LOVING IN THE STILLNESS OF EARTHQUAKES:

HO YUK — LET'S LOVE HONG KONG
HELEN HOK-SZE LEUNG

Word Play

Ho Yuk — Let's Love Hong Kong inhabits and negotiates the many ironies and contradictions of post-1997 Hong Kong. The film’s central characters survive in the interstitial spaces between technology, desire, commodity, and memory, wherever they can find them. It is uncertain if they are moving across the hyperdensity of Hong Kong’s urban jungle, or simply being carried along by the infamous speed of the city’s rhythm of change. This ambivalence is already resonant in the film’s title. Yuk — a verb in Cantonese meaning “to move” — is here colloquially used as an adjective to describe a perception of movement. The active will to move across space is displaced by the passive perception of movement around one’s stagnant, non-moving self. Chan Kwok Chan anxiously complains to her mother after feeling an earthquake that is imperceptible except to those who stay perfectly still: “Why is it that I feel movement around me and yet I stay still, unmoving?” However, such anxiety is itself displaced by another, less explicit, shade of meaning in the title. The adverb ho, meaning “very”, can also be understood as an adjective meaning “fond of”. Ho yuk, the anxious perception of movement can be playfully transformed into ho yuk, the fondness for movement. Thus, in contrast to Chan Kwok Chan, Zero actively pursues her desire and livelihood, with humour and playful enthusiasm. She does not feel the anxiety of movement around her but becomes herself...
a subject on the move. Finally, the title echoes one other important element in the film. One of the opening shots draws our attention to the character yuk which is made up of two parts, each of which forms a character on its own: nui and dzi. Nui dzi. Woman. Ho Yuk is about women's space: a site where women desire each other across the extremely difficult emotional and physical terrain of Hong Kong's urban life.

Desire and Space
Living space is one of the most valuable and hyper-inflated commodities in Hong Kong. Owning a flat of one's own is the quintessential Hong Kong dream. While intense real estate speculation over the years has made millionaires of many middle-class home-owners, the collapse of the housing market after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 has left just as many in dire straits. For other more disenfranchised groups, home ownership remains a distant and elusive goal. Ho Yuk takes a poignant, satirical look at this predicament. Zero is a squatter in an abandoned movie theatre, where she tries to maintain the illusion of a home, complete with house decorations and two cats, all in the space of a single theatre seat! Chan Kwok Chan lives with her parents in a one-room flat in a housing estate, where the family shares the same space for everything from cooking, eating, watching television to sleeping. Chan's dream is to earn enough money in the next decade to move into a bigger house with her mother. Her regular forays into the rental market highlight the squalid conditions of the city's living space. In the sugar-coated speech of the slick rental agent, any window that looks outside has a "view" and crumbling old buildings offer the most 'feel'! Yet, there is also a massive gap between the privileged and the disenfranchised. The foreign-educated young professional Nicole lives in a beautiful and spacious home, exactly the kind that Zero and Chan Kwok Chan desire. Yet, Nicole abuses her living environment (at least in the eyes of the sleazy feng shui master) by enclosing a corner of her house in artificial obscurity, where she loses herself in cyberporn every night. She escapes into the same extended living space where many of Zero's fellow squatters seek pleasure. Thus, even though Nicole already occupies the commodified living space that Chan Kwok Chan and Zero long for, she needs a habitat of a different kind. Cyberspace becomes another sort of real estate where exchange relations determine how and which bodies occupy what space.

Ironically, despite everyone's fervent longing for space, intimacy between people seems possible only when space is closed up. Nicole enjoys Chan Kwok Chan's body every night across the distance of cyberspace. Chan Kwok Chan would not allow herself to sleep with her favourite prostitute "for free" because she needs to be able to "own" her and ownership is not possible without an exchange relation and an emotional distance. Time and again, Zero and Chan Kwok Chan find themselves looking at each other across a distance, never connecting. Intimacy seems to demand a closing of physical space, such as the time when Zero slides across the seat on the MTR to get close to Chan Kwok Chan, or when Chan Kwok Chan climbs down the bunk bed and crowds into the tiny lower bed to sleep closely next to her mother. The film thus projects a complicated and at times contradictory relationship between the desire for commodified space and the desire for sexual and emotional intimacy. The footage of the giraffes, which always crosscuts with scenes of suspended desire circulating between the three women, marks a mock-utopian place that transcends such contradictions. When the first giraffe sequence appears, the voice-over jokingly explains: "Do you know why giraffes reach up so high for food? It's because the less evolved low-lives cannot reach up there to..."
compete with them! There is an interesting combination of self-mocking pathos and utopian longing in this simultaneously silly and romantic use of the images of the giraffes. In post-1997 Hong Kong, we seem to have remained less evolved low-lives who are unable or unwilling to reach high for a different kind of space and a different kind of human relation. In an attempt to make a connection with Chan Kwok Chan, Zero flirtatiously compliments her on her exquisite long neck that reminds Zero of a giraffe. Yet, at the end of the film, Chan Kwok Chan rolls up the collar of her turtleneck sweater to cover her neck in front of Zero, still refusing to close up the distance between them. Perhaps Chan Kwok Chan, whose name is burdened with allegorical significance — the national product of Hong Kong, China — cannot yet pursue or even imagine such freedom. And perhaps our hope lies more easily with Zero, whose minimalist name signifies a freer, more visionary path into the future?

Queer Self-Writing

While **Ho Yuk** is evocative of a mood that pervades contemporary Hong Kong society, it is also unmistakably a queer film. Hong Kong cinema is not devoid of queer spaces, which have existed throughout its entire history. Many of them are unconsciously, at times even accidentally produced. However, **Ho Yuk** opens up a different kind of queer space. Its independent spirit and community-driven production fosters an aesthetic that derives directly from the experiences, humour, and language of the local queer community. While the film problematizes the commodified relation between people, it also foregrounds and animates the desire of and between women. Even as it critiques certain aspects of the porn industry, **Ho Yuk** does not neglect to give us exuberant erotic scenes of queer sexuality, from Nicole’s masturbation to Chan Kwok Chan’s sexual encounters with the sex worker. At the same time, the portrayal of Chan Kwok Chan and Zero is drawn very closely from the culture and style of TB — the queer gender category specific to Hong Kong lesbians that approximates the notion of “butch” but is not entirely reducible to it. The two women’s androgynous appearance sometimes draws mild hostility from strangers (as Zero experiences in the elevator) and at other times invites others to simply address and communicate with them as men (Chan Kwok Chan is called Mr. Chan by the motel attendant while Zero is treated as a boy by her various clients). These subtle and lovingly reconstructed details of local queer lives give **Ho Yuk** a rare feel of familiarity for queer audience. Much like Zero’s karaoke rendition of William So’s “My Woman” in the closing credits, which is a brilliant TB appropriation of mainstream heterosexual culture, **Ho Yuk** appropriates the impersonally “big” stories of contemporary Hong Kong and tells them from the perspectives of queer women whose lives have, until now, been left out of the grand narratives of their troubled, beloved city.

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