

Genres as Time Machines: Hong Kong Cinema's Ways of Historicizing

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Abstract : Colonized by the UK, handed over to China, and now as a global financial city, Hong Kong's history is never easy to write under the dominant discourses of colonialism, nationalism and globalization. In this plight, cinema, regarded as Hong Kong's most representative cultural form, is used for writing, exploring and questioning the local history of the city. In their writing of the past, Hong Kong directors such as Wong Kar-wai, Stanley Kwan and Tsui Hark have demonstrated alternative ways of historicizing Hong Kong. Despite their interests in different periods of time (Wong is obsessed with the 1960s; Kwan is attracted to the 1930s; Tsui often goes back to the early 20th century), all these directors use genres as their time machines to revisit the past. As a popular cultural form, genres always come with a series of ideologies which define our lives and explain the society. Hence, in a changing society, genres change and complicate themselves with different packages of meanings. Genres function as open-ended and corrigible schemata which can contain multiple themes and various meanings. In Hong Kong, genres, often seen as highly commercial and overly market-oriented, are opportunities for alternative history writing and the exploration of local identities. This paper examines how these Hong Kong directors use the popular forms of genres, such as melodrama, martial art and gangster films, to present the past, and how the stories of the fictional characters, such as prostitutes, martial artists and jobless hooligans mobilize imagination of history. These texts show that genre is a crucial platform for Hong Kong's post-colonial self-writing. Via genres, history in these films is against official and canonical history as well as grand narrative. Genres as time machines articulate a voice for Hong Kong.

Keywords : Hong Kong cinema, genre, historicizing, local history, Wong Kar-Wai

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