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Cosmopolitan cinema: cross-cultural encounters in East Asian film

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Cosmopolitan cinema: cross-cultural encounters in East Asian film, by Felicia Chan, London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2017, 203 pp., £33.86 (Hardcover) ISBN 978-178076-722-2

In this exceptional book, Felicia Chan dives deep into the complexities of cosmopolitanism and cinema, questioning the meaning of ‘foreignness’ and aspirations of ‘belonging’ in the global context. Grounded on the premise that transnational cinema, or cinema in general, is an important platform for the production, imagination, and interrogation of cosmopolitan ideals, the book focuses on East Asian cinemas from China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore, challenging notions of definitive cultural boundaries. The book offers a way to understand cross-cultural encounters that emphasises the nuances and subjectivities of cultural imaginaries that cinema itself advances and challenges at the same time. While we see aspects of what appears to be seamless border-crossing, transnational circulation, and multilingualism, Chan renders specificities embedded in historical memory and narrative vividly coherent. Throughout the book, one gets a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity constantly occurring in cross-cultural encounters. The result is an eloquent critical reading of East Asian cinema under the framework of modernity, highlighting its self-reflexive tendencies and how it transforms as it crosses cultural and linguistic borders.

Chan’s parley with cosmopolitanism began long before the writing of this book. Her doctoral thesis on comparative poetics and cultural translatability was her initial attempt at theorising cosmopolitanism and transnational cinema. In this book, Chan broadens the scope to encompass East Asian cinema. Though the omission of South Korean cinema is glaring, the four cases used nevertheless provide a good lens to view cosmopolitan ideals and limitations without essentialising or idealising cross-cultural encounters. Chan meticulously examines the interstices of cosmopolitanism and cinema, which she describes as “both driven by idealism, fantasy, and aspiration and yet each also embodying within their own ideational conceptions internal contradictions which serve to keep the worst ideological outcomes at bay” (1). On the one hand, cosmopolitanism presents a means to imagine a global citizenship regardless of its abstracted form that lends itself unable to capture the complexities (and perils) of national/individual and global/collective issues and concerns. On the other hand, as a textual and technological medium, cinema reflects the dreams and paradoxes of postcolonialism and modern life, which are then reframed and transported back into the screen.

The book is organised into four main chapters, excluding an introduction and a concluding section. The first chapter probes into multilingual films and examines how they operate as spaces for defining “the difficult normativeness’ of language, universalism and translation in the cinema” (19). She looks at the difficulties of transnational textually without dismissing that translation involves various levels of discursive, contextual, and practical elements. The next chapter interrogates the process of self-reflexivity in cinema as a means to confront the society’s own anxieties situated in its history and memory. She examines how the reconstruction of memories in films involve not one but a myriad of memories, as well as engaging the present. The process of self-reflexivity involves an acknowledgment of its form, its history, and how that history is told through the history of the form.

The third chapter entitled ‘Film festivals and cosmopolitan affect’ offers a way to understand film festival as a site of cosmopolitanism. Chan explores the background on distribution and exhibition

to demonstrate films as social, cultural, and political practice and process, particularly in terms of the kinds of encounters they bring into effect. Film festivals are platforms where cultures intersect and collide, and therefore a place where one can identify who the displaced from the normative, how strangers and foreignness are constituted and constructed. The fourth and final chapter takes on the challenge of unravelling the materiality of the body responding to cinema in a physiological way by looking at Ming Wong's gallery films. Chan scrutinises Wong's work as a site where cosmopolitanism is simultaneously being imagined, constructed, and reframed to convey universalist ideals through a series of mimics, which end up as dissonant and clumsy attempts of authentic reproductions.

What makes Chan's book stand out is its recognition of the dangers that can make cosmopolitanism complicit with a superiority complex. She warns readers and scholars alike of the perils of disregarding the nexus where local specificities are, in fact, globally interlinked. Again and again, she prompts readers to situate crossing borders within the realm of liminality, along the nebulous points of translation and transformation. Following up from Zygmunt Bauman's stranger, 'who is neither an enemy nor a friend, but rather an unknown entity', Chan attempts to unravel who and what the stranger is in transnational cinema. It contributes to our efforts to dismantle simplistic and rigid connotations along racial lines and hardline conservative nationalisms.

With the recent political events happening across Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world, where we see the growing influence of right-wing populist movements, Chan's book is very timely and important as it presents us a way to reconsider the complexities that underline assumptions of 'foreignness' or 'otherness'. The more pressing global problems of today are transnational and transborder in scope. Migration, displacement, and transborder issues, to name a few, are inseparable from our basic understanding of cross-cultural encounters in the globalised era. This book urges us to take a step back and recognise that these issues are deeply rooted in colonialism and postcolonialism, and in the continuing current of transnationalism that results in various manifestations of strangeness and foreignness. But Chan, echoing Bauman, also compels us to look at strangeness not so much as embodied and categorical difference but as expressions of ambiguity and ambivalence that deserve further interrogation and discussion.

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