From *Infernal Affairs* to *The Departed*

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*Infernal Affairs* (2002) and its American remake *The Departed* (2006) set several records in both Hong Kong cinema and Hollywood: While *Infernal Affairs* won all major film awards in Hong Kong in the year of its release and is recognized as the film that brought Hong Kong commercial cinema back to its feet after almost a decade of declination, *The Departed* earned auteur director Martin Scorsese his first and so far only Oscar award for Best Director in 2007 and remains to be Scorsese's highest grossing film domestically. Both *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed*'s critical acclaim and commercial success are unprecedented when we consider the reception of Hollywood remakes of Asian films as a whole in the last fifty years; although remakes of Japanese horror films become trendy in the first decade of the twenty-first century in Hollywood, they received lukewarm critical and scholarly attention despite their general commercial success. Therefore, *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed*'s rare combination of critical recognition and commercial popularity serves as a significant case study that exemplifies a seamless cross-cultural migration of the film text, one of the most culturally embedded and socially coded expressive forms.

The representation of the city's urban space and its symbolic implications in *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed* proves particularly crucial in the process of transnational film remakes, because a successful visual translation of film narratives requires a viable transplantation of the city across cultural boundaries. *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed*'s exceptional achievements exemplify the ideal transculturalization of filmic texts by their re-conceptualization of the city as sociopolitical space, lived reality, and cinematic entity. This article examines how the layered concept of the Meta City is explored in both *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed* as each re-negotiates the postmodern city's cultural uniqueness and globalized homogeneity. The Meta City refers to a conceptualized re-imagination of a malleable urban space that is not necessarily the actual city, whose filmic representation adapts to its narrative significance and cultural connotations. In other words, while the actual city operates as the material basis (architecture, cityscape, landmark spaces, climate, topology, etc.), the Meta City determines its artistic re-conceptualization and spectatorial perception (cultural association, historical connotation, ethnic/racial portrayals, inter-textual multi-media representations, etc.) in the films.

Each film re-configures the mediated unique urban setting and recreates a Meta City that exists as an organic part of the narrative to reveal the film’s cultural and political discourses. The Meta City is represented as a singular presence that operates at the intersections of spatiality and temporality, urban topography and cultural imagination, and mediated visuality and lived reality. While *Infernal Affairs* represents Hong Kong as a polycentric Non-City in its discourse on political polycentrism and moral ambiguity...
that characterize post-colonial Hong Kong society, The Departed depicts Boston as a paradigmatic Crime City, where the repressive and redistribution prevail as a social structure that is dichotomized, in the sense that the society is understood in terms of good and evil, justice and punishment, right and wrong.

Infernal Affairs strategically represents the post-industrial urbanity of Hong Kong as the cinematic Non-City through its visualization of the city in nondescript spaces such as offices, parking lots, stores, commercial buildings, and modern apartments. These spatial signifiers characterize Hong Kong's homogenizing global economy and transnational commerce, while the city exists as a post-modern floating city, perpetually suspended "at the intersections of different times or spaces." This co-existence of discursive spatial-temporality is a combined result of Hong Kong's long and formative colonial history and a reaction against such alienating de-cultureization through deeply rooted reverence and adherence to Chinese traditional culture. Hong Kong's polycentric cultural identity thus manifests as an urban non-space, or a space of "dis-appear-ance," as Abbas would call it, where cinematic representations of Hong Kong is always transient, elusive, and out of sync with the present times.

It is against the backdrop of this urban polycentric Non-City that Infernal Affairs' psychological drama of double identity, guilt, and conflicting loyalty unfolds. Infernal Affairs successfully adds a philosophic undertone to Hong Kong cinema's famed gangster genre by ingeniously contriving the plot that shows how the police and the mafia infiltrate each other's camp. The film highlights a mercurial identity and challenges the previously inviolate binarism between good and evil through an almost symmetrical character development. The plot hinges upon two interwoven lives of a police undercover in the drug gang and a mafia mole inside the police department. Yan (Tony Leung) is pulled from police training school to infiltrate the illegal drug smuggling business of Sam (Eric Tsang), the boss of the triad ring. At the same time, Sam in infiltrate the police department. Yan's preference is thus not a blind support of local merchandize. The perfect combination in the stereo config-

Infernal Affairs endorses a polycentric cultural politics, visually metaphorized in the image of an infernal hell where "no compass point organizes its space."6 Simulation of a discursive point of view, the opening images of fragmented figures of Buddha and gargoyles intensify the sense of anchorlessness that is symptomatic of a flexible identity. These images are literally suspended in a spatial-temporal nowhere, a visual metaphor that hints at the cinematic Non-City in the ensuring film narrative. As "the orientation of movement becomes unclear," so are the life trajectories of the protagonists. The audience's attention is effectively anchored when quotes from Nirvana Sutra appear in white against a black background. "The worst of the Eight Hells is called Continuous Hell. It has the meaning of Continuous Suffering. Thus the name." With the spatial boundlessness, this cognitive timelessness creates a metaphoric limbo where spatial and temporal axes of history collapse. In this indefinitely expanded world, a historical moral evaluation of individuals based on a single unchanging identity becomes not only problematic but also counter-productive.

While the Non-City of Hong Kong is carefully visualized in such mundane places as restaurants, apartments, offices, parking lots, and streets in Infernal Affairs, it is on the rooftop and in the stereo store that the nondescript urban identity symbolizes flexible identity and moral ambivalence. Arguably a quintessential metropolitan non-place, the rooftop epitomizes a homogenizing post-industrial urban environment with its generic lack of cultural markers and its downtown location. It also provides a avant-garde vantage point where the skyline meets and ground level, an empowering affirmation of "being at the top," and a constant awe of the height and danger of falling. Thus, the rooftop serves as a perfect locale where the dramatic conflicts unfold, where good meets evil, where the truth comes to light. The stereo store, on the other hand, represents a prototypical space that signifies Hong Kong's economic achievements, ubiquitous consumerism, and its significance as the center of commerce and trade in Asia. Thus, the stereo store serves as a mise-en-scène opposite to the rooftop since the former is visualized as dark, quiet, private, yet constantly under surveillance, a place where hidden identities, double personas, and flexible identities interact.

Yan and Lau's flexible identities are strategically established in the claustrophobic scene in the stereo shop immediately after the title sequence in Infernal Affairs. Yan enters the scene with a disenchanted voice, assuming the identities of the shop assistant, technician, connoisseur, salesperson, drug-dealer, bully, and undercover policeman all in one. With his ability to synthesize all social identities and functions well on multiple levels, Yan characterizes Hong Kong's polynomous identity politics that combines transnational trade and commerce, inter-regional drug trafficking, globalization commodity fetishism, and localized re-packaging and trans-shipping. When Lau asks him to recommend a good speaker system, Yan is quick to match a Hong Kong car, and tastefully decorated apartment, Lau's economic status pointedly alludes to Infernal Affairs' obsession with a political economy that is "rooted in 'legitimate' colonial control and the legacy of illegal triad activities." With a flexible identity, Lau's own legitimate identity as a government agent and illegal identity as a triad mole unite harmoniously in his consumer persona.

If the stereo store provides a space where Yan and Lau's flexible identities become symbolic and metaphor to Hong Kong's polycentric society, the rooftop top serves as an allusion to the inter-textuality of Hong Kong cinema's gangster genre and signifies Infernal Affairs' ambivalent representation of globalization. The rooftop serves as a space that foregrounds the ambivalence of the code of brotherhood, a location for the final climactic face-off, and a symbol of freedom. There are three roof top scenes in Infernal Affairs and each roof top scene is a moment of dramatic development and advances the story. But it is the first roof top scene, where Yan has his first secret rendezvous with Superintendent Wong, which most powerfully depicts its representational significance. This scene represents the post-Indo Chinese era that follows the movie's triumph over lawlessness in Woo's Hard-Boiled, Infernal Affairs deconstructs the dichotomy between good and evil. In spite of such striking narrative and structural similarities, Infernal Affairs uses this roof top scene to accentuate the disturbing absence of social justice and moral assurance that are commonly associated with police work. This rooftop scene resuscitates stereotypical black-and-white characterization common in gangster films. Narrative and cinematographic devices reinforce the moral ambiguity that further establishes Wong and Yan's discursive identities. Emotional tension between Yan and Wong characterizes their discordant interaction from the opening shot of this scene, when the camera shows a walking Wong moving away from Yan, who coolly looks to the opposite direction. Both Yan's burning desire to get an alluring Cinderella's absence Yan in the next shot, Wong's accusing voice firmly registers on the acoustic channel. Yet Yan's outburst seems
to be only a half-hearted self-defense rather than genuine frustration. This ambivalence is subtly externalized through his}).

Hong Kong's polycentric identity serves as a prerequisite for the successful maintenance of this centripetal agency of this core identity that both contextualizes its urban space so that the Non-City becomes a trope for a generic postmodern metropolitan space in Infernal Affairs. Deviated from the usual narrative, the city becomes a single character whose generic features unite in their “homogenized blandness” to create the “transnational and transitory realm” that exerts its broad-spectrum appeal. Even the most stylistically used rooftop scenes are carefully presented so that none of Hong Kong's landmark skyscrapers is recognizable in the mise-en-scene. Long, wide-angle ambience shots that are typically complimentary to the panoramic view of Hong Kong's skyline are either muted or quickly cut to focus on characters before audience registers the location, with famous landmarks such as the Bank of China tower nowhere to be seen. This metropolitan environment therefore obtains a transnational significance that testifies to Hong Kong's ambition of becoming Asia's World City. Corresponding with the moral and political ambiguity that permeates the narrative of Infernal Affairs, this “global city identity elevates Hong Kong above the passe rubric of nation state. By all recogni-
tion, Hong Kong's identity is as an international city before it is a Chinese city.”

The Non-City of Hong Kong metaphorizes Infernal Affairs’ sociopolitical polycentricity and flexible identity, The Departed situates its narrative in the highly visible city of Boston and substitutes Infernal Affairs’ portrayal of flexible identity and moral ambivalence with clearly defined morality that predates on a system of hierarchical dichotomies. The Departed contextualizes its narrative in a lawless Meta City that exists as a result of the bipolarization of global economic and political competi-
tions. In the city of Boston's highly identifiable urban setting, the film's judicial insistence on an unproblematic distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and crime becomes apparent. The Meta City of Boston is thus represented as the Crime City, where conflicting iden-
tities externalize as physical violence, criminal acts infiltrate every aspect of social lives, and no one is unaffected by such lawlessness.

The Film City of Boston in The Departed has no place for moral ambiguity, and the opening sequence firmly establishes the main characters’ unproblematic identity. The Departed insists on a dichotomized world that is both vocalized and visualized in Boston's racial tension as a result of its rich racial demographic and the city's criminal history among the Irish gangster organizations. The film begins with Frank Costello's (Jack Nicholson, who plays Sam's counterpart) voiceover, a disembodied voice that contextualizes the subjective identity of the Self. For Costello, the Self is defined by the non-Self, which is constituted by the opposing forces of Irish Boston social politics. His narrative contex-
tualizes what appears to be its visual explanation or equival-
tely—the image that is shown on screen during the act of speaking off stage. In other words, as the voice of Costello is delivered through the audio channel, what is shown on screen is subconsciously viewed either as the visual contents of the speech or as an explanation of the articulation. This synchronicity of image and voice is typically used to create a synchrony between audio and visual information. Thus, upon their entrance into the film text, spectators are already drawn into the world of Frank Costello, the soon-to-be master of crimes. They are cinematically invited to share his point of view and sympathize with his rationale of the Irish Boston social politics. The audience is therefore under the preexisting gaze of the outside, other world as constructed on the screen, which stares back at the spectator who has been transformed into an object. What is un-seen here is precisely the narrative mimesis of the world, namely, the mechanism of the “construedness” of this world through Costello's pondering monologue.

The Departed employs a crosscutting sequence to introduce Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Colin Sullivan’s (Matt Damon) parallel yet contrapuntal naviga-
tion of their double lives. Billy Costigan is the undercover cop who prefers to be a criminal, and Colin Sullivan is mobster who infiltrates the police department. Neither Billy nor Colin are aware that they are, despite their struggles with the warring identities. Their existence is predicated on the clear distinction between who they are and whom they appear to be, and each man's ability to anchor toward his respective identity serves as a prerequisite for the successful maintenance of their camouflage. For Billy, life can go on only when he remembers that he is a policeman. By contrast, Colin's entire ethical structure is a successful demonstration of the act of appearing as a mobster who infiltrates the police department. Thus, it is ultimately an unconditional accept-
ance of the centripetal agency of this core identity that both resist the schizophrenic double identity, which characterizes Lau's life in Infernal Affairs. The Departed accentuates the unique Boston setting to re-emphasize the principle that “what's American is global” and thereby claim cultural ownership of the adapted narrative. Contrary to Infernal Affairs’ conscientious establishment of a transnational urban space, The Departed highlights its American setting in the flavorful city of Boston to invoke its close association with Irish American immigrant sub-culture. The film utilizes the city's rich and complex history as one of America's earliest colonialist settlements to encourage an Americanized spectator identification. Through close-up shots of high profile architectural landmarks, panoramic view of historic downtown Boston, and linguistic preva-
ce of Bostonian accent, The Departed poignantly centralizes Boston not only as a location that serves as a backdrop for the narrative, but more importantly as a tangible cultural component inextri-
cably embedded in the narrative. This emphasis of a typical American setting legitimizes a complete control of the narrative as it precludes any other possibility of spectator identification. It is only by a complete de-association with the original that The Departed re-establishes its claim to the ownership of the story and its re-culturalized adaptation.

Boston's intrinsically layered association with Irish mafia and Irish cultural heritage becomes a defining element in all the major characters' personal and public relationships. Through the pronounced Boston accent and ubiqui-
tous diegetic reference to the Crime City's Irish ethics, anthropological characteristics, and cultural self-identification, The Departed relentlessly explores Boston's political, economic, social, and historical realities that characterize a unique urban space as cinematic connective tissues that hold the narrative together. Not only do Boston's Irish gang activities influence the plot of The Departed, but Boston is portrayed as a city that thrives on the power dynamics between law and crimes, confrontations among
warring criminal organizations, and treacherous international illegalities.

The Departed uses the golden dome of Beacon Hill, one of the most recognizable visual signifiers of the Boston backdrop, to add an emotional appeal to its Americanization and to visually emphasize the inevitable triumph of state power. Beacon Hill’s dominance in the mise-en-scene in The Departed sharply contrasts with the absence of identifiable city landmarks in the non-space of Hong Kong in Infernal Affairs. Manifesting as a symbol of social power and elitist status, Beacon Hill embodies an upward mobility that is perfectly in sync with the concept of American Dream. Colin’s longing gaze up at the imposing dome earlier in the film returns significantly in a later scene when Colin admires the grandiose view of the State House from the balcony at his upper-class residence in an eye-level point of view shot. Thus, as Colin moves up the social ladder, his American Dream is measured by the increasingly short distance between him and the golden dome and an eye-level positioning of the State House in the mise-en-scene. When the audience is invited to share Colin’s gaze at the golden dome, they become keenly aware not only of the American setting of the film, but theAmericana of the sentiment.

The Departed’s reimagining of Boston as a Crime City manifests in its representation of the city as a center of international crimes of espionage and weapon smuggling, where the threat of a rising militant China becomes subject of ridicule and contempt. Analogously, if Hong Kong’s port city status is carefully hinted in Infernal Affairs, Kong’s cityscape, when the city is delineated as a Non-territorial city, is presented as a Crime City with its immensely visible and national remapping process, the city of Boston is cinematically represented as a Crime City with its immensely visible and metropolitan lawlessness. In the Crime City of Boston, while actors horrifically murder each other for money, in Infernal Affairs, while actors murder each other for status.

In the beginning of the new political reality in Hong Kong, cinema was in steady decline with significant decrease in production and box office revenue. As the first of the Infernal Affairs trilogy, Infernal Affairs I grossed $7,035,649 in Hong Kong alone as of January 29, 2002, which ranks second in the history of all Hong Kong made films. All box office statistics come from boxofficemojo.com accessed July 13, 2010.

11 In an interview, director Alan Mak acknowledges this indebtedness to John Woo, saying, “I think all the film makers in Hong Kong are influenced by John Woo” (Marchetti 178). Hard-Boiled (F 1990) (Lai sau san taam 1990) was one of Woo’s classic gangster films in his Hong Kong period. Hard-Boiled centralized Hong Kong’s crime trilogy here Tequila (Chow Yun-fat), a hard-boiled police detective, and a police undercover Tony (also played by Tony Leung Chun Wai), who Tequila must try to destroy the mob’s smuggling business. A Hong Kong audience of Infernal Affairs would recognize a similar role in Hard-Boiled, where he has a similar meeting with his boss on the roof top that overlooks Hong Kong’s busy bay.

12 Sheldon H. Lu, “Filming Diaspora and Identity: Hong Kong and Infernal Affairs ‘s reimagining of Boston as a Crime City essentially Americanized cultural space that is shaped by multi-racial dynamics and the social influences of crimes and metropolitan lawlessness. In the Crime City of Boston, The Departed creates a Black-and-white society where law and crime clash, police and criminal battle, and justice must triumph over evil.

Notes
1 Due to political, social, and economic circumstances at the beginning of the new political reality in Hong Kong, cinema was in steady decline with significant decrease in production and box office revenue. As the first of the Infernal Affairs trilogy, Infernal Affairs I grossed $7,035,649 in Hong Kong alone as of January 29, 2002, which ranks second in the history of all Hong Kong made films. All box office statistics come from boxofficemojo.com accessed July 13, 2010.


3 Acker Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 14.

4 Acker Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 14.

5 In an interview with Gina Marchetti, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak comment on how the idea of Infernal Affairs comes into being. Both Lau and Mak pointed out that although undercover agents become a recurring motif in Hong Kong gangster films, the parallel plot of double dots makes originates from Infernal Affairs. For further discussion, see the appendix in Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs by Gina Marchetti.


8 All quotes from Infernal Affairs are adopted from its English subtitles, unless otherwise specified.

9 Gina Marchetti, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs – The Trilogy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2007), 12.

10 The roof top is dramatized as a space that foregrounds the ambivalence of the code of brotherhood as in Color of the Truth, role reversal and whistle-blowing.

11 For further discussion, see Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 112.


13 Gina Marchetti, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs – The Trilogy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2007), 101.