit commentary on the

¹⁰ Marxian economists use variable and constant capital to explain mystification involved in the term “profit.” Namely, that capital replicates itself in the form of surplus-value out of both variable and constant capital made equivalent in capitalist’s point of view as “costs”: “To capitalists, both components of capital are equally ‘costs’, and surplus-value therefore appears to arise from both in equal measure” (Moseley, 2018: 98).

economics of capital, labor, debt, and credit also surface in the more conventional triad films that Wong Kar Wai authored as screenwriter. In *Final Victory*, for example, Hung (played by Eric Tsang), the likeable simpleton who works as a representative for his imprisoned older brother, is forced to eat a bucketful of ping pong balls to pay a debt accrued by his boss's girlfriend (Fig. 11). Like the later scenes of forced consumption in *Fallen Angels*, the audience may decide that the movie has ceased to make sense, but this would largely reflect expectations of an already stable or recognizable genre instead of accounting for the economic logic that Wong wants to extrapolate from genre. Peter Brunette, for example, commented that Ho's anticapitalist actions contain "seminonsensical humor" reminiscent of François Truffaut (Brunette, 2005: 65).¹¹ Such scenes also return the viewer to the recurring chases of illegal street vendors in Wong's films, including the sequence at the beginning of *Silent Romance* that Wong Kar Wai participates in as actor. Comically inverting the pound of flesh that must be paid for a debt—or challenging the premise that labor requires capital—Ho suggests cracks in the foundation of capitalism and gestures towards the restoration of creative power to labor.



Fig. 11: Hung forced to eat ping pong balls in *Final Victory*, Source: D & B Films

Conclusion: Genre-Constructed Bodies and Cinematic Self-Consciousness

From early in his career as a screenwriter, a carnivalesque play with genre conventions marked Wong's films. These experiments tested the bounds of Hong Kong popular cinema while

¹¹ Brunette's view may however reveal a wry economic critique that appears, *in toto*, as aesthetic excess to audiences of French and Hong Kong New Wave directors.

references in the films also traveled transnational circuits of cinephilia. Some of Wong's genre aberrations challenge normative expressions of gender that are embedded in genre and highlight race and racism. However, of all the forms of genre instability that are consistent across Wong's career, meditations on disablement create the most powerful expressions of the way that bodily difference is defined under capital. Wong's genre films feature zany parodies of genre and inset narratives that function to produce a genre-within-genre reflexivity to foster forms of cinematic self-consciousness. Moreover, these ruptures reflect and respond to social conditions of the neoliberal political economy more generally.

Ten years apart in Wong Kar Wai's body of work, both *Silent Romance* and *Fallen Angels* both create narratives around disablement in which a person with physical difference is subject to exclusion—but in each film the force of exclusion also means that the deaf and mute characters stand in an uncertain relation to labor under capital. This creates a space of freedom for a revaluation of labor that also illuminates ways that genre derives from labor. While Xiao Chen plays with genre conventions to move the discourse of the social constructedness of human social relations towards a critique of labor, Ho Chi Moo revels in ruptures of genre and resists the alienation of labor for capitalist profit. Each film ultimately invites the viewer to reflect upon their relationship with genre and labor and, in the process, invents new desires for cinema that are not solely driven by the normative operations of social relations under capital. These characters voice Wong's interest in genre as a mirror of the conditions of labor that come to define, and misrepresent, the human—bodily, emotionally, and socially.

Although the link between genre and labor is a theoretical project within Wong's films, it is also articulated out of Wong's long years of work in the demanding economy of Hong Kong commercial film production. A sensitivity to the labor of filmmaking is clear in the multiple and collaborative contributions that he made to films at numerous levels of production long before he became a director. The hard work Wong put into the films he worked on was returned in kind by friends and colleagues. In an example that links the two films analyzed in this essay, Wong wrote and acted in *Silent Romance*, a film that Frankie Chan directed and starred in, and Frankie Chan composed the soundtrack for *Fallen Angels*. In shifting self-reflexive play from the gendered bounds of normativity to the exceptional economic and political status of representations of disabled persons, Wong's films present an embodied and materialist reenvisioning of genre. In these screenplays and films, genre is not a question of the tension between nature and history, or

reducible to its etymological cousins, but is connected to specific filmic genealogies and economic networks of film production *qua* economic activity. Just as the construction of disability exposes the way that human ability is defined as economic value within capitalist social relations, disabled characters interrupt genre as economic mode in Wong's films to reveal the interconnectedness of genre and labor. Far from passive, isolated, or accessory elements of narrative, characters like Xiao Chen and Ho Chi Moo activate the audience's consciousness of entertainment as an ideological reflection of anxiety within a capitalist economy.

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