

The Floating Life of Fallen Angels: Unsettled Communities and Hong Kong Cinema

Sans Seraph

Only the angel . . . can undertake long journeys from the invisible No-where . . . toward the interior temple of man, enter his darkness, and help him recover his proper Orient.

Massimo Cacciari *The Necessary Angel*¹

Show me a single tear swallowed up by the earth! No, by paths unknown to us, they all go upwards.

E.M. Cioran *Tears and Saints*²

Wong Kar-Wai's *Fallen Angels* (1995)³ is one of the most arresting movies to emerge from the now internationally celebrated Hong Kong cinema. Initially appearing to be a cross between *Blade Runner*, *After Hours* and MTV, it soon manages to carve its own idiosyncratic space in both the viewer's psyche and the archive of Asian urban imagery. Following the dreamy movements of Hong Kong's *demi-monde*, Wong's film captures the hyper-alienated cultural climate of a city which has been cut loose from its previous colonial moorings, and now floats uncannily between the political grids which link Chinese and British history.

In his book *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas points to this "floating identity" as an integral part of a fundamentally liminal community. He writes: "Hong Kong has up to quite recently been a city of transients. Much of the population was made up of refugees or expatriates who thought of Hong Kong as a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed. The sense of the temporary is very strong, even if it can be entirely counterfactual."⁴ Abbas goes on to trace the perceived shift from what he calls Hong Kong's "reverse hallucination" – not seeing the obvious – to "a culture of disappearance."⁵ Abbas thus argues that Hong Kong represents an unprecedented form of postcoloniality – a kind of profane limbo populated by terrestrial angels who can't quite locate themselves, and consequently suffer various postmodern strains of globalist symptoms. "Hong Kong is an example of a *postculture*," he asserts, because "it is a culture that has developed in a situation where the available models of culture no longer work."⁶

Wong Kar-Wai's movies – at least those made up to (but not including) *Fallen Angels* – are presented by Abbas as symbolic artifacts from Hong Kong's postcultural, postcolonial position. Wong's "systematic irresolutions" are said to be an active reflection of this culture of disappearance; an attempt to self-consciously re-invent Hong Kong's identity within the very paradoxes which prevented it from doing so before 1989. This film-maker's entire aesthetic, at least according to Abbas, stems from his attempt to invent "a form of visuality that problematizes the visual"⁷ – an appropriate strategy for a "para-sitic" culture which emphasizes identity over subjectivity, emotions over affectivity, and voice over representation.⁸

Abbas's argument serves to identify Hong Kong as an example of what Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs have described as "unsettled societies." As a major informational and economic node in the global network, Hong Kong is a particularly spectacular example of the diasporic, millennial metropolis. *Fallen Angels* is thus a particularly vivid depiction of the people who Fanon called "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels."⁹ By inhabiting the spaces between Hong Kong's shifting identity, these always already fallen angels exist beyond the clichéd collision between tradition and modernity (and yet retain a secular connection to sacrality).

One striking scene in *Fallen Angels* focuses on a beautiful young woman masturbating alone in her business partner's apartment while he prowls the nocturnal street for his victims. One would be hard-pressed to find a more compelling portrait of the loneliness and sense of dis-location of a

generation of people who presumably grew up in Hong Kong, and should therefore by rights call it home. These are Wong's exterminating angels – the flipside of Bunuel's – who leave their rooms all too easily, and are in fact exiled to the streets and beyond, as if a giant invisible hand has spun their world with a powerful centrifugal force. These tear-and-blood-stained drifters are a testament to the atomized experience of a creeping global horror.

This same unnamed woman frequents her "partner's" favourite bar, hoping in vain that their paths will cross. She listens to a Wurlitzer jukebox which plays a Laurie Anderson song:

Daddy Daddy, it's just like you said
 Now that the living outnumber the dead
 Where I came from it's a long thin thread
 Across an ocean down a river of red . . .
 I'm one of many – speak my language

Wong thus constructs his own personal hymn to Hong Kong's seemingly eternal night, and the deadpan hysteria of those who populate it. "The night's full of weirdos," observes He Qiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro), a Taiwanese immigrant. The different characters interact, but rarely seem to become intimate: preferring to trace the absence of each other's frustrated desires. In one scene, the young woman's partner, Wong Chi Ming (Leon Lai) – a hired killer – cannot even remember one of his former girlfriends. She has now coloured her hair blonde to avoid such humiliation in the future. ("Let bygones be bygones. You like me now, that's fine." "I never said that," he replies.)

According to Wong's portrait of Hong Kong, proximity entails boredom and love is akin to break-and-enter. The rain-soaked streets and nicotine-heavy mahjong parlours are pregnant with the potential for random violence, and even sudden death. His characters massage pig-carcasses in a grotesque pantomime, and torture an inflatable doll in a stairwell. And yet within these interstitial and illicit spaces the possibility of human contact emerges. A family taken hostage in an ice-cream truck seem to enjoy a spontaneous tour of the city, temporarily wrenched out of their domestic routine. A woman enjoys the numb warmth of riding pillion on a high-speed motorbike, just as He Qiwu smiles at his dead father (who spoke a Taiwanese dialect with a Russian accent) captured for posterity on videotape. All these fleeting, fuzzy moments seem to contradict another character's heartbroken conviction that "there are no miracles in this world."

Massimo Cacciari has stated that "the dimension of the Angel is out-of-topical. Its place is the Land-of-no-where, the *mundus imaginalis*"¹⁰. As a quintessentially European thinker (and mayor of Venice, no less – Calvino's invisible city), Cacciari is concerned with the topology of a particularly Western angelology. Nevertheless, as the epigram to this section attests, his conclusions can be both productively – and problematically – applied to the "fallen" aspect of the angel, especially as it relates to exile. Like Wong's characters, the angel has no proper place; indeed, it is so weary, and "the vertigo of the fall so violent," that it has forgotten what it had to announce.¹¹ In a profane context, the angel becomes an unsettling and uncanny figure precisely by its banality: "Their own *tremendous* presence is a sign of distance, of separation. A metaphysical fracture intervenes in the angelological tradition. Instead of being the guardians of a threshold, here Angels appear to be unsurpassable demons of the limit . . . [This] means that every encounter will now have to begin by putting ourselves at risk."¹² Any relationship with the Other thus becomes a negotiation with the ontological miracle of presence, along with the subversive effects of absence: the broader culture of disappearance.

Cacciari reminds us that the angel represents a sacred form of lack, and that "incompleteness means metamorphosis, change of roles, ironic dissolution of the certainty of figures, of their 'ubi' [whereabouts]."¹³ We need only recall the glazed gaze of Wong's assassin in order to evoke that angel who "transforms the gaze into the gaze of nowhere."¹⁴ Looking backwards into the future, these avenging angels stalk the streets of a mythical city-space in which the familiar is always strange, and those who belong are already outcasts.

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau sees little distinction between “a foreigner, a city-dweller, [and] a ghost.”¹⁵ Moreover, he sees all urban consumers as “immigrants in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it.”¹⁶ In a passage which vividly evokes *Fallen Angels*, de Certeau notes that

[t]he moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place – an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. The identity furnished by this place . . . is only a pullulation of passer-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic, a shuffling among pretenses of the proper, a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places.¹⁷

Wong’s neon-lit angels are not only a hybrid of nations and races, but seem to be the illegitimate offspring of the union between cherub and ghost, even dyeing their hair blonde in order to closer resemble “the angels of perversity” (Remy de Gourmont). They themselves seem to be only “the effect of displacements and condensations.”¹⁸

From Pythagoras to Pygar, the fallen angel has represented the limits of the Enlightenment project, especially the uneasy nihilistic mandate of scientific paradigms. In his study entitled, *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory*, cultural critic Justin Clemens notes that “[d]espite the supposed death of God under the pressure of the globalization of capitalism, techno-scientific innovation, and the ongoing bureaucratization and corporatization of everyday life – in a word, nihilism – angels and daemons are everywhere in contemporary Western culture, and often mingle happily, if incoherently, with other preternatural apparitions drawn from a range of incompatible religious and cultural traditions (ghosts, spectres, vampires, zombies, aliens, and so on) In the supposed era of accomplished nihilism, the world is seething with deities of all kinds.”¹⁹

Hong Kong cinema has been particularly fond of depicting these supernatural figures in a variety of genres according to a range of aesthetic perspectives and intentions. The Kuomintang government banned the making of paranormal movies in 1935 in order to counter what it saw as a celebration of superstition; however, the last couple of decades have seen an explosion of Hong Kong horror movies, from the comic, to the erotic, the spooky, the sublime and the ridiculous.²⁰

Abbas offers Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* as an anti-spectacular meditation on Hong Kong identity, memory and desire through the figure of the ghost. One need not focus on an “actual” spectre, however, in order to bring a postcolonial narrative into the same uncanny tropological system. In Clara Law’s *Floating Life*, for instance, the compounded estrangement of migration becomes the medium of a similar unsettlement in regard to temporal and spatial slippage. Here ghosts are indistinguishable from fallen angels, for they both embody the restless plight of the exile: a life to be endured both *avec et sans seraph*.

Terror Nullius

“I agree that ghosts only come to sick people; but that only proves that ghosts cannot appear to anyone but sick people, not that they themselves don’t exist.”

Svidrigailov *Crime and Punishment*²¹

“Tradition is the illusion of permanence.”

Woody Allen *Deconstructing Harry*²²

Clara Law's *Floating Life* (1996) is a fascinating counterpoint to Wong Kar-Wai's equally beautiful, but radically distinct film. While *Fallen Angels* employs an eclectic and erratic array of styles, techniques and film-stocks to reflect the adrenalized exhaustion of its characters, Law's film is serene, stark and extremely nuanced in its depiction of a large Hong Kong family scattered across the globe between Germany, Australia and Hong Kong.

When most of the Chan family arrive in the Australian suburbs to be reunited with their second daughter, Bing (Annie Yip), she immediately gives them a long and neurotic list of warnings about their new home. The ozone layer has a hole in it and will give you skin cancer. People get burgled every few minutes. Watch out for killer wasps, redback spiders and pitbull terriers. ("It isn't that scary, is it?" asks ma. "So many people killed in Australia," laments pa.)

As a result of these suburban horror stories, the newly arrived family cower inside the house, which, unlike the traditional haunted house, is spartan, white, and flooded with harsh Australian light (in contrast to the soft pallor of the Hong Kong scenes). For a while the house resembles both bunker and boot camp, ruled over by the tyrannical Bing who insists that they assimilate into this new country, and yet terrifies them into such a state that they are incapable of leaving the relative safety of the thin wooden walls ("No incense! The house could burn down").

After becoming sick of midday TV soaps and listening to international radio broadcasts, the family decide to venture down the street in search of some Chinese tea while Bing is at work. They venture outside onto a cul-de-sac which seems to be on the very edge of the city, and consequently the world.²³ They soon become terrified of a tiny barking dog and run home, leaving the more curious pa to soldier on. He comes face to face with a kangaroo, an almost mythical creature which only serves to accentuate the alterity of Australian space. Pa lifts up his fists in true Hong Kong action style, and the roo skips off.

Later on in the film we are given a flashback of Bing's early days as an immigrant, working and living alone, waiting for her husband to save enough money to join her from Hong Kong. She takes a torch into the attic and is confronted by a more traditional image of gothic horror – a dark and sinister room choked full of spider webs and eerily shifting shadows. The scene quickly cuts to Bing frantically taping up the roof-access with gaffa-tape, as she attempts to isolate the creeping symbolism of her psyche (which, of course, constitutes only a repression which shall inevitably return in the noirish eruption of her clinical depression).

De Certeau reminds us that "[t]here is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in."²⁴ According to such an observation, the Chan family house in Australia is terrifying due to the very *absence* of spectres and other supernatural tenants.

While waiting for the bus into town, pa says to ma, "Let's not buy incense. We have nowhere to burn it. *Follow the customs of the new village*. Actually we're so far away, even if we make an offering it won't reach them." Ma begins to cry, so pa reassures her that it's ok, because "it's all in the heart." The distress resulting from not being able to relocate the family altar in the new house, however, seems to counter pa's stoic claim. Geographical distance in Law's film thus becomes an impediment to communing with the dead, just as the price of international phone calls prohibits any meaningful communication with the eldest daughter Yen (Annette Shun Wah) in Germany, or the first son Gar Ming (Anthony Wong) in Hong Kong.

In fact, geographical location seems to define what falls within the realm of the natural and the supernatural; what is ontologically present or absent. Yan – distressed by the unsettlement of her family – seems to blame her misfortunes on bad *feng shui*. Her German husband is initially sympathetic, and helps her to move the furniture around. As soon as the spiritual directions of interior direction become illogical to him, however, he reminds his wife that they need not feel bound by the laws of *feng shui*: "You're in Germany now."

At this point the slippage between house and home – a crucial one for the narrative – becomes painfully clear to Yan. In a tearful bedroom monologue, she explains her dilemma to her husband:

I don't know where my home is. I don't even know if I should think of myself as Chinese. I was born in Hong Kong. I don't speak Mandarin. And soon Hong Kong won't be Hong Kong. The colour of my skin is yellow, not white. I speak German with an accent. I live in Germany, but I'm not really German Where is my home?

Yan answers her own question by initially deciding that her home lies wherever her family lives. In contrast, Gar Ming believes it to be Hong Kong, where he still resides, hesitant to make the move to Australia.

Indeed, Gar Ming has his own horror to cope with, having seen his mistress's aborted fetus throb for a moment, following his unusual request to see the aftermath of the operation. "Three seconds of pleasure produces three inches of flesh," he ponders gloomily. "It throbs only once in its entire life. Its whole life is just one second. In one second it experiences birth, aging, illness and death. Too short or too long? It's not a piece of flesh. It's my child."

This traumatic experience is exacerbated by his filial duty to collect the bones of his grandparents, due to the shortage of land-space for burials in Hong Kong. He is instructed by the neo-Shakespearean gravedigger to make sure that the bones are arranged properly in a ceramic pot so that his ancestors do not have to endure eternity while kneeling.²⁵ Thus, for Gar Ming, the undead seem to have a particularly vivid currency in his thoughts concerning dis-location, deracination and expatriation, leading to an enigmatic epiphany concerning "the dead who are supposed to have disappeared."²⁶ Ultimately it seems that a faith in "spirituality" is little compensation for the permanence of death (especially the imminent passing of his parents, pa and ma).

McKenzie Wark has noted that "we no longer have roots, we have aeriels."

This may seem true in the case of the Chan family, as pa combs the airwaves with his shortwave radio in order to listen to Radio Free Russia and the BBC World Service. The resemblance to a cyborg, however, ends here. Yen, Gar Ming and Bing seem to suffer from phantom roots, which continue to ache like phantom limbs. The ghostly presence of these thirsty tendrils do nothing, however, to discredit Wong's and Abbas's representation of Hong Kong as being a place of *suspended emigration*, even "before the exit visas have been issued."²⁷

Even at the very beginning of *Floating Life*, the bustling people of Hong Kong are shot out-of-focus and in slow motion, so that they recall a population of spectres. Pa discusses green tea with a restaurant owner who is waiting for his Canadian visa: "I say we've just been warming our arses over here and now we're off to somewhere else." The family drink Coke and talk of duty-free Nikes, displaying an already endemic globalist identity and recalling Abbas's always already rootless Hong Kong residents.

Why then, given the floating life of the Chan family, is the transition to Australia so traumatic; even horrific ("This house stinks. It's full of AIDS You're here as migrants, not to enjoy life," shouts Bing)? The answer must be that we continue to have both roots *and* aeriels.²⁸ Roots constantly seek filial nourishment, no matter where we are transplanted, and aeriels receive the mysterious signals of our (sub)urban environments. Hence the crucial moment when ma reconstructs her ancestral altar in Bing's abandoned house in order to exorcise the demons from her daughter's troubled mind.

Home is thus figured by *Floating Life* as a form of utopia – a nowhere land glimpsed on the fringes of the banal everyday. Clara Law's film itself is symptomatic of this uncanny and ubiquitous cross-cultural liminality. An Australian film critic calls it "one of the most beautiful Australian films of the last few years,"²⁹ while the Hong Kong industry consider it merely an expatriate extension of their industry (just as John Woo and Jackie Chan will always be considered Hong Kong directors, no matter how many films they make in Los Angeles – the "city of Angels").

Australienation

“Trees of our life, when is our winter?
We do not agree on this. We do not know,
as migratory birds know. Outpaced and tardy,
we force ourselves into unseasonable winds
before landing heavily on some indifferent pool.”
Rainer Maria Rilke *The Duino Elegies*³⁰

“Don’t they ever stop migrating?”
Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*³¹

Australia has traditionally been viewed by the North-Western hemisphere as “down under,” or even upside-down. In commenting that everything is “back to front” in Australia, Ma Chan not only echoes a long legacy of culturally-coded compass points, but depicts the upside-down and uncertain perspective of Rilke’s angel.

In a recent advertisement for Sprite soda, Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) of the famed *X Files* parodies his character’s obsession with paranormal phenomena by tracing the elusive Big Foot to Australia, which turns out to be the hirsute cricket-player Merv Hughes. In the last shot, Mulder circles the syllable “alian” in the word “Australian” on his office blackboard. The truth of a certain species of Otherness – the ad suggests – seems to be “out there,” in Australia.

Abbas has noted that the population of Hong Kong is “now faced with the uncomfortable possibility of an alien identity about to be imposed on it from China,” and is consequently “experiencing a kind of last-minute collective search for a more definite identity.”³² Wong’s pre-1997 fallen angels seem almost too amnesiacal to feel the full effects of this immanent alienation, embodying Baudrillard’s thoughts on the anachronistic flavour of the very notion. How can such a moorless subjectivity experience the isolation of alienation?

When the Chan family move to Australia in *Floating Life*, everything seems particularly alien to their transplanted world-view. The film’s depiction of *actual* Australians (whatever such a fraught term may mean) is fleeting and peripheral, as if they themselves are ghostly apparitions haunting the fringes of the landscape. The overall effect is that the “natives” themselves become spectral and surreal, whereas the newly arrived immigrants are vivid and fully materialized in this new place.

No doubt, watching *Floating Life* is a radically different experience depending on whether you grew up in Australia or Hong Kong. As an example of the former, I couldn’t help but recall Gelder and Jacob’s notion of an uncanny form of nationalism, intermingling with what I call the “anglo-grotesque.” In his introduction to *Floating Life* for SBS television, Australian film critic David Stratton states that Law “makes Sydney a mysterious, at times rather threatening place, and the film was made before the ignorant bigotry of racism became a political factor in this country.” Despite the astonishing naivete of such a comment (as if the spectacular case of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party was the only reservoir of racism in the last 200 years), Stratton pinpoints the almost atavistic tension surrounding multiculturalist discourses in contemporary Australia.

As I write, national politicians are already making references to the “spectre of One Nation” in one breath, while hystericizing the “influx” of illegal Chinese immigrants in the next, seemingly oblivious of the hypocrisy involved.³³ Indeed, Pauline Hanson herself contributed to the supernaturalizing of her status in the national imaginary by taping a “posthumous” videotape to be broadcast in the event of her assassination (“Fellow Australians, if you are watching me now it is because I have been murdered”). That her sacrifice was made in the ballot-box, and not by a bullet, makes the event no less uncanny; in fact it makes the whole charade appear even more grotesque.

Coincidentally enough, I am also writing during the third anniversary of the Port Arthur massacre, a partly racially-motivated attack on Asian tourists which soon became an indiscriminate slaughter. The layers of homicidal history on this very site compelled the authorities

to demolish the blood-stained café in order to expunge the demons which had possessed this most recent structure (as if the entire area was not a ghoulish industry based on memorials of colonial horror).

As mentioned earlier, Gelder and Jacobs discuss the unsettling which inherently lies within modern Australia's relationship to the Aboriginal sacred. Their study is concerned with mapping that political dynamic whereby dispossession (and the discourses which articulate it) provide "the very conditions for a renewed mode of possession to occur."³⁴ Moreover, "sacredness 'returns' to modern Australia in the *context* of dispossession."³⁵

The phantasmatic promised-land of "reconciliation" both beckons and haunts the nation, sublime and unattainable. Gelder and Jacobs also emphasize the relationship between the uncanny and the *unheimlich* (Freud's "unhomeliness") in order to "give unsettling an activating function": a crucial strategy in this age of global dispossession.³⁶ Considering such a perspective, it isn't too far-fetched to see an affinity between the spectral Australians in Law's film, and the Chinese protagonists. "One is always (dis) possessed," write Gelder and Jacobs, "in the sense that neither possession nor dispossession is a fully realisable category."³⁷ Australian movies such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Summer Holiday* (both made in the self-conscious 1970s) symbolically trigger the European fear of trespassing on sacred ground – the *terror nullius* of Aboriginality, exposing an asymptotic parallel with the dilemma of the Chan family. Do we really belong here? Where is "here" anyway? At what point can we call Australia – Peter Allen style – "home"?

The Horror, The Horror

"[M]eaning is not in things but in-between."
Norman O. Brown *Love's Body*³⁸

"To be unhomed is not to be homeless . . ."
Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture*³⁹

"Decisive here is the idea of an *inessential* community, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence. Taking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence."
Giorgio Agamben *The Coming Community*⁴⁰

Neither *Fallen Angels* nor *Floating Life* are obvious candidates to describe as horror films. Nevertheless, they do open a useful theoretical space in which to discuss the mutating forms of a prosaic, but no less devastating, condition of global horror. Both are infused with a particularly postmodern strain of homelessness. And isn't the powerful sense of unsettling while in the bosom of the home the very essence of the gothic? (We need only refer to Poe's *House of Usher*.) It is within this generic context that we should understand Bing's comments to her parents regarding her younger brothers ("They might even kill you for your life insurance"), as a gothic expression of horror toward the dormant enemy within. In Baudrillard's age of transparent evil and all-too-visible obscenity, Reason produces monsters as much in its waking state as its sleep. Within such a context, the mundane (*mundus* – "earthly") angel and ghost become uncanny tropological figures through which we can rethink conceptions of identity, abandonment, alterity and belonging, in an age of unprecedented unsettling.

Homi Bhabha has noted that during displacement "the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting."⁴¹ Translating the micro-sphere into the macro, Bhabha states that "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence."⁴² "Can the perplexity of the unhomely, intrapersonal world," he asks, "lead to an international theme?"⁴³

The answer in mid-1999 – when the contrast between suburban Sydney and “war-torn regions” could not be more striking – would have to be a resounding “yes.” In scenes straight from an old B-Movie, the pro-Indonesian militia in East Timor drink goblets of each other’s blood in a vampiric performance of fealty and hatred. What we are witnessing in the Balkans, East Timor, Rwanda, and other less reported places, are the global consequences of unsettlement. Dispossession – or the fear of dispossession – leads to scenes far more gruesome than in any cinema. When these atrocities are perpetrated in the name of sovereignty or state power, the United Nations and NATO begin to look something like an *Attack of the Killer Zombies*, as the husks of old power-formations shuffle towards the market economy in order to reanimate themselves on the other side of the millennium.⁴⁴

Ghosts, angels, and indeed zombies, are figures of irreconciliation – of being unable to lay the past to rest. As with Benjamin’s over-cited Angel, history becomes merely the political momentum of an always unfolding catastrophe. Abbas has stated that Hong Kong has become a “mutant political entity”⁴⁵ although he believes that “describing mutations” opens up new possibilities.⁴⁶ Such Harawayesque faith in the future, however, seems to neglect the sinister ways in which the present day “military-industrial-entertainment complex” is itself a mutant. And yet, as *Floating Life* has taught us, horror need not lurk in obvious generic signifiers. The horror of normality can be equally terrifying. In contrast to David Lynch, who feels compelled to expose the monstrous underbelly of suburbia, Law captures the relentless banality of the quotidian. She understands that fear is located primarily in the prosaic mind and its unsettled projections, and rarely in the ominous riddles of a psychopathic dwarf.

Mediocrity is thus the true horror, because it is the innocuous breeding ground of nationalistic violence, even as it remains profoundly severed from it. *Domesticity is its own alibi* (recalling Bhabha’s comment concerning the interchangeability of public and private space). And yet the two horrors are connected via Abbas’s “hyphen-nation.” To romanticize a kind of rootless or nomadic subjectivity is only to reinforce the circuit of violence, as *Fallen Angels* vividly demonstrates. The “perfect forgetfulness” of the Angel is no solution to any equation linking homelessness and horror. Rather we might do well to consider the recent case whereby an Australian family returned a 700 year-old Samurai sword to the Japanese family from which it was stolen as a spoil of war in 1945. While such an exchange is inscribed within the relative histories of imperialism and demonization, this weapon was temporarily re-figured as a symbol of reconciliation. Far from “giving up the ghost,” this personal and political gesture invited a form of recovery, prompting the Japanese family to issue a statement that “It is like our father has returned to us.”⁴⁷

In a technique employed by Mrs Chan in *Floating Life*, psychic family baggage, which has become lost in transit, is returned in a gesture less concerned with closure than with a familiar and relatively reassuring mode of haunting. Re-establishing contact with dead kin serves to confirm the new portability of the past. As a consequence, this particular spectre becomes confused with Marx’s, which has wandered loose from the cellars of Europe. Together they embody De Lillo’s recent observation that “All terror is local now.”⁴⁸

¹ Massimo Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1994 1.

² E.M Cioran, *Tears and Saints*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995 3.

³ Jet Tone Productions. The Cantonese title is *Duoluo Tianshi*.

⁴ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997 4.

⁵ Abbas hedges his bets somewhat by defining this culture of disappearance as “a kind of pathology of presence” 8.

⁶ Abbas, *Hong Kong* 145.

⁷ Abbas, *Hong Kong* 36.

⁸ See Abbas, *Hong Kong* 14. Much of the credit for Wong’s sublime and subliminal aesthetic should be shared by his Australian cinematographer, Christopher Doyle. The significance of this artistic link between Sydney and Hong Kong should become clearer below, as I trace the flows between these different hemispheres.

⁹ Frances Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London, Paladin, 1963 176

¹⁰ Cacciari, *Necessary Angel* 1.

¹¹ Cacciari, *Necessary Angel* 33, 13.

¹² Cacciari, *Necessary Angel* 9, 11

¹³ Cacciari, *Necessary Angel* 24

¹⁴ Cacciari, *Necessary Angel* 3

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988 115

¹⁶ De Certeau *Everyday Life* xx

¹⁷ De Certeau *Everyday Life* 103

¹⁸ De Certeau *Everyday Life* 107

¹⁹ Justin Clemens *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis 20

²⁰ The popularity of Hong Kong horror film – along with its cinematic sibling, the martial art flick – cleared the way for the Western mainstream embrace of directors such as Michael Mok and Ngai Kai Lam. Initially only finding a “cult” audience in America, Europe and Australia, Hong Kong horror earned the dubious attention of Hollywood after the arthouse success of both the *Chinese Ghost Story* and *Sex and Zen* series.

²¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, New York, Vintage, 1998 289

²² Woody Allen, *Deconstructing Harry*, Jean Doumanian Productions, 1997

²³ This representation of the Australian suburbs is in sharp contrast to a movie like Rolf de Heer’s *Bad Boy Bobby* (1993), which opts for an almost post-apocalyptic *grand guignol*.

²⁴ De Certeau *Everyday Life* 108

²⁵ The younger brothers of the Chan family also meet an amiable Chinese version of Dr. Frankenstein in Sydney, who jokingly suggests that he can transplant bones into their bodies in order to make them taller.

²⁶ De Certeau *Everyday Life* 105

²⁷ Abbas *Hong Kong* 10

²⁸ This sentence becomes even more significant when we remember that *aerial* was a messenger spirit of the air, and consequently a kind of pagan angel. The blurring between roots and aeries is also encouraged by the Australian Collins Dictionary when it refers to the “aerial roots of a plant.”

²⁹ David Stratton’s introduction to the screening of *Floating Life* on SBS.

³⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, translated by Leslie Norris and Alan Keele, Columbia, Camden House, 1993 21. See also Rilke’s poem *Orchards*.

³¹ Alfred Hitchcock, *The Birds*, Universal, 1963.

³² Abbas *Hong Kong* 4

³³ The reference is to Senator Tim Fischer’s relaunch of the National Party, which was specifically designed to win back the “disenchanted” defection of rural Australian voters to One Nation. (Reported on ABC News, April 17, 1999.)

³⁴ Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1998 47.

³⁵ Gelder and Jacobs *Uncanny Australia* 46

³⁶ Gelder and Jacobs *Uncanny Australia* xvi

³⁷ Gelder and Jacobs *Uncanny Australia* 138

³⁸ Norman O. Brown, *Love’s Body*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990 247.

³⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York and London, Routledge, 1994 9

⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993 17-8. The second sentence is italicized in the original citation.

⁴¹ Bhabha *Location of Culture* 9

⁴² Bhabha *Location of Culture* 11

⁴³ Bhabha *Location of Culture* 12

⁴⁴ This is not to privilege some kind of nostalgic stability, but rather to plea for the recognition of the link between sacrality, power and bare life. (Giorgio Agamben’s latest book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is particularly crucial here.) If colonialism was a vampire, then postcolonialism (in its globalist form) is a relentless terminating cyborg.

⁴⁵ Abbas *Hong Kong* 142

⁴⁶ Abbas *Hong Kong* 62

⁴⁷ This quote is taken from a story aired on ABC News in February 1999.

⁴⁸ Don De Lillo, *Underworld*, London, Picador, 1999 816